

2008 SYMPOSIUM BOOK AWARD WINNER

**ETHICAL TURNS: ADORNO DEFENDED
AGAINST HIS DEVOTEES¹**

Lambert Zuidervaart (Institute for Christian Studies and University of
Toronto)

This essay examines the nexus of politics and ethics in Theodor W. Adorno's thought. First, the essay takes issue with emphatic ethical readings of Adorno that overlook both the societal reach and the inherent limitations to his politics. These limitations arise from his neglecting questions of collective agency and societal normativity. Then, the essay shows that such neglect creates problems for Adorno's moral philosophy. It concludes by suggesting that to do justice to the insights in Adorno's thought a democratic politics of global transformation is required.

¹ Much of this paper derives from Chapter 6, "Ethical Turns" in Lambert Zuidervaart, *Social Philosophy after Adorno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 155–81.

“Wrong Life Cannot Be Lived Rightly”²

Student activists in the 1960s who had absorbed Adorno’s critique of “the administered world” became impatient with his apparent lack of political alternatives. They asked, in effect, “What is to be done?” According to Adorno’s social philosophy, however, V. I. Lenin’s famous question can no longer be posed in the same way. That is one of the sobering lessons to be retained by a social philosophy after Adorno. Yet, the question will not disappear so long as one thinks that society as a whole needs to be transformed.

When Adorno said that wrong life cannot be lived rightly he did not mean that relatively good actions and dispositions are impossible. His point, instead, was that no individual is immune from the corrupting power of a “false society.” Further, any attempt to reflect critically on contemporary political or moral prospects must take into account the societal mediation of each individual’s life. *Minima Moralia*, Adorno’s own “reflections from damaged life,” begins with the following self-admonition: “[One] who wishes to know [*erfahren*] the truth about life in its immediacy must scrutinize its estranged form, the objective powers

² Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (1951), (tr.) E. F. N. Jephcott (London: NLB, 1974), §18, p. 39; *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben, Gesammelte Schriften* 4, 2d ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), p. 43. Hereafter referred to as MM. Citations of Adorno’s works listed in both English and German use abbreviations derived from the English title. Reference is given first to the English translation and then to the German original, thus: ND 153/156. Frequently, translations are emended. Dates immediately after titles indicate when the German originals were first published. The sentence in German reads: “*Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen.*” “*Richtiges Leben*” alludes to the primary topic of *Minima Moralia*, whose title parodies the Aristotelian *Magna Moralia*. Adorno describes the subject matter of his “melancholy science” as “the teaching of the good life” (*die Lehre vom richtigen Leben*) (MM 15/13). The phrase “melancholy science” (*traurige Wissenschaft*), in turn, inverts the title of Nietzsche’s book *The Gay Science* (*Fröhliche Wissenschaft*). For reasons to translate Adorno’s “*richtiges Leben*” as “good life” rather than “right living,” see the translator’s note to Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, “Adorno’s Negative Moral Philosophy” in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, (ed.) Tom Huhn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 349, n. 1. On the title and topics of Adorno’s book see Raymond Geuss, *Outside Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 235–7.

that determine individual existence even in its most hidden recesses.” (MM 15/13) Given such societal mediation, which Adorno links with the consumptive pressures of late capitalist production,³ even the once revolutionary question “What is to be done?” can take on ideological functions. As he would put it when he criticised student “actionism” (*Aktionismus*) in the 1960s: “[I]f praxis obscures its own present impossibility with the opiate of collectivity, it becomes in its turn ideology. There is a sure sign of this: the question ‘what is to be done?’ as an automatic reflex to every critical thought before it is fully expressed, let alone comprehended. Nowhere is the obscurantism of the latest hostility to theory so flagrant.”⁴

Paradoxically, sensitivity to such ideological potential, combined with the practical disappointments of the New Left, has directed anti-Habermasian critical theorists away from the societal to the ethical. Increasingly, the reception of Adorno’s radical social critique has slipped into an ethical turn. There are notable exceptions, of course. Fredric Jameson, for example, heroically christened Adorno’s unusual Marxism “a dialectical model for the 1990s.”⁵ Nevertheless, many attempts to reclaim Adorno from the Habermasians, when not defending and elaborating his aesthetics, turn his social philosophy into an ethics of “damaged life.” The retrieval of Adorno’s insights threatens to become a jargon of ethicality.

In fact, one could view the reception of Adorno’s social philosophy among subsequent critical theorists as a series of ethical turns. First,

³ “What the philosophers once knew as life has become the sphere of private existence and now of mere consumption, dragged along as an appendage of the process of material production, without autonomy or substance of its own.” MM 15/13

⁴ Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis” (1969) in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (1963, 1969), (tr.) H. W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 276; *Gesammelte Schriften* 10.2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 779. Hereafter cited as CM. Similar claims, less polemically expressed, occur in the first lecture (7 May 1963) of Adorno’s *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 1–11; *Probleme der Moralphilosophie*, (ed.) T. Schröder, (tr.) R. Livingstone (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 1–11; *Probleme der Moralphilosophie*, (ed.) T. Schröder (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), 9–23. Hereafter cited as PMP.

⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), 251.

there occurs a turn toward discourse ethics, led by Jürgen Habermas, Albrecht Wellmer, and their colleagues and students. Then anti-Habermasians such as Drucilla Cornell and J. M. Bernstein return to Adorno for an emphatic ethics of the nonidentical. Simultaneously, and with varying degrees of sympathy for both Habermasian discourse ethics and Adornian emphatic ethics, authors such as Seyla Benhabib and Axel Honneth attempt to retrieve those elements of a Hegelian social ethics that seem to have gone missing in both Adorno and Habermas. On matters ethical and political, my own critical retrieval of Adorno's social philosophy aligns more closely with this third ethical turn than with the other two.

This essay examines the nexus of politics and ethics in Adorno's thought. First, I take issue with emphatic ethical readings of Adorno that overlook both the societal reach and the inherent limitations to his politics. The limitations arise from his neglecting questions of collective agency and societal normativity. I then show that such neglect creates problems for Adorno's own moral philosophy. I conclude by suggesting that, to do justice to the insights in Adorno's social philosophy, a democratic politics of global transformation is required.

Adorno's Politics

Recent reconsiderations of Adorno's politics tend to turn it into an apolitical ethics. This occurs in one of two ways, either by valorising Adorno's insistence on the autonomy of authentic art and critical thought or by celebrating a stance of enlightened individual resistance. Whereas the first reduces Adorno's politics to an ethics of high culture, the second reduces it to an ethics of personal integrity. Russell Berman and Espen Hammer, for example, argue correctly that Adorno was not the apolitical aesthete that his left-wing critics once made him out to be. What these authors mean by Adorno's "politics," however, comes to little more than maintaining a stance of cultural autonomy or personal integrity. This reduction of Adorno's politics to a type of cultural or personal ethics misses some crucial insights in Adorno's social philosophy, and it fails to address the political problems in his aesthetics.

Russell Berman locates the core of Adorno's politics in his life-long insistence, against pressures from both the right and the left, on the autonomy "of art, of theory, and the individual."⁶ I think Berman's interpretation is consistent with Adorno's reluctance to urge political courses of action other than "democratic pedagogy," even when he identified social structures that engender fascist tendencies.⁷ Yet, it is hard to see how such insistence on cultural autonomy would have much purchase on the state or in political public spheres. If Adorno's politics comes down to urging and enacting a high-cultural change in consciousness, this would not be negligible in itself. Yet, it would be quite limited in scope, and inadequate too, given both the complexity of contemporary societies and the radicalness of Adorno's own critique.

The tendency to reduce politics to ethics is even more pronounced in Espen Hammer's book *Adorno and the Political*. Hammer says Adorno's politics consists in "ethically informed, micro-interruptive operations" that are "models of responsible exercise of autonomy" in purportedly democratic societies. Acknowledging that Adorno endorses the temporary migration of politics into theory and art, Hammer asks whether such an "ethics of resistance" can be conceived in a coherent fashion.⁸ He concludes that Adorno's "strategically elitist stress on disruption from culturally privileged standpoints" is unhelpful for addressing "any *collective* political project." Nevertheless, Hammer praises the Adornian ethic as an effective counterweight to liberal and Habermasian attempts to restrict politics to "the management of social positivity" and "consensually enforced administration."⁹

⁶ Russell Berman, "Adorno's Politics" in *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, (eds.) Nigel Gibson and Andrew Rubin (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 123.

⁷ A particularly striking example of this occurs in the essay "Education after Auschwitz" (1967), CM 191–204/674–90, where Adorno states: "Since the possibility of changing the objective—namely societal and political—conditions [that incubate such events] is extremely limited today, attempts to work against the repetition of Auschwitz are necessarily restricted to the subjective dimension. By this I also mean essentially the psychology of people who do such things" (CM 192/675–6). Berman comments on this essay in "Adorno's Politics," 124–6.

⁸ Espen Hammer, *Adorno and the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 8, 25.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 178–80.

By taking this approach Hammer avoids a number of political questions. To say that Adorno's elitism is merely "strategic" is to avoid asking whether it is politically legitimate. To say that it is unhelpful for *collective* political projects is problematically to presuppose that some genuinely political projects are *not* collective.¹⁰ To pit Adorno's "negativism" against liberal and Habermasian "positivism" is to ignore normative issues concerning the state and political public spheres. All of these potential objections point in the same direction: Hammer has turned Adorno's politics into a type of personal ethics. When, contra Jameson, he declares Marxism not essential to Adorno's political thought, Hammer states: "At the core of [Adorno's] vision of politics lies...an ethics of resistance—a readiness to think and act such that the space of the political is liberated from the grasp of identity."¹¹ This summary of Hammer's interpretation encapsulates its problems. For it is unclear what liberating the political from the grasp of identity could possibly mean. It is also doubtful whether Adorno, who opposed the illegitimate imposition of identity, not identity as such, would recognise this as his vision.

Hammer's formulations raise a number of issues for a critical retrieval of Adorno's insights, not least of which is the relation between ethics and politics. While Hammer is surely right that isolating the ethical from the political distorts "what politics can be,"¹² it is also a mistake, both in theory and in practice, to reduce the political to the ethical. Although Adorno does not make this mistake, Hammer does. Consequently he misses both crucial potential and intractable problems in Adorno's politics.

To begin, one needs to distinguish Adorno's actual political interventions both from compatible political orientations and from his theory concerning the political domain. Hammer tends to elide these dis-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 163–6, where a favorable comparison is made between Stanley Cavell and Adorno. Hammer says that both Cavell and Adorno regard "conformism and prejudice" as "the supreme threats to democracy," and that both oppose "any account of universality that presupposes an impersonal and pre-given...structure that unites the community and enables the philosopher to speak representatively." (165) My own discussion in *Social Philosophy after Adorno* suggests that to apply these descriptions to Adorno would require so many qualifications as to render them inapplicable.

¹¹ Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, 179.

¹² *Ibid.*, 158.

tinctions, stating first that “Adorno never developed anything like a theory of politics” and then claiming that “[t]he validity of Adorno’s approach to politics cannot be separated from the ‘success’ of each of his critical interventions.”¹³ There is something odd about this elision. As Hammer recognises, Adorno holds that under current conditions critical theory is itself the best form of political practice. If this theory has little to say about “representative government, international relations, legitimate forms of dissent, and so on,”¹⁴ or if what it says is demonstrably inadequate, then on Adorno’s own terms that would pose a *political* problem, precisely by being a *theoretical* deficit. Adorno’s critical interventions might well be admirable—I think that they were—but at the same time reflect a deficient understanding of the political domain. If they do, then to celebrate his interventions as exemplars for an “ethics of resistance” would be to turn a political problem into an apolitical solution.

Unlike Hammer, I take Marxism to be central to Adorno’s politics in all three senses: central to his political theory, his political vision, and his actual interventions. Unlike Jameson, however, I think the centrality of Marxism generates oversights as well as insights. It is well known that the Marxist tradition, especially as it came to Adorno via Lukács, is weak in the area of political theory. This is the case because for significant strands of Marxism the state and political public spheres are not legitimate in their own right; rather, they are instruments of class struggle whose necessity would largely disappear under post-capitalist conditions. This stance ignores normative issues concerning public justice under current conditions. Friedrich Pollock’s theory of state capitalism, to which Adorno partially subscribed, simply exacerbates a problematic tendency in the Marxist tradition.

While understandable in the context of Adorno’s Marxism, then, his failure to develop a political theory in the standard sense is a problem, and what he did develop is a poor substitute. That is one reason why I find Adorno’s account of autonomy more troublesome than Berman and Hammer do. By pitting the individual artwork or theorist or moral agent against society as a whole, Adorno overlooks the collective practices and institutions without which no authentic artwork or critical

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1, 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

theory or moral stance is possible. Adorno's account of autonomy lacks actual collectivity, even as it presupposes a strong normativity that it cannot articulate. This is so both because Adorno does not allow for non-economic filters between the economy and culture and because he restricts the psychological mechanisms of healthy ego formation to the internalisation of paternal authority.¹⁵ Such an approach holds limited promise for either theorising or strategising with respect to political public spheres, which are inherently collective, and which make little sense apart from articulable norms of both process and content.

The standard defense of Adorno at this point is to recall the radicalness of his social critique: it is so radical that it must question all existing forms of collectivity and normativity. This cannot be correct, however, for Adorno does not in fact question all existing forms of collectivity and normativity. Nor can the project of radical critique get off the ground if all such forms are considered ineffective or denied. This is a central insight in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*.¹⁶ Indeed, to take up the topics of collectivity and normativity requires a return to aspects of Hegelian political thought that Adorno, like Marx before him, finds problematic. Nor would this be unwarranted insofar as Adorno is more Hegelian than either his Habermasian or anti-Habermasian successors in Critical Theory: Adorno's social critique neither excises the idea of reconciliation nor gives up the category of totality. Adorno's lecture "*Wozu noch Philosophie*" puts it like this: "Praxis, whose purpose is to produce a...mature humanity, remains under the spell of disaster unless it has a theory that can think the totality in its untruth.... [T]his theory...must incorporate societal and political reality and its dynamic" (CM 14/470). Under pressure from his account of late capitalism as an "exchange society," however, Adorno gives up a Hegelian understanding of society as an *articulated* totality whose internal differentiation has normative implications.

¹⁵ See Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, (tr.) K. Baynes (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 80–92, and Jessica Benjamin, "The End of Internalization: Adorno's Social Psychology" in *Telos*, n. 32 (Summer 1977), 42–64.

¹⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, (ed.) Allen W. Wood, (tr.) H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

In *Social Philosophy after Adorno* I address four questions in order to reclaim the insights in Adorno's Critical Theory: (1) On what basis can there be hope for a fundamental transformation of society as a whole? (2) How can the experience that impels Adorno's radical critique of late capitalist society become available for public discussion and debate? (3) What type of societal transformation is needed in light of Adorno's critique? (4) How viable are the structures of civil society and the public sphere that such a transformation would require? Politically, all of these questions point to a need to rearticulate both the collective and the normative dimensions of Adorno's social philosophy. If this is not done, the disappointments of left-wing politics, together with transgressive individualism—a perennial fashion—, will channel Adorno's contributions into a postmodern "politics" that, while pretending to be progressive, loses all connection with the Marxian core to Adorno's radical critique.

My own attempt to rearticulate Adorno's social philosophy points instead to a democratic politics of global transformation.¹⁷ Such a politics calls for an interdisciplinary, historically-informed, and normative theory of globalisation; an understanding of, and commitment to, political, economic, and cultural democracy; attention to societal processes of differentiation and integration that are both structural and normative; and the development of a global ethic within a global civil society secured by a not-for-profit economy. Although resistance to economic domination and exploitation remains as crucial in such a politics as it was for Adorno's Critical Theory, high culture and autonomous individuals are no longer the privileged preserve of this resistance. Both the forces of resistance and the configuration of society turn out to be more collective in character and more normative in orientation than an Adornian politics would admit.

¹⁷ See especially Section 6.2 ("Social Ethics and Global Politics") in Zuidervaart, *Social Philosophy after Adorno*, 162–75.

Adorno's Moral Dialectic

Ethical Lacuna

Adorno scholars who regard ethics as his version of “first philosophy” (*prima philosophia*) might well object to my emphasis on collectivity and normativity in a democratic politics of global transformation.¹⁸ Manuel Knoll, for example, argues that Adorno’s “moral perspective” has primacy for his social theory, and that this perspective turns on the themes of injustice and suffering as well as justice and happiness (*Glück*). In fact, Knoll says a “materialist and utopian hedonistic ethic” forms the core of Adorno’s social thought.¹⁹ An interpretation along these lines could fault my articulation of a global politics for ignoring Adorno’s vigorous critique of existing forms of collectivity and his acute insights into contemporary dilemmas of normativity.

¹⁸ The description “first philosophy” derives from Manuel Knoll, *Theodor W. Adorno: Ethik als erste Philosophie* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2002). Knoll’s Introduction (7–27) summarises much of the German literature on Adorno’s moral philosophy, including Mirko Wischke, *Kritik der Ethik des Gehorsams: Zum Moralproblem bei Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993); Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, *Ethik nach Auschwitz: Adornos negative Moralphilosophie* (Hamburg: Argument-Verlag, 1993); Gerhard Schweppenhäuser and Mirko Wischke (eds.) *Impuls und Negativität: Ethik und Ästhetik bei Adorno* (Hamburg: Argument-Verlag, 1995); Ulrich Kohlmann, *Dialektik der Moral: Untersuchungen zur Moralphilosophie Adornos* (Lüneburg: zu Klampen, 1997). In addition to Espen Hammer’s *Adorno and the Political* and Raymond Geuss’s *Outside Ethics*, representative books in English on this topic include Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit* (New York: Routledge, 1992) and J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁹ Knoll, 19–20. By insisting on the primacy of ethics for Adorno’s social philosophy, political theory, epistemology, and aesthetics, Knoll takes issue with two other lines of interpretation: those who consider aesthetics to be Adorno’s “first philosophy” (Wolfgang Iser, Gerhard Kaiser, Jürgen Habermas, and Rüdiger Bubner), and those who interpret Adorno as primarily a religious or theological thinker (Mirko Wischke, Ulrich Kohlmann, and Helga Gripp). See Knoll, 22–4. Knoll does not discuss the substantial study by Hent de Vries, which was published in German in 1989 and has recently appeared in a revised English edition as *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas*, (tr.) G. Hale (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

Adorno himself touches on these issues in the 1963 lectures published posthumously as *Problems of Moral Philosophy*. There he identifies “the central problem of moral philosophy” as “the relationship of the...particular human being and the universal that stands opposed to it.” On the one hand, he says, contingent and “psychologically isolated” individuals can scarcely achieve “anything like freedom.” On the other hand, “the abstract norm” is such that “living human beings” cannot “appropriate it for themselves in a living way.” Both sides are “impossibilities,” and the task of moral philosophy is to think through both impossibilities in search of possible solutions. (PMP 18–9/33–5) On the one hand, Adorno assumes that “the substantial nature of custom, the possibility of the good life in the forms in which the community exists...has been radically eroded, that these forms have ceased to exist and that people today can no longer rely on them.” (PMP 10/22) It is precisely for this reason that he prefers the term “morality” (*Moralität*) to “ethics” (*Sittlichkeit*) and follows Kant more than Hegel in his own moral philosophy. On the other hand, Adorno’s thesis of the societal mediation of all individuals and their conduct makes him a harsh critic of an individualistic “ethics of authenticity,” to borrow a phrase from Charles Taylor.²⁰ Since “moral and immoral conduct is always a social phenomenon,” Adorno says, “it makes absolutely no sense to talk about...moral conduct separately from relations of human beings to each other, and an individual who exists purely for himself [or herself] is an empty abstraction.” (PMP 19/34–5) Nevertheless, despite Adorno’s critique of abstract individualism, an emphasis on collective normativity would seem problematic for his “negative moral philosophy”²¹ or, better, for his metacritique of

²⁰ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). See Adorno, PMP 10–11/22–3, 13–5/26–8. In fact, Adorno criticises all the standard moral philosophies. A formal Kantian ethics of conviction relies on intentions that either cannot be actualised or lead to disastrous consequences. A more substantive Hegelian ethics of responsibility presupposes a good social fabric and endorses the status quo. Nor would Nietzschean reevaluation or Aristotelian virtue ethics fare any better. See Fabian Freyenhagen, “Moral Philosophy” in *Theodor Adorno: Key Concepts*, (ed.) Deborah Cook (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008), 99–114.

²¹ See Schweppenhäuser, “Adorno’s Negative Moral Philosophy.”

moral philosophy.²² Whether one calls it a first philosophy or a last one, as Adorno preferred,²³ and whether one regards its primary topic to be ethics or morality, as Adorno also preferred, his reflections from damaged life seem incompatible with a transformative global politics.

If one's aim were simply to restate and defend Adorno's claims, such an objection would be irrefutable, despite the hermeneutical deficiency of any effort to reduce Adorno's social and political thought to a type of ethics. My aim is different, however, and on questions of collectivity and normativity I find Adorno's thought both theoretically inadequate and politically problematic. That is why, like Johann Sebastian Bach during the 1950 bicentennial of his death, Adorno needs to be defended against his devotees. My critical retrieval of Adorno's social philosophy does not ignore his insights. As a critique of contemporary society that shows why both standard moral philosophies and customary ethical stances are inadequate "after Auschwitz," his social philosophy is unsurpassed. Even his reasons for questioning the slogan "What is to be done?" retain their relevance under contemporary conditions of globalisation. Yet, as Adorno said concerning Bach, to do justice today to the truth content of Adorno's work one must go beyond merely interpreting it. One must take up the work of "composing." One needs to construct a

²² This description is suggested by the subtitle to the chapter or model on "Freedom" in *Negative Dialectics*: "On the Metacritique of Practical Reason" in *Negative Dialectics* (1966), (tr.) E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973)/*Negative Dialektik, Gesammelte Schriften* 6 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 211/211. Hereafter cited as ND. Adorno also uses the term "metacritique" in the title to his book on Husserlian phenomenology, cited in the next note, which has the misleading English translation *Against Epistemology*.

²³ "This is not a time for first philosophy, but for a last." Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique: Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies* (1956), (tr.) W. Domingo (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), 40; *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie: Studien über Husserl und die phänomenologischen Antinomien, Gesammelte Schriften* 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 47; translation modified. The sentence quoted concludes an Introduction that criticises every form of *prima philosophia*. This makes all the more puzzling attempts by later commentators to style Adorno's ethics as his own "first philosophy."

social philosophy that “is loyal to him in being disloyal,” that “[does justice to his truth content] in producing it anew.”²⁴

What I find missing in Adorno’s thought—what in fact he deliberately resists—is anything like a social ethics. Nor does the ethical turn among many Adornian critical theorists address this lacuna. In fact, their emphatic ethics misses something that *is* in Adorno’s thought, namely, a dialectical affirmation of what I call societal principles. Against those who would regard the universal as inherently oppressive and would “attribute all the good to the individual,” Adorno posits that “the universal always contains an implicit claim to represent a moral society in which force and compulsion have ceased to play any role.” (PMP 18/34) This position seems to imply that societal principles such as justice and solidarity have a positive role to play both in society and in individual lives. Yet, Adorno lacks an adequate account either of how the individual is constituted within multiple collectivities, and not simply within society as a whole, or of how such principles become effective in existing societies, and do not merely represent what Derrida calls justice that “is yet to come.”²⁵

²⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, “Bach Defended against His Devotees” (1951), in *Prisms*, (tr.) Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 146; “*Bach gegen seine Liebhaber verteidigt*” (1951), in *Prismen* (1955), *Gesammelte Schriften 10.1*, (ed.) Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), 151. I have modified the translation of the last clause. In German it reads: “*und seinen Gehalt beim Namen ruft, indem es ihn aus sich heraus nochmals erzeugt.*” The translation renders the German term “*Gehalt*” as “music” and renders “*beim Namen ruft*” as “calls by name,” as follows: “and calls his music by name in producing it anew.” In the essay and elsewhere Adorno uses “*Gehalt*” to indicate the import or substance or truth content of Bach’s music. The phrase “*beim Namen rufen*” is a German idiom for which the equivalent English idiom is “to do justice to”—hence my re-translation in square brackets. For an alternative translation and a discussion of the historical context to Adorno’s essay, see James R. Gaines, *Evening in the Palace of Reason: Bach Meets Frederick the Great in the Age of Enlightenment* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 268–71.

²⁵ “Justice remains, is yet, to come, *à venir*, it has an, it is *à-venir*, the very dimension of events irreducibly to come. It will always have it, this *à-venir*, and always has.” Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’” in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, (eds.) Drucilla Cornell, Michael Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3–67; quotation from page 27.

Gerhard Schweppenhäuser touches on this lack when he contrasts Adorno's moral philosophy with the "postmodern ethics" of Zygmunt Bauman. Schweppenhäuser claims that, unlike Adorno, Bauman fails to give an "*immanent* critique of modernity," problematically equates "philosophical universalism and imperialism," and thereby "negates moral-philosophical universalism abstractly."²⁶ By locating "the ultimate moral authority...in the individual's moral intuition,"²⁷ Bauman ends up in an abstract individualism not unlike the ethics of authenticity that Adorno sharply criticised in the 1960s. Yet, Adorno does not offer an adequate alternative, according to Schweppenhäuser: "The problem in Adorno's case is...that he gives no theory of universalism but merely indications of its immanent dialectic."²⁸ Schweppenhäuser detects this problem in Adorno's refusal to provide a grounding or justification (*Begründung*) for the "new categorical imperative" that Adorno presents.

A New Categorical Imperative

Reflecting on Adorno's refusal to offer justification will help illuminate a lack not only in his moral philosophy but also in his politics. In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno proposes "a new categorical imperative," namely, that human beings so "arrange their thought and action that Auschwitz would not repeat itself, [that] nothing similar would happen." Anticipating the objections of philosophers for whom argumentation trumps experience even in the face of unspeakable suffering, Adorno adds: "This imperative is as resistant to justification [*Begründung*] as the givenness of the Kantian [categorical imperative] once was." (ND 365/358)²⁹ A discursive treatment of the new imperative would be an "outrage" (*Frevel*), he says, violating not a human principle or divine law but the moment of ethical excess (*das Moment des Hinzutretenden am Sittlichen*) that the imperative lets one feel corporeally. The corporeal feeling is an abhorrence of

²⁶ Schweppenhäuser, "Adorno's Negative Moral Philosophy", 339, 341, 347.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 340.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 347.

²⁹ Adorno's essay "Education after Auschwitz" (1967) opens in a similar way: "The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again. Its priority before any other requirement is such that I believe I need not and should not justify it.... To justify it would be monstrous in the face of the monstrosity that took place." CM 191/674

physical pain, an abhorrence-become-practical toward the unbearable physical pain to which individuals are exposed. Morality survives, he says, in this “materialistic motive.” (ND 365/358)

Despite the necessity for Adorno to be provocative, which I acknowledge, and despite the crucial insights contained in this passage, his formulation of a “new categorical imperative” is problematic. It is problematic both in its refusal to offer justification and in its avoiding a significant political question. Now, I realise how difficult it is to say this, and how questionable it is for me to say this. To say that Adorno’s formulation is problematic seems immediately to violate the moment of ethical excess that the formulation is supposed to let one feel, thereby dishonoring the victims of Nazi genocide. Moreover, for me to say this seems to put me in a position of ethical superiority that I have neither the right nor the intention to claim. Yet, Adorno himself acknowledges that truth claims made in the articulation of philosophical experience must enter contexts of justification. And his understandable reluctance to justify the claim that after Auschwitz everyone ought to prevent its recurrence does not keep him from giving an implicit justification. Implicitly, he argues that systematically inflicting physical pain on human beings is always abhorrent and that the societal conditions fostering and supporting such abhorrent conduct must be resisted and changed.

But Adorno casts this justification in the form of saying the new imperative, which he has formulated, lets one *feel* abhorrence despite the false consolations of post-Auschwitz culture. That manner of justification is problematic in two respects. First, it ignores the fact that abhorrence, although it is a corporeal feeling, is itself culturally informed and ethically inflected, such that psychopaths and sociopaths may seldom feel it. Second, his implicit justification does not say why this feeling should have precedence over other feelings that also arise when people confront extreme suffering, such as anger, hatred, fear, despair, or compassion. Not even in circumstances of torture and cruelty does suffering speak for itself, at least not with respect to those who are not themselves the victims of torture and cruelty.

There is a political problem here as well. If we are indeed *morally* obligated to arrange our thoughts and actions in such a way that nothing similar to Auschwitz will happen again, then the question must arise whether this arrangement is possible and, if so, what it would be like. The question must arise because of a standard, albeit contested, assump-

tion of moral philosophy since Kant that “ought implies can.” Adorno shares this assumption when, for example, he poses the dilemma of how to judge the actions of those who perpetrated Nazi war crimes. A similar dilemma arises today in the zero-sum politics of terrorism and state-sponsored counter-terrorism.

Many of the Nazi perpetrators were either so psychologically damaged or externally coerced that they could not act upon their own moral judgments, if they had them. Yet, their actions cried out for public justice. Moreover, the only way belatedly to bring about a measure of public justice itself seemed coercive. Adorno writes: “Here the latest stage of the moral dialectic comes to a head: acquittal would be a barefaced injustice, but a just reparation would be infected with the principle of brute force, and humanity [*Humanität*] is nothing but resistance to that” (ND 286/282). I would simply note that for this to be a “moral dialectic,” the perpetrators must be considered morally and legally accountable. And to consider them accountable, we must assume with Adorno, and contrary to apparent fact, that they were able to act differently than they in fact did. In other words, “ought” implies “can.”

But this assumption holds with respect to Adorno’s new categorical imperative as well. We would only be morally obligated to prevent the repetition of Auschwitz if in fact we can. What would give us this ability? I find inadequate Adorno’s appeal to a “materialistic motive”—the abhorrence of physical pain or, as he puts it elsewhere, “the feeling of solidarity with what Brecht called ‘tormentable bodies.’” (ND 286/281) His appeal is inadequate because the arrangements needed to prevent a repetition of Auschwitz go far beyond anything one individual or group or country can achieve. If ought implies can, then positing the new categorical imperative must assume that the necessary arrangements can in fact be achieved. This implies, in turn, that contemporary society is not the godforsaken desert Adorno paints in his bleaker moments. Otherwise, the new categorical imperative would confront us with a massive moral gap not unlike the one my former colleague John Hare has identified in Kantian ethics.³⁰

³⁰ John E. Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God’s Assistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

From Resistance to Transformation

If we take seriously Adorno's new categorical imperative; if, indeed, we understand the moral dilemmas to which he points, then we should recover from Adornian neglect those moral sources and political agencies that would enable people to resist societal evil. Although not sufficient in themselves for individuals to "live rightly," such sources and agencies would at least keep people in touch with that within their lives and societies that is good. A social philosophy after Adorno requires the articulation of normative "universals" that are not abstract—societal principles such as justice and solidarity whose meaning neither floats in a modern heaven nor sinks into a postmodern morass but emerges historically "through clashes between societies and within them."³¹ Also required is the realisation that personal ethics and public morality are not enough, that neither resistant individuals nor steely imperatives will close multiple gaps between the historically emergent principles to which we aspire and the current arrangement of social institutions and cultural practices. To close the gaps will require concerted political efforts that, in transforming society, also reweave from within the fabric of our lives. To succeed, such a politics will need hues from the best colours available in the traditions that continue to sustain ethical communities around the world. The politics of transformation will need the rainbow of a truly global social ethic.

That is why, as theory, vision, and practice, Adorno's politics should not be reduced to a personal ethics of resistance. Rather, his ethics of resistance should be rearticulated within a democratic politics of global transformation. As Adorno once said, albeit with a different intent, "the quest for the good life is the quest for the right form of politics, if indeed such a right form of politics lay within the realm of what can be achieved today." (PMP 176/262) I am less skeptical than he about the possibility of an ethically attuned global politics.

Such a politics would recognise collective agency, legitimate differentiation, and articulable norms. It would not abandon Adorno's emphasis on suffering and hope. Neither would it ignore the societal evil

³¹ Lambert Zuidervaart, *Artistic Truth: Aesthetics, Discourse, and Imaginative Disclosure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 97.

identified by his critique of domination. Nor would it forget the need to fashion critical and utopian perspectives, perspectives that, in Adorno's words, "displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light." To gain such perspectives without violence is both "the simplest of all things," says Adorno, and "utterly impossible." (MM §153, 247/283) I have suggested instead that doing so is far from simple, yet also not impossible. To insist that autonomous art and critical theory do not have the sole prerogative for fashioning the perspectives needed, and to show why gaining these perspectives without violence is not utterly impossible—those are the challenges facing a social philosophy after Adorno.

lambertz@icscanada.edu