

Non-Pious Discourse: Adorno, Ethics, and the Politics of Suffering¹

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“In the innermost recesses of humanism, as its very soul, there rages a frantic prisoner who, as a Fascist, turns the world into a prison.”

– Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 89

Theodor Adorno’s ideas of wrong and damaged life have implications that remain relevant today for opposing war and the administered world, for the possibility of living a moral or right life, and, inseparably, for the persistence of philosophy and its relation to life.²

The larger constellation Adorno configured referentially for his own thinking suggests the nature of the crisis in philosophical thought to which, in relation to the notion of the way of the world [*der Weltlauf*] and to experience and life, his work responds.³ He has always in mind other such moments of crisis and responses to them, among them Immanuel Kant’s work, the three Critiques and especially the First, in which Adorno was thoroughly schooled at a young age, dealing with the inescapable contradictions of human reason and the “endless controversies” they engender, the “battlefield” [*Kampfplatz*] of which, Kant says, “is called metaphysics.”⁴ The second figure is Hegel “whose method,” Adorno says, “schooled that” of his book *Minima*

¹ In his refutation of Emmanuel Levinas’s theologically based ethics, Alain Badiou writes that unsubordinated to the theoretical and in general, “ethics is a category of pious discourse” (*Ethics*, p. 23). Badiou’s “ethical” thought seems sometimes similar to Adorno’s but is so resolutely Cartesian and Rationalist (and French) in its philosophical lineage that there is little to connect the two specifically, beyond their mostly shared materialism, the assumption that the word “ethics” is little more than a marker of bourgeois ideology, and the influence of Marx, which varies.

² Adorno’s best known statement of the ideas of “wrong” and “damaged” life occur in *Minima Moralia*, especially the book’s subtitle and pp. 38-39.

³ In *Late Marxism*, Fredric Jameson writes of “Benjamin’s and Adorno’s (profoundly modernist) fascination with the ‘constellation’ as such — a mobile and shifting set of elements in which it is sheer relationship rather than substantive content that marks their structure as a whole. This means that in a constellation there can be no ‘fundamental’ features, no centers, no ‘ultimately determining instances’ or bottom lines, except for the relationship of all these contents to each other . . .” (p. 244). Jameson’s book (not without controversy) has renewed and deepened attention to Adorno as “one of the greatest of twentieth-century Marxist philosophers” whose complex work only grows in interest and importance (p. 4).

⁴ From the opening paragraphs of the Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 99.

Moralia, arguing “against the mere being-for-itself of subjectivity on all its levels” (*Minima Moralia*, p. 16), and whose work extends the notion of contradiction, as well as of error, to make both constitutive, as subsumed moments, in the self-development of *Geist*, putatively absolute and complete. The third major figure in Adorno’s philosophical constellation is Karl Marx (Marxism is the “brightest star” in Adorno’s configuration),⁵ who of course took very much from Hegel, and argued, in the problematic Eleventh of the Theses on Feuerbach that the point was not, as philosophy had thus far endeavored, to interpret the world, but rather to change it, i.e., to realize philosophy socially and in action by making a different, far more peaceful and just world.⁶ The last constellational figure is Adorno’s philosophical friend Walter Benjamin, from whom he gained, among other things, aspects of a complex notion of historical materialism and of the working concepts of modes of production and secular redemption – all indicating the importance of Marx and social change for both thinkers.⁷ Adorno argued that the revolution, the attempt to realize philosophy, had failed (as he saw, for example, in the history of the Soviet Union’s famines and the purges of the prewar Stalin years and in Germany itself in the years after WWI); and he developed a socially necessary philosophical response to this crisis, which he eventually called Negative Dialectics.⁸ But he remained deeply, pervasively influenced by Marx’s materialist analysis of the systemic social and economic problems and contradictions of late

⁵ Martin Jay writes that this “brightest star” is “Marxism, or more precisely the heterodox tradition of Western Marxist thought inaugurated by Georg Lukacs and Karl Korsch in the years immediately following the First World War” (p. 15).

⁶ Louis Althusser argues in *For Marx* (pp. 32-36) that the Theses on Feuerbach is a Work of the (epistemological) Break (1845) in Marx’s oeuvre – and a series of *riddles* in form. There’s much to be said for the dynamics of this historicizing move, and for Althusser’s, and Marx’s, alertness to rhetorical form.

⁷ One thinks first here of Benjamin’s *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, and the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” from *Illuminations*. But much else would be relevant, including many passages of *The Arcades Project* and the magnificent essay on Proust (“Zum Bilde Prousts”) translated as “On the Image of Proust” in the *Selected Works*. Adorno also adapts the notions of *force field* [*Kraftfeld*] and *constellation* from Benjamin.

⁸ He wrote his 1966 book *Negative Dialectics* with the idea that “a new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler on unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen” (p. 365). Although I certainly recognize the importance of *Negative Dialectics* in Adorno’s lifework, in my view his final book *Aesthetic Theory* is his best and most important book, philosophically as well as in other respects.

capitalist society and by the moral and utopian potential implicit in his thought and work.⁹

A counterpart of Adorno's philosophical constellation (its dark matter, one might say) is the work of conservative (one-time National Socialist) philosopher Martin Heidegger to whom Adorno as anti-fascist played the role of chief philosophical antagonist throughout his life's work – but this problem will not be further touched upon here.¹⁰

Theodor Adorno was deeply concerned with the question of whether or not one can live a moral life – a good or right life – in the modern world, and he argued the negative, that, as he puts it in his 1951 book *Minima Moralia*, “wrong life cannot be lived rightly” [*Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen*] (pp. 38-9). The subtitle of *Minima Moralia* is Reflections from damaged Life [*Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*; in the French translation, *Réflexions sur la vie mutilée*]. Each of these three versions of the subtitle emphasizes the social or universal meanings of Damage and Life. And by life [*Leben*], he means basically but not only, as he puts it, what “the philosophers once knew as life” (*Minima Moralia* 15).¹¹

⁹ In his excellent essay “Red Kant, or the Persistence of the Third *Critique* in Adorno and Jameson,” p. 717, Robert Kaufman notes that “Adorno is himself committed to aesthetic, sociological, and historical analyses that spring from – and continue to utilize – Marxian thought about modes of production, means of production, and relations of production.” But even this understates the centrality of Marx to Adorno's thought. Badiou states, somewhat grudgingly, in the Appendix to *Ethics* (pp. 105, 113) that the “part of Marxism that consists of the scientific analysis of capital remains an absolutely valid background” and that it is Marx's idea that emancipatory politics “must be at least equal to the challenge of capital.”

¹⁰ Adorno's book *The Jargon of Authenticity* is his best-known critique of Heidegger – whom Adorno thought to be always a fundamentally fascist thinker – and German existential ontology, but his essays and books have passing criticisms of Heidegger from practically his first publications until his last book, *Aesthetic Theory*, published after his death in 1969. The chapters he published on Husserl in 1956 (English translation 1983, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique*) are extremely interesting in this regard although far less well known. There is an extended statement of Adorno's main points of disagreement with Heidegger in Martin Jay's essay “Taking on the Stigma of Inauthenticity: Adorno's Critique of Genuineness” (*Adorno and Ethics*, pp. 25-6).

¹¹ Stuart Hampshire in his fine book on Spinoza gives some sense of what Adorno means here, concerning life (although Adorno makes no claim to be a Spinozist): “The order of Spinoza's thought and the whole structure of his philosophy cannot be understood unless they are seen as culminating in his doctrine of human freedom and happiness and in his prescription of the right way of life” (*Spinoza*, p. 25). Malcolm Bull discusses this problem of conceptions of life in his “Vectors of the Biopolitical,” *NLR* 2007, where he traces its complexities from Aristotle through Foucault, Agamben, and around to Marx. Alistair Morgan's 2007 study *Adorno's Concept of Life* traces what he sees as Adorno's somewhat ambivalent relations to earlier philosophical notions of Life..

I want to worry that simple sentence – wrong life cannot be lived rightly – to emphasize some of its important implications for philosophy and for the problem of whether or not one can live rightly now, in this time of crisis, in our violent, business-dominated, war-scarred time – our stage of the capitalist mode of production – and how the life we know and live is damaged. For the purposes of this paper, I take Adorno’s terms “damaged life” and “wrong life” to be roughly equivalent.

Some readers (including, oddly, the editors of the new Verso edition of *Minima Moralia* and in part J.M. Bernstein in his book on Adorno and ethics, and even Detlev Claussen in his recent biographical study of Adorno’s lifework) translate the critical theorist’s sentence to be a claim about “a” life, about Adorno’s personal or individual life, rather than about social or general life.¹² That is, they seem to want to take it in a particular but not a universal sense, or at least they bridle at taking as a universal Adorno’s claim that wrong life cannot be lived rightly. Such resistance, however, is ideological and has to constitute itself by ignoring Adorno’s own argument – as made in *Minima Moralia* and thematically throughout his life’s work – that the concept of wrong or damaged life must be taken first in the social and universal (philosophical) sense, and then subsequently as indicating the dialectical interactions and interdependencies of subject and object, of particular and universal, the complex mediations of individual and society. Adorno’s argument is also that, although subject and object exist in a dialectical relationship, the object always exceeds and differs from the subject, thus frustrating the subject’s desire to dominate and control the object through knowledge and identification – as often, for instance, in the relations of the natural sciences and the world of nature. As Adorno puts it in *Minima Moralia*, negating Hegel’s well-known formulation, “The whole is the false” [*Das Ganze ist das Unwahre*; p. 50].¹³ The “central problem of

¹² J.M. Bernstein says on p. 2, for instance, of *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, that “there is no binding morality because a ‘wrong life cannot be lived rightly’”; the new Verso edition of the book is subtitled “Reflections from a Damaged Life.” Detlev Claussen writes on p. 244 of his recent biographical study of Adorno that in his work the “identity principle is questioned not just philosophically but by the experience of ‘a damaged life,’” and in the footnote on that phrase says incorrectly that it is the “subtitle of *Minima Moralia*.”

In my view Bernstein’s curious effort to wrench Adorno’s moral thought into consonance with conventional academic philosophical ethics renders his book practically useless from an authentically Adornian perspective.

¹³ The whole passage (in English) in Hegel’s famous Preface reads: “The truth is the whole. The whole, however, is merely the essential nature reaching its completeness through the process of its own

philosophy,” he says in his 1963 course of lectures *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, “is the relationship of the particular, the particular interests, the behaviour of the individual, particular human being and the universal that stands opposed to it” (p. 18). He consistently uses the terms universal [*allgemein*] and particular [*besonder*] first in their precise Kantian sense but then extending their range to social meanings. As Adorno argues in a later lecture from that course, “what appears in Kant as the intertwining of man and nature is also the intertwining of man and society. For in that second nature, in our universal state of dependency, there is no freedom. And for that reason there is no ethics either in the administered world. It follows that the premise of ethics is the critique of the administered world.” And a little further on in that lecture he writes that “anything that we can call morality today merges into the question of the organization of the world” (p. 176), and this ultimately in an action-oriented way. He thought that to “reduce the problem of morality to ethics is to perform a sort of conjuring trick by means of which the decisive problem of moral philosophy, namely the relation of the individual to the general, is made to disappear” (*Problems of Moral Philosophy*, p. 18). Adorno’s thinking here is partly consonant with Alain Badiou’s critique of “ethics” in his little book on the subject, for instance when he writes (truly) that “the theme of ethics and of human rights is compatible with the self-satisfied egoism of the affluent West, with advertising, and with service rendered to the powers that be” (p. 7) although Badiou’s thought is constrained mostly within the French philosophical sphere. And Badiou’s ethical thought, his ethic of truths, is shadowed by a theological, and bourgeois, remnant.

The need for critical, anti-personalist, non-pious argument about the enabling conditions of ethics/morality is more pressing today, I believe, in the ever more business-dominated and fractured world than when Adorno made it a half-century ago. But this need is ever an effect of the capitalist mode of production, as Marx argued so clearly in “The Chapter on Money” (Notebook 1) of the *Grundrisse*, for example, where he writes that in the process of commodification the “mutual influence of conscious individuals on one another” colliding with each other “produce an *alien* social power standing above them, produce their mutual interaction as a process and power independent of them,”

development. Of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a result, that only at the end is it what it is in very truth; and just in that consists its nature, which is to be actual, subject, or self-becoming, self-development” (A.V. Miller trans., p. 16).

which apparent helplessness is a primary effect of Circulation, “the first totality among the economic categories . . .” (pp. 196-7).

How broadly does Adorno intend for his claim of “damaged life” to be applied? What does he intend its range of reference to be? Does it include all the world’s cultures and peoples, for instance, the impoverished of the Global South as well, or does it apply only to Westerners (including the westernized)? Or more narrowly just to Western intellectuals and artists? Or to, as he says, “the mutilation of women by patriarchal society” (*Minima Moralia*, p. 246). Or perhaps only to German intellectuals, many Jewish, many Marxist, who fled from Hitler’s Germany in the years after January, 1933, to New York and southern California – including Adorno and his wife, Gretel, as well as Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Thomas Mann, Fritz Lang, and Bertholt Brecht, among others? Including Adorno’s philosophical friend Walter Benjamin, who in late September 1940 committed suicide while trying to cross the Pyrenees from France into Catalonia, thinking that the Gestapo was about to apprehend him? Or might it apply only to Adorno’s own individual situation, having landed as he did finally in Pasadena in his flight from the Nazis, in what Georg Lukacs scornfully referred to as the Grand Hotel Abyss [*Abgrund*] (a phrase he had first applied to Schopenhauer)?¹⁴ Is it, then, not damaged life in general, but only *a* damaged life, Adorno’s own – as the new Verso subtitle and J.M. Bernstein’s book on Adorno seem to want to insist?

The answer has to be that it includes all of these levels of reference, and no doubt more, but taken together and dialectically interrelated, with emphasis on the relation of individual to general, the two constantly fading into and out of each other although never as an identity. In the dedication of the book to Max Horkheimer Adorno writes that “the specific approach of *Minima Moralia*” is “to present aspects of our shared philosophy from the standpoint of subjective experience” (p. 18). It is important to note here, in the term “subjective experience,” the distancing from the merely autobiographical or memoiristic and the insistent relation of this experience to society, to life, and to philosophy. Indeed, there is a consistent Epicurean level in the complexity of Adorno’s life and thought (as in Marx’s), most notably in his philosophical friendships (Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin) and his thoroughgoing materialism, although of course

¹⁴ *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 23.

there is much more than Epicureanism, as well, given the social, economic, and egalitarian emphases of his work, and his insistence on the necessity of the materialist dialectic.¹⁵ Adorno, like any historically minded materialist, on principle and out of respect for truth, would not seek his philosophical standard, his standard of thought, in thinkers from an earlier mode of production.¹⁶

Clearly, Adorno's argument of "wrong life" applies to himself, insofar as he lived in, and as a social being was also necessarily distorted by, an economically exploitative and imperial profit-driven industrial system with all of its social and ideological power, including what he called the Culture Industry, a consistent concern in his writing.¹⁷ He argues that this system, this "administered world" (what in the largest sense he calls "Auschwitz") reduces human individuals to objects or things, thus negating human qualities and denying them the utopian hope for the potential fullness and difference of their human being as well as that of others¹⁸ – indeed, often enough denying them life itself, as in the mechanized death of the Nazi concentration camps, the Anglo-American policy of strategic including nuclear bombings – the allied firebombings of Dresden and Tokyo, as well as the atomic bombs exploded over Hiroshima and Nagasaki – and the continuing, brutal and brutalizing colonial or imperial wars.¹⁹ His book *Minima Moralia*

¹⁵ Marx's dissertation (on the *Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*) shows that early on he was forging the materialist dialectic in part as a way of resolving the issue of the *clinamen*, or swerve, which was Epicurus's (and I would argue Kant's) solution to the problem of free will. There are no leaps or swerves in Marx's mature thought, nor indeed in that of Adorno, because one of the purposes of materialist dialectic is to obviate perceived need for them, to think things through in materialist terms that cognize human freedom. Adorno works this out in part in his early book *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, which "appeared in bookstores on February 27, 1933, the day that Hitler declared a national emergency and suspended the freedom of the press . . ." (p. xi).

¹⁶ Spinoza is an example, as is Benjamin, and of course Marx, who, for instance, in "The Working Day" section of *Capital* Vol. I, 358, says (in reference to a House of Commons committee report) that "this kind of 'sophistry' understands better than Protagoras how to make white black, and black white, and better than the Eleatics how to demonstrate before your very eyes that everything real is merely apparent" – a critique that also prefigures Adorno's of Heidegger.

¹⁷ Perhaps most notably but certainly not only in the "Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" section of his and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*.

¹⁸ One example is in the chapter on The Working Day in vol. 1 of *Capital*, the passage concerning human qualities, with clear implications of the utopian future, in the midst of his wry discussion of the laborer's "leisure time" under Capital; or, again for example, in the utopian implications of Adorno's discussion of artistic form as "the seal of social labour" (*Aesthetic Theory*, p. 143).

¹⁹ In Lecture Fifteen of *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, for instance, he refers to "Auschwitz or the atom bomb or all those things which belong together here" and a little later refers to "Auschwitz and the world of Auschwitz" (pp. 116, 118). In Lecture 1 of *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965* he says that "by Auschwitz I mean of course the entire system. Confronted with the fact that Auschwitz was

is especially resonant in an individual (but not autobiographical) regard, perhaps especially in his meditations on the related concepts of home, housing, homelessness, refugees, and dwelling (profound moral and social issues in contemporary life, as becomes clear in the struggle for the concept of home between Adorno and Heidegger and academic humanists), but even in this apparently most personal of his works one finds frequent reference to the universal and its relations to the particular.²⁰ He writes on p. 154 that he “who holds fast the self and does away with theological concepts helps to justify the diabolical positive, naked interest. He borrows from the latter an aura of significance and makes the power of command of self-preserving reason into a lofty super-structure, while the real self has already become in the world what Schopenhauer recognized it to be in introspection, a phantom.” Indeed, Adorno’s commitment to and development of a critical dialectical thinking that grows out of engagement with the works of Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Benjamin, conceived as force fields, in response to history, would demand that he never stray from the dynamic relations between universal and particular, individual and society, the commodity and its fetishism, the forces and relations of production; and in *Minima Moralia*, as in his other finished, published works, Adorno’s materialist dialectic is pervasive, as well as consistently negative, as indicated by the title of his major philosophical book, *Negative Dialectics* (1966). Still, he had gained from Walter Benjamin intensified awareness of the need for secular social and historical redemption, at the same time as he denies any truth to mere affirmation or reproduction of existing society or to a transcendental being. “Knowledge,” he says at the end of *Minima Moralia*, “has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without arbitrariness [my translation] or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects – this alone is the task of thought” (p. 247). (Adorno thoroughly secularizes Benjaminian words and concepts like “messianic” and “redemption.”)

possible, that politics could merge directly with mass murder, the affirmative mentality becomes the mere assertion of a mind that is incapable of looking horror in the face and that thereby perpetuates it” (p. 7).

²⁰ My fragmented essay on home and homelessness in *minnesota review* (fall 2003), “Scattered Remarks on the Ideology of Home,” attempts to give some sense of the social and historical depth and breadth of the ongoing struggle over this most human of needs and concepts.

Adorno's argument implies that all of the world's cultures and peoples are damaged, or in a state of wrong life, to the extent that their practices, feelings, thought, and lives are determined by the decline and failure of that *haut bourgeois* society that culminates in World War I, by the failure of the German, Soviet, and world revolutions in the period late in or after the Great War, by the rise of Fascism and the horror of Auschwitz, by the globalizing, exploitative capitalist system – in brief, by what he often calls the administered world. Adorno was from the first an anti-fascist and Marxian thinker, although certainly no merely doctrinaire or dogmatic Marxist, and he considered the contradiction between the progressive technical forces of production and the static or regressive relations of production in modern economies, the processes of commodification and its accompanying, pervasive fetishism, and exploitation of humankind and of nature merely for relative surplus value, for profit, to be socially determining root problems that all human beings, and global society, necessarily but not quite consciously face and are damaged by.²¹ These fundamental characteristics of capitalism are (among other things) personally and socially distracting, inhibit and block thought, and thus cause much suffering and deflect people, humanity, from their properly human goals. In the 1964-65 course of lectures titled *History and Freedom*, he argues that, to achieve a better world and avoid self-destruction, humanity must develop into its own “global social subject,” into a “human race that possesses genuine control of its own destiny right down to the concrete details, and is thus able to fend off the unseeing blows of nature,” which would in fact amount to the coming into being for the first time of an actual human race, or humanity. This development of a “global subject of mankind,” real and not merely formal, would, and one hopes will, enable humanity to eliminate material want and avoid world-wide catastrophe: “Given the current state of technical development,” he argues, “the fact that there are still countless millions who suffer hunger and want must be attributed to the forms of social production, the relations of production, not to the intrinsic difficulty of meeting people's needs” (pp. 143-44). Malcolm Bull, in his recent discussion of related problems, writes that the “alienated

²¹ In this as in so much else he agrees with Marx, as in “The Working Day” chapter of *Capital I*: “the production of surplus-value, or the extraction of surplus labour, forms the specific content and purpose of capitalist production, quite apart from any reconstruction of the mode of production itself which may arise from the subordination of labour to capital” (411).

human beings of civil society are prematurely social, living in society before the socialization of the world.” He concludes by arguing, in nearly Adornian mode, that to be “equally social and socially equal may be utopian, but seeking to measure progress in that direction is not” (*NLR* 45 May/June 2007, 24-25).

And, to return to an earlier point, when Adorno refers to Auschwitz, as he often does after World War II – denoting specifically the Nazi concentration camps at Auschwitz/Birkenau in Poland, where over a million human beings, mostly Jews, were systematically killed – he means, as he often says, the entire system that produces mass mechanized murder, including the catastrophes of nuclear weapons, genocide, and colonial wars such as that in Vietnam (as he says in the 1965 lectures published as *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, p. 101). This Auschwitz system now includes the American-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq: A recent public health study indicates that excess mortality in Iraq is over one million persons since, and because of, the US invasion of 2003, not to mention the 4.7 million refugees forced from their homes into exile, half of whom have fled to crowded camps and urban squalor in Jordan and Syria. Recent studies confirm and update these consequences of the American war: “The overall figures are stunning: 4.5 million displaced, 1-2 million widows, 5 million orphans, about one million dead – in one way or another, affecting nearly one in two Iraqis.”²² The war in general, of course, affects all Iraqis. And also recently, American-influenced Pakistani military operations have displaced over two million persons in the Swat Valley. One can easily multiply such examples of avoidable catastrophic human suffering in the present time – Palestine or Columbia, for instance, Bolivia, the fetid, disease-ridden slums of Cairo or Manila, or much of sub-Saharan Africa; or the rapidly increasing United States reliance on deadly, wholly impersonal drones, such as Predator and Reaper, remotely triggered from a bunker in Nevada, to try to control the world’s poor. What Adorno calls the administered world, the world of Auschwitz, is clearly still with us, and we are still within it, are parts of it; and thus, I argue, in order to live a moral or ethical life, a right

²² John Tirman, *The Nation*, February 16, 2009, p. 6. Tirman (executive director and principal research scientist at the MIT Center for International Studies) updates among others the extensive public health survey done by Gilbert Burnham MD, *et al.* “Mortality after the 2003 invasion of Iraq: a cross-sectional cluster sample survey,” *The Lancet* 2006, 368: 1421-1428. The refugee figures have been widely reported; they appear in Patrick Cockburn’s articles in the *London Review of Books*, Sunday 14 August 2008, pp. 18-19, and in *The Guardian* of 20 September 2008.

life, in our time, at this stage of the capitalist mode of production, it is necessary first to acknowledge fully in thought, philosophically, the fundamental injustice of this system in which, as Adorno writes in *Minima Moralia*, “abundance of goods may temporarily obscure constantly increasing material inequalities” (p. 59) and then in some effective sense engage in the formation of the needed global human subject and join the radical work of changing the wrong world into a universally peaceful and just one.

Exactly how just? Adorno paraphrases an injunction from Walter Benjamin: “So long as there is still a single beggar . . . there is still myth; only with the last beggar’s disappearance would myth be appeased” (*Minima Moralia*, p. 199). Benjamin himself, in his “*Expose* of 1935” pointed to the difficulty of living a moral life, given the “amorality of the business world and the false morality enlisted in its service”²³ – words that deserve wide use in the present situation of global economic crisis and corruption. Adorno pursues this criticism of our business civilization when he writes in *Minima Moralia* that the “mechanism for reproducing life, for dominating and for destroying it, is exactly the same, and accordingly industry, state, and advertising are amalgamated. The old exaggeration of skeptical Liberals that war was a business, has come true: state power has shed even the appearance of independence from particular interests in profit; always in their service really, it now also places itself there ideologically” (p. 53). Present realities make this ring all the more true.

I wholly agree with Adorno (and Benjamin) that human beings should not submit to what Hegel calls (using an ancient expression) *der Weltlauf*, the way of the world, that wrong life cannot be lived rightly, that the world and the complex social and economic system in which we live – Auschwitz, or late capitalism – continue to be wrong or damaged, and that one necessarily has to reckon with its systematic violence and the suffering it causes and the need to work for universal social and economic justice in order to begin to live anything like a moral life, *ein richtiges Leben*.²⁴ “The good,” Adorno writes in *History and Freedom*, “is what struggles free, finds a language and opens its eyes” (p. 149). I also agree with the German scholar who recently wrote that “Adorno’s critical theory is nourished by a feeling of solidarity with suffering that distinguishes it

²³ *The Arcades Project*, p. 5.

²⁴ Hegel uses the term often in the Reason section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

from all forms of academic scholarship.”²⁵ More than this, Adorno maintains in his book *Negative Dialectics* that the “need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is the objectivity which weighs on the subject . . .” (p. 17). Latin American thinker Enrique Dussel wrote recently that philosophers must “assume the responsibility for addressing the ethical and political problems associated with the poverty, domination, and exclusion of large sectors of the population, especially in the Global South (in Africa, Asia, and Latin America). A critical philosophical dialogue presupposes critical philosophers, in the sense of the ‘critical theory’ of the Frankfurt School, which we in Latin America refer to our reality as Philosophy of Liberation.”²⁶ Adorno would clearly endorse much in this view, although, true to his own socially necessary materialist dialectic, he would reject the theological aspects of Dussel’s perspective. And the cultivation of a transient dissociative autonomy within the administered world as thinker and writer he saw as necessary to philosophical seriousness, to the truth of thought as of right life. Adorno concludes in *Minima Moralia* that the “only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption [*der Erlosung*]” (p. 247) – secular redemption in historical time from want, from needless human suffering, from Auschwitz, and from war.

²⁵ Detlev Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno: One Last Genius*, p. 267.

²⁶ “A New Age in the History of Philosophy: The World Dialogue Between Philosophical Traditions,” p. 10. Adorno would also disagree with Dussel’s notion of the form in which an intellectual practice that could be called “philosophy” might persist in the present era; but more importantly Dussel offers in many respects an updating of Adornian critical theory in order to address perhaps the greatest political problem of our time, from a generally Marxist perspective adapted to the perspectives of indigenous peoples and the impoverished of the Global South. His 2008 book *Twenty Theses on Politics* formulates his mature political thought in relatively brief compass. Another book that promises to be relevant is his *Ethics of Liberation in the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*, forthcoming from Duke University Press, although the limiting theoretical problem of the theological remnant may again appear in it.

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