

## **Travail à travers le passé après Auschwitz au regard de la philosophie morale d'Adorno**

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**Résumé:** Adorno, l'un des principaux philosophes de l'école de Francfort, se concentre sur la philosophie morale après Auschwitz, qui est sans aucun doute un moment catastrophique dans le développement de l'histoire humaine. Ainsi, "si après Auschwitz on peut continuer à vivre" est la question clé de la contemplation morale d'Adorno. En nous basant sur "Le sens du travail à travers le passé" (1959/1962), nous explorerons l'analyse d'Adorno sur le fascisme et l'appel à la ré-illumination à travers sa vision de l'histoire de la constellation et de l'illumination comme lutte contre l'oubli. En un mot, travailler à travers le passé signifie se ré-illuminer dans le sens social et être responsable et indépendant dans le sens individuel.

**Mots clés:** Adorno, Travail à travers le passé, Auschwitz, Histoire de la constellation, Lumières

# Working through the Past after Auschwitz in View of Adorno's Moral Philosophy

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**Abstract:** Adorno, a leading philosopher of the Frankfurt School, focused on moral philosophy after Auschwitz, which is undoubtedly a catastrophic moment in the development of human history. Thus, "whether after Auschwitz you can go on living" is the key question for Adorno's moral contemplation. Based on "The Meaning of working through the past" (1959/1962), we will explore Adorno's analysis of Fascism and the appeal for re-enlightenment through his view of history of constellation and enlightenment as fighting against forgetting. In a word, working through the past means to re-enlighten in the social sense and to be responsible and self-dependent in the personal sense.

**Keywords:** Adorno, Working through the past, Auschwitz, History of Constellation, Enlightenment

After the second world war, Adorno (T.W. Adorno, 1903-1969), as the key thinker of the Frankfurt school, put forward a popular but controversial proposition, in an article entitled "Cultural Criticism and Society" (1949), that is, "Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."<sup>1</sup> We can say that it belongs to the field of people's spiritual life in some ways when referring to the proposition that to write poetry (by extension, the artistic creation) after Auschwitz is barbaric. In Adorno's philosophical masterpiece *Negative dialectics*, which was published in 1966, he modified and further pursued the above proposition:

It may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living-- especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights

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<sup>1</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Prisms*, translated by Samuel and Shierry Weber, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1982, p. 34. According to S. Weller's investigation, after this article being published, Adorno declared this proposition repeatedly in different situations and the other ones also had subtle changes. See S. Weller, *Literature, Philosophy, Nihilism*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 72-73.

should have been killed, may go on living.<sup>2</sup>

As we know, even though he is of Jewish descent, Adorno “escaped by accident” the concentration camps such as Auschwitz and Dachau. However, it is right to say that Auschwitz hang over Adorno’s head all the time. Faced with the ashes of war and ruins of civilization, Adorno soberly realized that only if we would deeply rethink the logic that makes Auschwitz possible, could we ensure its eternal doom and truly comfort the countless lives which were swallowed by it. This article is based on one of Adorno’s radio lectures entitled “The Meaning of Working through the Past”. Indeed, we are those born after the era of Auschwitz and should think about the above question put forward by Adorno, just from two aspects, that is, history of constellation and enlightenment seeking for remembrance.

### **1. History of Constellation: making the past into the present**

If we want to answer the question, “whether after Auschwitz you can go on living” we better first think about whether Auschwitz is just a nightmare from which people can eventually escape. Adorno expounded this question in a radio lecture on November 6, 1959. The subject of the lecture is “the Meaning of Working through the Past” (hereinafter I will abbreviate it as “Walking through the Past”).<sup>3</sup> In his view, only in a certain way, that means, making the past always live in the present, could it be a worthy death for the victims.

At the beginning of the lecture, Adorno first distinguished two kinds of attitude towards the past (and the memory): “working through” (*Aufarbeitung*)<sup>4</sup> and “working upon” (*Verarbeitung*). In Adorno’s view, “working through the past” does not mean seriously “working upon the past”, the latter means “through a lucid consciousness

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<sup>2</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E. B. Ashton, London and New York: Routledge, 2000, pp.362-363.

<sup>3</sup> On May 24, 1962, at the invitation of German Socialist Students Union (*Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund*), Adorno made a lecture on this subject again in Berlin. In this lecture in 1962, specifically, Adorno added a quotation, which pointed out that the lecture derived from the hidden anti-semitism in the Federal Republic of Germany since the late 50’s. What is more, Adorno also talked about the objective conditions and trends which led to the disaster of the slaughter of Jews in World War II. Specifically, Adorno pointed out the “factors of social psychology in objective social situation”. See T. W. Adorno, *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft II*, herausgegeben aus Rolf Tiedemann unter Mitwirkung von Gretel Adorno, Susan Buck-Morss und Klaus Schultz, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003, SS.816-817; T. W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, translated by Henry W. Pickford, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, pp.307-308.

<sup>4</sup> H. W. Pickford, the English translator of this paper, pointed out that “working through” (*Aufarbeitung*) contains a meaning of “completing unpleasant obligations (such as, cleaning the table)”. On re-evaluating the need of the past, Adorno’s rhetoric is more acute than that of some politicians and historians’ then. See T. W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, pp. 337-338.

breaking its power to fascinate". On the contrary, the purpose of "working through the past" is to close the books on the past, or even to remove (wegwischen) it from the memory, if possible.<sup>5</sup> He thinks that it is ambiguous for people to make a clean break from the past (especially the one which is full of experience of disaster): on the one hand, nothing could live in the shadow of the past and it is just like quenching a thirst with poison if we pay back the previous atrocities with violence; however, on the other hand, the past, which people want to eliminate or avoid, is still as clear as yesterday. Obviously, what Adorno wants to stress is the latter. Meanwhile, his attitude, which was towards the past—or, more accurately, towards the previous suffering and pain— is very clear: we need to face (rather than forget) it and it is more important for us to criticize and sublimate them (rather than to idolize or to mystify them).

Thus, when referring to pathology, it is not a sense of guilt to remember the sufferings from body, mind and personality insults. If we uphold a principle of "the destruction of memory" (die Zerstörung von Erinnerung), just like Mephisto, the devil in *Faust*, it would lead to the decay of the continuation of historic consciousness, and eventually develop a social atrophy at the level of individual self-reflection and self-discipline activities.<sup>6</sup> In other words, once put into the arms of the devil who "loves eternal nothingness", people would lose the historical consciousness. In the end, the key question, that is, "whether after Auschwitz you can go on living", would be easily left behind. Therefore, Adorno thinks, in order to gain a self-independent and critical personality, it should be a righteousness for people after Auschwitz to keep a clear historical consciousness. Consequently, it becomes crucial for us to know how to understand the past. If the past is just "not the present any more", that is, in the sense of the linear passing of pure time, it would work against Adorno's will—which is to work through the past— that people at the present regard the past as an object, which could be taken away and dealt with randomly. Here, it is important to note that the past, which Adorno wants to "work through", is not general. In other words, it has clear historic coordinates, that is, human disaster represented by "Auschwitz". In this sense, we must put "the past" into activities of working through, which makes the query from the depths of history clearly audible-- in Adorno's words, the problem is "recalling memories" or "going into the past from the present."<sup>7</sup> Only in this way can we make sense of the damaged life, which has seemingly become the past and "makes death sweeter", leap before our eyes. This might cause (even force) introspection and change of modern people. In this regard, we can say this is a particular type of world - disclosing critique. The key to what Adorno wants to disclose is the disregard for the wrong life and experience of sufferings as well as indifference to history and chronic atrophic of critique.

Here, we might as well refer to the dialectical image of the past by Benjamin (W.

<sup>5</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p.89.

<sup>6</sup> See T. W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p.91.

<sup>7</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p.100.

Benjamin, 1892-1940) who is closely linked to Adorno in thought. In Benjamin's view, the image is the constellation of "what has been" (not the past) and "the now" (not the present); in other words, the image is the "dialectics at a standstill". The key point is that the dialectical image is not temporal in the natural sense but historical in the authentic sense, that is to say, it is not an archaic image.<sup>8</sup>

In his posthumous publication *On the Concept of History* (*Über den Begriff der Geschichte*)<sup>9</sup>, Benjamin further elucidated the "dialectical image", which is composed of the constellation of the past and the present. As he put it, history is the subject of construction, and the construction site is neither homogeneous nor empty time, but full of "now-time" (*Jetztzeit*). Thus, as for Robespierre, ancient Rome is the past full of "now-time", as he exploded "the continuum of history" to draw the past out.<sup>10</sup>

Obviously, in Benjamin's view, history is not the smooth process of homogeneity. It is made up of every current "now-time" which gives meaning to it. Actors in history, such as Robespierre, blew up the "temporal continuity" in an explosion, just like "a flash", at the moment of action.<sup>11</sup> Only in this way is the relationship between the past and the now dialectical, not homogeneous. Then "what has been" and "the now" could converge into a constellation in every "now-time". It is just in this sense that Benjamin thinks we could regard the French Revolution as the reincarnation of ancient Rome. As a matter of fact, Adorno analyzes the Benjaminian critique to the linear concept of Progress in his essay named "Progress". He thinks that, when referring to Benjamin, it is only in the following meanings that progress has legitimacy: "the happiness of unborn generations-- without which one cannot speak of progress-- inalienably includes the idea of redemption."<sup>12</sup>

More importantly, this kind of dialectical image put the past ("what has been") into association with the future ("what will be"). While in Benjamin's view, "existing" things concern redemption: the past has carried a secret guidance, which is associated with redemption. Hence, we have been given a **weak** force of Messiah<sup>13</sup>. Benjamin also

<sup>8</sup> See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 463.

<sup>9</sup> The work was written by Benjamin who lived in exile in France to avoid the persecution by German Fascists from February to May, 1940. However, in order to avoid being misunderstood, Benjamin was not going to publish it; on September 27, the same year, Benjamin committed suicide in exile and *On the Concept of History* was one of his relics that he carried with him. In 1955, the two-volume edition of Benjamin's work, edited by Adorno, was published, with *On the Concept of History* included. Hannah Arendt edited the English version of the selected works of Walter Benjamin, which was titled *Illuminations* and published in 1969. The article was published with the title "Thesis on the Philosophy of History". In order to present Benjamin's ideas more completely, all quotations in this book are from the four-volume edition of Benjamin's *Collected Writings*, translated by E. Jephcott and others, edited by Ho. Eiland and M. W. Jennings, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> See W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4(1938-1940), translated by E. Jephcott and others, edited by Ho. Eiland and M. W. Jennings, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 395.

<sup>11</sup> See W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4(1938-1940), p. 395.

<sup>12</sup> See W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p. 145.

<sup>13</sup> See W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4(1938-1940), p. 390.

pointed out definitively that historical materialists can recognize the power of Messiah, which is filled in each “now-time”, and, in the current “now - time”, their tasks are to recall the memory, create history and gain redemption.

As a matter of fact, *On the Concept of History* represents Benjamin’s inclination of the fusion between historical materialism and Messianism. While facing the attempt to save theology through a bloody history, Adorno showed little interest in the redemption of the past, or we could say that what Adorno is more concerned with analyzing the price that reason pays when controlling nature so as to promote human progress, which is well known as the “dialectics of enlightenment”<sup>14</sup>. In some sense, Benjamin’s constellation-style image is in the sense of “literary Montage”. Adorno, on the other hand, extends it in the sense of negative dialectics. Just as dialectics means that “objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder”<sup>15</sup>, the present life should go out of the field of “present” and thus include the time of “after Auschwitz”-- that is “now-time” in Benjamin’s sense so to speak. Hence, the key to the question is not whether or when the redemption would come, but whether or not a reoccurrence of the previous disaster could be avoided?!

For that matter, the question, that is, “whether after Auschwitz you can go on living”, not only puts forward the present and future but also regards “recalling memories” as a starting point. Though life needs to go on “after Auschwitz”, it must be marked with the brand--“Auschwitz”: thanks to “going into the past from the present”, life gains the ability to contemplate and question. Meanwhile, only by keeping distance from the past can we leave enough space for contemplating and questioning. In other words, we should neither let history compel and suppress life blindly, nor let the future pretend to get out of history easily. In a sense, Adorno uses the dialectical image “constellation” to understand the relationship between the past, the present and the future. But the “solidified dialectics” which he uses, is not to “solidify” a certain mysterious “hope” in the future but the various kinds of actual disaster in the past. This is also the question that Adorno asks in “progress”: “whether humanity is capable of preventing catastrophe?”<sup>16</sup>

If people only regard the catastrophic wrong life in the past as the finished (literally understanding) and historic one, then the arrival of the right life (not to mention the redemption in Benjamin’s view) would be as distant as ever; now that in Adorno’s view, we are all people “after Auschwitz”. Thus we have a duty to let the past disasters or catastrophes always hang above our heads and let them go with us and transform them into the vitality of life. In other words, in order to go on living, people must have the

<sup>14</sup> In “Reason and Revelation”, Adorno equate “dialectic enlightenment” with “the price of progress”, in which “all the ruin wrought by rationality in the form of the increasing domination of nature”. See T. W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, pp. 137-138.

<sup>15</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p.5.

<sup>16</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p.144.

power to break the past as well as to use it. One must bring the past to the court for judgments, question it relentlessly, and eventually convict it. Only after breaking and critiquing the past could we live strongly; only facing up and using the past, could we know ourselves thoroughly. Only then could we people “after Auschwitz” have the right to continue our lives and live the right life instead of repeating the previous mistakes.

## 2. Task of the Enlightenment: working against a forgetfulness

After the exile and returning to the motherland, Adorno saw a frustrated, indifferent country full of the cynical sense of distrust; similarly, in the article—“Report from Germany”— published in 1950, Arendt said that she also witnessed escapism from reality and responsibility in Germany. Perhaps at that time, most people might have thought that the first issue for Germany, squeezed between the United States and the Soviet Union, was returning to normal and private life. Ethos of narrow regionalism prevailed among Germans, for this made people relaxed. “Wait and see” became a life Maxim. However, according to Adorno, Germans could never decide whether or how to take political action<sup>17</sup>. In the essay “On the Question: ‘What is German’ ”, Adorno writes that “the True and the Better in every people is surely that which does not integrate itself into the collective subject and if possible resist it”.<sup>18</sup> In a word, what matters for Germans after Auschwitz is “critical self-reflection”.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, it is not hard for us to understand, why, after more than ten years of the end of World War II, Adorno still thinks it ultimately necessary to reflect upon National Socialism or/even totalitarian repeatedly in his article “The Meaning of Working through the past”. Because the premise of taking responsibility is, in Adorno’s view, to recall memories and face the past. Hence, people’s attitude towards National Socialism is far from a pathological case: if “the terribly real past is trivialized into merely a figment of the imagination of those who are affected by it”, then “it’s as good as if it never happened” will become the principle so as to destruct memory in the end.<sup>20</sup> In order to fully understand the “forgetting of National Socialism”, as Adorno points out, it should be explained “far more in terms of the general situation of society than in terms of psychopathology”<sup>21</sup>:

*That fascism lives on, that the oft-invoked working through of the past has to this day been unsuccessful and has degenerated into its own caricature, **an empty and cold***

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<sup>17</sup> See Wolf Lepenies: *The Seduction of culture in German History*, Princeton University Press, 2006, Chap 6.

<sup>18</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p.205.

<sup>19</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p.206.

<sup>20</sup> See T. W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p.91.

<sup>21</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p.91.

*forgetting, is due to the fact that the objective conditions of society that engendered fascism continue to exist. Fascism essentially cannot be derived from subjective dispositions. The economic order, and to a great extent also the economic organization modeled upon it, now as then renders the majority of people dependent upon conditions beyond their control and thus maintains them in a state of political immaturity. If they want to live, then no other avenue remains but to adapt, submit themselves to the given conditions; they must negate precisely that autonomous subjectivity to which the idea of democracy appeals; they can preserve themselves only if they renounce their self.* <sup>22</sup>

“The economic order” and “the economic organization”, which Adorno emphasizes, is the state capitalism (F. Pollock) that attempts to monopolize all resources and integrate every aspects of social life<sup>23</sup>; in this kind of “administered world” (die verwaltete Welt), everyone’s economic activities, political activities, cultural activities (including entertainment), which constitute our daily life, are absorbed into it and finally integrated as one. Adorno puts forward that “the totality” of culture industry “culminates in the demand that no one can be any different from itself”<sup>24</sup>. This actually clearly embodies the overall falsehood of the “administered society”. In order to insight this kind of deception as well as to be able to go on living and lead a right life after Auschwitz, people should make a hard intellectual effort and constantly engage with self-reflection and self-enlightenment. Only then could we gain the moral autonomy and political maturity. Therefore, people should not just keep muddling along, that is, “Wait and See”, or even give up their “autonomous subjectivity”. Otherwise, Adorno warns us that the identification with the given, the status quo, with power as such would “create the potential for totalitarianism”<sup>25</sup>. In other words, Auschwitz should not been forgotten and “working though the past” is one of the premises of avoiding disaster happening again.

In Adorno’s view, it is the economic order of state capitalism and the “organizational

<sup>22</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p.98, emphasis added.

<sup>23</sup> As an economic expert at the institute for social research, F. Pollock’s concept of “state capitalism” had a great influence on Horkheimer and Adorno (*Dialectics Enlightenment* is just for him). Pollock believes that, in modern developed capitalist society, the regulation between the national economic and society is not “local” but gradually becomes “whole”; In his view, when the ability of free-market economy develops to its limit, “state capitalism” begins to develop. It especially develops under the totalitarian system, while also under democracy. In fact, from the New Deal to Hitler’s policy of National Socialist system, there are different versions of “state capitalism”. Pollock divided them as follows: “democratic state capitalism” and “totalitarian state capitalism”—the former is called “national capitalism under democratic monitoring” and the latter is referred to as “the worst appearance of society when contradictions intensified”. See Emile Walter-Bush: *Geschichte der Franfurter Schule: Kritische Theorie und Politik*, Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2010, SS.75-83.

<sup>24</sup> T. W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, edited by J. M. Bernstein, London and New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 92. Know more about the critical thinking of Adorno on Culture Industry, please refer to one of my articles: “Art and Society in the Light of Adorno’s Non - Identity Philosophy”, in *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, Vol. 8. Num. 2, 2013 (June).

<sup>25</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p.99.

power of totalitarian system”<sup>26</sup>that produces some kind of authoritarian personality. Its characteristics are as follows: thinking oriented along the dimensions of power and powerlessness, an inability to react, the lack of self-introspection, and, most importantly, “an overall inability to experience”<sup>27</sup>:

*Authoritarian personalities identify themselves with real existing power per se, prior to any particular contents. Basically, they possess weak egos and therefore require the compensation of identifying themselves with, and finding security in great collectives.*<sup>28</sup>

Obviously, “weak-egos” are not only in a state of identifying with “great collectives” but also in the indifferent state of forgetting those catastrophes. Consequently, the existence of fascism is closely related to the “weak egos”. In Adorno’s view, in order to revive oneself and to remove the characteristic of authoritarianism, individuals need to the “experience” of “any particular contents” based on themselves (here the “experience” can be understood in general meaning with memory included). If one cannot experience those contents based on his lived experiences (such as the memory of suffering), he would then be vulnerable to be carried away by the ubiquitous “administered world”. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno says clearly that “only a mind which it has not entirely molded” can withstand the administered world.<sup>29</sup> In brief, the first step for the sake of self-enlightenment is that individuals should have the ability to go on living based on particular life experiences rather than be identified with the modeled experience controlled and ruled by “the administered world” or “great collectives” consciously and/or unconsciously.

As we know, the essence of enlightenment, as Kant puts it, is “*the human being’s emergence from his self-incurred minority*”. The minority or immaturity means that, without the guidance of other people (monarch, minister, parents, teachers or great collectives so to speak), one would feel powerless to make use of one’s own understanding. Enlightenment, therefore, aims to let everyone illuminate himself using intellectual understanding, that is, to stand in the world and understand it independently. In a word, “Have courage to make use of your own understanding!” is the “motto of enlightenment”.<sup>30</sup> The motto, “have courage to make use of your own understanding”, embodies the zeitgeist of enlightenment. Then, after Auschwitz, Adorno further points out that, if one wants to go on living and gain maturity, which means becoming a man both in thought and action rather than a potential follower of totalitarianism or some kind of authoritarian personality, he must cast aside the identity imposed by the

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<sup>26</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p.94.

<sup>27</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p.94.

<sup>28</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p.94, emphasis added.

<sup>29</sup> See T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E. B. Ashton, London and New York: Routledge, 2000, p.41.

<sup>30</sup> See Kant: “An answer to the question: What is enlightenment?”, in Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, translated and edited by Mary J. Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 17.

administered world (with the help of a variety of ways, such as the cultural industry) and get rid of the false security imposed by great collectives (by making the past forgotten) – one must have courage to experience and remember, which is the motto of re-enlightenment after Auschwitz according to Adorno. In “Walking through the Past”, Adorno writes:

*Above all enlightenment about what has happened must **work against a forgetfulness** that all too easily turns up together with justification of what has been forgotten—for instance, parents who must endure embarrassing questions from children about Hitler and in response, indeed to whitewash their own guilt, speak of the good aspects and say that in fact it was not so awful.*<sup>31</sup>

We can see that, “Working through the Past” is not just an abstract policy—it even refers to the dialogue between parents and children. As Alex Thomson points out, one of the great strengths of Adorno’s writing is “his ability to connect the largest metaphysical questions to the smallest details of human existence”.<sup>32</sup> Hence, working through the past first requires us to listen to and respond to the past rather than turn a deaf ear to it. For responsible citizens who have the sense of historical and moral responsibility, it is their obligation and responsibility to fight against forgetting (even defending, justifying or distorting). What Adorno worries about is perhaps that the biggest evildoers are those who never try to remember things happened because they never think about what they have done. Generally speaking, without memory, Auschwitz will happen again. Furthermore, we can say, without “after Auschwitz”, there would be no moral philosophy by Adorno, which is based upon specific and historical contexts represented by Auschwitz. In this regard, Adorno’s moral philosophy (and indeed his whole philosophy) is historical materialism in some sense in contrast to transcendently idealist moral philosophy like Kant’s. As we know, the validity of Kantian moral law is derived from pure reason or pure practical reason.

As matter of fact, Adorno, in his lecture in the 60’s, “Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems”, made a clear definition of “the biggest evildoer” which means people never remember—just as Arendt talks about “the banality of evil”. Adorno totally agrees with Arendt’s identification of evil with triviality in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. From Adorno’s perspective, the definition of triviality is as follows: “triviality, that is, as the form of consciousness and mind which **adapts itself to the world as it is**, which obeys the principle of inertia.” What is more, as Adorno points out, “this principle of inertia truly is **what is radically evil**”.<sup>33</sup> It is not hard to see that the “principle of inertia” is on the one hand the characteristic of authoritarian personalities that “identify themselves with real existing power per se”, and on the other “an empty and cold forgetting” that “all too

<sup>31</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, pp.99-100, emphasis added.

<sup>32</sup> See Alex Thomson, *Adorno: A Guide for the Perplexed*, London and New York: Continuum, 2006, p. 88.

<sup>33</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, trans. E. Jephcott, Cambridge: Polity, 2000, p. 115, emphasis added.

easily turns up together with justification of what has been forgotten". Obviously, only by reflecting deeply upon things of the past could parents have the courage to answer the question from descendants especially from one's own; and only if people worked against the empty and cold forgetting (the radical evil) could they complete the unfinished work of enlightenment. What Adorno wants to emphasize is for people to uproot the "principle of inertia" on which weak egos are based and to then become a truly mature subject both in thought and in action. Only in this way could we answer the vital ontological question, that is, "whether after Auschwitz you can go on living".

In this respect, enlightenment after Auschwitz in Adorno's view is actually consistent with the one once Kant puts forward in the era of Enlightenment. From my perspective, both reflections concerning enlightenment start from the subject itself, and then become subject-oriented. With regard to Adorno, enlightenment is internally related to working through the past:

*A Working through of the past understood as enlightenment is essentially such a turn toward the subject, the reinforcement of a person's self-consciousness and hence also of his self.*<sup>34</sup>

With this regard, the core of enlightenment after Auschwitz is the self-transformation from weak egos to "the reinforcement of a person's self-consciousness" by working through the past. Although Adorno's view of enlightenment follows Kant's, there is nevertheless essential difference between them concerning the meaning of subject. While Kant's view of subject is, broadly speaking, referred to the transcendental subjectivity, what Adorno strengthens is the historical and actual subject who has particular and unique lived experiences as well as past memories. Furthermore, in Adorno's view, "the need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth"<sup>35</sup>, and only if we work through the past could we truly learn from sufferings. That makes modern people after Auschwitz in the Benjaminian constellation-style correlation of "past", "now" and even "future", which is likely to make descendants experience the same way of sufferings as our predecessors. Finally we could maintain the experience of sufferings rather than turn a blind eye to it or even distort it consciously. There is no doubt that this is the substantial condition for people after Auschwitz to go on living and lead a right life.

### 3. A brief conclusion: right life after/beyond Auschwitz

<sup>34</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p.102, emphasis added.

<sup>35</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E. B. Ashton, London and New York: Routledge, 2000, pp.17-18.

As Adorno often mentions, “wrong life cannot be lived rightly”.<sup>36</sup> Auschwitz is doubtlessly the extreme symbol of “wrong life”. As for Adorno, one of the basic conditions of living rightly is to work through the past symbolized by Auschwitz. Therefore, we can know the reason why the specification, “after Auschwitz”, is of great importance for us (including Adorno) to reflect upon how to go on living. In other words, “Auschwitz” has become a threshold which cannot be forgotten easily for us to live and think. Consequently, it is an essential part of our real life. Based on this dialectical understanding of the right life, in another radio lecture named “Education after Auschwitz”, Adorno pointed out clearly:

*Every debate about the ideals of education is trivial and inconsequential compared to this single ideal: never again Auschwitz. It was the barbarism all education strives against.*<sup>37</sup>

To a certain extent, not only “all education” but all sorts of enlightenment after World War II strive against Auschwitz. Obviously, Adorno does hope that education takes the responsibility for the new generation to remember history and cultivate a mature and autonomous personality. By the way, in the lectures on Metaphysics (1965), Adorno points out that, due to the decline of individual as well as ego-weakness, “being-towards-death” (Heidegger) has become famous and popular.<sup>38</sup> However, we can see that the “single ideal” of education, that is, “never again Auschwitz” is **negative**. As a matter of fact, Adorno does not want to put forward some positive guideline for education or even right life, simply because there is no possibility for philosophers in the totally-administered society to describe what the right life should be. Nevertheless, philosophers can reflect and criticize the wrong life, and let their voices be heard just as Adorno does in the 1950-60’s.

So we can say Adorno’s moral philosophy is negative or minima, which means, first of all, that it tells us **what should not be done** from historical and specific contexts such as Auschwitz, instead of what should be done abstractly. As Adorno says in *Problems of Moral Philosophy*: “In short, anything that we can call morality today merges into the question of the organization of the world”, and the quest for the right life “is the quest for the right form of politics”.<sup>39</sup> As far as our thesis is concerned, the quest for the right form of politics and life depends on first working through the past after Auschwitz and then thoroughly criticizing, resisting and changing the wrong form of politics (Fascism, totalitarianism, etc.) and life (such as forgetting and even distorting the past).

In conclusion, working through the past means to re-enlighten in the social sense

<sup>36</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, translated by E. F. N. Jephcott, London and New York: Verso, 2005, p. 39.

<sup>37</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p.191, emphasis added.

<sup>38</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, trans. E. Jephcott, pp. 129-136.

<sup>39</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, translated by Rodney Livingstone, London: Polity Press, 2000. p. 176.

and to be responsible and self-dependent in the personal sense. From my point of view, Adorno's aim of asking the question "whether after Auschwitz you can go on living" is to call on us to contemplate how to live rightly. We could say that the contemplation of Adorno points directly to every one after Auschwitz, and we hope to make them echo constantly in the future.

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