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# ADORNO'S CRITICAL MORAL PHILOSOPHY AND BUSINESS ETHICS

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A COMMENTARY ON Craig Reeves and Matthew Sinnicks (2021), “Business Ethics from the Standpoint of Redemption: Adorno on the Possibility of Good Work,” *Bus Ethics Q* [first online 19 February]: 1–24,  
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## ABSTRACT

Reeves and Sinnicks present Theodor Adorno as a philosopher with a sombre message to business ethics. Capitalist markets distort our needs and work in business organisations stultifies our moral capacities. Thus, the discipline's self-understanding must be revised, and supplemented with reflections on what would be good work: free creative activity. After raising some questions about their interpretation of Adorno's writings on human needs, I argue that the paper does not contain all the necessary resources to support its ferociously critical claims. Once such resources are made available, however, the appeal to a notion of good work is no longer viable.

**BUSINESS ETHICS TYPICALLY** asks questions about how to ethically evaluate the behaviour of companies and the conduct of their key personnel. Frankfurt School critical theory asks questions about how, in light of the experiences of the first half of the twentieth century, we are to understand the manner in which capitalist market societies organise the satisfaction of needs. Reeves and Sinnicks (2021) provide a timely contribution by introducing Theodor Adorno's thought as relevant to the intersection of these questions. The paper can be summarised as follows:

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- a) capitalist economic activity as exchange and profit oriented prevents human beings from expressing their genuine needs.
- b) this follows from an adaptive orientation to functional roles.
- c) as an upshot our social worlds are devoid of the kind of moral orientation business ethics presupposes.
- d) despite these obstacles, we can reorient the discipline by gleaning from Adorno that “good work”, work appropriate to free human beings, resembles philosophical and artistic activity.

This commentary is a sympathetic but critical examination of three aspects of this paper. I wish to amplify the importance of Adorno's debt to Marx with respect to the notion of human needs (section 1). I then suggest that Adorno's moral epistemological argument about the antinomical character of moral philosophy should be spelled out (section 2). Finally, I argue that the position of Reeves and Sinnicks contains a methodological tension between critical theory and moral philosophy as it is typically understood (section 3). Bringing these three points to the surface supports the relevance of Adorno's thought to new directions in business ethics (section 4).

## 1.

According to Reeves and Sinnicks (2021: 4), Adorno is a fierce critic of capitalist societies, chiefly their mode of commodity production. Far from meeting human needs directly and with intent, capitalist commodity production does so accidentally: “what happens to be profitable has no intrinsic connection with people's needs because consumptive wants have proved themselves to be susceptible to manipulation and manufacture.” From the profit driven character of the system follow that our needs are “false”, “wrong”, “inverted”, with the qualification that “. . . in adapting themselves to an inhospitable social world, they prevent themselves from being what they really are themselves, from encountering their real needs and interests” (Reeves and Sinnicks 2021: 9).

The paper's discussion of human needs calls for clarification because the notion of false needs is commonly associated with the work of Herbert Marcuse, and the wires may here be somewhat crossed. The latter's critique of consumerism holds that we obtain most of our needs only because of the heteronomous interests their satisfaction serves. Satisfying such “false” needs, which Marcuse

(2013: 7–8) thinks we can identify empirically, represses our “true” autonomously acquired needs. In contrast, Adorno (2017: 103) denies precisely a polar distinction between true and false needs: “No neat distinction can be made between a need proper to humanity and one that would be a consequence of repression” and further still that all existing “needs are conglomerates of truth and falsehood” (Adorno 1973: 93).

Centrally, to Adorno need satisfaction within capitalism is antagonistic, in the sense that it is both “true” and “false”. The closeness of these ideas, as suggested by Reeves and Sinnicks (2021: 3–6), with Marx's notion of “socially necessary illusion” is key to understanding this. Accordingly, capitalist production processes are necessarily abstraction generating: use-values have to be fitted into a category qualitatively alien to them, monetary exchange value. The capitalist form of exchange produces illusions about itself because it serves the drive of capital to self-reproduce via something qualitatively different to it: needs and the labour of wage workers. Needs and labour are simultaneously the engines of the capitalist economy, and yet necessarily subservient to it. Marx and Adorno articulate theoretically what successful business people will know instinctively: the weight of the objective economic reality demands canonising both the use-values of products as well as the conditions of the labour force so that they accommodate the latest developments in scientific processes and the finance-markets.

Centrally, and at odds with standard Marxian business ethics (Corlett 2013; Shaw 2009), Adorno's theory is not predicated on the notions that profits are morally unjust or that business actors are greedy. Rather, it has systemic implications which are salient to the very possibility of moral thought and action.

## 2.

Reeves and Sinnicks (2021: 1–2) follow Adorno's assertions to the effect that the modern capitalist world is “radically evil” and “our societies and their basic institutions are fundamentally bad”. On these lines, it is argued that Adorno's thought challenges business ethics' and management's self-understanding. In substantiating these points, Reeves and Sinnicks (2021: 8–11) focus on Adorno's socio-psychological claims. Indeed, one benefits from the discussion of social

roles and the psychological disintegration they arguably precipitate. Adorno, on their interpretation, emphasises “the freedom undermining effect of the social pressure to adapt and identify with employment roles” (Reeves and Sinnicks 2021: 11).

I expect many working in business ethics scholarship may appreciate these points but still wonder how the moral adjective “evil” can apply to societies in their entirety, or why these problems pose a fundamental challenge to business ethics. Here Reeves and Sinnicks are short of philosophical resources, and we can clarify this issue by distinguishing between a moral epistemological and a sociological argument which run side by side in Adorno’s writings.

The first is a Nietzsche and Freud inspired objection to Kant's notion of moral agency. Very briefly, conceptual reflection on a moral principle cannot by itself result to action unless it is mediated by motivating impulses, but the latter – contra Kant – have to be more than formless raw material for cognition (Adorno 1973: 221–223). Their substance matters for morality. Moral “knowledge” through impulses, as also Hegelians and virtue ethicists think, is a shared, circular 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 which enable its ongoing nurturing.

Adorno's critique of moral philosophy's possibility (and thus business ethics' possibility) draws the implications of this moral epistemological argument in light of already introduced sociological one about the structural demands imposed on agents. Self-preservation in an economic sense enforces the opposite of moral impulses: a calculative and strategic orientation in any area markets and economic-administrative systems penetrate. Even if impulses such as empathy survive this, the lack of control individuals and organisations have of the social conditions of moral action typically render it void. Therefore, a Hegelian or communitarian alternative to Kantianism will not secure moral agency. We face an aporia: reflection on moral principles is empty without situated moral knowledge, but the structures of institutions deprive us its acquisition and application.

Adorno's assertion that the world is on the whole “bad” or “evil” can be understood as the claim that the kinds of experiences morality depends upon, as suggested by the canonical representatives of the

philosophical tradition, are undermined by the basic principles of capitalist social organisation. The trouble with standard moral philosophy – and business ethics – is that it cannot even consider this as a possibility, and thus rides roughshod over the deeper question about its own intelligibility, “namely the question whether culture, and what has become of culture, permits something like the good life” (Adorno 2000: 14).

### 3.

The reconstructive element of Reeves and Sinnicks’s (2021: 2) paper involves a sketch “on the nature and the possibility of the best kind of work for human beings”. They write,

Forms of genuine activity are marked by their relative freedom from the reifying forces of exchange society, whereby they approximate kinds of genuine experience that comes close to fulfilling genuine needs for creative activity and granting genuinely autonomous experience, even if the wider context ensures they will fall some way short of this *telos* (Reeves and Sinnicks 2021: 17).

In particular, “philosophical and artistic activity are something like paradigms of good work” (Reeves and Sinnicks 2021: 18), whereas monotonous performative work and especially management roles are examples of alienated work. Such ideas act as the critical fork against which reality is held to an account: “Adorno’s critique appraises modern work from the unrestricted standpoint of the potential for human flourishing” (Reeves and Sinnicks 2021: 19).

At this juncture the argument does not, methodologically speaking, proceed as a critical theory,<sup>2</sup> but as moral philosophy which understands its activity as assessing the world in light of a normative ontology, rather close to the thought of Alasdair MacIntyre (2008). However, keeping in mind the paper’s indictment of our capitalist social institutions as radically evil, this gesturing towards a quasi-Aristotelian notion of genuine activity as an evaluative standpoint generates, *prima facie*, a dilemma. If capitalism is merely “some way short” of the genuine human form, it does not sound all that radical, or evil (Reeves and Sinnicks 2021: 17). And if we maintain the radical evil thesis, the restriction of it to cover only performative work and management – but not philosophy and art – is an arbitrary one. Clari-

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<sup>2</sup> On the distinction between “traditional” and “critical” theories, see Horkheimer (1972).

fication with respect to the notion of “relative freedom” from social dynamics, as well as disambiguation between the “good”, the “genuine”, and the “best” types of work would be helpful.

#### 4.

In conclusion, Reeves's and Sinnicks's reconstructive claims about the best kind of work can perhaps be understood as an additional perspective, which is strictly speaking not required for the appreciation of the paper's other elements. From these we can draw resources for a renewed business ethics as an explanatory critique of the conditions which render business ethics (under its traditional self-conception) ineffective. Consider in this context that “a systemic breakdown in accountability and ethics” has been identified as one of the drivers of the 2008 economic crash (Angelides, et al 2010). In this sense, an effective moral critique leads to the critique of the conditions in which morality has collapsed.

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