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Christian Skirke on Fabian Freyenhagen's "Adorno's Practical Philosophy"

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Skirke, C.

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Critique

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[FABIAN FREYENHAGEN | Adorno's Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly | Cambridge University Press 2013](#)

By Christian Skirke

Fabian Freyenhagen's masterful book, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, offers an exceptionally clear and philosophically rich defence of Adorno's perspective on ethics. I have great sympathies for Freyenhagen's project; and, given the depth and detail of his book, writing a critical review of it is an especially challenging and rewarding task.

In what follows, I want to take issue with two central aspects of Freyenhagen's defence of Adorno. First, he provides a metaethical argument which centrally involves the claim that Adorno's perspective on ethics is explanatory; it is in light of this claim that Adorno's perspective is said to amount to an ethical minimalism which provides us with better explanations than other views for the moral challenges we face under difficult historical circumstances. And Freyenhagen contends, second, that this ethical minimalism is best brought home, at the level of normative ethical theorising, as a negative Aristotelianism.

As to the first aspect, I agree with Freyenhagen that Adorno has an explanatory approach to ethics. Yet, in my view, what he explains is the modality of moral living under certain historical circumstances, that is, the impossibility of a good life, and thus he employs a wholly different type of explanation, one that cannot be cast in pragmatic terms of better or worse explanations; I believe that Freyenhagen does not get this modal concern into clear focus because he underplays the transcendental character of Adorno's approach. As to the second aspect, instead of ascribing metaethical purposes to Adorno, I believe it is more in keeping with Adorno's project in general, and with his modal concerns in particular, to characterise his ethical minimalism as a kind of moral phenomenology. I realise that both points of criticism are controversial, the second far more so than the first. However, it seems to me that it is reasonable to concede my first point; and I believe my second point is the best way further to substantiate the first point.

1. Preliminaries

Adorno's perspective is in need of a defence because he has often been criticised for his negativism about moral values and moral agency (e.g. Habermas 1987, more sympathetically Bernstein 2001). His negativism can be adumbrated as the thesis that historical circumstances, in particular those of his own time of living, can be such that it is impossible for us to appeal to moral goodness as a guideline for our concrete moral

agency. Emblematic for Adorno's negativism are aphoristic statements like "Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen" ("The wrong life cannot be lived rightly") (Adorno, MM ¶ 18), a statement that Freyenhagen calls the 'No Right Living Thesis', and mirrors in the subtitle of his book: *Living Less Wrongly*. This subtitle gives us a hint as to Freyenhagen's fundamental intentions: Adorno's perspective on ethics is defended most effectively as a kind of minimalism about ethics. In Freyenhagen's words:

In a social world without access to the good, even what we are entitled to say is reduced compared to a social world in which the good is realised and accessible—'better' can only be shorthand for 'less bad'; 'good' for 'avoidance of the worst'. (p. 214)

Despite these tight strictures on moral agency, however, Adorno still sees room for manoeuvre for moral agents. Although we cannot appeal to moral goodness for guidance, we can resist the wrong that surrounds us and puts us in question as moral agents, and in this sense maintain some rudimentary moral agency. Freyenhagen points out repeatedly that, for Adorno, moral uncertainty does not entail moral scepticism or fatalism because we, as moral agents, remain morally responsive to, and responsible for, our moral failures, even if we cannot prevent them from happening (p.168, *et passim*). In concrete terms, even compromised and damaged moral agents still feel an impulse against the wrong, against the suffering around them, because wrongdoing affects them in what they are—agents committed to realising the good (p. 247). Freyenhagen concludes by invoking human nature in this very broad sense, interpreting Adorno's minimalism about ethics as a negative twist on Aristotelianism. To put it somewhat simplistically, his claim is that it is in our second nature to suffer from badness, badness in the actions of others as well as in our own, so that we possess motivation to counteract it. And this negative Aristotelianism can be said to satisfy the requirement that we engage the wrong around us in a critical spirit:

[T]here is a way to reflect on the validity of individual impulses—not by hard and fast rules, not in an absolutely fool-proof way, but by looking at whether or not they would be part of the best explanation of our world and its ills. (pp. 250–1)

Exemplarity and prudential reasoning resonate with Adorno's general misgivings about conceptual overgeneralisation or, in his idiom, identity-thinking. This makes for a strong case in favour of negative Aristotelianism as a close approximation of Adorno's ethical minimalism.

Addressing the negativistic roots of Adorno's perspective on ethics clearly is the most challenging part of any defence of Adorno because these roots may be taken, and have been taken by many, to undermine this perspective in its entirety. Freyenhagen spends considerable effort and care on bringing these roots into view, and on spelling out what they entail for Adorno's account of moral agency. This can be taken to be the metaethical core of *Adorno's Practical Philosophy* (p. 11). The discussion here turns on what Freyenhagen calls Adorno's 'Problem of Normativity'. To present this problem summarily, as Adorno makes normative claims, he has to account for the normativity behind his

claims; such an account involves some (epistemic) reference to goodness; but Adorno claims that such a reference to goodness is impossible; therefore, Adorno can't justify normative claims; therefore, his own normative claims are untenable (p. 7). Freyenhagen then proposes a defence of Adorno's ethical minimalism by challenging the premise of Adorno's 'Problem of Normativity' that a normative account involve some (epistemic) reference to goodness (p.10).

I agree with this strategy; and I also agree with Freyenhagen that, normatively speaking, badness can stand on its own. Eschewing badness carries sufficient normative weight even if we lack any clues with respect to the good: "It seems superfluous to ask for a reason to avoid the bad; its badness is reason enough" (p. 211). As I hope to show in the next part of this critical note, however, the relative independence of badness from goodness is best articulated by way of Adorno's transcendental engagement with the modality of moral lives under difficult historical circumstances. With respect to Adorno's transcendentalism, I agree with Freyenhagen that, for Adorno, universality, necessity and apriority are not, as for Kant, fixed characteristics of cognition but have a historical dimension (p. 42). I also think, like him, that we can make sense of Adorno's cautionary remarks around identity thinking by interpreting them as requirements to be extremely scrupulous with our moral categorisations and to recognise that these categorisations are too coarse to capture decisive details about the moral challenges we encounter in the wrong life (p. 49). As I hope to show further below, however, this problem is best articulated by way of an argument about intentional experiences of these details and their fulfilment rather than by way of an argument about conceptual schemes and experiences that somehow elude them.

2. Normativity and Explanation

To bring my concerns into focus, I first want to discuss Freyenhagen's claim that, for Adorno, normative claims are explanatory. As I have noted above, I agree with this claim as such, but not with his argument for this claim.

Freyenhagen contends (correctly, I think) that Adorno rejects the fact-value distinction and considers normative claims to be explanatory claims at the same time (p. 6). An important philosophical motivation for this claim is Adorno's historical materialism according to which any theoretical activity reflects implicitly or explicitly what the problems of our times are. Critical Theory differs from most other theoretical activities in that it makes these problems philosophically explicit (cf. Horkheimer 1982:206-7). The intuitive picture of this approach is that, when analyzing the problems of our times, Critical Theory explains them structurally and, in so doing, states something normative. To take a classical example, speaking directly to the phenomenon, in addressing nineteenth and twentieth century industrial work relations, explaining how workers are situated in the whole of industrial labour in the same breath draws attention to their exploited and alienated existence. On this count, the description of nineteenth and twentieth century industrial work relations is inseparable from the normative indictment that condemns these relations as harmful.

In light of this intuitive picture, we could simply appeal to Adorno's historical materialist background assumptions about philosophical and other theorising in order to argue for the continuity of the normative with the explanatory. Freyenhagen, however, eventually takes the more difficult route of motivating the nexus between the normative and the explanatory through Adorno's opposition to discursive moral theorising (p. 204). Famously, Adorno traces moral claims back to impulses which blend into the nonconceptual, the somatic, the non-identical (e.g. Adorno, ND, p. 221). On his view, if we were to impose discursive requirements on these claims, the content of moral claims would be restricted to the cognitive, the conceptual, the general. Therefore, discursive requirements are inappropriate and indeed curb the scope and force of the moral demands under which we act (Adorno, MM, ¶ 46). Freyenhagen concludes that, as claims are unavoidably discursive, yet moral content is not, moral claims are carried to their conclusion, as it were, by explanations of their scope of application:

[...] while it might not be possible (or, indeed, necessary) to ground normativity, we can provide a general explanation of how anything can be normative to us and of what is normative and with what force. Such an explanation might play a clarifying or reassuring role for those who accept the normative practice or theory in question, although it might be unsuitable for convincing a sceptic of this normative practice or theory. (p. 201)

For example, on Adorno's theory there is no discursive normative ground to oppose oppression. There simply are many examples of circumstances and structures that are an impediment to a dignified life. We oppose these circumstances and structures because they are unbearable to us. This is not due to a general principle that asks everyone to oppose all unbearable circumstances and structures for the sake of our moral dignity. As Freyenhagen suggests, the normative demand that we oppose them goes hand in hand with a description of these particular circumstances and those particular structures.

A first critical observation to make at this point is that, contrary to the intuitive picture described above, Freyenhagen does not seem to view Adornian moral claims as integrally explanatory. Moral claims are part of ongoing moral practices so that, given his portrayal of these claims, it seems more accurate to say that the explanatory component enters the picture as a supplement to moral claims. Although moral claims are such that "their negative normativity is primitive in the sense that [...] they provide us with paradigmatic examples to orientate ourselves in other moral matters" (p. 199), they need a supplement because moral claims are normative claims without a positive normative basis for their justification. Explanation, as Freyenhagen describes it, allows us to settle questions about the scope and force of moral claims which are not sceptical questions from outside moral agency, but emerge from ongoing moral practices. On his picture, while agents within these ongoing practices also have some ongoing normative sense of their agency, they recognise that, due to the missing grounding for their norms and values, further illumination or encouragement is needed to understand why they pursue

and endorse certain courses of action and reject or disavow others. One might say that explanations provide agents with a context in which the norms and values to which they adhere can be enacted.

If we adopt this view, however, the explanation of, say, industrial relations is not itself normative and thus does not by itself tell us what is harmful about this configuration. What the explanation does in this case, for example, is to identify targets for moral indignation, for resistance and opposition—say, the government, the taxman, the factory owner. But if explanations “might play a clarifying or reassuring role for those who accept the normative practice or theory in question” (p. 201), as Freyenhagen puts it, the sense of harm which carries the normative force of moral agency is not part of the explanation. The explanation itself remains essentially factual without possessing any normative force of its own.

That Freyenhagen keeps the explanatory and normative dimension in relative separation from each other has an important consequence for his interpretation of the place of explanations in Adorno’s moral theory. This brings me to my second critical observation. On Freyenhagen’s reconstruction of what he calls Adorno’s “explanatory account of normativity” (p. 5), there are moral imperatives or values or motives, for example the impulse to oppose oppression, combined with *better* or *worse* supporting explanations. We may ask ourselves, for example, whether we should oppose oppression because we lack the means to buy a new car or because we lack the means to buy food for our children. Should we oppose oppression on the grounds of more or less clear-cut ideological identifications of our oppressors or because we see through the fact that we are implicated in structures of oppression in such a way that we also at times take the place of oppressors? In working out these explanations, the argument of *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy* runs, we shall be able, ideally, to point to the better supporting explanation and thus to a more precise guideline for our resistance to the wrongs of our situation. We can trust, in principle, that “the view in question is the best account (in terms of explanatory power) constructed so far” (p. 206). With respect to Adorno’s notion of the wrong life, Freyenhagen contends,

the standards in play in his critical theory [...] are a central part of an explanatory project which explains these ills, and they derive their validity and legitimacy from the success of this explanatory project. (p. 230)

Both passages suggest that Freyenhagen interprets explanation pragmatically. Norms, he says, have force because they have explanatory support; and they are supported well if these explanations are successful, that is, if they trump other explanations. But this pragmatism seems out of place in Adorno’s case. Of course, Critical Theory can fall short in a variety of ways and in this sense fail or succeed to give good explanations for the phenomena in question. But it looks unlikely that Adorno thought of Critical Theory as a competitor with other theories. To him, like Horkheimer, alternatives to Critical Theory simply get it wrong because they are not sufficiently reflective (cf. Horkheimer 1982:196–7). Consequently, it would be wrong to present Adorno’s ethical minimalism as

explanatorily superior to, say, Ayer's emotivism or Scheler's material value ethics (cf. Adorno, ND, p. 235). By the standards of Critical Theory, positivist or life-philosophical approaches do not simply have a less successful conception of our moral agency, but are blind to central problems of moral agency, and therefore are fundamentally misguided. Explanations in support of Adorno's moral exhortations not to join in or not to succumb to the illusion of leading a good life thus do not have the pragmatic status of a better explanation for the difficulties that moral agents encounter under current circumstances.

Yet we have seen that Adorno's perspective on ethics has an explanatory side. What we need to make sense of it is an alternative to Freyenhagen's pragmatist interpretation of explanation. I want to outline such an alternative by turning to the modality of impossibility which is so central to Adorno's perspective on goodness. I believe, more specifically, that Adorno's verdict about the impossibility of goodness has a transcendental character, in the sense that his verdict can be interpreted as an answer to the ethical question "How is a good life possible?". To see which role explanation plays in this context, also in relation to normativity, let me distinguish How-possible-questions about the good life from other, more common, kinds of questions about the good life.

Familiar ethical questions like "What is the good life?" ask for definitions or canonical examples that tell us, for instance, that temperance, solicitude, or courage are all part of a virtuous character who is in a position to realise the good life; or they give us a principle that, for instance, interdicts the instrumentalisation of others. But definitions and canonical examples are not explanations. To move closer to our concern, consider moral Why-questions. The question "Why is this a good life?" asks for the identification of causes, statistical data, or a nomological-deductive account to give content to the notion of a good life and in this way explain it. Empirical psychology serves this purpose as much as happiness polls. The question "How is the good life possible?", by contrast, asks us first to identify obstacles that render the good life impossible, and then to respond to this How-possible-question by indicating how these obstacles could be surmounted or dissolved, thus showing that what we ask for, the good life, is possible (cf. Cassam 2007). Specifying how to surmount or dissolve these obstacles means giving an explanation for how the good life is possible, despite concerns that make the good life look impossible. If we compare this explanation with deductive-nomological or causal explanations as well as statements of principle or of canonical features, we see that it is of a different explanatory order, a philosophical explanation if you will (I take the term from Nozick 1981). Philosophical explanations do not provide us with causes, values, or laws, but identify conditions that enable certain cognitive performances or certain kinds of agency which we may take for granted but cannot easily articulate.

So far, I have described the basic features of How-possible-questions and related responses on the optimistic assumption that the good life is possible. Adorno's negativism and minimalism clearly do not allow us to maintain this assumption. Generally, we can say that pessimistic answers to How-possible-questions keep obstacles in place and thus detail the impossibility of the item in question. Pessimistic responses to How-possible-questions offer an analysis of the obstacle, and state why the obstacle is

insurmountable. Adorno's ethical explorations of the modern condition can be understood in this way. If agents are tacitly complicit with, and deluded about, a context of agency that puts obstructions between them and the good life, they do not possess any means to achieve the good life. To explain obstacles at which moral agents must falter is to clarify why certain strictures on moral agency apply in a given context or situation or era so that the good life is impossible for moral agents. Clarifications of this kind tell moral agents, why their moral failures are unavoidable and what the significance of these failures is for them as moral agents. It is easy to see how explanation and normative indictment go together under this model. Societal and historical constellations undermine the very possibility of ethical goals. If we describe these constellations appropriately, we explain at the same time how they contribute to the impossibility of a moral life and thus render moral agency inherently, normatively, problematic.

Let me stress the transcendental element of Adorno's perspective on the good life. We have seen that the How-possible model ordinarily (optimistically) explains means by which, and conditions under which, obstacles to the possibility of something can be put aside. These conditions are not causal, nor necessary and sufficient, but enabling. Adorno may be said to adopt a similar approach: he takes societal configurations or historical processes to embody enabling conditions for moral agency, with the pessimistic twist on the ordinary (optimistic) model that the conditions we find ourselves in under current socio-historical circumstances are not enabling for moral agency. Therefore, moral agency remains stagnant in the mode of impossibility.

To conclude this section, let me summarise how my alternative contrasts with the account of explanation in *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*. According to Freyenhagen, explanations delineate the span and strength of ongoing normative practices. They explain why we have to act under certain requirements or motivations such as Adorno's recommendation not to join in, or to be mindful of, inevitable moral dilemmas. Thus they have a bearing on normative claims, yet this bearing is indirect in the sense that normative claims are the object of explanation that stands separately from the explanation so that there can be better or worse explanations for it. Freyenhagen concludes in this spirit that the best explanation for Adorno's recommendation is a negative Aristotelian account which turns on the vulnerability of human nature. On my alternative, explanations detail the impossibility of the good life, and thus the impossibility of endorsing positive moral values or norms. By that token, explanations have normative content of their own. Given insurmountable obstacles between us and the good life, these explanations tell us that the means that we currently have available to us in order to attain the good life are deeply compromised. Thus they tell us immediately that we, as moral agents, have a very limited moral repertory, cannot assume that we succeed in acting morally when we deploy it, and thus cannot endorse our moral agency in a simple straightforward manner. Consequently, these are not better or worse explanations but explanations that simultaneously make normative statements about our agency in the wrong life.

3. Phenomenological Content and Reflection

A central topic in Adorno's ethical minimalism is the impulse that agents have against wrongdoing. This impulse is closely entwined with Adorno's thesis about the non-identical, content that defies conceptualisation because it cannot be subsumed under general concepts. The wrongs of the world manifest themselves most clearly, for Adorno, where practices, people, communities, lifestyles or value sets are endangered and marginalised because they do not conform to generalisable categories or principles and for that reason are non-identical. Conversely, the impulse against the wrong life is at the same time an impulse to protect what falls outside general categories or principles, that is, to protect the non-identical.

The notion of an impulse is connected to Adorno's broader ideas about experience. He opposes the conceptualist claim that all proper experiences are such that we can bring them under concepts. What lies outside the purview of concepts, however, are not simply raw empirical data. Rather, these are recalcitrant experiential contents that we can capture, as Adorno says prominently in *Negative Dialectics*, by turning the concepts and categories, which we still are bound to use, against their limitations (Adorno, ND, p. 24). This is the background against which Freyenhagen draws attention to distinctive experiential approximations of the non-identical, which occur, for example, when children find a whole universe of meaning in something particular and idiosyncratic, wholly outside received patterns of representation, approximations that Adorno privileges as metaphysical or philosophical experiences (p. 48). Adorno circumscribes these experiences as experiences of "as if" fulfilment (Adorno, ND, pp. 366–8).

One way of detailing these experiences is to trace them back to the German Idealist background of Adorno's philosophy and to think of them as a species of reflective judgement that for systematic reasons fails to attain generality. If we follow this line, what draws our attention to recalcitrant experiences are certain conceptual failures or lapses. This is Freyenhagen's view, by and large, when he characterises reflection on recalcitrant experiences as a fallible "balancing act" (p. 50). It seems to me, however, that this angle on the non-identical, and recalcitrant experiences of it, is too much under the influence, still, of the (Kantian, Hegelian) conceptualism that Adorno rejects. On this view, Adorno inverts the prefix of (Kantian, Hegelian) conceptualism, as it were, and ends up with complicated self-contradictory conceptual gestures at the non-identical. This picture may strike us as recognisable, for Adorno himself repeatedly stresses the antinomic nature of his own conceptual efforts (Adorno, ND, p. 103, *et passim*). But complicated self-contradictory conceptual gestures tell us less about recalcitrant experiences than what Adorno appears to be able to say about them, for instance when he talks about the childhood experiences that I have mentioned above, like in his image of a lazy afternoon, drifting on the water, without a worry (Adorno, MM, ¶ 100). Therefore, I want to suggest another account of recalcitrant experiences, which may seem counterintuitive at first. I am going to rely on two notions in particular, first, Adorno's notion that recalcitrant experiences are "as if" fulfilled, and second, Adorno's notion that critical reflection on recalcitrant experiences takes the form of *Selbstbesinnung*, self-reflection that makes its experiential roots perspicuous to itself. My

contention is that these notions are best understood phenomenologically. Understanding them in this way, I hope, will bring into view the phenomenal aspects of recalcitrant experiences, and thus give us a more direct picture of our exposure to the non-identical.

Phenomenology emphasises the pre-reflective and pre-conceptual character of experience. Basic intentional experiences are undivided intuitive and meaning-bearing acts of consciousness, yet are not conceptually articulated. Phenomenology then proposes descriptive accounts of these experiences which involve, among other things, a special kind of reflection. Phenomenological reflection on basic intentional experiences is distinctive because, contrary to higher-order reflection, it does not objectify basic experiences. Instead, it draws attention to structures of subjectivity that enable these experiences while subjects live through them. Phenomenological reflection describes how perceptions or thoughts strike us, for example, how something we see looks to us, how something we undertake moves us, in the wider context of our conscious life. By articulating what the literature calls the phenomenal character of intentional experience, reflection of this kind tells us something about enabling structures of subjectivity, personhood, or agency (cf. Siewert 1998).

Adorno famously criticises phenomenology as an instance of identity-thinking because intentional experiences are immediate, owed to immutable features of transcendental subjectivity, and thus do not seem to be open to critical reflection. However, his criticisms are biased; phenomenological consciousness broadly conceived is not Kantian; nor are intentional objects sense manifolds. Especially in the later Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenological subject turns out embodied and situated historically in a world. Taking this into account, phenomenological reflection on intentional experiences, 'experiencing experiencing' in Husserl's parlance (Husserl 1977:134) brings out how subjects experience, phenomenally speaking, their experiences, and such differential experiences include a sense of one's integrated agency. In other words, reflection on the phenomenal character of our experiences brings out how our position in the world, the circumstances of our embodied agency, affect us as agents prior to conceptualisation, identification, or essentialisation. Therefore, first, phenomenological reflection can be expected to include recalcitrant experiences such as those that make up our agentic impulse against wrongdoing. Second, phenomenological reflection brings in view our agency as a whole, and thus also brings in view tensions within our agency. As I want to make plausible in the following paragraphs, in light of Adorno's perspective, these tensions reflect the modality of our agency, namely that the good life is impossible for us.

Fulfilment is a basic phenomenological concept which is fundamental to the phenomenological conception of truth. According to Husserl, it describes the relation between two intentional acts that are directed at the same intentional object *X*. These acts may be different in character—for the sake of simplicity, say, a perceptual act and a meaning-bearing act both directed at *X*; one act presents *X* as perceived while the other anticipates *X* as meant. In the case of fulfilment, these two acts are congruent in jointly presenting *X* both as perceived and as meant. That is, their congruence, and effectively

the point of origin of an experience of fulfilment, is noëmatic in the first place, and in this sense objective, but does not of necessity extend to *X* in the truly objective sense that Adorno calls the “preponderance of the object” over the subject (Adorno, ND, pp. 184–5). Truth, by contrast, is a fulfilment experience where we are struck by the perfectly congruent focus of all relevant experiences which includes *X* in the truly objective sense (Husserl 2001, VI, ¶ 39). Fulfilment thus admits of degrees and leaves room for error.

My contention is that Adorno adopts this conception of fulfilment when he talks about recalcitrant experiences “so wäre man im Erfüllten, als ob es wäre” (“one would be in the fulfilled as if it existed”) (Adorno, ND, p. 366). In light of the Husserlian picture above, we may say that, in cases of “as if” fulfilment, we are struck by the perfect alignment of everything noëmatically speaking. Yet we are either naive or rash about its fit, or rather mismatch, with how things are truly objectively. We have a fulfilment experience because our acts directed at the *X* that we perceive or mean are congruent in the *X* as perceived and as meant. But this specific congruence on *X*, looked at critically, could be owed to a structural delusion, given how things stand truly objectively, and given that how they stand truly objectively can differ from how things stand in light of the noëmatic correlates of our intentions. For agency that is not yet mature, as in the childhood experiences Adorno mentions in these contexts, the noëmatic and truly objective side of fulfilment do not yet come apart; and this may be said to be adequate to an agency that is not yet mature and critical. Phenomenologically speaking, we could say that something about this kind of agency is bracketed or suspended blamelessly that cannot remain bracketed or suspended blamelessly in the mature perspective. Therefore, fulfilment experiences of this kind may be said to give mature moral agents a glimpse of the good life “as if” it was possible. In the moral context of the wrong life, then, where our full agency is deferred due to our socio-historical situation, fulfilment experiences of the good life “as if” it existed exhaust our insight into the good life. This insight bypasses the patterns of identity thinking that are characteristic of the wrong life because, while the fulfilment experience is undeniable, it also reflects its deficiency, namely the fact that what is truly objective about our situation—for instance the destruction of human life forms that have been marginalised—remains bracketed so that genuine fulfilment is denied to us. Contrary to agents who are not yet mature, mature and critical agents have to be aware, in light of available explanations for the impossibility of the good life, that what is truly objective can come apart from the suspended, correlative objectivity of perfect noëmatic alignment.

This brings me to the second aspect, *Selbstbesinnung*, which I have circumscribed as a kind of self-reflection that makes its experiential roots perspicuous to itself.

Phenomenological reflection, which I have sketched above, seems to me a suitable example of *Selbstbesinnung* because it looks at the phenomenal character of our feelings, perceptions, intentions and thoughts, how they feel to us, look to us, sound to us, strike us. I have emphasised that phenomenological reflection differs from higher-order reflection in that the latter objectifies the basic experiences *on* which it reflects from a bird’s eye perspective; rather, phenomenological reflection reflects *with* the basic

intentional experience while the subject lives through the basic experience (the contrast between “reflecting on” and “reflecting with” is borrowed from Dretske 1981), and in this sense brings out enabling structures of subjectivity, personhood or agency.

Adorno’s case of “as if” fulfilment can be interpreted along these lines. Phenomenological reflection brings out that, in the context of our moral agency, we have striking fulfilment experiences; yet these experiences also testify to blockages in our agency due to which we fail problematically to realise the good life beyond the suspended objectivity that the noëmatic correlates of our “as if” fulfilled intentions possess. In testifying to this blockage, “as if” fulfilment allows us to experience obstacles due to which the good life is impossible. *Selbstbesinnung* on the phenomenal character of these experiences makes us see that, as moral agents, wrongdoing strikes us as insufferable; and there is something primary, pre-conceptual, to this impulse against wrongdoing. Yet *Selbstbesinnung* on “as if” fulfilment also tells us that, despite acting on our impulse against wrongdoing, we fail to meet the challenge of making the good life come true for ourselves and others. It is in this way that the phenomenological layer of “as if” fulfilment experiences tells us immediately that we are exposed to the impossibility of living our life as a good life. So the transcendental claim that the good life is impossible given our socio-historical circumstances has concrete phenomenological contents. These contents consists in the phenomenal character, or the differential aspects, of our compromised, dilemma-prone, agency. As I have tried to suggest by borrowing from Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, these differential aspects become explicit, and subject to criticism, upon a specific kind of reflection that has to be distinguished clearly from a higher-order perspective on first-order intentions, desires, or beliefs. We may thus ascribe the view to Adorno that, if we reflect in the appropriate way, we realise that our moral intentions, though part of an integral experience, lack fulfilment in the sense that whatever we do, we cannot under current circumstances realise something fully morally good, and as moral agents are struck by this impossibility because it is in immediate conflict with our impulse against wrongdoing.

4. Conclusion

To summarise, I have suggested that giving full reign to the transcendental aspect of Adorno’s perspective on ethics provides us with an account of explanation that directly addresses the modality of our moral lives, as Adorno sees it. This explanation, a philosophical explanation, details the impossibility of the good life, and thus does not compete, first, with approaches that articulate, in explanatory perspective or otherwise, in which sense or by which means the good life is possible; nor does it compete, secondly, with approaches that adduce causes, regularities, principles, definitions, or canonical examples to state what the good life is or to state why something counts as the good life. Explanation in this transcendental sense does not explain our moral agency better than, say, Humean moral psychology, Kantian deontology, consequentialism or virtue ethics, but addresses its enabling conditions.

If this is convincing, 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—the question that leads Freyenhagen to attribute a negative Aristotelianism to Adorno. If we offer explanations to the effect that the good life is impossible, we simultaneously make normative statements that whatever residual moral agency is left for us is morally problematic and cannot be fully endorsed by agents. Rather than a transition from metaethics to normative ethical theorising, this kind of explanation asks for substantiation in the realm of experience. I have suggested that it is a moral phenomenology that allows Adorno to make recalcitrant experiences relevant to moral agency because it respects the pre-conceptual level of the phenomena in question; on reflection, recalcitrant experiences come out in how the impossibility of the good life strikes us as moral agents. This has implications for how the theoretical ambition of Adorno's ethical minimalism should be described. By bringing in view our impulse against wrongdoing and thus an immanent tension within moral agency in a current setting, Adorno provides us with a phenomenological preface to more common moral theorising. Rather than giving us a metaethical framework that can be fleshed out by integrating his negativism in broadly familiar normative ethical paradigms, Adorno may be said to detail concrete experiences of the impossibility of a moral life by attending to the phenomenology of the wrong life.

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*Christian Skirke is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. His work concentrates on metaphysical and moral topics in phenomenology, existentialism, and Adorno and Critical Theory. He has published in, among other places, **Inquiry**, **Southern Journal of Philosophy**, **Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung** and **Philosophy and Social Criticism**. His latest paper, published in **European Journal of Philosophy**, is on Ernst Tugendhat's alternative existential conception of truth. In the context of the current discussion, Skirke's article 'Metaphysical Experience and Constitutive Error in Adorno's "Meditations on Metaphysics", which appeared in **Inquiry**, is recommended.*

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