BACK TO ADORNO: CRITICAL THEORY'S PROBLEM OF NORMATIVE GROUNDING

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ABSTRACT

This chapter offers a review of Amy Allen's The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory *(2016) and presents the book as having both a negative and positive aim. Its negative aim is to offer a critique of the Eurocentric narratives of historical progress that serves the function of normative grounding in the critical theories of Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth. Its positive aim is to provide a new approach to the normative grounding of critical theory that eschews Eurocentric narratives of progress through the idea of metanormative contextualism. For Allen, metanormative contextualism is developed through an engagement with the works of Adorno and Foucault. This chapter raises some critical questions concerning the position of metanormative contextualism, arguing that there are significant differences between Adorno and Foucault that render the position unstable. Specifically, Adorno's normative conception of truth, alongside his critical naturalism presented through the notion of natural history, makes him ill-suited as a representative of Allen's metanormative contextualism and complicates the contributions of Foucault's genealogical analyses. The chapter concludes that a careful consideration of Adorno's views reveals him to be opposed to the two central tenets of metanormative contextualism as defined by Allen.*

Keywords: Critical theory; progress; decolonization; Amy Allen; Theodor W. Adorno; Michel Foucault; Jürgen Habermas; Axel Honneth; Rainer Forst; metanormative contextualism

The intellectual battle in critical theory between the methods and analyses of the first generation and those of its subsequent (second, third, and now fourth) generations has long served as a site of heated debate concerning a wide variety of questions related to social critique. In its roughest outline, the most heated debate between the first and subsequent generations of critical theory has been the following: if we accept that history and historical analyses are central to any adequate form of social critique, what then, are the normative foundations of that critique, the criteria by which we judge the successes and failures, the rights and wrongs, of a historically specific social formation? One prominent answer to this question, found in the works of Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, has been to suggest that the unassailable normative progress of European modernity, which can be ascertained from the development of its moral and legal institutions, can itself serve as a basis for the critical assessment of modern societies. As Allen documents in her new book, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (2016), the securing of normative foundations on the basis of a progressive understanding of European history has come at a huge critical cost, one that arguably renders Frankfurt School critical theory complicit in Eurocentric and neocolonial discourses of historical development that have long been criticized by post- and decolonial thinkers − not to mention first-generation critical theorists, such as Benjamin and Adorno.

Allen's book is an important and overdue intervention in what she terms the narrow sense of critical theory, namely, the "German tradition of interdisciplinary social theory, inaugurated in Frankfurt in the 1930s," which, after its first generation, sought to redeem the philosophies of history found in Kant and Hegel, despite abandoning their so-called metaphysics (Allen, 2016, p. xi). By contrast, critical theory in the wider, more capacious sense − which includes feminist and queer theory, critical race theory, and post- and decolonial theory, as well as French poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theory − has largely been founded upon challenging many of the central tenets of enlightenment thinking, including its conceptions of reason, subjectivity, and history, of which Kant and Hegel are often represented as characteristic proponents and culprits. Although this characterization of critical theory in the broad sense surely risks oversimplification, it points to a larger, disciplinary dispute within philosophy and the humanities concerning how canonical thinkers and their ideas ought to be inherited. With respect to critical theory in the narrow sense, Allen charges that Habermas, Honneth, and Rainer Forst, who are the main contemporary representatives of the Frankfurt School in Germany, have been far too sanguine in their inheritance of Kantian and Hegelian ideas, particularly concerning the idea of progress. Her central line of argument distinguishes between two conceptions of progress: a forward-looking conception of progress as a moral-political imperative that has emancipation from domination and injustice as its goal, and a backward-looking conception of progress as a historical "fact" reflected in the moral and rational superiority of European modernity over and against its predecessors and its non-Western contemporaries (Allen, 2016, pp. 11−12). According to Allen, the problem with critical theory since Habermas is that the former has come to be normatively and definitively grounded in the latter. If it

turns out that the latter conception of progress can no longer be defended, then critical theory will need a different account of normative grounding, one that retains the importance of historical insight without resorting to large-scale claims concerning European modernity's superiority and progress.

Allen's book thus has both a negative and positive aim. Negatively, Allen aims to show that the critical theories of Habermas and Honneth are normatively grounded in, and cannot be successfully extricated from, a conception of historical progress that takes European modernity as both exemplary and authoritative. Rather than reading Habermas as a neo-Kantian constructivist for whom normativity is self-grounding according to idealized procedures of rational deliberation, Allen contends that Habermas' critical theory, from his universal pragmatics to his discourse ethics, relies upon a Eurocentric theory of modernity as its necessary normative ground. In the case of Honneth's neo-Hegelian project, his flagship conception of social freedom − institutionalized forms of mutual recognition that are the conditions for individual autonomy − is grounded upon a strongly teleological conception of historical progress as an ineliminable, transcendental assumption. Allen's claim is that the critical theories of Habermas and Honneth are not only grounded in large-scale theories of European progress, but further, that without these theories, the normative claims of both thinkers would fail according to their own self-delimited criteria. That is, *with* their progressive theories of modernity, Habermas and Honneth cannot answer the charges of parochial Eurocentrism; however, *without* their progressive theories of modernity, neither can successfully navigate the dilemma between context-transcendence and relativistic conventionalism, which their theories of modernity are meant to address and resolve. Allen's positive aim is to rethink the relation between the historical and the normative in order to find an alternative approach to the normative grounding of critical theory. (Forst's theory, according to Allen, avoids the problematic conception of historical progress but relies on a Kantian conception of practical reason that sacrifices the methodological distinctiveness of critical theory. In addition, Allen contends that Forst is still subject to the charge of Eurocentrism on account of presenting a uniquely Western conception of practical reason as something universal, beyond the reach of power relations. I will leave aside Allen's critique of Forst in what follows.)

Central to Allen's positive aim of rethinking the relation between the historical and the normative is her defense of metanormative contextualism, a position inspired by the works of Adorno and Foucault. In line with Allen's earlier work, Foucault is enlisted as a thinker who is both an ally of and an underappreciated resource for critical theory, and here, Allen names Foucault (rather than Derrida) as Adorno's "other son" (Allen, 2016, p. 164). What Adorno and Foucault share in common for Allen's purposes is their opposition to progressive philosophies of history, which results in a genealogical method that aims at "a critical problematization of our present historical moment" (Allen, 2016, p. 166). Rather than understanding the development of enlightenment reason and its institutions as representative of normative progress, Adorno and Foucault present genealogies that reveal the deeply ambivalent nature of modernity in which pairs such as progress and regress, freedom and domination,

reason and unreason are simultaneously present. Specifically, Allen defends Adorno and Foucault against Habermas' reading of their projects as conservative, negative philosophies of history, or *Verfallsgeschichten*, that present the history of modernity's development as "a process of decline and fall" (Allen, 2016, p. 164). With respect to Adorno and Horkheimer, Allen reminds us that the critique of the dialectic of enlightenment was at the same time an attempt to rescue the normative potential of enlightenment's promise of freedom. On her reading, Adorno and Horkheimer aim to demonstrate that the positive and negative elements of the enlightenment are inextricably intertwined. In her words, there is a:

> dialectical relationship between the negative, totalitarian, regressive, barbaric, and amoral aspects of enlightenment and its positive, reflective, and emancipatory aspects, between enlightenment as domination and enlightenment as the capacity for rational self-reflection. (Allen, 2016, pp. 168–169)

Or again: "enlightenment rationality is both freedom and unfreedom or domination at the same time" (Allen, 2016, p. 170). If this is the case, then two things follow. First, the story of European enlightenment as a process of moral-practical learning is, at best, a partial and one-sided view of modernity, and at worst, serves to both obscure and justify its negative aspects. Second, given the necessary entwinement of the negative and the positive in the development of modernity, the best strategy for securing progress as a moral-political imperative is to come to an understanding of this dialectic, rather than viewing this development as a clear instance of progress as a historical "fact."

Similarly, Foucault's *History of Madness* should not be read as "advocating a rejection of reason in favor of a romantic embrace of unreason or madness"; rather, in writing a history of reason that demonstrates its entanglement with the pathologization of madness as mental illness, Foucault's aim "is to open up a space of freedom between ourselves and our historical a priori" (Allen, 2016, p. 177). Again, to present this ambivalent history as a history of progress would be to be present a one-sided view of things that obscured the negative effects of reason's development, along with the yet-to-be-determined potential for freedom contained within this history – the productive side of power. Thus, Allen presents Adorno and Foucault as offering an alternative approach to historicized normative theorizing. Their genealogies are "critical problematizations" that, in demonstrating the limits and blind spots of a particular historical self-conception, have the normative aim of "the fuller realization of the normative inheritance of the Enlightenment, in particular, the norms of freedom and respect for the other" (Allen, 2016, p. 166).

In what follows, I will focus on Allen's positive thesis that the problem of the normative foundations of critical theory can be reconceived along the lines of metanormative contextualism inspired by Adorno and Foucault. I am generally sympathetic with Allen's negative thesis *contra* Habermas and Honneth concerning their large-scale narratives of European moral and institutional progress, and agree that such narratives are both highly problematic and unnecessary as normative grounds for critique. However, it may also be the case that more modest, localized, and contingent conceptions of progress may be sufficient and

unavoidable in many instances, which perhaps makes me less skeptical than Allen concerning judgments of progress in general.[1] I would also defend aspects of Honneth's social ontology that form the core of his early recognition theory, which I believe are separable from his stronger statements concerning the teleological progression of history, and are more central for his project of normative grounding than suggested by Allen in her book (see Allen, 2016, pp. 81–82 and 117–119). Nonetheless, I will focus on the question of what it would mean to return to Adorno in order to rethink the relation between history and normativity, and raise two challenges concerning Allen's reading of Adorno and the alliance with Foucault. Specifically, I will suggest that Adorno's commitment to a normative conception of truth and irrationality, alongside his critical naturalism and materialism, makes him potentially ill-suited as a representative of Allen's metanormative contextualism, and complicates the contributions of Foucault's historical analyses. That is, although Adorno's critique of the concept of progress fits in neatly with Allen's negative thesis against Habermas and Honneth, other aspects of Adorno's work pose potential problems for her positive thesis of proposing metanormative contextualism as an approach to normative grounding in critical theory.

In addition to the discussed contributions from Adorno and Foucault, metanormative contextualism for Allen consists of two claims.

> First, moral principles or normative ideals are always justified relative to a set of contextually salient values, conceptions of the good life, or normative horizons—roughly speaking, forms of life or life-worlds. Second, there is no über-context, no context-free or transcendent point of view from which we can adjudicate which contexts are ultimately correct or even in a position of hierarchical superiority over which others. (Allen, 2016, p. 215)

The key to understanding Allen's thesis is a distinction between first-order normative claims and second-order metanormative ones. At the first-order level, we can be committed to values such as "freedom, equality, and solidarity with the suffering of others" (Allen, 2016, p. 211). These first-order normative claims are justified relative to our form of life, and may even form an essential part of our self-conception as moral agents (Allen, 2016, p. 202). However, at the metanormative level, Allen suggests that we must be aware "of the violence inherent" in our first-order normative claims as well as take a position of "fundamental modesty or humility regarding their status and authority" (Allen, 2016, p. 202). That is, our higher-order, meta-level reflections on the status of our first-order claims ought to be made with an awareness of their necessarily contingent foundations. If we accept the thesis that there is no über-context from which we can adjudicate, with absolute certainty, the status of our first-order claims, then a normative and epistemic humility with respect to those claims, such as claims about the superiority of European modernity, seems to follow as a result. Borrowing from work in contextualist epistemology by Michael Williams and Linda Martín Alcoff, Allen argues that, importantly, metanormative contextualism does not entail first-order relativism, and further, that the worry about relativism is itself a pseudoproblem derived from a false dichotomy between relativism and absolutism (Allen, 2016, pp. 212, 216). In other words, accepting metanormative

contextualism need not undermine our ability to endorse first-order normative claims, and in fact, only does so on the presumption that there exists an absolute, context-transcendent point of view from which to adjudicate those claims in the first place.

Allen's suggestion that worries about relativism often correlate with the assumption of absolutism sounds right, and in making her case, she draws on Adorno who contends that the opposition to false absolutes is much more pressing from the perspective of moral thinking than the (entirely futile) search for absolute and foundational values. However, Adorno's rejection of an absolute standpoint or über-context is complicated by further philosophical commitments that may not fit entirely with Allen's (and Foucault's) metanormative contextualism. First, although Adorno rejects the presumption of a context-transcendent, absolute point of view, he nonetheless continues to hold onto a normative conception of truth and irrationality. Brian O'Connor puts the point in the following way:

> [For Adorno] there is a *normativity of correctness* […] of *how we ought to think* […] in order to get experience right this is what one must think. (O'Connor, 2004, pp. 1−2)

That is to say: there is a right and wrong way to think, and this correlates with our ability to make correct and incorrect judgments about ourselves and about the world. Adorno's incessant critique of idealism, for example, can thus be roughly understood as suggesting that idealism takes the wrong approach to thinking, operates on false assumptions, and generates false judgments about ourselves and the world. His own preferred approach of negative dialectics, or what Jay Bernstein calls "the complex concept" (see Bernstein, 2001, chapter 6) would be the right approach to thinking endorsed by Adorno, one that would generate true judgments about ourselves and the world (for example, "The whole is the false," or "Wrong life cannot be lived rightly," or "Culture has failed," etc.).

Without pretending to do justice to Adorno's complex view here, we can provisionally draw two conclusions from this normative view of truth. The first is simply that this doesn't seem to fit in well with Foucault, and although Allen does not aim at a full-scale reconstruction or reconciliation of their views, I think this particular difference between Adorno and Foucault is one that matters to their respective approaches to historical critique. In Adorno and Horkheimer's negative dialectical presentation of the development of enlightenment modernity, the judgment of this history is that it has produced a barbaric, damaged, and inhuman form of life − a wrong life − and they endorse this judgment as the correct view of things such that other judgments (for example, enlightenment as moral progress) would be false. Foucault's presentation of the history of reason and its relation to madness serves the function of "creat[ing] distance between ourselves and our system of thought, our historical a priori," where this distance constitutes the "space of freedom" (p. 184). This suggests that they draw entirely different conclusions from the insight that there is no context-transcendent, absolute point of view: for Adorno, accepting this is compatible with a normative account of truth and first-order judgments about

society's wrongness and irrationality; for Foucault, accepting this means that critique and resistance can only consist in creating distance between ourselves and our historical a priori, but not a judgment about whether a particular power/knowledge order is ultimately right or wrong. Foucault's approach to historical critique requires a certain *suspension of judgment* (and arguably, more optimism about the productive possibilities of power), whereas Adorno's approach to historical critique aims at *true judgments* concerning our past and present.[2] This allows us to see, secondly, that the normative view of truth is in fact in conflict with the second claim of metanormative contextualism, namely, that the lack of a context-transcendent point of view entails that we cannot judge the correctness or incorrectness of particular contexts or make comparative judgments in which one context is judged to be superior or inferior to another. Foucault may accept this claim, but not Adorno. There may even be an Adornian critique of this claim, where the suspension of judgment is itself a symptom of our generally reduced capacities for both empathy and thought.

The normative view of truth brings us to a second complication brought by Adorno to metanormative contextualism. Given that Adorno endorses a normative view of truth, what exactly forms the basis of truth, if there is no context-transcendent point of view? (And even more problematically, what is the basis of truth when we live a *Verblendungszusammenhang*, a context of delusion?) While the full answer to this question, as expected, highly complex, the short answer is his negativistic critical naturalism or materialism.[3] Very roughly, Adorno contends that the basis of truth can be discerned by attending to the priority of the object, insofar as concepts can never exhaust the content of the objects they conceive. Two particular types of objects are especially relevant: nature that is external to us, and ourselves as natural creatures with acute needs and desires. The wrongness evidenced by the dialectic of enlightenment consists partly in the instinct for self-preservation gone terribly awry, where the taming and domination of nature (initially through myth, and then through the conceptual apparatus and technology brought by enlightenment reason), so important for our survival, have resulted in a context that threatens our very survival – both in that our technology and the destruction of nature threaten to make the earth uninhabitable for humans and other life-forms, and in that the knowledge and technology brought about by modernity (most notably, the capitalist form of exchange) fail to satisfy our basic needs and desires and even come to deform them entirely, despite their promise and potential to do exactly the opposite. This means that the truth content of the judgment that enlightenment has led to a new kind of barbarism is indexed to nature in both cases, although in a highly mediated and qualified sense.

Adorno's dialectical approach to naturalism (sometimes also called his materialism) is best understood through his Marxian concept of natural history.[4] Allen explains the first half of Adorno's thesis as follows:

> Adorno's complicated account of the relationship between nature and history is the idea that historically constituted objects come, over time, to seem natural and therefore unchangeable. Revealing this "second nature" to be historically contingent and therefore changeable is a crucial task of critical theory for Adorno. (p. 195)

Here, the aim of critique is to reveal the historically contingent character of things that appear to us as "natural" — things that appear (via unreflective habits and ideological reinforcement) as non-historical, eternal, unchanging, and necessary. This is a central feature of Adorno's dialectical critique of enlightenment rationality, which aims to reconstruct its historical development and trajectory. But there is a second feature of Adorno's natural history approach that Allen omits in her account, which claims, at the same time, that everything historical also has its basis in the natural, that history itself is a "natural outgrowth," which is concealed by certain historical self-understandings (Adorno, 1973, p. 358). The natural history thesis aims to demonstrate the dialectical interrelation of two opposed claims: on the one hand, everything is historically mediated and critique needs to denaturalize what appears as second nature; on the other hand, all history is an outgrowth of and thoroughly conditioned by nature, a condition that is likewise concealed and damaged by unreflective forms of historicism. Because there is no unmediated, non-historical, access to either external or human nature, and human nature itself is both unrealized and distorted, what critique can do is to help us attend to and become aware of history's repressed natural origins, which are most perspicuous in their negative, damaged form. Bernstein puts the point in the following way:

> In a way from which he never deviated, Adorno regards culture as a *part* of the natural world, albeit an intensely historicized part whose fundamental forms of activity cannot be reduced to their natural origins or counterparts, but whose origins and counterparts provide the conditions of possibility of their cultural elaboration as well as their genealogical intelligibility. (Bernstein, 2001, p. 189)

Nature (mediated, historicized, damaged, dominated, appearing in the negative, but still expressive of natural needs, functions, and desires) provides the conditions not just for culture, but also for its genealogical intelligibility; that is, without reference to nature, there would be no basis for truth, history, culture, or genealogical critique or self-understanding. So although Allen is right in suggesting that Adorno's appeal to inhumanity and the reality of suffering "cannot be indicative of a naïve or straightforward realism or objectivism about moral truths or values," the appeal is likewise idle without a reference to our existence as natural creatures in a natural environment with natural needs and desires, all of which only manifest themselves in a historically mediated, arguably damaged form, but none of which can be entirely erased by the concepts and practices of institutionalized enlightened reason that seek to obliviate it (p. 217).[5] All of this is a result of Adorno's normative theory of truth grounded in the priority of the object thesis. What Allen refers to as the method of historical problematization in Adorno thus makes necessary reference to nature as the basis of historical truth.

What are the implications of Adorno's critical naturalism for the thesis of meta-normative contextualism? Again I think we can draw two provisional conclusions. The first (again) concerns the divergence between Adorno and Foucault and their respective approaches to historical critique. Traditionally, Foucault has been viewed as a representative of strong social constructivism in which language and discourse come to eclipse any talk of nature or materiality, but more recently Foucault has

been viewed as a potential resource for thinkers associated with the "new materialism." Here is a characteristic passage from Foucault concerning the body:

> We believe, in any event, that the body obeys the exclusive laws of physiology and that it escapes the influence of history, but this too is false. The body is molded by a great many distinct regimes; it is broken down by the rhythms of work, rest, and holidays; it is poisoned by food or values, through eating habits or moral laws; it constructs resistances […]. Nothing in man—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men. The traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled. (Foucault, 1984, pp. 87–88)

Some of what Foucault says here fits in well with Adorno's conception of natural history: our physical bodies are molded by history and social practices, but no power regime can ever fully discipline the body such that it does not construct resistances, such that pleasures and perversions do not arise that create a distance from power, even while not being outside of or beyond it. However, Adorno draws significant moral conclusions from his natural history approach ("arrange thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself"), whereas Foucault consistently and deliberately abstains from moral prescriptions, and would not ever ground moral claims on the basis of bodies and how they are molded by specific power regimes. Like Allen, my point is not to compare and contrast Adorno and Foucault, but I would contend that whereas natural history is a source of normativity for Adorno and a sufficient normative ground for critique, Foucault would reject this approach to normative grounding entirely. He may even reject the very idea that we need normative grounds for critique, and contend that the very debate over normative grounding in critical theory is largely a psuedoproblem. Where does metanormative contextualism fit in here? Does it side with Adorno, turning to natural history as a normative ground, or does it side with Foucault, who does not appear to have the problem of finding normative grounds at all? For Adorno, the potential success of the appeal to inhumanity and suffering depends upon the natural history thesis. Without it, the appeal lacks the necessary explanatory and normative force to make a genuine moral claim.

The second issue concerns how Adorno's critical naturalism complicates the first claim of metanormative contextualism, which states that:

> moral principles or normative ideals are always justified relative to a set of contextually salient values, conceptions of the good life, or normative horizons—roughly speaking, forms of life or life-worlds. (p. 215)

Given Adorno's rejection of a context-transcendent point of view, this must be right. However, Adorno's account may be less pluralistic than is suggested by this claim: the dialectic of enlightenment has a totalizing reach, its destruction of external nature and unrealized human nature knows no bounds, and capitalism is the form of life shared by humanity across the globe. If this is right (a big if), then contextualism is less contextual than it first appears, insofar as all of humanity is implicated in the wrong life. To put the point in Adorno's negative terms: suffering and inhuman practices are wrong everywhere, even if the grounds upon which we make this claim are shifting,

contingent, and historically mediated foundations, as Adorno's own attempts at grounding surely are. Negative dialectics itself is, for Adorno, the right way of thinking about wrong life, but it is only right insofar as the conditions of wrong life continue to obtain. This is indeed a form of contextual justification, but when that context is total, the truth of contextualism loses some of its critical edge.

To conclude, none of what I have said implies that Adorno's account is correct, or that critical theory *must* return to Adorno, however, we come to interpret his controversial approach to historical critique. I have tried to draw out some of the implications that I think follow if we do indeed wish to return to Adorno's method of normative grounding, and raise some questions as to whether Adorno's method is compatible with metanormative contextualism. Allen has put forward a sophisticated, powerful, and undeniable challenge to critical theories that are normatively grounded in Eurocentric conceptions of progress. While the need to reject such parochial narratives is clear, critical theory's way forward continues to be open for debate.

NOTES

1. Allen also holds open the idea of more localized and contingent judgments of progress, calling this "progress in history." See Allen (2016, pp. 228−229). One question we could raise is whether progress in history (as opposed to historical progress) would be sufficient, in principal, to normatively ground the critical theories of Habermas and Honneth.

2. On Foucault's conception of critique and the suspension of judgment, see Butler (2002). Butler also draws a connection between Adorno's and Foucault's conceptions of critique, but I disagree with her that Adorno's conception of critique can also be understood along the lines of the suspension of judgment. Note also that Adorno's judgments are generally negative. For a sophisticated defense of Adorno's epistemic negativism which claims that we can only know the wrong, bad, false, inhuman, and so forth, see Freyenhagen (2013, esp. chapters 2 and 8).

3. I agree with Freyenhagen that we can also characterize this as a negative Aristotelianism. See Freyenhagen (2013, chapter 9).

4. Deborah Cook refers to Adorno's natural history approach as critical materialism. See Cook ([2011] 2014, chapter 1).

5. Although I cannot enter the debate as to whether Adorno is a realist of some sort, Alcoff and Shomali (2010) refer to Adorno as a dialectical realist. They also draw a connection between Adorno's conception of constellations and Foucault's conception of an *episteme*.

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