

Eric S. Nelson

Forthcoming / Prepublication Draft / Journal of the History of Philosophy, 2015

Fabian Freyenhagen. *Adorno's Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xv + 285. Cloth, \$95.00.

Theodor Adorno's corpus does not appear to be a significant source for practical philosophy due to his skepticism concerning prospects for living a good life in the midst of damaged life and achieving a just society in the face of the reproduction of unjust social realities in modern administered social systems. How are human flourishing and the good life imaginable given the preponderance of socially produced suffering and evil? How are equality, fairness, and genuine democratic participation conceivable if hierarchical forms of power and privilege are engrained in existing social structures? Fabian Freyenhagen addresses such concerns by examining Adorno's theses that "there is no right life within the wrong" life (66–67), and that only negativity can save us (222). Based on Adorno's social theory and fragmentary moral commentary in works such as *Minima Moralia*, Freyenhagen articulates what can be described as the "negative ethics" underlying Adorno's ultimately ethically informed critique of the exploitation and alienation characteristic of modern social systems.

In this significant contribution concerning the practical concerns that orient Adorno's overall project, Freyenhagen corrects the common understanding of Adorno as a melancholic, pessimistic thinker by reconsidering his engaged confrontations with the systematically produced pathologies of capitalistically and bureaucratically managed social life. He depicts Adorno as a sophisticated moral thinker by clarifying and reconstructing the argumentative structures at work in the dialectical movement of his writing and revealing their constructive potential.

Freyenhagen frames his analysis of Adorno's negative ethics by adopting the vocabularies of Aristotelian practical philosophy and contemporary analytic ethics without reducing the richness and complexity of Adorno's language. Adorno contrasted his *minima* with

Aristotle's *magna moralia*. The phrase '*minima moralia*' is not so much a nihilistic rejection but rather a minimalistic negativist reinterpretation of human ethical possibilities under dire conditions (185). This disastrous and non-accidental modern condition is horrifically epitomized in the radical evil associated with Auschwitz (27).

The author contends that we should consider Adorno to be a methodological, epistemic, and substantive negativist (3–4). This strong negativist thesis concerns the possibility of conceiving the good and a flourishing community. Strong ethical negativism is the only appropriate option for ethical reasons. Not only is an appropriate form of life and model of human flourishing lacking, but there are also no reliable criteria for adequately determining what it might be. The good is unknown under current conditions even while we are called to recognize and confront that which is bad or the "radical evil" that prevails in life (27–30).

Adorno examined the problems of suffering and evil in relation to the alienation and exploitation of modern capitalist societies that are closely linked to the logic of self-preservation, exchange, and instrumental rationality in which things, including individuals and communities, are transformed into means, instruments, and mere objects of use and administration. The extreme realization of this logic is the Holocaust. Its mass-produced extermination shapes Adorno's Post-War works and haunts any redemptive "promise of happiness." It is this conditional anthropological-social "promise of happiness," a phrase Adorno adopted from Stendhal, that allows Adorno to make normative claims without falling into performative-contradiction. Habermas's polemic against Adorno in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* fails since Adorno never abandoned the right to make normative claims in rejecting grand moral theories of the sort Habermas hoped to resuscitate (192, 202–3).

Freyenhagen develops Adorno's minimalist account of the ethical in a nuanced and thought-provoking manner. There are tensions between the two sides of Freyenhagen's account. Ethical negativism, occurring without reference to an established form of life, reveals a fundamental dissonance between Adorno and philosophers who prioritize the prevailing ethical form and content of the existing community and ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*). The communitarian

ethics of Aristotle and Hegel perpetuates illusions of social integration that potentially excuse the human suffering that Adorno confronted.

Adorno's minimalist ethics is better conceived in relation to ideas of critique found in Kant and Marx. Adorno can be read as criticizing the failures of universality, formalism, and cognitivism in Kantian ethics while contextualizing its aspirations within the concrete affective and social conditions of fragile embodied life. Adorno concurrently adopted and problematized the ambiguous promise of emancipation and human fulfillment found in the Enlightenment. In particular, critical modernistic thinkers such as Kant and Marx confronted the social-political failures of the existing form of ethical life—Kant through a normative model of right, and Marx with his vision of a future in which human well-being would be more fully realized. Kant's normative idea of right, and his conceptions of the categorical imperative and universal respect, and Marx's equal and just society to come, disappeared through the pathologies of modernization that made these thinkers complicit with the suffering and evil they diagnosed. The dialectic of Enlightenment has undone modernity's emancipatory potential. Nevertheless, aspirations toward a flourishing community of autonomous individuals exercise an orienting power within Adorno's negative social critique when its normative dimensions are clarified.

ERIC S. NELSON

Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

University of Massachusetts, Lowell