Interests without history? Some difficulties for a negative Aristotelianism

—Contribution to a book symposium on Fabian Freyenhagen's *Adorno's Practical: Living Less Wrongly*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on 3 features of Freyenhagen's Aristotelian version of Adorno. (a) It challenges the strict negativism Freyenhagen finds in Adorno. If we have morally relevant interests in ourselves, it is implicit that we have a standard by which to understand what is both good and bad for us (our interests). Because strict negativism operates without reference to what is good, it seems to be detached from real interests too. Torture, it is argued, is, among other things, a violation of those interests. (b) Freyenhagen identifies the "impulse" in Adorno as an untutored yet moral reaction to morally demanding situations. The plausibility of this primitivism and its compatibility with Adorno's general worries about immediacy are considered. (c) The disruptive character of Adorno's version of the categorical imperative, its willingness to complicate action through wholesale reflection on the norms of what we are committing ourselves to, is set in contrast with Freyenhagen's Aristotelian claim that certain notions, such as "humanity," cannot be intelligibly questioned.

Unlike many thinkers who are considered to be moral philosophers, Adorno offers his readers a sizeable number of opinions about the moral condition of the world. The theoretical basis that sustains or gives possible coherence to these opinions is, though, notoriously elusive. Adorno fiercely rejects philosophical efforts to explain why we ought to act or respond in certain ways to morally pertinent situations. He claims that rationalism distances us from feeling and action, that universalism neglects particular experiences, that the shared norms of our communities are implicated in life-destroying practices, and that sentimentality, history shows us, is irrational and dangerous. These stances seem to deprive Adorno of any recognisable framework within which to defend his own moral statements in anything other than conventional terms. Perhaps we should leave Adorno at that level. It is hard not to doubt that he is

actually attempting to ground or source normativity in any way that could be expected of moral philosophers, not least because he does not explicitly commit himself to any general theory. Fabian Freyenhagen's contention in the concluding chapter of Adorno's *Practical Philosophy* is therefore notable. He maintains that an Aristotelian notion of moral evaluation lies behind Adorno's various assessments of the norms and practices of modern life. Furthermore, Freyenhagen understands Adorno's Aristotelianism to be compatible with "negativism," a kind of procedural commitment Freyenhagen also ascribes to Adorno. Negativism consists in adopting a purely critical stance which makes no use of nor expresses any positive images of a better world. It does not, however, silence moral philosophy since, on Freyenhagen's account, we can know what is bad for us, in some morally relevant way, without knowing what is positive or good for us. The Adorno that emerges from Freyenhagen's interpretation is robustly systematic.

This consideration of Freyenhagen's book will concentrate mainly on the chapter on Adorno's Aristotelianism, though some of the book's wider claims will also come into view. No issue need be taken with Freyenhagen's sensitive and detailed textual interpretations. The discussion will focus on a broader concern. Philosophers like Adorno seem to give their interpreters a number of versions of themselves from which to select, should we be in search of a single line of reconstruction. What this paper will examine is whether Freyenhagen's impressively executed choice allows us to make sense of the moral phenomena that are of evident concern to Adorno.

1.

Freyenhagen sets out the Aristotelian thesis that moral evaluation is structurally similar to the evaluation of all things (p. 232). Evaluation relates to the specific ways of functioning that are "appropriate" to each "life form." Appropriateness is, the theory holds, an objective quality. It refers to the way a thing is somehow supposed to be. Because the sense of what is appropriate is gleaned from perceived ways that things actually work, the style of thinking Freyenhagen describes holds some appeal among conservative-minded thinkers too. They tell us what the objective functions appropriate to human beings are. Those functions are then used as a kind of measure of how well we are acting. Failure to function in those ways is considered to be an objective violation of what we are said really to be. Conservatives are not interested in

whether these functions might be settlements that followed from power struggles in the past. They are deemed, instead, to be somewhat natural and unforced. Conservative functional evaluation might be labelled retrospective in that more often than not it comes into play when some supposed threat looms over the preferred social arrangements and moral values of conservatively minded people.

Now one might suggest that progressively minded thinkers also share this type of analysis, and talk of conservative affinities is misleading. Progressive thinkers, for example, insist on the ongoing provision of social goods that have led to liberty and equality. Their outlook evidently involves some notion of what "objectively" allows for proper human, say autonomous, functioning. That notion grounds their resistance to any deviation from arrangements or policies which support that functioning. But there is an obvious point of departure from what we have seen in the conservative model. Progressives also believe that proposed improvements in social arrangements need not be defended in terms of any existing institution or practice. Values that are based on abstract notions of fairness or justice or freedom or whatever also motivate progressive ideals. No doubt progressive theory can be translated into the terms of "appropriateness" and "proper function" but its imaginative dimension means that it cannot be explanatorily accommodated within retrospective Aristotelianism.

These few thoughts about the conservative appeal of Aristotelianism allow us to appreciate the audacious reach of Freyenhagen's reading of Adorno as a kind of (1) proper functioning theorist (2) who offers nothing positive about possible human arrangements by limiting himself exclusively to identifying what is bad in the world. In taking us to the basis of his Aristotelian reading of Adorno, Freyenhagen cites the latter's view that humanity is not yet "actualised." He takes this to mean that there is some better way for human beings to be, though it is unknown: "According to Adorno, humanity is not something which we actually instantiate in virtue of being born as human animals, but it is a potential which we have and which is yet to be actualised" (p. 237). Since this functional actuality will stand in contrast with everything we take to be morally true in the world today, we can call this perspective on the opaque possibilities for our actualization a prospective one.

The difference between retrospective and prospective theories is at one level profound. The former arrogates a variety of common sense claim to objectivity in that it refers to certain institutions or norms that have, under some favoured measure, proven successful or stable. Its opponents, of course, doubt the success of this retrospection and point to its biases. The Adornian prospective thinker, as Freyenhagen explains him, uses, in contrast, no historical experience upon which to hang claims to realised actuality. That perspective is instead oriented towards a "not yet specifiable potential" (p. 243) whose actualisation "we cannot even conceptualise or imagine" (p. 239). And, as Adorno makes clear, we are not permitted to allow utopian images to guide us towards a fulfilled future. That is because we cannot be confident that our utopianism is not shaped by beliefs that originate in the very world we are critically assessing. Now Freyenhagen holds that we can nevertheless know what is bad for us even if we must not conjecture on what is good for us, that is, what would actualise our potential. Hence, we can know that something is bad for us even if we have no idea about how, if at all, it affects our full potential.

This set of ideas takes us to the question of how normative assessments can be pursued within this Adorno inflected Aristotelianism. If Adorno has a prospective actuality in mind and cannot make any utterances about how things ought to be his theorising appears be non-historical. A prospective actuality does not exist and nor is it implied in the present. Were it implied then it would not stand in that relation of pure negativity that Freyenhagen takes to be a commitment of Adorno's moral practical philosophy. Hence, when Freyenhagen's Adorno declares that something is wrong, he does so without reference to any function to which we could attach a norm since that function is unknown. We can only, as we shall see in some detail, offer brute rejections of current suffering. Those complaints too are without a context in that they refer not to a being with a history, but simply to one with what Adorno, citing Brecht, called a "tormentable" body (Adorno, 1973, p. 286).

Perhaps Freyenhagen is willing to attribute to Adorno the notion of a de-contextualised capacity for normative assessment, that is, assessment which requires no sense of historical location. After all, Freyenhagen thinks of Aristotelianism as a way of grounding normativity which rescues normativity from the vicissitudes of social history (the evaluation of morals and things by reference to intrinsic functions).

His Adorno, therefore, is happy to be understood to be a theorist who is not dependent on history for the normativity of his moral opinions. Much of what takes Freyenhagen to that point—if this is indeed his line of thought—rests on what he understands to be entailed in the phenomenon of bodily suffering. The example of torture is central to the case. Torture is wrong because—and it seems exhaustively so—it causes creatures like us to suffer, it denies our proper realisation (whatever it might be: we cannot say), and it is inappropriate to us. Freyenhagen sets out the issue in this way:

> … the conjunction of (a) the pain of someone's being tortured and (b) the requirement of the human life form to avoid pain if possible, gives the tortured person (as well as those responsive to reasons generally) an objective reason to end the torture. This point illuminates one aspect of why Aristotelians speak of objective reasons; the requirements we face are not figments of the imagination, projections, or constructions; but actual features of states of affairs or situations (p. 235).

When we ask, though, for an account of what these features might be in any specific situation, we probably move beyond monumental-sounding commandments and into the business of what we believe we are entitled to, some outline of where our interests lie, and why. That is not to say that the tortured person must offer us a good reason for why their agony should cease. What is in focus here is not the cry of pain but the phenomenon of torture as it affects our humanity. It seems, though, that Freyenhagen's Adorno might not help us with that feature of the phenomenon, and this is because his negativity gives us norms that are either brute (relating to pain avoidance) or prospective (relating to an unimaginable version of ourselves).

A story of what counts as the kind of pain the human life form does not want requires, we might think, a sense of the normative context in which it takes place given the presence of even severe pain in many voluntary and fulfilling undertakings. Granted, if we define torture as the infliction of unwanted pain on an individual, we seem to have a phenomenon that looks to be bad without any further analysis. But the point here is not that there could be contexts in which some human beings seem perfectly at ease with what horrifies us as torture. Questioning Freyenhagen's Adorno with a kind of spurious relativism would not be a worthy response. The work of context, rather,

relates to the biographical story. Torture is wrong certainly not only because of the agony it inflicts but also because of its shattering and humiliating effects on the person's sense of self, integrity, and body. Hence, its wrongs go beyond what we can infer from animal aversion. Furthermore, it is not only the unrealised potential of victims that may forever be forestalled. Their actuality, most obviously, is ruined, as Freyenhagen indeed notes. Describing those who suffered in the concentration camps, he writes: "The way they were treated completely destroyed the possibility of their seeing any sense in their life" (p. 245). If this, though, is at least part of the right way to capture our revulsion at torture, it operates from a different space from either the brute or the prospective. And this raises a challenge to one of Freyenhagen's principal claims: "Insofar as we can know what basis human functioning requires (and what a shortfall from it would involve) without having (positive) knowledge of the human potential, we can know the bad without knowing the good" (p. 240). But we must know the good in order to give an adequate account of torture. We know who we are and we also know that we have an interest in maintaining—not necessarily even augmenting or further realising—ourselves according to that image. That is a good for us. Torture, when it is geared towards betrayal for instance, can threaten our deepest sense of the commitments that make us who we take ourselves to be. Winston Smith is broken—his personality eliminated—not by his hysterical terror of rats but by his renunciation of his beloved in the (literal) face of that terror. The objections we have to the treatment we receive—the "bad" for us—are likely to be intelligible in terms of how we would like to live: some way we believe we are entitled to live, the way, perhaps, we do live. This aspect of the phenomenon is not reducible to anything that physical agony alone might intimate to us and nor does it belong to the speculative space of unrealised humanity. Freyenhagen's Adorno holds that human beings now lack "basic human functioning." That functioning "requires at least a minimal level of actively choosing how to structure one's life, of developing a sense of the self with an extended life story, of having meaningful relationships with others, etc." (p. 241). If, however, human beings are now marked by such profound deficits—a world perhaps even more deranged than the one we usually expect to find in Adorno—part of what we saw above as the horror of torture does not apply to them. These would be human beings, we might surmise, who could not know humiliation. With its victims lacking a sense of value, life projects, and attachments, torture would register principally as a physical violation.

Attentive Adorno interpreters find themselves confronted with the question of whether he wishes to suspend all construction of alternative values—strict negativism—or whether, slightly less broadly, he is opposed to every feature of life that has been marked by rationalisation and capitalism. The second line does not preclude the possibility that we have interests that are not saturated by the norms of the social totality. There are features of our lives, beyond animality, that are not falsely meaningful. (For example, Adorno may lament what he sees as the transactional quality of marriage today, but he is unlikely to doubt that individuals continue to see much of the value of their lives as bound up with their familial attachments.) One might expect Freyenhagen's Adorno to identify with the first option. Interestingly, ground is implicitly given to the second. The thingly reality of human beings in societies today, he writes,

> … causes immense suffering (both directly and indirectly in fuelling aggression towards and repression of others), and analysing the causes of this suffering would suggest, at least from an Adornian perspective, that human beings have a basic need to be recognised as individuals, as centres of irreplaceable uniqueness (p. 242).

What we can see here is the use of a measure that rests, arguably, in second nature. (Second nature refers to those institutions and conventions that are produced by human action and which then govern human interactions, with an apparent law-likeness, structure, and seeming independence from individual wills.) The notion of "irreplaceable uniqueness," of course, has a history. It is not a concept to be derived from our animality. Indeed, Adorno himself does not deny that the sense we might have that our humanity is jeopardised owes something to the attenuated inheritance of earlier notions of *Bildung* and of social liberalism.[1] And, if the category of irreplaceable uniqueness excites some kind of normative reaction, we might think that it is a reaction to potential that is to some degree actualised. Were it purely prospective the talk about needs—as individuals—would no longer refer to features of experience that we have come to value.

[1] Hence, the famous "petitio principii" of social freedom and social integration with which Adorno and Horkheimer open their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

2.

A confusing feature of Adorno's various thoughts on morality is the connection he makes between action and the obscure notion of "impulse." "Impulse" appears to be a term that stands for a number of different things, depending upon the very specific contexts in which Adorno uses it. Sometimes "impulse" names something that resembles a Freudian drive type, at others, an intuitive sense of what needs to be done, and, in discussions of concrete moral actions, a kind of spontaneous yet correct moral reaction by those who are appropriately attuned. The first two together might appear to have no bearing on morality as they are natural rather than acquired states. The second, though, seems to be represented in the ideal, quoted by Freyenhagen, of the "good animal" (Adorno, 1973, p. 299). The third should be objectionable to Adorno's critical theory since moral attunement of this kind is possible only where the socialising community is actually capable of morality. Adorno, of course, sees only the absence of the conditions for genuine moral formation in modern society.

It is this third option that we normally find in Aristotelian thinking. We could think that in a general Aristotelian framework, "impulses" would be a reasonably acceptable label for the right kind of sensitivity. This sensitivity is the capacity to respond in morally recognisable ways to what we immediately perceive in a given situation. The Aristotelian believes that we gain that sensitivity through the right kind of education. The process of education is more like enculturation than instruction in principles. We are political beings because we are members of a polis, or something like it, whose norms we adopt and eventually express and enact in individual ways. A similar notion of ethical formation is captured in Hegel's report: "When a father asked him for advice about the best way of educating his son in ethical matters, a Pythagorean replied: 'Make him the citizen of a state with good laws'" (Hegel, 1991, p. 196). We know that no such enculturation is open to the Adornian agent. Second nature is thoroughly compromised.

Freyenhagen sees a connection between the Aristotelian position and a notion of impulses that, it turns out, belongs to the second meaning above (i.e., the intuitive sense of what needs to be done). He writes: "Adorno claims that the demand that no one should be tortured is 'true as an impulse, as a reaction to the news that torture is

going on somewhere'" (p. 249). Freyenhagen characterises this reaction as one which is "untutored" (p. 250). This means, then, that we are somehow capable of the right kind of moral response without prior moral instruction. It may be that moral education deprives us of our reliable impulses. The impulses are not wrong in what they intimate to us about what we need. Freyenhagen believes these impulses "express the objective interests of us as the life form we are and could become" (p. 250). They give us a sense of what we are entitled to, what we ought to be, and that some actions are wrong in that they stand in the way of our entitlements. Freyenhagen is again identifying a kind of brute aversion to pain as a legitimate interest but he also notes that those interests extend to unrealised potential ("what we could become"). The latter makes this a discussion about values, that is, about the worth of human beings in their fullness, in their life projects, and self-development.

No doubt there are romantic primitivists who believe that our natural capacity for goodness is spoiled by civilisation. Freyenhagen0s discussion of Rousseau in this regard is quite apt. It is less clear that there are, however, Aristotelians among them (though the natural law strand of that theory might hold that there is some natural way of responding rightly to situations where something moral is at stake). Since Freyenhagen does not want to ascribe any kind of metaphysical view to Adorno he cannot be willing to ascribe any inherent sense of value to him either. A sense of value which owes nothing to experience or social formation is arguably a piece of metaphysics. Untutored responses to complex moral situations—i.e., those in which one0s future potential is at stake—leave Adorno with that very commitment, however. We can see from Adorno0s texts why Freyenhagen prefers to present Adorno this way. Adorno does indeed reject the action-inhibiting ratiocinations of Kantian theory. The notion of a "good animal" is itself an anti-Kantian provocation. There is a difference though between acting without crippling reflections—"one thought too many," and so on—and infusing untutored reactions with a kind of value orientation.

No statement in Adorno0s texts directly excludes the "untutored" theory of our sense of our interests and entitlements. That position, though, does seem to sit awkwardly alongside a core claim of Adorno0s general philosophical position: the mediation

thesis.[2] Normative primitivism looks in that light like a commitment to what Adorno calls and exposes as the error of "immediacy": i.e., that there are states of affairs whose truth is independent of human judgment. Adorno sees naive realism in epistemology, for example, as a wrong-headed commitment to immediacy in that it does not recognise that what it takes to be given by the external world—the things of experience—and passively received by us has a historical background. That background determines most if not all (Adorno is ambivalent on this point) of how things appear to us and how we respond to them. Normative primitivism would, we might suggest, be guilty of an analogous naiveté in claiming that our normative interest in ourselves has a kind of independence from experience even though it comes replete with motivating interests shaped by historical considerations about human value and meaningful life. The untutored would be critically exposed as socialised, or, to put it another way, mediated by society and its values.

Now, it is fairly likely that Adorno would be willing to deviate from central principles were "the object" of analysis to require it. There might be times, to be more specific, where immediacy commitments could not be properly explained as mediated ones. The lack of theoretical rigidity is characteristic of Adorno0s philosophical work. Nevertheless, there would have to be good grounds for deviating from the mediation thesis. Normative primitivism does not look like the right candidate in that it is freighted with knowledge: our immediate interests and sense of possible future ones. In highlighting Adorno0s commitment to that primitivism (my label), however, Freyenhagen points us towards a baffling feature of Adorno0s work.

3.

Among the attractions of Aristotelianism to conservatives is its opposition to Kantian varieties of moral evaluation. The Kantian is seen, typically, as divorcing us from our living immersion in our moral communities. Within that communal space, we enact the prevailing general norms in context-sensitive ways without having to discursively defend a principle as though it were perpetually provisional. The heroes of that world are phronimoi, individuals who act appropriately, sensitively, and, indeed, without the

[2] As Adorno puts it: "[i]dealism was the first to make clear that the reality in which men live is not unvarying and independent of them. Its shape is human and even absolutely extra-human nature is mediated through consciousness (Adorno, 1982, p. 28).

burden of complex moral reasoning. Moral actors live within certain practices that frame what is right and what is permissible for them. Action has a kind of spontaneity in that knowing how to respond rightly is a feature of the properly formed moral agent. When we step outside practices, as Kantians are said to do, we engage in a garbled form of moral evaluation, built out of de-contextualised reasons that have no grip on the persons we really are. We then lose some kind of organic connection between moral thinking and moral action. A human being whose relation to moral principles is reflection alone turns praxis into mere implementation. This process disrupts and destroys our authentic normative and practices bound dispositions. Freyenhagen explains:

… if one responded to the Aristotelian account of what we have reasons to do qua human beings by asking for such grounding (for example, asking questions such as "why act on our objective interests?" or "why be human?"), then one would miss the point. It would be to overlook that all the normativity which is required is already given and accounted for, that all what can and needs to be said has been said (p. 236).

Little wonder Aristotelian conservatives see good societies as those where individuals are morally cohesive, where values are intuitive and where radical assessment of those values never arises. Socrates is, in this regard, a menace. But Adorno, too, is willing to adopt a Socratic approach in which the content of what we claim to be our "objective interests" and what we understand by "human" are subject even to crippling, action-sapping scrutiny. We cannot, Freyenhagen acknowledges, rely on any practice. And, he is surely right to observe, "it sometimes seems as if Aristotelians lack critical distance to the traditional social practices and institutions which allegedly underwrote the exercise of the virtues in pre-modern times—something which Adorno is not guilty of" (p. 252). We must, Adorno maintains, ensure that our actions are incompatible with any kind of precept or prejudice which might lead to justification for or acceptance of the torment of other human beings. This, though, turns moral action into a painstaking and essentially revisable process. No previous decision guarantees that we will get the next one right. Here, the difference between the Aristotelian proper and Adorno is not simply that the latter is a little wiser about the ways of the world: Adorno must exclude the ideal of ethical spontaneity for so long as we live in the false world. Freyenhagen successfully argues

that Adorno does not bring the notion of humanity into question. But Adorno seems very far from believing that morality gains nothing from discourse and debate ("all what can and needs to be said has been said"). This would imply that the notion of humanity by itself made it easy to act without reflection: specific responses would flow from that self-explaining notion. That we are to "arrange" our "thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself" (Adorno, 1973, p. 365) involves, if anything, the deliberate denial of spontaneity or the intuitive use of notions of humanity. Every urge or intuition we have must be measured against a principle.

4.

Freyenhagen's Adorno occupies a complex and unique space. He is committed to a kind of immediate sense that we can negatively relate to present and prospective interests. The present ones come down to avoiding pain, the future ones refer to potential that has yet to be realised. The rigour of this position may just threaten to undermine it as an explanation of our morally relevant interests in ourselves. Its strict adherence to negativity means that our interests ought not to be linked to any value conception we actually hold since that conception, being a positive one, might be implicated in the false world. The very notion of interests recedes into abstraction. What it might mean for any individual to worry about their own loss in the context of their own individual lives is not readily licensed by the theory.

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