

## **Adorno's Ethics Without the Ineffable\***

### I. Introduction

There is a perennial problem affecting Adorno's philosophy. It seems to lack the resources to account for the normativity it contains. In an influential article, Finlayson has analyzed this problem and offered an intriguing solution to it.<sup>1</sup> According to Finlayson, Adorno subscribes to a normative ethics, but this normative commitment is in tension with his view that we cannot know the good or any positive values (in short, with his negativism). Finlayson argues that by drawing only on resources within Adorno's philosophy, it is, however, possible to provide access to a kind of good which is suitable as a normative basis for his ethics (namely, the good involved in the experiences of having ineffable insights), and this is the best way to resolve the tension between Adorno's normative commitment and his negativism.

In this paper, I show that this proposal is unsuitable as (1) a normative basis of Adorno's ethics and also as (2) an explanation of the possibility of people acting according to this ethics. I end by outlining an alternative solution and by defending it against Finlayson's objections.

### II. Finlayson's reconstruction of Adorno's ethics

According to Finlayson, Adorno subscribes to an "ethics of resistance."<sup>2</sup> This ethics is a normative ethics insofar as it tells us how we should live in the late capitalist social world. It also provides a rationale for why we should live in the way it requires us to live. This rationale takes the form of a "new categorical imperative", which demands of us to arrange our "thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself."<sup>3</sup> In particular, this involves the requirement to resist the social

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<sup>1</sup> J.G. Finlayson, "Adorno on the Ethical and the Ineffable," *European Journal of Philosophy* 10.1 (April 2002): 1–25.

<sup>2</sup> Finlayson, "Adorno on the Ethical and the Ineffable," 5f.

<sup>3</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966), p. 358/translated as *Negative Dialectics* by E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 365. Henceforth "ND."

world we live in—for this social world is radically evil. This evil is exemplified in the events to which Adorno refers by using the name “Auschwitz”, but it is not restricted to these events. Just the opposite: according to Finlayson’s reconstruction of Adorno’s views, the whole social world and the model of rationality on which it is built are evil root and branch,<sup>4</sup> and deserve to be resisted in virtue of this.

It is one of the merits of Finlayson’s article that he tries to reconstruct in more detail what Adorno’s ethics of resistance requires of us.<sup>5</sup> According to this reconstruction, we should adopt “(...) various strategies of self-conscious non-cooperation with institutionalized forms of social unfreedom and with prevailing norms and values.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, it is constitutive of a life of resistance to develop and exercise certain dispositions and corresponding modes of behavior which Finlayson calls “virtues.”<sup>7</sup> Of these, there are three: (I) “autonomy” (as Finlayson translates “*Mündigkeit*”), that is, the “capacity to take a critical stance and to act on it”; (II) “humility” (as he translates “*Bescheidenheit*”), that is, “consciousness of one’s own fallibility” and (III) “affection”, that is, the “capacity to be moved by (...) the fate of others.”<sup>8</sup> These virtues are directly related to what the New Categorical Imperative requires of us. It was the absence of affection, humility and autonomy and the prevalence of the opposite character traits (submission to authority, self-certainty, and bourgeois coldness) which made Auschwitz possible. Conversely, a sufficiently widespread practice of the three virtues might prevent its reoccurrence—there is no guarantee that it will, but the individual exercising these virtues will at least be unlikely to partake directly in such events. However, deploying the three virtues successfully requires that they are developed and exercised together. For example, autonomy needs to be kept in check by humility, for otherwise it

<sup>4</sup> Finlayson, “Adorno on the Ethical and the Ineffable,” 2-4.

<sup>5</sup> For a slightly different reconstruction of Adorno’s ethics, see my “Moral Philosophy,” in D. Cook (ed.), *Adorno – Key Concepts* (London: Acumen, 2008), Ch. 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Finlayson is aware that talk of “virtues” traditionally takes place in the context of describing the constitutive ingredients of a good life or human flourishing; yet, he does not think that this makes the term inapplicable (*Ibid.*, 7). Presumably, this is because the qualities Finlayson has in mind share with virtues as they are traditionally conceived that these qualities are constitutive of a certain way of life (albeit in this case a life of resistance, not the good life) and that they are dispositions and modes of behaviour which cannot be cashed out in terms of definite rules.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 6f

would be “ossifying into moral self-righteousness.”<sup>9</sup>

For the later discussion, it is worth noting two points which Finlayson does not explicitly acknowledge. Firstly, Adorno’s ethics of resistance and the virtues constitutive of it are *historically specific*—they are a reaction to the particular social evil of the modern social world and do not arise from a transhistorical or *a priori* analysis of how we should live or of the concept of resistance. For example, resistance to other evils might involve quite different virtues, such as boastfulness instead of humility. Similarly, if Adorno were to write an ethics for a free society, such an ethics would, presumably, also be quite different—there would be no need any more to require of people to resist this society, and while the three virtues might still be of importance, the list of virtues might be longer. Even the New Categorical Imperative is best seen as something historically specific in the sense that its justification lies in reacting adequately to particular events—the genocide of the European Jews.<sup>10</sup> This is, indeed, one of the points Adorno is making against Kant: neither the formal structure of pure practical reason, nor any other discursive grounding is suitable as justification.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, while Adorno might accept the kind of constraints on action which are the most likely candidates for an ahistorical, minimalist ethics (such as the demands that we should not murder, torture or enslave others), these constraints do not exhaust his ethical perspective. In fact, they are not even its core. That core is made up by what is required specifically to resist the radical evil of the modern world, that is, on Finlayson’s reconstruction, the three virtues of autonomy, humility and affection.

Secondly, Adorno’s ethics, as reconstructed by Finlayson, is *minimalist*. Adorno does not subscribe to a full-blown ethics which regulates every aspect of our live and promises us the possibility of right or even good living, if strictly adhered to. Rather, Adorno merely subscribes to a “*minima moralia*”, to an ethics which offers limited guidance and which does not leave room for

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 7; on this danger, see T.W. Adorno, *Probleme der Moralphilosophie (1963)*, ed. by T. Schröder (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996)/translated as *Problems of Moral Philosophy* by R. Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), lecture 16.

<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the New Categorical Imperative along these lines, see J.M. Bernstein, *Adorno—Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Ch. 8.

<sup>11</sup> See ND, 358/365.

the possibility of right living.

### III. The Problem of Normativity and Finlayson's proposed solution to it:

It has often been argued that Adorno cannot account for the normativity of his ethics (or, indeed, the normativity of his philosophy as a whole). For example, Habermas objects on two counts to Adorno's critical theory.<sup>12</sup> Firstly, he doubts that Adorno could explain the possibility of there being critical individuals in late capitalism, given that Adorno describes this social form as an almost completely "administered world [*verwaltete Welt*]" and "delusional system [*Verblendungs-zusammenhang*]." And, secondly, Habermas calls into question that Adorno could justify his critical stance towards this society. It is this second problem which is central to the discussion in this paper (although we will also briefly return to the first one later on). Habermas and other critics elsewhere speak of it in terms of Adorno's philosophy lacking "normative foundations [*normative Grundlagen*]."<sup>13</sup> Thus, what these critics are demanding is a justificatory account of the ethical and normative requirements of Adorno's theory and, according to them, this demand cannot be met within this theory. Call this the *Problem of Normativity*.

Finlayson recognizes that this is a problem. He admits that it would be necessary to "(...) justify the 'ought' claims of his [Adorno's] social and ethical theory (...)" and to "(...) give his philosophy a practical orientation to the present."<sup>14</sup> In particular, what would have to be justified is the claim that late capitalism is radically evil and in virtue of this deserves to be resisted. The worry of Adorno's critics is that he could not justify this claim because he could not say that late capitalism is radically evil (or that this evil would deserve to be resisted) without appealing to a conception of the good, and he could not appeal to such a conception because of his negativism.<sup>15</sup> A

<sup>12</sup> J. Habermas, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. by F.G. Lawrence (London: Heinemann, 1983), pp. 101-107.

<sup>13</sup> See J. Habermas (1984), *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1: *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. by T. McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity, 1984), p. 374; see also S. Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: a study of the foundations of critical theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), especially Chs. 5-6.

<sup>14</sup> Finlayson, "Adorno on the Ethical and the Ineffable," 5.

<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Finlayson argues (following Theunissen) that Adorno cannot (contrary to what he sometimes tries to do) read what ought to be (the good) from the "traces of its reflection" in what ought not to be (the bad), since this would conflict with Adorno's own commitment that the negation of the a negation is not yet something positive (*Ibid.*, 10).

conception of the good (or of a suitable specific good) would be required, for example because otherwise we could not justify that the structurally induced domination and brutality of late capitalism are radically evil and deserve resistance, rather than being, say, (a) unavoidable evils which cannot be resisted, or (b) bads which should be tolerated because they are preferable to the direct domination and brutality which characterized earlier social forms, or perhaps (c) not bads after all.

Finlayson's strategy in defending Adorno is to argue that the good is available within Adorno's philosophy—or, to be more precise, that a specific good is available which is suitable to provide the normative basis of his ethics of resistance. If Finlayson is right about this, then the Problem of Normativity could be avoided and Adorno's philosophy would not be guilty of this deep-seated incoherence after all.

The challenge which Finlayson's defense faces is to show how such a good is available within Adorno's philosophy, despite statements by Adorno which seem to suggest that no good or positive value whatsoever are available in the radically evil modern social world.<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, in his article Finlayson is oscillating between two different ways of meeting this challenge. Initially, Finlayson's approach seems to consist in restricting the *scope* of Adorno's negativism, namely, restricting it to the thesis that we cannot have *conceptual* access to or knowledge of the good (or a suitable specific good). As Finlayson writes: "One cannot think the good by means of concepts without identifying it and thereby doing injustice to it. (...)" Consequently, Adorno has to seek a non-discursive or non-conceptual mode of access to the good."<sup>17</sup> One reason for attaching such a scope restriction to Adorno's negativism could be that conceptualization is particularly deeply implicated in the radical evil of the modern social world, but the same is not true of other ways of knowing and experiencing (such as certain forms of aesthetic engagement with the world). Hence, according to this reinterpretation of Adorno's

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<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Adorno's remarks about the possibility of positivity after Auschwitz (ND, 354/361).

<sup>17</sup> Finlayson, "Adorno on the Ethical and the Ineffable," 11; see also 4.

negativism, the good exists and we can have non-conceptual access to it; the only thing we cannot do is to conceptualize it. The good is hidden from conceptual thought, but not necessarily from all forms of experiencing whatsoever.<sup>18</sup> If Finlayson were to take this line, he would not be the only commentator to do so. Others before him have already, albeit less explicitly, taken this path. For example, there is a tendency among some commentator to ascribe to Adorno the view that we could gain knowledge of the good through aesthetic means.<sup>19</sup>

However, later on in the article, Finlayson seems to deny that for Adorno the good is given at all.<sup>20</sup> If so, it becomes irrelevant which form (conceptual or non-conceptual) the alleged access to the good takes. Also, Finlayson is skeptical at this point that Adorno actually exempted the non-conceptual forms of knowing and experiencing (such as art) from the strictures of negativism. This is partly because these other practices cannot stand on their own, but for Adorno always require philosophical interpretation and thereby conceptualization.<sup>21</sup> We could not know the good through an aesthetic presentation of it. In this sense, the idea of a non-conceptual, non-discursive access to the good is blocked on Finlayson's interpretation of Adorno. And this also fits the text better. For example, Adorno claims that even our imagination—a potential source of non-conceptual acquaintance with the good—is so affected by the radically evil world that it cannot provide us with access to the good.<sup>22</sup>

In these later parts of the article Finlayson shifts to an alternative approach to meet the challenge of making his defense strategy compatible with Adorno's negativism and this seems to be his considered view. According to this second approach, it is by undergoing the experiences of attempting, but failing to think the non-identical that we have access to and knowledge of a specific good (and this specific good is, moreover, suitable as normative basis of Adorno's ethics). The

<sup>18</sup> See *Ibid.*, 11, where Finlayson talks of the good as hidden from conceptual thought.

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., R. Bubner, "Kann Theorie ästhetisch werden? Zum Hauptmotiv der Philosophie Adornos," in B. Lindner & M. Lüdke (eds.), *Materialien zur ästhetischen Theorie Theodor W. Adornos – Konstruktio[n] der Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), pp 108-137; H. Brunkhorst, *Adorno and Critical Theory* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Finlayson, "Adorno on the Ethical and the Ineffable," 16.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 17f.

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., ND, 345/352.

access and knowledge is here, at least in part, conceptual, so that on this second approach Adorno's negativism is not restricted in scope (as applying only to conceptualization), but in terms of its *content*: reinterpreted in this way, it says that we have not and cannot have access to the good, but can still have access to specific goods. Finlayson does not explicitly present his view in this way, but this is the best way of making sense of what he does say.

To make this second approach work as a defense strategy of Adorno, Finlayson needs to show (a) that Adorno does, indeed, think that we could gain access to a specific good by undergoing the experiences of attempting, but failing to think the non-identical, and (b) that the specific good in question is of the right kind to provide a normative basis of Adorno's ethics of resistance.

Finlayson's argument for (a) is rather complex.<sup>23</sup> The first step in this argument is that Finlayson makes two interpretative claims. Firstly, according to Finlayson, the main task of philosophy for Adorno is to think what escapes conceptual thought, that is, to think what Adorno refers to as the “non-identical [*Nichtidentische*]”, “the inexpressible [*Unsagbare; Unausdrückliche*]”, or “the non-conceptual [*Begriffslose; Nichtbegriffliche*]”.<sup>24</sup> Finlayson's guiding idea is that any ethics within Adorno's theory should be compatible with this main task, or, better still, tightly connected to it. Secondly, Finlayson claims that what Adorno calls the “non-identical” is best captured by term “the ineffable.”<sup>25</sup> In particular, this interpretation has two advantages: (1) it is less “prejudicial” than the other terms Adorno uses to describe what cannot be captured by conceptual thought; and (2) it allows us to connect Adorno's idea of thinking the non-identical with other (credible) philosophical projects, such as the negative theology of Nicholas of Cusa and Wittgensteinian thoughts about what can be shown, but not said.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> See Finlayson, “Adorno on the Ethical and the Ineffable,” 11-18.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> I will here ignore Finlayson's comparison of Adorno's position with De Cusa's negative theology (*Ibid.*, 12ff), since this comparison is not of importance for the critical discussion which is to follow. It mainly serves the role of disarming the charge of mysticism and irrationalism lodged against Adorno by his critics: Finlayson claims that de Cusa's negative theology is philosophically legitimate, and then argues by analogy that insofar as Adorno's project of attempting, but failing to think the ineffable is structurally similar to Cusa's project, it is also philosophically

The second step is to provide a closer analysis of the ineffable and the experiences involved “(...) in trying to think something which eludes conceptual thought.”<sup>27</sup> Finlayson is fairly open as to what the intended objects of these experiences are. Presumably, God, or the Absolute, or what Hegel calls the “true infinite” would be among them, but trying to think a single particular might also count as an attempt to think what eludes conceptual thought. Thus, there is a multiplicity of intended objects which could potentially be involved in the experiences in question. Finlayson is also open about which form these experiences will take. Some of these experiences in question might be aesthetic experiences,<sup>28</sup> but what matters is that they are attempts at thinking or grasping what eludes conceptual thought, not first and foremost that they are *aesthetic*. It might well be the case that attempts to grasp what eludes conceptual thought could also be made in other fields—philosophy or theology being the most likely candidates. For example, Finlayson mentions Adorno’s central thought of arranging concepts in a constellation in order to “(...) represent from without what the concepts have excised within, the ‘more’ which the concepts strives to be, and fails to be in equal measure.”<sup>29</sup> Finally, Finlayson’s account of the ineffable follows A.W. Moore influential analysis, according to which the ineffable denotes that which cannot be expressed or conceptualized or uttered *as a matter of principle*.<sup>30</sup> Any attempts to think what eludes conceptual thought are inevitably bound to fail. In a nutshell, the reason for this is that thinking requires conceptualization and with the latter comes the possibility of articulation, so that thinking the in-principle-inexpressible is impossible.

This final point has an important implication: whatever value is at issue in the experiences involved in thinking what eludes conceptual thought, it cannot be that the value or good is ineffable and we have insight into it. Rather, the value or goodness involved must consist in, or derive from, the attempt of grasping the ineffable *qua* act or state. Finlayson is well aware of

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legitimate.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>29</sup> ND, 164/162; quoted in Finlayson, “Adorno on the Ethical and the Ineffable,” 15.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 14; with references. See especially A.W. Moore, *Points of View* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) p. 148.

this and insists on it.<sup>31</sup> In fact, he proposes that the value in question lies in the goodness of recognizing our human finitude which the experiences in question demonstrate to us. Thus, strictly speaking, we do not gain access to goodness by having insight into an ineffable, hidden good. Rather, the experiential states of the failed attempts to gain insights into the ineffable are what are valuable, and the access to goodness is, hence, undergoing these experiences.

These experiential states are, at least in part, conceptual—while what we aimed to say cannot be put into words, that we are shown something in this (failed) attempts to express the ineffable can be put into words.<sup>32</sup> We can describe that we are shown something and what this experience is like. In fact, we can even speak of knowledge in this context (at least, “broadly speaking”),<sup>33</sup> since we make some cognitive advance in attempting to grasp what eludes conceptual thought. We might not have learned something about the nature of the intended objects of our failed attempts to grasp the ineffable (such as God, or true infinity, or the single particular), but in the process we learned something about the finitude and nature of human cognition itself. In this sense, Finlayson does talk of “ineffable insights”, but what he means is not “insights into the ineffable”, but insights which are gained from trying (but inevitably failing) to think the ineffable. (Throughout this paper, I follow Finlayson in understanding “ineffable insights” in this way).

The next step in the argument is that Finlayson makes a further interpretative claim: having experiences and gaining knowledge is valuable for Adorno, either instrumentally or intrinsically.<sup>34</sup> In particular, the positive value in question consists in happiness: cognitive experiences are connected to happiness, either intrinsically (in being happy states) or instrumentally (in enabling us to do things which satisfy our desires and thereby give rise to happiness).

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<sup>31</sup> Finlayson, “Adorno on the Ethical and the Ineffable,” 16.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 16f. Unfortunately, Finlayson misidentifies the source of the key quotation on which his interpretation rests—it is not to be found in *Ästhetische Theorie*, as Finlayson claims (*ibid.*, 16), but instead is in “Resignation” [1969] (reprinted in T.W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 20 Vols., ed. by G. Adorno & R. Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973-1986), 10.2:798f; henceforth “GS”). Also, there is room for disagreement about his interpretation of this passage. Still, the view that knowledge is valuable is independently plausible, and I will not press this matter further, other than mentioning a different interpretation in passing below (in note 43).

Moreover, according to Finlayson, trying to think the ineffable fulfills no instrumental goal and, in fact, could not fulfill any such goal, since the nature of the relevant experiences is insufficiently transparent for any instrumental purpose: unlike other forms of cognition, these experiences tell us only about the state of knowledge, not what the knowledge is good for.<sup>35</sup> Yet, since all experiences and forms of gaining knowledge are valuable in one of the two ways for Adorno, the experiences involved must then be intrinsically valuable for him.

This leaves Finlayson's with the task (b): showing that this specific intrinsic good is suitable as a "normative basis of an ethics of resistance."<sup>36</sup> Here the argument is much more straightforward. According to Finlayson, the goodness of experiences involved in trying, but failing to think what eludes conceptual thought is suitable to underwrite Adorno's ethics of resistance because the three virtues constitutive of this ethics are also constitutive of these experiences. Thus, gaining ineffable insights, the experience of being shown something, requires that one is not just passive, but actively makes use of one's disposition for and capacity of critical reflection, that is, that one exercises one's autonomy. Similarly, the virtue of humility links up with the idea of epistemological modesty which arises from the attempt to think the ineffable; and the capacity for affection involves the same kind of receptivity and sensibility as is required for being shown something.

In sum, Finlayson aligns Adorno's notion of the non-identical with the notion of the ineffable and points to the value of the experiences involved in the failed attempts to think it. Moreover, he shows how this value relates to the three virtues and thereby can serve as the normative basis of Adorno's ethics of resistance. In this way, Finlayson seems to have rescued Adorno's ethics from the danger of incoherence.

The advantage of this way of underwriting Adorno's normative ethics is that there is a clear link between his ethics and his concern with thinking the non-identical (interpreted by

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<sup>35</sup> Finlayson, "Adorno on the Ethical and the Ineffable," 17.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

Finlayson, as thinking the ineffable). In other words, there is a connection between Adorno's theoretical and practical philosophy. In fact, in a certain sense, on Finlayson's proposal it would be Adorno's theoretical philosophy that underwrites his practical philosophy: the 'happiness of knowledge' [*Glück der Erkenntnis*] derived from certain experiences functions as the normative basis of Adorno's ethics and the epistemic virtues involved in such experiences double up as ethical ones.

#### IV. Critique of Finlayson's proposal taken as a justificatory account

The step of Finlayson's argument on which I want to focus my critique is the crucial final one. Thus, for the sake of argument, I grant Finlayson that Adorno's non-identical can be equated with the ineffable and his claim that for Adorno the experience of attempting, but inevitably failing to gain knowledge of it is valuable. In general, I here leave concerns about textual matters (largely) aside and concentrate on the philosophical issues instead.

There are two reasons for thinking that Finlayson's proposed solution is unpromising as a justificatory account. Both of these cast doubt on the possibility that the specific intrinsic value (or good) gained through ineffable experiences is suitable as normative basis of Adorno's ethics.

Firstly, recall that the ineffable is that which it is *as a matter of principle* impossible to put into words and to gain insight into. Attempts to think or grasp the ineffable will always fail. The goodness involved in such failed attempts is, hence, something which would occur in any society and at any point of history. It has nothing specifically to do with the modern social world and its forms of thought. This shows that the value which allegedly arises from the failed attempts of thinking the ineffable is not of the right kind to underwrite Adorno's ethics *qua* ethics which requires us to oppose a particular, historically developed social world. Finlayson's proposal is unsuitable as a justificatory account because the goodness of ineffable experiences does not relate or contrast to the radical evil of late capitalism in a way which would ground resistance to the latter. This historically specific radical evil does not consist in blocking insights into the ineffable—in

fact, it cannot consist in this, since such insights are *in principle* blocked.

Secondly, even if one granted that the value of having ineffable insights provides a normative basis for the three virtues contained in the ethics of resistance, it does not provide such a basis for them as ethical qualities, but merely as epistemic ones and as constitutive of a certain form of experiencing. Nothing which Finlayson says shows that Adorno's theoretical philosophy could underwrite (in the sense of justify) his practical philosophy. The fact that certain dispositions are connected to a valuable experiential state is not a justification for practicing these virtues in a different context—the context of deciding how to act in ethical situations. It is unlikely that the valuable experiential states will occur in this different context, and even if they did, this occurrence by itself would not be a justification. At most, Finlayson's proposal could explain that we cannot but act in certain ways once we have acquired these dispositions, but that by itself would not justify acting in such ways.

There are three ways in which Finlayson (or those defending his proposal) could respond to these objections. Firstly, one of the things to which Adorno objects is that life in the modern social world has led to a narrower set of experiences—our experiences have become more uniform and regimented. In fact, if Adorno is to be believed, the very ability to make unrestricted experiences (that is, the ability to remain open to be formed by the object of experience rather than forming it according to some preconceived conceptual scheme) is being progressively undermined by the culture industry and other aspects of the modern social world (such as the repetitive and impoverished nature of many occupations). Perhaps, this means that the modern social world also blocks the experiences of attempting but failing to grasp the ineffable. In this way, one could say that this social world blocks the goodness associated with these experiences and that it is in this sense bad (and worthy of being resisted).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> This reply could be strengthened further if Finlayson dropped his equation of the ineffable with the non-identical. Thus, instead of interpreting Adorno as saying that the non-identical is that which is *in principle* ineffable (as Finlayson proposes), one could interpret Adorno as saying that the non-identical is that which cannot be captured *within the conceptual framework of modern rationality*. Then it might be true that one of the things which make up the evil of capitalism is the badness of the fact that the modern world and mode of rationality block the possibility of unrestricted experience of the non-identical. This badness would be specific to capitalism, and as such it would

However, even if so, this would not be all what is evil about this social world for Adorno, or even what is mainly evil about it. To forego the goodness of certain experiences seems of rather peripheral importance if what is at stake is avoiding the reoccurrence of torture and genocide. Consequently, the idea that the social world blocks the goodness associated with the experiences of ineffable insights cannot really do the main justificatory work for Adorno's ethics of resistance. Moreover, the key rationale for this ethics, as identified by Finlayson, was to prevent another Auschwitz from happening, not to reinstate the capacity for unrestricted experiences. Admittedly, one way to prevent the reoccurrence of Auschwitz might be to prevent a further restriction of experiences (since such a restriction might have been partly responsible for the bourgeois coldness which made Auschwitz possible in the first place). Still, this would then *follow* as a specific prescription from the New Categorical Imperative, rather than justify this imperative and the ethics of which it is part.

Alternatively, Finlayson could argue against the charge that his proposal is insufficiently historically specific to capture Adorno's ethics by re-interpreting this ethics as merely consisting in a transhistorical moral minimalism.<sup>38</sup> In particular, he could emphasize a sense in which the New Categorical Imperative is not historically specific: its content, on this interpretation, is meant to hold for the future, even if it is indexed to a particular historical event.

However, not only would this reply be highly implausible as a reading of Adorno's texts, it would also not be convincing as philosophical position. The goodness of the experiences involved in ineffable insights would still be of the wrong sort for a justificatory account of normativity of Adorno's ethics: the value of being shown something about the finitude of human cognition does not seem suitable as key to an account of the ethical demands of moral minimalism—for example, it is implausible to suggest that the demand not to torture derives from this value.

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be at least a suitable candidate for underpinning Adorno's historically specific ethics of resistance. However, it would be overly reductionist to suggest that the normativity at issue is exhausted in the badness of the modern conceptual framework. Any account of the normativity of Adorno's ethical perspective has to be wider, and, hence, even the revised version of Finlayson's proposal is unsatisfactory.

<sup>38</sup> Finlayson suggested this rejoinder in response to an earlier version of this paper (08/09/2007).

Also, a transhistorical interpretation would be committed to the claim that resistance as such requires the virtues of humility, autonomy and affection, and validating this claim would be a tall order—as mentioned before, resistance might well require the opposite of humility in certain circumstances. Moreover, the justification of the New Categorical Imperative should not be understood as independent of the particular events to which it explicitly refers—this would be to overlook Adorno’s very purpose in formulating a New Categorical Imperative against Kant’s conception of the categorical imperative and strategy of justifying it. Consequently, even this second line of reply is unconvincing.

As a final reply, Finlayson could argue that my objections overlook that the value of becoming aware of the finitude and limits of the human cognitive capacities is of particular importance in the context of modern society and rationality. It is one of the central theses of Adorno that this society and rationality have led to a particular disregard of the non-identical—with the full development of capitalist production, the natural sciences, and modern instrumental rationality, the non-identical is much more systematically and thoroughly disregarded than would have been possible under any earlier social form. In this sense, we can cash out the historically specific evil of the modern social world in terms of the heightened disregard of the non-identical which is characteristic of this world and its dominant thought form (i.e., what Adorno calls “identity thinking” [*Identitätsdenken*]). Similarly, we can base the historically specific ethics of resistance on the goodness of the experience of having ineffable insights, since this goodness can act as a counterweight against the heightened disregard of the non-identical. After Auschwitz, we have a special need for this kind of experience, even if it might well have been around forever. In this sense, Finlayson’s proposal can cater for the historic specific sense of the ethics of resistance after all.

This might look like the most promising reply, but it cannot rescue Finlayson’s proposal, at least not as a justificatory account. Firstly, the goodness of the experiences involved in

the insights gained from trying, but failing to think the ineffable might perhaps act as a counterweight to the badness of the heightened disregard of the non-identical in our times, but it is not suitable as justification for why this disregard is bad or why modern society is evil in virtue of leading to more of such disregard than ever before. The fact that we might have a specific historic need for such experiences (and the goodness they entail) presupposes, rather than shows, that something has gone amiss in the modern world. Moreover, the goodness of the experiences is, even on this reading, too limited to underwrite Adorno's ethics. The only way it could function as a justification of this ethics would be to commit Finlayson to a reductionist account of Adorno's conception of badness, that is, to the view that all what is bad about the modern social world is that it makes us forgo the goodness of certain experiences and especially so, when compared to earlier social worlds. As seen in my rejoinder to the first response, this view is implausible and it does not fit Finlayson's own characterization of the Adorno's ethics, which emphasizes the New Categorical Imperative as its key rationale. Thus, the specific good to which Finlayson points is neither suitable as the normative basis of Adorno's ethics, nor of the badness of the heightened disregard of the non-identical in modern times—at best it is a medicine to what would have to be already recognized (and justified) as an illness of the modern age.

Still, this third line of reply suggests a strategy in which Finlayson's proposal could perhaps be salvaged. There are at least two different ways in which we can understand the demand for an account of normativity: as (a) a justificatory account or as (b) an explanatory one. According to the first of the two models, often adopted by Kantians, an account of the normativity of, say, an ethical theory would consist in providing justificatory grounds for the requirements of this theory—for example, in Kant's own case, these requirements derive their normative force from pure practical reason. In contrast to this, proponents of an explanatory account of normativity would reject the demand for such a justification, for example, as the outgrowth of modern enlightenment thinking and as having led to skepticism about moral demands.<sup>39</sup> Instead, an explanatory account of

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<sup>39</sup> See, e.g., A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a study in moral theory* (London: Duckworth, [1981], second edition 1985),

normativity would consist in showing how certain considerations would have normative force for us because, for example, we have been brought up well and see the world in the appropriate light, or because we have certain sentiments. Yet, showing this would not justify the normative force in question—the theorists of this school of thought (often Aristotelians or Humeans) would admit that the fact that, for example, human beings attach negative normative force to pain or suffering does not mean that this is something which any rational being would have to accept. Still, these theorists would not think that admitting to this lack of justification would be a problem for their view—a justification at the level of the sources of normativity is for them impossible and unnecessary.

Maybe, Finlayson's proposal could function as an explanatory account. It would then have to help explain how and why people (or, at least, those who were lucky enough to have been well-brought up) would recognize the ought claims of Adorno's philosophy as binding and orientate their lives accordingly.

Admittedly, Finlayson seems to set out to provide a justificatory account and Adorno's critics often demand such an account, but an explanatory account could be of use in defending Adorno in a different way. Firstly, there is also an explanatory lacuna in his theory: as we seen earlier, the critics (such as Habermas) worry about both (a) the normative foundations of Adorno's critical theory (what I call the Problem of Normativity) and (b) how anyone might be able to act according to this theory and its ethical demands. Perhaps, Finlayson's proposal has merit as a response to (b). After all, Adorno's negativism seems to present him with a problem here too. For example, Adorno's critics argue that without a conception of the good (or of a suitable specific good) people could not recognize the evil for what it is, since to do so requires a contrast class and only such a conception could fulfill this role.<sup>40</sup>

Secondly, there is some reason to think that Adorno himself might not have accepted

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Chs. 5-6.

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., M. Theunissen, "Negativität bei Adorno," in: v. Friedeburg & Habermas (eds.) (1983), *Adorno-Konferenz 1983*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), pp. 41-65.; see also M. Seel, *Adornos Philosophie der Kontemplation* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2004), p. 22. (Neither Theunissen, nor Seel distinguish between explanatory and justificatory accounts.)

the critics's demand for a justificatory account. After all, he was skeptical of the success of (and need for) "discursive grounding."<sup>41</sup> Thus, an explanatory account could be more in Adorno's spirit, though it would not satisfy his critics, unless further arguments would be provided for why a justificatory account is, indeed, unnecessary.

#### V. Critique of Finlayson's proposal taken as explanatory account

Finlayson's account might be read as an explanation of how we might acquire (and nourish) the three virtues which he identifies as constitutive of Adorno's ethics. Thus, it might be a fortunate, but predictable side-effect of the goodness of having ineffable insights that people develop the three virtues in question, which then can also be used for a life of resistance. What are initially epistemic virtues could double up as ethical ones in this way—once the virtues are acquired within one context, they could be exercised more generally. As long as this account is meant to be explanatory only (and not also to justify the extended exercise of the virtues), this seems promising. In fact, it is often the nature of dispositions and character traits that they tend to influence all aspects of one's behavior, rather than being something we switch one and off. Similarly, if we take the alleged fact that attempting, but failing to grasp the ineffable is a valuable and pleasurable experience, then we might be able to explain why some people do not despair in this radically evil world, but cling on to the hope that a different world is possible and live a life of resistance.<sup>42</sup> And the goodness of this experience can be a source of dissatisfaction with identity thinking, since the latter deprives us of such experiences. In this way, Finlayson's proposal could be seen to provide at least an indirect explanation for why individuals may come to view the ought claims of Adorno's ethics as compelling and use them for practical orientation. What Finlayson would be demonstrating is that the experiences of attempting, but failing to grasp the ineffable might lead us to have dispositions of the sort also constitutive of Adorno's ethics of resistance.

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<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., ND 358/365.

<sup>42</sup> In fact, this might be what Adorno has in mind in the passage which is key to Finlayson's reading and in which Adorno talks about the happiness of knowledge (see "Resignation" [1969], GS, 10.2:798f).

This way of reading Finlayson's proposal is highly reconstructive—it is not clear that this is what he wants to say, and, as seen, his language points to a different project than what might be called an “aetiology of the three virtues” (that is, a study of their causes).<sup>43</sup> Still, it looks more promising to take it in this latter sense than to read it as a justificatory account, and, perhaps, in this way Finlayson's interesting reading of Adorno's philosophy can be rescued.

However, there are also reasons to be skeptical about the success of this alternative way of taking Finlayson's proposal. Firstly, it seems highly unlikely that (failed) attempts at grasping the ineffable would actually function as a way of building up the virtues for a life of resistance—after all, trying to grasp the ineffable is quite an esoteric pursuit in the first place. Still, this is not decisive, since Adorno is not very confident that many people would be able to live a life of resistance and he might accept that it only results from esoteric pursuits, such as trying to grasp the ineffable. Also, explaining how there could be even the mere possibility of living such a life would be an advance on the view painted by his critics. Yet, there are more damaging worries.

Thus, secondly, it is not clear that making the experiences in question does not already presuppose the three virtues, rather than being a way of developing them. How could we be shown something, if we do not engage in critical reflection, if we are not open to recognize our finitude, and if we are not receptive? In reply, one might argue that any account of virtues will be circular to some extent, but this need not mean that it is viciously circular. Thus, only by acting rightly will we develop right dispositions and only by having the right dispositions will we act rightly. However, this reply is problematic, since it leaves out a crucial step of the traditional account. The traditional account is not strictly circular: one is habituated into acting in accordance with virtues, but only later begins to recognize the reasons for why it is virtuous to act in this way, and it is only at that point that one actually becomes virtuous. It is hard to see what the equivalent to the habituation step would be in Finlayson's account. Moreover, who would guide this habituation in a radically evil

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<sup>43</sup> Finlayson suggested this description of his proposal in conversation to me (08/09/2007).

and delusional world? While Adorno sometimes speaks of people becoming critical by sheer luck,<sup>44</sup> nothing in Finlayson's proposal increases the plausibility of this claim.

Finally, the materialist dimension of Adorno's philosophy gets somewhat lost in Finlayson's reconstruction of it. For Adorno, it is suffering which is the "engine of dialectical thought" and the abhorrence of it which is the "materialistic motive" in which alone "morality survives."<sup>45</sup> In this sense, one might expect that suffering would have to play an important role in explaining why people turned to a life of resistance, why they started to think critically, became wary of self-righteousness, and developed the capacity to be moved by the fate of others. Yet, these materialistic explanatory grounds are neglected by Finlayson's proposal, and this detracts from its suitability as an Adornian aetiology of a life of resistance and the three virtues.

In sum, even as an explanatory account, Finlayson's proposal is, at best, incomplete, and, at worst, unsuccessful.

## VI. Alternative responses to the Problem of Normativity

The immediate question is whether there might be another way to solve the Problem of Normativity, or whether the failure of Finlayson's defense strategy means that Adorno is guilty as charged and his ethics is subject to a deep-seated incoherence.

Recall the Problem of Normativity, which can be formalized as follows:

- (1) Adorno subscribes to an ethics of resistance and in virtue of this his philosophy is normative.
- (2) Accounting for normativity requires the availability of a positive conception of the good (or of a suitable specific good), that is, it requires that we know what the good is (or what the specific good in question is) and that we can make appeal to it in the course of providing such an account.
- (3) Within Adorno's philosophy, a positive conception of the good (or, even, of a specific good) is unavailable. ["Adorno's negativism"]
- (4) From (2) and (3), Adorno's philosophy cannot be normative.
- (5) From (1) and (4), Adorno's philosophy both is and cannot be normative.

We can identify four general ways in which one might respond to it. Firstly, one could reject premise (1) and deny that Adorno's philosophy contains a normative ethics. If defensible as an

<sup>44</sup> See, e.g., ND, 51/41.

<sup>45</sup> ND, 202, 358/202, 365.

interpretation, then the Problem of Normativity does not even arise—for there is no ethics whose normativity needs accounting for.<sup>46</sup> Secondly, one might try to make the good available within Adorno’s philosophy and despite his negativism, and, thus, reject or qualify premise (3). This defense strategy is, in effect, the one which Finlayson aimed for, but there might be alternative ways to carry it out.<sup>47</sup> Thirdly, one might call into question the inference from premises (2) and (3) to the interim conclusion (4). In particular, one could adopt what might be called a “context-dependent” approach to accounting for normativity, according to which no general account of normativity is possible (or desirable) and the Problem of Normativity is misconceived.<sup>48</sup> Finally, one could reject premise (2). This is what might be called the “negativistic strategy”, and here the idea is that access or appeal to the good is not necessary for accounting for all forms of normativity—the reason-giving force of Adorno’s ethics can be accounted simply by appealing and knowing what the bad (or the worst) is.

For various reasons, I think that the negativistic option is the most promising defense strategy. To argue for this would require more space than I have available here, so that it will have to suffice to disarm three immediate objections to it. In fact, these objections are already articulated in Finlayson’s original article and taking them up, thus, completes the critical discussion of it.

The first objection is that a purely negativistic account would not be able to offer sufficient practical guidance or provide the kind of “constraints on individual action we typically expect from a normative ethical theory.”<sup>49</sup> The upshot of this would presumably be that either the negativistic account could not underwrite Adorno’s ethics, or what it could underwrite would not be an ethics.

In reply, it is important to note that one need not claim that a purely negativistic account

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<sup>46</sup> However, as I have argued elsewhere, this interpretation is not defensible (see my “No Easy Way Out: Adorno’s Negativism and the Problem of Normativity,” in S. Giacchetti (ed.), *Nostalgia for a Redeemed Future: Critical Theory* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2008), pp. 39-50).

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g., Seel, *Adornos Philosophie der Kontemplation*.

<sup>48</sup> See, e.g., R. Geuss (1996), “Morality and Identity,” in C. Korsgaard *et al.*, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 189-199.

<sup>49</sup> Finlayson, “Adorno on the Ethical and the Ineffable,” 9.

could provide the normative basis for any ethics, but merely that it can underwrite all the practical guidance and constraints which Adorno's minimalist ethics contains. For a start, this guidance is only limited and unlike what we typically expect from a normative ethical theory—hence, we cannot use the latter as a standard to evaluate the former. Adorno's ethics, even according to Finlayson's own reconstruction, is not a full-blown morality which governs or constraints every action (such as Utilitarianism or Kantian morality). The limited character of Adorno's ethics tallies well with the limited character of a negativistic normative basis—in fact, one could argue that one of the reasons why Adorno's ethics is minimal in its guidance is because of his negativism.

Moreover, and quite independently of Adorno's philosophy, it is unclear why a purely negativistic ethics should not be able to provide most of the central constraints on individual action. If anything, it is this area of ethics that a negativistic account is best suited for, as the long tradition of minimalism shows: to require that people should not murder, rape, torture, or enslave others is something for which we need not appeal to the good or some instance of intrinsic goodness; here, clearly, the negative normative force of the intrinsic badness of such actions suffices. Thus, even though Adorno's ethics goes beyond the minimalism just described, there is no reason in principle to think that a negativistic approach to this ethics could not underwrite any constraints on individual action.

The second objection is that the three virtues of Adorno's ethics would only be instrumentally valuable on a purely negativistic account and as such part of the very context of fungibility which makes up the radically evil social world.<sup>50</sup> In this sense, a negativistic account of Adorno's ethics would be self-defeating insofar as it would be guilty of the very thing it says we should resist.

In response, one might doubt that everything which is instrumentally valuable is thereby already part of the context of fungibility and, hence, bad for Adorno. More importantly, the virtues need not be merely instrumental for, but can also be *constitutive* of a life of resistance *even* on a

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 9f.

purely negativistic account: radical evil is to be resisted because of its intrinsic badness and to resist it *just is* to demonstrate autonomy, humility and affection. Either these personal qualities are merely instrumental to what we should do and not real virtues, or they are also constitutive of what we should do and in this respect proper virtues; but, if the latter, then this is so whether or not what we should do is cashed out only in terms of avoidance of the bad or by invoking the good (or a good). True, the issue of what is constitutive to a life of resistance is dependent on the issue of the source of its normativity in a certain way: what is the constitutive content of a life of resistance depends on the source and will vary relative to it, including relative to its polarity (it might, for example, be more minimal or less so, depending on whether the source is solely negative or not). However, this dependence does not exclude negativism, for *that* something is constitutive of such a life is *not* dependent on the polarity of the source, but just an expression of what this source requires. To illustrate this point, think back to the New Categorical Imperative: Adorno is claiming that the evil of Auschwitz by itself demands that nothing similar should happen ever again. One thing we can do as individuals is to live our lives in such a way that at least we ourselves do not become perpetrators of such evil. For this, we need to exercise the three virtues of autonomy, humility and affection. Yet, these virtues are not just useful for this purpose, but also its realization: if we virtuous in this way, we will neither be one of the torturers, nor become a *Schreibtischtäter* like Eichmann.

To clarify further; the form which resistance will take, and thereby also what is constitutive of a particular form of resistance, depends on what is being resisted. To resist temptation is different to resisting a social regime, and what makes them different is the different object of resistance. If Adorno's analysis of the modern social world and Finlayson's reconstruction of this analysis are correct, then resistance to it consists in exercising the three virtues of autonomy, humility and affection (just as resisting temptation might consist in being non-emotional). There are not merely the means to such resistance, since only by exercising them do we resist properly speaking (just as being non-emotional need not be merely the means to resisting temptation, but

also constitutive of it). This is not to say that one could not also behave in resistance-conforming ways accidentally or without possessing the virtues—merely that such continent behavior would not constitute resistance properly speaking, even though it sometimes would have the same result. Thus, to take an example from Adorno,<sup>51</sup> one could refuse to go to the cinema since one could object to being subjected to another piece of conformity-inducing entertainment, or one could refuse to go because one is too tired after a long day of doing one's best to keep the capitalist machine running—the latter might happen to avoid a bad, but it is not an act of resistance, properly speaking.

This leaves the third objection. Here, the argument is that negativistic accounts tend to cash out the radical evil of the modern world in terms of the suffering it causes.<sup>52</sup> However, this seems unsuitable as account of the normativity of Adorno's ethics, since (a) not all pains (or suffering) are bad (think of the pain involved in dental surgery—here the pain is often the necessary means to something good, such as less pain in the future); and (b) not all badness to which Adorno points can be reduced to painfulness or suffering—whatever is bad, for example, about the culture industry is not bad, or not bad primarily, because of the suffering it might cause.<sup>53</sup>

It is not obvious that the view of the badness of pain suggested in this objection is accurate. One might instead think that all pain (and suffering) is *prima facie* bad, but not all pain is bad all things considered. This makes better sense of the dentist example (and also more generally): the pain involved in dental surgery should be acknowledged as a bad (especially when one adopts an Adornian perspective), even if—all things considered—we are willing to tolerate or endure it.<sup>54</sup>

Moreover, independently of this different view of the badness of pain, a purely

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<sup>51</sup> See, e.g., ND 249/168.

<sup>52</sup> See, e.g., U. Kohlmann, *Dialektik der Moral – Untersuchungen zur Moralphilosophie Adornos* (Lüneburg: zu Klampen, 1997)

<sup>53</sup> Finlayson, “Adorno on the Ethical and the Ineffable,” 21f n.23.

<sup>54</sup> Is the case of someone who finds pleasure in experiencing pain (such as a masochist) a counterexample to this view? I am not convinced that it is, since one could account for it in two ways: either a masochist would, at least on reflection, acknowledge the *prima facie* badness of pain, but insist (perhaps wrongly) on it being pleasurable to endure the badness of pain (e.g. because it is enjoyable to exercise our ability of endurance); or, alternatively, a masochist, on this view of pain, has a deranged conception of pain insofar as he/she shows an inadequate response to it.

negativistic account need anyway not be monolithic and reduce everything to the badness of pain, but can (and should) acknowledge a plurality of bads. Nothing in the idea of negativism prevents one from doing so—in fact, it is one of the attractions of Adorno’s particular form of negativism that he is attentive to the different kinds of badness and their complex relationship with human suffering. The fault to which Finlayson points is not one of the negativistic approach as such or of Adorno’s version of it, but the fault of a too simple version of such an approach.

## VII. Conclusion

While those wanting to understand Adorno’s ethics have much to thank Finlayson for his account of it, I have argued that, ultimately, his proposed solution to the Problem of Normativity is unsuccessful. The happiness of having ineffable insights is suitable neither as normative basis of Adorno’s ethics, nor as an aetiology of the qualities involved in exercising this ethics. Yet, Finlayson has, nonetheless, pointed the way for those who want to defend Adorno and address this problem. I have suggested that a negativistic strategy might be the best approach for achieving this aim, but much more needs to be said to validate this suggestion. The negativistic strategy would have to be situated within the debate between justificatory and explanatory accounts of normativity; one would need to show how it relates to Adorno’s concern with the non-identical; and it would need to contain a plausible, pluralist conception of badness. But these are tasks for another occasion.