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Inversion and Interconversion: A Comparative Study on the Negative Dimension of Adorno's Inverse Theology and Pre-Qin Daoist Thought

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Abstract: Negativity is an important dimension in both Adorno's inverse theology and the theological thought of pre-Qin Daoism. Firstly, both have a negative thinking and approach. Adorno inherited the Jewish idea of "forbidden images" and negative theology, and his negative dialectics is just a negative method. The pre-Qin Daoist description of the Dao and its laws are also negative. Secondly, in terms of negative language, Adorno insists on a negative discourse, arguing that concepts cannot fully express objects, and that the purpose of philosophy is to "express the inexpressible". The pre-Qin Daoist idea of "no name" is also a negative discourse. Adorno and Zhuangzi both attempted to express truth in a non-conceptual language. Finally, negativity is the essence of social criticism and redemption. Both Adorno and the pre-Qin Daoists were in the midst of social collapse. Adorno argued that redemption could only be expected from an inner criticism of society and through the art of negativity. And the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi was ultimately understood as the spirit of Chinese art. However, Adorno's negativity contains the idea of intermediation, while the negativity of Laozi and Zhuangzi's thought is based on the idea of interconversion. The ideas of the two can be informed by each other.



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1. Introduction

Negation in philosophy and theology is an important category that not only inspires negative ways of reaching essence and truth, but also provides a critical perspective for social and ideological analysis. The methods of negation and criticism in critical theory, for example, are clearly influenced by negative theology. Furthermore, theological negativity is not only found in Judaism and Christianity, but also in ancient Chinese thought, such as in pre-Qin Daoist thought, represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi. Negativity is closely linked to mystery and transcendence, the latter two also being the core of religion. This paper attempts to look at the dimension of negation in T. W. Adorno's "inverse theology" and Laozi's and Zhuangzi's Daoist thought from a comparative philosophical perspective. There are similarities in that both practice negation in epistemology, metaphysics and social ethics, and differences in that the former negation is primarily an inversion adopted to remove identified thinking and ideology, while the latter emphasizes the interconversion (mutual creation and transformation) of things.

Not many articles and books have been written on Adorno's theological thought, perhaps because Adorno himself did not write much specifically on theology. His essays on theology and religion, such as "Reason and Revelation", focus on the connection and distinction between reason and revelation and criticize modern theological demands. "Theses Upon Art and Religion Today" refers to the historical process of the unification and separation of religion and art, and criticizes attempts to reunite art and religion. In addition to this, his ideas on religion are reflected in other works such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (co-written with M. Horkheimer), *Negative Dialectics* and *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*,

all of which refer to theology. In these essays Adorno looks at traditional religion and the modern religious revival movement mainly from a critical point of view. Adorno holds a dialectical and critical attitude towards religion. Firstly, Adorno believes that religion has become an ideology, whether positive or negative (Brittain 2010, pp. 86–87). This ideology is prone to mere identified thinking and instrumental rationality. Even modern religious revivals have sought to exploit religion “for apologetic or ideological reasons” (Brittain 2010, p. 88). Secondly, Adorno, like M. Horkheimer, does not completely abandon the rational elements of religion, especially its critical and negative elements. Adorno has pointed out the need for reason to reflect on itself in order to oppose the absolute rigidity that makes it an ideology and a means of domination. This self-reflection is also reflected in the need for religion today. This attitude of Adorno towards religion as a critical inheritance has provoked a number of scholars to debate his religious position.

Some scholars, such as J. Habermas, consider Adorno to be an “atheist” (Habermas 1987, p. 108). H. Peukert argues that in Adorno’s case “Theology is then precisely what ought not to be thought” (Peukert 1984, p. 212). More scholars, however, see Adorno’s thought as a kind of negative theology. R. Wolin notes, “especially in the case of Adorno, whose ‘negative dialectics’, as a species of negative theology, revered the biblical taboo against graven images” (Wolin 2006, p. 58). U. Liedke also argues that Adorno’s “negative dialectics is negative theology” (Liedke 1997, p. 439). However, in reality, although Adorno’s negative dialectics has similarities with negative theology in that both believe that it is impossible to know and reach the truth (God) from the positive, the differences between the two are also enormous. Whereas negative theology insists on faith and revelation as the only viable way, Adorno looks to the transformation of language as well as artistic redemption. He argues that the belief in negative theology is just as likely to become an ideology and identified thinking.

However, Adorno himself does not completely conceal his theological thinking. He puts forward the term “inverse theology” in his correspondence with Benjamin:

Since I always insisted on such a position, before entering into your Arcades, it seems to me doubly important that the image of theology, into which I would gladly see our thoughts dissolve, is none other than the very one which sustains your thoughts here—it could indeed be called an “inverse” theology. This position, directed against natural and supernatural interpretation alike, first formulated here as it is with total precision, strikes me as utterly identical with my own”. (Adorno and Benjamin 2003, pp. 66–67)

S. Buck-Morss has rightly recognized the agreement between Adorno and Benjamin in their theological positions (Buck-Morss 1989, p. 246). C. Brittain explained in detail the connotation of “inverse theology” in *Adorno and Theology*.

In the author’s view, the main reason for these debates also lies in Adorno’s different understanding of religious belief and theological dimensions. On the one hand, Adorno does not believe in any religion, let alone in any personalized god. The essence of his philosophy is a critical and skeptical one, not an exclusively faith-based and revelatory one. On the other hand, however, Adorno identifies with the truthfulness of theology and draws many of his theoretical sources from it. Some of his philosophical methods and philosophical categories are derived from theology, such as the negative method and concepts such as “expressing the inexpressible”, “the prohibition of image” (Bilderverbot), “constellations”, and “redemption”. He also acknowledges that there is indeed a strong connection between metaphysics and theology. “Now it is certainly true that metaphysics has something in common with theology in its manner of seeking to elevate itself above immanence, above the empirical world” (Adorno 2000, p. 12). Can there be theology in atheist thought? It is certainly possible. As Horkheimer points out in his essay *Theism and Atheism*, atheists and theists are not opposites; atheists are in many cases true theists. This is mainly because theism also has truth, and “truth—eternal truth outlasting human error—

cannot as such be separated from theism" (Horkheimer 2012, p. 69). It is that transcendent and eternal truth that atheism seeks.

Thus, although Adorno is an atheist, his philosophy draws on sound elements of theology and is consistent with it in terms of truthfulness, transcendence and salvation. This is why he describes himself as having an inverse theological position.

A similar theological stance is found in the thought of the pre-Qin Chinese Daoists, especially Laozi and Zhuangzi. Pre-Qin Daoist thought, on the one hand, inherits some of the methods and categories of primitive Chinese religion, such as the negative approach that evolved from mysticism, and the ultimate categories of Dao and Qi. On the other hand, it becomes the main theoretical source of the later Daoist form of religion. The Dao, in this case, is supreme and eventually develops into the basic core of Gods. Despite this, we cannot say that pre-Qin Daoist thought is religious, but rather that it is close to theological thought. For Laozi and Zhuangzi does not divinize the ultimate categories of *Dao* 道 and *Qi* 气, nor is their thought based entirely on faith and revelation. And it is the very elements of negativity, dynamism and dialectic in their thought that prevent the religiosity of their thought. This is very close to Adorno. Both ultimately move towards art when their negative elements are transformed into a redemptive approach. While Adorno consciously chooses art as his method of salvation, the thought of Zhuangzi was drawn upon by the Chinese art of literati as a "Chinese artistic spirit".

Most Chinese scholars do not directly consider Laozi and Zhuangzi thoughts to be religious or theological. For example, according to Hu Shih, Laozi was a thoroughgoing atheist, and Laozi's Natural Dao (天道) was equivalent to the natural law of Western philosophy, where everything runs according to the natural Dao and "there is no need for any divine way to rule" (Hu 1997, p. 46). Liang Qichao, Zhang Taiyan and Xu Fuguan all believed that Laozi was opposed to God and had dispelled the "divine creation theory" (cf. Chen 2006, p. 70). This may have something to do with the revolutionary thinking of the era. In his *New History of Chinese Philosophy*, Feng Youlan mentions the retention of some primitive religious categories in Laozi's thought, such as the words "valley spirit" (谷神) and "female mystery" (玄牝), which have connotations of fertility worship (Feng 2001, p. 283). Religious scholars generally discuss the religious dimension of Laozi's and Zhuangzi's thought, for example, Mou Zhongjian and Zhang Jian point out that Laozi and Zhuangzi were not atheists (Mou and Zhang 2000, p. 191), but set up an ultimate being, the Dao, as a natural, metaphysical philosophical essence, above the gods (Mou and Zhang 2000, p. 189). Not many contemporary scholars discuss the religious elements in Daoism, such as Chen Lin, who briefly compares the similarities between Dao and the Christian God (cf. Chen 2006, pp. 19–22). And Lun argues that Laozi's Dao has religious implications and can be understood as the supreme God (cf. An 2014, pp. 77–83). Deng Lianhe argues that Zhuangzi's descriptions of ideal figures such as "sacred person" were influenced by the religious concepts of the Chu region (cf. Deng 2011, pp. 211–15).

In contrast to Chinese scholars, who attach little importance to the religious nature of Laozi and Zhuangzi, Western scholars have generally incorporated Laozi's and Zhuangzi's thought into religion. Many scholars see no distinction between pre-Qin Daoism and the religion of Daoism. In *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, H. Maspero treats Confucianism as philosophical and rational, and Taoism [Daoism] (including pre-Qin Taoism) as religious and irrational (Maspero 1981, p. 25). N. Sivin, on the other hand, argues that while the distinction between "Taoist school" and "Taoist sect" is a creation of modern historians, it is not useful in textual studies. But it is necessary to distinguish between "philosophical Taoism" and "religious Taoism" (Sivin 1978, pp. 304–5). Other contemporary scholars of English Sinology, such as K. Schipper, have argued for a distinction between Daoism (Daojia) and the religion of Daoism (Daojiao). T. Michael has proposed the term "early Daoist" to make this distinction. He argues that pre-Qin Daoism was not a religion because religion requires that each participant be exclusive in the religion (Michael 2016, pp. 30, 34). M. Csikszentmihalyi points out that although pre-Qin Daoism was not an institutional Daoism, as Daoism later became, it is, however, impossible to distinguish pre-Qin thinkers

as religious and philosophical, since their thought included what later generations would call “religion” and “philosophy” (Csikszentmihalyi 2006, pp. xix, xxiii).

Comparative studies of the theology and religion of pre-Qin Daoism are not common in Western scholarship, and there is study of the Hebrew religion and the Daoist philosophical view of happiness (Kalman 2017, pp. 23–30). There are also works comparing the theology of Zhuangzi and Kierkegaard, in which the authors note several similarities between the two: the critique of the times, the anti-rationalist stance taken, and the use of stories and metaphors as vehicles for their ideas (cf. Carr and Ivanhoe 2010).

In my opinion, this dilution of the distinction between pre-Qin Daoism and the religious Daoism is unreasonable. Such confusion leads to two results, either by amplifying the religious elements in pre-Qin Daoist thought, or by ignoring the theological elements in it altogether. In fact, the thoughts of Laozi and Zhuangzi clearly had an anti-religious bent. This is because they attached more importance to the regularity of the secular world and the problems of life than to transcendence and faith. At the same time, however, there is a clear theological element in their thought, due to the supernatural mastery and beliefs that characterize the thought of Laozi and Zhuangzi.

This paper therefore compares the theological elements of Adorno and Daoism through negative characteristics. On the one hand it is intended to clarify the distinction between religion and theology in pre-Qin Daoism. On the other hand, it is also intended to view Daoist thought from a theological perspective and, it is hoped, to complement modern theology with Daoist thought.

2. Negation in Adorno and Pre-Qin Daoist Thought

2.1. Negative Thinking and Approach

Negation is one of the approaches to belief in religions. Negation refers primarily to the negation of human rational faculties, secular phenomena and images, in fact, the negation of the infinite against the finite. The banning of the image and name of God in Judaism reflects this form of negation. Horkheimer and Adorno points out:

In the Jewish religion, in which the idea of patriarchy rises to the annihilation of myth, the bond between name and being remains recognised through the prohibition of pronouncing the name of God. The disenchanted world of Judaism reconciles sorcery through its negation in the idea of God. The Jewish religion does not tolerate any word that gives comfort to the despair of all mortals. It attaches hope only to the prohibition of invoking the false as God, the finite as the infinite, the lie as truth. The pledge of salvation lies in the turning away from all faith that is subordinated to it, knowledge in the denunciation of illusion. The denial, of course, is not abstract (Adorno and Horkheimer 2003, p. 40).

The “negative theology” of Christianity also holds that finite human reason cannot know God, and that the infinite can only be approached through faith beyond reason. As Nicolaus de Cusanus suggests:

Therefore, since God is beyond all reason, it is not possible to discover God within the realm or sphere of reason, nor is it possible to reach the knowledge that God is outside the realm of reason by means of reason. Therefore, since we can only reach God outside the realm of reason in a negative way, we enjoy his way in the truth of being and life, and reach God in that highest realm, that is, in the realm of the highest ecstasy of our spirit, in peace and serenity. (Cusanus 1996, p. 42)

Dionysius argues that even we cannot prescribe God in terms of attributes such as “affirmation” and “negation”,

In so far as He is the Cause of all things, we must needs impute and affirm of Him all their attributes; but in so far as He is beyond and above all, we must needs deny those attributes to Him entirely, yet not suppose that this affirmation and denial are contradictory, but that He Himself is before and above all denials, and beyond all negating and imputing. (Dionysius 1994, p. 26)

Horkheimer, the founder of critical theory, considers negation to be an important approach to philosophy. He says,

Negation plays a crucial role in philosophy. The negation is double-edged—a negation of the absolute claims of prevailing ideology and of the brash claims of reality. Philosophy in which negation is an element is not to be equated with skepticism. The latter uses negation in a formalistic and abstract way. Philosophy takes existing values seriously but insists that they become parts of a theoretical whole that reveals their relativity. (Horkheimer 2004, pp. 123–24)

Horkheimer develops critical theory directly into a Jewish negative theology in his later discourses. This marriage of critical theory and negative theology also profoundly influenced Adorno. (cf. Gur-Ze'ev 2011, pp. 59–82)

Adorno was familiar with this approach of negation. The central method and category of his philosophy is the “negative dialectics”, which requires the elimination of the positive from dialectics and the maintenance of a radical negation (Adorno 2015, p. 9). For Adorno, negation is both a position—the negation of the society of identification and positive society—and a method of thinking and expression, i.e., the preservation of non-identification in cognition and the contradiction of expression. At the heart of the negative dialectics is a “determinant negation” (Adorno 2015, p. 161). This was in fact influenced by B. Spinoza and F. Hegel. The philosophy of Spinoza was considered by Hegel to be the main representative of deism (Hegel 1971, p. 288). H. A. Wolfson also directly pointed out that Spinoza’s philosophy was a theology of negation (Wolfson 1934, p. 116). Although Adorno’s negative dialectic draws on the methods of negative theology, there is a fundamental difference between the two. Negative theology distrusts any rational faculty and does not endorse any prescriptions, attributes or concepts to describe God. Adorno, on the other hand, although he also criticizes the finitude of language, the concept of reification and human identified thinking, still needs to express the non-identical through concepts. Thus, his negation is therefore not an actual, practical negation, but rather a thinking negation—that is, one that values criticism, contradiction and non-identity. Negation is relative to identification, wholeness and positivity, an inversion of these elements of certainty. Therefore, we cannot simply regard Adorno’s theology as a theology of negation; as Brittain puts it, “guided by a commitment to the Jewish concept of Bilderverbot, [Adorno] develops what he calls an ‘inverse theology’ to challenge identity thinking and the domination of the object by the thinking subject” (Brittain 2010, p. 83). This theology is one that maintains a negative, dialectical analysis of the contradictions in social existence.

In fact, the negative thinking among pre-Qin Daoists was also linked to the mystical nature of primitive religions. The ancient Chinese scholar Gao You, commenting on *Lv’s Spring and Autumn Annals*, says that “Shang Rong, the sage of Yin Dynasty, was also the teacher of Laozi” (商容，殷之贤人，老子师也) (Lv and Gao 2014, p. 161). Although the two men are said to be far apart in time, it is quite possible that Laozi had strong links with religious thought from the Shang(Yin) and Zhou periods and even more primitive eras (Hu and Lv 2009, pp. 10–14). The Shang dynasty believed in a supreme god, the *Di* 帝, who was mysterious and ungraspable. Therefore, the people in Shang did not directly pray to or worship God (Hu and Hu 2003, p. 517; Chen 1988, p. 577). The Confucian attitude towards “ghosts and gods” was also one of “respecting spiritual beings, to keep aloof from them” (敬鬼神而远之) (Kong 1960, p. 191). In *The Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸, however, it is clearly stated that “the Master said, ‘How abundantly do spiritual beings display the powers that belong to them! We look for them, but do not see them; we listen to, but do not hear them; yet they enter into all things, and there is nothing without them’ ” (子曰: ‘鬼神之为德，其盛矣乎! 视之而弗见，听之而弗闻，体物而不可遗’) (Zisi 1960, p. 397). This is consistent with Laozi’s attitude towards his highest category, the Dao. The Dao has a certain mysterious nature, and we can only grasp and experience the Dao from the negative side. Laozi said:

1. We look at it, and we do not see it, and we name it “the Equable”. We listen to it, and we do not hear it, and we name it “the Inaudible”. We try to grasp it, and do not get hold of it, and we name it “the Subtle”. With these three qualities, it cannot be made the subject of description; and hence we blend them together and obtain The One.

2. Its upper part is not bright, and its lower part is not obscure. Ceaseless in its action, it yet cannot be named, and then it again returns and becomes nothing. This is called the Form of the Formless, and the Semblance of the Invisible; this is called the Fleeting and Indeterminable.

3. We meet it and do not see its Front; we follow it, and do not see its Back.

视之不见名曰夷，听之不闻名曰希，搏之不得名曰微。此三者不可致诘，故混而为一。其上不皦，其下不昧，绳绳兮不可名，复归于无物，是谓无状之状，无象之象，是为惚恍。迎之不见其首，随之不见其后。(Chp. 14) (Laozi 2001)¹

This discourse is about the way in which the Dao can be grasped: Firstly, the Dao cannot be accessed by senses or actions. Secondly, the Dao cannot be named. Finally, the Dao cannot be encountered in space and time. Laozi uses a series of negative sentences to deny that the Dao can be felt, known and encountered. We summarize the descriptions of Dao in Laozi’s entire text and find that they are basically narrated at the level of negation. For example: 1. the Dao is not an ordinary law; “the Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao” (道可道，非常道) (Chp. 1). 2. The Dao is in constant motion, “reaching everywhere and in no danger (of being exhausted)” (周行而不殆). “Great, it passes on (in constant flow). Passing on, it becomes remote. Having become remote, it returns” (大曰逝，逝曰远，远曰反) (Chp. 25). This “return (反)” is not just a movement back and forth, but refers to the movement caused by the contradiction of something. Therefore, the contradictory transformation (return) is the basic law of movement and behaviour of the Dao. “The movement of the Tao by contraries proceeds; and weakness marks the course of Tao’s mighty deeds” (反者道之动，弱者道之用) (Chp. 40), which Wang Bi explains here as: “The high is based on the low, the noble on the low, and the ‘having’ are useful because of the ‘not-having’, which is the opposite” (高以下为基，贵以贱为本，有以无为用，此其反也。) (Laozi and Wang 2008, p. 110). 4. Therefore, we must also understand and grasp the Dao in a negative way. “The Tao, considered as unchanging, has no name” (道常无名) (Chp. 32) and “the Tao in its regular course does nothing” (道常无为) (Chp. 37).

There are similarities between Laozi’s account of the Dao and the understanding of God in negative theology – both cannot be understood or grasped in a positive light. However, there are also clear differences between the two. Firstly, the God spoken of in negative theology is beyond the real world and therefore is not to be specified by the properties of the real world (Dionysius 1994, p. 26). In contrast, the Dao of Laozi is the fundamental law of these real and unreal worlds. Secondly, the God of negative theology is perfect and therefore does not have any contradictions. The Dao of Laozi is itself a law of motion transformed by contradiction and is in constant motion. Again, the God of negative theology is revelatory and redemptive, whereas the Dao of Laozi is not. The Dao can be experienced and even practiced by means of negation, such as “keeping soft” (守柔), “keeping weak” (处弱), and “holding to the ancient way” (执古之道). Zhuangzi also inherited this negation of the Dao from Laozi, arguing that “the Way has its reality and its signs but is without action or form. You can hand it down, but you cannot receive it; you can get it, but you cannot see it” (夫道有情有信，无为无形；可传而不可受，可得而不可见) (The Great Aneable Teacher, p. 45).²

The Dao of Laozi and Zhuangzi is closer to the “contradiction” and “negation” approach of Adorno’s “inverse theology”. Adorno saw contradiction and negation as fundamental laws in the human spiritual world and in real society. I. Kant believed that there was always an unbridgeable gap between our perceptions, concepts and things. The later philosophers, such as Hegel, tried to bridge this divide by identifying things as spiritual

ideas. Adorno, on the other hand, insists that this split is objective and irreparable. He suggests that this cognitive rift is the result of the division of society, and that we should confront the fact that this irreparability provides an opportunity for human understanding and development (Adorno 2001, p. 66). Thus, the use of negation is required in epistemology, social criticism, and social redemption. Adorno argues that in cognition we should value the dialectic of negation, recognizing the non-identity of the finite and the infinite, of concepts and things, of subject and object. Concepts and things should be like the relationship between planets and constellations,³ that the subject of cognition can only approach the object continuously, and should not identify the object through concepts, leading to ideology (cf. Adorno 2015). This negative understanding is extremely similar to the negation of theology and the negativity of Laozi and Zhuangzi. In social criticism, Adorno believes that negation is contradiction, and that contradiction is expressed in social and cultural terms in the form of criticism: “Criticism is an indispensable element of culture which is itself contradictory” (Adorno 1981, p. 22). For Adorno, the criticism of society is the implementation of his dialectic of negation in social practice. In relation to social redemption, Adorno argues that the art form of negation allows for the criticism of society and the correction of human understanding and reason.

2.2. Negative Language

The language of negation is an important connotation of the negative approach of Adorno’s and Laozi’s and Zhuangzi’s thought. The Jewish prohibition includes not only the prohibition of idols, but also the prohibition of language. Adorno once noted that “the possibility for which the divine name stands is held by the one who does not believe. If the prohibition of images (Bilderverbot) once extended to the naming of the name, in this form it has become suspect even of superstition. It has become more severe: to even think of hope is sacrilegious to it and works against it” (Adorno 2015, p. 394). This prohibition against speaking becomes “unspeakable” in negative theology, that is, not as a prohibition but as a limitation of infinite language. “God is beyond any concept. What cannot be generalized is also unspeakable. To speak is to put an inner concept into words by means of audible or other tangible symbols. Therefore, if one does not generalize the analogy of a thing, one does not know its name” (Cusanus 1996, p. 14). This “negative” discourse of negative theology was valued by philosophers such as Adorno and J. Derrida, except that the object of their negation was language and knowledge itself. “From the moment a proposition takes a negative form, the negativity that manifests itself need only be pushed to the limit, and at least resembles an apophatic theology If there is a work of negativity in discourse and predication, it will produce divinity” (Derrida 1992, p. 76).

Adorno’s thesis of negative language is in accordance with his negative dialectic. The starting point of this negative discourse lies in the inexpressibility of things, i.e., the inability of concepts to express the non-identical part of things. However, inexpressibility does not mean giving up expression, as Wittgenstein says: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (Wittgenstein 1963, p. 83). By contrast, Adorno argues that the goal of philosophy is to “express the inexpressible”: “If philosophy can be defined at all, it is an effort to express things one cannot speak about, to help express the nonidentical despite the fact that expressing it identifies it at the same time” (Adorno 1993, pp. 101–2). Adorno does not abandon the expression of concepts altogether, as negative theology does, but tries to transform them into ideas with a historical-social dimension, to approach objects. The transformed concept is thus the mediation of Adorno’s expression: “Mediation is essential to the concept; in terms of its nature, the concept itself is immediate mediation” (Adorno 2015, p. 173). This conceptual mediation is not absolute and definitive, but is constantly revised and dynamic. This is why, according to Adorno, this negative discourse is like a fluid musical language (Adorno 1993, p. 136).

The negativity of language is also an important connotation of Laozi’s and Zhuangzi’s thought. For example, Laozi suggests that “the name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name” (名可名，非常名) (Chp. 1). Laozi’s juxtaposition of the Dao and

the Name highlights the importance of the latter. The reason why the Name is so important is that it plays a role in both the natural world and the human society, bridging Dao (the law of nature) and Virtue 德 (the rule of society). On the one hand, the Name is the naming and recognition of all things in the world, “(conceived of as) having a name, it is the Mother of all things” (有名万物之母) (Chp. 1), and on the other hand, the Name is the political rule and decree of the real world. “As soon as it proceeds to action, it has a name. When it once has that name, (men) can know to rest in it. When they know to rest in it, they can be free from all risk of failure and error” (始制有名, 名亦既有, 夫亦將知止。知止可以不殆) (Chp. 32). In the pre-Qin era, the debate on “names” was mainly motivated by political reasons, such as the Confucian doctrine of “correcting names” (正名), which advocates political stability through “correcting names”. Daoism, on the other hand, argues that it was the plethora of “names” (decrees and identities) that led to chaos in the world. This is why Daoism favors “no name”. Laozi discusses the importance of “no name” from a metaphysical perspective, “(Conceived of as) having no name, it is the Originator of heaven and earth” (无名天地之始) (Chp. 1). The negation of the name (no name) is not only considered from a political point of view, but also from the point of view of the Dao itself, which, as a supreme category, is beyond people’s perception and conception, and can therefore only be described from a negative perspective: “The Tao, considered as unchanging, has no name” (道常无名) (Chp. 32), “The Tao is hidden, and has no name” (道隱无名) (Chp. 41), and so on. Zhuangzi not only argues that the Dao cannot be described in words, he goes even further by pointing out the finite nature of names: “Meaning has something it is pursuing, but the thing that it is pursuing cannot be put into words and handed down” (意之所隨者, 不可以言傳也) (the Way of Heaven, p. 106). Zhuangzi’s discourse is also full of negativity, and he tries to use contradictory examples to show that the distinction between things and language is wrong. L. Yearley has pointed out that this is because Zhuangzi attaches more importance to “those kinds of naming that guide people’s ethical and religious life”. “In those areas, he casts argumentation [bian], and the kind of distinction-making and aggressive intellectuality that often accompany it, in a negative light” (Yearley 2005, p. 507). He sees language as a source of confusion, as in “Words are like wind and waves; actions are a matter of gain and loss. (言者, 風波也; 行者, 實喪也) (In the World of Men, p. 28). Therefore, Zhuangzi believes that words are only tools; it is the meaning behind the words that is most important, and “once you’ve gotten the meaning, you can forget the words” (得意而忘言) (External Things, p. 233). Wang Bi further develops the discernment of words and meanings into a relationship between words, meanings and images, “Once you’ve gotten the meaning, you can forget the images. Once you’ve gotten the images, you can forget the words. Therefore, if expressing meaning is to exhaust the images, the images can be forgotten, and if painting symbols is to exhaust the emotion, the symbols can be forgotten” (得意在忘象, 得象在忘言。故立意以盡象, 而象可忘也; 重畫以盡情, 而畫可忘也) (Wang 1980, p. 609). This statement became the essence of Chinese culture and art in later times. For Zhuangzi, “forgetting” (忘) is an important way of reaching the truth and essence, such as “forgetting the division” and “forgetting the self”, which is also a kind of negative discourse.⁴ The “words” in the “forgetting words” of Zhuangzi and later scholars are also similar to Adorno’s “concepts” as mediation, i.e., they both serve as a kind of mediation to reach the truth. However, while Zhuangzi and others ultimately wanted to dispense with language altogether, Adorno believed that it remained the most important means of salvation. According to H. Moeller, Zhuangzi’s approach to language is based on his “zero position”. By “zero position”, it means that one should stand in the position of the “Pivot of the Dao” (Dao Shu 道樞) and see the changes around him equally, a position that is empty. Zhuangzi “tells the story out of the empty center of the process of change” (Moeller 2004, p. 105). This “zero position” is similar to Adorno’s “constellation”. The object, like the Dao, is at the center, and the subject should keep approaching this center. But whereas Zhuangzi is more concerned with how to approach this center by “forgetting

the divisions”, Adorno believes that one should approach the reality of the object through trial and error, just as an infant learns language.

Both Zhuangzi and Adorno emphasize the mediating nature of language, which is also reflected in their common choice of linguistic expression, namely allegory. Benjamin, out of his criticism of traditional language and symbolism, values the “allegory”, with its negative connotations. According to Benjamin, allegory is a “script-image” (Schriftbild), which is a fragment and a rune (Benjamin 2008, pp. 176–77). Allegory itself has a self-negation through which it shatters the appearance of a false totality. “Allegories are, in the realm of thought, what ruins are in the realm of things” (Benjamin 2008, p. 180). Allegorical theory also reflects Benjamin’s theological thought (Benjamin 2008, p. 178). Adorno attaches great importance to the imaginative and negative nature of Benjamin’s allegory. On a micro level, concepts (words) need to be disintegrated and reconfigured. “No hope remains to it but to place the words around the new truth in such a way that their mere configuration yields the new truth” (Adorno 1973, p. 369). At a macro level, language should be, like art, a kind of puzzle enigma. This enigma is characterized by fracturedness, and it is through fracturedness that the artwork actually negates itself (Adorno 2016, p. 191).

The negation of language is thus one of the most important aspects of Adorno’s thought, and it is the implementation of his method of negation in terms of language, which is similar to Zhuangzi’s initial use of allegory. In his *Imputed Words* 寓言⁵, Zhuangzi points out that in order to obtain meanings and forget words, one must use “three kinds of words”, namely, “imputed words”, “repeated words”, and “goblet words”. The original meaning of Zhuangzi’s allegory is “persons brought in from outside for the purpose of exposition” (Imputed Words, p. 234). This is a kind of allegory in the broad sense of the term. In addition to this, Zhuangzi’s book also uses a large amount of imaginative allegory, which shows that the use of “allegory” is the main way in which he “gets the meanings and forgets the words”. Zhuangzi’s ideal language is the “goblet words”: “With these goblet words that come forth day after day, I harmonize all things in the Heavenly Equality, leave them to their endless changes, and so live out my years” (厄言日出, 和以天倪, 因以曼衍, 所以穷年) (Imputed Words, p. 234). This language is characterized by fluidity (endless changes 曼衍) and sacredness (Heavenly Equality 天倪), much like Adorno’s ideal philosophical language. Adorno believed that philosophical language should be as dynamic, unprejudiced and non-central as musical language (Adorno 1992, p. 229). However, Zhuangzi’s ultimate goal is to discard language altogether, to achieve “no-words” (无言) (Imputed Words, p. 235), for “heaven and earth have their great beauties but do not speak of them” (天地有大美而不言) (Knowledge Wandered North, p. 178), which would ultimately lead to mysticism and nihilism. Adorno, on the other hand, clearly states that language should not be abolished because of its finiteness and the unknowability of things, but rather that it is in this impotent but never-ending attempt to express the inexpressible that the meaning of things emerges.

The immediate expression of the inexpressible is null and void; where its expression carried, as in great music, its seal was the slipping and ephemeral, and it clung to the course, not to the suggestive ‘that is it’. The thought that wants to think the inexpressible by surrendering the thought falsifies it into what it least wants, the absurdity of an absolutely abstract object. (Adorno 2015, p. 116)

The negation of language by both is motivated not only by a cognitive and spiritual dimension, but also by a critique of society above all.

2.3. Negative Criticism and Redemption

Adorno lived in a society in which human reason was highly developed, but in which war was raging and life was in ruins. He feels pessimistic and despairing about such a society. Faced with this reality, he argued that the negative approach should be applied to the critique of society and culture. First of all, he argues that modern reason in its truest essence is criticism (Adorno 1998, p. 282). Negation is the very identity of criticism. Secondly, Adorno’s criticism is an immanent criticism, which finds its breakthrough in its

own contradictions. In pointing to a reading of Hegel, for example, he states that to read him through experimentation is to judge him according to his own criteria (Adorno 1993, p. 145). Again, his approach to immanent criticism is widely applied to cognitive, linguistic, cultural and social criticism.

Adorno, like other critical theorists such as Horkheimer and Benjamin, prayed for a moment of redemption to come. However, whereas they looked directly to religious theology, Adorno can only be said to have a theological element. As R. Wolin points out, Adorno expresses reservations about Benjamin's theological ideas, which he considers incompatible with a truly materialist approach. He suggests that "Adorno's version of constellations approximated 'negative theology'. The state of redemption or 'reconciliation' (Versöhnung) toward which Benjamin's thought inclined could only be deduced ex negativo: it would be the antithesis of the current degraded state" (Wolin 2006, p. 51). Adorno's immanent criticism is a desire to start from the inside of the totality controlled by an identification system, to allow the internal contradictions of thought and social totality to break down and produce an opportunity for redemption. Because everyone lives within this system, no one can really withdraw from it.

To the end—Philosophy, as it is the only thing that can still be justified in the face of despair, would be the attempt to look at all things as they appear from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that which shines on the world from the point of view of redemption: everything else is exhausted in reconstruction and remains technology. Perspectives must be created in which the world is similarly displaced, alienated, reveals its cracks and fissures, as it will one day lie there as needy and distorted in the Messianic light. (Adorno 2014, p. 283)

The era of pre-Qin Daoism was also an era full of contradictions and disputes and constant wars. Laozi said, "When the Great Tao (Way or Method) ceased to be observed, benevolence and righteousness came into vogue. (Then) appeared wisdom and shrewdness, and there ensued great hypocrisy" (大道废，有仁义；智慧出，有大伪) (Chp. 18). Various moral and social standards and machinations are causally linked to the chaos in the world. Therefore, according to Laozi, the solution to the chaos is to "do nothing" (无为), "not to enlighten the people" (愚民) (Chp. 65), and "hold of the Tao of old" (执古之道) (Chp. 14). The world described by Zhuangzi is even more horrific, a society in which there are starving people on the roads and where there is no security. According to Zhuangzi, the root cause of chaos lies first and foremost in the disputes and strife caused by the completed mind of humanity itself. Therefore, he argues that to calm the chaos, it was necessary to eliminate the differences, the "completed mind" (成心) and "machine heart" (机心), and ultimately to abandon all human-made factors and return to the natural state where "heaven and man are not yet separated". We can see that both Laozi and Zhuangzi, too, begin their criticism of society with a criticism of human awareness, of the separate mind, which also coincides with Adorno's immanent criticism. The approach given by Laozi and Zhuangzi is one that denies the existing rules of society, i.e., a return to a state of primitive nature. The ideal system of government that Laozi wishes for is the "little state with a small population" (小国寡民), "though there were individuals with the abilities of ten or a hundred men, there should be no employment of them" (使有什伯之器而不用) (Chp. 80), a kind of self-sufficient peasant age. Zhuangzi, on the other hand, is more conservative and wants man to return to his most primitive animal state: "Horses and oxen have four feet—this is what I mean by the Heavenly. Putting a halter on the horse's head, piercing the ox's nose—this is what I mean by the human" (牛马四足，是谓天；落马首，穿牛鼻，是谓人) (Autumn Floods, p. 133). This state of unity of nature and humanity emphasizes the natural property of human beings and denies the particularity of human beings. This is both different from and similar to Adorno's emphasis on the unity of subject and object and the primacy of the object. The unity of subject and object is the realization of the equality of subject and object in terms of awareness and practice. The subject no longer sees the object as a means to an end, but respects the laws of the object itself. This unity is based on the

opposition of subject and object. The nature–human relationship, on the other hand, has not really developed to the stage where the subject and the object are in opposition, so that both the separation of, and the unity of the nature–human, are in a pre-subject–object state. However, the similarity between the two, the unity of nature–human and the unity of subject–object, lies in the fact that they see the contradiction and opposition between humanity and the world, and hope to dissolve this opposition. Both pre-Qin Daoism and Adorno adopt a negative approach. The difference is that the Daoists wanted to return to a time of primitive obscurantism. Adorno, on the other hand, believed that enlightenment and the primitive were in a dialectical process of development, and that he did not simply wish to return to the past or hope for the future. He was simply waiting for the opportunity of redemption to arise from the contradictions within society and knowledge. The former could lead to a certain nihilism and primitivism, while the latter could fall into idealism and infantilism.

Another coincidence between Adorno and Daoism is that both methods of salvation are related to art. In Adorno's posthumously published book, *Aesthetic Theory*, he saw negative art as the only way to save identified language and thought. Adorno believed that artistic rationality was the true rationality, for it was in art that imitative rationality and knowing were dialectically coexistent, so that art was the salvation of instrumental rationality, the salvation of knowledge, and that art was a more rational structure of knowledge for reaching truth. Adorno points out that in an age of incomprehensible horror, truth is concrete, and this can only be met by art (Adorno 2016, p. 35). For Adorno, theology and aesthetics have similarities in that both are somewhat revelatory and redemptive:

For it really seems to me that here, where the most absolutely decisive and fundamental issues are concerned, one has to speak out loudly and clearly, and thereby reveal the undiminished categorial depth of the question, without neglecting theology here; . . . that here the “aesthetic” dimension will be capable of intervening in reality in an incomparably more profound and revolutionary manner. (Adorno and Benjamin 2003, pp. 53–54)

In Laozi and Zhuangzi themselves, art is only an artificial distinction that should be dissolved. However, some of their negative descriptions and pursuits of the Dao have become the spiritual source of later Chinese art. For example, Laozi's negative description of the characteristics of the Dao, “Loud is its sound, but never word is said; a semblance great, the shadow of a shade” (大音希声, 大象无形) (Chp. 41), became the highest pursuit of arts and aesthetics in China: “The (state of) vacancy should be brought to the utmost degree, and that of stillness guarded with unwearied vigour (致虚极, 守静笃) (Chp. 16), “cleansing away the most mysterious sights (of his imagination)” (涤除玄鉴) (Chp. 10) then becomes an aesthetic attitude. In Zhuangzi, the aesthetic life attitude of “free and easy wandering” (逍遥游) and “no machine heart” (无机心) (Heaven and Earth, p. 91) is similar to the ideas of “free play” and “no interest” advocated by Kant and F. Schiller. The “fasting of the mind” (心斋) and “sitting down and forgetting everything” (坐忘) advocated by Zhuangzi have also become the guideline for artistic creation: “The spirit of Chinese art, after all, is the spirit of emptiness, stillness and clarity of Zhuangzi” (Xu 1980, p. 154). And the most important spirit of Laozi and Zhuangzi, of the unity of nature–human and the inaction of nature, is transformed into the highest spirit of Chinese art: “Only by placing the mysterious mind in nature, in the great thing in nature—the landscape—can the mysterious mind and the mysterious realm of this interesting spirit be brought into harmony; and what Zhuangzi called the ‘Dao’—is in fact the spirit of art” (Xu 2002, pp. 202–3). Thus, although Laozi's and Zhuangzi's negative salvation is not operative in social practice, it is entirely possible to save people's hearts and consciousness through art. This is very similar to Adorno's hope for artistic salvation. In fact, artistic salvation and theological salvation are similar in that, on the one hand, both seem to have a creator behind them, and, on the other, eternity, truth and transcendence are the common quest of both art and theology.

3. Conclusions

As can be seen from the above, one of the most important aspects of pre-Qin Daoist and Adorno's theological thought is the element of negation. This factor is manifested in the negative way in which their thought is argued, in the negativity of their language, and in the negative nature of their criticism and redemption of society.

However, there is still a clear difference when looking at the content of negation. The negation of Laozi and Zhuangzi is based in part on the creation and transformation of all things into each other, in addition to the negative discourse on the Dao. There are many opposing categories in Laozi's thought, such as having (有) and not-having (无), having name (有名) and no name (无名), virtue and no virtue, strength and weakness, good and evil, misfortune and fortune, and so on. Laozi does not solidify these categories or simply believe that not-having is superior to having, but that these categories could be mutually reinforcing and transformative of each other: "It is that existence and non-existence give birth the one to (the idea of) the other" (有无相生) (Chp. 2); "Misery!—happiness is to be found by its side! Happiness!—misery lurks beneath it!" (祸兮福之所倚, 福兮祸之所伏) (Chp. 58). The nature of the Dao is to move back and forth, and the nature of this movement is to create and transform each other: "All things alike go through their processes of activity, and (then) we see them return (to their original state)" (万物并作, 吾以观复) (Chp. 16). This reciprocal movement of the Dao evolves in Zhuangzi into the breath transformation of all things, "you have only to comprehend the one breath that is the world". (通下一气耳) (Knowledge Wandered North, p. 177), "all things are transformed and brought to birth" (万物皆化生) (Supreme Happiness, p. 140). The material manifestation of the Dao is Qi (breath, 气), of which all things are composed, so that things can be transformed into each other. As a result, there should be no differences and nobility between things, thus eliminating chaos and achieving equality in all things. Moeller rightly points out "from a Daoist point of view other philosophies simply oppose one another, affirming one thing and thereby denying another. From the perspective of the Daoist sage these are simply complementary positions" (Moeller 2004, p. 124). For Daoists, the complementarity and mutual transformation of things is more important than simple negation and opposition. The Daoist thought of interconversion had a great influence on later Chinese philosophical and religious thought, such as the later ideas of having and not-having and the theory of Taiji (太极). In addition to developing the religion of Daoism, pre-Qin Daoist thought also had a great influence on the later Chinese Buddhism, namely Zen Buddhism (Kong 1999, pp. 25–29). Zhuangzi's view of the meaning and words directly influenced Zen Buddhism's idea of "not leaving words" and "not using words" (Fang 2002, p. 42).

Adorno's negativity, on the other hand, contains an inverse and a mutually mediating character. Inversion refers primarily to the reversal of the status of subject and object, of the status of society and consciousness. Adorno argues that the suppression of the object by the subject brought about by enlightenment reason should be corrected by promoting the primacy of the object. He suggests that the subject's knowledge of the object should be the subject's imitation of the object. Subject and object should also be mutually mediated. The human being is itself an object-thing from which self-consciousness develops subjectivity, and subjectivity can necessarily be manifested only in the human existence of the object. Moreover, subjectivity can also develop objectivity (Adorno 1998, p. 246). From the subject–object relationship, the relationship between society and consciousness develops, where society is the basis of consciousness and not the other way around, and therefore religion arises because of the development of society. L. Feuerbach realizes that theology actually wrongly projected the attributes of the subject onto the object, reversing the subject–object relationship. K. Marx wants to reverse it. He emphasizes both how the subject is shaped by the social environment and the idea that the subject can subsequently change the environment by controlling himself. Adorno argues that this subjectivity should not be overemphasized. He argues that materialism is too eager to grasp things, which leads to thinking of objects that can only be imageless and utopias that cannot be positively portrayed, in line with the "prohibition of image" in theology. Materialism "agrees

with theology where it is most materialistic” (Adorno 2015, p. 207). Although Adorno’s inverse theology also adheres to a negative approach, it is still fundamentally different from negative theology. Brittain notes that Adorno’s inverse theology is neither a positive nor a negative theology, and it “maintains a negative and dialectical analysis of the contradictions within social existence. With an almost prayerful attention to the particularity of phenomena in the world, Adorno’s work seeks to illuminate concealed possibility and non-identity, and to prevent finite human thought from grasping onto some seemingly obvious or self-evident facts, and building an ideology upon them” (Brittain 2010, p. 112).

Thus, the negation factor is a useful clue when we want to compare the theological elements in the thought of pre-Qin Daoists and Adorno, but we also need to further identify the different connotations that remain in these negation factors. For Adorno’s negative dialectics, the pre-Qin Daoist idea of interconversion can be a dimension of reference. That is, subject and object, society and consciousness are not merely a mutually mediating relationship, but can themselves be generated and transformed into each other. This relationship is dynamic and harmonious. Although Adorno’s negative dialectics also emphasizes a dynamic nature—the negation of negation is negation—this kind of dialectic, like the traditional Western dialectic, still overemphasizes the oppositional and contradictory nature of things. This causes subject and object, human and nature, to maintain a strong antagonism. Reconciliation can only be achieved in an ideal state. Adorno wants to redeem the society by transforming language, transforming reason, and pioneering art, which is itself a kind of utopia. This is why some scholars point out that his view of redemption is full of elitism. For example, in relation to his advocacy of artistic redemption, P. Johnson points out that modernist artwork has only a formal capacity for subversion, and that the alienation of authentic artwork from the needs of the masses deprives it of any real impact (Johnson 1984, p. 95).

In this context, might we not introduce the idea of a dynamic harmony, that is, the interconversion of Laozi and Zhuangzi, as a way of reconciling Adorno’s contradictions? However, in introducing the idea of this interconversion, we also need to be careful not to allow this dynamic harmony to become a new “positive dialectic”, i.e., harmony becomes identification. It is not that Laozi and Zhuangzi do not value contradiction and negativity but that any contradiction is the result of a failure to grasp the interconversion law of the Dao. The basis of change lies in the mutual generation of things, and from the generation of things, they can be transformed into each other. Therefore, contradictions are dissolved in this generation and transformation. In the time of the pre-Qin Daoists, the rational understanding of the subject–object dichotomy had not yet been developed. Therefore, this so-called phase interconversion was primitive and naive, i.e., it did not experience the full development of the subject’s consciousness and did not fully realize the opposition of subject and object and the specific laws of movement of contradiction. Therefore, when we assimilate Laozi’s and Zhuangzi’s ideas of interconversion, we also need to use the philosophical analysis of Adorno and others to further examine the movement of the inner categories, so as to establish a solid logic foundation for this interconversion.

In conclusion, the law of mutual generation and transformation is the more essential regularity. The ultimate aim of interconversion is to eliminate discrimination and equalize all things (齐物), which is one of the ultimate aims of theology. We can develop a new dialectical theology with the possibility of reconciliation by combining Adorno’s negative dialectics with Laozi’s and Zhuangzi’s law of interconversion.

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Notes

- ¹ The English quotations from *Laozi* in this article are taken from James Legge’s translation of the text; only the chapters are listed below and are not described cf. (Laozi 2001).

- ² The English quotations from *Zhuangzi* in this article are taken from Watson Burton's translation of the text; the chapters and page numbers are listed below and are not described. cf. (Zhuangzi and Watson 2013).
- ³ The concept of "constellation" was borrowed by Benjamin and Adorno from Jewish thought.
- ⁴ The attitude towards language in *Zhuangzi* is coherent but not identical. In the section "Discussion on Making All Things Equal", the author points out that language is the source of disagreement and the chaos of war, so that to eliminate chaos, one must eliminate "completed mind", and ultimately language. In the chapter on "External Things" he mentions "forgetting one's words". However, in "Imputed Words", the author still believes in the validity of the Three Words (especially the Goblet Words). This may be partly due to the inconsistent authorship of *Zhuangzi*, and partly due to the phased nature of the author's goal of achieving "no name". It is clear that *Zhuangzi*'s attitude towards "no name" is more resolute than that of Laozi.
- ⁵ In Chinese, 寓言 (allegory) refers to a literary work that uses a fictitious story or the anthropomorphism of a natural object to illustrate a certain truth or lesson, often with a satirical and exhortatory effect. (cf. Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 2005, p. 1670).

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