

Adorno's Critical Moral Philosophy

Throughout Theodor Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* moral philosophy is discussed only indirectly, as a subject which is relevant to the more primary discussions of freedom and world history, among others. In the relatively recently released English translation of the *History and Freedom* lectures, however, moral philosophy is more explicitly discussed, but even there its subject matter is of secondary importance to the more fundamental discussions of the philosophy of history and of freedom. In fact, that moral philosophy is an auxiliary concern in these lectures reveals much about how Adorno views moral philosophy. Perhaps a trivial detail but revealing nonetheless, the lecture entitled 'Transition to Moral Philosophy' points to something quite essential about Adorno's moral philosophy. In this lecture Adorno attempts to show that his previous discussions of the philosophy of history have direct bearing on the concept of freedom. He claims that his task is to articulate "what we [can glean]...about the problem of freedom, from the discussions of the philosophy of history" (*HF*, 177). Adorno rightfully believes that freedom, the ability to act (in some way) without being determined to do so, is a precondition of one's actions being considered on moral grounds, of one being held morally accountable for such actions. Surely, therefore, it is appropriate that a transition takes place from discussing freedom to discussing moral philosophy. There is something else going on here, however, that reveals the peculiar nature of Adorno's moral philosophy. The above quote reveals that the philosophy of history conditions the problem of freedom, and therefore moral philosophy for Adorno. The following attempts to show how Adorno's moral philosophy is situated within his more foundational considerations of the philosophy of history and of freedom. As a result of it being so situated it also attempts to argue that the *History and Freedom* lectures reveal that the task for moral philosophy is the critique of moral philosophy

To reiterate, Adorno claims there are things we can 'glean' "about the problem of freedom, from the discussions of the philosophy of history" (*HF*, 177). In his early lectures on history in *History and Freedom* he states "history is possible only as the philosophy of history" (*HF*, 10). Here he is taken to mean that "every objective historical tendency...what people immediately experience when they find themselves caught up in a maelstrom of the so-called great historical epochs" (*HF*, 10) is only capable of being so experienced if conceived as consisting of a dialectic between the universal world spirit and the particular. Indeed for Adorno history *is* such a dialectic and therefore his discussion of freedom, and therefore of morality, takes place within "one specific problem of history, namely the relation between the universal, the universal tendency, and the particular, that is, the individual" (*HF*, 11). Indeed it is important to keep in mind that for Adorno the nature of this relation is not one problem

among many, but *the* problem of history and therefore the most important problem which has direct bearing on freedom and morality.

About the context within which freedom must be considered Adorno states “we cannot speak of a freedom of the species or a freedom of society unless it means the freedom of individuals in that society” (*HF*, 179). For Adorno, as he discusses in the *History and Freedom* lectures (See pg. 192, for example), there is no such thing as ‘inner’ freedom in the sense in which the bourgeois writers of the seventeenth century meant it, i.e. freedom which is said to exist in humanity’s ‘nature’, regardless of the external conditions which may impede the exercise of such freedom. Adorno thinks that “we need to be aware that the idea of freedom as something purely individual is itself an abstraction from the *contexts* in which we find ourselves as living, social individual beings; and in the absence of these contexts, freedom has no meaning at all” (*HF*, 178, emphasis mine). These ‘contexts’ wherein we are ‘living’ and ‘social’ human beings are where Adorno’s discussions of the philosophy of history and the dialectic operative between the universal and particular are relevant to his discussion of freedom. For indeed Adorno is ultimately articulating the contexts within which individuals are said to be free or determined, as well as how and if individuals can be free within such contexts. Given the moral determination of an action depends upon whether or not it was freely exercised, it will be essential to articulate the form freedom takes within such contexts and more importantly the nature of these contexts in order to capture Adorno’s particular conception of moral philosophy.

As is evident from the above, there are two ‘contexts’ within which Adorno claims individuals find themselves capable of performing free acts or of being determined. He refers to human beings as both ‘natural’ and ‘social’ beings which, although perhaps not intended to be used in such a way, is a useful way to categorize the two ‘contexts’ of the individual.

As Adorno notes, theorizing on freedom arose relatively late in the history of thought, i.e. in the seventeenth-century “in connection with the emancipation of the bourgeoisie” (*HF*, 193). Adorno claims that the bourgeoisie had a “narcissistic” (*HF*, 209) interest in “freedom from the restrictions and dependencies that the feudal system

had imposed” (*HF*, 194) on them. Accordingly, this theorizing attempted to ground freedom in humanity’s “own nature, that is to say, in man’s nature as subject” (*HF*, 194). For Adorno, however, man’s nature as subject is only one of two somewhat distinct but related contexts where freedom is possible: the inner or ‘natural’ context of the human as subject, and the outer context of the human and society. It should be made clear, however, that what is being referred to as the ‘inner’ context, which Adorno articulates, is quite different from the one the bourgeois writers of the seventeenth-century discussed in that Adorno believes even the individual’s inner nature is not independent of social construction.

As is clear in the above quotation, freedom for Adorno cannot be considered externally from society; freedom of the individual, inner freedom, is always freedom of the individual *in* society. Nonetheless, for Adorno the nature of the individual as a ‘natural’ being, aside from yet not wholly independent of society’s influence by any means, must have a certain characterization. This ‘natural’ context is therefore a precondition for freedom in society in the sense that such a characterization is *required* if freedom in context of the individual’s relation to society is to be both possible and understandable¹. It will be appropriate, therefore, to briefly discuss this ‘natural’ context before the more essential ‘social’ context is articulated.

Contrasting his with Kant’s philosophy of freedom, Adorno claims that inner freedom is not to be found solely within the subject’s rationality or consciousness. For Adorno “both the elements that are needed if freedom is to make its appearance, in other words both reason *and* impulse, are mutually interdependent.” (*HF*, 238). What is being referred to here as ‘inner’ freedom is freedom of the ‘natural’ human being, of the individual considered as both a rational *and* empirical being (in contrast to Kant). As ‘natural’ human beings Adorno insists that we are not solely an individual consciousness or rationality separate from all external reality, but that we are at once “both somatic and mental” beings (*HF*, 235). In order for freedom to be possible the individual’s consciousness must not only be capable of affecting external reality, but it must in a sense

¹ ‘Understandable’ is included here not only to denote the reader’s understanding, but also to refer to the necessity Adorno places on individuals understanding themselves and the character of their own freedom if they are to escape the problems associated with such ‘contexts’.

be external reality already. In contrast with Kant whose radical separation of consciousness from reality ultimately makes the gap he creates between the two unbridgeable, Adorno is advancing that in order for freedom to be possible the individual must already be an intertwinement of the categories of reason and nature which Kant separates.

Rather than characterizing a free act as one which “glide[s] along the surface of the chain of causality” (*HF*, 229), an act which is constituted by the bridging of the gap between consciousness and external reality, the intervening of the former on the latter, Adorno claims that consciousness and external reality are intertwined. Indeed he claims that consciousness was formed out of the instinct for self-preservation and, as motivated by instinct, it must contain connections to the deterministic empirical world. Therefore consciousness is already ‘part of’ the empirical world in such a way and only as such is a free act possible for Adorno. This is essential in that it is what the nature of the human being must be if it is to have the potential to be free in society. It is the individual’s ‘social’ context, however, which is the most important for the possibility of freedom for Adorno. If freedom is ultimately only possible in society, then the individual social ‘context’, its relation to society is of the utmost importance for freedom and morality.

For Adorno, the human being is “intertwined with...both the sphere of experience coming from outside and the impulses that arise within the individual” (*HF*, 192). Departing from Kant whose “gulf between inner and outer” (*HF*, 231) as set up in the third antinomy opposes consciousness to both internal and external nature, Adorno is attempting to redefine the individual’s relation to both kinds of nature. As stated above, Adorno’s discussion of freedom arises within the context of the relation between universal and particular. The relation which is the most relevant to freedom is, as mentioned, the individual’s relation to the universal historical tendency. The above ‘inner’ precondition for freedom is the relation which must exist between the subject and its own internal nature if freedom is to be possible for Adorno. On the other hand, this ‘social’ relation between the individual and society is the relation which exists between the subject, the particular, and society as embodying of the universal historical tendency.

Throughout *Negative Dialectics* and *History and Freedom* Adorno insists that

individuals have largely “fallen under the thumb of the universal” (*HF*, 235) to the extent that he believes individuals themselves have become ‘bits of ideology’. In such a context where the individual is almost identical to the universal, freedom is radically affected. Adorno believes that even when we experience ourselves as acting freely, at best we may be doing what the universal has conditioned us to do and at worst we are perpetuating the conditions which result in our being under society’s ‘thumb’.

Adorno states that “[t]he difficulties...connected with the concept of freedom ultimately represent something like an interiorization or sublimation of that very real conflict between the doctrines of freedom and conformity in bourgeois society itself” (*HF*, 212). The individual’s freedom in relation to society is affected by the fact that the individual seems to be a reflection of society yet is still said to be an individual; a truly free act is just as hard to detect as is an individual who is not mirroring society. Adorno’s cites as an example of the conflicting demands society places on the individual, and which effect the nature of freedom, the way in which the dominant American ideology insists that individuals obey their superiors at the same time as assert their rugged individualism (see *HF*, 212). Adorno claims American ideology *demand*s that individuals exercise their individuality. It is precisely this context of being ‘demanded’, that one is ‘forced’ to exercise freedom (essentially a contradiction of terms) which the individual faces, is therefore influenced by, and may in part become. Indeed we have already seen here how the individual’s freedom is affected by the conflicting demands society places on it in virtue of its embodiment of a ‘bad’ universal historical tendency.

Due to the fact that the individual is so determined by the universal, as stated above, freedom has a dubious nature where, for Adorno, the individual can be said to be both free and unfree at the same time. Again, Adorno constantly emphasizes that even when we experience ourselves as free we cannot know for sure whether or not what we are doing is not in some sense influenced by the universal acting both ‘over and through our heads’. Just as Adorno argued that the bourgeois insistence on inner freedom was narcissistic and that it masks the degree to which we are actually free in reality, here too the subject narcissistically experiences itself as free when such an experience may only blind the subject from realizing its own unfreedom.

From the above it can be seen that the individual's own individuality is deeply affected by society. Adorno claims that, in relation to the way in which the individual is at odds with society, the fact that "these two are never reconciled, is essential to moral philosophy" (*HF*, 264). If Adorno believes the individual is both free and unfree, that it is often unclear whether or the individual is freely acting within its 'social' context, surely the degree to which "the object of the moral, namely action" (*HF*, 240) is a free one is directly related. Indeed it seems that it is of essential importance to moral philosophy since a free action is the precondition for judging such an action on moral ground and ascribing moral responsibility for such an action.

The title of the final lecture of *History and Freedom* is appropriately entitled 'Moral Uncertainties' in virtue of the consequences Adorno's analysis of freedom has for moral philosophy. In virtue of the fact that we are said to be both free and unfree at the same time, that our freedom is unclear, the moral character of our actions is equally unclear. Indeed Adorno comes to the conclusion that morality is uncertain: due to the fact that we cannot always tell the way in which we are under the thumb of the universal, just as we can never be sure that our actions are free, we can also never be sure that our actions are not perpetuating an immoral state of affairs. Indeed this is the way in which Adorno's moral philosophy is intimately related to his reflections on the philosophy of history. In that he sees that the relationship between the particular individual and the universal historical tendency is of such a nature that it is unclear whether or not the individual's actions are 'under the thumb of the universal'; the problematic nature of the universal (here meaning the economic, social, and cultural structure of society in the present historical epoch) makes it such that it is very likely that the universal perpetuates its problematic nature through the individual which represents and is indeed a part of it.

From what has been said above it may be obvious that Adorno's moral philosophy does not provide "a guide to the good life" or "present a supreme principle of morality from which a full blown system of obligations and permissions" (Freyenhagen) is derived like much traditional moral philosophy. Indeed, as was mentioned at the start, moral philosophy is only given secondary consideration. Moral philosophy for Adorno is deeply interwoven within other, what could be called, more primary considerations, and therefore the present task for such a subject can be expected to depend on it being so

interwoven.

There are some, however, like J.M. Bernstein who take the fact that Adorno's thought is "infused with a stringent and commanding ethical intensity" (Bernstein, xi) to mean that it is possible "to construct or reconstruct...a philosophical ethics" (Bernstein, xi) from within his writings. Bernstein's *Disenchantment and Ethics* is therefore an attempt to articulate the "ethical vision" which he feels drives Adorno's work, "to disentangle and elaborate the always presupposed ethical contours of his thought" (Bernstein, 2) which, as Bernstein seems to acknowledge, are never explicitly presented but indeed only 'presupposed'.

To be sure, many 'problems of moral philosophy' were addressed by Adorno, but as illustrated above they are often addressed only indirectly. That Bernstein feels one can "reconstruct an Adornian philosophical ethics" (Tassone, 251) from the latent ethical bent of his writings is interesting but it seems that, as illustrated above, Adorno is redefining the context within which moral² philosophy takes place. Indeed Adorno's engagement with and critique of Kant largely have to do with the problems Adorno sees in the structure of traditional moral philosophy itself where 'guides to the good life' or 'supreme ethical principles' are provided (Kant's categorical imperative being an archetype of such moral philosophy). It therefore seems that if one is to address the moral dimension of Adorno's thought it must be done very cautiously in light of the context within which moral philosophy takes place for him, and which the *History and Freedom* lectures make explicit.

Bernstein partially avoids misinterpreting Adorno in this manner by acknowledging the ethical dimension of Adorno's thought is 'presupposed' rather than explicitly argued for and that he is embarking on a 'construction' of it. It is questionable, however, whether or not even such a 'construction' or articulation of what is presupposed does not in itself risk assuming that Adorno believes in a traditional context of morality of the kind Adorno would like to avoid; that in locating a 'latent' philosophical ethics in

² Although ethics and moral philosophy will be somewhat equated in the following it should be noted that there is of course a difference in the meaning of each. Gerhard Shweppenhauser gives an excellent distinction in his 'Adorno's Negative Moral Philosophy', p. 331 ff. but due to it being an unnecessary consideration for the present purpose its reiteration will be avoided.

Adorno's thought Bernstein does not consider that Adorno is arguing for a particular context for moral philosophy to take place in. This question is only raised here rather than answered in order to avoid a discussion worthy of attention on its own. There are various other interpretations of Adorno's moral philosophy however. Evaluating such interpretations in light of the context within which morality takes place for him, as described above, will help to articulate the task Adorno sees for moral philosophy as a result.

Giuseppe Tassone in his "Amoral Adorno: Negative Dialectics Outside Ethics", as the title suggest, advances a somewhat opposite position to Bernstein in that he feels "only a moral dialectic, but no moral theory" (Tassone, 253) can be derived from the particular dialectic which Adorno argues exists between individual and society. Tassone seems to more faithfully acknowledge, therefore, that Adorno's moral philosophy is situated within a particular context of universal and particular. He acknowledges that Adorno's is different from moral philosophy's traditional character:

"far from pointing to the teaching of what a right conduct ought to be, practices such as love, marriage, and dwelling constantly belie the premises on which they are grounded, distilling illusions rather than moral certainties, and then suppressing their fallacy so as to make them appear as though they were true."(Tassone, 256)

Tassone seems to share the interpretation offered above that, related to the individual's narcissistic insistence on the existence of its own freedom, the individual is constantly blind to, and indeed mistakenly regards as true or good, what the foundations of his/her seemingly moral actions are. That the universal constantly perpetuates itself both in and through the heads of particular individuals means that, even though an individual may think its actions are moral, they may in fact not be, and indeed for Adorno they commonly are not. Tassone does not, therefore, think Adorno has what he calls "an autonomous domain of morality" (Tassone, 259), but rather that Adorno's moral considerations take place "within the total framework of philosophy of history" (Tassone, 259).

Tassone goes on to say, however, that in virtue of moral philosophy's intertwinement with the philosophy of history "[i]t is the task of ideology critique...and

not of ethics” (Tassone, 263), therefore, to address the current problems once relegated to moral philosophy. Tassone claims that “the recovery of an ethical dimension in Adorno’s thought is incompatible with Adorno’s projects of radical transformation of society” (Tassone, 260) since what is needed is not ethics but ideology critique which can carry out this project.

Tassone’s rejection of the ethical dimension of Adorno’s thought therefore leads him to disregard or at least trivialize the moral theorizing he claims is in connection with Adorno’s philosophy of history. Although it may be true that moral philosophy can no longer do what it could traditionally, and that ideology critique is what is needed to accomplish this now, this does not mean moral philosophy has no function what so ever for Adorno. Indeed it is *because* moral philosophy is intimately connected with the philosophy of history and freedom that its function has changed. Although its traditional function or task is gone, it is very possible that it needs redefinition, which is precisely what Adorno seems to be doing. Tassone therefore too quickly ignores, or at least is not considering, the possibility that there is a task for moral philosophy in Adorno eyes, just that it is different from its traditional one.

For Drucilla Cornell the task of moral philosophy for Adorno is not “to spell out...behavioural norms which, once determined, can be translated into a system of rules” (Cornell, 13) in the same spirit as the establishing of a supreme principle of morality from which recommendations for actions or inaction can be derived. This kind of moral philosophy is, as Freyenhagen notes, clearly Kant’s conception. Indeed, given Adorno’s extensive critique of Kant’s moral philosophy on this very point, surely this cannot be Adorno’s conception of moral philosophy. Cornell argues that Adorno focuses on what she terms the ‘ethical relation’ which “focuses instead on the kind of person one must become in order to develop a nonviolative relationship with the other” (Cornell, 13).

Cornell acknowledges that Adorno’s redefinition of the dialectic operative between universal and particular must not be ignored for to do so would be “to miss its ethical aspiration” (Cornell, 15). Again this ethical aspiration, Cornell believes, is the redefinition of a “nonviolative relationship to the other” (Cornell, 23). However, given that Cornell takes this to mean that Adorno is arguing that the individual must become a

certain type of being, that Adorno is making a prescriptive claim in this regard, may be a stretched interpretation.

Surely Adorno's discussion of the relation between the universal and the particular is both a discussion of each, the universal and the particular, as well as their relation. However, if anything, Adorno is defining the nature of the particular individual under present conditions where, as stated above, it is 'under the thumb of the universal'. Cornell seems to think that a positive picture of what a reconciled dialectic would look like can be found in Adorno's thought in her attempt to articulate a prescriptive ethics. But Adorno is far from fully articulating what this reconciled state would look like, but rather only states that such reconciliation is still possible and simply suggest what things *might* look like if things were reconciled. Cornell therefore may be taking what she claims to be the ethical aspirations of Adorno's dialectic a bit too far, although she does rightfully situate Adorno's moral philosophy strongly within the context of his philosophy of history.

There is an alternative interpretation of what Adorno thinks is the 'task' of moral philosophy, however, which is more consistent with his philosophy of history and his discussion of freedom which the *History and Freedom* lectures point to. Fabian Freyenhagen claims that, for Adorno, "moral philosophy today should consist mainly in the critique of moral philosophy" (Freyenhagen). As we have seen above, morally right or wrong actions are largely uncertain for Adorno given their intertwinement with the present state of the dialectic operative between individual and society. This results in any action being potentially bad without our being aware. In a rather insightful reading, Freyenhagen claims that just as Adorno is uncertain above the moral nature of actions, "then scepticism about moral theorizing" (Freyenhagen) is the next step to take. Indeed if it is true that, in virtue of our intertwinement with and subjection to the universal history tendency, the actions of individuals are implicated in the nature of a bad universal, then surely so is our thought. Indeed one could say that the positive practical guidance that Adorno seems to stay away from, as discussed above, is due to the fact that he realizes that even any practical guidance, dictated by thought, risks being effected by a bad universal.

Christoph Menke agrees with Freyenhagen in that he believes “[f]or Adorno, morality is one of the cultural practices at which...critique is aimed, precisely because *it* damages the right life of individuals” (Menke, 310). Indeed this is entirely consistent with Freyenhagen in that it presupposes that moral theorizing is itself affected by the universal in the same way moral action is. Menke continues: “the false life only knows false representations of the right one, or, more precisely, ‘false’ culture develops only pictures or models of life which make it impossible for individuals to lead a right life any longer” (Menke, 309). Moral philosophy, therefore, as long as it exists within the context of individuals living under the thumb of the bad universal is itself at risk of perpetuating that universal in the same way actions are. Moral philosophy is therefore no longer capable of performing its traditional task of guiding the lives of individuals.

For Menke, Adorno is advancing the position that morality can only be ‘realized’ “through its transcendence” (Menke, 321). As stated above, moral philosophy can no longer exist nor can it perform its traditional task. If “the condition of a culture determines if and how we can acquire an appropriate understanding of the right life” (Menke, 309), then moral philosophy cannot presently do this but can only hope to exist, can only be ‘realized’, if it ‘transcends’ or becomes something different and better than what it once was. Menke claims that Adorno therefore aims his criticism at culture “for not providing the models nor expounding the capabilities which allow individuals simply to achieve an appropriate *idea* of the accomplishment of their individual existence”(Menke, 309). It is possible that Tassone was right in that the task for individual’s now is to critique ideology. But this task seems to be able to take place from the standpoint of moral philosophy since what is criticized is the economic, social, and cultural ideology as embodied by moral philosophy itself. Indeed, because such a critique’s aim is to redeem the potential saving power of moral philosophy, to make people aware of how they may or may not perform moral action, this critique takes place from the standpoint of moral philosophy.

The above quotation from Menke illustrates the severity of the state of the individual’s relation to society. Regardless of the fact that our actions largely cannot escape being determined by the universal in a way which perpetuates its problematic nature, even philosophical theorizing, what is supposed to be capable of escaping all

determination in virtue of its ability to abstract, is at risk of only furthering the problematic context the individual finds itself in. Indeed this places further emphasis on the urgency Adorno sees in the need to self-reflect, to be ‘aware’ of the way in which even thought, highly critical philosophical thought, is not innocent in a context of guilt. The *History and Freedom* lectures make clear that moral philosophy for Adorno ought to be situated within his discussion of the philosophy of history and of freedom, and that its task needs to be redefined as a result of it being so situated. The possibility of a better state of affairs is not possible “by thinking...it calls, rather, for self-reflection in thinking” (ND, 233). If moral philosophy is to be of any help in alleviating our situation, moral philosophy, for Adorno, essentially consists of transparent reflection on moral philosophy itself. Moral philosophy becomes critique when under the thumb of the bad universal.

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