

# No easy way out: Adorno's Negativism and the Problem of Normativity\*

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In this paper, I will address a question that has long overshadowed T.W. Adorno's critical theory, namely, the question of whether or not it is possible to account for normativity within his negativistic philosophy. I believe that we can answer this question in the affirmative, but in this paper my aim will be more limited. I will clarify the problem and lay out the response strategies that are open to those hoping to defend Adorno's theory. And I will argue that the problem cannot be dismissed as easily as is sometimes suggested, namely, by those who claim that Adorno's theory is not normative.

Adorno has long been criticised for being too negative.<sup>1</sup> By subjecting everything to critique, he seems to leave himself without a vantage point from which his critique could be justified. In particular, the problem is thought to be that Adorno is not able to account for the normativity to which he lays claim in his theory, that is, he cannot account for the standards of judgement ('norms') on which he relies, their force, and the reasons they (supposedly) give us (reasons to act, to believe, etc.). Adorno cannot account for normativity, since this would require appeal to (and thereby knowledge of) the good (or the right). At least implicitly, accounting for one's standards of judgement will have to make reference to the good—so that when we, for example, say of a sculpture that it is bad we cannot but invoke the idea of a good sculpture. However, within Adorno's negativistic theory, no appeal to (and knowledge of) the good (or the right) is possible.<sup>2</sup> It is central to Adorno's negativism that (a) the bad, not

the good, is currently realised in our social world, and that (b) we cannot come to know the good by conceptual or other means. At the same time, Adorno cannot do without normativity in his theory. This is so for two reasons: firstly, Adorno's theory consists essentially in critique, and critique (one might think) is inevitably normative; and, secondly, his theory contains a number of ethical claims (such as the 'new categorical imperative'),<sup>3</sup> and these claims are also normative. Thus, Adorno seems to be faced with a dilemma: either he gives up his negativism, but this would mean losing the substance of his theoretical stance; or he erases all traces of normativity from his theory, but then it would lose its status as critique and he would have to drop his ethical claims.

Consequently, it seems as if there is a problem which affects the very core of Adorno's theory. Call it the *Problem of Normativity*. If this problem is not addressed, then his theory is subject to a deep-seated contradiction. Thus, it is imperative for those who want to defend Adorno to address this problem.

In order to facilitate the discussion, I propose to formalise the Problem of Normativity as follows:<sup>4</sup>

- (1) Adorno's theory is normative.
- (2) Accounting for normativity requires appeal to (and thereby knowledge of) the good.
- (3) Within Adorno's theory no such appeal (or knowledge) is possible. [Adorno's negativism]
- (4) From (2) and (3), Adorno's theory cannot be normative.
- (5) From (1) and (4), Adorno's theory both is and cannot be normative.

This formalisation brings out clearly the alleged contradictory nature of Adorno's position. It also helps to clarify which options are open to defenders of Adorno's theory. They might deny one of the three premises (1)-(3), or, alternatively, they might call into question the inference from premises (2) and (3) to the interim conclusion (4). This suggests that there are four possible ways in which to address the Problem of Normativity.

Firstly, one could argue that Adorno's theory is not normative after all. This would mean that premise (1) is false and that the Problem of Normativity could be avoided altogether. I entitle this strategy to defend Adorno's theory the 'non-normative' strategy. In

the last decade, this strategy or non-normative interpretations of his works more generally have *not* been represented in the literature very much. However, recently G. Tassone has proposed an 'amoral' and non-normative reading of Adorno's theory, though without relating this explicitly to the Problem of Normativity as a defence strategy.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, it is possible to call into question premise (3) and to claim that we can appeal to the good within Adorno's theory after all, either despite what Adorno says, or in a sense which is supposedly compatible with what he says. And if such an appeal is possible, then we can account for the normativity of Adorno's theory in the way demanded by the critics. This defence strategy might be called 'positivistic' insofar as it involves a violation or reinterpretation of Adorno's negativism. A number of commentators have recently proposed interpretations of Adorno's theory according to which this theory is less negativistic than it has been traditionally presented. And while not all of these commentators explicitly present their readings as a reply to the Problem of Normativity on Adorno's behalf, this problem is probably part of their underlying motivation. Among the positivistic interpretations in the literature, there are a number of variants. Thus, it has been suggested that there is a positive core to Adorno's philosophy either in his conception of contemplation,<sup>6</sup> or his understanding of emphatic concepts (such as the concept of freedom),<sup>7</sup> or in his engagement with authentic art,<sup>8</sup> or in the value of the experiences we make by attempting to gain ineffable insights.<sup>9</sup>

Thirdly, one could defend Adorno by denying premise (2), that is, by denying that accounting for normativity requires appeal to (or knowledge of) the good. Doing this would be most in keeping with Adorno's negativism and I, hence, entitle attempts to defend his theory in this way 'negativistic'. There are a number of authors who implicitly or explicitly interpret Adorno's theory in a negativistic way.<sup>10</sup> However, until now this interpretation has not been developed sufficiently as a response to the Problem of Normativity. It is part of my overall project to rectify this.

Finally, there is the strategy of rejecting that interim conclusion (4) follows from premises (2) and (3). The thought here is that even if one granted that an account of normativity would require appeal to the good, one could maintain that this requirement only arises because of the assumption that such an account would have to take the form of a *general* theory of normativity. Yet, one could then argue that normativity is so context-dependent that a general theory of normativity is both impossible and unnecessary. Consequently, it would be unproblematic that within Adorno's theory one cannot provide an account of normativity in the sense just specified. For one cannot fault any theory for lacking what is impossible and unnecessary to provide. On this view, the challenge would only be to account for each of Adorno's normative claims locally or in their context. And on this issue, there is nothing much informative which can be said about the success or failure of Adorno's normative claims at the general level. Call this the 'context-dependent' strategy.<sup>11</sup>

In this paper, I will mainly argue against the non-normative reading of Adorno (and particularly against Tassone's recent version of it) and thereby against the non-normative defence strategy. I will show that it cannot be supported by the text, goes against the spirit of Adorno's critical theory and is mistaken in downgrading the ethical dimension of his theory (section I). Moreover, even if Adorno's method of immanent critique is taken into account, it would be misleading to think that this makes his theory non-normative—or so I will argue in section II. I will remain agnostic about the other three response strategies—the aim in this paper is just to show that there is a genuine problem which needs answering and that this problem cannot be dismissed by simply denying that Adorno lays claim to normativity in his theory. This negative result will hopefully have the positive upshot of encouraging renewed efforts to defend Adorno's theory in other ways.

### Section I: Adorno's theory is normative

It has been argued that Adorno's critical theory is not normative. This argument is connected with what I have called the non-normative strategy to respond to the Problem of Normativity. If successful, this strategy allows one to dismiss this problem as missing the point of Adorno's theory. As mentioned above, this strategy is not popular today in the literature, but this by itself does not rule it out. I will show in this section that the non-normative strategy is unpopular for a good reason: to deny that Adorno's theory is normative would be to fundamentally distort it.

In the introduction, I mentioned two reasons why one might think that Adorno's philosophy is normative. On the one hand, Adorno understands theory essentially as critique and critique (one might think) is inherently normative; on the other hand, his theory contains ethical claims and such claims in turn are normative. Obviously, there is more to say about these issues and I will come back to a complication later (in section II).<sup>12</sup> Still, these two reasons are a good starting point. Accepting them for the moment, we can identify what a non-normative defence of Adorno's theory would have to show in order to be successful. It would have to show (1) that Adorno's theory is merely descriptive or explanatory, not also critical, and (2) that it contains no ethical claims.

In fact, the most recent proponent of a non-normative reading of Adorno's works, Tassone, argues explicitly for (2) and also seems to be committed to (1). According to Tassone, Adorno holds a purely theoretical and explanatory social theory paired with an equally non-normative philosophy of history; and anything which *looks* like being an ethical or moral judgement in Adorno's writings is either *actually* not such a judgement, or is not part of Adorno's theory (but, one presumes, instead merely a matter of his personal opinion).<sup>13</sup> If anything, Adorno is a critic of morality, who—like Marx before him—denies that morality could be an instrument of change (a 'lever of emancipation').<sup>14</sup> Although Tassone realises that

Adorno is undertaking 'projects of radical transformation of society' and that implicit in Adorno's description of society is 'a moral indictment',<sup>15</sup> Tassone thinks that Adorno ultimately just seeks to scientifically *explain* the current social world and its latent potentialities for change. Any social change will be the outcome of a 'necessary logical-conceptual progression', with 'practical-normative judgements' playing no role whatsoever.<sup>16</sup> Even the New Categorical Imperative (about which I say more shortly) is just the phenomenological expression of a contradiction in consciousness, not a moral norm which Adorno's theory prescribes.<sup>17</sup>

In reply, I will now advance three interrelated considerations against the non-normative reading of Adorno's theory. I will tailor the discussion of these considerations especially to Tassone's account, but, I believe, that they speak against the non-normative reading of Adorno's works more generally.

Firstly, there is strong textual evidence for thinking that Adorno is not just engaged in a merely descriptive or explanatory social theory. If anything, this is clearest in his writings on sociology. As early as 1937, in a critique of the sociologist K. Mannheim with the title 'Neue wertfreie Soziologie',<sup>18</sup> Adorno argues against the very idea of a value-free, merely descriptive sociology. Such sociology fails to be neutral because in the end it justifies the *status quo*.<sup>19</sup> Part of the reason for this is that such sociology would involve taking things as they are, unreflectively accepting states of affairs or opinions as data. Doing so would miss the fundamental underlying causes and mechanism, which do not directly show up in the surface phenomena. To compensate for this, descriptive sociology tends to introduce abstract classifications, which, according to Adorno, have little relation to the social reality they are meant to describe. The end result of this is that social reality is not grasped, but rather masked by being described in terms of invariant categories. In this way, descriptive sociology is not just objectionable because it overlooks the 'necessity for criticism',<sup>20</sup> but also because it

makes for a bad sociology.<sup>21</sup> Adorno held on to these views throughout his life, and defended them, for example, against K. Popper and others in a debate about the nature of sociology in the 1960s.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in Adorno's works which are not directly sociological he also rejects the idea that theory should be solely descriptive or explanatory. To point to just a few examples: (a) Adorno claims that to understand something is already to criticise it, to distinguish what is true and false in it;<sup>23</sup> (b) for him, thinking consists essentially in negation;<sup>24</sup> and (c) he argues that critique of ideologies is not peripheral, but central to philosophy.<sup>25</sup> That critique is essential to Adorno's conception of theory is perhaps most explicit in his paper 'Wozu noch Philosophie' [1962]. Here, he writes:

If philosophy is still necessary, it is so only in the way it has been from time immemorial: as critique, as resistance to the expanding heteronomy, as what might be the powerless attempt of thought to remain its own master and to convict of untruth, by their own criteria, fabricated mythology and a conniving, resigned conformity.<sup>26</sup>

In sum, there is ample textual evidence to suggest that Adorno was not engaged in a merely descriptive or explanatory project and, in fact, would have dismissed such a project, even when it comes to social theory.

Secondly, the thesis that Adorno's critical theory is merely an explanatory social theory goes also against the very *spirit* of his whole project. For Adorno, a merely explanatory social theory would be what his long time collaborator M. Horkheimer describes as 'traditional theory'.<sup>27</sup> This is a conception of theory, according to which impartial, merely descriptive theorising is both possible and represents the ideal form of theorising. Horkheimer and Adorno reject this conception in favour of what they call 'critical theory'. According to them, it is an illusion to think that one could engage in impartial and merely descriptive social theorising. Instead one's social theory will always be informed by an interest (at least implicitly). The important thing is not to theorise independently of any interest (which is impossible), but rather to adopt the right one, namely, the interest in the abolition of suffering and injustice.<sup>28</sup> This has an important implication. Critical theory always brings standards to

bear on its theorising—the badness of suffering and injustice (and the interest in their abolition).<sup>29</sup> Hence, critical theory is not just descriptive or explanatory, but always already normative in at least the following sense: it uses certain standards of judgements as norms with which society (and any theories defending it) can be criticised. Moreover, critical theory also involves the demand for social transformation—the demand, well captured in a formulation by Marx, ‘(...) to overthrow all circumstances in which man is humiliated, enslaved, abandoned and despised’.<sup>30</sup> This demand is normative not just in the sense of providing a standard of judgement, but also in the further sense of requiring us to act in certain ways. In fact, Adorno’s demand for social transformation often takes the form of an ethical or moral demand. For example, consider a central theme in Adorno’s theory, namely, Auschwitz and the events for which this name symbolically stands. Adorno aims not just to explain the occurrence of Auschwitz (as much as this can be done at all); he demands of us to change the circumstances which made Auschwitz possible and which still largely persist. In a key passage, Adorno claims that ‘[a] new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon human beings in the state of their unfreedom: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen’.<sup>31</sup> This New Categorical Imperative would require detailed analysis—for there are a number of unusual aspects to it (such as the fact that it is *imposed* by Hitler rather than self-legislated or demanded by reason).<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, one thing is clear: this imperative demonstrates that Adorno’s theory is not merely explanatory, but results in ethical demands for social transformation and, therefore, is deeply normative.

Thirdly, this last point also shows that the ethical demands which Adorno makes are not just a matter of his personal opinion, but integral to his theory. It is not that the New Categorical Imperative arrives as an after-thought or optional extra in Adorno’s theory. Rather, to understand his analysis of the evils of Auschwitz and how modern society and



culture is deeply implicated in them is to accept that we should arrange our thoughts and actions differently; the evils of Auschwitz and the failure of culture thus analysed *categorically* demand that we should aim to prevent that something similar can happen. Equally with other ethical claims which Adorno makes: it is not the case that we need an extra step from the analysis of something as a form of wrong life to the demand that we should resist it; for Adorno this 'negative prescription' derives directly from life being wrong.<sup>33</sup> Hence, his descriptions and explanations are already ethically loaded. Thus, whether or not one agrees with those commentators who think that Adorno's theory contains an ethics, one ought to agree that an ethical dimension is not accidental to, or separate from, it. There is a direct line from Adorno's conception of theory as critique to his demands for social transformation; and, insofar as many of these demands are ethical in nature (most prominently the New Categorical Imperative), an ethical dimension is indispensable to his theory.

Moreover, it would be a serious confusion to take the fact that Adorno is critical of morality and moral philosophy to mean that his theory cannot contain any ethical or moral claims. To give an analogy, B. Williams is very critical of moral systems in that he rejects modern, principle-based morality and aims to restrict the role of ethical theory in everyday life.<sup>34</sup> Yet, no one would want to say that Williams's philosophy is devoid of ethical normativity. In a similar way, one should not conflate Adorno's critical views about morality and moral philosophy with a denial of all ethical or moral claims.<sup>35</sup> Admittedly, Adorno is sceptical about the possibility of living rightly in our current wrong social world (as he famously writes, '[w]rong life cannot be lived rightly').<sup>36</sup> And he is also sceptical about the possibility that moral theory could change that.<sup>37</sup> Yet, this scepticism does not stop him from putting forward ethical demands on how we should live our wrong lives, such as the already mentioned 'negative prescription' to resist '(...) the forms of wrong life which have been seen through and critically dissected by the most progressive minds'.<sup>38</sup> Such negative prescriptions

might not add up to a full-blown morality or be part of a systematic moral theory, but, again, there is no need to think that ethics would have to take either of these forms (think back to the analogy with Williams). Finally, even if it was true that Adorno did not consider morality as a successful 'lever of emancipation' (and I am far from certain that it is true), this need not mean that he made no ethical or moral claims. It would only mean that he did not consider the ethical claims he made to have much practical effect on people. However, Adorno never accepted that the adequacy of a theory should be measured by its practical effects.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, if the social conditions are such that they give rise to ethical demands to change them, then this is unaffected by the putative fact that morality or ethics are unsuitable instruments of social change. If anything, this putative fact would constitute a moral calamity in its own right: there would be an ethical demand, but ethics would be powerless to effect that this demand is met. Hence, there is nothing in Adorno's critique of moral philosophy which makes it the case that his critical theory cannot be ethical.

For these reasons, the non-normative reading should be rejected and we should agree with the critics of Adorno that his theory is normative. This also spells trouble for the non-normative defence strategy to the Problem of Normativity. Admittedly, those defending Adorno might have to give up some of what he says, but a non-normative defence would have to give up too much of it.

However, this does not yet settle the matter. One might admit that Adorno's theory is normative and still reject that he owes us an *account* of this normativity. Next, I will discuss one reason for why one might reject this. I will show that this reason is, in fact, not a good reason for doing so.

## Section II: The limitations of immanent critique

It could be argued that Adorno's theory mainly takes the form of immanent critiques, meaning that Adorno mainly took the standards or ideals implicit in society (or theories defending it) and criticised society (and those theories) with the help of their own standards and ideals. Such a method need not involve independent endorsement of the claims made use in the critique of a position. For example, to criticise bourgeois society for not living up to its ideals of freedom and equality would be compatible with not actually endorsing these ideals.

In this way, one might think, Adorno's theory can be normative, but does not owe us an *account* of this normativity. The normativity would derive from within his immanent critique and, if anyone, those Adorno criticises (such as Kant) need to account for it (and if they could not do so, then this would be a problem *for them*, not for Adorno).

As a rejoinder, I will now raise doubts about the idea that Adorno's method absolves him from having to give his own account of normativity. I agree that Adorno largely criticises positions immanently (or, at least, aims to do so). Yet, crucially, Adorno does not think that immanent critique can be solely immanent.<sup>40</sup> This is especially so, when it comes to criticising the social world of late capitalism. Adorno became increasingly sceptical about the possibility of immanent critique of the current social order. He points out that confronting bourgeois society with its moral norms might just lead to these norms being dropped, rather than realised.<sup>41</sup> In fact, he seems to think that these norms (and other ideals used to justify capitalism) had, indeed, been largely dropped by the middle of the twentieth century, so that it is no longer possible to confront the given reality with the claims it makes about itself. For example, he writes: 'There is not a crevice in the cliff of the established order into which the ironist might hook a fingernail'.<sup>42</sup> Thus, Adorno suggests that there is no longer a discrepancy between what the social world presents itself to realise (its ideals) and its actual reality. Without such a discrepancy, immanent critique cannot get going. Moreover, even where

immanent critique is still possible, Adorno is not only concerned with demanding the realisation of what the bourgeoisie had promised.<sup>43</sup> Rather, the current state of the world is bad for Adorno, whether or not it cloaks itself in positive claims. We know inhumanity and misery by themselves,<sup>44</sup> and by themselves they demand their abolition.<sup>45</sup> In fact, in order to undertake adequate immanent critiques we have to be guided in them by knowledge of the bad and of the fact that our current society realises the bad.<sup>46</sup> Otherwise, immanent critiques just turn into instances of false consciousness.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, we are back with the point which I already raised about Adorno's critical theory: this theory presupposes normative premises of its own. In this sense, Adorno cannot rely on immanent critique alone, but brings into it the knowledge of the bad and the inhuman as well as the interest in their abolition. And to underwrite this knowledge and interest Adorno needs an account of the normativity they contain—something which his critics would argue is impossible within his negativistic theory. Whether or not the critics are right about this, one thing is certain: the fact that Adorno mainly relies on immanent critiques does not absolve him from providing an account of normativity. Either this form of critique is altogether impossible today, or, insofar as immanent critique is still possible, it relies on normative assumptions brought to it from the outside.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I have concentrated on clarifying the Problem of Normativity and on showing that it is a genuine problem insofar as it cannot simply be dismissed out of hand, as those who advance the non-normative reading of Adorno's theory tend to suggest (section I). In fact, as I have also argued (in section II), even Adorno's reliance on immanent critiques does not absolve him from providing an account of the normativity contained in his theory. In this sense, the question put to those defending Adorno still stands: 'can Adorno account for the

normativity of his critical stance and ethical demands without giving up on his negativism?' Instead of answering this question, my main point in this paper was merely to argue that those, who like me, think that this question can be answered in the affirmative should not deny that Adorno's theory is normative. What looks like an easy way out of the Problem of Normativity is actually not a solution at all.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Habermas was perhaps the first who explicitly stated this criticism of his former teacher (see, e.g., ‘Theodor Adorno: The Primal History of Subjectivity – Self-Affirmation Gone Wild (1969)’ in his *Philosophical-Political Profiles* (London: Heinemann, 1983), translated by F.G. Lawrence, pp. 99-110, especially p. 106).

<sup>2</sup> From now on, I speak only about the good, not the right as well, because the considerations are exactly parallel in both cases and to repeat both would be cumbersome.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Hitler has imposed a new categorical imperative upon human beings in the state of their unfreedom: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen’ [*‘Hitler hat den Menschen im Stande ihrer Unfreiheit einen neuen kategorischen Imperativ aufgezwungen: ihr Denken und Handeln so einzurichten, daß Auschwitz sich nicht wiederhole, nichts Ähnliches geschehe’*] (ND, 6:358/365; translation amended). All references to Adorno’s published works are to his *Gesammelte Schriften*, 20 Vols., ed. by G. Adorno & R. Tiedemann, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970-1986. The following abbreviations are used ‘ND’ for *Negative Dialektik* (English translation by E.B. Ashton, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973; but I have also consulted the one by D. Redmond, <http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/ndtrans.html>, 2001), ‘MM’ for *Minima Moralia* (English translation by E. Jephcott, London: Verso, 1991). I also refer to the transcripts of Adorno’s lectures on moral philosophy, *Probleme der Moralphilosophie (1963)*, ed. by T. Schröder, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996 (English translation by R. Livingstone, Cambridge: Polity, 2000), using the abbreviation ‘PMP’. References are first to the German edition and then to the English translation (if there is one), separated by a forward slash.

<sup>4</sup> In formalising this problem I have benefited from Finlayson’s work on Adorno (J.G. Finlayson (2002), ‘Adorno on the Ethical and the Ineffable’, *European Journal of Philosophy* 10(1): 1–25, especially 1-5).

<sup>5</sup> G. Tassone (2005), ‘Amoral Adorno: Negative Dialectics Outside Ethics’, *European Journal of Social Theory* 8(3): 251–267. For an earlier example, see, e.g., P. Piccone (1991), ‘Does Critical Theory Need Saints or Foundations?’, *Telos* 87 (24.1): 146-157.

<sup>6</sup> M. Seel (2004), *Adornos Philosophie der Kontemplation*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, Ch. 2.

<sup>7</sup> M. Knoll (2002), *Theodor W. Adorno – Ethik als erste Philosophie*, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, pp. 172-175. See also J.G. Finlayson (2003), ‘Adorno: Modern Art, Metaphysics and Radical Evil’ in *Modernism/Modernity* 10: 71-97.

<sup>8</sup> Mainly among Adorno's critics there are a number of commentators who think that Adorno tried to avoid the alleged impasses of his theory by escaping from philosophy into aesthetics (see, e.g., R. Bubner (1983), *Modern German Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 179-182), and they would probably ascribe this strategy to Adorno also in the case of the Problem of Normativity. However, the thought that Adorno moves beyond his negativism in his aesthetic theory can also be encountered in the writings of those who set out to defend Adorno (see, e.g., H. Brunkhorst (1999), *Adorno and Critical Theory*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, especially pp. 9, 67f, 118f).

<sup>9</sup> Finlayson 2002.

<sup>10</sup> G. Schweppenhäuser (1993), *Ethik nach Auschwitz: Adorno negative Moralphilosophie*, Hamburg: Argument-Verlag (Argument-Sonderband Neue Folge AS 231); U. Kohlmann (1997), *Dialektik der Moral – Untersuchungen zur Moralphilosophie Adornos*, Lüneburg: zu Klampen; and J.M. Bernstein (2001), *Adorno – Disenchantment & Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>11</sup>The only commentator I know of who holds this view is R. Geuss. However, even in his case he never presented a positive characterisation of this view. Rather, it is implicit in his engagement with Adorno and the contemporary literature on normativity (see, e.g., R. Geuss (1996), 'Morality and Identity', in C. Korsgaard *et al.* (1996), *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 189-199, especially 198f).

<sup>12</sup> For example, one might be sceptical about the first claim, that is, the claim that critique is inherently normative. Perhaps, not all forms of critique need be normative (see R. Geuss (2002), 'Genealogy as Critique', *European Journal of Philosophy* 10.2: 209-215, reprinted in his (2005), *Outside Ethics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, Ch. 9). In section II, I do consider the argument that Adorno's theory is dominated by a form of critique (immanent critique) which absolves him from accounting for the normativity of the claims at issue.

<sup>13</sup> Tassone 2005: especially 256, 259, 261.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 258:

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 258, 260.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 260

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 259

<sup>18</sup> 20.1:13-45.

<sup>19</sup> 20.1:39.

<sup>20</sup> 20.1:45

<sup>21</sup> 20.1:33; see also 'Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften' [1962], 8:547-565, here 8:565/English translation by G. Adey and D. Frisby in T.W. Adorno *et al.* (1976), *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, London: Heinemann, pp. 105-122, here pp. 121f.

<sup>22</sup> See 'Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften' [1962]; 'Einleitung zum *Positivismussstreit in der deutschen Soziologie*' 8:280-353/Adorno *et al.* 1976: 1-67.

<sup>23</sup> *Ästhetische Theorie* [posthumous, 1971], 7:391/trans. R. Hullot-Kentor, London: Continuum, [1997], 2004, p. 341.

<sup>24</sup> ND, 6:30/19.

<sup>25</sup> ND, 6:151/148.

<sup>26</sup> ['*Ist Philosophie noch nötig, dann wie von je als Kritik, als Widerstand gegen die sich ausbreitende Heteronomie, als sei's auch machtloser Versuch des Gedankens, seiner selbst mächtig zu bleiben und angedrehte Mythologie wie blinzelnd resignierte Anpassung nach ihrem eigenen Maß des Unwahren zu überführen.*'] 10.2:464-465/English translation by H.W. Pickford in T.W. Adorno (1998), *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 10; translation amended; see also 10.2:470/Adorno 1998: 14.

<sup>27</sup> See M. Horkheimer, 'Traditionelle and Kritische Theorie' [1937], and 'Postscript' [1937] in his *Die gesellschaftliche Funktion der Philosophie – Ausgewählte Essays*, Frankfurt a. Main: Suhrkamp, pp. 145-209; English translation in his *Critical Theory*, trans. by O'Connell, Matthew J. et al., (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), pp. 188-252; see also ND, 6:27-29/pp. 15-18; 20.1: 151; 20.2: 706.

<sup>28</sup> See *Ibid.*, pp. 199, 205/English translation, pp. 242, 248. See also Schweppenhäuser 1993: pp. 6, 177, 183f, 185f, 190; Knoll 2002: pp. 19, 30, 33, 35f.

<sup>29</sup> It should be noted that the presupposition of these standards neither is, nor contains a (positive) conception of the good. Also, although the badness of the suffering is the basic assumption, it is not a foundation in the sense of *Ursprungsphilosophie*: it is not grounded in an *a priori* way, but is based on the historical experience of suffering; and it is also not the ultimate ground or something unconditioned, but dependent on the objective existence of suffering and the reality causing it (see Knoll 2002: pp. 33, 42).

<sup>30</sup> K. Marx, 'Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung' [1844], MEW I:385/English translation in D. McLellan (ed.) (1977), *Karl Marx - Selected Writings*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 63-73, here p. 69.

<sup>31</sup> ND, 6:358/365; translation amended. For the German original, see note 3 above.

<sup>32</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the New Categorical Imperative see Bernstein 2001: Ch. 8; see also my 'Adorno's Negativistic Ethics', Ph.D. Thesis, Sheffield 2005, Ch. 7, sect. III.

<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., PMP, 248/167f.

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., B. Williams (1993), *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, London: Fontana Press, [1985], revised edition, especially Chs. 1, 5.

<sup>35</sup> By saying that Adorno's philosophy is ethical, I do not take myself to be in conflict with Geuss' thesis that Adorno's philosophy lies 'outside ethics'. Geuss uses 'ethics' in a more narrow sense than I do. His claim is that



Adorno's rejects the principle-based, Kant-inspired morality which has arguably dominated modern moral philosophy (see R. Geuss (2003), 'Outside Ethics', *European Journal of Philosophy* 11.1: 29–53; reprinted in Geuss 2005, Ch. 3). This claim is compatible with the view presented here—in fact, one way to read Geuss is to understand him to advance a case against (what he perceives as) the monopolising tendencies of Kant-inspired morality *within ethics* (now understood in my wider sense of the term). In this way, he might be happy to accept that Adorno's theory is ethical insofar as it offers a guide to how we should live, albeit one (Geuss would emphasise) which is importantly different from the dominant strand of modern moral philosophy.

<sup>36</sup> MM, 4:43/39.

<sup>37</sup> See, e.g., PMP, 246f/166

<sup>38</sup> PMP, 249/167f; translation amended.

<sup>39</sup> See, e.g., ND, 6:15/3.

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., ND, 6:183/182. see also 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft' [1949, 1951], especially 10.1:23, 28/English translation in R. Tiedemann (ed.) (2003), *Can One Live after Auschwitz? – A Philosophical Reader*, trans. by R. Livingstone *et al.*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, especially pp. 156, 160.

<sup>41</sup> MM, 4:105/93.

<sup>42</sup> MM, 4:241/211; see also ND, 6:271/274; 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft' [1949, 1951], especially 10.1:29f/English translation in R. Tiedemann (ed.) (2003), especially pp. 161f. It seems reasonable to think that what Adorno says in the quoted passage about the 'ironist', he would also say about the critical theorist.

<sup>43</sup> See Kohlmann 1997: pp. 184f. At one point, Adorno states that it would constitute real progress if what the bourgeoisie had promised were actually realised ('Kritik' [1969], 10.2:792f/Adorno 1998: 287). Still, this should not be understood as suggesting that such realisation would be all what is required for a free society or the realisation of the (human) good. Rather, Adorno is making a more limited point here. He is reacting to the demand that critique of society should always be able to point to positive practical improvements. In response to this demand, he argues that critics can always point out that if a society lived up to its own norms, then this would already be such an improvement— they do not need to present fully worked out proposals for a different society just to be able to criticise the current society. This response is compatible with Adorno thinking that a free, post-capitalist society would go beyond the realisation of bourgeois norms. In fact, this *is* what Adorno thinks. For example, Adorno says that it would be an improvement to realise the capitalist ideal of free and fair exchange of equivalents, but such realisation would then allow the transcendence of exchange altogether (ND, 6:150/147).

<sup>44</sup> PMP, 261/175.

<sup>45</sup> See ND, 6:203/203.

<sup>46</sup> See 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft' [1942, 1951], especially 10.1:27f/Tiedemann (ed.) 2003: especially 160. R. Jaeggi suggests that Adorno undertakes immanent critique at its limit (R. Jaeggi "Kein Einzelner vermag etwas dagegen". Adornos *Minima Moralia* als Kritik von Lebensformen', in A. Honneth (ed.) (2005), *Dialektik der Freiheit. Frankfurter Adorno-Konferenz 2003*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, pp. 115-141, here p. 141/translated into English as "No Individual Can Resist": *Minima Moralia* as Critique of Forms of Life', *Constellations* 12.1 (March 2005): 65-82, here 82), that is, he proceeds immanently as much as possible, but also realises that we cannot restrict ourselves to this procedure and that it does not yield strict contradictions, but only inadequacies. This is partly because Adorno gives up Hegel's optimism of history as the unfolding of reason and, hence, has no longer a warrant that all of the individual immanent critiques would add up to more than just a set of inconsistencies or relativism. In this sense, he cannot just trust on immanent critique, but needs also objective criteria of what success [*Gelingen*] would consist in. Jaeggi does not comment on what these criteria are for Adorno, but the absence of suffering, injustice and unfreedom would be the obvious candidate (especially if anchored by an Aristotelian conception of normativity as I propose elsewhere). Yet, presumably, she means to say that these criteria, whatever they are, do not arise from, but are brought to the immanent critiques (which might, nonetheless, also confirm and validate them).

<sup>47</sup> Similar considerations apply to one of the other methods employed by Adorno, namely ideology critique (that is, the critique of a theory or set of beliefs for misrepresenting reality in a way which benefits a certain social group or the established social order). According to Adorno, there is the danger that ideology critique just becomes the blanket accusation that all theorising relies on particular interests (or that it is in some other way biased). Hence, without a critical stance towards society, ideology critique would just lead to a general relativism (see 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft' [1942, 1951], 10.1:23f/Tiedemann (ed.) 2003: 157; see also ND, 6:198/198).