About the person:

Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969) was a philosopher, sociologist, art theorist, composer, and, together with Max Horkheimer (1874–1973), one of the most important representatives of the Frankfurt School. His mother, Maria Calvelli-Adorno, was a trained singer and a Catholic. His father, Oscar Alexander Wiesengrund, a successful wine wholesaler, came from a Jewish family but converted to Protestantism. Adorno himself was baptized as a Catholic. In 1931, he delivered his inaugural lecture as a private lecturer in philosophy, but as early as 1933, the Nazis revoked his teaching license. It was not his father, who had converted to Protestantism, but Hitler himself who made him a Jew, the journalist Dorothea Razumovsky later said of him. Adorno first emigrated to England, then moved on to the United States in 1938. He returned to Germany for the first time in 1949 and settled there permanently in 1953. Together with Max Horkheimer, he examined in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* why a civilization committed to reason and progress could relapse into barbarism. In *Minima Moralia*, *Negative Dialectics*, and the 1950 study *The Authoritarian Personality*—published in collaboration with other researchers—he analyzed antisemitism, fascism, and authoritarian thinking. In an AI-facilitated conversation with Fokusisrael.ch, Theodor Adorno discusses antisemitism and Auschwitz, humans and animals, and his views on entirely new forms of domination.

Theodor Adorno said, “Anti-Semitism is the rumor about the Jews.” When you read the newspaper or scroll through social media today, do you recognize that rumor?

Theodor Adorno: Absolutely . And it’s spreading much faster than it used to. But its essence has remained the same. The anti-Semite has no need for the real Jew. He knows in advance what he will find: the Jew is a capitalist and a Bolshevik, weak and all-powerful, rootless and at the same time part of a worldwide conspiracy. These internal contradictions do not refute the rumor. They give it flexibility.

When do such rumors become dangerous? In your *Studies on the Authoritarian Character*, you describe an attitude that submits to those above and tramples on those below. So, the typical fascist?

Theodor Adorno: Don’t get too comfortable. The authoritarian personality doesn’t necessarily wear a uniform. Even someone who is completely convinced of their own moral superiority can be authoritarian. The authoritarian personality uncritically submits to the authorities and norms of his own group and reacts with aggression

toward those who deviate from them. He thinks in rigid categories, reveres strength, and despises weakness. All of this can also be concealed behind the certainty of being on the morally right side.

But the authoritarian nature of the regime alone does not fully explain Auschwitz. Why was the extermination directed specifically against the Jews?

Theodor Adorno: Because European anti-Semitism had turned Jews into a projection screen for centuries. Excluded from many areas of society while at the same time being identified with commerce and the financial system, Jews were, in the eyes of anti-Semites, both outside of society and supposedly at the center of its power. Jews were attributed with money, power, intellect, and otherness, and were held responsible for social contradictions whose true causes were not understood. In the Jew, the anti-Semite fought against what he both feared and desired. The real human being disappeared behind this distorted image. The National Socialist turned this into the “counter-race,” the absolute evil, whose annihilation was supposed to redeem the world.

That explains the desire to annihilate. But it does not explain how an enlightened civilization could have turned that into Auschwitz.

Theodor Adorno: No . Enlightenment does not necessarily lead to Auschwitz—but neither does it protect against it. Where reason limits itself to finding the most effective means for a given end, it can also serve barbarism. The extermination of the Jews was irrational in its goal and, at the same time, organized with terrifying rationality. This is precisely where the dialectic lies. Our critique is directed not against reason itself, but against its reduction to calculation, expediency, and domination.

And what remains of God after Auschwitz?

Theodor Adorno: Auschwitz has irrevocably shattered the notion of a good and just world as a whole. But it does not follow that the longing for redemption has become meaningless. Precisely because the world cannot make amends for the suffering, the idea remains that injustice must not have the last word.

You were raised Catholic; your father came from a Jewish family. Did you consider yourself Jewish?

Theodor Adorno: Not in the religious sense. I wasn’t raised as a Jew. But the anti-Semite doesn’t ask how a person sees themselves. The Nazis turned my origins into my fate. Perhaps this is precisely what teaches us something about identity: It is not only what we believe ourselves to be, but sometimes also what others make of us.

Before this experience, what did a Jewish state mean to you?

Theodor Adorno: After Auschwitz, the fact that Jews have a place where their safety does not depend on the goodwill of others is not merely a geopolitical issue, but an existential one

But Israel is, after all, also a state that exercises power.

Theodor Adorno: A state remains a state. Its government can err, commit injustices, and make disastrous decisions. Criticism of this is not anti-Semitic. However, it can become so if Israel is declared the sole embodiment of evil, the violence of its opponents is ignored, or Jews elsewhere are held responsible for its policies. Anti-Semitism has learned to change its language.

… and can masquerade as morality.

Theodor Adorno: That is precisely when anti-Semitism becomes dangerous. The perpetrator rarely considers himself evil. He sees himself as the defender of good.

And what if someone, out of moral conviction, denies Israel’s right to exist?

Theodor Adorno: Then he should ask himself what this conviction means for those whose safety depends on the existence of this state. Morality becomes abstract as soon as it no longer sees concrete suffering. Then the individual disappears behind the category—the “Israeli,” the “Zionist,” the “Jew.” The category takes the place of the human being. Therein lies an element of domination: the individual is to be whatever the judgment passed on him determines him to be.

She and Max Horkheimer also associate domination with our relationship to nature.

Theodor Adorno: Human beings are nature itself. They have bodies; they age, suffer, desire, fall ill, and die. Civilization has taught them to be ashamed of precisely those things that remind them of this.

For his own body?

Theodor Adorno: Because of his dependence on it. Horkheimer may have seen this aspect even more clearly. Civilized man does not merely master external nature. He must also master the nature within himself. Hunger, sexuality, pain, fear, fatigue—all of these must be controlled. The mind is regarded as the higher realm, the physical as the lower.

Is that where the animal comes into play?

Theodor Adorno: Exactly. The animal reminds humans of what they have painstakingly distanced themselves from: physicality, neediness, mortality, nature. In a sense, they see in it the self they have left behind. At the same time, the animal becomes the antithesis of humans: humans possess reason, while animals are said to possess only instinct. Humans are the end; animals are the means. Humans rule; animals are ruled.

What effect does this hierarchy have on people themselves?

Theodor Adorno: It accustoms him to a coldness that turns a life capable of suffering into a disposable object and accepts his suffering with indifference. This indifference can be directed against human beings as soon as they, too, are reified. In the concentration camps, this logic of reification reached its monstrous extreme: people were registered, sorted, transported, and ultimately administratively exterminated.

That sounds like equating a slaughterhouse with a concentration camp.

Theodor Adorno: No , that equivalence would be wrong. Auschwitz refers to a historically specific, anti-Semitic, and state-organized crime against humanity. The connection lies not in the similarity of the events, but in a way of thinking: a being capable of suffering is reduced to disposable material. Its individual suffering loses its meaning. And observe the language of persecution: People are declared to be rats, vermin, or beasts. They are symbolically turned into animals—and this already presupposes that one may treat animals almost however one pleases.

For you, domination doesn’t begin only with overt violence. You have also criticized the culture industry for shaping thought and perception. Would artificial intelligence be its culmination?

Theodor Adorno: Perhaps its technical perfection. The culture industry standardized what people see, hear, and desire. A machine that also tells them what they should

know, think, and decide could extend this conformity into their very thinking. “There is no real life in the false one” never meant that resistance is futile. Rather, it becomes dangerous when the false life is no longer even experienced as false.

And what if, one day, a human-machine hybrid or artificial intelligence takes over?

Theodor Adorno: Then an old question resurfaced in a new form: What happens to the weaker one when the stronger one no longer needs him? We justify our dominion over other living beings on the basis of our superior intelligence. How do we respond to a being that one day becomes far superior to us and derives the same right from that superiority?

Then we ourselves would be the animal.

Theodor Adorno: Perhaps humanity must first go through this experience in order to understand what was wrong with its old rationale. Humanity begins where we see in the weaker no reason to dominate, but rather a reason to limit our power.

Remark: This interview is based on statements and writings by Theodor Adorno that were identified and compiled using AI. In our series “Conversations with Legends,” we speak with figures from politics, religion, academia, and culture who have been significant to Judaism and Israel. Our aim is to introduce them and their ideas to today’s audience. Interviews published so far include Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, Chaim Weizmann, Israel’s first president, David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, Israel’s only female prime minister, Golda Meir, Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian president, who traveled to Jerusalem in 1977 to make peace with Israel, Moses, who led the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt to freedom, with the one who lived in the 12th and 13th centuries the great Jewish scholar Maimonides, with whom former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, Lord Jonathan Sacks, Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, Albert Einstein, the founder of the theory of relativity, Robert Oppenheimer, the “father of the atomic bomb,” the Hollywood icon and inventor Hedy Lamarr, the entrepreneur Estée Lauder, and the Nobel Prize in Economics laureate Milton Friedman, Levi Strauss, the inventor of jeans, the writer, and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel and the Italian chemist and writer Primo Levi.