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Book Review: Fabian Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly* (2013, Cambridge: CUP)

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Having already made an impression, it seems likely Freyenhagen's book will come to be regarded as a game-changer in Adorno and Critical Theory scholarship (it seems less likely to make an impact on mainstream philosophical ethics, but that probably says more about mainstream philosophical ethics than about Freyenhagen's argument). It will be essential reading for anyone working on Critical Theory, and should also be mandatory for those interested in ethics and moral philosophy. For critical realists it will prove most interesting, making clear that their concerns are more deeply entwined with issues in contemporary debates about the Frankfurt School than they might so far have realised.

One of the attractive things about Adorno's thought is that he offers a critique of modern societies that is at once radically negative and ethically serious, and that does not capitulate to idealist, rationalist or proceduralist pressures but rather retrieves a materialist and naturalistic orientation which it puts in the service of a radical critique of modern social arrangements. But it is precisely this ethical dimension of his critical theory that has attracted sharpest criticism. For it is well-known that Adorno claimed 'there is no right life within the wrong [life]' (p. 53). He held that the modern social world is 'radically evil' (p. 29), that 'there is no freedom' in this world (p. 75), and that within our social world there is no freedom, and that we can have no access to the good life either in practice or even theory: our social world is so corrupted we cannot live an ethically good or even right life, and we cannot even know what such a good or right life would look like. Yet Adorno's work is at the same time replete with substantive ethical claims – claims about the badness or wrongness of our existing social world, and claims also about how we as individuals ought to live in this wrong world – for example, that we should live a 'life of resistance' rather joining in (p. 164), and that above all we should 'arrange our thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself' (p. 133).

Now it has often been said that there are contradictions in Adorno's descriptive ethical claims, and between those and his prescriptive ethical claims. His descriptive claim that the world is so wrong that it is not possible to live or know the good or right life seems contradictory, because if we cannot know the good or right, how is Adorno supposed to be able to know this fact? How can he know how bad the world is without being able to know anything about the good? And even if Adorno is descriptively right about how bad the world is, his prescriptive proposals about how to live seem neither practically helpful nor normatively grounded. Practically unhelpful, for what good is telling us what we ought to do, if the world is so corrupt that living rightly is impossible anyway? If the world is structured so that no right options are available, what can we do? And if there is no moral freedom, if we are all determined by society, what could be the point of telling us to resist it, or of us trying to do so? In unfree wrong life, in what way is moral deliberation about action even possible or meaningful? And normatively ungrounded, since, again, how is it possible to know anything about what we ought to do if the world is so bad that knowledge of the good is completely closed off?

We can summarise these worries in two sets of issues, which consist of two main problems each. First, the practical issues, which consists of: the Freedom Problem: what is the point of ethical reflection if we are unfree anyway? And the Guidance Problem: what is the point of ethical criticism if we cannot do anything right anyway? i.e. how can such criticism offer any guidance? And second, the normativity issues, which consist of the Epistemic Problem: if things are so bad, how is Adorno, or anyone, supposed to be able to get knowledge of this fact? And the Vindication Problem: how is such knowledge supposed to be grounded or justified?

These are distinctively philosophical worries, *a priori* objections to the conceptual shape of Adorno's project, and Freyenhagen's leading aim is to forestall such worries, defending the in-principle viability of Adorno's 'research programme' (p. 253). He doesn't claim that Adorno is actually right about the modern world, but he argues that it is conceivable that Adorno is right – there is nothing *a priori* wrong with the kind of position he articulates: it is not self-contradictory or incoherent; to what extent it is actually correct is a substantive, partly empirical question which awaits more detailed, interdisciplinary exploration. In the process, Freyenhagen offers an interpretation of the nature, status and method of Adorno's version of critical theory generally. He shows that, properly interpreted, it stakes a major claim to our attention as a paradigm whose critical power may be deeper and more enduring than that of the supposedly post-metaphysical forms that have succeeded it.

The interpretation of Adorno offered casts him as a radical Aristotelian, and his ethical criticism of modern societies as rooted in an idea of an unactualised human nature which our social forms distort and deny, 'needs' and 'potentials' that remain unfulfilled, powers and capacities undeveloped, because of the damage modern social conditions inflict on people qua the kind of beings we are. It is because modern societies (though Adorno is not eulogising some golden past either) are inadequate to human beings' needs and potentials – they are forms of the wrong life, or wrong forms of life, that is, wrong qua forms of (human) life, we might say – that they make it impossible to live well or rightly. There is none of the magical reference to a mysterious nonreified nature here – because there is nothing magical about reference to our human nature, and nothing mysterious about the thought that the wrong conditions can damage an animal (such as a human being) and suppress the proper actualisation of its real nature. This interpretation, Freyenhagen thinks, can dissolve the supposedly insuperable problems with Adorno's ethics and his critical theory generally. Freyenhagen answers the philosophical objections to Adorno, basically, by showing that Adorno's commitment to the premise that our world makes it impossible to live or even know the good or right life is compatible with his having the premise that it is possible to epistemic access to this very fact. In essence, we can know the bad without any access to the good – we can have a purely negative ethics. If that is so, there is no basic contradiction in Adorno's project.

The 'Introduction' and first two chapters set out this overall orientation, on the basis of which Freyenhagen offers an answer to the question of the practical application of Adorno's ethical claims: although we cannot live wrong life rightly, we can nevertheless live it more or less wrongly: 'neither the good, nor the right life, nor any genuine living is possible within our social world. Yet, Adorno's thesis... leaves open the possibility that there are forms of living the wrong life which are preferable to others' (p. 65). And Adorno, Freyenhagen argues, has detailed things to say about how we might go about living wrong life less wrongly. Adorno is 'not saying that there is nothing we can and should do... it is still possible to lead a decent life' (pp. 94-5). The gist is that we should resist joining in with the bad practices and activities of our social world, avoid cooperating with its evils as much as possible, and above all do what we can to avoid anything like Auschwitz happening again.

Over the next four chapters this minimalist 'ethics of resistance' is developed in more detail. Chapter 3 addresses the Freedom Problem, arguing that although wrong life makes people *unfree* in the sense of not self-determining or autonomous, through both external and internalised domination, nevertheless negative freedom to resist is not ruled out by social determination. We are not free enough to live a good or right life, but at least some of us have sufficient freedom to resist the tendencies of wrong life to some extent. The following chapter defends Adorno's critique of moral philosophy, devoting sustained attention to the critique of Kantian ethics in Adorno's work. The gist is that no moral theory, whether Kantian, consequentialist or naturalist (Schopenhauer, Nietzsche) can provide a guide for living rightly, since each remains open to subversion by the evils of the

wrong social world in which we live. An important discussion of Adorno's views on agency, spontaneity and embodiment is, oddly, relegated to an Appendix.

Chapters 5 and 6 reconstruct in detail Adorno's own negative 'ethics of resistance' - answering the Guidance Problem: although we cannot live rightly (since we are unfree, dominated by a bad social world, because we cannot know the good in such a bad world, and because we could not live rightly even if we knew what it would do so would consist in because the opportunities for right social actions are not available), we can nevertheless live less wrongly, and Adorno's ethics aims to help us understand what this would involve and how to go about it. The most basic ethical demand is to arrange our lives so as to prevent a repetition of Auschwitz or anything like it (p. 134), but this 'new categorical imperative' turns out to be 'just a more specific variant of the negative prescription to resist all forms of the wrong life that have been seen through' (p. 165). The injunction, basically, is to 'resist the pressures that make one conform to and reproduce the current social world' (p. 166) - no mean feat. What does this involve? Critical reflection (because wrong life is so opaque and ideologically confusing that no-one can hope to see through the concrete instances of badness without critical reflection); modesty (in order to guard against self-righteousness, narcissism and hubris); and solidarity and identification with the suffering of others (because they embody the ethical directedness of the physical impulse against suffering that, for Adorno, is at the heart of ethical knowledge and action) (p. 175).

In the final three chapters, Freyenhagen addresses the normative issues: the question is essentially of whether and how Adorno's claim that the bad can be known and acted on even in a world that prevents us knowing about the good is defensible. Chapter 7 responds to the Vindication Problem, defending an explanatory as opposed to justificatory view of normative grounds, drawing out into the open and calling into question the tacit assumption of many of Adorno's critics, that an account of normativity must amount to a justificatory discursive grounding. In effect, Freyenhagen's move here is to reject the question of normative justification by showing that a discursive justification of normative claims is not the only or most appropriate kind of grounding that can be given. The Aristotelian tradition has approached the question of grounding ethics differently: it says that one can give an explanatory account of ethical insight, a theory that explains what ethical insights are about and how they are possible, and that such a theory can vindicate ethical claims, without trying to give a discursive justification for such insights, and that we should interpret Adorno as standing in this tradition. Adorno, on this view, offers an explanatory theory of ethical insights which gives a central place to sensuous impulses in ethical experience, and refuses to enter into the game of discursively grounding his normative claims because he sees this game as a dead-end. This comes out, on the one hand, in his attack on Kant's dogmatic 'fact of reason': general principles cannot ultimately be grounded anyway without (explicit or implicit) appeal to something non-rational and somatic in which they necessarily bottom-out, so appeal to an ethical impulse is inevitable. Likewise, Adorno claims that ethical judgments are particularistic and in a sense immediate: the judgments that Auschwitz should not repeat itself is, or that torture should not be going on, or that no-one should go hungry, are for Adorno not ones that can or should be argumentatively justified. They are a kind of rock bottom, and any demand for an argument would be not only futile but an 'outrage', because it would already have assumed that the unbearable suffering doesn't speak for itself normatively, implying that the normativity of suffering itself is insufficient as compared with the discursive grounding of general principles. Or as Adorno puts it in *Negative Dialectics*, 'morality survives in the materialistic motive alone.'

In chapter 8, negativism is directly defended - responding to the Epistemic Problem. Freyenhagen picks apart and rebuts the slippery contention that knowledge of the good is a necessary condition of knowledge of the bad. We must distinguish the thought that the bad cannot have normative force on its own, the thought that claims about the bad and the good are convertible, and the thought that we could not have epistemic

access to the bad without access to the good. He defends what he calls 'meta-ethical negativism', both on its own terms and as a reading of Adorno's own commitments: the bad is its own normative index – 'woe says: go!' – and there is no convincing reason to think that normativity can only accrue to badness derivatively, that goodness rather than badness is the foundational normative concept.

The final chapter seeks to tie these arguments for an explanatory and negative approach to ethical knowledge by developing an Aristotelian take on Adorno, which, Freyenhagen claims, allows us to make sense of and vindicate Adorno's negativism. For on an Aristotelian view, 'the good and the bad are indexed to humanity and inhumanity respectively... it is because we cannot know what realised humanity is that we cannot know what the good is' (p. 239). For Adorno (contrary to most Aristotelians) human beings have yet to realise their potential for humanity; the human life form is as-yet largely unactualised. This explains why we cannot know the good. But we can know the bad because we can still perceive the ways in which we fall away from our form, at least in extreme cases. Our knowledge of the bad is not derivative of general principles that can be discursively grounded; rather, when we are able to recognise and understand the bad (and this in itself is a difficult thing to do in our social world, which is part of what is so bad about it, and partly explains why we need critical theory at all), it is by the exercise of our capacities for ethical judgment which depend irreducibly on ethically sensitive sensuous impulses as well as the rational education of those impulses. The quasi-transcendent quality of physical impulse, that cannot be reduced to or entirely reduced by any social form of life, ensures that we (or at least the most sensitive among us, Freyenhagen says) can know radical deficiency when we see and feel it, and this is enough for us to have knowledge of the badness of the world, to criticise and resist it, without knowing anything about the good.

I think Freyenhagen is definitely on the right lines in interpreting Adorno as a thinker in the Aristotelian tradition. Yet Freyenhagen's reconstruction points to a need to think through the metaphysical presuppositions of Adorno's (or any similar) critical ethical project more explicitly, and it is this point which will perhaps be of most interest to a critical realist readership, since critical realists have been especially concerned with the importance to any critical social research of explicitly thinking through metaphysical questions in a time when metaphysics has often been denounced as a suspicious relic of an outdated philosophical imagination. Now Freyenhagen – and this is for me the main limitation of the book – is reticent when it comes to committing Adorno or himself metaphysically. This is understandable given the dialectical context, but it seems to me that his discussion cries out for exploration of the substantive metaphysical commitments Adorno's position must, if Freyenhagen's reading is correct, presuppose. The kind of metaphysical picture presupposed by Adorno's critical theory as Freyenhagen presents it is, it seems to me, a broadly speaking Aristotelian one which breaks decisively with the dominant Humean-Kantian modern metaphysical picture. It is a picture in which the biological category of life rather than the physical category of mechanism plays a central heuristic role, and in which the palette of basic ontological categories is not limited to events and relations between them but centrally involves real natures or forms, real powers and potentialities, real processes of change, and causality is understood not in event-causal nor even in exclusively efficient causal terms at all, for it understands efficient cause as centrally referring to things actively exercising or displaying powers and capacities, and it understands efficient cause to be only one of the objects of causal inquiry, alongside the material and formal causality which that implies. And accommodates the non-empirical reality of forms, including life-forms, and the human life-form in particular, as both real independently of their actualisation in particular empirical cases, yet thoroughly immanent in rather than transcendent of the natural world.

The central aspects of this picture have been the subject of a serious renewal of interest in recent decades in a variety of quarters, including philosophy of science, analytic

metaphysics and philosophy of action. Critical realists are among those who have sought to reinvigorate metaphysical inquiry as both possible and necessary to the project of a critical theory, and the critical realist view has much common ground with neo-Aristotelian accounts that have recently gained traction in the philosophy of action and ethics. I suspect readers grounded in these traditions will find much to provoke their interest in Freyenhagen's book. And for readers of Adorno, Aristotelianism and in particular the critical realist tradition (which can at least broadly be seen as part of the Aristotelian revival) may, conversely, prove interesting as a resource for thinking through and developing the metaphysical presuppositions of critical theory.

Freyenhagen's book indicates, to me, that a long-overdue serious dialogue between critical theory and critical realism would be mutually fruitful. By exploring the intriguing and generally overlooked relationship between Adorno's critical theory and the revival of Aristotelian ideas in metaphysics and ontology, the possibility of a dialogue between critical theorists and neo-Aristotelians opens up that could prove extremely fruitful for a development of the project of a philosophically defensible critical social theory today. In particular it could help reorient critical theory away from the increasingly transfigurative and reconstructive register of Honneth's work and toward a more resolutely and rigorously critical one, for it is plausible that the side-lining of Adorno's project by Habermas and then Honneth has at least something to do with misunderstandings of Adorno's work that flow directly from a failure adequately to engage with the metaphysical presuppositions of his project.

This is really a first-rate book, bringing an unparalleled level of clarity of exposition and thoughtfulness of reconstruction to a difficult but vital topic, and managing to present Adorno's difficult thought as straight-forward and thoroughly plausible. In the process it shows up rather convincingly the received understanding of Adorno – as a confused and self-contradictory thinker stuck in the dead-end of an obsolete philosophical paradigm that leads only into hopeless aporia and aesthete's resignation – as based on misunderstanding, and in doing so it makes an important contribution to the wider re-thinking of the direction in which Critical Theory has been heading over the last 40 years. At the level of detail, Freyenhagen seems anxious to hold back from engaging in heavy-duty metaphysical theorising, whereas I think it becomes clear from the internal logic of his account that he ought in fact to go further than he does in explicitly thematising metaphysical issues in Adorno's thought. Nevertheless, Freyenhagen's book serves as an excellent and timely stimulus to exploring these sorts of questions.¹

1 See my review essay 'Ethics and Critical Theory Beyond the Post-Metaphysical Turn' (in the present issue) for elaboration on these remarks.