

# **A whole lot of misery: Adorno's negative Aristotelianism**

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To read Adorno as a negativist Aristotelian was always going to be controversial. It is, thus, unsurprising that the common critical concern running through the three reviews assembled here is the Aristotelianism I ascribe to Adorno. I am immensely grateful for these generous and thoughtful contributions, and in what follows I will try to do justice to the concerns they raise. I focus on the ascription of Aristotelianism as the major concern (section I), but I also discuss related and wider comments, regarding immanent critique (section II), negativism (section III), the role of social theory in Adorno's work (section IV), and the danger of being co-opted (section V). Elsewhere, I have clarified the structure of the book and the aims of the different parts of it, and readers of this current reply might find it helpful to consult this other text first.<sup>1</sup>

## *I: Aristotelianism*

In *Adorno's Practical Philosophy* (APP), I argue that an Aristotelian conception of normativity is operative in Adorno's theory. I do not claim that it is made explicit in his writings, but rather that we can unearth it from them, and that doing so is the best way to make sense of what he does say.

Before entering into the details, let me flag up something about the strategy I employ in replying to my critics' worries about Aristotelianism and about ascribing it to Adorno. I will repeatedly argue that what my critics present as Aristotelianism misdescribes it, and that the actual view held by Aristotelians (whether those traditionally understood as such or Adorno) does not suffer from the drawbacks my critics allege. Importantly, this is not a terminological

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<sup>1</sup> Freyenhagen 2016.

disagreement. While I think that it is most apt to reserve the term ‘Aristotelian’ for a certain cluster of positions, nothing, ultimately, hangs for me on that term. What does matter to me are both (a) interpretative questions (whether Adorno actually held the views I ascribe to him) and (b) substantive ones (whether these views are fruitful for understanding and responding to the world we face). In the following, I will show that at least some of the disagreement that exists, on both counts, between my critics and me, can be bridged. This comes with a risk of coming across as effacing the distinctiveness of the Aristotelian position. Thus, let me state it clearly upfront: even after removing certain wrong preconceptions about Aristotelianism, it remains a distinctive substantive approach with which many (including possibly Allen, Celikates, and O’Connor) would disagree, rightly or wrongly. By way of bookmarks for the discussion to come, let me highlight here four points:

- indexing values (most notably the good and the bad) to the human life form (to humanity and inhumanity);
- ethical objectivism (a rejection of subjectivism);
- denying that ethics can be codified (and, hence, that it is or can be principle-based); and
- a particular conception of rationality, whereby bodily reactions can be expressive of reason, sometimes more so than deliberate responses.

This much by way of preamble.

The Aristotelianism I ascribe to Adorno is unusual in a number of ways. First and foremost, it is unusual in being compatible with his (four-fold) negativism.<sup>2</sup> Aristotelians usually start from the assumption that we know what the human good is and then develop ethical guidance on the basis of this knowledge. My Adorno would deny the assumption that

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<sup>2</sup> On the four-fold negativism, see APP, 3-5 and 10f; and Allen’s helpful summary on p. 5 of her review.

we know what the human good is (epistemic negativism), in good part because he thinks that we cannot escape the particular social context we are in and that social context realises what is bad for human beings (substantive negativism). However, ethical guidance is still available on the basis of our knowledge of what is bad for human beings (the other side of his epistemic negativism), and this knowledge is sufficient on its own, normatively speaking (meta-ethical negativism). O'Connor helpfully speaks of traditional Aristotelians as having a retrospective approach (p. 3): they look back at how the human good has already been realised and then try to emulate that again and again. (Unsurprisingly, O'Connor, thus, thinks of traditional Aristotelians as 'conservative'.) My Adorno, according to O'Connor, is a prospective Aristotelian: he holds the thesis that humanity and thereby the human good have never been realised so far, and would only be realised in a possible future society freed off the bads of our social world (see APP, 137n15 for textual evidence that Adorno holds this view).

Aristotelians would rightly be puzzled at this point. While Aristotle did not simply generalise his account of human nature from observing human beings as they happen to be, there is a relation to what they actually are like, not simply to what they could be. In the contemporary literature, Thompson has done more than anyone to investigate the complex relationship between Aristotelian claims about life forms and empirical observations.<sup>3</sup> He suggests that Aristotelian claims about life forms are a *sui generis* kind of judgement, whereby they are not a simple generalisation of facts or capture what is statistically most frequent, but have a certain normative structure, such that a three-legged cat is a pathological case of a cat, even if by some accident the majority of cats in one generation would be born with three legs. Still, completely losing the mooring in what is the case with actual specimen would be to leave an Aristotelian approach firmly behind.

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<sup>3</sup> See Thompson 2008.

It is here that I would like to correct O'Connor's characterisation of the Aristotelianism I ascribe to Adorno. It is not simply prospective, and if it were, then I think it would probably not make sense anymore to speak of Aristotelianism for the reason just sketched in the previous paragraph. Rather, my Adorno's Aristotelianism is *both* retrospective and prospective – or to be more precise: for him, we can draw on the long history of domination and suffering to build up a pluralist conception of the bad (consulting, if you like, Benjamin's angel of history about the storms of the past that propel him forward); but this retrospective work does not suffice to identify the human good, of which we can only speak prospectively as something yet to be realised and as such not something we can positively identify from where we are now. As part of this picture, it probably makes best sense to think of values along a tripartite distinction rather than a simple dualism of good and bad. In APP, I suggest such a tripartite distinction between (1) the bads, (2) the overcoming of the bads in basic (or minimal) human functioning, and (3) the good (APP, 216, 240f).<sup>4</sup>

The second way in which Adorno's Aristotelianism is unusual is that history plays a bigger and more fundamental role in his account than it tends to do in other Aristotelian accounts. One common picture – held by Allen and O'Connor alike – of how traditional Aristotelians think about the human good is that for them it is something that is metaphysically fixed for eternity. There may be some cultural and historical variation of how it is realised in detail (for example, promising as an institution is unavoidable for human beings, but the particular way this institution manifests itself will vary, such that different rituals will be involved in entering, accepting and releasing someone from a promise). Still, ultimately, our

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<sup>4</sup> The use of the plural noun 'bads' is deliberate here. Bad tends to be used only as a singular noun in English, but an important aspect of Adorno's negativism is that his view contains multiple dimensions and intensities of badness, not a single category of badness. Speaking of 'evils' is a possibility and sometimes apt, but runs the danger to levelling all bad things to one intensity – and a particularly stark one at that.

human interests are fixed without history, and ethical objectivity is understood as transhistorical (to pick up on the way O'Connor's and Allen's express one of worries they have about my ascription of Aristotelianism to Adorno). I suspect that this common picture of traditional Aristotelianism is more of a caricature than a faithful portrait. But more importantly, the kind of Aristotelianism I ascribed to Adorno is anyway different from it. I probably do not emphasise this sufficiently in the book, where I only briefly raise this issue (APP, 252). As noted above, when it comes to the bads, Adorno's Aristotelianism is deeply historical: history teaches us (or can do so, if we are attentive to it) what is bad for us qua human beings. And about our potential for the human good we also only know from the careful study of history and contemporary society, not from a metaphysics that swings free from history and sociology.

Let me clarify this point. My proposal in the book is that Adorno's theory, taken as a whole, is meant to be vindicated as the best explanation of our social world and the problems it contains. The theory is thereby understood as a web of ideas, concepts and evidence, in which the different elements are combined into a whole which stands and falls together. As part of this web there are, at least on my reading, some claims which could be described as broadly falling into philosophical anthropology (here I accept Allen's characterisation of my position on p. 10 of her review). These are, for the most part, implicit commitments of Adorno's theory, which can be unearthed by viewing his theory through the lens of Aristotelianism. However, there are not your common and garden variety of philosophical anthropology as ascribed to the commonly held picture of Aristotelianism. Why not? For at least two reasons.

First, they are, in a certain sense and in a particular regard, more formal than the common picture of Aristotelianism: on Adorno's view, we have substantive knowledge of what is bad for human beings, but this substantive knowledge does not suffice to yield what living well for human beings would consist in. We only know that living well does definitely *not* consist in being subject to the variety of bads that (Adorno thinks) we are, systematically

subject to in this social world. This radically underdetermines the human good. As noted in the book (APP, Ch. 8, Section II), we can have a rich historical understanding of the events for which the name ‘Auschwitz’ symbolically stands and this rich historical understanding yields some knowledge about what it is *not* to live well, *whatever living well will include* (the final clause is what makes my account more formal than typical Aristotelian ones).<sup>5</sup> This rich historical understanding will also give us some guidance on what repeating Auschwitz would consist in, but even this knowledge and guidance will underdetermine what it would take to live in a society where genuine realisation of the human potential is possible and where we would then know what the human good is. There can be societies and social worlds which would prevent a repeat of Auschwitz, but still fall short of allowing individuals to develop and realise the human good. And the same is true, even if we simply combined all the various bads of which we have this historically rich understanding. Their combination will tell us at most about basic human functioning, that is, that which is required as a minimum condition for living well whatever living well actually amounts to.

Second, the various claims (about what is bad for human beings, about what is required for their basic functioning, and that humanity is an unrealised potential) are embedded in a theory that aims to make best sense of a particular historical social world. They are not derived or posited independently from such a historically informed theory, but part and parcel of it. In the book, I, thus, speak of the anthropological commitments as postulates. There is an analogy here with Kant’s postulates of pure practical reason, *but only in a restricted sense*. The commitments in question are not, strictly speaking, transcendental conditions – in that respect

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<sup>5</sup> The reference to Auschwitz here relates to Adorno’s new categorical imperative: ‘Hitler has imposed a new categorical imperative upon human beings in the state of their unfreedom: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen’ (Adorno 1966: 358/1973: 365).

they are different from what Kant intended the postulates of pure practical reason to be. Still the latter could not stand on their own, but depend on the wider theory of which they are part. Whatever warrant we have for them is indirect and derivative – there are something that has to be true, if the other elements of the theory, which Kant aims to demonstrate more directly, are true. In this restricted sense, an analogy holds.

In sum, ascribing Aristotelianism to Adorno is compatible both with his negativism and with his deeply historical outlook. The latter is what both O'Connor and Allen, and more implicitly Celikates, worry is ruled out, but hopefully the above goes some way to answer their concerns. Put differently, negative Aristotelianism and Hegelian historicism need not be seen as alternatives (contrary to what Allen says on p. 10). Indeed, my notion of Aristotelianism is deliberately broad, so as to include not just Adorno, but also Hegel and Marx. An old tutor of mine used to say of Hegel that he is 'Aristotle on wheels' to indicate how Aristotelianism could be combined with a deeply historical approach.

Beyond the general worry about how Aristotelianism is compatible with Adorno's historical approach, the three reviewers also air specific worries about the Aristotelianism which I ascribe to Adorno. Let me discuss the main ones in turn.

One parallel I draw between Aristotelianism and Adorno's theory is objectivism, specifically ethical objectivism. The key thought here is that one can be in error in one's ethical judgements. These judgements may express perfectly one's sentiments, but still be wrong, because the sentiments are not sufficiently attuned to what a situation ethically requires. (And the same holds for other subjectivist accounts, not just those who index morality to the sentiments.) The logic of Adorno's position requires such objectivism. For him to be able to say that many of us most of the time and the remainder some of the time are mistaken in what they think and do (in part because of ideological influences on us), he needs to subscribe to a

form of ethical objectivism.<sup>6</sup> In addition, I think that Adorno, at least on occasion, explicitly endorses objectivism.

Allen objects to the latter point by criticising my reading of a passage in which Adorno speaks about objectivity. He speaks about objectivity, Allen notes, only in ‘square quotes’ (p. 9, in reference to APP, 197), and we should read him as advancing an interpretation ‘to illuminate heretofore unilluminated segments of social reality’, rather than as saying that reality makes demands on us directly (p. 9). Later, she then adds that even when Adorno says that ‘what the inhuman is we know very well indeed’, he is not speaking about the absolute inhuman and, as such, something objective, but something ‘concrete, historically situated’ (p. 12).

In reply, I begin with Adorno’s texts and statements. It is true, that Adorno uses scare quotes when he speaks of ‘objectively’ in his exchange with Popper, but he is less guarded in writing and talking about objectivity on other occasions. One notable example is in *Negative Dialektik*, when he appeals to ‘objective truth’ in the context of discussing ideological distortions.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in the exchange with Popper he describes values as, originally, ‘question-forms of reality’ (quoted in APP, 197 and Allen, p. 9). It seems, thus, not inapt to say that for Adorno the world as it actually is gives rise to ethical demands on us. This connects

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<sup>6</sup> In this context, let me briefly correct one misunderstanding about the third Adornian constraint on any account of normativity. This third constraint is not, as Allen has it (p. 12), supporting an error theory about morality (in the way J.L. Mackie famously did). Rather, it is about ascribing error, including moral error, to many of us most of the time and some of us part of the time, in the context of where there is objective truth about ethics. It is *not* that there is no moral truth to be known, but, rather, it is the case that we sometimes get such truth wrong – and often not just accidentally so, but because of the way our social world is.

<sup>7</sup> Adorno 1966: 198/1973: 198. Another example is a radio discussion with Gehlen, where Adorno speaks of ‘objective happiness’ and ‘objective misery’, but *qua* oral comment it is difficult to ascertain whether his use of ‘objective’ is here less qualified than the use of scare quotes in the exchange with Popper suggests it is there (Adorno and Gehlen 1983: 250).

to an important phenomenon: our feeling that our actual situation demands something of us, rather than that we merely interpret it as issuing such demands. The textual grounds on absolute inhumanity are even stronger: Adorno notes repeatedly that the catastrophe has already happened (see APP, p 158n68) and speaks of Nazism as ‘absolute evil [*Böse*]’.<sup>8</sup> It might be an interesting philosophical question, how we can form an absolute judgement on the basis of a historical experience, but this idea of a contingently arisen necessity is clearly what Adorno intends (consider also his new *categorical* imperative as arising from a historical context<sup>9</sup>).

What I think misleads Allen is assuming that, for objectivists, interpretation (or human responses generally) have no direct or primary importance whatsoever. But this is to assume wrongly in relation to Aristotelian objectivism. For example, in McDowell’s well-known variant, ethical properties are understood in parallel to colour judgements.<sup>10</sup> They are objective in the sense that one can be wrong about the colours of an object, but this does not mean that the reactions of *perceivers in general* are completely secondary or incidental to what colours are. Not every response captures them adequately, but unless there were some perceiver who could capture them adequately, then (on this view) it would not make sense to speak of colours. *Mutatis mutandis* with ethical properties. Moreover, this does not mean that we should give up on the notion of objectivity. On the contrary, we should free this notion from an absolute conception of reality, as there is no way we can make sense of such an absolute conception

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<sup>8</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno 1969: 177/2002: 137.

<sup>9</sup> See note 5 above.

<sup>10</sup> McDowell 1998: Chapters 6-7. To forestall misunderstanding: in drawing some specific parallels between Adorno and McDowell, I am not suggesting that they hold the same view in all respects. My point is rather one about a certain family resemblance (if I may be allowed to extend this notion to talk about philosophical positions, not just ordinary notions like ‘game’). Among other differences, McDowell seems to think immanent critique of a certain sort suffices as critical purchase, whereas Adorno is skeptical of this (see II below and Freyenhagen 2013b).

(something about which McDowell and Adorno agree). This means, objectivity need not (indeed, cannot) be thought of as antithetical to interpretation and human responses.

This leads me to the second specific parallel between Aristotelianism generally and Adorno's view in particular that is relevant here. In both cases, I submit, the problem as to how we identify what the adequate response to an objective ethical demand is, consists not in a principle, but in the judgements of certain people, the *phronimoi*. The difference is that for traditional Aristotelians, *phronimoi* are virtuous agents, whereas for Adorno no one can be fully virtuous in our current (damaged) social world. For Adorno, critical individuals have a similar function to the virtuous agents in other forms of Aristotelianism, but without being fully virtuous. They function as a reference point and take the place that principles have in Kantian ethics or Utilitarianism.

Both O'Connor and Celikates object to my ascribing a *phronimoi* account to Adorno. For O'Connor, such an account is insufficiently reflective, as for Adorno '[e]very urge and intuition we have must be measured against a principle' (p. 15). Celikates accepts that appealing to insights of a few critical individuals is an aspect of Adorno's understanding of social critique, but that I 'risk painting a one-sided picture' by 'disembedding this feature from its wider social-theoretical context' (p. 9). He also thinks that this feature of Adorno's thought is problematic, as it reduces the pool of potential critics to the lucky and privileged (pp. 9f).

I will return to Adorno's social theory below (section IV) and thereby to Celikates' disembedding criticism. For now, I note several other points. *Phronimoi* need not be thought of as unreflective. The main insight is, rather, that there is no standard independent of what the best judges judge to be the case; no independent standard by which to evaluate their and our judgements; and also no principle which codifies their judgements. The ultimate authority of reflection is not the principle of pure reason, but the not fully codifiable judgement of those most attuned to the situation and most reflective about it. That this is Adorno's view can be

attested both by reminding the reader of the criticisms of principles (see APP, Chapters 4-5) and by passages such as the following:

The only thing that can perhaps be said is that the right way of living today would consist in resistance to the forms of the wrong life that *have been seen through and critically dissected by the most progressive minds*.<sup>11</sup>

In some cases, there will be a certain kind of immediacy to the *phronimoi*'s judgement (I come back to the sense of immediacy below). But this will not always be so and need not be so. Indeed, sometimes critical dissecting by the most progressive minds will require the full works of a critical social theory. The key thought is that reflectiveness need not be principle-driven. Indeed, if Adorno and other Aristotelians are correct, then it *could not* be principle-driven at least in certain areas of enquiry (such as ethics), as these areas cannot be fully codified, but require a different kind of reflectiveness. (Indeed, if this is so, we *should not* even attempt to uncover the purported governing principles of these areas.)

There is much more to be said about this, but for our purposes now, the following will need to suffice. One can accept that a *phronimoi* account of ethics is the most suitable way to go, without thereby subscribing to an elitism and authoritarianism. Nothing in the idea of *phronimoi* excludes that everyone could acquire the excellency in question. Indeed, Adorno is adamant that in the right social context, everybody would acquire it (this comes out well in his discussion with Gehlen, who does not share this democratic vision of the *phronimoi* account; see also APP, 249). Adorno's point is rather that in the wrong social world, it will likely only be the lucky and privileged that can acquire something of the excellency in question. He might have been wrong about this or at least too restrictive in his vision of what is required to become a critical individual in his sense (a sheltered, bourgeois upbringing in high European culture).

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<sup>11</sup> Adorno 1996: 248-9/2000: 167-8; translation amended; my emphasis.

But in interpreting an author, charity is not the only virtue; fidelity to what he does say and to the logic of his position is also required. A position like the one Celikates recommends might still be Adornian in relaxing some of the strictures of how critical individuals might develop, but this would require that Celikates holds on to a philosophical aspect of Adorno's theory (what I have loosely been calling 'the *phronimoi* account') *and* – ironically, given Celikates' insistence on social theory – that he makes this philosophical aspect more central than some of Adorno's claims about the social context.

O'Connor's objection to my ascription of a *phronimoi* account to Adorno is part of a broader worry. O'Connor picks up on how Adorno physical impulses play a crucial role in the remnants of ethical agency (something I emphasise, see APP, Chapter 5, 7, 9, and Appendix). O'Connor understands these impulses as brute aversions. It is, he contends, only such aversions that *phronimoi* could be guided by (on my reconstruction), but these aversions, he thinks, do not suffice to navigate our ethical challenges. Indeed, even something extreme as torture could not be tackled simply on the basis of the brute aversion to pain, since torture's 'wrongs go beyond what we can infer from animal aversion' (p. 7). At its worst, my talk of 'untutored' physical impulses (APP, 250) also violates 'a core claim of Adorno's general philosophical position: the mediation thesis' (p. 12). This comes close to Allen's worry about unqualified objectivism – again, mediation by human judgement is being insisted upon.

I think this objection overlooks an important aspect of Aristotelianism, which I also identify as present in Adorno's theory. The Aristotelian conception of reason is broader than what is being deliberately done for reasons. Notably, a body reflex can be rational for Aristotelians despite the fact that no deliberation has gone into it, not even initially, before it was formed. Thus, Aristotelians can view my bodily reflexes – such as when I instinctively retreat from something so hot it would burn me – as expressive of objective reasons. As member of an animal species, I have objective reason, at least other things being equal, to avoid

being burnt. The fact that I withdraw my hand instinctively does not deduct anything from the reasonableness of the response; nor does the fact that I could not have prevented myself from doing so. In fact, a non-human animals' withdrawal from fire is also embodying objective reason, even if one stipulated that in their case deliberation is not possible at all. Moreover, on the Aristotelian view, it is possible that a bodily reaction is not just expressive of the objective reason we have, but might be better at capturing these reasons than our deliberative responses do (see APP, Ch. 7). These deliberative responses might be so infected by ideology that they are worse guides to what we should do than our reflexes and physical impulses, which may be more recalcitrant to being infected in this way. Still, in one sense even these bodily reactions are not completely independent from judgement by ethical agents: such agents can recognise (and indeed ought to recognise) such a reflex as expressive of the reasons we have. In sum, reasons need not feature consciously to be present, and their relation to judgement can be fairly indirect.

Moreover, reason-expressive reflexes or physical impulses are not brute givens, completely unmediated by anything. As I stress in the book (APP, 48n64, 241, and 250), they are mediated with our interests as the specific life form we are. Indeed, they are also historically mediated: our life form itself has a complex natural history, and our reflexes and other physical impulses are its product. Adorno takes a leaf out of Freud's book here. Freud writes:

The experiences of the ego seem at first to be lost for inheritance; but, when they have been repeated often enough and with sufficient strength in many individuals in successive generations, they transform themselves, so to say, into experiences of the id, the impressions of which are preserved by heredity. Thus in the id, which is capable of being inherited, are harboured residues of the existence of countless egos.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Freud 1989: 644. I owe thanks to Jaakko Nevasto for bringing this passage to my attention.

If Adorno follows Freud in this view, we might then say that the physical impulses – notably the physical abhorrence to suffering – are the sedimented layers inherited by each human being from a long natural history, in which human experiences of and resistance to suffering played a major role. The impulses may be ‘untutored’ in the sense of being untouched by our formation in modern society (i.e., what is for Adorno the wrong social world), but they are not thereby simply immediate and brute givens.

It seems to me that O’Connor does not see this because he assumes a too cognitivist notion of mediation: mediation has to be by way of concepts, it has to involve conscious judgement, and it has to, ultimately, relate to principles (he explicitly expresses the latter on p. 15). But this both begs the question against Aristotelianism and sits uneasily with Adorno’s texts, which, as O’Connor does not deny, give physical impulses, not principles, an important place in ethical practice. (On the new categorical imperative as not a principle in O’Connor’s sense, see APP, Chapter 5 and 7).

O’Connor, ultimately, rejects my ascription of Aristotelianism to Adorno also for another reason, albeit this is never explicitly stated as such: he suggests that it imposes a systematicity that is alien to Adorno’s works, which Adorno conceives, after all, as constituting an ‘anti-system’, in the way we speak of anti-heroes in novels and films.<sup>13</sup> This objection seems to me problematic for two reasons. First, Adorno always insisted that his rejection of first-philosophy and deductively organised philosophical systems is not the same as an embrace of inconsistency and an abandonment of rigour (I discuss this in APP, 18-20). Systematicity is not alien to Adorno’s anti-system. Instead, it is present in a number of ways, such as the striking consistency with which he advances his position from his inaugural lecture in 1931 until his death in 1969, or the careful construction of texts. Aristotelianism, also, offers systematicity

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<sup>13</sup> Adorno 1966: 10/1973: ix-xx.

without system. It provides Adorno's position with the kind of coherence that he would have accepted: not one that involves a first principle from which everything is derived, but one in which inconsistencies are avoided and everything fits together into a whole, against which certain moves (like the rejection of discursive grounding or the emphasis placed on physical impulses) make sense. Second, O'Connor's own concern about how my reading fits with Adorno's mediation thesis suggests that he, at one level, also accepts that Adorno was in the business of systematicity and coherences of a certain sort.

It is difficult to emphasise enough the holism of Adorno's position. In the very passage, when I write about 'untutored physical impulses' (APP, 250), I continue by saying that this element should be seen as part of a theory that as a whole presents itself for our assent as the best explanation of our social world and its problems. I think we misunderstand this whole if we do not recognise it for its strongly Aristotelian character – perhaps because we are misled by a too narrow conception of Aristotelianism according to which it is necessarily ahistorical and objective in a way completely severed from human judgements and history. Aristotelian philosophical anthropology could not be an independent foundation for Adorno – nothing could be *that* – but as an integral part of an overall whole, it has its place.

## *II: Immanent Critique*

Both Allen and Celikates seek clarification regarding immanent critique. In the book, I argue that immanent critique plays a role in Adorno's theory, but does not suffice on its own for his critique of modern society and its thought forms. In the book, I sketch briefly some considerations for why this is so and also offer textual grounds (APP, 13-15).

Immanent critique is traditionally contrasted with external critique, whereby the critical standards brought to bear on an object of critique transcend it. If the object of critique is the whole social world and its thought forms (as is the case with Adorno), then the standard of

critique would have to be external to that world and these forms. Adorno clearly rejects such external critique on the basis of transcendent standards as impossible (here I find myself in full agreement with Allen). Does this mean that in rejecting immanent critique, I settled Adorno with something he rejects? Allen suggests that the opposition between immanent and external critique is not exhaustive, and seeks clarification which of the third alternatives I ascribe to Adorno. She offers two options: 'immanent transcendence', whereby we appeal to something outside of the social world and its thought forms (the 'non-identical' is, on Allen's interpretation the label for that something outside), but without expressing it directly (as this would infect it by the bad immanence), and 'immanent negativism', where 'the bads and wrongs that are invoked in critique are themselves negative ideals or value that are found within the existing social world, rather than putatively objective or transcendent bads or wrongs' (p. 7). Allen favours the former, but I think a somewhat modified version of the latter is Adorno's view (and I thank her for the opportunity to clarify that this was all along the view expounded in my book).

Let me explicate what I have in mind. As Allen notes, towards the end of the book I state that the conception of the bad I ascribe to Adorno 'is not a transcendent standard but – to use a formulation by Horkheimer – “grounded on the misery off the present”' (APP, 244). The thought is that the multiple badness of our social world gives rise to a manifold of negative experiences. The origin of these negative experiences and even their negativity is not always transparent to us, but requires disclosure. Moreover, the negativity in question may not be well-captured by the accepted negative ideals and values, for the latter might be inflected by ideological distortion in various ways. Nonetheless, it is the negative experiences that provide us with the impetus and orientation for a critical theory of society. Making them visible depends in part on the disclosing power of critical theory, but this does not take away that they provide it with its critical orientation. Elsewhere I have described this position as a form of internal

critique: neither immanent critique in the traditional sense (because it does not take the accepted values and ideals as given, not even the negative ones), nor transcendent (for it does not rely on access to something beyond this social world and its thought forms).<sup>14</sup>

This seems to me to fit Adorno's position better than immanent transcendence. Note first an ambiguity in Allen's description of this position: she says first that Adorno 'need not – and, in my view, does not – claim to have access to this outside in order for this idea to do critical work' (pp. 5-6), but then continues that it is a particular kind of access (direct access via subsumption) that is the problem, not expressing it indirectly through the fragmentary character of essays. Presumably even indirect expression involves some form of access (for otherwise how would it be expressive of the something outside in question?), so she either cannot mean that we need not claim to have access to something outside or she has to accept that that we cannot express it after all. Either way, the position is unsustainable. I also think that he does not conceive of the non-identical as something outside of our social world and its thought forms. Yes, it is not fully captured by these thought forms; yes, there is something that is done violence to; and yes, in a different social world with different thought forms, this violence could be avoided (or at least minimised). But this does not mean that what is not captured fully and what is violated is outside of this social world; or that what it would mean not to do violence to it can be anticipated here and now. On the latter point, consider a well-known passage from *Negative Dialektik*: 'In the right condition everything would be, as in the Jewish theologoumenon, only the slightest bit different than what it is, but *not the slightest thing* can be imagined, as how it would then be'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Freyenhagen 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Adorno 1966: 294/1973: 299; translation amended; my emphasis.

Celikates also calls for 'further elaboration' when it comes to the rejection of immanent critique (p. 4). The above reply to Allen hopefully provides this elaboration already, but let me pick up on two specific points.

First, Celikates might well be right in insisting – in a way reminiscent of Bernard Williams – that there are 'certain values or ideals that are constitutive for our self-understanding and that we could not simply give up'. In relation to such values and ideals, immanent critique has clear mileage. I happily accept that. What, in the book, I was reporting on about Adorno's rejection of immanent critique concerns, however, ideals and values that, it turns out, are not constitutive, despite initial appearances. In particular, Adorno comments on the social self-understanding(s) found in legitimising discourse. He thinks that capitalist modernity at some point did without supporting legitimising discourse altogether. This means the values and ideals utilised in this discourse turned out to be non-constitutive (capitalist modernity could persist without them). Crucially, it also means that it is no longer possible to criticise it for failing to realise the ideals and values of this legitimising discourse. Adorno might be factually wrong about the disappearance of legitimising discourse. Still, insofar as he was right about this disappearance, one can see why immanent social critique would no longer be applicable in such a context. In other words, in the book I was not so much reporting about a general argument against immanent critique *per se*, as about Adorno's specific contextualist judgement about a particular socio-historical setting. Even in this setting, Adorno saw structural contradictions at play – on this Celikates and I are in agreement. However, my point was that these structural contradictions require our bringing to bear the negativist, Aristotelian orientation that I highlight in the book, rather than simply exposing capitalist modernity for not living up to its own promise. This orientation is internal (it arises from and expresses negative experiences and misery), but it is not immanent in the sense that is or has to be part of the reigning legitimising discourse.

Second, this also means that Celikates and I hold largely overlapping positions, albeit with one key difference that remains. The overlap is obscured because our different use of the terms involved: in effect, Celikates calls ‘internal critique’ what I call ‘immanent critique’. He agrees that merely looking to the standard people already accept is insufficient. Instead, what is required, according to him (and others like Jaeggi), is ‘...to extract the normative resources for critique from the (often implicit) normative structure of those practices and self-understandings that are *constitutive for the (type of) society* in question ...’ (p. 5; my emphasis). This is what he calls ‘immanent critique’. My ‘internal critique’ differs from it insofar as the misery and negative experiences internal to the current social world, which it takes as its (negative) orientation, provide normative structure that could point *beyond* what is constitutive for this social world, not merely to a better realisation of its constitutive structure. Moreover, let me also note a point located at a different level: the main purpose of the discussion of immanent critique in the *Introduction* of APP is to reveal that Adorno cannot rely on such critique alone – as long as that premise is granted, then the dialectic can be pressed further in the way I suggested. Celikates accepts that Adorno does not exclusively rely on either what he calls immanent and internal critique, noting of even his preferred option that few would ‘claim that it is applicable under all circumstances, including National Socialism’ (p. 5). Again, one might not accept Adorno’s claim that we are in circumstances where what is constitutive for our social world does not suffice for capturing what is wrong and bad about it, but among the various things that make Adorno’s theory interesting and challenging is that he is trying to think through what our critical resources are in such circumstances.<sup>16</sup> In sum, again my point was not to provide a general argument against immanent critique *per se*, but to explicate the implications of Adorno’s contextualist judgement about a particular socio-historical setting.

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<sup>16</sup> See also Freyenhagen 2013b for an attempt to grapple with this challenge.

### *III: Negativism*

One aspect of O'Connor's line of objection I have not picked up on yet is his claim that torture's 'wrongs go beyond what we can infer from animal aversion' (p. 7) and that an adequate account of it requires knowledge of the good. This is part of a wider worry (or, rather, set of worries) O'Connor airs about (metaethical) negativism. As much as physical agony is bad for us and part of what makes torture wrong, not all that is bad is reducible to the bad of physical agony. At the same time, physical agony is not always bad – it depends on the context and individual. Even 'severe pain' is present 'in many voluntary and fulfilling undertakings' (p. 6). Moreover, if we really were marked by a lack of basic human functioning, then we would not experience humiliation or the loss of this basic human functioning (p. 8). Insofar as we do notice the way our irreplaceable uniqueness is being jeopardised, this suggests that our humanity and the good are not just there as potential, but 'to some degree actualized' (p. 9).

In reply, let me begin by a clarification. In the chapter in which I defend metaethical negativism (APP, Ch. 8), I use physical agony repeatedly as an example. This has a certain dialectical point: my sense is that the default position is so stacked against negativism that only some stark and relatively simple examples will make people see that the matter is more complicated. Put differently, these examples serve the point of getting the foot in the door for negativism. They are not meant to be exhaustive of negativism or even representative of the complex, multi-dimensional forms of negativism that its proponents normally hold. They are meant to provide an opening for such forms, so that they can get a fair hearing. That is all.

Crucially, this does not mean that Adorno's negativism is about only the badness of physical agony. For him such agony is all too easily brushed aside or overlooked. Also, he thinks often physical pain is how other forms of suffering reveal themselves – while Adorno never says so in these terms, he, in effect, subscribes to what we would nowadays call psychosomatic

disorders. But, ultimately, he holds a multi-dimensional conception of the bad, in which physical agony is *just one dimension* (APP, Ch. 5, especially 144-9, and 245-6). Hence, my use of the plural ‘bads’. Equipped with a multi-dimensional conception of the bad, we can, I would maintain, explicate the evils involved in torture without falling into a problematically reductive account or requiring knowledge of the good. In fact, contrary to O’Connor, I would argue that knowledge of the good requires knowledge of bads and wrongs: it is by our exposure to the latter that we might eventually come to know what the good and the right are – just consider how pivotal examples like torture or slavery are as baselines in how people argue for their conception of justice or the good. But I do accept that explicating what goes wrong when people are tortured involves a multi-dimensional conception of the bad. Indeed, I would even accept that prior to knowing what the good is, we might not be able to explicate what is wrong with torture *in full*. But then even explicating some of its problematic aspects will suffice for ethical guidance in most cases (and can avoid being problematically reductive).

When I discuss what explicating the evils of Auschwitz would consist in for Adorno, I highlight that these evils went beyond physical agony (APP, 245-6). It is by such explication that we can learn about some of the elements of basic human flourishing – that we learn that, whatever the human good is, we need at least a minimal sense of being agents with a specific life history and attachments and projects. (Here again, we encounter the sense in which the Aristotelianism I am ascribing has a formal element to it; see already section I above.) Depriving us of even this minimal sense is to deny us the conditions for functioning as human beings at all. O’Connor is right that in being so deprived, we are unlikely to experience the humiliation and loss of basic human functioning. But this is not an objection to what my Adorno says. Just the opposite, it captures what Primo Levi has described as ‘the drowned’ and was referred to as ‘*Muselmänner*’ in the slang term used among captives of Nazi concentration and extermination camps. The drowned could not bear witness to the loss of basic human

functioning – others, like Levi, had to do it for them. But this makes it no less the case that basic human functioning in Adorno's sense was what they were being robbed off.

In addition, I also note that the thesis I ascribe to Adorno about physical agony is not a total exclusion of it. Rather, the thesis is that physical agony *always gives us a prima facie reason* and *sometimes* gives us an *all-things-considered reason* to avoid it (see also APP, 144-9 and 211-3). For example, my Adorno does not deny that it might well be that the agony of going to the dentist now is something that all-things-considered is the less bad path to take than the agony that would follow otherwise. Also, physical agony might be accepted to avoid another bad or evil in some context – for example, a member of the French Resistance who did not reveal names to his Nazi torturers is acting admirably, including for Adorno, despite the fact that this results in prolongation and intensification of physical agony. Once more, what Adorno warns about is that our modern civilisation is all too ready to accept physical pain in exchange for some promised good to come at some future point, which (a) often never materialises and (b) might not be worth the trade-off. This does *not* mean that we should never make or accept such trade-offs. It does mean, however, that Adorno would be more suspicious than O'Connor is to accept that the 'many voluntary and fulfilling undertakings' involving severe pain are *genuinely* voluntary and fulfilling.

Finally, let me say something briefly about whether humanity or the good is not just something that might become realised in a different social world, but already, in part, actualised in the here and now. Importantly, Adorno is not denying that we always have our basic human functioning denied in our social world, although he thinks it always includes the objective tendency towards such a denial. He is also not denying that there will be some positive experiences, like having a pleasurable meal or encounter with others. What Adorno does claim is that humanity has not been realised (as discussed in APP, 11-2 and 237-9), and that we do not really encounter happiness, as distinct from fleeting pleasures, in this social world. As he

puts it in *Negative Dialektik*: ‘To this day, all happiness is a pledge of what has *not yet been*, and the belief in its imminence obstructs its becoming’.<sup>17</sup> These are controversial claims, and I do not pretend that I have conclusively established in the book that Adorno is right about them. What I have tried to do in the book is to show that there are no convincing *philosophical* grounds for thinking that he is wrong. Specifically, in defending metaethical negativism, my aim was to show that his position could be true. Whether or not, ultimately, it is, requires renewing and then evaluating his research programme. On this programme and its results the jury is very much out – but the objective of the book was “merely” that the programme is not dismissed out of court from the start.

#### *IV: Social Theory*

Celikates’s second and ‘main worry’ (p. 9) is that my interpretation downplays the social-theoretical dimensions of Adorno’s work at the expense of the ethical one. I will leave aside here whether the German ‘Übel’ is better translated as ‘evil’ or as ‘bad’ – in either case, the language is strongly evaluative. The real question is whether my reading of Adorno underplays the embedding of such language in his social theory.

It will be useful to start with a clarification. Celikates picks up on something important to my book, namely, that it aims to prepare the philosophical ground for Adorno’s interdisciplinary research programme, not yet carry that programme out (APP, 22f, 253f; referred to by Celikates on pp. 6 and 10). What I mean with this is the following. One key question for a book (or article) is its context of reception – what is the dominant picture in the existing literature and will the book (or article) reinforce it or try to dislodge it. In my view, the still dominant picture of Adorno’s work is one according to which his theory is lacking

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<sup>17</sup> Adorno 1966: 346/1973: 352; my emphasis.

normative foundations (Allen captures the picture well in her opening pages). In particular, I think this dominant picture gets in the way of evaluating Adorno's research programme on its merits – it forecloses such evaluation already at the get-go. One of the main aims of my book was to dislodge this picture and open up again a view on that research programme – this is what I meant with 'preparing the philosophical ground' for it. By showing that the insistence on normative foundations is problematic and that critics overlook the viability of metaethical negativism, I hoped to clear the ground of philosophical prejudice against Adorno's research programme.

Importantly, what I did *not* mean by talking of 'preparing the philosophical ground' is for Adorno's ethics or practical philosophy to ground his social theory. While Celikates never actually says this, I wonder whether he suspects me of having wanted to suggest such an ethical grounding of social theory. Understandably, he is critical of that endeavour. To be clear: such a grounding project is not what I have intended or offered in the book. I am in agreement with Celikates that this would not capture Adorno's intention. However, I worry that Celikates overshoots in the other direction – some of his formulations (particular his talk of social theory as 'a precondition of the kind of negativist and minimalist ethics that Freyenhagen develops' (p. 8)) suggest that Adorno's social theory is presented as the foundation for his ethics. That strikes me as wrong too. Instead, as already indicated in section I, Adorno is best read, I submit, as presenting a web of elements in which none has a foundational role, but all are interdependent. Indeed, to suggest that Adorno's social theory is somehow prior to his ethics is to suggest that Adorno subscribes to something much more resembling traditional theory (in Horkheimer's seminal sense) than critical theory. It would be to ascribe to him the kind of value-free social theory he always rejected, and upon which is then later added an ethics separate from social theory (a division which he also always rejected). Instead, Adorno, like Horkheimer, has a partisan conception of theory and theorising, in which a particular ethical

orientation is constitutive of the theoretical endeavour – not separate from it; not its independent basis; and not derived from social theory either.<sup>18</sup>

The nub of the disagreement, however, is again the Aristotelianism I ascribe to Adorno. Celikates thinks that Aristotelianism is difficult to reconcile with Adorno's commitment to a materialist and critical social theory (p. 8), rather than (as I presented it in the book and again in section I) seeing them as tied together. Where I see similarities between widely recognised Aristotelian social theorising (such as Taylor's work) and Adorno's, Celikates denies that the notion of basic human functioning places any explanatory role in, for example, Adorno's writings on Anti-Semitism. Indeed, the later works resist 'being subsumed under an account of "minimum conditions of basic human functioning"' (p. 9).

I cannot here do justice to the complex work on Anti-Semitism by Adorno (and Horkheimer), but let me briefly indicate how the idea of basic human functioning, contrary to what Celikates claims, is not just compatible with it, but, actually, plays a role in it. To be clear: I am not saying that Adorno actually used the terms 'minimal human functioning' or the like. My point is that the logic of his position is such that we make best sense of it in these terms.

Let's concentrate here on 'Elements of Anti-Semitism'. Already in the first section, we can read how Adorno and Horkheimer claim that Anti-Semitism is not a break with modern society, but reveals its truth, that is, it reveals the truth that modern society cannot exist 'without disfiguring human beings [*Entstellung der Menschen*]'.<sup>19</sup> Here, like elsewhere, Adorno operates with an emphatic notion of (yet-to-be-realized) humanity, which he thinks our social world denies – as I have argued in my book (APP, Chapter 9), this has clear affinities with Aristotelian conceptions of normativity and, indeed, makes best sense as one of them. One might think, however, that talk of inhumanity could also be captured differently, so the

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<sup>18</sup> See also Freyenhagen 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno 1969: 178/2002: 139.

statement might only be compatible with ‘an Aristotelian twist’ (Celikates, p. 8), but not more than that. Clearer evidence is provided in the sixth section: here the two authors argue that Anti-Semitism involves, indeed is based on, ‘false projection’.<sup>20</sup> This is contrasted with the normal level of projection that, they claim, is part of any perception. In effect, we get here an account of one of the elements of what minimal human functioning involves: in order to navigate the world successfully and survive, we need to engage in projection – the thought seems to be that anticipating how the world might pan out and projecting possibilities onto it, is a key abilities of higher animals to secure their food and avoid dangers. At the same time, projection should never become total, such that we become completely immune to any counterevidence the world provides. Whatever the human good is, we need the ability to project and we need to be placed and encultured in such a way that we make appropriate use of it. Paranoia as mental illness and Anti-Semitism as a social phenomenon share, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, the deformation of this basic human functioning. They do so, however, for different reasons: in one case, mental illness; in the other, certain social and political contexts which led to a deformation of the ability of projection and deny our being in a position to use it appropriately. Adorno and Horkheimer do not tell the story in the mental illness case; and their story in the latter case is complex and controversial (consisting, basically in a socially induced and politically promoted loss of keeping projection in check by way of reflexion and/or imagination). My point here is that basic human functioning is part of it.

#### *V: Co-option*

Celikates’ third and final point is not about interpreting Adorno, but whether Adorno is right that co-option in our wrong social world is unavoidable. While Celikates recognises the risks

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<sup>20</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno 1969: 196/2002: 154.

that Adorno points to as 'real' (p. 11), he thinks that Adorno overlooks that social struggles and movements have developed strategies to counter or at least minimise these risks. Celikates makes the customary points that perhaps the historical situation has changed from when Adorno wrote and that, anyway, it is worrisome to ascribe 'a lack of autonomy to oppressed groups and those who act in solidarity with them'. These considerations culminate in a powerful passage by Cornelius Castoriadis, where he insists that the constant worry about co-optation means one has become co-opted oneself; and that there is one thing that cannot be co-opted, 'our own reflective, critical, autonomous activity' (quoted on p. 12).

This is also a too big topic to address adequately here. And I am not even sure that I would myself agree with Adorno on this matter. What I can do here is to express doubts about the alternative that Castoriadis and, indirectly, Celikates present. First an important clarification: in the book, I distinguish between negative freedom to resist, on the one hand, and autonomy, on the other (APP, Chapters 2-3). My Adorno does not deny that we have, at least on occasion, the negative freedom to resist. Moreover, his notion of autonomy is different from the notion of autonomy used by liberal theorists to fix the boundary between those who get the full range of liberal individual rights and those who do not. By denying that *anyone* has or could have autonomy in this social world, Adorno is not proposing to deprive the oppressed of rights or saying that we should treat them paternalistically or in an elitist fashion ascribing something to him which he denies them. For that reason, it is not worrisome to ascribe a lack of autonomy to the oppressed (and those in solidarity with them). It is worrisome that we all lack autonomy (if indeed Adorno's social theory is correct that we do lack it, that is, that we lack the ability to live a self-determined life and the genuine possibility to exercise this ability). Perhaps, there is something particularly pernicious in its being denied to the oppressed. But none of the normal reasons to specifically worry about the lack of autonomy of the oppressed applies. Adorno might be wrong in his analysis, but if he is right, then it would be to shoot the

messenger to fault him for denying that the oppressed have autonomy. It is unclear how we could be harmed by refusing to ascribe to us what we do not have in the first place.

Second, I think one of the most interesting aspects of Adorno's theory – whether one agrees with him in the final analysis – is his challenge to the idea that autonomy as an inner citadel that is somehow unscratched and cannot be touched by the delusions, repression, and ideologies our modern social world generates. The way he proposes to detect heteronomy at the heart of (what is commonly thought to be) autonomy should at least make one think twice before declaring autonomy a nature reserve untouchable by even the subtlest forms of social control.

Finally, as powerful as Castoriadis rhetoric comes across, there are a number of problems with his statement. Why would someone who is afraid simply in virtue of this already be co-opted, rather than being extra vigilant and standing a better chance to resist co-option as much as possible? Castoriadis's answer seems to be that seeking a guarantee against being co-opted means co-opting has already reached in 'the deepest reaches of [one's] mind' insofar as one 'has already been caught in the trap of reactionary ideology: the search for an anti-cooption talisman or fetishistic magic charm' (quoted on p. 12). But from being afraid about something's coming to pass, it does not necessarily follow that one seeks a guarantee against its happening – one can be aware that no such guarantee is available, and still be afraid about its coming to pass. Moreover, the passage seems to contain a central inconsistency. Castoriadis, first, says that 'There is no guarantee against cooption; in a sense everything can be coopted, and everything is one day or another' (*ibid.*). But then claims later on that there is 'one thing' that cannot not be coopted: 'our own reflective, critical, autonomous activity' (*ibid.*). Isn't Castoriadis turning autonomy here into the very thing he warned us against, an 'anti-cooption talisman or fetishistic magic charm'? One might respond that no inconsistency is present here as the two statements are located at different levels – one at the level of contents (specific aims,

ideas, etc.); the other at the level of activity or capacity for activity. But, even so, why think that capacities or activities cannot be co-opted? Castoriadis faces a dilemma here. Either he falls back onto an inner citadel notion of autonomy (for example of the Kantian kind, whereby pure practical reason is incorruptible, available to us, and self-validating), but, like Adorno, he is normally sceptical of this notion, drawing (again like Adorno) on Freudian insights; or Castoriadis should admit that even the capacity and activity of self-reflection can be co-opted.

For Adorno, there are no guarantees against co-option, not even reflectiveness itself. Whether or not Adorno's dark worldview is right in the final analysis, we do better to at least remain alive to the possibility that the inner citadel can be taken too, rather than simply rule this out from the start. Heteronomy might come to reign in the realm of autonomy – letting Adorno speak to us anew about this, will be one of the most important reminders he can offer us.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> My thanks go to Amy Allen, Robin Celikates, and Brian O'Connor, both for their contributions and for comments on an earlier draft of this reply. My thanks also go to this journal's Reviews Editor, Andrew Huddleston, and to the members of the Critical Theory Colloquium at Essex and Wayne Martin.

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