

## INTRODUCTION

Pessimism and optimism often come as a pair. In Adorno's case, his deep pessimism about the contemporary social world is coupled with a strong optimism about human potential. In fact, it is the latter which explains his negative views about the contemporary social world and his demand that we should resist and change it – or so I argue in this study.

Adorno's combination of pessimism and optimism finds perhaps its best expression in a discussion with the anthropologist and sociologist Arnold Gehlen. There is much to be said about the relationship between Gehlen and Adorno,<sup>1</sup> but it suffices here to note that Gehlen and Adorno share a number of views – specifically, a negative, pessimistic evaluation of much of the modern social world and its culture – but they also disagree strongly: Gehlen is a conservative, a former member of the Nazi party, and is a firm believer in institutions and order as the only way to prevent chaos and to protect individuals from their own mistakes; Adorno, on the other hand, is a Hegelian Marxist, who went into exile in the 1930s and who – as we see in detail later – does not believe that modern institutions could save us, but rather that they are part of the problem and need to be overcome. They got on surprisingly well personally and in the 1960s they engaged in a series of public disputes about their respective positions. Their disagreements notwithstanding, they took each other seriously, and each thought it necessary to take on the other, if not to convince him (there is little evidence of that going on), but at least to demonstrate to third parties the superiority of their viewpoint.

Of these disputes, one is particularly revealing. It took place in 1965 and contains the following key passage:

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Müller-Dohm 2005: 340, 377–9, 390–1.

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**ADORNO:** Ethics is surely nothing other than the attempt to do justice to the obligations which the experience of this entangled world presents us with. Yet this obligation can equally take the form of adjustment and subordination, which you seem to emphasise more here, and also the form which I would emphasise more, namely, that the attempt to take this obligation seriously consists exactly in changing what stops human beings in contemporary conditions – and I mean stops all human beings – from living out their own possibilities and thus realising the potential contained in them.

**GEHLEN:** I did not exactly understand. How do you know what potential undirected human beings have?

**ADORNO:** Well, I do not know positively what this potential is, but I know from all sorts of findings – including the particular findings of the sciences – that the adjustment processes, which human beings are subjected to nowadays, lead to an unprecedented extent – and I think that you would admit this – to the crippling of human beings. Take for example an issue about which you have thought extensively, namely, technical talent. You tend towards saying – and Verblen also held this thesis – that there is something like an instinct of workmanship, thus that there is a kind of technical-anthropological instinct. Whether or not this is the case, I find difficult to decide. But what I do know, is that today there are uncounted human beings, whose relationship to technology is, if I may use a clinical term, neurotic, that is, they are tied non-reflectively to technology, to all sorts of means to control life, because [their] purposes – namely, a fulfilment of their own lives and of their own vital needs – is largely denied to them. And I would also say that just the psychological observation of all of those uncounted, defective human beings – and defectiveness has become, I might almost say, the norm today – that this [observation alone] justifies us in saying that the potential of human beings is being wasted and suppressed to an unprecedented extent by institutions.<sup>2</sup>

The way this passage encapsulates Adorno's practical philosophy only becomes apparent as this study unfolds, but let me – by way of anticipation – summarise some of the main points it raises.

The first striking aspect of this passage is that Adorno talks in a way that suggests that he has an ethics – something that some commentators deny.<sup>3</sup> While one passage will never be conclusive, it is telling that he speaks in the first sentences about an ethical demand. He says that our experience of our situation ('our entangled world') gives rise to certain

<sup>2</sup> Adorno and Gehlen 1983 in Grenz 1983: 246–7; my translation.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Tassone 2005; for critical discussion, see Freyenhagen 2009.

norms. In particular, he thinks that it gives us the obligation to resist our social world and to change it (rather than – as Adorno summarises Gehlen's alternative position – to react to it by subordinating oneself to the institutional order). Thus, we are confronted here with evidence that Adorno accepts that there are ethical obligations, that they arise from (our reactions to) certain states of affairs, and that they consist in negative prescriptions (to resist and overcome our social world).

The second striking aspect of this passage is that Adorno links ethics to human potential, specifically to its denial by the present social world and its institutions. The reason why we should resist these institutions and world is that they cripple human beings and waste our potential. While talk of human potential is actually very widespread in Adorno's corpus, it has not been properly recognised as an explicit and central normative category operative in it (I return to this later). It is here that Gehlen's challenge emerges: how does Adorno know what potential undirected human beings have? How can or does he support this pivotal premise of his critique of modern social structures?

The third interesting aspect of the quoted passage is that it contains Adorno's answer to this challenge – or, at least, the elements of an answer which requires further development and elaboration (which I provide in this study). What Adorno is saying reveals something – at least in my view – absolutely central about his thought: he says that we do not know positively what the human potential is; we only know something indirectly concerning it – by realising when things are going badly, both individually (as when people suffer from neuroses) and collectively (for example, in economic crises or breakdown of civil order, but also when groups engage in racist discrimination and violence). The pathologies of the social world point to the crippling of human potential, and they do so without our having to know what the realisation of this potentiality would positively entail.

What we encounter here is a specific kind of *negativism*.<sup>4</sup> Generally, negativism can take various forms – it can be methodological, epistemic,

<sup>4</sup> It is no small irony that in psychology and psychiatry 'negativism' can be a symptom of (mental) illness or disorder. (In this case, it is understood – as the *Oxford English Dictionary* has it – as 'active or passive resistance to producing the expected response to a stimulus, command, request, etc.; negative or oppositional behaviour or thought'). Adorno would admit that the fact that the bad is realised and the good unknowable to us in our current predicament is a sign of the illness of our time, but he would refuse to accept that his negativism (now understood in the non-psychological sense of the *OED* as 'the practice of being or tendency to be negative, critical, or sceptical in attitude while failing to offer positive

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and substantive.<sup>5</sup> According to *methodological negativism*, the way to find out about something positive (say the human good or health) is to look at where things go badly, where the positive element is missing or being denied. For example, it might be the case that in order to find out what it is to be healthy, one must study first what it is for people to be ill. This might, however, be merely a methodological procedure to acquire knowledge of the positive element in question. Once we know what illness is, we can conceptualise and define health, either as the absence of illness or more positively (in terms of well-functioning). Many thinkers adopt a methodological negativism, both within the Frankfurt School tradition (apart from Adorno, another clear example is Honneth's work, with its focus on the grievances of marginalised groups as an indicator of misrecognition) and beyond it (such as Canguilhem's famous study *The Normal and the Pathological*).

However, there is also the stronger thesis of *epistemic negativism*. Here, the claim is that we can only know the wrong, the bad, illness, etc.; we cannot know the good, the right, what health is. It is, thus, a claim about the limitations of our knowledge – at least in our current circumstances. The latter qualification of epistemic negativism is important in the context of Adorno's work: on my reading, he is an epistemic negativist, but only within a certain historical context – specifically, he (like Hegel) thinks that we cannot know what the good life is prior to the realisation of its social conditions. These conditions are given neither in any pre-modern society, nor (*pace* Hegel) in our modern social world.

Finally, one can be – and Adorno is – a *substantive negativist*, where this means affirming the thesis that the bad is not just knowable, but instantiated, realised in the social world (including its thought forms or culture). This world is fundamentally wrong, bad, even ill and pathological. This is a substantive claim about the (moral) nature of this world.<sup>6</sup> It can be connected to epistemic negativism. In fact, in Adorno's case it is thus connected: according to him, we cannot know

suggestions or views') is pathological. If anything, the craving for constructive criticism and positive alternatives would be that (see, for example, 10.2: 793/CM, 287–8).

5 It can also be *meta-ethical* – here the thesis is that knowledge of the bad (or parts thereof) is sufficient to account for the normativity of claims based on it. I come back to this later.

6 It is also a substantial claim about the nature of morality. I comment later in the chapter on Adorno's meta-ethical negativism and discuss it in more detail in Chapters 7–9. However, I only indirectly deal with constructivist and relativist challenges to his objectivism: by defending Adorno's views on the fact of reason and on normativity and justification more generally (Chapters 4–5 and 7–9). Much more could be and would have to be said on these issues – the focus here is, primarily, on showing that Adorno's project is not self-defeating, but instead a serious contender for our allegiance.

what human potential and good is *because* this world realises the bad and suppresses this potential.

The passage from the Gehlen–Adorno exchange provides clear evidence for ascribing a methodological negativism to Adorno: the way to find out about human potential is to look at instances where it is suppressed and human beings are crippled. This passage also suggests that he is an epistemic negativist: he tells us that we cannot know positively what the human potential is; suggesting that we can – for now at least – only know the bads that cripple human beings. Finally, the passage also points to Adorno's view that the modern social world and its institutions systematically stunt and suppress human potential and, as such, realise the bad – in short, his substantive negativism.

In fact, this final point is also supported by another noteworthy aspect of the quoted passage – his claim that defectiveness, illness, has become the norm. Adorno expresses this in a typically conditional and cautious way ('I might almost say'). Still, he actually subscribes to the view that individuals, as a norm, are damaged.<sup>7</sup> In a wrong world, no one can be healthy, live well or even rightly. Also, in such an ill state of affairs, reacting as if everything was normal is pathological and can only be upheld by inner or outer repression. Part of the claim here is that we often do not recognise bads as such any more because they have become so prevalent, so much part of normality. In this way, Adorno's substantive negativism has a further epistemic implication – this time, that the very widespread nature of the bads makes recognition of them difficult. Also, society forms a delusional system, such that the bads it systematically produces are often not directly in view. Instead, they manifest themselves in most people's experience only indirectly – such as in psychological conditions (notably neuroses) to which they become subject as a consequence of their repressed lives, or in the sense of powerlessness they feel in relation to social forces. Thus, the fact that we live in a pathological world and suffer from the way our potential goes to waste requires careful unearthing, despite the fact that at some level everybody senses it.

Here a final aspect of the quoted passage becomes noteworthy. The passage points to the fact that, for Adorno, the *explanatory success* of his critical theory vindicates the negativistic conception of humanity

<sup>7</sup> As is, for example, evidenced throughout *Minima Moralia* – aptly subtitled 'Reflection from Damaged Life' – but most explicitly expressed in Aphorism No. 36.

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embedded in it. If this theory succeeds better than rival theories in explaining (1) certain social phenomena and developments (such as the high incidence of paranoia and neurosis in the modern social world); and also (2) why its rivals fail to explain these phenomena adequately, then its underlying 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 – in a word, theorising is inextricably partisan. This fits well with Adorno's and Horkheimer's own conception of the theory: for them, understanding and critique are one and the same project.<sup>8</sup> Thus, we should not think of the normative part of the theory as separate from the explanatory one. In other words, Adorno rejects the nowadays widespread view, according to which we engage in purely normative theorising and then bring our results together with the results of purely descriptively conceived social sciences. This is simply not a possibility and those who claim otherwise are either deluded or try to mislead us. Instead, we can only confront normative-laden explanatory theories with each other in order to establish which one of them is the best, including in terms of its normative content.

In these ways, the quoted passage encapsulates a number of important aspects of Adorno's thought – aspects we revisit throughout this study. However, it also encapsulates one of the key challenges which is itself connected to a wider set of problems. Thus, the epistemic challenge that Gehlen poses (the problem of how we could know what the potential of undirected human beings consists in) is part of a wider question as to how Adorno can account for the normative claims he makes. Does Adorno undermine his own position by taking an ultra-negative and uncompromising critical perspective? Does it not lead him into a performative contradiction such that his substantive theses, if they were true, would make it impossible to engage in the kind of critical theorising that is required to develop and support these theses? Even if Adorno could avoid entangling himself in contradictions, what would justify or vindicate his critical theory? Would it not be just be the expression of the idiosyncratic tastes of a certain elite, lamenting the coming end of civilisation while still enjoying its luxuries to the exclusion of the wretched of the earth?<sup>9</sup>

8 See, for example, MCP, 101–2/64; see also Horkheimer 1972: 216, 229.

9 Such worries are not restricted to those unsympathetic to the Frankfurt School, but were also crucial to the reorientation initiated by its second generation (see, for example,

Let us denote this set of problems the 'Problem of Normativity'. As we just saw and also see in more detail later, it takes on various specific guises, but for now I want to elaborate the general issue that pertains to all of them. In order to get a clearer grip on this problem and on possible responses to it, I adopt the following more formalised way of capturing it:

- A** Adorno's philosophy contains normative claims (it involves standards ('norms') of judgement and is meant to give rise to reasons).
- B** In order to justifiably make normative claims, one needs to provide an account of the normativity in question.
- C** Accounting for normativity requires appeal to (and knowledge of) the good.
- D** Within Adorno's philosophy no such appeal (or knowledge) is possible. [Adorno's Epistemic Negativism.]
- E** From (B), (C), and (D), Adorno cannot justifiably make normative claims.
- F** From (A) and (E), Adorno is not entitled to make the normative claims his philosophy contains.

Let me comment more on each of these premises as well as – first of all – on the sense of 'normative' with which I operate. By 'normative' I mean to denote those considerations that provide us with reasons – not just reasons to act (such as a moral obligation to help others in need, or a prudential consideration to stop smoking now in order to live longer and avoid future health problems), but also reasons to believe (such as the presence of a trace in the cloud chamber pointing to the existence of a sub-atomic particle) or reasons to admire (such as the fine workmanship of a craftsman or the beauty of a painting). To make normative claims is to invoke standards of judgement, and these standards are (part of) the account we give of the reasons we have. Thus, if I make a normative statement (such as that you ought to keep your promises or that *War and Peace* is a masterpiece), I at least implicitly invoke a standard (be it a moral standard about what I owe to others, or what makes a novel a masterpiece) and this standard is directly connected to certain reasons (say, it gives us a reason to keep our promises, or to read *War and Peace*). This is, I take it, an ecumenical understanding of normativity – restricted as it is to a minimal core.

Habermas's 'Theodor Adorno: The Primal History of Subjectivity – Self-Affirmation Gone Wild', in his 1983b: 99–110, esp. 106).

With this clarification in mind, we can turn to the premises. We have already seen textual evidence to support premise A – the Gehlen-Adorno exchange quoted at the beginning of the chapter indicates that Adorno makes normative claims (such as that the social world cripples us) which invoke normative standards (that such crippling ought to be resisted) and imply reasons for, and guidance of, action (we should resist the social world because of the way it suppresses our potential, and one important element in doing so is to study the various pathologies to which we are subject). While the ascription of normative claims to Adorno remains disputed, there are other passages that support it. Consider, for example, the following passage:

If philosophy is still necessary, it is so only in the way it has been from time immemorial: as critique, as resistance to the expanding heteronomy, as what might be the powerless attempt of thought to remain its own master and to convict of untruth, by their own criteria, fabricated mythology and a conniving, resigned conformity.<sup>10</sup>

Here we see that he conceives of philosophy as a critical enterprise. If you combine this with the further claim that any critical enterprise is a normative endeavour (that it invokes standards of judgements and aims to provide us with reasons of various sort),<sup>11</sup> then it would follow that his theory – or indeed any philosophy worthy of the name – is normative. Consider further:

Hitler has imposed a new categorical imperative upon human beings in the state of their unfreedom: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen.<sup>12</sup>

This passage raises all sorts of interesting questions – some of which we consider later (especially Chapter 5) – but for the current purposes the main point is that it provides further evidence that Adorno thinks that there are ethical claims on us (including a particularly strong moral claim: a categorical imperative). This also shows that Adorno's theory is normative.

As to premise B, the thought here is that whenever one makes normative claims – whenever one invokes standards of judgement that are meant to give rise to reasons – one owes others (and perhaps even oneself) an account of these claims. There are several issues at

<sup>10</sup> 10.2: 464–5/CM, 10; translation amended.

<sup>11</sup> For doubts about the claim that all critiques are normative, see Geuss 2005: Ch. 9.

<sup>12</sup> ND, 6: 358/365; translation amended.



stake here – both epistemic issues of the sort Gehlen raises about Adorno's claim to know that our human potential is suppressed and questions of justification, of the right and authority to invoke certain standards – and we look at these in detail when considering the more specific forms of the general problem I want to draw attention to here. It turns out that much of the controversy surrounding the Problem of Normativity depends on disputes about what it would be to account for normativity (and whether we do need to do so at all). The critics of Adorno often presume it would have to involve grounding our normative claims (in the sense of justifying), but whether or not this is required or appropriate is very much part of the dispute (see especially Chapter 7).

Still, there is one overarching theme to such debates: accounting for normativity (whatever that turns out to be) has to invoke positive goods or ideals (the right, the good, health, etc.). This is often an implicit premise. In fact, as far as I know, not one of Adorno's critics argues for it, at least not explicitly or directly. The underlying thought can, however, be reconstructed as follows: whenever one, for example, criticises a sculpture, one – at least implicitly – does so with reference to what a good sculpture would be. One appeals to the perfect exemplar and relies on one's knowledge of it. This sort of consideration might lead one to accept the claim that accounting for normativity requires appeal to (and knowledge of) the good – i.e., to accept premise C.

We now begin to see more clearly the problem that Adorno seems to face. His theory is premised on the claim that we cannot know what the good is (i.e., on epistemic negativism). This would suggest that – if premise C is true – it lacks the resources for an account of its normative claims. I have already pointed to one passage that supports the ascription of epistemic negativism to Adorno, but let me muster some further evidence. In *Negative Dialectics*, he speculates that 'In the right situation everything would be . . . only the tiniest bit different from what it is', but goes on to say that even so 'not the slightest thing can be conceived as how it would then be'.<sup>13</sup> And later on, he reaffirms this standpoint, emphasising how society is an objectivity which has 'supremacy [*Vormacht*]' over the individual and blocks any view beyond itself, even by the imagination:

<sup>13</sup> ND, 6: 294/298; translation amended.

Whoever presents an image of the right conditions, in order to answer the objection that he does not know what he wants, cannot disregard that supremacy [which extends] also over him. Even if his imagination were capable of representing everything as radically different, it would still remain chained to him and his present time as static points of reference, and everything would be askew.<sup>14</sup>

In sum, the realisation of the bad prevents us from knowing the good directly – we cannot just read the good off from its manifestations in social institutions and practices, for there are no such manifestations; nor can we read it off from the rational potential of these institutions and practices, for they are too infected by the bads even for this. The realised badness even undermines other routes to knowledge of, or acquaintance with, the good: it taints even our attempts to think or imagine something beyond it. Still, none of this means that we cannot know the bad, the inhuman:

We may not know what absolute good is or the absolute norm, we may not even know what man is or the human or humanity – but what the inhuman is we know very well indeed. I would say that the place of moral philosophy today lies more in the concrete denunciation of the inhuman, than in vague and abstract attempts to situate man in his existence.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, Adorno claims that the false is index of its own untruth, that it 'proclaims itself in what we might call a certain immediacy'.<sup>16</sup> If, however, Adorno is an (epistemic) negativist, then it seems that he is not entitled to make his normative claims. Adorno seems to face a dilemma: he would have to give up either his negativism (but this seems to be central to his philosophical position) or his normative claims (but, again, they seem to be at the core of his theory).

My proposal in this study is to steer between both horns of this dilemma by rejecting premise C. In particular, I argue that we can account for normativity even in the absence of knowing the good, the right, or any positive value – in short, I advocate *meta-ethical negativism*. This is, in part, quite independently of Adorno's philosophy – he agrees with this thesis, but I think we should do so, even if we rejected his overall theory. On any justifiable sense of account of normativity, the bad is normatively sufficient on its own, and it is only by implicitly – and I argue illicitly – assuming otherwise that the Problem of Normativity

<sup>14</sup> ND, 6: 345/352; translation amended; see also HF, 72/47.

<sup>15</sup> PMP 1963, 261/175; see also 8: 456. <sup>16</sup> Adorno 2003b: 49/28–9.