

Walter Benjamin: Analysis of the Concept of Adam State

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Abstract: This paper attempts to provide an explanation about the concept of “Adam’s state” put forward by Walter Benjamin according to his theological thinking. Adam’s state is divided into Adam’s paradise state in the garden of Eden and Adam’s secular state after his fall. As the origin of human beings, paradise state is a harmonious, unified and perfect heaven state. The secular state is the broken exile life of mankind after Adam’s fall. The paradise state is the metaphysical basis of Benjamin’s philosophy of language, while the secular state is the background where Benjamin’s philosophy presents the fragmentary characteristics and points to the doctrine of redemption. Benjamin’s Adam state is not only an important content of Benjamin’s theology, but also one of the important logical dark lines of Benjamin’s thought.

Keywords: Benjamin; Adam state; Modernity

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1. Adam state

Benjamin was born in a rich Jewish businessman family in Germany. He grew up in the Jewish-Christian cultural atmosphere. In the 20th century, when religion was in doubt, Benjamin never doubted the existence of God. After Benjamin met his close friend Scholem in 1915, Benjamin came into contact with the thoughts of Jewish spiritual leaders such as Ahad Ham, Martin Buber and Kharanaq Judaism. Especially the thoughts of Jewish spirit, such as the Kabbalah and the Messianic, had a profound influence on the construction of Benjamin’s ideological system. Unlike Scholem, Benjamin himself is not a pure Jewish believer. Christianity and Judaism are fused in Benjamin’s theological thought and serve for his criticism of modernity. Although Benjamin himself emphasized the difference between Judaism and Christianity, Christian and Jewish elements together constitute his theological thinking, and Adam’s state is the product of the combination of the two ^[1].

Adam’s state comes from Benjamin’s reinterpretation of the experience of Adam, the father of human beings in Jewish-Christian doctrine. The Adam’s state takes the degeneration of Adam as the node in Benjamin’s thought, which is divided into the state of Paradise in Paradise Lost and the secular state after being exiled. In his book *The Origin of German Tragedic Drama*, he clearly mentioned that “Adam’s action of naming things is so far removed from play or caprice that it actually confirms the state of paradise as a state in which there is as yet no need to struggle with the communicative significance of words.” Therefore, Adam’s paradise state actually refers to Adam’s experience in the garden of Eden after he was created by God. This paradise state is linked not only to the Christian biblical interpretation of human origins, but also to the Jewish Kabbalistic interpretation of the creation myth. God is the source of the legitimacy, sanctity and eternity of all life. Paradise is the space where God and all things in the world coexist and share. The

creation of God becomes the source of human pure power, the source of the existence of all things, and the origin of the truth that human beings seek. In Benjamin's understanding, God, man and nature constitute a complete and pure paradise world in the Garden of Eden. The state of Paradise refers to the original, unified and sacred existence in the garden of Eden ruled by the tree of life. All things together with man and god constitute a whole, eternal paradise world. The breaking of paradise state is due to Adam's degeneration. Adam ate the fruit of wisdom, God expressed His anger, and everything broke silence. Adam was banished from the Garden of Eden by God, and the perfect loop of heaven, earth, God and man was broken by Adam's fall. The world began to be dominated by the tree of good and evil. Adam opened his way of exile and atonement. In the secular state, the unity of the world is broken, the sacred and secular, human and nature, good and evil, beauty and ugliness begin to show their differences, and the world becomes a broken and divided world. The sacred field is gradually hidden, and secularity occupies the dominant position in the world. The secular state is the unredeemed secular life of man after the fall of Adam. In the secular state, the separation between man, God and nature makes people call for salvation, expecting to return to the Garden of Eden and the embrace of God [2-3].

As an important part of Benjamin's theology, Adam's state is consistent with his theological thought. Benjamin did not define or explain this concept. Just like the theological concepts such as "new angel" and "Messiah," researchers can only explore Benjamin's intention through his application of these concepts. Adam's paradise state is the origin of all things and the original heaven. But the perfect paradise was broken by the fall of Adam, and the secular state was the journey of the Jews in exile. Human history, as a process of decay, gradually deviates from the paradise state. Therefore, the angel is no longer singing hymns for God, but to call for the salvation of the Messiah. Only by breaking through the unredeemed secular life can we end the broken relationship between God, man and nature. But Benjamin's redemption does not mean the static return to the state of Adam's paradise. The paradise state is not a starting point to return, but the origin of human beings that cannot return in the process of the world. Therefore, Benjamin did not regard Adam's paradise state as a traceable realm of gods. The state of paradise exists only as the registration point before the world process and represents the utopian world ruled by the supreme order. Redemption refers to the return to the content of unity represented by the paradise state. In other words, the fallen cannot return to the state of purity, but the existence of authenticity, sanctity and unity should become the goal of secular mankind. Therefore, Adam's secular state must point to man's redemption. In the piece of *Fragments of Theology and Politics*, Benjamin called it "the profane illumination." Benjamin's salvation path is related to his modernity experience.

According to Scholem's recollection of Benjamin, the transcendental concept of "Lehre" occupied one of the core concepts in Benjamin's spiritual field at least from 1915 to 1927. Benjamin, based on the Hebrew Torah, interprets this as "teaching," which teaches not only the true condition and way of man in the world, but also the causality of things and their acceptance of the gods. Correct understanding of the world is the path of salvation proposed by Benjamin, that is, to know that the world originates from the unified paradise state. Only through correct understanding of this fact can we transcend the secular state and achieve "secular revelation," so as to achieve the salvation of the Messiah. Only by transcending Adam's secular state can the potential of paradise be realized and finally opened to the subject. This is also the task of historical materialism mentioned by Benjamin in his last work, *On the Concept of History*. But what Benjamin talked about is not the subjective and objective correspondence of epistemology. On the contrary, we need to abandon the previous achievements of epistemology. All logical relations in the secular world ruled by the wisdom tree are not the real essence of the thing. Truth is given by God. People's "cognition" mentioned in epistemology cannot realize the transcendental essence of things given by God. Therefore, man's activities in the world are merely mental games in the secular state. Trying to be God is the taboo of mankind that inherited Adam's original sin. Only by abandoning the common sense of

understanding and giving up the future prophecy in the secular sense can we feel the imparting of God and realize the salvation in the sacred field. In a sense, human activities have deepened the division in the secular world. The subject only needs to break the secular conventional state and return to the paradise state. "Only the Messiah himself consummates all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic." Benjamin's road of redemption has a strong sense of mystical ^[4].

2. Adam's state and philosophy of language

Referring to the Kabbalistic reflections on the function of language in the courses of human origin, Benjamin took the philosophy of language as an important content of theological metaphysical thinking. Therefore, Benjamin tries to make a new interpretation of the concept of "Adam's state" from the perspective of linguistic philosophy. This interpretation is deeply influenced by German epistemological philosophy and language philosophy. At the end of 1915, Benjamin's philosophical thinking gradually changed from thinking about the critical activities of youth to discussing the concepts of experience, cognition and knowledge. Benjamin focused on the follow-up exploration of the poor enlightenment and the failed rational movement. Benjamin became familiar with the ideas of Kant and neo-Kantianism during his college years. He believes that the reason why Kant's empiricism falls into emptiness and secularity is that Kant's philosophy attempts to pursue the expression of a logically perfect world, but ignores the essence of philosophy. Benjamin believes that the key to philosophical thinking lies in the use of language. At the same time, the nonviolence of language also makes language the basis of Benjamin's metaphysical thinking. Benjamin's experience as a Jew, as well as the turmoil in Europe at the time, was inevitably marked by violence, whether political or purely religious. All this makes Benjamin "holds fast to the reference point of constraint-free intersubjectivity of mutual understanding." Therefore, Benjamin found the field of human consensus-language as a starting point. Based on this, Benjamin developed his early view of meta-language. He believed that the task of philosophy was to call things by correct names ^[5-6].

As early as 1916, Benjamin used language as a means of communication between the sacred and the secular realms in his essay "On Language as Such and on Human Language." Influenced by theology, Benjamin divided language into God's language, human language and the language of all things. In the paradise state, God creates all things through language, and at the same time, people receive the instruction from God, naming all things, naming themselves and giving names to all things. Name is to translate God's language into human language, and it is a tool for human language to understand God's language. The name is also a tool for human beings to translate the silent existence of all things into human language, and to understand all things in this way. Therefore, Benjamin believes that truth is "a state of being, beyond all phenomenality...is that of the name," that is, the unity of the relationship between words and things. Under the rule of the tree of life, what people first see, hear and touch is the living language (the silent language of nature). Only through human naming can the meaning of nature be revealed. The name not only represents the objective attribute of the thing, but also expresses the divine essence of the thing. "The language of an entity is the medium in which its mental being is communicated... From the lowest forms of existence to man and from man to God." In the state of paradise, God, man and nature form a perfect closed loop. At the same time, Adam's paradise state is the theological basis of language translation. The translation of the language of all things into the language of men, or from one language to another, does not alter the nature of the world. This is because language is rooted in God and in the eternal sacred field. The form of language does not change the nature of things. It is worth noting that Benjamin's theory of name is actually a reflection on epistemology, especially Kant's (including neo-Kantianism) epistemology. "The original language is a pure language of names; it did not yet know of the (profane) separation between word and thing; that is, it had no need of 'knowledge' to produce artificially an identity of subject and object." Benjamin believes that subject and object are unified in the state of paradise. Therefore, in paradise

there is no opposition between subject and object [7-10].

But the paradise state of name and truth was broken with Adam's fall. Adam ate the fruits of good and evil, and human language tried to become God's language to speak creative and judgmental words. Such knowledge of good and evil "transcends itself, and the name of good and evil is no longer complete." The difference between good and evil broke the purity of the name, and mankind entered the secular state of Adam. The sacred field is closed to the main body, and the secularity and the sanctity are in conflict with each other. In the secular state, too many proper name theories destroy the name of things themselves, and it is difficult to translate the silent language of all things so that nature falls into silent sorrow and mourning. Adam's secular state is the emptiness of human language. The sacredness of language is destroyed by secularity. But the origin of language is not destroyed in the secular state, but in the state of distortion. In the secular state, the origin and secularity of language coexist, and the concreteness and symbolism coexist. However, in modern society, the instrumental and abstract characteristics of language become more and more obvious, and the logic rules and mathematical standards become the typical characteristics of modernity. Modern mechanization and depersonalization not only destroy the original cognitive form of human beings, but also destroy the spiritual essence of nature. The disenchantment of nature makes nature lose its language and become more silent. One of Benjamin's early linguistic pursuits is to restore the original unity of language in Adam's paradise, restore the name and return to truth.^[11]

This also points to Benjamin's art criticism. Artistic language is a kind of breaking of human daily language, and then dispels the profanity of human language in the secular state, and returns to the language pattern in the paradise state. The dialectical relationship between the paradise world and the secular world constructed by Benjamin has formed the tension of the development of world history. Benjamin's thinking on the existence and origin of art works and his exploration of the authentic nature of art works are based on the break of the secular state and the return of the paradise state. The world, like modern works of art, shows its characteristics of ruins. The state of human exile needs to be redeemed urgently, and the world history needs to return to the state of paradise. Mankind is looking forward to the salvation era of the Messiah.

In the paradise state and the secular state, the different forms of human language not only reflect Benjamin's reflection on epistemology, but also point to the most important concern of human nature in Benjamin's philosophy. Benjamin set the paradise state of mutual communication (translatable) among God, man and nature, and emphasized the unified relationship between man and nature on the transcendental level. But in secular state, the destruction of the name makes the communication between man and nature non-existent, and the relationship between subject and object appears as binary opposition between subject and object. Benjamin's view of language attempts to correct this opposition and points to Benjamin's ultimate goal, that is, to restore human integrity.

3. Conclusion

Adam's state plays a regulatory and explanatory role in Benjamin's thought. The binary opposition between paradise state and secular state is not only Benjamin's inheritance of traditional metaphysics, but also his important transformation of enlightenment scheme. Adam's state is that the world degenerates from a unified and harmonious state to a broken and unbalanced state, which points to the important source of legitimacy of Messiah redemption. The causes of Benjamin's thought is both mystical and rationalistic. He put the metaphysical basis of language philosophy, historical philosophy and art philosophy in Adam's paradise state. All three of them are fragmentary and secularized in Adam's secular state. Benjamin's hope is to save these three dimensions, which are so closely related to humanity, from the threat of oblivion and cover-up. Therefore, the emphasis on the present and the need to break and reconstruct all point to Benjamin's demand for the return of eternal paradise. Adam state is Benjamin's most profound

interpretation of modernity, that is, his eternal concern for secular enlightenment and his deep expectation for the coming of the Messiah era. Benjamin completed his transformation of the enlightenment program by relying on theology. He not only pays attention to the opening of mankind to the sacred field, but also returns to personal real life and historical situation. Benjamin's Adam state not only shows Benjamin's dissatisfaction with reality and criticism of modernity, but also shows Benjamin's expectation for the future. In such a contradictory and extreme state, Benjamin developed his unique thoughts, which attracted later researchers.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References and notes

- [1] Benjamin's 1917 letter to Shoreham emphasized the difference between Judaism and Christianity.
- [2] The term "Adam's state" is derived from Benjamin's account of the different world contexts before and after Adam's fall. In order to better describe the role and importance of the two stages before and after the fall based on Benjamin's thought, they are summed up as Adam's state, and divided into the paradise state before Adam's fall and the secular state after Adam's fall.
- [3] Benjamin W, 1998, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* [Osborne J, Trans.], Verso Press, 37.
- [4] Benjamin W, 1979, *One-Way Street and Other Writings* [Jephcott E and Shorter K, Trans.], NLB, London, 155.
- [5] Habermas J, 1987, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* [Lawrence F, Trans.], Polity Press, 220.
- [6] Name is translated here as designation, and the following is translated into name after person or person's name, which will not be repeated below.
- [7] Humans name themselves. Adam named his wife as soon as he took her, and man gave the children to God by naming them. Adam named his wife, which can be seen in Benjamin's article "On Language and Human Language." In the second chapter of the Genesis, Eve was born, the name of women were used to be known as Eve, and in the third chapter the name "Eve" was used. So, Adam named Eve when he just took over. See Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writing, Vol.1*, translated by Rodney Livingstone et al., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999, 69.
- [8] Benjamin W, 1998, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* [Osborne J, Trans.], Verso Press, 36.
- [9] Benjamin W, 1999, *Selected Writing, Vol.1* [Livingstone R, et al., Trans.], Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 74.
- [10] Walling R, 1982, *Walter Benjamin: The Aesthetics of Redemption*, Columbia University Press, New York, 42.
- [11] Benjamin W, 1999, *Selected Writing, Vol.1* [Livingstone R, et al., Trans.], Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 71.