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Can Moderns Live Rightly?

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Abstract

In a modern world stricken by evils of all kinds, can we truly live rightly? Reconciliationists like Marx think that we need to figure out a way to be at home in modernity before developing a legitimate answer to this question. Ethical individualists, on the other hand, say yes to the right living question, reminding us of the power of our own agency. Pessimistic holists will disagree with both parties, invariably pointing to evidence both empirical and theoretical that highlights structural inequalities in modern peoples' opportunities to basic liberties, civil rights, education, healthcare, offices of authority, and so on. Historically, philosophers have placed Adorno and his No Right Living Thesis in the latter camp. In this paper, however, I defend a constructive account of Adorno's practical philosophy. I argue that, although Adorno is a negativist and a holist, his normativity actually has significant positive value. Adorno, like all great philosophers, provides hope for the future, and hope for human beings. Like myself, Adorno takes it that moderns can and *should* ultimately aim to live rightly. In contrast to most recent scholarship, I make my positive case for Adorno in a way that preserves his characteristic emphasis on antinomies, or irresolvable puzzles, in modern social life.

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§ 0. Introduction

Freyenhagen (2013) takes Adorno's practical philosophy to rest on the following evaluative claim:

"There is no right life within the wrong."[2]

Freyenhagen calls this assertion the 'No Right Living Thesis.'[3] It has three main implications: that, given modernity's social and historical circumstances, (1) we are not in a position to realise *eudaimonia*, (2) we are not in a position to live self-determining lives, and (3) we are not in a position to live morally upright lives.[4] Adorno provides three primary arguments which support his No Right Living Thesis: (1) the existence of practical antinomies, (2) the ideological nature of modern social life, and (3) the centrality of bare living in the modern social world. In the following section, I draw on Freyenhagen to provide a brief sketch of each component of the No Right Living Thesis. In the section after, I consider some objections and replies to bolster Adorno's position. Finally, I suggest that, although Adorno's normative prescriptions for better living are negative, such normativity actually has positive, albeit antinomical, value. I argue this means, with some caveats, that Adorno thinks moderns can and should ultimately aim to live rightly.

§ 1. No Right Living

The No Right Living Thesis sits at the intersection of ethics and politics. It stands in sharp contrast to the liberal philosophical project, which is characterised by a primacy of ideal theory and justice, as well as a strong emphasis on explanatory and ethical individualism.[5] Adorno, on the other hand, is a holist about the social world.[6] For him, the individual is inextricable from society, and society is inextricable from the individual. Adorno's practical claims, then, are primarily directed at the collective causal powers of social roles and institutions, not the causality of individual morality. Freyenhagen nicely expresses this macro-level feature of Adorno's social ontology by drawing a parallel to Hegel's absolute idealism, which conceives of totality as a spirit (*Geist*) that encompasses the truth of everything, including the teleological development of world history (*Weltgeschichte*).[7] But Adorno, like Marx, is a historical materialist. For him,

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[2] *MM*, 4: 43/39.
[3] *A* 53.
[4] Timothy J. Hinton (2024). *Adorno: Lectures.* North Carolina State University, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies.
[5] See for example, Michael Freeden (2015). "Philosophical Liberalism: Idealizing Justice." In: *Liberalism: A Very Short Introduction, Very Short Introductions.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 94-107.
[6] Social holism is the notion that all of the social elements in a system are interconnected. This means that the meaning of the system itself is "irreducible to the meaning or function of one or more of the system's constituent elements." See Shane J. Ralston (2015). "Holism." In: *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought*, First Edition. Edited by Michael T. Gibbons. John Wiley & Sons, 1.
[7] See for example, *PhR*, §185R.

Freyenhagen thinks, it is not a spirit, but *society* which is the whole. And instead of encompassing absolute truth, "the whole is the untrue."[8] Furthermore, while Hegel's paradigm of world history progresses through teleological development in a positive dialectic, Adorno's materialist conception of history works in a sharply *negative* dialectic. Like Hegel, Adorno takes it that society has progressed through a starting point of undifferentiated unity and into a period of large-scale alienation, or differentiated disunity.[9] For both thinkers, social antagonism acts as a progressive historical force. But instead of then naturally developing towards a more concrete determination—an overcoming of such alienation in a step which in Hegel I'll call differentiated unity—Adorno's dialectic posits that the modern social world is stuck, rooted in pervasive estrangement. So, Adorno's philosophical project is one which is both practically and theoretically situated in nonideal theory.

On the face of it, there are two ways in which one might interpret Adorno's conception of right living: (1) as a strong form of moral uprightness, or (2) as a weak form of merely acceptable living conditions. In his practical philosophy, however, I take it that Adorno is primarily concerned with (1). While Adorno seems to concede that (2) could be realized from the *ex ante* products of internal, individual transformation, he thinks it is impossible that (1) could be realised without radical, collective change in the external social whole. So, from Adornian holism emerges a causal connection between right living and *external injustice*. I take it that Adorno would agree with the following claim, which endorses a strong form of Levinas-like negative responsibility:[10]

Even if one is perfectly ethically integral *herself*, i.e. internally, she cannot live rightly if she benefits from, or is exploited by, external injustices in the modern social world.

Unlike Levinas, however, Adorno does not conceive of the evils of modernity as an aversive Other. For Adorno, society has already infiltrated the individual, and individual ends are subordinated by society's exchange demands. In this way, modern individuals are mere "appendages of the machine,"[11] no more able to live rightly than society is able to be right. Put in another way, no one individual can on her own change the radical evils that characterise modernity on a social, systematic level.[12] Adorno's moral picture, then, stands in sharp contrast to that of ethical

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[8] *A* 36.
[9] For the sake of explaining Adorno's negative dialectic, I have taken it for granted that he thinks society has progressed through a stage of undifferentiated unity. But in his lectures, Adorno says that he suspects it to be more likely that we are merely unable to "give an account of the excess of suffering and injustice without which [substantial ages in which the individual lived in harmony with the collective of which he was a member] would not have existed" (*HF* 208).
[10] See for example, *EFP* 82-89 for a more thorough account of Levinas' position on negative responsibility.
[11] *MM,* 4: 13/15.
[12] Ibid., 42/39.

individualists like the Stoics, whose vision of the good life is exclusive to the inner.[13] Adorno's negativism forms the basis of his first argument for the No Right Living Thesis: the pervasiveness of social antinomies in modernity.[14]

Following Kant, an antinomy can be understood as a practical paradox, or an irresolvable conflict between two sides with an equal claim to being justified.[15] An Adornian antinomy can be understood as a Kantian antinomy with the additional condition that such a conflict is only irresolvable within the modern social world. Throughout his work, Adorno primarily centers his discussion of antinomies around micrological analyses, or case studies which help bring the broader, interrelated elements of the modern social world into better focus.[16] As a holist, Adorno takes micrological analyses to be an especially crucial form of study, since they reveal the irreducibility of constituent social parts from their proper whole. This inductive methodological emphasis, which is characteristic of Adorno's overall philosophical work, reveals one of his key thoughts: That moral theory alone is insufficient for the provision of normative guidance in modernity. Instead, such prescription must be derived from, but not limited to, critical interdisciplinary assessment of case-specific risk.[17] I will return to this point in §2 and §3.

The first micrological analysis of Adorno's which Freyenhagen takes to be relevant vis-à-vis the No Right Living Thesis is that of the private life. In it, Adorno interrogates the question of whether it is possible for people to truly be at home in modernity. I think that, as opposed to philosophical reconciliationists,[18] Adorno falls on this point into the camp of *political* reconciliationists like Marx, who think that being at home in modernity is something which must be irreducibly transparent, or self-evident prima facie. On this view, because there is evidently pervasive

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[13] See for example, William O. Stephens (2020). "The Stoics and Their Philosophical System." In: Kelly Arenson (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Hellenistic Philosophy.* Routledge, pp. 22-34; see also Pierre Hadot (1998)."The Inner Citadel, or the Discipline of Assent." In: *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius.* Translated by Michael Chase. Harvard University Press, pp. 101-127.

[14] Throughout the paper, I employ a core understanding of the word "modernity" to refer not only to the current time, but to societies which "are built on the principles of individual freedom and instrumental mastery." See Peter Wagner (2020). "Modernity." In: *The Cambridge Handbook of Social Theory*. Edited by Peter Kivisto. Cambridge University Press, pp. 143-162.

[15] See B 425-461; see also *A* 55.

[16] Ibid., 54.

[17] Ibid., 166.

[18] Here, I am drawing on Michael O. Hardimon's (1992) distinction in "The Project of Reconciliation: Hegel's Social Philosophy." *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 165-195. I should say here that I have changed my stance on Hegelian reconciliation. For a view of my earlier position, see Luke T. Metzger (2024). "In Defense of Hegelian Reconciliation." *Aporia,* Brigham Young University, Vol. 34, No. 2, pp. 13-26. My position now is that to call Hegel a reconciliationist, as Hardimon does, is somewhat reductive. I do think that Hegel's social project is one of figuring out how to be at home (*Heimatlichkeit*) in the social world. But in Hegel's system, there is only dialectical progress, no closure. Any unity which is captured via double negation is immediately and dynamically overcome by further contradiction. Hegel's conception of world history, then, does not seem to be a secularised eschatology, but rather a dynamic dialectical progression of truth within itself (a decisive improvement over the dualistic arbitrariness of the Platonic dialectic). This constant positively rational progress emerges from a *self*-sublation (*aufheben*) of nothing external to itself. See Julie E. Maybee (2020). "Hegel's Dialectics." In: E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

alienation in the modern social world, modernity itself cannot be a home.[19] In the following section, I will say more about this position and its relationship to Adorno. But for now, let us turn back to Adorno's study of the private life, which comprises only a constituent part of this larger relation.

In Aphorism No. 18, Adorno hones in on one object of particular interest to private life in the modern whole: dwelling, or shelter. Here, he observes that modernity levels various social pressures on people, e.g. the pressure to buy a nice house, that make it difficult, or even impossible, for them to feel at home in their own dwellings.[20] Namely, Adorno thinks that capitalist consumerism forces (not coerces)[21] people to pursue unimportant things for fear of feeling left out.[22] If people do not give in to these pressures, feeling at home starts to seem precariously unimportant. But if they do, the feeling of home becomes distorted by fleeting impulsivity. Then there are the homeless: those who are considered free and equal citizens in a liberal democracy, but lack even the most basic rights and liberties to exercise the causal powers to pursue unimportant things in the first place. These reflections on dwelling lead Adorno to an antinomy: we should not, but also need to, make ourselves at home in the modern social world.[23] One salient example of this kind of antimony is private property. While Adorno takes the legal regime of private property to be necessary in modernity, since without it we would risk "ending up destitute or precariously dependent on the good will of others or social institutions,"[24] He also points out that the institution of private property allows certain people to retain much more than is needed to live comfortably. As a result, those who retain less end up suffering needlessly. This raises a host of social problems. In particular, Adorno thinks that using the fact that ownership rights are necessary for survival in a defense of one's own possessions is dangerously ideological.[25]

This leads me to Adorno's second argument for the No Right Living Thesis: the inevitable entanglement of ideological claims in modern social life. Here, we can roughly say that ideology refers to a systematic set of beliefs about the social world.[26] But since Adorno conceives of the social underbelly of the modern world as

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[19] Ibid., 171. That alienation is evident in modernity to begin with is a characteristic feature of the political reconciliationist project.
[20] *MM,* 4: 38.
[21] Here, I am using Cohen's distinction between force, which entails that *X* must do *A* because no reasonable alternatives are available, and coercion, which entails that *X* must do *A* because no alternatives are available at all. See G. A. Cohen (1983). "The Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom." *Philosophy and Public Affairs,* Vol. 12, No. 1, pp. 3-33.
[22] *MM,* 4: 38.
[23] Ibid., 39.
[24] *A* 55.
[25] Ibid, 59.
[26] See for example, Michael Freeden (1998). "Ideology." In: *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Taylor and Francis.

morally reprehensible and "radically evil,"[27] This second argument might be better reframed as the idea that moderns inevitably develop *false consciousness*, or misperceptions about their real position, in the social world.[28] As I take it, there are four main elements to Adorno's understanding of false consciousness. First, false consciousness manifests on the micro level as individually mistaken self-consciousness about the social world. Second, false consciousness manifests on the macro level as a systematically deluded ideology. Third, the role of false consciousness is to reproduce itself such that people become reconciled to the social world by their blindness to true social realities.[29] And fourth, false consciousness either stabilises or legitimises oppression. We might think of an example of this sort of characterisation of false consciousness, in modernity, as the meritocratic American Dream originally proposed by Benjamin Franklin.[30]

Franklin's version of the American Dream advocated for individualistic self-realisation on an unabashedly constitutional basis, placing economic opportunity within seemingly easy reach for those who worked hard and spent frugally. But because such a materialistic conception of what it meant to realise personal dreams in America was far from the true reality, Franklin's model of the self-made man quickly developed into a target of social criticism in, for example, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.[31] Importantly, Franklin's model was not just imposed by Franklin himself. People in positions of power adopted and reproduced its sentiments to legitimise their place in the social hierarchy, blinding and reconciling both themselves and others to the true social realities of the late eighteenth century, a time when most immigrants coming to the United States suffered from significantly restricted social mobility.[32] Just as Franklin's model of the self-made man restricted the practical capacities of both those who adopted his model and those on whom it was leveraged, I think that Adorno's schema of false consciousness can broadly be understood as a form of

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[27] *A* 30.

[28] Cf. Marxist interpretations of false consciousness, which are often limited to the realm of the political superstructure. Adorno's view of false consciousness, on the other hand, is unconstrained by anything but modernity itself. See Ron Eyerman (1981). "False Consciousness and Ideology in Marxist Theory." *Acta Sociologica*, Vol. 24, No. 1/2, Work and Ideology, pp. 43-56.

[29] This third feature of Adornian false consciousness aligns nicely with the Platonic notion of false consciousness. As presented in the Allegory of the Cave (*Republic* 514b–518d), Plato's picture of false consciousness is famously exemplified by prisoners who are enslaved and reconciled to their false belief that shadows represent real objects in the world.

[30] See Benjamin Franklin (1758). "The Way to Wealth." In: *Poor Richard Improved.* Extracted from the Doctor's Political Works.

[31] Alfred Hornung (1999). "The Un-American Dream." In: *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 4, pp. 545-553.

[32] See for example, the 1790 U.S. Naturalization Bill, H. R. 40, which limited new citizenship to "free white person(s)...of good character." Courtesy of the *Archives of the U.S. Capitol.*

social unfreedom—one which is collectively self-imposed.[33] As Rousseau famously put it: "Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains."[34]

For Adorno, many of these chains are forged, in modernity, by capitalism. While as members of liberal democracies people conceive of themselves as free and equal citizens, they are in reality hopelessly bound to the ebb and flow of capitalist commodification, which Adorno thinks has entered into all social relations. Adorno specifically directs his criticisms of commodification, or the transformation of individual use-value into common exchange value,[35] towards the sort of hypercommercialised marketisation which characterises a modern mutation of capitalism he calls *late capitalism*.[36] Whereas early Marxist critiques of capitalism positioned exchange value as intrinsic, i.e. goods are sold based on the value they have in themselves, Adorno's late capitalism goes a step further by positing that individual use-value is, in modernity, grossly transformed and fetishised by exchange value.[37] That is, the genuine use value (*Rang*) of something like a piece of art, e.g. its ability to organically challenge a viewer's preconceptions, is replaced by the social value (*gesellschaftliche Schätzung*) it has on the exchange market, e.g. its ability to be sold for a price.[38] Adorno takes commodification to be the primary and most pervasive source of alienation in modernity. To further unpack this claim, however, it might be helpful to briefly sketch two primary tendencies which Adorno thinks all modern societies exemplify: (1) the elimination of individuality, and (2) the inversion of means and ends.

The first tendency, the elimination of individuality, entails an indifference towards individual life, including the objectification and depersonalisation of people.[39] In modernity, Adorno thinks that people are constantly being put into broad, general, and therefore disposable categories as particularity becomes eliminated. More specifically, he thinks that workers are treated with a lack of respect for their individuality by employers and employment contracts. Take, for example, the recent plight of migrant workers in Qatar, who have only barely been paid enough to sustain their own basic needs, much less their unique lives outside of the workplace.[40] The second tendency, the inversion of means and ends, obtains in a similarly Marxist vein, when human beings become subordinated to their own creations.[41] For Adorno, this is best exemplified in late capitalist society when

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[33] *A* 169.
[34] Rousseau, J. J. (1997). "Of the Social Contract or Principles of Political Right." From: *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings.* Cambridge University Press, 351.
[35] *Das Kapital*, Vol. 1, Hamburg: Meissner, 1867; *Marx and Engels Werke*, 1956–90 MEW, XXIII/ *Marx Engels Collected Works*, 1975–2005, MECW, XXXV, Ch. 1.
[36] My thanks to an anonymous referee at the UPJA for drawing my attention to this crucial distinction.
[37] *LC* 232-246.
[38] *DE* 128.
[39] *A* 26.
[40] Mohamed (2023). "Migrant workers in Qatar should not be exploited and abused like I was." *Amnesty International.*
[41] *A* 28.

production and maximisation of profit become undertaken for their own sakes. Take, for example, the recent Amazon strikes, in which workers have claimed that even their bathroom breaks are strictly timed by employers to maximise efficiency in the workplace.[42] Here, commodification takes on a life of its own, and blinds people to the unpleasant social realities of inequality, injustice, suffering, and evil. Late capitalism, then, not only perpetuates, but is itself an Adornian form of false consciousness. It "abjures [moderns'] autonomy."[43]

This leads me to Adorno's final argument for the No Right Living Thesis: the centrality of bare living in modern social life. Here, Freyenhagen takes Adorno to mean roughly this: that while "human life used to be conceived as encompassing all aspects of human existence, it is increasingly narrowing down to only two aspects: consumption and production."[44] It is alarming to Adorno, in other words, that modernity has become increasingly privatised and material. This 'bare life' is not one which Adorno thinks can truly be worth living, both in the sense that it cannot be morally acceptable, and in the sense that it cannot actively be shaped by the modern agent whose life it is. Part of the reason why is because Adorno thinks that such a life severely lacks autonomy, or positive freedom.[45] When we become beholden to untrue social realities—and Adorno thinks that we cannot help but do this, since we are irreducibly constituent members of a corrupt modern whole—it becomes impossible for us to act as self-determining agents. Following Kant, I think Adorno means here that false consciousness prevents us from forming true practical conceptions of ourselves, and therefore from being able to act on normative reasons at all.[46] As I have claimed, Adorno thinks that all individual ends which indeed may seem to be taken up freely are ultimately hijacked by modernity's telos of uninspired exchange commodification. The Adornian modern, then, seems to scrape by without any meaningful say in the direction of the course of their own life. This is an especially haunting thought, particularly for the atomized liberal ideal.

It is also, in part, why Adorno thinks that we are not in a position to realise *eudaimonia.* Although Adorno concedes that we may be able to foster some ultimately illusory form of subjective happiness in modernity, a robustly Aristotelian *eudaimonism* entails a rational and positive *activity* of the self,[47] which is inconsistent with the deterministic bare life. Furthermore, Aristotelian *eudaimonism* is lived (1) in accordance with virtue (2) over the course of a complete life (3)

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[42] Dearbail Jordan & Zoe Conway (2023). "Amazon strikes: Workers claim their toilet breaks are timed." *BBC Business News.*
[43] *DE* 127.
[44] *A* 63.
[45] See for example, *ND*, 6: 222, 230–1, 239.
[46] See for example, *SN* 92.
[47] *EN,* 1097b22–1098a20.

unmarred by external misfortune.[48] But (1) cannot be realised in Adornian modernity because it requires autonomous *praxis*.[49] Adornian modernity leaves no room for moral uprightness (2) in a complete life because it is marked by pervasive alienation. And, as I have claimed, Adorno thinks that right living is inseparable from the presence of (3) collective, external evil. But while Adorno holds that a strong form of moral uprightness is impossible in modernity, he does concede that there are better and worse ways of living in it. Morality is hardly unimportant, Adorno says, since "without evil there would be no good; without a rift [between individual and society] to provide mankind with its substantial security within a given society, the idea of freedom and with it the idea of a condition worthy of human beings would not exist."[50]

§ 2. The Possibility of Reconciliation

There is no shortage of objections to Adorno's position.[51] In this section, however, I am most interested in the following question: Does Adorno think that reconciliation to the social world is possible at all? To begin to provide an answer, I would like to revisit what Michael Hardimon (1992) calls the political reconciliationist position. Recall that in sharp contrast to the philosophical reconciliationist, who thinks that the modern social world *is* a home but just does not look or feel like it,[52] The political reconciliationist thinks that the modern world is not a home at all. On this view, if it is not plainly obvious that we are at home in our social world, and if there is truly a need for a detailed philosophical account to help us become reconciled with both our world and ourselves, then we cannot be at home at all.[53] Here, it seems that Adorno and the political reconciliationist agree. But this leads to a prima facie antinomy. As I will sketch it, the antinomy consists of the following two sides, both of which at first seem to have an equal claim to justification: (1) because

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[48] Here, I highlight the main features of Aristotelian *eudaimonism* that conflict with Adornian modernity. However, perhaps the most marked characteristic of Aristotelian normativity is its implication in a life form's *ergon*, or unique teleological function, *qua* member of that life form's respective kind, or 'species.' That is, a life form is considered good or bad based on whether it is able to carry out its appropriate function, e.g. a good acorn is one that grows into a strong oak tree. Aristotle's prudential, functionalist conception of normativity, as Freyenhagen points out in *A* 232-251, is actually quite consistent with Adorno's negativism, since Adorno takes humanity's *ergon*, i.e. its full potential for good, to be presently suppressed by the evils of modern social life.

[49] Although Adorno does think that there is one prime virtue, which is modesty (*Bescheidenheit*). See *PMP* 251–2/169–70; see also *ND* 6: 345/352; *MM,* Aphorism No. 6, 4: 29/27–8.

[50] *HF*, 287–288.

[51] See for example, William P. Nye (1988). "Theodor Adorno on Jazz: A Critique of Critical Theory." *Popular Music and Society,* Vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 69-73; Jürgen Habermas (1990). *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity.* Translated by Frederick G. Lawrence. The MIT Press; Fredric Jameson (1991). *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.* Duke University Press.

[52] Although, as Hardimon notes, the philosophical reconciliationist does not automatically jump to this conclusion. Rather, her project of reconciliation derives its practical power from the philosophical theory it provides, develops, and affirms. See Michael O. Hardimon (1992). "The Project of Reconciliation: Hegel's Social Philosophy." *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 171.

[53] Ibid., 172.

Adornian modernity itself consists of pervasive, irresolvable antinomies, Adorno seems to be committed to being unconcerned with reconciliation. But because he is also committed to the claim that pervasive alienation is rooted in the external, collective social whole, it seems that he must agree with the political reconciliationist that (2) the ideal way to dispel the alienation that marks modernity (and therefore to realize the way to reconciliation and true right living) is through collective, material social transformation.[54]

For now, I will characterise both (1) and (2) as Adornian. Let us explore some potential objections. One might swiftly object to (2) by pointing to cases where collective social conditions *have* been transformed, but individuals are left unaffected, their false consciousness still intact. Consider, for example, the case of a sheltered college student who, against all odds, makes it through all of her coursework without having any of her fundamental beliefs challenged. To such a worry, I think the response (from either camp) would be this: the kind of ideal, collective social transformation envisioned on this view *aims* to challenge, but does not necessarily change, false consciousness. The goal is not to impose or dogmatize knowledge, but simply to provide greater opportunity for people to reach towards the truth. This might quickly lead to another worry: how could Adorno be committed to both (1) and (2) when his thesis is that there is no right living? Here, the Adornian response is as follows: there is only no right living within *the wrong*. And the wrong, for Adorno, is strictly modernity. It is only within *modernity* that irresolvable antinomies are pervasive. In future, differently structured societies, this could very well change. Importantly, however, the prima facie antinomy I have presented stems from the fact that Adorno himself does not seem to be particularly concerned with a project of reconciliation, nor with the prospect of building towards a better future.[55] Instead, it seems that he merely leaves room for the slim possibility that current social conditions could undergo a drastic enough transformation from which right living could be realised. Adorno's tempered attitude here stands in sharp contrast to the ambition of the political reconciliationist project, which takes building towards a better future to be an actively pressing endeavor.[56]

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[54] Recall here Marx's famous line against Feuerbach that "philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it." See Robert C. Tucker. (1978). "Thesenuber Feuerbach," in Marx Engels Werke (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1983), 3:535 ("Theses on Feuerbach," in The Marx-Engels Reader, 2d ed., ed. [New York: Norton], 145).

[55] Indeed, it seems that Adorno takes modernity to be condemned to the kind of uninspired status quo Martin Luther King Jr. called "negative normalcy." In his seminal *Letter From Birmingham Jail* (1963), King describes such a state as "the absence of tension," which is more "devoted to order than to justice" (p. 3). What I ultimately attempt to highlight in this paper, however, is that Adorno still thinks it is imperative that we break through the "facades [of such a status quo] into which our consciousness crashes" (*ND* 17).

[56] See for example, Wendell Bell (1991). "Values and the Future in Marx and Marxism." *Futures.* Butterworth-Heinemann Ltd., pp. 147-162.

This is where Adorno and the political reconciliationist diverge. While the political reconciliationist sees ideal, collective transformation as being shaped through positive agency, an Adornian social transformation must be *negative,* since the bare life affords no positive freedom for self-determination.[57] This significantly complicates things. If, on Adorno's view, our social whole cannot at least in part be reshaped through initiative, modernity's only hope for right living lies strictly in an exercise of the kind of freedom afforded by the absence of obstacles, barriers, constraints, or interferences external (and in Adorno's case, deterministically internal) to them.[58] Of course, negative agency is still *agency.* In this case, it does not necessarily entail passivity, only that modernity is forced (not coerced) to either omit to act, or refrain from acting, if social conditions are to be radically transformed. Freyenhagen calls this negative normative prescription an 'ethics of resistance.'[59] Here, Adorno advises us to exercise our negative causal powers to *resist* wrong life. Adorno does this because, as I have claimed, he thinks that there *are* better and worse ways of living within the wrong. In fact, Adorno actually takes individual moral agency to warrant a great deal of importance (just not primacy) in the pursuit of a better social future.[60] Accordingly, the main purpose of his ethics of resistance is to provide practical, albeit negative, normative guidance from which this agency can benefit. Adorno's ethics of resistance can be roughly summed up by what Freyenhagen calls 'the new categorical imperative,' which commands us to "arrange our thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen."[61]

But while living less wrongly in the wrong does constitute a kind of determination, this does not mean (as it does for Hegel)[62] that we can know anything positive about such determination. In other words, although Adorno takes resisting forms of the wrong life to warrant a great deal of practical import, this does not allow us to say that we can live rightly automatically.[63] To say the least, this revelation seems to make the possibility of *future* right living increasingly improbable. How can radical social transformation ever occur if we can't even make an active difference in our own lives, our efforts towards resistance still hopelessly subjected to the "changing forms of repression?"[64] The fact that Adorno leaves this possibility of future reconciliation open while also denying positive self-determination points to one, perhaps unsatisfying, answer: that because of the current evils in modernity, we cannot know what the future holds, nor what the human good actually is (since on

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[57] *CM* 85.
[58] See for example, Isaiah Berlin (1969). "Two Concepts of Liberty." In: *I. Berlin, Four Essays on Liberty*, London: Oxford University Press: 118–72. New ed. in Berlin 2002: 166–217.
[59] *A* 162.
[60] *PMP* 250/168.
[61] *ND* 365.
[62] See for example, *PhR* §324R.
[63] See for example, *ND*, 6: 161–3.
[64] *A* 166.

Adorno's view, our collective human potential has yet to be realised historically).[65] It is possible that we could live rightly in the future, but for this to happen, a great collective shift would have to occur. Adorno does not do much in the way of explaining how this might happen. But the postulate of such a collective shift *does*, on Adorno's view, crucially help us make sense of the true social world.[66]

This is the practical power of the No Right Living Thesis. It aims to provide a sober account of modernity's current evils and injustices. It is a critical, experimental reflection on the present, but it is importantly not a *completed* project. Adorno does, however, give us something to chew on—a negative picture of what a postulate of positive freedom would look like: "In view of the concrete possibility of utopia, dialectics is the ontology of the false condition. A right condition would be freed from dialectics, no more system than contradiction."[67] I take up the consequences of this claim in the next section.

§ 3. Negative as Positive

As Freyenhagen rightly notes, Adorno's commitment to epistemic negativism does not automatically make him susceptible to objections about an analytic connection to the good.[68] That is, we do not necessarily or symmetrically know the good or how to attain it just by virtue of the fact that we are presently well-acquainted with the bad. Consider the case of pain. When we feel pain, it is not obvious that we need to know what pleasure is like to intuit that the absence of pain is intrinsically preferable to its presence. This, of course, (for most people besides masochists) is because pain feels bad, and is meant to feel bad. But just because what is bad does not automatically have positive epistemic implications does not mean that it cannot have negative ones which are *positively motivated*. In the following, I will suggest that, although the No Right Living Thesis has decidedly negative normative implications, it actually has underlying positive value. Contrary to most current scholarship, the way in which I do this takes us up a weaker approach that preserves Adorno's characteristic emphasis on irresolution.[69] I think that a nice way of beginning to cash out my view is by situating it in what Korsgaard calls a "double-level theory," a model which reconciles Rawls' distinction of moral

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[65] See, for example: "Without exception, human beings have yet to become themselves. By the concept of the self we should properly mean their potential, and this potential stands in polemical opposition to the reality of the self" *ND*, 6: 274/278.
[66] *A* 243.
[67] *ND* 11.
[68] See *A* 209 - 231.
[69] Cf. Yvonne Sherratt (2002). *Adorno's Positive Dialectic.* Cambridge University Press, which takes a strong, ideal approach to unearthing positive features of Adorno's normativity. I take the view that Adorno does not have a hidden ontology, and that his normativity is plainly negative. But I do suggest, more weakly, that this normativity crucially turns on a positive postulate, and is derivative of what I take to be a positive, albeit antinomical, view of philosophical inquiry itself.

philosophy into ideal and nonideal theory.[70] Applying this model to Adorno's normativity, the Rawlsian ideal initially seems to posit that options of active resistance are open to modern agents who hope to exercise their negative causal powers and live better within the wrong. In the nonideal, however, where options of resistance may be unavailable,[71] It seems that Adorno thinks there is no possibility for agency at all. But as I have claimed, Adorno only thinks that we lack positive freedom *presently*.

A consequence of this feature of Adorno's project is that it rules out what social and political philosophers call "backwards-looking" models for achieving rectificatory or corrective justice, such as the black radical liberalism famously endorsed by Charles Mills.[72] For Adorno, the evils of our past have led us to our present. They cannot and should not be reconciled. Instead, although Adorno does not say it outright, our only option seems to be to negatively pursue "big-tent," forward-looking strategies to address inequality, injustice, suffering, and evil.[73] So, after a more thorough pass, it seems that we can revise the double-level theory: the exercise of negative agency, as I will put it, actually represents the Rawlsian nonideal,[74] while the ideal can be understood as Adorno's *postulate* of positive freedom, i.e. the absence of dialectics. Ideal, in this sense, might be pejorative for Adorno—something which is entirely unrealistic given our current circumstances. But the fact that Adorno thinks we need a positive postulate at all to make sense of the social world as it is leaves open the possibility of future revision, our collective human potential yet unfulfilled.

Although Freyenhagen identifies this feature of Adorno's normativity, I think that he undersells how practically powerful an idea it really is. Adorno is effectively saying that, given the alienating nature of modernity (some features of which are surely better now than ever before, given significant advances in medicine, technology, civil rights, and so on),[75] it is certain that there is a wealth of potential for human good yet untapped. That this may be *solely* because of history's failings is for now orthogonal. My own stance here is more weakly that of proto-Kantians like Waldron (2017), who think that the capacity of acting for reasons (beneficial or harmful, determined or undetermined) confers significant value onto human beings

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[70] See Christine M. Korsgaard (1986). "The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil." *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 15(4): 325-349.

[71] For example, because of coercion, or losses in cognitive function, or excesses of physical or mental pain.

[72] See Charles W. Mills (2017). *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism.* New York: Oxford University Press; see also Charles W. Mills (1997). *The Racial Contract.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

[73] Here, I am using language from Derrick Darby (2023). *A Realistic Blacktopia: Why We Must Unite to Fight.* New York: Oxford University Press.

[74] Indeed, along with everything that Adorno says outright, since his entire enterprise works from the nonideal.

[75] In fact, Adorno himself goes so far as to claim that modernity currently has the productive and material resources necessary to mitigate the suffering of its constituents, but continues to perpetuate it anyways. See, for example: "The productive forces would directly permit [mitigation] here and now, and as the conditions of production on either side relentlessly prevent it." (*ND* 203).

themselves.[76] I shall call proponents of this view *capacity-first value theorists.* Capacity-first value theorists afford primacy of value to human capacities, not their exercise, because it seems that most attempts to construct philosophical criteria for *persons-first value* are ad hoc.[77] That is, such attempts struggle to categorically define what makes persons valuable in themselves, or intrinsically valuable, without excluding certain persons from the picture. Of course, capacity-first value theorists are committed to the similarly agent-relative position that capacities are only valuable insofar as it is a live possibility that they can be exercised, since this is what gives them practical significance. Critics, then, might worry that such a view excludes, for instance, children and those with certain disabilities. But I take it that Adorno's view is, conveniently, *agent-neutral.* That is, it generates the same kind of normativity for all agents, giving them common aims.[78] Adorno thinks that *all* human beings ought to attempt to resist wrong living, to negatively organise their thoughts and actions so as not to live in a world where something like Auschwitz could happen again. Here, I think real reasoning-giving force begins to emerge from Adorno's assertion that we need a positive postulate to make sense of the modern social world. Not all ends will end well, and not all attempts at living rightly will bear fruits, since we cannot (presently) know what the human good is. But the capacity for goodness and its future exercise is a powerful one. On this view, it grounds an agent's value.[79]

Now, bracketing my claim that a postulate of positive freedom holds unexpectedly important practical power, the foregoing reflections have as of yet failed to shed light on perhaps Adorno's most pressing and holistic practical antinomy about modernity: that although we ought not deny the possibility of a better future so as not to deny that the suffering pervasive in modernity is worthy of being addressed, we also cannot affirm it so as not to affirm the evil that characterises it.[80] Adorno is right to be puzzled by such a grave observation, and I think that worries along this line of thought inform the crux of his practical philosophy. But since practical antinomies, as a consequence of being themselves, have opposing sides with equal claims to justification, I find that the solution to most of them is this: either way is okay. This is where I disagree with Adorno. To make meaningful and pragmatic progress towards reshaping our current social world, we will have to bite the bullet and make painful choices. The radical evils of modernity should not be reason alone for people to give up the hope of leading more than merely acceptable lives. When hope is lost, so is philosophy. But by furnishing us with what he takes to be a

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[76] Jeremy Waldron (2017). *One Another's Equals*. Cambridge MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 240.
[77] L. Nandi Theunissen (2020). "Common Humanity." In: *The Value of Humanity*, Oxford University Press, 26.
[78] Derek Parfit (1984). *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 27, 143. Recall here Adorno's claim that modernity exemplifies the elimination of individuality.
[79] L. Nandi Theunissen (2020). "On Valuing and the Good Life." In: *The Value of Humanity*, Oxford University Press, 101.
[80] See for example, *ND* 17.

truthful account of the current social world, it seems that Adorno *does*, perhaps just implicitly, supply us with a small but impactful bit of what his own observations about modernity sorely fail to capture. While Adorno agrees with the political reconciliationist that the modern social world is far from being a home, I take it that he would agree with Hegel on the following claim:

It is vital that the active provision and development of philosophical understanding helps moderns to grasp the true nature of their social world.[81]

For both Hegel and Adorno, pursuing truth serves a *positive* purpose, even if that truth is not ultimately worth coming to terms with. The truth, in other words, is something for which, in each case, we deeply owe it to ourselves to *actively* seek. For Adorno, this is because the truth helps reveal modernity's great failings, and its miring in alienation. But although on Adorno's view we cannot help but become subject to such failings, coming closer to the truth crucially helps us to avoid blindly and mindlessly becoming a part of them: "Thought that does not capitulate before wretched existence comes to nought before its criteria, truth becomes untruth, philosophy becomes folly. And yet philosophy cannot give up, lest idiocy triumph in actualised unreason (*Widervernunft*)."[82]

In this way, I think that Adorno understands positive critical reflection as the *arche*, or first principle, of his negative ethics of resistance. While acts of resistance are themselves negative, the agency required to bring them about is derived from an underlying axiom of polemical, positive philosophical inquiry, the goal of which is to "*construct* keys before which reality springs open."[83] Take, for example, the initial political resistance to apartheid in South Africa, which was ignited in the late 1940s after a widespread critical inquiry into the systematicity of the state's racist policies.[84] Resistance, in this case, originated in, or derived from, a positive social reaction to wrongness. This is the distinct sort of resistance that I think Adorno has in mind when he makes negative normative prescriptions to moderns. I'll call it *positively axiomatic resistance.* We might contrast positively axiomatic resistance, or resistance that derives its practical power from a fundamentally positive impetus like critical philosophical inquiry, to the sort of resistance that gets off the ground because of a negative axiom. Take, for example, Smith's New Year's resolution to stay away from sweets. When confronted with a sweet, Smith recalls his negative resolution to refrain from indulging his cravings, and initiates a process of resistance. This resistance is actualised by the negativity of Smith's maxim, so that the negativity of refraining as a principle is indexed to the negativity of resistance as

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[81] See for example, *PhR,* Preface, 14.
[82] *ND* 404.
[83] Theodor W. Adorno. (1977). "The Actuality of Philosophy." *Telos: Critical Theory of the Contemporary.* (31): 120-133. The italics are my own, and highlight Adorno's positive use of the word "construct."
[84] See for example, Edward A. Tiryakian (1960). "Apartheid and Politics in South Africa." *The Journal of Politics,* Vol. 22, No. 4, pp. 682-697.

an act. In Adorno's case, however, resistance to, say, purchasing a piece of fine art (*schöne Kunst*) solely because of its exchange value, can only be actualised by the potentiality of a prior polemical inquiry into the social and intellectual character (*geistiger Gehalt*) of modern art as a whole.[85] A positive investigation, in other words, must necessarily take place before any negative act of resistance can subsequently come to fruition. Of course, Adorno is naturally skeptical of a fundamentally positive philosophical process (and indeed, of the philosophical enterprise entirely),[86] since it often leads to failure, and must itself be consistently challenged. But this is, antinomically, precisely the reason philosophy can and must go forward.[87]

On a corollary point, it is worth noting that Adorno's practical philosophy mirrors the dialectical antagonism he takes to characterise history and reality itself. When philosophy ceases to be challenging, and indeed frustrating, Adorno thinks that it has lost its purpose.[88] Like Nietzche, Adorno's philosophical task is doubly creation and destruction.[89] To make progress, Adorno says, we must tear down old forms of thought, and then tear them down again. But while this experimental approach makes plain its negative problematization of the modern whole, what I have been attempting to highlight is that it also not only invites positive revision, but fundamentally *turns* on it. Although Adorno doesn't think it is possible that moderns can live rightly in the present, I think that he does think we can, and in fact should, aim to live in a *future* where right living is not only possible, but normative. As I have claimed, we already know something negative about such a future, just by virtue of the badness which presently pervades modernity. That is, to truly live rightly, and not merely better, society as a whole must exemplify the absence of dialectics. Only then will an ethics of resistance no longer be required, and will autonomy become possible.[90] And it is here, I think, that Adorno presents a glimmer of real hope. For maybe when we start to realise that philosophy itself has a positive purpose, we can start to find common ground, to begin paving the way towards a better future, and ultimately towards a strong form of true right living. For Adorno, philosophy is, at least in part, the positive motivation which has the unbridled potential to inspire a negative utopia: "Critical thought alone, not thought's complacent agreement with itself, is what may help bring about [real] change."[91]

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[85] See for example, *AT* 9.
[86] *ND* 4.
[87] See for example: "In principle, philosophy can always go astray, which is the sole reason it can go forward" (*ND* 14).
[88] *ND* 23.
[89] Alex Thomson (2006). *Adorno: A Guide for the Perplexed.* Continuum: London, 5.
[90] *ND* 403.
[91] *CM* 122.

§ 4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have defended a constructive account of Adorno's practical philosophy. With the foregoing, I have recounted the main components of the No Right Living Thesis, explained what I think is its relationship to the political reconciliationist position, parried several common objections leveled at Adorno's position, and ultimately suggested that the No Right Living Thesis' negative normative implications actually have underlying positive value. I have suggested that such underlying positivity is derived from (1) the necessity of a postulate of positive freedom and unrealised teleological human good in comprehending the true nature of the modern social world, and (2) Adorno's implicit view that philosophy itself must have positive impetus in order for an ethics of negative resistance to be legitimate *imprimis*. This positivity reveals Adorno's guarded but poignant sentiment that, although moderns cannot live rightly in the present, they must do everything in their power to create a better future where right living is not only possible, but normative, and where dialectics and an ethics of resistance are therefore necessary no longer.

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