

Reply to Christian Skirke

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Critique

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FABIAN FREYENHAGEN | *Adorno's Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly* | Cambridge University Press 2013

By Fabian Freyenhagen

Hegel's insight that work involves becoming objectified in the world and that these objectifications can take on a life of their own is apt for books too. Authors are accordingly thankful for the occasions to reappropriate their objectifications by way of replying to reviewers and critics. Skirke's generous and thoughtful critical note on my *Adorno's Practical Philosophy* (henceforth APP) is a particularly welcome occasion of this kind. My thanks to him (and also to the editors of this journal).

Skirke takes issue with two central aspects of my defence of Adorno. First, he notes that I ascribe an explanatory account of normativity to Adorno (see APP, especially ch. 7). He agrees that this is, indeed, the right approach, but criticises my interpretation for not living up sufficiently to this explanatory character. This is so in two ways:

(a) "the explanatory component enters the picture as a supplement to moral claims", rather than as presenting a "view of Adornian moral claims as integrally explanatory"; and (b) the explanatory account offered in the book is too pragmatic, not sufficiently attuned to the "how-possible-questions about the good life", and hence "the transcendental element of Adorno's perspective". Second, my defence wrongly ascribes metaethical purposes to Adorno, when, in fact, his ethical minimalism is better characterised "as a kind of moral phenomenology".

These criticisms allow me to clarify *what* I aimed to do in the book, *how* I aim to do so, and *where* in the book I do so. I shall discuss them in the above order, and shall argue that, in fact, there is agreement between Skirke and me on many of the substantive points and that these points are already reflected in the book—albeit in ways that might not be clear. There will be also a couple of issues, where I shall mark (and briefly discuss) areas of disagreement, mainly relating to the Husserlian phenomenology Skirke offers towards the end of his text.

It might be helpful to think about my book in terms of three different, albeit interrelated themes:



Thus, like Skirke, I think Adorno is deeply concerned with the question how it is possible to live well and rightly in our specific socio-historical context. While this might get lost in the specifics of the material discussed, Chapters 1–4 are meant to reconstruct Adorno's answer to this question. As he famously says, we cannot live rightly in a wrong world. To understand this 'No Right Living Thesis' (as I call it in the book), we need to understand why he thinks we live in a wrong world (ch. 1); why this specifically prevents our living rightly (and well), with the antinomical nature of our moral situation as one important factor (see ch. 2) and the lack of autonomy another (in more detail in ch. 3); and also why moral philosophy cannot provide us guidance about how to live rightly (ch. 4). Hence, I submit that the kind of historicised transcendental explanatory project that Skirke demands of a defensible reconstruction of Adorno is already present in the book—and I thank him for the occasion to make this more visible.

Next, Skirke is correct in describing my interpretation as ascribing a certain kind of ethical minimalism to Adorno—one that includes his new categorical imperative (ch. 5), but also other elements that are less often recognised than the new categorical imperative (ch. 6). In a nutshell, while—according to Adorno—we cannot live rightly in our wrong world, we can live more or less wrongly and Critical Theory can include guidance on how to live *less wrongly*. (In this context, I would like to note that some reviewers—though not Skirke—have misunderstood my ascription of ethics to Adorno as restricted to merely individual conduct and character traits. This impression is partly fuelled by the fact that I had to leave out a discussion of Adorno's politics for reasons of space. That discussion—originally conceived as a chapter in the book—has now been published separately (Freyenhagen 2014), and I would like to refer readers to it. The key point is that when I speak of ethics in relation to Adorno, it does not concern a private ethics for individuals, but the Aristotelian notion of ethics of which politics—and collective action—is always already an integral part.

Skirke is also correct that, *at this level*, I do not concentrate mainly on how-possible-questions (although they do feature in Chapter 6, where I briefly discuss

how a life of resistance, of living less wrongly, is possible for Adorno—see APP, ch. 6, ¶ II, pp. 175ff.). Indeed, I even agree that here I keep “the explanatory and normative dimension in relative separation from each other”, as Skirke says. This is, I submit, as it should be: in explicating Adorno’s ethical minimalism, we are explicating something normative, of which we might *afterwards* ask how it is possible.

But where then does the explanatory account of normativity come in (on my reconstruction and defence of Adorno’s work)? The answer is: at two points; first in relation to a specific matter in metaethics (level [c] in above table), namely, the account of normativity and rejection of discursive grounding; and second in respect with the theory as a whole (levels [a]–[c] taken together, if you like). Let me explain.

In Chapter 7 of the book, I undertake two main tasks: (1) showing—building on arguments in Chapter 4 (against Kant’s fact of reason) and Chapter 5 (regarding the ‘outrage’ of attempting to ground discursively the new categorical imperative)—that Adorno rejects a justificatory account of normativity and defensibly so; and (2) suggesting that he is not a sceptic about providing an account of normativity, but (at least implicitly) holds an explanatory account. At this point, I should briefly clarify what I mean by justificatory and explanatory accounts of normativity. The former is the idea that normativity (whether moral or more broadly conceived) requires a justification that goes all the way down. There is a great variety in how theorists understand what is required and they do not agree on the details, but Korsgaard’s work on the sources of normativity will do as an example of the kind of thing I have in mind. It is this notion of normativity, moreover, that critics of Adorno—notably Habermas—invoke when they speak of his theory’s lacking ‘normative foundations’. And it is this notion that he rejects as unnecessary and even undesirable—or so I argue.

This does not mean, however, that there is nothing left to say about normativity. Instead, I defend metaethical negativism, partly on independent grounds (ch. 8), and ascribe to Adorno a broadly Aristotelian move, according to which we can make sense of our normative operations by reference to our life form, humanity and its specific grammar (ch. 9)—in a structurally analogous way to what Philippa Foot’s later writings provide an example of, and which Michael Thompson is currently trying to work out in more detail.^[1] This is novel as an interpretation, but also controversial. There is much more to be said about it, but I cannot do so here—apart from in the book, I say a bit more about it in a reply to critics that will appear in the *European Journal of Philosophy* shortly. I merely note that for me explanation is not understood as value-free and merely factual (contrary to Skirke’s characterisation of my approach). It is a making

sense that incorporates our normative orientations, explicating them, as it were, from within. (It is, in part, for this reason that it can only play a clarifying and perhaps reassuring role, not one of justification all the way down.)

More pressing in this context is the second point at which my reconstruction and defence brings in an explanatory claim. Also controversially, I suggest that we should think of Adorno's theory as a whole as being a claim to the best explanation of the modern social world. In other words, it is not at the level of arguing about different normative theories or in an argument against emotivism that the explanatory character of his theory comes in (as Skirke understood me as saying), but at the level of the theory as a whole.^[2] Again, the notion of explanation here is not a merely factual one which is bolted onto a normative, moral account, but always already involves the normative (and metaethical) commitments of the theory in question. These commitments are not grounded as free-standing elements (indeed nothing is attempted to be grounded at all); but this also does not mean that what is explained or what is doing the explaining is non-normative or merely pragmatic. What distinguishes one way of making sense as better than another is, at least in part, the normative orientation that animates it. Skirke, thus, operates with a false alternative when he contrasts my talk of better or worse explanations with "explanations that simultaneously make normative statements about our agency in the wrong life". (Again, this might be because he misunderstood me as having located the explanatory comparison at the level of metaethical accounts only, not whole theories.)

To make this more concrete, consider an alternative theory of our modern world to Adorno's—perhaps one endorsed by certain Hegelians like Robert Pippin or perhaps certain Nietzscheans. On this alternative account, there is a recognition that a number of things are deeply troubling and problematic about the modern world, but that, ultimately, these matters are remediable and we live in the best social formation history has produced and perhaps can produce. The criticism of Adorno's theory would then be that he hankers after an impossibly demanding ideal—whether positively or negatively defined—and this is problematic, since either—this would perhaps be the Nietzschean variant of this alternative view—this ideal has a life-denying, ascetic effect or—and this would be the Hegelian variant—it unduly alienates us from our social world and is likely to produce inaction, when in fact action is required to realise the (normative) potential of our modern world. (One way to think about it is to consider a common trope in US cinema: the world is fundamentally rotten in various ways, but at least it produces heroes that can, at least on occasion, make things right; and we should not despair over the problems and become beautiful souls or self-flagellating monks, but instead try to become, as much as we can, these kind of heroes.)

What can Adorno say in response to such an alternative view of the world? I would think that he can say a number of things (a good many of which will have to do with ideology), but ultimately what I would like to argue is that he would say that his critical theory provides a *better explanation* of the (social) world and phenomena we face than this alternative (or, indeed, other competitors). Let me briefly sketch how this would run: the kind of suffering we encounter suggests that there is a potential in us that is being denied ('crippled', as Adorno puts it in his exchange with Gehlen with which I start the book); that actualising this potential is incompatible with the way our social world is constituted; and that this need not imply an impossible demand, although what is demanded might appear as impossible (and its appearing that way is related to class interests and—however inadvertently—entrenches the status quo as if it were unchangeable, when it is not).

To be clear, such a comparison will probably never deliver a knock-down argument in favour of Adorno's critical theory. Competing hermeneutic frameworks will disagree about the criteria of comparison and nature of the problems and phenomena, and we cannot appeal to neutral criteria or a view from nowhere to adjudicate such disputes. Instead we shall have to use rhetoric and disclosure techniques to free those in the grip of other explanations from that grip. It is, thus, not altogether unsurprising that Adorno in his written work and his public appearances—though less so in his lectures to students—tends not to even take seriously alternative theories as competitors. On my reading, this is a performance of a certain kind—one that is compatible with being in the game of presenting one's own theory as the best explanatory account of modernity, even implied by a certain conception of that game. Similarly, Skirke is wrong in suggesting that the fact that Adorno and Horkheimer dismissed competitor theories, like positivism, as "simply wrong" and "insufficiently reflective" shows that they were not presenting their theory as the best explanatory account out there. Such dismissals are perfectly compatible with the fact that one's theory is in a competition with alternative accounts and even with one's seeing oneself in a competition with them (though one might see it as a lopsided competition).

So far I suggested that Skirke and I are in substantial agreement about what Adorno's theory entails and that the book actually speaks to many of the issues that Skirke demands that it should speak to (but thinks that it does not). Now, I would like to turn to his second cluster of criticism and thereby to an area of disagreement, but I need first to prepare the ground a bit.

Skirke and I do not disagree that Adorno engages in phenomenology, particularly in relation to the role of impulses in decision-making and actions. Indeed, I put particular emphasis in the book on the pre-reflective and pre-conceptual

character of the experiences involved (see APP, chs 5 and 7, and particularly the Appendix). I would stress more the negative use of phenomenology than Skirke does, by which I mean that in my interpretation Adorno uses phenomenology mainly as a critical tool (for example, in objecting to Kant's practical philosophy or in arguing against liberal accounts of capitalism), whereas Skirke seems to envisage a more positive use of it. But this might be more a matter of emphasis than substantial disagreement.

Skirke moves from talking about impulses against wrongdoing as “recalcitrant experiences” for Adorno to talking about—what I would think are—a different kind of such experiences, namely metaphysical experiences, and describes them as having an “as if” fulfilment structure”. He then goes on to analyse these with the help of Husserlian phenomenology—suggesting that this is what is at work in Adorno (something he argues my interpretation fails to capture and also something that makes the central move to negative Aristotelianism I propose unnecessary). I accept that some recalcitrant experiences have for Adorno the as-if structure that Skirke points to (and analyses in more detail elsewhere^[3]). But I would dispute that for him such as-if fulfilment experiences “give mature moral agents a glimpse of the good life ‘as if’ it was possible”. On my interpretation, Adorno's negativism is more thoroughgoing than just excluding conceptual access to the good life; it requires not just “bypass[ing] the patterns of identity thinking that are characteristic of the wrong life”, but extends also to recalcitrant experiences (and art and metaphysics). Instead, such as-if experiences—along with art and metaphysics—play a different role: they remind us that things could be different (see APP, ch. 8, ¶ V). They do *not* acquaint us with *what* it would be when things are different, but ‘merely’ express the promise *that* they could be. This difference is important for holding a purely negativist stance—the kind of stance Adorno subscribes to (at least on my interpretation).

Partly related to this is a second disagreement. Skirke suggests that we capture the phenomenology of reflection (*Selbstbesinnung*) on metaphysical experiences in terms of Husserlian phenomenology. Moreover, when we do so, then this can help us with the how-possible question that Adorno poses about the good and right life—or rather the question how it is *impossible* to live the ‘well and rightly’ because of our socio-historical situation. This move strikes me as problematic in the context of Adorno's theory. In particular, it seems to me that there is a mismatch between, on the one hand, the fact that the impossibility of right living is “due to our socio-historical situation” and, on the other hand, the Husserlian analysis in terms of noematic correlates and alignment. It might simply be that I do not understand the Husserlian approach sufficiently (or perhaps I am reading it as too Kantian), but it sounds to me as too universalistic and too inward-facing. (This universalism makes it unsurprising that Skirke operates with a more

restricted negativism than me and allows glimpses of the good life—the first disagreement noted above.) The way I read Adorno, we do not find out about the impossibility of right living by reflecting on the structure of our experiences as agents at the abstract level Husserl operates, which might suggest something universal. We do so by reflecting on our particular society and its structures—something historical. Adorno is not after the universal structures of what makes good and right living (or the experience thereof) impossible for human agents—not even if we aim to get there by starting with historical experiences and increasingly abstracting from them. Rather, he is after a concrete analysis of the concrete situation (to speak with Lenin).

Reflection on the fact that we have impulses against wrongdoing and still do not live rightly is clearly a part of Adorno's analysis, but I am not sure that we need to mobilise the Husserlian apparatus for it. Indeed—and this is what I meant with too inward-facing—focus on our experiences as agents at its level of abstraction could be misleading: we might end up making certain (purported) structures of agency responsible for the impossibility of the good life (say by adopting the view that our desires seem insatiable, such that whenever we seem to have satisfied them, some new urge appears—or rather the old urge in a new guise reappears), rather than the social structures. Thus, even where Adorno proceeds phenomenologically in a certain sense (such as in describing how we experience ourselves both as free and unfree in capitalist modernity), he does not mobilise the Husserlian apparatus, but, to stay with the example just mentioned in parenthesis, Marxist considerations (see ch. 3 of the book). I might be missing something about the Husserlian picture, but—as far as I can tell—it is redundant for Adorno's critical theory and potentially misleading.

Finally, even if one were to grant that Adorno engages in transcendental enquiries and moral phenomenology of the sort Skirke claims he does, it still does not follow that “then the question does not arise which normative ethical theory is the most suitable one to bear out the implications of Adorno's metaethical negativism and minimalism” (and that, as a consequence, the ascription of negative Aristotelianism to Adorno is unmotivated). Indeed, it does not even follow that one is no longer in the game of competing explanations. To take the latter point first: the Husserlian story Skirke appeals to is just one among different transcendental explanations and it also competes with more historical or naturalist explanations. Part of Adorno's own strategy is to make this very point—for example, when he offers a debunking story based on Freud about the categorical nature we experience moral demands to have as part of his argument against Kant's transcendental strategy of invoking the fact of reason (see ch. 4, ¶ 1.4). Appeal to transcendental conditions of possibility is only valid, when it is not possible to account for the phenomenon in question (say the spatio-temporal

character of experience or the categorical nature of the moral demands we experience as standing under) without such appeal. Moreover, Adorno did not just state that right and good living is impossible; he also provided some guidance on how to live less wrongly (and Skirke does not deny that he did so). Thus, it is not sufficient to offer an account for the impossibility of good and right living; we *also* need to account for and explicate Adorno's minimalist ethics of resistance. This means that nothing Skirke says provides grounds against my argument (in the book) that this ethics has clear Aristotelian features.

I suspect that the proposal of reading Adorno as a negativist Aristotelian will remain controversial, but I submit that it makes best sense of what he says—best sense not just of the modal claim that is the No Right Living Thesis but also of his ethical minimalism and his metaethical negativism, which form part of an overall theory that is presented as the best explanation of a wrong world and its ills.

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Notes:

[1] See notably Foot (2001) and Thompson (2008). Skirke's exposition of my move is accurate bar one small detail: I do not commit to, and would probably deny, that "it is in our *second* nature to suffer from badness" (emphasis added). If one wanted to operate with the distinction between first and second nature in relation to Adorno's work at all, I think it would be more accurate to say that "it is in our *first* nature to suffer from badness, although as a result of our particular modern social formation—our modern second nature—we are typically unaware of this and repress or redirect this impulse". ↩

[2] This is not immediately clear from my book, in part because the one major occasion where I do turn to the question of how to handle debates about adjudicating different explanatory frameworks comes at the end of one of the central chapters on metaethical matters (ch. 7, specifically pp. 205–7). The thought here is that whatever consideration Adorno can advance in support of his theory as a whole cannot violate the rejection of discursive grounding that is—I argue—a cornerstone of it. Instead the strategy would be one of disclosing, of making opponents see things in a different light, such that the explanation Adorno's theory offers could get traction with them. ↩

[3] See Skirke (2012). ↩

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