

Luca Scafoglio*

Suffering and resistance. Remarks on critical theory and moral thought in Adorno

Abstract

This paper explores three levels at which Adorno's Critical Theory engages moral thought, by constantly connecting normative and descriptive aspects: a) as a moral critique of bourgeois life, i.e., a critique of real modes of subject's relation to itself, things and other people, invoking moral-normative criteria; b) as a critique of the internal normativity of bourgeois life, which turns out to be intertwined with domination, and c) as a critique of modern moral theories, which themselves prove to be connected with the same social relations and grounded in identity thought. Making a demarcation with respect to both the tradition of virtue and the good, and that of the ethics of norms, it is argued that Adorno's proposal of an ethics of "resistance" moves between a contextualism of "damaged life" and a peculiar "agent-based" moral theory, centred on the self-reflexive movement of a situated agent. The latter finds itself entangled within relations of domination, as such committed to revoking its own monadic constitution and inclined to give voice to the oppressed, "inside" and "outside" himself.

Keywords

Forms of life; Context of guilt; Right/wrong life; Description/prescription; *Nicht mitmachen*

1. Bourgeois form of life as a "context of guilt"

The following considerations deal with Adorno's critical theory in terms of a critique of bourgeois world as a form of life, which includes three theoretical moves: a) a moral critique of bourgeois life, i.e., a critique of real modes of subject's relation to itself, things and other people, which invokes moral-normative criteria¹; b) a critique of the internal

* Università degli Studi di Salerno

¹ Cf. G. Schweppenhäuser, *Ethik nach Auschwitz. Adornos negative Moralphilosophie*, 2nd rev. ed., Springer, Wiesbaden 2016, pp. 202 ff.

normativity of bourgeois life, which turns out to be both intertwined with the private property relationship and “ruined”, overcome and confuted by social development and finally reduced to a “ghostly” condition – social criticism here includes descriptive, social-theoretical moments, which strive to reconstruct the connection between the social process and its internal moral ideology, as well as moral-theoretical moments, in light of which the whole connection proves to be “guilty”; c) a critique of modern moral theories, which themselves prove to be connected with social relations of domination and grounded in identity thought. While the first and the second issues are addressed in *Minima Moralia*, which offers a “physiognomic” concretion of the conceptual framework established in *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, the third topic is discussed in *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, the lecture given in 1956-1957 and in 1963.

In fact, Adorno focuses on and challenges the framework of a liberal individualism; the latter, more than just as a specific direction of normative theory, is meant as a widespread self-understanding and ideology of the individual in the postwar Reconstruction society, centered on the separation between private and social dimensions, between morality and politics. Such an individual “still feels sure of its autonomy”, he actually only imitates, or mimics, the qualities of the “old subject”², now in full dissolution.

One of the reference passages states: “the caring hand that even now tends the little garden as if it had not long since become a ‘lot’” like many others, “but fearfully wards off the unknown intruder”, “is already that which denies asylum the political refugee”³. What is called into question is the individual’s claim to preserve the private as a sphere of innocent enjoyment, in which to carry out non-antagonistic, loving or caring practices toward things – or perhaps even people –, at a time when the economic foundations of that dimension have been undermined and in the face of the unspeakable suffering generated by the socio-historical course on a global scale. In the background lies the constitution of the modern individual centered on the property relationship, by virtue of which the other, the stranger, is perceived as an intruder and a potential threat, in accordance with a tendency emphasized by the development of monopoly and state capitalism: the more personal property falls at the mercy of large social organisms – monopolies and public-private power aggregates

² Th. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 1951, in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by R. Tiedemann, vols. 1-20, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 1970-1986 (= AGS), vol. 4, p. 14; Engl. transl. by E.F.N. Jephcott, *Minima Moralia. Reflections from Damaged Life*, Verso, London 1974, p. 16 (“Dedication”).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 37; Engl. transl., p. 34 (“Le bourgeois revenant”).

– the more the individual grabs on its excluding feature. The latter must prevail all the more as a fierce closure toward those on whom domination falls hardest, in a world where the effects of global processes increasingly, directly impact the daily lives of the privileged ones. Hence Adorno's conclusion: the more their world threatens objectively to collapse, the more "the subjectivity of the rulers and their hangers-on becomes totally inhuman [*unmenschlich*]"⁴. Everyday life is denied all innocence in light of the relationships of subjugation sedimented in it and in which it is involved. "There is nothing innocuous left": even the "little pleasures", in which life would like to conceal the great responsibilities and awareness, turn out to be caught within the social connection in which domination and terror unfold, as a kind of "joining in" it⁵.

By resorting to a semantics proper to virtue ethics, Adorno records the decay of three areas of moral experience and corresponding qualities of the person. First of all, "independence, perseverance, forethought, circumspection", "whatever was once good and decent in bourgeois values"⁶, i.e., the properties requested from the good businessman, related to the intellectual and emotive autonomy of the self disappear: as Sombart already notes about "middle class virtues", some of them cease to exist as characteristics of living beings and become systemic imperatives, embedded in the rationality immanent to large economic aggregates, as "part of the mechanism of business" and "objective principles" of its functioning⁷. In such a displacement from the individual to the mechanism the other virtues, those connected with "the trammels of law and morality" – the constraints exerting a restraining and regulating effect on economic activity, and in particular on competition, even symbolically – simply fade away, as Sombart adds, since "unrestricted competition" and "unscrupulous smart business" prevail⁸. For the individual's self-preservation, an ability to "adapt" to circumstances in the short term becomes decisive. In any case, from the perspective of Critical Theory, such figures of "rationality" and "freedom" are so deeply rooted in "acquisitive" and "possessive" individualism⁹, that they cannot claim any moment of (moral) "surplus" – in this sense, the very notion of "virtue", in the Adornian evocation, perhaps does not lack an ironic undertone.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26; Engl. transl., p. 25 ("How nice of you, Doctor!").

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37; Engl. transl., p. 34 ("Le bourgeois revenant").

⁷ W. Sombart, *Der Bourgeois. Zur Geistesgeschichte des modernen Wirtschaftsmenschen*, Duncker & Humblot, München/Leipzig 1920 (I ed. 1913), p. 236; Engl. transl. by M. Epstein, *The Quintessence of Capitalism: A Study of the History and Psychology of the Modern Business Man*, Howard Fertig, New York 1967, p. 187.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 234 f.; Engl. transl., pp. 184 f.

⁹ Cf. C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1962.

A second area consists of disparate moral experiences, such as “tenderness between people”, “consideration for others”¹⁰ and gift – as a concretion of cognitive-emotional contact with things that does not reduce them to mere means and thus to performance, but recognises them as *medium* of experience and of its articulation between living subjectivities¹¹. According to their social matrix, these are the result of the survival of pre-capitalist privileges, transitional phenomena between the society of absolutism and liberal society, or emerging in the interstices of the bourgeois form of life. At the same time, they disclose a utopian moment, as they envisage the possibility of non-instrumental relations between people who think of each other as a subject¹². In any case, since things and people are reduced in terms of mere fungibility, they atrophy and the individual immersed in the flow of “giving and taking, discussion and implementation, control and function”, “makes himself a thing and freezes”¹³.

A third area, somewhat close to the second one – though carrying its own moral and social identity – is that of feminine values of care: as Horkheimer and Adorno write in *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, the triumph of patriarchy and proprietary order fixes women’s identity as the one who, outside the world of production, “look(s) after [*pflegt*] the producers”¹⁴. The qualities emerging here allude to a “solidary” attitude, by which human beings can confront death; however, they refer to a “reconciliation” that grows in the shadow of relations of subjugation¹⁵. Anyway, as with the other moments of “surplus”, these also seem to be affected by the most recent modernization, which, with the widespread nature of the (post)liberal individual, promises women, to all those who are allowed to produce, the “redive” “autonomy of the entrepreneur”¹⁶.

Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen: while Jephcott translated it as “Wrong life cannot be lived rightly”¹⁷, Livingstone’s translation reports:

¹⁰ Th. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, op. cit., p. 45; Engl. transl. p. 41 (“Struwwelpeter”).

¹¹ The “live contact with the warmth of things” which reverberates on people: *ibid.*, p. 47; Engl. transl., p. 43 (“Articles may not be exchanged”).

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 45, 47; Engl. transl., pp. 41 (“Struwwelpeter”), 42 (“Articles may not be exchanged”).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 47; Engl. transl., p. 43 (“Articles may not be exchanged”).

¹⁴ M. Horkheimer, Th. W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*, Querido, Amsterdam 1947, in AGS, vol. 3, p. 285; Engl. transl. by E.F.N. Jephcott, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, Stanford UP, Stanford 2002, p. 206 (“Man and beast”).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94; Engl. transl., p. 59.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 127; Engl. transl., p. 84.

¹⁷ Th. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, op. cit., p. 43; Engl. transl., p. 39 (“Refuge for homeless”).

“There can be no good life within the bad one”¹⁸, emphasizing the tension between singular life and the one of the social nexus, as well as the dependence of the former on the latter. This is because in the capitalist world, domination is still largely implemented through real abstraction, whereby relations of subjugation unfold through a chain of intermediate nexuses and impersonal practices; since for most individuals it is true that they both are dominated and take part in domination, a single man can deceptively claim to have innocent conduct or at least enjoy innocent moments in private. This is well understood by the notion of “context of guilt”¹⁹: in its mythical configuration, it refers to caducity ad guilt, the “blind context of nature”²⁰ that holds and penetrates beings as subject to the rhythm of mere transience, of birth and death. It is the creatural condition as life at the mercy of an inscrutable destiny, whereby birth is paid for with death and existence itself is resolved in the progressive extinction of the ‘debt’. The formulation marks the condemnation of finite beings decreed by myth, and reaffirmed – on a new basis – by the enlightenment. However, once “disenchanted”, it points to the “entanglement” (*Verstricktheit*)²¹, the guilty nexus of a society ruled by relations of domination, which determine the individual by penetrating into the “most hidden recesses” of its existence and subjectivity²².

However real, ambiguity is the mythical condition *par excellence*: on the one hand, social totality collapses upon the individual and apparently deprives him of all agency; on the other hand, as long as he does not question the relationships of domination within and without himself, his conduct bears the traits of complicity and collaboration. Therefore, “people are at once responsible and not responsible”²³. The issue results in the antinomy of necessity and freedom, as formulated and claimed to be solved by modern thought starting from Kant, on a “metaphysical” level; in Adorno, instead, ambiguity and antinomy are to be grasped in historical terms: it is the thickening of experience in the singular (and collective) life that, from time to time, anchors the individual, somehow

¹⁸ Id., *Probleme der Moralphilosophie* (1963), Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 1996, p. 9; Engl. transl. by R. Livingstone, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2000, p. 1.

¹⁹ Cf. M. Horkheimer, Th. W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, op. cit., p. 77; Engl. transl., p. 46, mod. transl.

²⁰ Th. W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard. Konstruktion des Ästhetischen*, Mohr, Tübingen 1933, in AGS, vol. 2, p. 168; Engl. transl. by R. Hullot-Kentor, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1989, p. 120, mod. transl.

²¹ M. Horkheimer, Th. W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, op. cit., p. 47; Engl. transl., p. 23.

²² Th. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, op. cit., p. 13; Engl. transl., p. 15 (“Dedication”)

²³ R. Jaeggi, “No Individual Can Resist”: “*Minima Moralia*” as Critique of Forms of Life, in “Constellations”, 12/2005, No 1, pp. 65-82, here p. 70.

hardened and “immunized” in the face of the awareness of his own and others’ suffering, so that collaboration with domination remains unconscious, or leaks out, until it eventually imposes itself as something intolerable for the subject, as a situation that causes him to question the primacy of self-preservation and triggers “resistance” (*Widerstand*). Such a non-predetermined interweaving of cognitive and affective moments defines the “supervenient”, or “additional” character of moral action²⁴.

Therefore, Adorno’s formula identifies – and challenges – a theoretical model that, following a path from Kant to existentialist ethics, upholds the absolute autonomy of moral life from the socio-historical context, of morality from politics: at the climax of the path, the claim that the subject can gather in itself, regardless of any socio-historical determination, as something “freely fluctuating”, transfigures “dependence” on the social-historical nexus into a metaphysical “unavailability” that afflicts human being in relation to God (Kierkegaard) or being (Heidegger).

2. Beyond the “right” and the “good”

While making regular use of “*richtiges Leben*” in his discussion of ethical problems, Adorno seems to avoid the term “good life”, except when associating it with the idea of a live unfolding “in the form in which community exists”, i.e., with the “harmonizing representations”, asserting a double reconciliation, a forced and therefore only apparent one, both of individual and social life, and of existence and value²⁵. Using a Hegelian terminology, he defines it as the “substantial nature of the ethical”²⁶. Therefore, with reference to the translation occurring in the English edition of the mentioned lecture of 1963, one may wonder if “good/bad life” best renders Adorno’s intent, or if this may be better understood through the formulation: “There can be no right life within the wrong one”, both in the light of Adorno’s terminological preference and theoretical implications, and of contemporary debate in ethics.

²⁴ Th. W. Adorno, *Probleme der Moralphilosophie*, op. cit., p. 18; Engl. transl., p. 7, mod. transl. For the “indifference of the privileged”, a constellation of problems somewhat akin to the Adornian one, see C. Gilligan, A. Hochschild, J. Tronto, *Contre l’indifférence des privilégiés. A quoi sert le “care”*, French transl., Payot, Paris 2013. On Adorno’s moral thought and the care, cf. E. Ferrarese, *The Fragility of Concern for Others. Adorno and the Ethics of Care*, Engl. transl. by S. Corcoran, Edinburgh UP, Edinburgh 2021.

²⁵ Th. W. Adorno, *Probleme der Moralphilosophie*, op. cit., pp. 22, 28; Engl. transl., pp. 10, 15.

²⁶ “Substantialität des Sittlichen”: *ibid.*, p. 24; Engl. transl., p. 12. Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke*, Bd. 12: *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 1986, p. 142; Engl. transl. by J. Sibree, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Bell, London 1902, p. 117, mod. transl.

This is somewhat related to the distinction, argued by Adorno, between “ethics” (*Ethik*) and “morality” (*Moral*)²⁷: while the latter maintains “the tensions between the general and the particular, between empirical existence and the good”²⁸, the former tends to replace the (moral) norm with a given identity, whether individual or collective, which should guarantee the actuality of moral life. In both cases, certain areas of existence are transfigured into value, so that it becomes possible, as Adorno states in the first draft of the lecture *Problems of Moral Philosophy* delivered in 1956-57, “to talk about conscience without appealing to the element of compulsion it contains”²⁹.

The ethics-morality pattern of polarization reveals the crisis of the ascetic ideal as a binding force within the post-bourgeois form of life, as it is transposed in a twofold ideology, which identifies good life with the “refinement and self-cultivation of the individual”³⁰, or with its accordance with “some cultural values”³¹. As for its philosophical resonance, Heidegger’s “existentialism” remains Adorno’s main reference also for the post-World War II ethical debate³²: here, in the tension and complicity between the primacy of individual authenticity and the restoration of community, he finds the prototypical forms of two patterns of ethics (of the good life). In fact, as he also argues in *The Jargon of Authenticity*, emptied subjectivity, reduced to mere “self-belonging” as *Dasein*, to what is “in each case mine” – on the pattern of the “relation of property”³³ – is too unstable and precarious not to invoke the return of the *Gemeinschaft*³⁴.

One might argue that Adorno prefigures – and criticises – the impulse that Heideggerism gives to the inaugural stages of the “rehabilitation of practical philosophy”³⁵. In more general terms, his approach allows for the problematization of “good life”, as this notion occurs in contemporary ethical debates: both insofar as it discloses the core of ethics of the good, whether (objectively) oriented according to a conception of human nature or (subjectively) referring to the shared values of a specific com-

²⁷ Th. W. Adorno, *Probleme der Moralphilosophie*, op. cit., p. 22; Engl. transl., p. 10.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29; Engl. transl., p. 15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 270; Engl. transl., pp. 185 f. note.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23; Engl. transl., p. 11.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28; Engl. transl., p. 14.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 26; Engl. transl., p. 13.

³³ Th. W. Adorno, *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit. Zur deutschen Ideologie*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 1964, p. 489; Engl. transl. by K. Tarnowski, F. Will, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Northwestern UP, Evanston 1973, p. 114.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 422 ff., 465; Engl. transl., pp. 13 ff., 78; Cfr. Id., *Probleme der Moralphilosophie*, op. cit., p. 27; Engl. transl., p. 14.

³⁵ Cf. M. Riedl, *Rehabilitierung der praktischen Philosophie*, 2 vols., Rombach, Freiburg d. B. 1972-1974.

munity; and insofar as it is expelled from the sphere of moral consideration and left to individual arbitrariness, as in the case of the theories of justice. In this sense, Adorno rejects the attempt to categorically separate questions of justice from questions of good life, nor does he try to resolve the former into the latter.

In *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, from the debate around Kantian ethics, as it takes place from neo-Kantism to Weber and Scheler, Adorno can deduce the distinction between the formalism of moral law as the prevailing feature of Kantian ethics, and an ethics centered on “values” or “goods”, (to borrow Ernst Troeltsch’s words) between a “formal ethics of the apriori of practical reason” and an “ethics of objective goods”³⁶ – Adorno preferably refers to this polarized conceptual complex through the notions of “ethics of conviction” (*Gesinnungsethik*) and “ethics of responsibility” (*Verantwortungsethik*), giving Weberian opposition, in turn, a peculiar connotation³⁷. He stresses that formalism – the concept of “the formal nature of the Ethical”³⁸ – gives the imperative or deontological character of Kant’s moral theory the most coherent and radical configuration. As the power of abstraction within theory, it expresses “the radical separation of the principle of freedom or reason from that of nature”, “nothing but the identity of reason with itself”³⁹. Properly, in the Adornian perspective, duty as an “expression of the moral law in all its rigour”⁴⁰ still constitutes, in its full ambiguity, the extreme sublimation of normativity internal to prevailing social practices: in the categorical imperative, the ethics of the merchant and the bourgeois virtues – the entanglement of self-preservation and acquisition, subjugation of man and subjugation of nature – taken to a higher level of abstraction, appear as a mere “lawful form”⁴¹.

It is the genetic, functional, and structural link between domination, given morality and moral thought. On the one hand, by folding in on itself, and thus duplicating itself, abstracting reason distances itself from all content of the empirical world, as from that which somehow remains at the mercy of mere natural necessity: bourgeois reason denounces it-

³⁶ E. Troeltsch, *Grundprobleme der Ethik*, in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 2, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 1913, pp. 552-672, here p. 566.

³⁷ Cf. M. Weber, *Politik als Beruf*, in Id., *Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. I/17, hrsg. v. W.J. Mommsen, W. Schluchter, Mohr, Tübingen 1992, pp. 157-254, here p. 237; Engl. transl., *Politics as Vocation*, in Id., *From Max Weber. Essays in Sociology*, ed. by H.H. Gerth, C. Wright Mills, Oxford UP, New York 1946, pp. 77-128, here p. 120.

³⁸ Th. W. Adorno, *Probleme der Moralphilosophie*, cit., p. 162; Engl. transl., p. 108.

³⁹ *Ibid.*; Engl. transl., p. 109.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ I. Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, in Id., *Werke in zwölf Bänden*, ed. by W. Weischedel, Insel, Frankfurt/M. 1968, p. 179; Engl. transl. by M. Gregor, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 2015, p. 52.

self, its repressive character, thus surrendering itself all the more to repression. On the other hand, in Kant, teleological elements crystallize around the notions of “highest good” (*summum bonum*, *höchstes Gut*) and “kingdom of ends”, in order to mitigate formalism and account for the complexity of moral life – which includes aspects such as motivation and consideration of consequences – by envisaging a possible reconciliation of morality and happiness, that is, the realization of reason in the world⁴². Post-Kantian ethics no longer bears the tension between the moral and empirical worlds; after the Hegelian attempts to conceive the *Sittlichkeit* as the the social effectivity of the Idea as universal reason, the philosophy of “goods” or “values” prevails: complexes of more or less institutionalized, supra-individual ends that claim a superior normative validity before individual subjects, to whom they impose themselves not as the outcome of their common work, but as something irreducible and autonomous. In Adorno’s terms, teleological ethics results in the above-mentioned primacy of the ethical over the moral, i.e., in an ethics of complete “heteronomy”.

To Adorno, “the right” and “the good” represent the two poles of a dialectic of morality that consumes modern ethics⁴³: while the acting moved by mere *Gesinnung* flows – as a long line of thought, from Hegel to Ibsen, from Lukács to Brecht⁴⁴ proves – into the opposite of what it aims for, giving rise to a new wrong condition, responsible acting results in social adaptation and a conformity that confirm the bad order. Therefore, as recalled in the lecture dated 1963, the formulation “There can be no right life in a wrong one” refers primarily to the failure of modern moral theories, rather than of the modern form of life; these prove unable both to truly problematize the given morality and to offer the criteria of moral or ethical life, as they ignore the moral scope of social relations of subjugation. Around this, instead, Adornian moral theory is articulated.

⁴² On the issue, posed already by K. Dusing, *Das Problem des höchsten Gutes in Kants praktischer Philosophie*, in “Kant-studien”, 62, 1971, pp. 5-42, see K. Ameriks, *Kant and Motivational Externalism*, in H. Klemme, M. Kühn, D. Schönecker (Hrsg.), *Moralische Motivation. Kant und die Alternative*, Meiner, Hamburg 2006, pp. 3-22; L. Fonnesu, *La filosofia pratica di Kant e la realizzazione della morale*, in Id., *Per una moralità concreta. Studi sulla filosofia classica tedesca*, il Mulino, Bologna 2010, pp. 39-56; D. Tafani, *Il fine della volontà buona in Kant*, in Fonnesu, *Etica e mondo in Kant*, il Mulino, Bologna 2008, pp. 145-164. Cf. also Id., *Virtù e felicità in Kant*, Olschki, Firenze 2006.

⁴³ Cf. Ch. Menke, *Tugend und Reflexion. Die “Antinomien der Moralphilosophie”*, in A. Honneth (Hrsg.), *Dialektik der Freiheit. Frankfurter Adorno-Konferenz 2003*, pp. 142-164, here pp. 144 f., 156 f.

⁴⁴ Cf. Th. W. Adorno, *Probleme der Moralphilosophie*, cit., pp. 174, 211 ff., 234 ff., 240; Engl. transl., pp. 116, 142 ss., 158 ff., 162.

3. Between description and prescription: a contestualism of the “damaged life”

The wrong (or bad) condition coincides with the condition of domination: the Marxian relationships of production as class relationships and, at the same time, as the relation of subjectivity to itself, to other persons and things, in the mode proper to the subjugation of nature (*Naturbeherrschung*) conceived as the reduction (of the other) to nature, that is, to a mere object – such is the “descriptive” meaning of the notion of the bad condition, upon which the moral signification supervenes⁴⁵.

Adornian thought assumes suffering as an index of the bad state. A twofold dimension, both of descriptive and evaluative-normative nature, gathers in it. In the first instance, it is the ‘excavation’ of subjectivity by domination, encompassing both more manifest modes – for example, the experiences of pain as the effects of exploitation and misery, or of violence – and those linked to unease and tightening up, a kind of suffering exposed but unnoticed by the subject, which has its conceptual pattern in the Freudian notion of unconscious anxiety⁴⁶. The latter are reified modes of articulation of subjectivities, somehow lived but not known: from the inability to establish intersubjective relations transcending instrumental character, to seemingly opposite forms of emotional contagion underlying mass phenomena and to outbursts of frustration into individual and collective violence. The work of deciphering, making them accessible, while reframing the concepts of Freudian psychodynamics in light of the Marxian theory of commodity fetishism and Lukácsian idea of reification, offers simultaneously new concretions and figures of these notions or “models”. According to the concept of “interpretation”⁴⁷, the work of interpreting subjectivity fulfills the Benjaminian “task of the narrator”, to bring the mute suffering, or lament, of nature to the word⁴⁸. In

⁴⁵ For the distinction between descriptive and evaluative meaning of moral terms, cf. R.M. Hare, *The Language of Morals*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1952, pp. 111 ff. On the concept of “supervenience”, cf. *ibid.*, p. 145.

⁴⁶ S. Freud, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Bde. 1-18, Fischer, Frankfurt/M. 1968, Bd. 14, pp. 419-506, here p. 495; Engl. transl., *Civilization and its Discontents*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by J. Strachey, vols. 1-24, Hogarth, London 1961, vol. 21, pp. 59-145, here p. 135.

⁴⁷ Cf. Th. W. Adorno, *Die Aktualität der Philosophie* [1931], in AGS, vol. 1, pp. 325-344; Engl. transl. by B. Snow, *The Actuality of Philosophy*, in “Telos”, 31, Spring 1977, pp. 120-133.

⁴⁸ W. Benjamin, *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften*, in “Neue Deutsche Beiträge”, 1924, poi in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by R. Tiedemann, H. Schweppenhäuser, vols. 1-7, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 1972-1989, vol. 1/1, pp. 123-201, here pp. 200 ff.; Engl. transl. by S. Corngold, *Goethe's “Elective Affinities”*, in Id., *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, Harvard UP, Cambridge (Ma)/London 2002, pp. 297-360, here pp. 354 ff.

Benjamin, the work takes on an explicitly theological promise of redemption; Adorno, who intensively discussed about the status of the theological moment in Critical Theory with Benjamin himself, as well as with Horkheimer during the 1930s, in terms of “inverse theology”⁴⁹, rejects an explicitly theological outcome⁵⁰. From the theological promise, however, he intends to extrapolate all its cognitive and practical content: deciphering suffering would not really be possible if it were not permeated by the demand, or rather the claim, that suffering comes to an end⁵¹.

While referring back to descriptively representable “states of things”, the exposition – *Darstellung* – of suffering has a constitutively normative-moral charge: it qualifies that state as “bad”, or “wrong”, and carries by itself the claim that it should cease, and therefore the demand for a condition of full justice. In doing so, it does not invoke a given moral principle; it represents its emergence; it is morality *statu nascendi*. Therein lies the appellative character of suffering, as it unfolds along the relationship between the injured life and the subjectivity that brings the injury to the word – with the latter hoping and struggling on behalf of the former. Moreover, since there is no disembodied or sovereign subject, who has rather revealed itself to be a transfiguration of the dominating subject, reflective subjectivity must discover itself as situated in the sphere of life taken by domination: as the subtitle of *Minima Moralia* suggests, its reflections move “from the damaged life”, being motivated by it⁵². Such a “contextualism of life” offers a “localization”⁵³ of Critical Theory; while urban reality becomes

⁴⁹ Letter of Th. W. Adorno to W. Benjamin, December 17, 1934, in Th. W. Adorno, W. Benjamin, *Briefwechsel 1928-1940*, ed. by H. Lonitz, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 1994, p. 90; Engl. transl. by N. Walker, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2003, p. 67.

⁵⁰ Cf. W. v. Reijen, *Die Adorno-Benjamin-Kontroverse*, in “Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung”, LX, 1, 2006, pp. 99-121, here p. 119.

⁵¹ On the discussion of the theological element in Adorno, see M. Brumlik, *Theologie und Messianismus*, in R. Klein, J. Kreuzer, S. Müller-Dooch (Hrsg.), *Adorno Handbuch. Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, Metzler, Stuttgart/Weimar 2011, pp. 295-309. On the problems of a messianic pattern of social criticism, called into question here, cf. R. Mordacci, *Critica e utopia. Da Kant a Francoforte*, Castelveccchi, Roma 2023, pp. 89 ff.

⁵² According to Derrida’s commentary: “Not ‘reflections on’ a wounded, injured, damaged, mutilated life, but ‘reflections from or starting from’ such a life, *aus dem beschädigten Leben*: reflections marked by pain, signed by a wounding”: J. Derrida, *Fichus*, Editions Galilée, Paris 2002; Engl. transl. by R. Bowlby, *Fichus: Frankfurt Address*, in Id., *Paper Machine*, Stanford UP, Stanford 2005, pp. 164-181, here p. 166.

⁵³ On this concept, cf. A. Honneth, *Die soziale Dynamik von Missachtung. Zur Ortsbestimmung einer kritischen Gesellschaftstheorie*, in Id., *Das Andere der Gerechtigkeit. Aufsätze zur praktischen Philosophie*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 2000, pp. 88-109; Engl. transl. by J. Farrell, *The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory Today*, in “Constellations”, 1, 1994, pp. 255-269.

“landscape”⁵⁴ to the *flâneur*, critical subjectivity owes its constitution to its belonging to that world, as a “folding back upon itself” of life that penetrates the injury suffered and, at the same time, the ways of its “complicity” with domination, bringing them to discourse and eventually praxis, and implementing their moral qualification⁵⁵.

This allows Adornian thought to dispense with a positive notion of “good life” – whether naturalistic (the late MacIntyre) or intuitionistic (Williams) –, from which to deduce the criteria of critique that would be incompatible with its epistemological premises and those related to the critique of ideology⁵⁶. On the contrary, it is only while deciphering suffering and in light of it that an idea of a righteous and fulfilled life takes shape, by contrast with the condition of domination. Therefore, Adorno’s ethics remains irreducible to the alternative between liberal universalism and communitarian particularism: the one, in its formal-abstract character, is traced back to the practices from which it results, those that accomplish abstraction and those from which it abstracts, and thus to acquisitive individualism; the other is identified with “false concrete”, which is not such as it ignores the mediative movement and the relations of oppression constituting it⁵⁷.

From the awareness of domination as a “bad” state, or a state of “injustice”, arises the imperative, or the “norm” to “refrain from joining in the game” (*nicht mitspielen*)⁵⁸, of “refusing to be part of” domination (*nicht mitmachen*)⁵⁹, thus of refusing – as we also might express it – “to be complicit” with it. In the background lies perhaps the memory of those who took part, according to various modes of involvement, in the establishment and normalization of Nazism in Germany⁶⁰. If already the

⁵⁴ Cf. W. Benjamin, *Das Passagenwerk*, in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, op. cit., vol. 5/2, p. 525; Engl. transl. by H. Eiland, K. McLaughlin, *Arcades Project*, Harvard UP, Cambridge (Mass.)/London 1999, p. 417.

⁵⁵ Only within a framework of such a contextualism does the further determination of Adornian ethics in a “materialistic”, i.e., “utopian-hedonistic” sense takes place, on which Knoll’s interpretation is focused: cf. M. Knoll, *Theodor W. Adorno. Ethik als erste Philosophie*, Fink, München 2002, in part. pp. 135 ff.

⁵⁶ However, on an attempt to ascribe “an Aristotelian conception of normativity to Adorno”, “compatible with his negativism” and focused on a “realistic” concept of “basic functioning” of human beings, cf. F. Freyenhagen, *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy. Living Less Wrongly*, Cambridge UP, New York 2013, in part. pp. 235 ff.

⁵⁷ The “aporia of internalism and externalism” would seem to be correctly formulated in Adorno, insofar as it is traced back to the social nexuses that underlie it: cf. J.M. Bernstein, *Adorno. Disenchantment and Ethics*, Cambridge UP, New York 2001.

⁵⁸ Th. W. Adorno, *Probleme der Moralphilosophie*, op. cit., p. 250; Engl. transl., p. 168, mod. transl.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18; Engl. transl., p. 7.

⁶⁰ Cf. the reference to Fabian von Schlabrendorff, “one of the few crucial actors of the 20 July” 1944 – the failed assassination attempt on Hitler known under the name “Operation Valkyrie” –, *ibid.*, p. 19; Engl. transl., p. 8.

insight into the relationships of oppression and the deciphering of their incidence on life seem to make a breach in the “blind connection” that holds individuals together, they become constitutive of singular and collective subjectivities, stretched out in complexes of practices; if the latter fail to prefigure a reversal of social relationships, nonetheless they incline to the sabotage of their daily reproduction. At the same time, Adorno clarifies that “It is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home”⁶¹; the emphasis shifts from the primacy of the rule – whether it is derived in terms of logic (Hare), of discourse theory (Habermas) or of proceduralism (Rawls) – to that of a constitution and a mode of “feeling” of subjectivity that formulates it and gathers in it, bringing to articulation both affective and cognitive moments. A peculiar “agent-based” moral theory⁶² would be outlined here: centered on the self-reflexive movement of a situated agent, who discovers himself caught within relationships of domination, as such engaged in revoking his own monadic constitution and inclined to give voice to the oppressed, ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ himself. In place of a deontological normative theory, it would rather be a matter of grasping a prescriptivist tension in the ethics of “resistance”, operating on the metaethical plane of moral semantics⁶³.

⁶¹ Th. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, op. cit., p. 43; Engl. transl., p. 39 (“Refuge for the homeless”).

⁶² Cf. M. Slote, *Morals from Motives*, Oxford UP, New York 2001, pp. 5-7.

⁶³ On prescriptivism as a declination of moral semantics, cf. R.M. Hare, *The Language of Morals*, op. cit.