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Adorno, Ethics and Business Ethics

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Abstract: Theodor W. Adorno was one of the twentieth century's most potent and influential European thinkers, whose impact is felt across the humanities and social sciences. However, Adorno's thought has been almost entirely absent from the business ethics conversation. This chapter explores the relevance of Adorno's thought for business ethics that has emerged in recent scholarship. It does so through an engagement with topics such as positivistic management, consumer culture, social media and political discourse, and the possibility of good work, and by expounding Adorno's critical theory, the critique of the business ethics tradition implied by his work, and the debate regarding whether Adorno can be read as a 'negative Aristotelian'.

INTRODUCTION

Theodor W. Adorno was one of the twentieth century's most potent and influential European thinkers, whose impact is felt across the humanities and social sciences. Yet, though he has attracted some attention from Critical Management Studies scholars (Parker, 2003; Beyes & De Cock, 2017; Granter, 2019) on account of his powerful critique of our 'wrong life', until recently Adorno's thought has been almost entirely absent from the business ethics conversation (Reeves & Sinnicks, 2021, 2022). This chapter explores the relevance of Adorno's thought for business ethics that has emerged in recent scholarship.

Adorno's claims about our social world are resolutely scathing and unforgiving: our social world, including the sphere of business, is a 'damaged', 'false', even 'radically evil' one (Adorno, 2005a; Reeves & Sinnicks, 2021; Nevasto, 2021). Our social world is, he claims, so distorted and unfree that it is impossible not only to live well in it, but even to know what living a good or even a right life would be. Such claims are discomfiting and run against the grain of the moral-philosophical – and business ethics – traditions, which assume individuals can, at least in principle, live well or at least rightly in our social world. But that these claims are troubling does not entail that they are false; wishful thinking is the enemy of insight.

In this chapter we outline Adorno's critical ethical thought, troubling as it may be, and show how it bears on topics in business ethics, and on the more general orientation of the business ethics tradition. We then turn to a significant controversy in the interpretation of Adorno's ethics amongst scholars who advocate its importance for business ethics, and finally by sketching its implications for business ethics questions such as the possibility of good work.

Taken together, these discussions reveal the unignorable, even if uncomfortable, relevance of Adorno's thought for business ethics.

ADORNO'S CRITICAL THEORY AND BUSINESS ETHICS

The central theme of Adorno's philosophy is a critique of what he perceived as the moral poverty of the modern social world. He argued that this world is inherently 'damaged' (Adorno, 2005a), making it a hostile environment for human beings, stifling both their flourishing and their freedom. Adorno described the organizing principle of modern society as the "universal exchange relationship," where everything exists only in relation to something else (Adorno, 1993, p.26). This exchange principle stems from a basic drive within subjects to dominate objects (Adorno, 2008, p.9), which motivates categorizing people and things into abstract categories, increases the subject's power to classify, predict, and control.

This drive is crystalized in commodity exchange, reducing all things, including people, to exchangeable units. As a result, human beings and their needs become "mere things" subject to the laws of the marketplace (Zuidervaart, 1991, p.76). In this 'exchange society', everything and everyone is reduced to a means for something else, creating a world where people are defined by their economic roles as buyers and sellers. These roles reduce individuals to mere quantities. Consumers are seen as a quantity of purchasing power, and workers as a quantity of labouring power. To meet their basic needs, individuals are compelled to commodify their labour: an exchangeable unit determined by what is profitable, which often bears no relation to actual human needs.

If we treat people as exchangeable units, we risk 'reifying' them – seeing them as mere objects to be manipulated and controlled, rather than recognizing one another as unique individuals (see Jutten, 2010). This reification contributes to the sense that modern society is 'unfree' (Adorno, 2006, pp.202-3) because it undermines the possibility of autonomy. That is, it prevents individuals from exercising self-governing control over their lives by forcing them to engage in activities that are heteronomous. However, rather than causing a revolt against present conditions, people have by and large adapted so thoroughly to this world that they have sacrificed the development of the rational capacities and impulses needed for autonomous engagement with both their psychic and social realities. Our experience is for the most part conditioned by distorting patterns of thought, feeling and action. This distortion is draining, and leaves little room for autonomous, critical experience and practice.

In this light, it is unsurprising that Adorno's work sits uneasily alongside mainstream moral philosophy, of the sort that has played the biggest role in business ethics. Indeed, Adorno argues that moral philosophy is possible only as a "critique of moral philosophy, the critique of its options and awareness of its antinomies" (Adorno, 2000, p.167). This involves an expansion of what moral philosophy is thought to be, and in that sense what business ethics is thought to be as well.

The mainstream of Anglophone moral philosophy poses questions such as 'what ought I to do?' addressed to an individual, and the 'ought' stands for a specifically ethical dimension of the world. Theories of business ethics, as frameworks for enquiry into how to morally or ethically assess and guide the behaviour of companies and their personnel, typically follow this model. While the meaning of the 'ought' varies between deontology, consequentialism, pragmatism, and existentialism, they for Adorno guilty of a similar mistake.

Mainstream moral philosophy is – to draw on Horkheimer's distinction – an example of 'traditional' as opposed to 'Critical' theory (Horkheimer, 1989; see also Parker, 2003). In contrast to traditional theory, Critical Theory asks after the conditions of possibility for posing questions in this manner. Traditional theory has to presuppose things such as the moral-psychological capacities of individuals and the justification of conceptions of the good. Interrogation of these opens up the relationship between socio-historical conditions and philosophical claims, which demands the suspension of thinking of these domains as methodologically distinct.

The rationale for this position derives from an attack on the notion of philosophical invariants (whether playing out in epistemology, ontology, or metaphysics) as they are thought to forge an identity between the concept and its object: "Dialectics is the consistent sense of non-identity. It does not begin by taking a standpoint" (Adorno, 1973, p.5). Adorno maintains that invariant principles hypostasize existing social reality by bracketing off some particular aspect of it, and then claiming it has objective, universal validity for our thought and action. Following Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche, Adorno holds that the social conditions characteristic of specific (typically privileged) social groups reappear in the formal structures of philosophical works. Critical Theory is thus, for Adorno, an essential contributor to the tasks of philosophy: "The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth" (1973, pp.15-6).

This leads to a thoroughgoing 'metacritique' of rationalistic theories of morality. The thought is that moral knowledge presupposes virtue, which is itself not a product of reason, but of acculturation as a shared achievement. A moral agent has the capacity to acquire it, but moral capacity cannot emerge unless one lives among other such agents within institutions such as families and workplaces might foster it. This, Adorno argues, is not possible in mass capitalist societies. Adorno's argument to that effect is as follows: As moral knowledge as virtue takes the form of non-reflective situational awareness as to how to act, it presupposes knowledge of one's situation and its relative stability as a form of life. These presuppositions are unavailable to modern actors. Self-preservation enforces the calculative and strategic orientation in any area markets and economic-administrative systems penetrate. Even if impulses such as empathy are preserved, the lack of control individuals and organisations have of the social conditions of moral action typically render it void beyond narrow domain of private existence.

Nonetheless, we propose that this is not the whole story about virtue ethics with respect to its philosophical form. Recent work has brought together Neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism (Foot, 2001; Hursthouse, 1999) and Adorno's Critical Theory (see Freyenhagen, 2013; Reeves, 2016; Whyman, 2017). The crux of this debate is thought that if the human good inheres in our natures – as Neo-Aristotelians hold – it can secure an appeal that cuts across its current historically distorted form under capitalist societies, and this can combat both theoretical and practical nihilism and possibly buttress radical political claims.

While the good life is not practically available in current circumstances, this strategy makes use of those elements in Adorno's writings which emphasise the particular instances of moral badness and takes these as a guide to ethical normativity. Critical reflection on ordinary or commonsense experiences can itself be ethically salient, despite not yielding results to anything like the narrowly conceived task of modern moral theory. There is an ethically salient cognitive advantage in knowing badness, especially the worst kinds of badness (Peters, 2015). Pursuing this line of thought allows us to register numerous ways in which Adorno's social critique

identified, anticipated and diagnosed ethically bad features and developmental tendencies of the contemporary world of business, and of the discourse of business ethics that attempts to rationally redescribe it.

ADORNO'S CRITIQUE AND TOPICS IN BUSINESS ETHICS

We now indicate what this changed, critical conception of thinking about business ethics might concretely amount to regarding key topics of business ethics.

Positivistic management

Adorno might not be a 'moral philosopher' in the sense that aligns with traditional theory, but his critical comments on social phenomena are far from being ethically neutral. Indeed, given that his Critical Theory is deeply and intentionally an examination of the ethically salient societal structures around us, Adorno emerges as a valuable resource for critically analysing the ethical dimensions of organizational and commercial practices in capitalist systems. There is, after all, much in the world of business and management that is worthy of negativist critique.

Part of the reason for this is that a considerable portion of management research adopts a scientistic and technicist view of management. Management and organisation studies often fall prey to 'physics envy' (Thomas & Wilson, 2011; Joullié & Spillane, 2022). In practice, and given that management of people is central to the discipline, this means that it often becomes primarily a discipline concerned with the classification, evaluation, and control of individuals. Freeman and Newkirk acknowledge that "[i]mplicit in much of the management discussion is a mechanical, deterministic, positivistic view of business—a financial engine controlled by the machinery of scientific management" (2009, p.117).

Adorno's critique of positivism is relevant here. Positivism takes knowledge produced by the natural sciences as the default form of human knowledge. It rests on two main assumptions: first, that the fundamental aspects of reality consist of states, events, and the constant conjunctions or universal regularities between them; and second, that knowledge is derived from observing these states and events and systematically organizing these observations through hierarchical if-then generalizations—laws—that allow deductions from these observations (e.g., Hempel & Oppenheim, 1948; Popper, 2002).

Adorno argues that positivism blurs the line between what is and what ought to be (Cook, 2001). On such a view, positivism implicitly endorses the status quo and aims to gather predictive knowledge about human behaviour for the purpose of manipulation and control, much like the natural sciences use knowledge of law-like regularities to exert control over – indeed, even 'dominate' (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002; see also Cook, 2011) – the natural world. Within the social realm, by reducing the world to empirical regularities, positivism overlooks the importance of unrealized potential, thereby stifling the possibility of meaningful change (Adorno, 1973). Positivistic thinking thus encourages the belief that the social and psychological realities of the modern world are both inevitable and unchangeable, leading to their acceptance rather than critical examination.

This mindset tends to produce a dehistoricized, reductionist, and reified consciousness regarding human phenomena. Consequently, research influenced by positivism is likely to be

deeply suspect on account of both implicitly validating a flawed social order while obscuring or deflecting attention from its systemic deficiencies (see Reeves & Sinnicks, 2024).

Consumer culture

A central aspect of Adorno's critique of consumer culture is the idea that people often embrace the trivialities offered by the 'culture industry' (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002), not because these align with their true needs, but because these distractions help them cope in a world that frustrates their genuine needs. This creates a paradox where these trivialities become real but ultimately false needs:

> People actually do not know what to do with their free time [because] they have been deprived beforehand of what would make the state of freedom pleasant to them. That state of freedom has been refused them and disparaged for so long that they no longer even like it. People need superficial distraction... in order to summon up the energy for the work that is demanded of them from the organization of society (Adorno, 2005b, p.172).

Moreover, this socially imposed triviality brings the qualities of labour, as enforced by a society governed by the exchange principle, into leisure itself (Adorno 2005b, p.171). As a result, although free time is meant to contrast with work time ultimately comes to mirror it, with a similar structure imposed on different content: "surreptitiously the contraband of behavioural mores from work, which never lets go of people, is being smuggled in" (Adorno 2005b, p.169).

The leisure and culture industries are designed to offer endless opportunities for superficial distraction. This was a central point in Adorno's critique of hobbies and the culture industry (2005b), but it has arguably become more pertinent in the present day. The advent of online streaming platforms is a case in point. It offers an almost endless stream of entertainment with addictiveness built in (for a fuller account, see Reeves & Sinnicks, 2024).

The other side of this enforced triviality is what Adorno terms 'pseudo-activity,' superficially 'productive' hobbies that tend to be merely the negative image of the actually and meaningfully productive activities that the advanced division of labour withholds from most of us: "what they create has something superfluous about it... which in turn spoils any pleasure it might give." (Adorno, 2005a, p.172) While trivial distractions are a response to boredom that manifests a renunciation of imagination, pseudo-activities are a misplaced attempt to claw back a sense of genuine agency: "pseudo-activity is misguided spontaneity." (Adorno, 2005a, p.173). This pseudo-activity represents a desire for authentic action—marked by relative freedom from the external forces of capitalist society—that approximates genuine autonomy, yet it is easily subsumed by the logic of work (Reeves & Sinnicks, 2024, pp.293-294).

Schoneboom suggests that "paid work continually extends its reach and... leisure is caught up in the dynamics of intensification" (2018, p.360). This is evident in our guilt when we fail to 'maximise the utility' of our free time, an experience which parallels the efficiency imperative typical of capitalism. The issue is not only that we should come to value 'idleness' (O'Connor, 2018), but also that various undesirable aspects of work, particularly the fetishisation of conscientiousness regardless of the end to which it is put, can distort our understanding of what is truly worth pursuing, leading to the failure of the impulse for spontaneous activity.

Social media and the public sphere

Another crucial way in which business shapes contemporary life is the influence of social media on the public sphere. Both news and participation in public conversation are increasingly mediated by a few dominant social media platforms with global reach. This reality has contributed to pathologies of democratic life such as 'fake news' and 'post-truth' culture, driving political polarisation, conspiracy theories and extremism of various stripes (Prakasam & Huxtable-Thomas, 2021). In this light, the hopeful vision of the internet as a neutral facilitator of public debate is no longer credible.

Adorno would have found this reality unsurprising. Indeed, his description of the mechanism which govern public discourse offer a prescient account of the tendencies which have developed further in subsequent decades. As far back as the 1940s, Adorno identified the underlying irrationality and destructiveness present in the individual tendencies that 'the administered society' fosters (Adorno et al. 2019). In the 1960s, Adorno diagnosed right-wing extremism's tendency to understand itself as a defence of 'true democracy' (Adorno 2020, p.24). Such tendencies are a conspicuous feature of today's social reality.

The subordination of news media to the logic of the culture industry had already eroded our capacities for rational discourse. News and public discourse are governed by the exchange principle. As a consequence, public discourse ends up being governed not by truth or rationality but by the untutored impulses at play in consumer preference. The result is a subjectivised and instrumentalised conception of public deliberation – an 'opinion delusion society' (see Adorno 2005b, pp.105-122). In such a society, "the tendency becomes to view the average of subjective opinions – the average of subjective reason, as it were – as the pinnacle of objectivity." (Adorno 2019a, p.57)

The upshot is a system promoting subjectivization, which glamorises arbitrary opinion. The role algorithms play in how news content is 'consumed' via social media is a telling example. In contrast to the editorial processes which shaped traditional news media, the algorithms of social media newsfeeds and recommendations operate out of view and beyond public scrutiny. The endless stream of content that we experience seems to emerge as if by natural growth, when in reality it reflects data profiles often procured without informed consent.

As a result of shaping ostensibly factual news according to partisan preferences, social media 'news feeds' invite the assumption that subjective preference is the measure of reality. This, in turn, underpins the rationalisation of a psychic defensiveness that fosters persecutory and destructive tendencies. Adorno suggests that the allure of subjectivist, 'opinion-delusion' thinking is the escape it provides from the responsibility to think for oneself. If the standard is mere subjective preference, error is ruled out and we are free to fit things into whatever narratives we find gratifying.

For Adorno, "the affective power inside people which resists [the idea of] objective, anonymous laws governing events over their heads is so immense that people will fall for this mechanism of personalization, even against their better judgment." (2019a, p.35) Yet at the same time, Adorno rejects the idea of technology as a reified force, which suppresses the element of human agency in the development of technical means, which have after all been developed under specific social conditions and imperatives. Neither focusing on individuals nor on technology gets the structural totality that is at work properly into view.

ADORNO'S CRITIQUE OF THE BUSINESS ETHICS TRADITION

Adorno's Critical Theory bears not only on topics in business ethics, but on the broader philosophical orientation of the modern business ethics tradition. In this section we consider the Adornian critique of that tradition.

Critique of Moral Philosophy

As in contemporary moral and political philosophy generally, in the business ethics tradition Kantian ethical thought has loomed large. In addition to the explicitly Kantian work of the likes of Bowie (2017), Smith and Dubbink (2011), et al. the Kantian tradition is also embodied in work in Rawlsian (Norman, 2015), contractualist (Luetge et al., 2016), and a range of other broadly deontological perspectives, including stakeholder theory (Gibson, 2000). According to Kant, the basic epistemological story about knowledge is that cognition confronts our desires, but takes them to be formless and to follow an event-causal order. Our minds construct experience out of them, assuming a set of synthetic a priori categories. Kant has to appeal to a very curious notion to forge a link between the sensible material and cognition, namely "transcendental apperception", a process of which by his admission the subject remains unaware (Kant, 2007, p.140). A crucial consequence of this is that the moral will is, in the final analysis, understood to be unconditionally free to assign order of importance to our interest. Adorno argues that this makes it, on the one hand, mysterious how reason alone could motivate one to act, while our desires as mere raw material could not secure a stable relation between minds and worlds, as cognition of objects becomes indistinguishable from the mere imposition of reason's own order (Adorno, 1973, pp.221–223).

The metaphysical conundrum is echoed in Kant's moral philosophy. As Kant declares in the first formulation of the Categorical Imperative, action from moral duty is performed not only as acceptable to any rationally thinking human being, but as willing the principle followed to become a universal law: "I ought never to proceed except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become universal law" (Kant, 2012, p.17). In a Kantian spirit, principle 9 of The UN Global Compact for Corporate Sustainability states that "Businesses should encourage the development and diffusion of environmentally friendly technologies" (UN n.d.). An attempt to treat the 'should' in a strict Kantian fashion yields curious results. Innovations typically involve capital-intensive research and development, which cannot be initiated without the expectation of returns. But these cannot be reaped without future competitive advantage, which consists principally of exclusive knowing or having. This means that the owners and managers of developer companies could not possibly be motivated to act out of willing the new environmentally-friendly technologies to become universally diffused as it would undermine their *sine qua non* profitability expectations. That would be self-defeating towards the very essence of private enterprise and thus contrary to the categorical imperative. In other words, it would not only be unrealistic to expect business managers act as the Global Compact states, but, according to the categorical imperative, also morally impermissible.

The Kantian business manager faces a dilemma of either acting out imperatives other than morality, or not acting at all. It is similarly implausible to expect capitalist businesses to be run as "moral communities", where "the interest of every member of the community are equal to the interest of every other member" (Bowie, 1998, p.46). So far, this may sound familiar to those who have reservations about deontological ethics. However, the standard assessment of deontological ethics as "more ideal than a reality" with respect to business actors misses the crucial point (Crane et al., 2019, p.103).

On the one hand, it is true that Kantian moral acts presuppose a world in which it is possible to unite subjective and objective interests, whereas capitalist business thrives on pitting subjects against one another, and all organisations against the objective expectations of the market as such. However, on the other hand, Kant is inadvertently perspicacious: it is *antagonistic* reality, in which one is formally free and freely giving oneself to be determined by forces outside one's control, which is articulated in painstaking detail in Kant's writings (Adorno, 1973, pp.214-21; 2000, pp.151-2). Furthermore, Kant's admission that the ultimate connection-point between reason and impulse, located in a transcendental capacity all human beings possess, is an indirect way of admitting that it is a supra-individual process (Horkheimer, 1993). What appears as metaphysically mysterious in Kant, doubles up as reified and mysterious in practices of social reality.

We propose in an Adornian spirit, that it is only on the basis of containing an essential truth about capitalism that Kant's moral thinking has been so highly productive for capitalist legal and market systems, and downstream as a business ethics mainstay. The Kantian 'ought' neatly transposes the relevant questions about the real conditions of possibility (ends of production, ownership and social value of business) of moral action onto conscience and hope. It is unique in allowing a simultaneous speculative moral utopianism and practical scepticism.

In other words, Kant's 'failure' to be useful to market agents is itself illuminating about market society. Business ethics scholars might benefit from Adorno's dialectical mode of reasoning by both recognising the incoherency and ideological function of Kant, but nonetheless persist with his thought, reading him against the grain, and ask: what is it about our economic system that simultaneously throws up the demand to think universally beyond particular individual or communitarian interests, and yet straddles agents in positions in which they cannot meaningfully act? If Kant's thinking is more ideal than one fitting reality, then perhaps it is reality that is at fault. What, if anything, could be done to make the individual interests cohere with the interests of all and vice-versa?

Critique of Political Economy

To answer these questions in principle requires a cold hard look at what is going on in our economies. Resources for that are diverse, but we offer "explanatory hypotheses" of sorts, via the intimate mentor to Critical Theory that is Marx's critique of political economy.

The objective social interest may well be posited to be happiness, efficiency, individual freedom or whatever else, but in our practical social life the reproduction of capital mediates them. In a sense, capital is the objective social interest within the world of its own making. What, one may ask, is wrong with that? Given this is the case, would it not be in in the objective interest to have more economic growth?

The difficulty, according to Marx, is that capitalism allows for the mediation of the subjective and objective only in a highly abstract form: as value, expressed in prices, as "a relationship between the individual labor of producers and the total labor of society" (Heinrich, 2004, p.55). It is only in market exchange where the subjective interest in some way connects with an objective interest. However, the objective interest is an enigma: the aims and organisation of the total labour of society do not correspond to any coordination, but rather follow pressures corresponding to expected returns on capital. In social terms capitalism is a type of self-contradiction as it can only preserve itself by intensifying the often-destructive competition between various units of capital, its agents, and workers.

Whilst such creative destruction can be the short-term interest of specific groups and individuals, the dynamic makes it impossible to achieve a conscious and deliberative approach to objective social goods, and thus it is often thought that optimally satisfying subjective preferences can take its place as the purpose of the economy (see, for instance, Heath, 2014).

Such an assumption – inherited from economics textbooks – glosses over complicated issues. Adorno writes, "[b]ut a thought based on a need becomes confused if our conception of the need is purely subjective. Needs are conglomerates of truth and falsehood; what is true is the thought that wants the right thing" (1973, p.93). On the one hand, there are things which human beings need, and things they do not but that may deceptively appear to be needed. The addict, for example, who is at some level convinced they need the drug or the gambling or whatever, is deceived by a distorted development of appetite, as may be clear to those around them, and even to them. But there are also needs that become actual because of the context yet are still false needs.

In one respect, what individuals need will be relative to the social world in which they live – for example, as we saw: managers may need to feel in control of their employees, as in the past supervisors felt in control of the machine; workers may need mindless and predictable distractions in their free time in order to recuperate from draining work and in order to stave off the bleak sense that their imaginative capacities are atrophying, etc. Often, when our needs go unmet, we adapt by channelling our needs into substitutes that can be met. We may actually need something in order to cope with a bad situation, and yet that need (and its fulfilment) may in turn be sustaining the bad situation that gives rise to it. The tendency to adaptation to a privative situation fuels the problem that our actual needs may often prop up the bad social situation that generates them.

The difficulty of separating the true needs from the actual but false needs is notorious, because of this tendency to adaptation, and because the articulation and satisfaction of needs takes place in alienated social relations, and it is these relations that we simultaneously reproduce whilst satisfying our actual, individual needs. The production of environmentally sustainable technologies is a true need in the sense that the planet must be sustained for life itself to go on. Nonetheless, it is arguable that lesser production as such could achieve similar or better results, thus making, say, electric vehicles potentially simultaneously a 'true' and a 'false' need: if they help to preserve the planet (and they may well do so), they do so only in and through preserving our capitalist social relations of production. The difficulty is that we cannot tell what the true objects of our needs are without a reflective insight into the aims of economic production as a whole.

Critical Business Ethics as Metacritique

Our earlier remarks on positivistic management, leisure consumption and social media exhibit this pattern of critique. Whereas the common sense of business ethics literature is that critique must be practical and propose improvements, Adornian critique rejects this demand in favour of a more curious and resilient commitment to the question of what it is live to well, which it poses to the concrete reality of our social world. This runs counter to the dominant demand in contemporary business ethics to make constructive recommendations. As Adorno puts it,

> One continually finds the word *critique*, if it is tolerated at all, accompanied by the word *constructive*. The insinuation is that only someone can practice critique who can propose something better than what is being criticized. By making the positive a condition for it, critique is tamed from the very beginning and loses its vehemence. (Adorno, 2005b, p.287)

Adorno's point is that the demand – ubiquitous in the business ethics tradition, and in the editorial demands of the top journals in the area – to offer some positive, constructive side threatens the integrity of critique. For we cannot assume *a priori* that it is possible to offer constructive recommendations, and even if possible, it is not a necessary condition of a valid critique.

Of course, in some circumstances "critique can proceed by way of confronting realities with the norms to which those realities appeal," because "following the norms would already be better" (Adorno, 2005b, p.287). But this will not always be enough, not least because it will not always be the case that following the norms will be better. If the appealed-to norms themselves are corrupt, following them may be worse than the norm-breaching reality, and there are contexts in which we are glad that the reality does not live up to the bad professed norms. Furthermore, realities typically appeal to numerous norms that may be in conflict not only with the reality but with each other. Hence, simply siding with the norms to which a reality appeals will not solve the problem. Critique cannot be insulated from the possibility of being led beyond such a comfort-zone.

The deeper form of critique will confront the reality with the fact that it appeals to values that it systematically, rather than accidentally or occasionally, flouts. This does not endorse those values any more than it endorses the reality that espouses them, but it challenges the whole – the reality to which values that it essentially flouts are essential. The conclusion of such a critique might be that the social whole is incoherent or contradictory insofar as it necessarily appeals to values it necessarily flouts. We would be interested then in why societies appeal to values they fail to live up to, and to decipher important aspirations in those values as well as what blocks their realisation.

This procedure is what Adorno calls 'metacritique'. Critical business ethics thus would involve a process of metacritical moral learning as unlearning. This might take in considering the extent to which ethical notions register social experiences but in distorted form, and the extent to which the dominant casting of certain problems as 'ethical' is itself a diversion from tackling other questions – of participation, ownership, aims of production, etc. In parallel to what has been suggested as the meaning of the Frankfurt School for critical management studies, critical business ethics could proceed in the spirit of "embracing its constraining elements and using the contradictions it produces to move towards something new" (Cluley and Parker, 2023, p.1711).

But the question whether such an investigation itself presupposes some philosophical grounds is far from uncontroversial. Indeed, in the emerging literature on Adorno and business ethics

there is a dispute about precisely how to interpret and extend Adorno's moral philosophy (in which the present authors have been interlocutors), to which we now turn.

INVERTED ARISTOTELIAN OR RESOLUTELY METACRITICAL?

For Adorno, then, the idea that ethical questions can coherently be posed as issues of abstract principle is an expression of the functional needs of a socio-economic system of domination and reification, and their tasks. But given that Adorno rejects the standard ways of approaching ethics, and so business ethics, might there still be a way of providing an ethical basis for Adorno's Critical Theory in the language of moral philosophy? Most plausibly, Adorno's thought sits in the Aristotelian ethical naturalist tradition, although in a negative or inverted form (see Freyenhagen, 2013; Reeves, 2016).

Rather than try to offer discursive justification for particular normative claims, Aristotelian ethics tries to account for the possibility and reproduction of virtuous character. Recent Aristotelian accounts do this by trying to elucidate the natural normativity of the human sphere (e.g. Foot, 2001; Hursthouse, 1999), attempting to spell out the naturalistic status of the virtues as elements of the proper functioning of the human being given our specifically human, rational nature. On this view, ethical *qua* natural normativity bottoms-out in our (distinctively rational) nature, and the task of ethics is to clarify that.

It makes sense to interpret Adorno in this tradition for several reasons. First, naturalistic normative language is ubiquitous in his works: our social world and its inhabitants are "damaged", "deformed", "sick", "ailing", "mutilated", etc. (Adorno, 2005a) Second, Adorno repeatedly rejects the idea that ethical claims can or should be discursively justified by appeal to more general principles. He writes,

> Nobody should be tortured; there should be no concentration camps… [These] lines are true as an impulse, as a reaction to the news that torture is going on somewhere. They must not be rationalised; as an abstract principle they would fall promptly into the bad infinities of derivation and validity. (1973, p.285)

The implication is that ethical insights depend on the right sort of impulses or immediate reactions and cannot be justified by appeal to more abstract principles since those principles would anyway need discursive justification in turn, a chain of derivation that would anyway bottom-out in impulses sooner or later. Rather, "breaking off rationality at such places better serves reason than a kind of pseudo-rationality that erects systems where it is first and foremost a question of immediate reaction" (2005b, p.304).

It is not that Adorno embraces an epistemology of immediacy or impulse, which would be just as arbitrary and abstract as the rationalism he rejects (cf. Hulatt, 2014). Rather, while bodily impulses are the crux of ethical responses, these impulsive reactions are only ethically adequate insofar as they are properly tutored, and so are not unmediated by reason. So far, so Aristotelian.

However, while positive Aristotelianism assumes a social world that adequately actualises and nurtures our human nature, for Adorno, humanity as such is yet to be socially actualised, and so cannot be positively appealed to. For positive Aristotelians our communities can be assumed to be adequate to tutor our impulses, and thus allow us to develop the virtues, including within the context of business and the workplace (Audi, 2012). For Adorno that is simply not the case.

On the contrary, our social world tends to suppress, erode and distort our ethical impulses, such that genuine ethical reactions are difficult to cultivate. Hence, adequate reactions are the aberration rather than the norm: the "reconciliation of spirit, the union of reason and nature, as it survives in [the] impulse" (Adorno, 2006, p.237) depends on reflection so that the impulse has passed "through coercive identity and [been] mediated by it," (2006, p.266) against the grain of the social world that depends on a distorting glorification of abstract principles.

Where positive Aristotelianism views our ethical impulses as redeemed by the adequacy of the community that explains them, Adorno's inverted Aristotelianism views our impulses as in the typical case distorted and undermined by the inadequate community that explains them. The redeemable ethical reactions are those negative impulses – experiences of resistance and rebellion to social ailing and suffering – that are not best explained as mere symptoms of the badness of our social world. It is our unactualized human potential that experiences and diagnoses of badness implicitly appeal to. And the whole account is redeemable insofar as Adorno's Critical Theory offers a more comprehensive and plausible explanation of our social world than rival accounts (Freyenhagen, 2013).

However, there is disagreement about how this fits with Adorno's metacritical commitments. On one prominent view, the unactualized human potential that metacritique of abstract ethics and business ethics must implicitly invoke has to be more than a mere potential or "postulate" (Freyenhagen, 2013, p.243). For diagnoses of *ailing* to make sense, the unactualized potential must correspond to a real human nature or human life-form that has so far been suppressed or distorted, and metacritique must presuppose it even though we do not know what it would be like and so cannot appeal to it as a positive standard.

Moreover, it might be thought that from insights into the badness of our situation, extrapolations to the good, to the suppressed potential, the true human life-form, are – however fallibilistically – possible (see Reeves, 2016). From the urgent need, say, to avoid a tornado, and the traumatic quality of such a need, quite a lot can surely be discerned about us – our vulnerability, our need for safety and a persisting secure base – and from this, various implications could be drawn (Reeves & Sinnicks, 2022). Or, from the fact that massive economic inequalities tend to generate and reinforce social problems for which no obvious solution has been found, it might be extrapolated that the human life-form involves a need for self-determination, democratic co-determination, and so mutual respect and the social bases for that. Such extrapolations would of course be fallibilist, and the more concrete we try to make them the more fallible our extrapolations will be. But that is nothing strange – scientific knowledge is accrued through similarly fallibilist extrapolations and speculations and their testing. In this light, the idea that nothing about the good could be even fallibilistically extrapolated from insights into the bad seems an arbitrary and unjustified restriction on moral imagination.

As introduced earlier, the other reading emphasises the thorough-going metacritical character of Adorno's Critical Theory and his critique of foundationalism (for discussion, see Nevasto, 2024). Adorno's metacritique of philosophy takes the framing of the question of ethics as a search for the ultimate good as misguided. Such questions are not resolvable by moral theories, debates among which are a mirror of society predicated on competition. While philosophers, like various stakeholders, will inevitably defend their particular conceptions of the good, it is not the task of critical theory to weigh-in on such debates. Rather, its aim is to raise to

theoretical consciousness the ways in which individuals and communities are all reliant upon and mostly powerless against the dynamics of capital's accumulation and reproduction. Accordingly, philosophy befitting a broken world involves a paradoxical attitude: it must face up to the experience of its suffering squarely, with despair but without nihilism, meaning that it must come to terms with the necessity of holding on to a utopian impulse, whist conceding the impossibility of any concrete overriding conception of the human good.

We next consider the implications of this debate for a particular topic in business ethics – the possibility of good work.

THE QUESTION OF 'GOOD WORK'

This interpretive dispute has implications for business ethics, including the question of good work. Is work something that we ought to wish away as an ideology of wrong life – should we want to be liberated from work? Or should we want the liberation *of* work from the distortion of our social world? And, if the latter, are some kinds of work closer to being good even within our distorted social world, or is that a hopeless humanist delusion bound to dilute critical aspirations?

For Adorno, modern work is by and large unfree and against our interests: it is mostly "time that is determined heteronomously" (Adorno, 2005a, p.167), and this shows up in various forms of suffering. One such form of suffering is the "feeling of powerlessness" (2005a, p.171). Most people today lack the freedom to "seek out and arrange [their] work according to [their] own intentions" (2005a, p.169). Even if there is a range of kinds of work made available to people by the market, this range does not necessarily include many desirable options, and anyway most people's actual options regarding the sorts of work they can do on the labour market are very restricted to options they do not themselves 'seek out' so much as reluctantly accept. But the fundamental problem is not the extent of subjective choice or control over one's work; it is, rather, that the objective qualities of available work which would be necessary to render such choice or control meaningful are largely absent:

> If one is born as a worker, unfreedom persists objectively despite the semblance of levelling and equalization... Every single one of us can, in spite of everything, also experience this when for example we find ourselves in a job-seeking situation. It will be experienced primarily in the fact that what is expected of us as someone who… has to sell themselves on the market is not what we ourselves would like; that is, we cannot actually realize our own possibilities and talent but must largely follow what is demanded of us. (Adorno, 2019a, pp.58-9)

Since the available forms of work are determined by the market, by what is and is not profitable, there is a disconnect between available work and fulfilling work in which we could realize our distinctive, personal, human qualities. For this reason, the modern work-world is predominantly a sphere of subjectively experienced powerlessness – particularly for those who are already most socio-economically vulnerable, deprived or marginalised, such as women (see Koskinen Sandberg, Törnroos, & Kohvakka, 2018) and ethnic minorities (see McDowell, Rootham, & Hardgrove, 2014).

Another form of suffering characteristic of contemporary work is boredom (Fisher, 1993; Johnsen, 2016). Insofar as it is a symptom of privation rather than mistake, boredom must have to do with the intrinsic, objective quality of work activities: "boredom is the reflex reaction to

objective dullness... boredom is objective desperation" (Adorno 2005a, p.171) flowing from "the [existing] structure of labour... the technically rationalised character of which basically consists in the repetition of ideally identical processes and operations on the part of the labouring individuals." (2019b, p.155) That is, workers' boredom registers the objectively tedious character of the work they are expected to perform today, and the impulsive protest against it.

On the inverted Aristotelian view, Adorno's diagnoses of the ills of modern work suggest that the corruption of work in our social world, rather than work as such, is the problem, and that good, undistorted work is in principle ethically valuable. Moreover, Adorno's critique of work is not merely negative: "we are merely encouraging the cause of untruth if we turn *prematurely* to the positive and fail to persevere in the negative" (Adorno & Mann, 2006, p.97, emphasis added), but that does not mean we should stop at the negative. From there, fallibilistic positive extrapolations present themselves.

That we suffer from the heteronomy of modern work plausibly implies that we have a need for autonomous activity. The feeling of powerless stands in stark contrast to the self-guided, virtuous execution of judgment, skill, and practical wisdom implied by autonomous work. And workers' struggles for more 'meaningful' or 'humanized' work seem an appropriate reaction against the objective dullness of work that boredom registers. These extrapolations point us, perhaps, toward a critical reconstruction of the 'craft conception' of work.

On this view, while most modern work is privative, work as such, irreducible to mere leisure, is of ineliminable ethical significance for us bearers of the human life-form. Thus, Adorno's critique takes up the intuition of the 'anti-work' tradition (Gorz, 1985) while reframing it: work in wrong life is privative, but work as such is ethically significant. We should want the liberation *of* work from the distortions of wrong life.

On the resolutely metacritical view, however, more circumspect conclusions follow. For any prospect of theoretically establishing notions such as good, better or humanly fitting work are, on this view, illusory. After all, the notions "good", "genuine" or "craft" work are also values within contemporary culture that is committed to self-realisation as a basic human good, mediated by the logic of capital's reproduction. The notion of human *qua* human forms of activity have been co-opted into the mainstream of business education by humanist management theories for decades. As Adorno was keenly aware, searching for non-reified domains in the annals of philosophy is attractive precisely because reified social relations are disappointing. Nonetheless, that search remains committed to "a latent idealism, and a barrier to incisive critique of idealism" (1973, p.93).

The concern is that the inverted Aristotelian view might place Adorno too close to the 'humanist' or 'idealist' positions he was so critical of. Given that accounts of meaningful or fitting human activity have been integrated into the mainstream of business education by humanist management theories for decades (see Pirson 2019 for an overview), it would appear there is no gap in the market for such accounts.

Moreover, we may wonder what justifies singling out some values as normative standards from which ethical and organizational practises can be legitimately judged? If we try to extrapolate ethical values from negative insights, do we not run the risk of fetishizing the abstract negation, the mere opposite of what is bad about our social world? For example, in *Minima Moralia*

Adorno expresses scepticism about the 19th century ideal of the full actualisation and realisation of human powers, as the mere abstract negation of the stultifying and oppressive forms of work characteristic of industrial society, which secretly aligns with the societal principle of that society:

> The conception of unfettered activity, of uninterrupted procreation, of chubby insatiability, of freedom as frantic bustle, feeds on the bourgeois concept of nature that has always served solely to proclaim social violence as unchangeable, as a piece of healthy eternity… Perhaps the true society will grow tired development and, out of freedom, leave possibilities unused… (2005a, p.156)

This presses home the point that we should be wary of extrapolating positive ethical values from current privations. On the resolutely metacritical interpretation, Adorno's critique of modern work forces us to ask important questions about the limits of ethical insight. Rather than exploring positive ethical implications, we are encouraged to reflect sceptically on the purpose and value of doing so in our wider socio-economic situation.

Moreover, the same logic of capital reproduction penetrates the very process of writing about such matters in collections such as the present one, as the career prospects of academics depend upon producing chapters such as these: "the critic himself is also measured only in terms of his marketable success" (Adorno, 1982, p.20). This presses the starkly metacritical question of how far attempts to extract positive extrapolations from Adorno's negative criticisms are shaped by the demands and expectations of the economics of present academic commentary, which is also part of the socio-economic world – and such questions ought to be taken seriously. Taking these issues seriously, we might give more weight to Adorno's occasional favourable remarks on "freedom from work" (e.g. Adorno & Horkheimer, 2019, p.16).

Against this, though, Adorno does often seem to take the ethical worth of work seriously, and to think that we can extrapolate ethical values from the current privations of work. For example, he insists that "[w]e must not succumb to the ideology of work, but we cannot deny that all happiness is twinned with work." (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2019, p.35), and, when his friend and mentor Max Horkheimer pushes the anti-work position – "The worst thing is to mix up work and happiness" (2019, p.39) – Adorno explicitly refuses it, insisting that "work is also happiness, but one isn't allowed to say so" (2019, p.39). Such passages suggest that we should want the liberation *of* work from the heteronomous and tedious corruptions of it in our social world, and hint that even in wrong life work can sometimes approximate to worthwhile, good work.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While the dispute about the interpretation of Adorno in relation to business ethics remains an open one, we hope to have made clear that, on either view, Adorno's Critical Theory has rich and provocative implications for the question of good work, for several other central topics in business ethics, and for the practice of business ethicists more generally.

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