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Adorno's critique of late capitalism: negative, explanatory, and practical

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Adorno seems to set out to do the impossible. He criticises the whole of the modern social world, including its forms of rationality and thinking, but he does not seem to have an identifiable addressee for his theory, someone or some group who could be the agent for change. Famously, he and Horkheimer described their own work as a 'message in a bottle'.[1] Moreover, it is neither clear what Adorno's standards of critique are, nor how he could underwrite them. Hence, his critical project seems to undermine itself: by subjecting everything to critique, he seems to leave himself without a vantage point from which his critique could be justified or acted upon.[2]

In this chapter, I will argue that the bulk of these objections can be met. After unpacking the objections (section 1), I will argue that Adorno's theory, if understood correctly, contains two largely unnoticed resources for an account of normativity. First, I will suggest that Adorno builds his philosophy around a conception of the bad that suffices to undertake his critical project (section 2). It is best seen as a *negativistic* critique of modernity.[3] Second, I will unearth Adorno's commitment to the normative

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[1] See T.W. Adorno & M. Horkheimer, 'Towards a New Manifesto?' [1956], *New Left Review* LXV (2010): 33-61, here 58; see also W. van Reijen & G. Schmid Noerr (eds.), *Vierzig Jahre Flaschenpost. Dialektik der Aufklärung 1947–1987* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1987).

[2] See, for example, J. Habermas, 'Theodor Adorno: The Primal History of Subjectivity – Self-Affirmation Gone Wild (1969)' in his *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. by F.G. Lawrence (London: Heinemann, 1983), pp. 99-110, especially p. 106.

[3] For alternative interpretations that ascribe a positive core to Adorno's theory, see, for example, J.G. Finlayson, 'Adorno on the Ethical and the Ineffable', *European Journal of Philosophy* XX/1 (2002): 1–25; and M. Seel, *Adornos Philosophie der Kontemplation* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004).

ideal of humanity, which is both compatible with and enriches his negativistic outlook. Adorno's project emerges as a normative, but explanation-driven form of critical theory (section 3). Finally, I will suggest that this theory also contains practical guidance on how *not* to live our lives – in short, a minimal, negativistic ethics (section 4).

1. A brief summary of common objections

Adorno's theory is a form of radical social critique in that it aims at changing not merely specific aspects of contemporary society, but its whole social structure (of which he speaks in terms of 'late capitalism'). Adorno wholeheartedly endorses Horkheimer's programmatic statement, according to which critical theory's objective

> […] is not simply to eliminate one or other abuse, for it regards such abuses as necessarily connected with the entire setup of the social structure. Although it itself emerges from the social structure, its purpose is not, either in its conscious intention or in its objective significance, the better functioning of any element in the structure. On the contrary, it is suspicious of the very categories of better, useful, appropriate, productive, and valuable, as these are understood in the present order, and refuses to take them as nonscientific presuppositions about which it can do nothing.[4]

However, the project of criticising the totality of social reality seems to undermine itself, for Adorno's own diagnosis of this totality seems to leave no room for such a critical project. The first difficulty arises when one asks to whom critical theory is addressed and who would be able to act on it. If Adorno is right about the nature of late capitalism, then the proletariat – for Marx, the revolutionary subject capable of seeing through and opposing capitalism – has been integrated into society in such a

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[4] M. Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory' (1937) [henceforth 'TCT'], in his *Critical Theory: selected essays* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), trans. by M.J. O'Connell, pp. 188-252 [including 'Postscript'], here pp. 206f; translation amended. See also T.W. Adorno, 'Max Horkheimer' (1965), in his *Gesammelte Schriften* [henceforth 'GS'], ed. by R. Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp), 1972ff, 20.1:149-152, here 151.

way as to blunt its revolutionary potential.[5] Similarly, late capitalist society forms all individuals in such a way that unquestioning conformity to it has become a strong, internalised force, eroding the critical spirit from within. And even where protest movements emerge, they tend to become suppressed, diverted or blunted by various social mechanisms, such as being turned into fashionable trends within mass culture. In these circumstances, there is no identifiable addressee for critical theory, nor is it clear how this theory could have been formulated in the first place. Adorno admits that having critical abilities becomes a privilege of the lucky few who escaped full integration, perhaps because they grew up when capitalism had not yet permeated society to the extent that it did from the 1930s onwards.[6]

Moreover, one could object further that it is not even possible to identify the standards of critique with which Adorno operates. Admittedly, he often presents his theory as a form of immanent critique, that is, he aims to show how a theory or society fails to live up to its own norms.[7] Hence, it might seem as if he does not have to supply his own standards of critique, but can just make use of those at work in contemporary society. However, Adorno denies that purely immanent critique of late capitalism is still possible. Those internal standards with which capitalism was at some stage in conflict have been either given up or reinterpreted in such a way as to

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[5] See, for example, T.W. Adorno 'Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?' (1968), trans. by R. Livingstone, in his *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. by R. Tiedemann (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 111-25, especially pp. 114f. See already TCT, pp. 213f.

[6] See T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (1966) [henceforth 'ND'], trans. by E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 41; see also his 'Education for Autonomy' (1969), with H. Becker, trans. by D.J. Patent, *Telos* 56 (1983): 103-110, here 104.

[7] See T.W. Adorno, 'Critique' (1969), in his *Critical Models*, trans. by H.W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 281-8, here p. 287; see also ND, p. 197; 'Why Still Philosophy' (1962), in *Critical Models*, pp. 5-17, here pp. 10, 12.

end this conflict.[8] Moreover, Adorno thinks that immanent critique must be guided by knowledge that one brings to this endeavour independently of the norms operative in the theory or society one criticises. Thus, he writes in 'Culture Criticism and Society' that it would be 'naive' to think that 'unflinching immersion in the object will lead to truth by virtue of the logic of things if only subjective knowledge of the false whole is kept from intruding from the outside, as it were, in the determination of the object'. In *Negative Dialectics* he adds that it is exactly this subjective knowledge that is required for thought to break out of the social totality.[9] Adorno, in fact, doubts that the strict division between immanent and external critique can be maintained.[10] In sum, he does not rely on immanent critique alone, but brings to his critical project knowledge of the inhuman state of affairs that, on his view, late capitalism is.[11]

At the same time, Adorno also rejects the view that critique can rely on transcendent standards. Even if there were such standards, we could not have access to them, since we cannot take up 'a standpoint removed by however tiny a distance from the circle of being'.[12] At least part of what Adorno means by this claim from *Minima Moralia* is the Hegelian thought that philosophers are children of their time and cannot really take up a standpoint that transcends their social and historical

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[8] See, for example, *Minima Moralia* (1951) [henceforth 'MM'], trans. by E.F.N. Jephcott (London: New Left Books, 1974), Aphorism No. 58, p. 93; see also Aphorism No. 134, p. 211; 'Culture Criticism and Society' (1951), trans. by S. Weber & S. Weber Nicholsen, in his *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, pp. 146-162, especially p. 161; and J. Habermas, 'Historical Materialism and the Development of Normative Structures', reprinted in his *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, translated by T. McCarthy (London: Heinemann 1979), Ch. 3, pp. 96f.

[9] 'Culture Criticism and Society', p. 160; and ND, p. 30.

[10] See, for example, 'Culture Criticism and Society', pp. 158, 160f; and ND, p. 181.

[11] Something similar is true of Horkheimer: he makes the interest in abolishing suffering, oppression, and injustice central to critical theory (TCT, pp. 222, 223, 241, 242, 246; see also TCT, pp. 199, 207, 213, 216f, 225, 233).

[12] MM, Aphorism No. 153, p. 247.

context.[13] Attempting to do so will only yield "abstract oughts", that is, ineffective and ultimately empty normative claims about what should happen. In fact, if Adorno is to be believed, the problem of accessing a transcendent standard runs particularly deep within the social world he is addressing: whatever might be true about other social contexts, late capitalism has become so delusional and has affected our faculties so much that we cannot even imagine what a really different society would be like.[14] Hence, if imagining an alternative to the actual world is a precondition of radical social critique, then such critique would not be available.

Contrary to what some commentators have argued,[15] Adorno does not even consider art to provide access to the good or to happiness. Art merely allows us to hold on to the promise for happiness and the good, but it cannot fulfil this promise.[16] Adorno also explicitly rejects the idea of progress by way of a transcendent intervention,[17] which speaks against the Messianism sometimes ascribed to him.

For these reasons, Adorno's critical theory seems to be self-effacing: it seems to lack the resources to account for its conditions of possibility, addressee and critical standards. In what follows, I will argue that these objections can be largely answered by showing that Adorno is a *negativist*. On his view, we can only know the bad (or part thereof), but not the good, and that this knowledge of the bad is sufficient to underpin his critical theory.

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[13] See G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1821), trans. by H.B. Nisbet, ed. by A.W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 9ff. See also T.W. Adorno, 'Culture Criticism and Society', p. 159.

[14] See ND, p. 352.

[15] Among these commentators are Adorno's critics (see, for example, R. Bubner, *Modern German Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 179-182), but also some of his defenders (see, for example, H. Brunkhorst, *Adorno and Critical Theory* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), especially pp. 9, 67f, 118f).

[16] See T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (posthumous, 1970) [henceforth 'AT'], trans. by R. Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone, 1997), pp. 15, 178; see also pp. 41, 336.

[17] See T.W. Adorno, 'Progress' (1964), in his *Critical Models*, pp. 143-60, here pp. 147f.

2. The resources of critical theory I: negativism

From the very beginning negativism is deeply ingrained in Adorno's theory. In fact, he shares this outlook with Horkheimer, who in his seminal essay, 'Traditional and Critical Theory', states:

> The goal at which the latter [critical thought] aims, namely the rational state of society, is grounded on the misery of the present. However, this misery does not provide the image of its abolition. The theory which projects such a solution onto the distress does not labor in the service of an existing reality, but only reveals its secret.[18]

For Horkheimer, the reason why we should move beyond the current social structure is provided by the misery it cannot but produce. Still, this does not reveal what a just and free society would be like beyond avoiding the current evils. Similarly, Adorno repeatedly emphasises that we cannot know or even imagine what the good, reconciliation, utopia, or a free society would look like. For example, he writes in *Negative Dialectics* that '[i]n the right condition, as in the Jewish *theologoumenon*, all things would differ only a little from the way there are; but not the least can be conceived now as it would be then'.[19]

However, the absence of positive standards does not imply that Adorno gives up on his critical project. Instead, he proposes to criticise capitalism on the basis of the evils it produces, evils which – according to Adorno – are of the worst kind. For example, he thinks that the systematic persecution and murder of the European Jews was not accidental to modern capitalist society, but the result of the inhuman tendency inherent in it.[20] In his view, the worst catastrophe already happened in Auschwitz,[21]

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[18] TCT, pp. 216f; translation amended and expanded.

[19] ND, p. 299; see also pp. 207, 352; *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 41; 'Critique', pp. 287f; *History and Freedom*, ed. by R. Tiedemann, trans. by R Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), pp. 47f.

[20] See, for example, ND, pp. 361-368.

and late capitalism, by its very nature, is steering towards a repeat of such a catastrophe or even towards its permanent occurrence.[22]

These claims might strike one as problematic in at least two ways. Firstly, one might be surprised by the seemingly moralistic and religious language used by Adorno and Horkheimer, especially given how influenced they were by Nietzsche. Secondly, one might be sceptical about the purported link between the capitalist social world and the *Shoah*. Here I can only hint at how Adorno deals with these complex issues.[23] For a start, Adorno's (and Horkheimer's) talk of evil reflects the view that the bads we are faced with are so grave that they are beyond any relativistic questioning – they express objective bads and should be acknowledged as such. However, this does not mean that such talk is meant to cut short critical scrutiny – as appeals to evil often tend to do. Just the opposite: Adorno insists on our facing up to the problem of evil much more than has happened in the past. After Auschwitz, we cannot just go on doing philosophy and living our lives as before. Instead, we have to investigate how it could happen that social, cultural, and moral mechanisms were as powerless as they turned out to be, and adjust, even radically change, our lives and theories according to the findings.

Moreover, Adorno's use of the term '*Böse*' ('evil') is less moralistic than it might sound. He also uses other terms – such as *Übel* (which could be translated as 'evil', but also as 'ill', 'malady' or even 'trouble'), *Unheil* ('calamity', 'catastrophe'), and *Grauen* ('horror'). These terms are equally evaluatively charged, but seem to be referring to a state of affairs rather than to properties of persons. Crucially, the predicates are primarily and mainly ascribed to our social world. As Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*:

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[21] MM, Aphorism No. 33, p. 55; see also 'Education after Auschwitz' (1966, 1967), in his *Critical Models*, pp. 191-204, here p. 191; and 'Marginalia to Theory and Praxis' (1969), in his *Critical Models*, pp. 259-78, here p. 268.

[22] See, for example, ND, p. 362. Horkheimer in his programmatic essay of 1937 already warns of a looming 'catastrophe' and, following Marx, the danger of a new barbarism; see TCT, pp. 227, 249.

[23] An excellent discussion of the idea of evil, both in general and in relation to Adorno, can be found in P. Dews, *The Idea of Evil* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

> The trouble [*das Übel*] is not that free men do radical evil, as evil is being done beyond all measure conceivable to Kant; the trouble is that as yet there is no world in which […] men would no longer need to be evil. Evil, therefore, is the world's own unfreedom. Whatever evil is done comes from the world. Society destines the individuals to be what they are, even by their immanent genesis.[24]

An analogy might help here: modern capitalist society is for Adorno like the Stanford Prison Experiment writ large, just that it is not an experiment that was intentionally initiated by anyone or that we could easily stop. The conditions, under which we grow up and live, shape us in such a way that we are capable of severely negligent omissions and atrocious acts. In fact, even mere decency is an achievement; living a right and good life (going beyond mere decency) is objectively blocked. This is one of the aspects of Adorno's famous dictum that '[w]rong life cannot be lived rightly'.[25]

This deserves further unpacking, but I will only be able to sketch two elements at play here.[26] Firstly, we have to understand what Adorno means by saying that society 'destines' us to behave as we do. While we take ourselves to be free and while many of us enjoy formal freedom (legal rights and protections), we are – according to Adorno – mere cogs in the capitalist production and consumption mechanisms that perpetuate themselves behind our backs.[27] For the most part, we are not aware of this,

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[24] ND, p. 218.

[25] MM, Aphorism No. 18, p. 39.

[26] For further analysis, see J.M. Bernstein, *Adorno – Disenchantment and Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), especially Ch. 2; and my 'Moral Philosophy', in *Adorno—Key Concepts*, ed. D. Cook (London: Acumen, 2008), Ch. 6.

[27] See, for example, ND, 262. In Adorno's view, genuine freedom is blocked not just in late capitalism, but also in those societies that lay claim to realise socialism. If anything, he prefers liberal capitalist regimes because they permit more formal freedoms, are less openly restrictive and monotonous in their cultural life, and also do not compromise the socialist ideal in the way that the Soviet Union and similar regimes have done.

and even where we are, we tend to misconceive the mechanisms that govern us. For example, we mistakenly view market forces as equally inescapable as natural ones.

Secondly, Adorno holds that our destiny is determined by an economic structure that replicates itself for its own sake rather than for the sake of the human beings that maintain it, with grave consequences for the latter. Many of their material needs remain unmet, while they are subject to an ever increasing expansion of artificial needs, which also contributes to their frustration. In order to survive within the highly competitive social setting, individuals have to internalise a great number of pressures and norms, which requires a great amount of repression. As a result, individuals develop neuroses and other pathologies. Partly to compensate for repression and partly to rebel against the increasing loss of identity, they differentiate themselves into groups of imagined, but nonetheless powerful identities and enter into competition or conflict with other such groups. In the worst cases, this involves discharges of violence and aggression. Such acts are aided by the coldness to the fate of others, which the competitive social pressures generate. Moreover, the decoupling or even inversion of ends and means in modern society also contributes to these trends. Industrialisation, modern means of transportation and communication as well as organisational and administrative procedures become decoupled from basic human ends and their employment endangers the survival of individual and even the species as a whole. That is why for Adorno nationalism, war, racism, and even genocide are not accidental features of the modern world, but are engendered by the social and conceptual structures characteristic of it.

At best, one can hope to develop sufficient subjective resources to resist the objective forces that push individuals towards participating in evils. Still, even those who so resist remain implicated – presumably because leading a decent life is insufficient in a world where evil is systematically engendered. Such a world constitutes what Adorno calls a ‘guilt context’, in which even committing no wrong does not extract one from the calamities with which everyone’s existence is inevitably interwoven.[28]

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[28] See T.W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems* [henceforth ‘MCP’], ed. by R. Tiedemann, trans. by R. Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 113.

One might be puzzled whether talk of ‘evil’ and ‘guilt’ – which suggests individual responsibility and freedom – is still apt when it is applied to a social world that destines its members to behave in morally problematic ways. Adorno would probably answer that there is a sense in which individuals continue to bear responsibility. Another analogy might help here: even if we, as mere individuals, could not stop climate-changing production and consumption patterns, this does not mean that we, as a collective, could not put an end to them, albeit only by completely reorganising our way of life and thinking. If – as might still be true at this point in time – we could stop the warming of the climate, then we are collectively responsible for the bad effects that such warming would produce. In fact, we would be thus responsible, even if the bad effects are not caused by wicked intentions, but mere negligence on our part. The same holds for Adorno’s views about the evils engendered by late capitalism: our indirect individual responsibility derives from our collective capacity to put an end to the problem.

Adorno’s claims about the way in which modern society necessarily engenders evil are – without a doubt – controversial. Moreover, for Adorno there are no fundamental differences between the 1930s/1940s and the 1960s or, presumably, the early 2000s – the basic tendencies towards moral catastrophe remain in place. According to him, modern society and its thought forms present a grave danger from which one should take flight, and his evaluatively charged language owes a lot to his fear that many will fail to recognise this danger, almost as if they remained in a house despite the fact that it is on fire. Yet if one grants Adorno his claims about the nature of modern society and thought forms as premises, then his critical theory becomes both understandable and defensible. If it is true that late capitalism systematically produces the conditions for acts that are morally deeply problematic, then this suffices to legitimate its critique and the demand to overcome it. If these bads constitute moral rock bottom, then anything that would genuinely avoid them would be an improvement. Moreover, anything that would not be an improvement could be criticised on the basis of the very conception of the bad which Adorno and Horkheimer employ to object to late capitalism. In this way, the absence of positive standards does not detract from the legitimacy of their critical project.

One might think that Adorno’s negativism nevertheless implies a conception of the good society. In a very minimal sense, this is true, for by knowing what the

evils are we know what the good society should *not* be like. However, why should we think that this provides us with more than a sort of compass with which to navigate away from the current state of affairs? To take issue with a society that cannot but steer towards catastrophe does not tell us much about the features of an alternative society. It would be like saying that we should develop an energy source that does not depend on fossil fuels – this is not an empty demand, but it also radically underdetermines what the solution to the problems is going be.

Admittedly, Adorno and Horkheimer state, for example, that human beings should no longer be governed by their own creations (be it the capitalist economic system or state socialism's vast bureaucracy); that there should be an end to human misery and hunger; that events like those that took place in Auschwitz should never be allowed to happen again; that people should be freed from the enormous pressures that workplaces put them under; that they should even be freed from most of the kind of work which capitalism requires people to undertake; and so on.[29] Nonetheless, such statements should be understood as merely negating the evils of modernity and, indeed, of a long history of domination.[30] As I see it, nothing in these statements commits Adorno to operating with a conception of the good. The key point is that – according to Adorno – we can identify many of the negative aspects of late capitalism and demand its overcoming simply on the basis of a conception of the bad.

Still, even granting this point, one could object to a purely negativistic strategy by arguing that critique should always provide a positive alternative, not just lament a short-coming. However, Horkheimer and Adorno would maintain that the demand for a detailed blueprint of a better society is impossible to meet and highly inappropriate. Practical solutions can hardly ever be theoretically anticipated, and we are so deeply governed by late capitalism that we cannot even imagine what a radically different society would look like. At most, what can be required of radical social critique is that it must be capable of guiding our actions such that we can avoid producing the

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[29] See, for example, TCT, pp. 217, 229, 241, 242, 246, 248f; MM, Aphorism No. 100, pp. 155-157; and ND, p. 365.

[30] On the latter, see M. Horkheimer & T.W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944, 1947), trans. by J. Cumming (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), especially essays 1-3.

object(s) of criticism, or least minimise our doing so. This would be already a real achievement.[31] Moreover, in their view, demands for a positive alternative are often just veiled demands to maintain or improve the *status quo* and as such beg the question against radical social critique that reject it as beyond reform. In sum, the demand for constructive criticism should be rejected, for it requires that we contribute to 'the administration of what cannot be administered', to perpetuate the 'monstrous totality'.[32]

One further objection would be that a merely negativistic critical theory cannot be justified or vindicated, that its conception of the bad would require some independent warrant. This issue is made more difficult by the fact that, as seen, Adorno seems to have given up on the possibility of both transcendent and purely immanent critique. In the light of such difficulties, the second generation critical theorists (especially Habermas) have adopted Kantian, (quasi-) transcendental strategies of justification. For Adorno this would have been a non-starter. In fact, even the idea that we should provide ethical reactions to torture and suffering with discursive grounding is an 'outrage' for him.[33] Oppression and lack of freedom are 'the evil whose malevolence requires as little philosophical proof as does its existence'.[34]

One way to support this view is to consider that it does indeed seem outrageous to suggest that torture is wrong mainly or solely because the maxim in question cannot be universalised or because the balance of utility would speak against it in most cases. Similarly, it would be outrageous to demand a justification for saying that what happened in the extermination camps was evil – implying that it could in principle turn out that the actions in question were not evil or that this evil would be merely derivative (rather than seeing these events as paradigmatic and constitutive of

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[31] See also 'Critique', p. 287.

[32] T.W. Adorno, 'Society' (1965), trans. by F.R. Jameson, in S.E. Bronner & D. MacKey Kellner (eds.), *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader* (New York/London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 267-275, here p. 275; see also TCT, pp. 206f.

[33] See, for example, ND, p. 365.

[34] 'Why Still Philosophy', p. 10.

evil). Here one feels drawn to Adorno's view that something goes wrong when one enters into a search for discursive grounds – both because it might well turn out that reason cannot provide such grounds but instead entangles itself in an infinite chain of arguments;[35] and because it is inappropriate to ask for them.

At the same time, if Adorno does not want to fall into irrationalism or dogmatism, he should be able to offer something to support his highly contentious claims. In fact, he himself distinguishes between grounding [*Begründung*] and vindication [*Rechtfertigung*], rejecting only the demand for the former.[36] Hence, what vindication of his critical theory and its conception of the bad can he offer? It seems to me that a neglected resource is the Marxist-Aristotelian conception of humanity that is operative in the first generation critical theory.

3. The resources of critical theory II: humanity

Already in Horkheimer's seminal essay the pivotal role that a Marxist-Aristotelian conception of humanity plays is striking. He speaks repeatedly of the inhuman nature of late capitalism and laments that the current social structure prevents the constitution of humanity as conscious, self-determining subject.[37] He also suggests that the idea of a free society is immanent in specific human capacities, namely, our capacity to transform nature and in our capacity to think.[38] He seems to hold that both these capacities make possible human self-determination. Nonetheless, he also suggests that this ideal of self-determination can be grasped only negatively. He does not claim that we already know what human self-determination fully entails, but purports that we only know that the current social world prevents us from developing and realising our potential for self-determination. In his view, the misery of the

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[35] See *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 118; T.W. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, [henceforth 'PMP'], ed. by T. Schröder, trans. by R. Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), p. 97; MCP, p. 116.

[36] See, for example, ND, p. xix.

[37] TCT, pp. 204, 210, 211, 221, 233.

[38] TCT, pp. 213, 242.

present serves as an index of the fact that this world is an obstacle to human self-determination.

This negativistic account of the normative ideal of humanity is even more present in Adorno's theory. Accusations of inhumanity levelled at late capitalism are a constant threat running through his writings, often as criticism of the way it has turned human beings into objects or appendages of the machine.[39] What might be surprising is that Adorno builds here on elements from Kant's philosophy. In *Negative Dialectics*, he writes:

> The "principle of humanity as end in itself" is, despite all ethics of conviction, not something purely internal, but an instruction to realise a concept of humanity, which [–] as a social, albeit internalised, principle [–] has its place in every individual. Kant must have noticed the double meaning of the word "humanity," as the idea of being human and as the epitome of all human beings.[40]

According to Adorno, the gap between human beings as they are now – damaged, reduced to appendages of the machine, lacking real autonomy – and their potential, their humanity, provides the normative resources for a radical critique of late capitalism. Interestingly, the parallel with Kant runs deeper on this issue. Adorno speaks of humanity as not yet having reached *Mündigkeit.*[41] This term is commonly translated as 'maturity', but it indicates much more than reaching adulthood. In Kant's use of this term it refers rather to 'autonomy', to thinking for oneself and governing

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[39] See, for example, MM, Aphorism No. 96, p. 147; 'Society', p. 275; 'Reflections on Class Theory' (1942), trans. by R. Livingstone, in T.W. Adorno, *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, pp. 93-110, here p. 109; and GS, 8:582, 20.2:464; see also MM, 'Dedication' and Aphorism No. 131, pp. 15, 205.

[40] ND, p. 258; translation amended.

[41] See, for example, T.W. Adorno in conversation with A. Gehlen, 'Is the sociology a science of man?' (1965), published as appendix in F. Grenz, *Adornos Philosophie in Grundbegriffen. Auflösung einiger Deutungsprobleme* [henceforth 'Grenz'] (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), pp. 225-251, here pp. 234, 243.

one's own life.[42] The fact that Adorno uses this term suggests that he, like Horkheimer, endorses something similar to Kant's ideal of human self-determination.

However, how can we know that there is an unrealised potential of the sort Adorno refers to, and how can we know what it consists in? In a revealing interchange with the anthropologist A. Gehlen on German radio in 1965, Adorno is confronted by this very question.[43] Adorno answers as follows:

> Well. I do not know positively what this potential is, but I know from all sorts of findings – including the particular findings of the [social and human] sciences – that the processes of adjustment to which human beings are subjected nowadays lead in an unprecedented extent – […] – to the crippling of human beings. […] And I would say that merely the psychological observation of all the defect human beings that one encounters – and defectiveness has become, I would nearly say, the norm today – this justifies the claim that the potentialities of humanity have been crippled and suppressed by [social] institutions to an unprecedented extent. [44]

Firstly, Adorno here advances the empirical claim that human beings today are damaged; something that he takes to be illustrated, for example, by the fact that neuroses are very widespread. Secondly, he expounds what might be called his 'methodological negativism', that is, the view that we should start our inquiries by looking at forms of suffering and despair. Put differently, the negative experiences of people are the *organon* of critical theory. This methodological view is common among critical theorists of a variety of traditions, including some of the later members of the Frankfurt School (such as Honneth). However, thirdly, Adorno's negativism is not merely methodological, but runs more deeply. As he says here to Gehlen (and reaffirms elsewhere), we can know what is bad for humans, but we do not have

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[42] For Kant's classic statement, see his 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment' (1784), Prussian Academy Edition, 8:33-42, especially 35f. Adorno's characterisation of *Mündigkeit* is very reminiscent of Kant, see 'Critique', pp. 281f; see also 'Education after Auschwitz', p. 195; and 'Education for Autonomy '.

[43] Grenz, p. 246.

[44] Grenz, pp. 246f; my translation.

positive knowledge of the human potential and good.[45] Thus, Adorno thinks we can maintain that human beings are crippled insofar as the realisation of their potential is blocked, without being able to determine what the full realisation of this potential would actually come down to. In this way, the ideal of humanity at play in Adorno's thinking is compatible with his negativism. This also explains why humanity and self-determination remain fairly vague in his works: because we can have only a partial grasp of what they exclude, their meaning is radically underdetermined and we cannot fully substantiate our conceptions of them.

Adorno's interchange with Gehlen also reveals how he conceives of vindication: if his critical theory succeeds better than rival theories to explain certain social phenomena and developments (such as the high incidences of paranoia and neurosis in late capitalism or modern anti-Semitism), then its underlying negativistic conception of humanity is as redeemed as it could be. This strategy relies on the claim that any theory, whether acknowledged or not, contains normative presuppositions, whose legitimacy is directly tied up with its explanatory success.[46] This fits well with Adorno's and Horkheimer's conception of theory: for them, understanding and critique are one and the same project.[47] In other words, Adorno rejects the nowadays widespread view that we first engage in purely normative theorising and then try to bring our results together with results of social sciences (conceived, on this view, as purely descriptive). Instead, he thinks we should confront normative laden theories with each other in order to establish which one of them is the best in terms of its explanatory force.

This interpretation of how Adorno's theory has the advantage of removing an otherwise gapping discrepancy between the conception of humanity that provides the fundamental normative background in his theory, on the one hand, and his repeated

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[45] See also PMP, p. 175.

[46] This claim is also held by other social theorists, such as Charles Taylor (see his *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), especially Ch. 2).

[47] See, for example, MCP, p. 64; see also TCT, pp. 216, 229.

criticisms of transhistorical conceptions of human nature, on the other.[48] On my interpretation, his conception of humanity first and foremost stands and falls with the analysis and critique of late capitalism of which it is an integral part; rather than deriving its legitimacy from a metaphysical or teleological account of human nature. It also reduces the problem of how we come to know the bad: it is not a transcendent standard, but it is – to come back to Horkheimer's formulation – 'grounded on the misery of the present'.[49] In this sense, Adorno presents a sort of internal critique of late capitalism. Still, unlike immanent critiques, it does not require that there is a gap between a social world and the norms used to defend it – his critical standard consists in the objective bads generated by this world and is independent of whether or not these bads are recognised as such by its defenders.

However, even assuming that Adorno's critical theory could be vindicated in this way, what practical guidance, if any, would it imply? Or, as Lukács famously objected, does this theory just amount to the lament of a few intellectuals lodging in the 'Grand Hotel Abyss' and contemplating the end of civilisation?[50]

4. Negativistic ethics

In response to this objection we can return to the already mentioned radio discussion between Gehlen and Adorno. Here the latter states:

> Ethics is surely nothing else than the attempt to do justice to the obligations, with which the experience of this entangled world present us. Yet this obligation can equally take the form of adjustment and subordination, which you seem to emphasise more, as also the form, which I emphasise more, namely, that the attempt to take this obligation seriously consists exactly in

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[48] See already in TCT, pp. 240, 250f. See also ND, pp. 51, 124; and 'Thesen über das Bedürfnis' (1942), GS, 8:393.

[49] TCT, p. 217; translation amended.

[50] G. Lukács, 'Preface' (1962), in his *The Theory of the Novel: a historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature*, trans. by Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), p. 22.

> changing that which stops – in all cases – human beings within the contemporary conditions to live their own possibility and thus to realise the potential contained in them.[51]

Passages as this one deserve to be studied closely because it is not always recognised, and sometimes denied, that Adorno has an ethics.[52] Specifically, it is important to investigate the content of the obligation(s) to which Adorno thinks the contemporary social world gives rise. In line with what I argued in the previous section, Adorno links here the ethical demand for social change with his view of humanity: it is because the current social world does not allow human beings to realise their potential that it should be resisted and overcome. In this sense, he seems to be committed to a negativistic ethics – a guide to how we should live based on knowledge of the bad, rather than the good.

This suggestion is confirmed if we consider other works by Adorno. Most importantly perhaps, he claims that a 'new categorical imperative' commands us 'to arrange our thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen'.[53] This prescription is negative and minimalist, but nonetheless ethical. It tells us what we have to avoid and how we ought *not* to live. Yet it does not underwrite a full-blown morality governing all aspects of our ethical life (as, arguably, Kant's categorical imperative was meant to do). It is, however, not an isolated element either. Rather, Adorno's new categorical imperative is a specific variant of the obligation to resist all forms of wrong life which have been seen through as such.[54] Also, he offers also more particular guidance on how (not) to live in late capitalism. For example, Adorno warns us against being self-righteous and

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[51] Grenz, p. 246; my translation.

[52] For the view that Adorno's theory is not ethical, see, for example, G. Tassone, 'Amoral Adorno: Negative Dialectics Outside Ethics', *European Journal of Social Theory* VIII/3 (2005): 251–267). For critical discussion, see my 'No Easy Way Out: Adorno's Negativism and the Problem of Normativity', in S. Giacchetti Ludovisi (ed.), *Nostalgia for a Redeemed Future: Critical Theory*, Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2009.

[53] ND, p. 365; see also MCP, p. 116.

[54] PMP, pp. 167f; see also ND, p. 265.

asks us to show solidarity with those who are suffering. While his ethics does not tell us positively what a better alternative would be like, it meets the requirement to yield constraints on action with which we can condemn both the evils of late capitalism and those that might be committed in the name of radical social change. The negativistic ethics supplies us with the necessary moral compass.[55]

However, my emphasis on the practical guidance that Adorno's theory offers should not be taken to suggest that moral philosophy alone could rescue us from our precarious predicament. Adorno thinks that moral philosophy can never provide the kind of guidance that would suffice for deciding what to do in specific situations.[56] At most, it can provide a general framework (such as constraints on action), but nothing more. Specifically, recognising morally salient features and adjudicating between them is not something that can be fully codified or theory-driven. Also, the precariousness of our situation is not something that a theory could change: right living would require a fundamental social transformation, not just one in the realm of consciousness.

I do not wish to suggest that, in Adorno's view, theorising is subordinated to the practical struggle for social change. To the contrary, given the absence of a revolutionary subject, the first task is to get a full understanding of how exactly society operates.[57] Without such an understanding, practice is likely to backfire and reinforce or worsen the *status quo*, especially if it uses violent means. This is why Adorno opposed what he perceived as "actionism" on the students's part in the 1960s.[58] In his view, the difficult task of providing a critical theory of society (including a critique of its dominant thought forms) will, eventually, suggest ways in which social change can be attempted, but the analytic process should not be stopped prematurely. In fact, Adorno thinks that theorising should not be seen in contrast to

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[55] For a more detailed account of Adorno's negativistic ethics, see my 'Moral Philosophy'.

[56] See, for example,'"Keine Angst vor dem Elfenbeinturm." Ein "Spiegel" Gespräch' (1969), in GS, 20.1:402-409, here 408; and PMP, pp. 166, 167.

[57] 'Society', pp. 274f; 'Critique', pp. 287f.

[58] See, for example, 'Critique', p. 288; and 'Kritische Theorie und Protestbewegung. Ein Interview mit der "Süddeutschen Zeitung"' (1969), in GS, 20.1:398-401, especially 398.

revolutionary practice, but as itself a form of practice. For a start, theorising involves the active resistance against the pressure to conform. Moreover, as our social practices and institutions are themselves theory-infused, a critique of the conceptual and ideological schemes that structure them is not just a theoretical, but also a practical intervention. For these reasons, Adorno considers theory to be the critical practice that is currently most appropriate, at least when the conditions for such theorising are relatively favourable, as is the case within democracies.[59]

Adorno never gave up on radical change as the ultimate aim of his theory.[60] Despite his pessimism about its coming about, he emphasised repeatedly that capitalism harbours the real possibility for a radically different social system.[61] In this regard, at least, he seemed to support the orthodox Marxist view that capitalism initially was progressive insofar as it exponentially expanded human productive capacities. Although the capitalist relations of production eventually became fetters on further development of these capacities,[62] capitalism's achievements make radical social change to a free society not an unrealisable dream, but materially and technologically possible. Still, this possibility cannot realise itself by itself, and in the absence of a revolutionary subject and situation, it remains only an abstract hope – enough, perhaps, to keep the critical flame alight, but not by itself sufficient to abandon the pessimistic outlook of what lies ahead.

This pessimism brings us back to the issue of the likely addressee for Adorno's theory and the practical guidance it implies. As far as I can make out, he saw no reliable mechanism at work in society that would generate the critical individuals required to heed his words (never mind a revolutionary class). Luck or accident might produce critical individuals – just as Adorno claims that his own critical endeavours were due to the fortunate fact of growing up in a still not fully

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[59] See, for example, ND, pp. 3, 143, 245; 10.2:469f, '"Keine Angst vor dem Elfenbeinturm."', 20.1:408f; see also TCT, pp. 216, 231.

[60] For example, he writes approvingly about Horkheimer by saying that his work 'aims for the essential: the transformation of the world' ('Max Horkheimer', GS 20.1:151; my translation).

[61] See, for example, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 41. See also TCT, p. 219.

[62] See, for example, ND, p. 203; see also TCT, pp. 213, 227.

systematised capitalist world. Perhaps, the constant renewal which capitalism requires at some level to sustain itself will mean that some people will be allowed to think for themselves to a greater extent than most people are destined to do by this social context. Some of these might, perhaps driven by the fact that – according to Adorno – our material needs can be never fully integrated,[63] come to some critical insight, and then pass this on to others equally fortunate. However, if at all, this will only happen as an accidental by-product, and, hence, is likely to be limited to a small number of people. Still, they might not be white males from a privileged background that are educated in modernist high culture – for it could turn out that others are more attuned to the experience of negativity and the denial of our potential as human beings. If so, they would turn out to be the keepers of the critical flame.

Conclusion

I started with the objection that Adorno, on the one hand, has to invoke critical standards to make normative claims about what should be avoided (late capitalism), but, on the other hand, cannot underwrite these standards. I have argued that Adorno's theory can meet this objection because his negativistic conception of humanity provides him with all the reasons, standards, and practical constraints that could justifiably be required of a radical critique of late capitalism.

This is not to say that there are no problems remaining, particularly when it comes to the question of who today might be the likely addressee of Adorno's critical theory. Even if its critical standards can be vindicated, his theory either is reserved for only those few privileged by lucky coincidences or remains a message in a bottle for an unknown addressee in an unknown future.

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[63] See ND, p. 92.