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## Moral Philosophy

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### Introduction

Moral philosophy used to be full of promises. In ancient times, it aimed at providing a guide to the good life that integrated moral matters with other concerns (such as our intellectual, aesthetic and prudential interests). In modern times, it set out to present a supreme principle of morality (such as Kant's categorical imperative, or the greatest happiness principle of utilitarianism) from which a full-blown system of obligations and permissions was meant to be derived, guiding or constraining our conduct.

However, if Adorno is to be believed, the promises of moral philosophy have not been fulfilled: neither the good life, nor even the moral life, is currently available. In this sense, his position can be characterised as a negative moral philosophy. What makes this position interesting is *why* Adorno thinks that both the good life and the moral life are blocked and *what implications* he draws from this, in terms of criticising the dominant strands of modern moral philosophy and suggesting how we should live our distorted and deformed lives.

In this essay we will look at each of these aspects and ask the following questions:

1. Why can no one live the right life in our current social world?
2. Why does the task of moral philosophy today consist essentially in the critique of moral philosophy?
3. Does Adorno say anything about how we should live, or is his negative moral philosophy devoid of any practical guidance?

## The Impossibility of Right Living Today

Adorno is not alone in thinking that something is problematic about ethical practice and theory in the modern social world. For example, contemporary Aristotelians often lament the breakdown of traditional social practices which (supposedly) underwrote the exercise of the virtues.<sup>1</sup> Yet Adorno's thesis that '[w]rong life cannot be lived rightly'<sup>2</sup> is distinctive in a number of ways.

Firstly, Adorno's thesis is distinctive because of his particular conception of the modern social world. One way to describe this conception is to say that the modern social world (especially in the post-1930s stage of 'late capitalism') is *radically evil*. This is not to invoke theology, where talk of 'radical evil' traditionally had its place, but to express this two-fold claim: (1) late capitalism is evil to the root (evil is not accidental to it, or only a surface phenomenon); and (2) this evil is particularly grave (it does not get more evil than this).

The clearest example of why Adorno thinks that late capitalism is radically evil is the genocide of the European Jews. For Adorno, this genocide was not an accidental relapse into barbaric times, or due to the fact that modern civilisation had not fully taken root in Germany. Rather, these events mean that enlightenment culture *as a whole* has failed in important respects.<sup>3</sup> This culture, and the modern social world that gave rise to it, are deeply implicated in the moral catastrophe of Auschwitz. They constitute the 'objective conditions' for its occurrence and unless they are overcome, a moral catastrophe of the same kind is possible again.<sup>4</sup> More

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1 See A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 2nd ed. 1985).

2 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, tr. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1991), p. 39. Hereafter *MM*.

3 *Idem*, *Negative Dialectics*, tr. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 366f. Hereafter *ND*.

4 *Idem*, 'Education after Auschwitz', *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, tr. Rodney Livingstone *et al.* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 20f. Note that Adorno does *not* advocate renouncing the enlightenment culture completely, but merely insists on it

generally, what happened to the victims in the concentration camps is what late capitalism is moving towards: the liquidation of anything individual, the degradation of people to things, and the triumph of bureaucratic rationality at the expense of deeper reflection about ends and means. Here, we have a clear example in which late capitalism is radically evil in the two senses mentioned: Auschwitz was a moral catastrophe of the gravest kind and its occurrence (and the threat of its reoccurrence) is systematically connected to our current social world.

Adorno says that right living is not possible because, in a radically evil social setting, whatever we do short of changing this setting will likely implicate us in its evil--either, indirectly insofar as we contribute to maintaining this social setting where it should be changed, or directly by actually participating in and furthering particular evils within it. In other words, in most cases we can only hope that we do not participate actively and directly in evils. However, even if we do not participate actively and directly, to think that this would constitute right living would mistake a lucky and merely partial escape for more than it is. Even then, we would still be part of a guilt context, that is, we would still contribute to the continuity of a radically evil world.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, Adorno's thesis that we cannot live rightly in this social world is phrased in a distinctive way. He always speaks of 'right life' [*richtiges Leben*], rather than the more

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incorporating the reflection on its regressive tendency.

<sup>5</sup> This obviously raises the complex issue of individual responsibility. Since society determines individuals, it would seem that they are not responsible for their wrong-doing (see, for example, *ND*, 219). In fact, Adorno was sceptical of conceptions of freedom (such as Kant's) in which people can be held responsible and punished (see, for example, *ND*, 215, 232, 255). Yet he also rejects the suggestion that those who do evil should be let off; specifically, he rejects this in respect to the perpetrators of Nazism (see *ND*, 264f, 286f). Hence there appears to be an inconsistency in his thinking. Yet, Adorno responds that this inconsistency expresses an 'objective antagonism' (*ND*, 286) or 'antinomy' (*ND*, 264) between the legitimate desire (and social need) not to let crimes go unpunished, and the impossibility of pinning evil acts on the individual as the agent responsible for them.

traditional ‘good life’ [*‘gutes Leben’*].<sup>6</sup> He does so deliberately. With the phrase ‘right life’, he can exploit an ambiguity between using ‘right’ in a normative sense and contrasting it to ‘wrong’ (as in ‘this is not the right thing to do’), on the one hand, and using it in a factual sense and contrasting it to ‘false’ or ‘counterfeit’ (as in ‘this is a false beard’), on the other. Exploiting this ambiguity allows Adorno to say both (a) that *moral* living is not possible in today’s world and (b) that no real *living* is taking place. While these two aspects are dialectically entwined, I will begin by analysing them separately, before considering the underlying explanation for both.

The possibility of morally right living is blocked partly because we are caught in the guilt context of our radically evil society, but partly for further reasons. Firstly, within this guilt context we almost always get caught in ideologies, that is, we hold a set of beliefs, attitudes and preferences which are distorted in ways that benefit the established social order (and the dominant social group within it) at the expense of the satisfaction of people’s real interests. To defend our behaviour (e.g., holding on to our possessions while others face severe deprivations), we often end up implicitly defending what should be criticised, namely, late capitalism or elements thereof (e.g., its property regime).<sup>7</sup> And even where we do not attempt to justify our way of life, we tend to fall prey to ideological distortions, so that we accept social arrangements as they are, instead of changing them as we should (this is true even of those who are most disadvantaged by these arrangements). Thus, either by endorsing or by unreflectively accepting distorted truths or half-truths, we entrench the social *status quo* and fail to do what we should do.

Morally right living is also impossible today because we face practical ‘antinomies’.

Adorno uses this Kantian term, which traditionally denotes ‘irresolvable conflicts’, in this sense:

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<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, some translators (such as Rodney Livingstone) use ‘good life’ and ‘bad life’ for ‘richtiges Leben’ and ‘falsches Leben’, thereby obliterating the ambiguity with which Adorno plays.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, *MM*, 39.

we are faced with conflicts which are not fully resolvable within the current social system, so that whatever we do, we cannot do the right thing. One example of such conflict involves compassion.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, while compassion is the right reaction to the suffering of others, it often only mitigates injustices and suffering within the current social system. It thereby might contribute to their persistence. On the other hand, working towards overcoming (not merely mitigating) injustices and suffering might mean that we do not always show people in need the compassion required by their situation. This is not just owing to a lack of imagination, but because of the social structures in which we find ourselves.

In effect, Adorno thinks that we constantly face practical antinomies of this kind, and that, while tragic conflicts exist in all societies, at least some of these antinomies are irresolvable only within (or only occur because of) the social world we live in. Their pervasive existence is another reason why life in this social world is wrong and why right living is blocked.

Let me now turn to the second aspect of Adorno's thesis. Here, the thought is that what we normally refer to as the life we live is actually something which falls short of it (what might be called 'surviving' or 'getting by'). 'Life does not live' (MM, 19)<sup>9</sup> for two reasons. Firstly, under a capitalist economy and culture, life becomes more and more uniform and impoverished (and this is true even of that small part of humanity who can make full use of the goods and opportunities afforded by late capitalism). Secondly, and related to this point, life does not live because we do not actually and actively live it. We lack autonomy in the sense of not being able to exercise our capacity for self-determination. At most, we merely *react* to external or internal pressures, and this is connected to the social world which surrounds and forms us. Even where

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<sup>8</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, tr. by R. Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), pp. 173f. Hereafter *PMP*.

<sup>9</sup> This is a quotation from the nineteenth century Austrian writer Ferdinand Kürnberger, employed by Adorno as motto for the first part of *Minima Moralia*.

we seem to act against society by following our self-interest, we are, in fact, serving and maintaining a social system which often relies on people acting in this way.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Adorno turns Adam Smith on his head: instead of capitalism's invisible hand mechanisms making possible a prosperous and moral society, they enable a radically evil society that depletes natural and human resources to sustain itself.

Finally, this already points to Adorno's distinctive explanation for why right living (in both senses of the term) is impossible. It is not merely that traditional social practices are lacking, or that the boundless reflection characteristic of modern reason destroys ethical knowledge. Rather, right living is also blocked because society undermines our autonomy. This marks an interesting shift from traditional philosophical conceptions of obstacles to freedom: instead of first nature (natural events or our psychological make-up) endangering our freedom and autonomy, 'second nature', or society, is the main obstacle. In other words, Adorno agrees with Kant and the tradition that 'human beings are unfree because they are beholden to externality'. But this 'externality' is not independent of human beings (as nature is said to be) but made and sustained by them as part of the social world (*ND*, 219, tr. mod.). As Adorno puts it: 'the intertwining of man and nature is also the intertwining of man and society' (*PMP*, 176).

The 'intertwining of man and nature' has two social dimensions. Firstly, the prevailing way of thinking about first nature--as a closed, determined system--does not reflect its actual reality. Rather, it reflects a particular social reality and the relationship with nature this involves. For Adorno, our conception of nature is shaped for the purposes of domination and exploitation, and, hence, it is no surprise that we think of nature as a closed system (*ND*, 269). Thinking about it in this way serves our purposes because it facilitates predictions (and control) of natural events. However, if we abstract from the way we conceive of nature for the purpose of dominating it, we

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, *ND*, 261f.

have no good evidence for thinking that nature--whether external nature or internal nature (our physical impulses and psychological make-up)--determines us in a way that endangers our freedom or autonomy.<sup>11</sup> So we need not appeal to Kant's metaphysical thesis of a different world underlying nature to make room for freedom. Rather, we should concentrate on the real factors which block our autonomy: autonomy is blocked by society, not first nature.

Secondly, the intertwining of human beings and nature has a social dimension because we mistake determination by society, which we do in fact experience, for determination by nature. We do so partly because capitalist society is not the product of a consciously made history, but of something approximating natural growth--it is part of our natural history as vulnerable creatures who aim to master our surroundings to gain security. We also make this mistake because capitalism presents itself as if it were first nature, as if its laws were as fixed as the law of gravity. For example, capitalism operates mainly in an impersonal way--it is not a warrior elite which forces people to work and lead a certain life, but market pressures and other structural forces. It is therefore natural to overlook the real obstacles to our autonomy and to right living. To uncover these obstacles requires the kind of complex analysis of the underlying structure of capitalism that Marx presented in *Capital*.

In this section, we have seen what Adorno means by 'wrong life cannot be lived rightly' and his reasons for making this claim. Now, we should turn towards its implications for moral theorising and for whatever practical guidance Adorno can offer us.

### **Moral Philosophy as Critique**

So far I have presented Adorno as saying that modern society creates the obstacles to moral

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<sup>11</sup> Admittedly, this does not fully settle the matter, for even a non-deterministic nature may be inhospitable to human freedom (for further discussion of this problem, see my 'Adorno's Negative Dialectics of Freedom', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 32, no. 2 (2006) pp. 429-40.)

living. Yet, even so, his moral philosophy might not differ greatly from traditional ones which theorise about examples, or conceptually analyse, say, the faculty of volition, to generate practical guidance in the form of principles for action, duties and permissions, or ideals and aspirational virtues. However, Adorno is sceptical of the success of such projects. Although we shall see that he does not completely exclude the possibility of moral theory containing some limited practical recommendations and prescriptions, he questions whether moral philosophers can offer us more than a minimalist ethics. In other words, he rejects the idea that moral theory could currently provide or underwrite a full-blown morality or a canonical plan for the good and right life.

Adorno's scepticism is broadly Hegelian in nature: the good and right life would actually have to be realised and institutionalised in the current social world to a significant degree for moral theory to provide a fully worked-out conception of the good life or morality.<sup>12</sup> Otherwise, we are faced either with highly abstract, indeterminate and ultimately empty ideals with which to confront reality, without actually being able to give any detailed practical guidance; or we are stuck with a substantive ethics which is built on the wrong kind of social practices and institutions, so that we end up entrenching or legitimising unjust or bad states of affairs. Instead of adopting either of these extremes, the dialectical relations between them should be played out.

If one combines these Hegelian concerns with Adorno's premise that right living is currently impossible, then scepticism about moral theorising is the natural conclusion. From this perspective, the problems of moral practice (right living) affect moral theorising which cannot directly solve these problems--only a change in social practices would help. This why Adorno says that moral philosophy today should consist mainly in the critique of moral philosophy and

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<sup>12</sup> Hegel expresses this view in the preface of *Elements of a Philosophy of Right*, tr. H. B. Nisbet, ed. A. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).



its options: for, however much modern moral philosophers might differ, mainstream philosophers tend to suggest that a full set of practical guidance is possible. It is against this confidence that Adorno directs his scepticism.<sup>13</sup>

Among moral theories, Adorno both criticises and values Kant's ethics. His ambiguous stance is explained by the fact that he thinks Kant's ethics reflects better the problematic state of affairs of moral theory and practice in the modern social world. Kant's ethics is the most fruitful moral philosophy because, even where it gets things wrong, it captures best the antinomies and problems of moral living and theorising in the modern world.

To see this more clearly, let us consider two examples of criticisms that Adorno advances against Kant. For Adorno, Kant's ethics is characterised by its focus on principles (morality is anchored for Kant in a supreme principle, the categorical imperative<sup>14</sup>); by its formalism (its supreme principle is not a substantive, but a formal principle); by its emphasis on intentions rather than consequences; and by the idea that we can (and often should) act independently of our desires and physical impulses. Adorno objects to all four of these elements, but let us concentrate here on Kant's formalism and on his idea that we acquire moral worth in virtue of our good intentions (our 'good will').<sup>15</sup>

In respect to formalism, Adorno rejects the Kantian claim that the categorical imperative generates a set of specific duties. Equipped with this imperative alone, that is, with the demand that our subjective principles for action ('maxims') be suitable as universal laws, we will either

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13 For an excellent discussion of how Adorno's views differ from the central claims of the dominant strand of modern moral philosophy, see R. Geuss, *Outside Ethics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005) Chapter 1.

14 In its universal law formulation, the categorical imperative states: 'act in accordance with a maxim that can at the same time make itself a universal law'. See Kant's *Practical Philosophy*, tr. and ed. M. J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 86.

15 Kant, *Practical Philosophy, op. cit.*, Part I.

be left completely in the dark about what to do in specific circumstances; or, if we do hit upon specific obligations and guidelines, we will have to import them from somewhere else, such as, for example, from the social norms we have internalised as children.<sup>16</sup>

Secondly, Adorno criticises Kant's idea of an ethics of conviction or intention as follows. If our moral worth lies in our intentions, then there is the grave danger of people behaving self-righteously and irresponsibly insofar as they insist simply on aiming at morality without any sense for the kind of havoc they might cause in doing so. Adorno illustrates this by discussing Ibsen's play *The Wild Duck*<sup>17</sup> where the main character, Gregers Werle, seems in many respects a perfect example of a Kantian moral agent in that he consistently strives for the good, even at the expense of his own self-interest. However, even as Werle exposes what he perceives as moral wrong-doing, his actions (and thereby the Kantian idea of moral agency), are called into question when they drive an innocent person to suicide.

Far from suggesting here that we should not aim at eliminating moral wrongs, Adorno argues that we need to be sensitive to consequences as well--moral worth cannot be uncoupled from consequences.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, in developing this objection to Kant's ethics, Adorno also questions the very idea of having a pure intention to act morally. Making use of Freudian insights, he argues that, more often than not, what looks like a purely moral intention is actually the consequence of repressed drives or feelings of guilt (*PMP*, 162f).

These examples also illustrate that Kantian ethics might be interesting and reflect some truth, even where it is (allegedly) wrong. Kant's formalism is for Adorno in part the natural

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16 See, for example, *PMP*, 81-3; *ND*, 270f; on formalism, see also *ND*, 235-7.

17 See *PMP*, Lecture 16.

18 For an interesting Kantian reply, not to Adorno's objection specifically, but to objections of this type, see B. Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), especially Chapter 5.

extension of criticisms of traditional moral systems and in part a response to the breakdown of these systems, which used to provide people with specific roles and practical guidance. Many traditional, premodern systems were too narrow in their conception of moral agents or rights-holders, and criticisms of them tend towards the idea of abstract and formal equality (expressed in the universalisability requirement of Kant's categorical imperative). Yet, the progressive breakdown of these traditional systems required a new way of generating moral duties, and many theorists (including Kant) thought that abstract equality, and the principles based on it, would be suitable for this task. Their mistake did not come into full view until this breakdown was complete. In this sense, Kant, who lived during the transition, might not have fully realised that his ethics was both eroding and relying on the substantive moral systems that preceded him.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, it is natural to adopt an ethics of intention, given that we can be even less certain of how the consequences might work out in the modern world than in a traditional society where roles and responsibilities were clearly assigned (*PMP*, 98f). For Adorno thinks that whatever we do in late capitalism, we get caught in the guilt context of our radically evil society. In these circumstances, it is natural, and even to some extent admirable, to try to save morality by consigning it to the 'sphere of interiority', or to intentions. Yet, this can have the unacceptable consequence that what actually happens to people is not sufficiently important for ethical theory and those who adopt it (as in the example from *The Wild Duck*).

However, an ethics which is more sensitive to consequences and less based on formal principles is not a better solution to deal with the radically evil world. As an alternative, Adorno

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<sup>19</sup> See *PMP*, 116f; see also *ND*, 243. We encounter here what Adorno calls 'metacritique', that is, his attempts to supplement the philosophical critique of other theorists with sociological considerations which show why they got things wrong or could develop only a limited point of view. It is important to note that for Adorno 'metacritique' is a supplement to philosophical critique, and cannot replace it (*PMP*, 152; *ND*, 197). On Adorno's conception of metacritique, see also Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), pp. 12, 153-7.

considers Hegel's idea of 'ethical life' which has consequentialist elements, and ties morality to social norms and practices. According to Adorno, adopting such a substantive ethics of responsibility today would make morality too dependent on the way of the world; it would surrender morality, which tells us what we ought to do, to what is the case. Moral norms would then lose much of their critical edge and individuals would be subordinated to the way the world actually is (*PMP*, 163-6). Hence, a substantive ethics of responsibility, rooted in the current social world, cannot underwrite right living either-for it is complicit in what makes right living impossible: the radically evil society that overwhelms us.

Apart from these two options--a formal ethics of conviction and a substantive ethics of responsibility--Adorno does not discuss moral systems in detail. This is presumably partly because he thinks that these two options exhaust most of the space of (credible) moral theories, so that if he has shown that they cannot offer us a guide to right living in our current social world, then this is true of moral theory more generally.<sup>20</sup>

However, Adorno does make some dispersed and brief remarks on other options. For example, he objects that Nietzsche's proposal to proclaim new values does not take seriously his own critique of morality (*ND*, 275; *PMP* 172-4). Adorno has nothing good at all to say about existentialism, whose notion of choice and talk of authenticity he rejects as ideological.<sup>21</sup> And he thinks that 'the concept of virtue has taken on an archaic sound' because of the breakdown of the

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<sup>20</sup> Thus, a more formal consequentialism (of the sort familiar from contemporary ethics and as also intended by Max Weber in his 'ethics of responsibility') is not a live option for Adorno either, though it is less clear why this is so. Perhaps, he accepts the Kantian criticisms of such a moral theory (e.g., that it is too demanding) as true in respect to the current society; and he might be worried that such an ethics is open to the formalism objection (either it is empty, or it implicitly relies on the current social norms after all, for example in using a particular conception of welfare as its criterion for measuring the goodness of consequences).

<sup>21</sup> Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, tr. K. Tarnowski and F. Will (London: Kegan & Paul, 1973); see also *ND*, 49-51, 276-8; *PMP*, 13f, 176.

social practices and institutions that made the exercise of virtues possible (*PMP*, 98).<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, the emphasis on people's character and dispositions typical of virtue ethics tends to detract from the real problems and their real cause, namely, the radically evil and overwhelming capitalist society (*PMP*, 10-16). Finally, it is unlikely that Adorno would have accepted a full ethics based on compassion, since, as we have already seen, compassion gives rise to an antinomy in this society.

In sum, it is Adorno's view that the problematic nature of living in late capitalism affects moral theorising deeply and cannot be fully addressed by such theorising. His moral philosophy mainly takes the form of fighting the illusions and pretensions to which moral philosophy itself gives rise, namely, its claims to guide, or underwrite, right living. However, Adorno's own moral philosophy is not just restricted to this critical function, as we will see now.

### **How to Live Wrong Life**

It might seem that Adorno's moral philosophy consists solely in critique and does not contain any positive views or practical recommendations whatsoever. And this is, indeed, a widely held view, both among his critics (who think that it is problematic for a theory with emancipatory intent to not have practical import),<sup>23</sup> and some of his defenders (who think that his theory is

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22 See also C. Menke, 'A Virtue and Reflection: The 'Antinomies of Moral Philosophy'', *Constellations* 12, no. 1 (March 2005) pp. 36-49. There are, hence, some parallels after all between Adorno's and the Aristotelian accounts of the problematic nature of moral life in the modern social world.

23 The charge that Adorno's theory has no practical import was made by his New Left critics in the 1960s and 1970s, but is not restricted to them. For it also played an important role in the reorientation of the Frankfurt School by second and third generation theorists; see, for example, A. Honneth, *Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, tr. K. Baynes, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991) Chapter 3, especially pp. 95f.

merely explanatory, not normative).<sup>24</sup>

However, there are both textual and other grounds which speak against this. And in the last decade a number of authors have argued that Adorno's philosophy contains an ethics, or even that it is ethical through and through.<sup>25</sup> What speaks for the claim that Adorno's philosophy contains an ethics is that he puts forward an amalgam of ethical ideals, prescriptions and even a categorical imperative of his own.

For example, Adorno suggests that, in the absence of the possibility of living morally, one should aim to live one's life in such a way that 'one may believe oneself to have been a good animal' (*ND*, 299; tr. mod.). One of the things which seem to make one a good animal is to identify with others and their plight, to show 'solidarity with the tormentable body' (*ND*, 285). Such solidarity arises out of the abhorrence of physical suffering, which has direct motivational force for human animals (*ND*, 365), and for other animals as well insofar as Adorno situates this abhorrence within the context of natural evolution.

What is at issue here is not a rationalised form of pity, motivated by thoughts of reciprocity or reward, since such thoughts would undermine identification-based solidarity.<sup>26</sup> Rather, at issue is the natural compassion, a 'physical impulse' (*ND*, 285) of which animals are allegedly capable (though they might show this only in exceptional circumstances, such as the rare instances of an animal raising a young of a different species). Adorno thinks that it is one of the problems of modern society, and the preeminence of instrumental reasoning within it, that

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24 For a recent example of the latter view see G. Tassone, 'Amoral Adorno: Negative Dialectics Outside Ethics', *European Journal of Social Theory* 8, no. 3 (2005) pp. 251B67

25 For the first of these views, see J. G. Finlayson, 'Adorno on the Ethical and the Ineffable', *European Journal of Philosophy* 10, no. 1 (2002) Section 3; for the stronger view, see J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

26 See, for example, *MM*, 33.

such solidarity is disappearing. Our social context engenders the opposite of identification-based solidarity, namely, bourgeois coldness. It is this coldness--the ability to stand back and look on unaffected in the face of misery--which made Auschwitz possible (*ND*, 363). Identification-based solidarity is, therefore, an important element for counteracting bourgeois coldness and finds its expression in the moral impulse against suffering (*ND*, 286, 365). At the same time, solidarity is something to which we can only aspire, not something we are currently able to fully achieve.

In the absence of a socially institutionalised and fully functioning ethical life, the conditions for the cultivation of this solidarity are not given. In this sense, Adorno is not so much advancing a prescription as describing an ethical ideal. And one can find other ethical ideals in Adorno's writings, such as his suggestion that modesty might be the only suitable virtue in our current predicament. By suggesting this, he means to say that we should 'have a conscience, but not insist on our own' (*PMP*, 169f; *ND*, 352), that is, we should make ethical demands on ourselves and others, but without behaving self-righteously. Adorno is not confident that we will succeed in this delicate balancing act--it is again something towards which we can only strive.

Adorno also puts forward 'negative prescriptions' of how to live wrong life. In particular, he puts forward the prescription that we should resist what society makes of us (*PMP*, 167; *ND*, 265). Although resistance will be futile most of the time, trying not to join in (or, where joining in cannot be avoided, at least not do so fullheartedly) is something which we are obligated to do, given the radical evil of our current social world.<sup>27</sup>

In one instance, Adorno goes further and suggests that we face a 'new categorical

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<sup>27</sup> Adorno never explicitly and directly put forward the prescription to overthrow the radically social world (as one would expect him to do). This might have to do with a number of factors, such as the Cold War context in which he was mainly writing, his fear of that such a prescription could backfire (e.g., by provoking a repressive backlash), and the fact that he thought that currently only resistance can be achieved because the moment for a revolution had been missed.

imperative', namely, 'to arrange our thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen' (ND, 365). This new imperative is unlike Kant's in a number of ways: it mentions Auschwitz (and a set of events), rather than being merely formal and ahistorical; it refers explicitly to actions and consequences, rather than focussing on principles or intentions; it is only negative, minimalist and strict in its prescription, rather than enjoining wide, positive duties and underwriting a full-blown morality; and it is 'imposed by Hitler upon human beings in their state of unfreedom' (ND, 365; tr. mod.), rather than being the self-legislated principle of autonomous, individual agents. Nonetheless, the new categorical imperative, arguably, shares one property with its Kantian predecessor: it is categorical in the sense that the normative force of the prescription to stop another Auschwitz from happening is not dependent on whether we have the requisite inclinations, ends or attitudes. For even if 'morality survives' only 'in the unvarnished materialist motive' (ND, 365)--that (bodily) suffering should cease--the new categorical imperative applies also to those who ignore, repress or lack this motive.<sup>28</sup>

In sum, Adorno advances both ideals and negative prescriptions, including one of a categorical nature. Hence, he does subscribe to an ethics of sorts by giving whatever guidance is currently possible about how we should live and how we should *not* live our wrong lives. This ethics only offers negative and minimalist guidance insofar as Adorno tells us mainly what we should avoid and provides us only with a general sketch, not a fully worked-out picture. Yet, he would say that nothing more than this limited guidance can be offered today. In the absence of the possibility of right living, and the inability of moral philosophy to underwrite such living, the most we can prescribe and strive for is *to live less wrongly*.

However, one might object that no practical recommendations or prescriptions, even if

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<sup>28</sup> However, this interpretation of Adorno's categorical imperative does not answer further puzzles about it, such as whether a particular historical event can give rise to a prescription of a categorical nature and whether this prescription is meant to hold indefinitely.



they were merely of a negative and minimalist nature, could flow from Adorno's philosophy. If Adorno thinks that individuals are determined by society, how could they resist it? And how could moral theory prescribe to them that they should resist society? Would this not violate the principle 'ought implies can', that is, the principle that we can only obligate people to do something if there are able to do it?

In reply, we have to return to Adorno's conception of freedom and extend our understanding of it. As we saw earlier, autonomy involves a capacity for self-determination, but Adorno claims that such autonomy (or, as he also calls it, positive freedom) is currently denied to us.<sup>29</sup> However, along with this idea of autonomy, he takes from Kant a more limited conception of freedom, namely, negative freedom as independence from external determination.<sup>30</sup> As we have also seen, Adorno, unlike Kant, denies that the determination in question comes from first nature. Rather, it is the determination by society from which we have to make ourselves independent in order to be negatively free. And while autonomy is completely blocked in late capitalism, Adorno does not reject the possibility of negative freedom within it. As he writes at one point: 'There has been as much free will as people wanted to free themselves' (*ND*, 265; tr. mod.).

Now, to admit that negative freedom is available to us (at least sometimes and to some extent), is not sufficient for a full-blown morality, as Adorno is well aware. Instead, it is only possible to make negative and minimal prescriptions. Such prescriptions are compatible with Adorno's conception of freedom because they simply ask us to make use of our negative

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29 See, for example, *MM*, 37f; *ND*, 231f, 241.

30 See Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, *op. cit.*, p. 94. Note that negative freedom for Kant and Adorno includes both freedom of action from external constraints and also freedom of thought from such constraints (that is, it includes the idea of *Mündigkeit*: the courage to think for oneself without direction from others).

freedom to resist society and the forms of wrong life within it. Still, making use of our negative freedom will never be sufficient for living autonomously: even on the few occasions where we are able to resist determination by society, we are not directing our lives, but merely reacting to the ‘changing forms of repression’.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, while negative freedom might make resisting wrong life possible in some instances, there will be too few of them to add up to right living. Hence, this defence of Adorno is compatible with his negative moral philosophy presented in the first two sections of this essay.

However, problems remain. For example, even if the possibility of negative freedom sufficed to underwrite a minimalist ethics, Adorno owes us an account of how individuals are capable of such freedom. Sometimes he sounds as if the social world is determining us to an extent that even mere resistance to it is impossible.<sup>32</sup> Either this is an exaggeration meant to bring to our attention the precarious nature of our predicament; or Adorno has to tell us how, even within late capitalism, it is possible for some individuals, when they are lucky, to see through the workings of society and resist it (*ND*, 41).

Moreover, Adorno’s moral philosophy faces perhaps an even graver problem. He has long been criticised for not being able to underwrite the normativity contained in his philosophy, that is to say, he is accused of not being able to account for the standards with which he operates

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31 *Ibid.*; see also *ND*, 231. Perhaps, the idea of negative freedom allows us to rescue a limited notion of individual responsibility for Adorno: if we are negatively free, we are responsible for our acts to the degree that we can be obligated to act in certain ways (such as resist the pressures to join in) and be blamed (albeit not necessarily legitimately punished) for failing to do so. A full sense of responsibility would require for Adorno that people (a) live in a social arrangement where their acts would have real, attributable effects (*ND*, 264); (b) have the ability to avoid living wrongly; and (c) are autonomous, not just negatively free.

32 See, for example, ‘Unfreedom is consummated in its invisible totality, which tolerates no outside any more from which it might be seen and broken’ (*ND*, 274; tr. mod; see also *ND*, 243).

in criticising late capitalism and in prescribing resistance to it.<sup>33</sup> In particular, his philosophy is thought to be too negative. Critics argue that any account of normative standards requires knowledge of and appeal to the good--for example, we may only be able to say of a sculpture that it is bad, if we invoke the idea of a good sculpture. However, within Adorno's philosophy, knowledge of, the good (or the right) is impossible for the following reasons: late capitalism is deeply evil and we, hence, cannot learn about the good from its realisation in the world. Our conceptual capacities are deeply implicated in this evil and are, consequently, no use either to gain such knowledge; and even our imaginative capacities are too damaged to acquire any determinate idea of how a free society and the good life would look like (*ND*, 352).

This problem might be called the problem of normativity. It is especially pressing when it comes to Adorno's moral philosophy: to deny that right living is possible and to prescribe certain forms of living over others seems to require knowledge of the good. In the literature, a number of responses have been suggested, ranging from (1) a denial of the problem to (2) the suggestion that the good (or a good) can be known within Adorno's philosophy after all and can be used to underpin his ethics to (3) the claim that Adorno can account for the normativity inherent in his philosophy without appeal to the good or the right.<sup>34</sup> However, this is very much a live issue in the contemporary debate and more needs to be said to solve this problem, if, indeed, it can be solved.

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33 Jürgen Habermas was perhaps the first who explicitly stated this criticism in 'Theodor Adorno: The Primal History of Subjectivity: Self-Affirmation Gone Wild', *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, tr. F. G. Lawrence (London: Heinemann, 1983), pp. 99-110, especially p. 106).

34 The first strategy is implicit in the nonnormative reading of Adorno's philosophy; see Tassone, 'Amoral Adorno: Negative Dialectics Outside Ethics', *op. cit.* For the second, see Finlayson, 'Adorno on the Ethical and the Ineffable', *op. cit.* I have been working on the third strategy in an unpublished manuscript, 'The Good, the Bad and the Normative'.

## **Conclusion**

We have seen why Adorno thinks that (right) living has become problematic in the modern world. We have also seen that moral theory cannot just point to a way out of these problems, but is deeply affected by them. However, as shown in the final section, this does not mean that nothing can be said about how we should live in late capitalism: Adorno does offer us some limited guidance on how to live and what to do within our current predicament. In this sense, the common objection that Adorno's moral philosophy is devoid of practical recommendations can be rejected--as emphasised in a wave of publications on Adorno's moral philosophy over the last decade. There are other objections which, perhaps, have not been fully answered in the literature so far. Still, it is fair to say that Adorno's moral philosophy presents us with an important challenge to the way we normally think about our lives and moral theory. It might not be a systematic theory and it might not give us all we expect from a moral philosophy, but we have seen that there are reasons why this is the case and why moral philosophy cannot provide or promise more in our current predicament.