Fabian Freyenhagen


Freyenhagen’s book is timely, important, and powerful. It is timely because Adorno has yet to receive the sort of robust Anglophone reception that other figures from the German philosophical tradition have received—one thinks of Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger (a notable exception is Jay Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, (Cambridge University Press, 2001)). This reception is important because Adorno offers insights about the (often dangerous) turns that capitalism has taken. For this reason, Freyenhagen’s account is powerful: because Adorno’s insights are as pertinent now as they were when he wrote. Furthermore, by unpacking those insights in a vocabulary that neither relies nor—importantly—betrays Adorno’s own (at worst, bewildering, and, at best, challenging) vocabulary, Freyenhagen has written a book that will be useful for specialists and generalists. Now, Freyenhagen’s book is not an overview of Adorno’s thought, but this is no failing of the book since such a task would be difficult if not possible (given Adorno’s varied output—the German edition of Adorno’s writings is currently 20 volumes). Instead, Freyenhagen focuses on Adorno’s practical philosophy. And while Freyenhagen’s book is just shy of three hundred pages, it covers a wide array of material. For this reason, I cannot hope to summarize it. Instead, I will focus on the most significant elements of his argument; needless to say, there is much that I neglect. Along the way, I also make a few critical comments, noting places where I think that Freyenhagen’s account raises questions.

Freyenhagen sees Adorno committed to ‘negativism’ (Freyenhagen delineates various ways of elaborating this—see p. 4 and the introduction). In this way, Adorno is wed to the “No Right Living Thesis” (p. 52ff), which suggests that (1) we do not “really and actively shape our lives” and that (2) we do not live “a morally acceptable life” (p. 52). Both are justified through an analysis of Adorno’s estimation of the modern world. Following Marx, Adorno sees in the modern world, a “commodification of all aspects of life” (p. 31), an alienation from the fruits of one’s labor (p. 32), and an exploitation of subjects (p. 34). For, Adorno, capitalism has formed a totality, albeit not one without contradictions (p. 36ff). Where Adorno differs from Marx is that the Adorno “does not think that when the forces of production come into conflict with the relations of production...capitalism will necessarily collapse” (p. 37). In other words, capitalism is not self-defeating; rather it can continue in contradiction essentially indefinitely (or, at least, until we destroy ourselves). Apart from these material conditions, Adorno also diagnoses problems with the forms of modern
thought, where identity thinking reigns (Freyenhagen provides his reading of this concept at p. 44ff). Because of his analysis of the modern world, Freyenhagen highlights the extent to which Adorno sees the world as radically evil (p. 27ff), as both (1) producing “practical antinomies” (p. 60) and (2) ensnaring us in “ideological claims” (pp. 60–61). In other words, our world is such that it forces upon us practical quandaries (Freyenhagen gives a list of examples on pp. 57–58), and also produces subjects who are “prone to hold beliefs, attitudes, and preferences which are false or distorted in ways that benefit the established social order” (p. 60). Furthermore, these two work together to produce subjects whose lives are “more and more standardized” and who exist largely as functions in an administered world (say “consumer and producer”—p. 63). Modern individuals (whether rich or poor or in between) have become appendages tacked onto the capitalist structure (p. 64ff).

All of this, however, should not be taken to imply that some ways of living are not less wrong than others (nor to suggest some sort of nostalgia for a golden past—pp. 67–71). The minimization of suffering and the cultivation of solidarity with those suffering is one way to live a life less wrongly (see chapter 5, and especially Freyenhagen’s discussion of suffering at p. 147ff). Another way to live less wrongly: pursuing critical reflection and an ethics of resistance against the current social order (see chapter 6). A merit of Freyenhagen’s account is that he tackles the chief question that this raises: what justification can Adorno give for these claims? Freyenhagen proposes an account of Adorno’s alleged “negative Aristotelianism,” where the authority of such norms is indexed to the situation in question, and failing to recognize the situation as this sort of situation is a moral failing (p. 199). The difference from Aristotle and neo-Aristotelians is not, then, “about the basic outlook,” but rather “about whether humanity is realized already or not, and thereby about whether we are in the position to say what humanity and its goodness consists in” (p. 239). Adorno’s position, according to Freyenhagen, is unsurprisingly that we are not; this is the chief difference between Adorno’s negative Aristotelianism and others. The form is similar: one can be a ‘phronimos of the bad’ (my phrase), where one knows and acts via a sensible experience of the bad (and this ties to Freyenhagen’s appendix on Adorno’s notion of the addendum and moral impulses). Adorno, then, cannot be faulted for failing to provide a ‘justificatory’ account of norms (as in Habermas’s influential critique), for that was a project that he rejected, instead opting for an account of normativity that (1) relies solely on the situation in question, (2) connects up with Adorno’s stress on moral impulses, and (3) must be able to countenance an explanatory (not necessarily a justificatory) account of normativity (for all of these, see chapter 7). According to Freyenhagen, such a view doesn’t require any knowledge of the