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Against Negativism: Why Critical Theory Should Appeal to the Good

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In this article, I argue against negativism in critical theory. Negativism holds that critical theory should avoid appealing to explicit positive normative standards ("the good") in its social critique. I distinguish between two types of negativism prevalent in critical theory. While *dialectical negativism* claims that we can approach the good in a negative way, *radical negativism* rejects such appeals entirely. I then review three motivations for negativism: that appealing to the good is *epistemically precarious*, *normatively inadequate*, and *unimportant for the project of critical theory*. I contend that the arguments for negativism are largely unsuccessful. Some reliable knowledge of human goods is possible, appeals to the good need not be undemocratic or paternalistic, and positive normative standards are crucial for grounding critique and guiding transformation. I conclude that critical theory's emancipatory aims are undermined by negativism, and that it should embrace appealing to the good in its social critique.

Against Negativism: Why Critical Theory Should Appeal to the Good

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The idea that we should approach social critique in a "negativistic" manner is widespread in critical theory.[1] Both classical critical theorists (like Adorno or Foucault) and contemporary thinkers (like Amy Allen or Fabian Freyenhagen) seem to share the view that it would be a mistake to tie the critique of social structures of domination to explicit and positive normative standards. Various epistemological and normative reasons for this view have been advanced by critical theorists. In this article, I categorize different types of, and motivations for, negativism in critical theory. I then argue against negativism, suggesting that the main arguments for a negativistic approach to social critique are unpersuasive, and that there are important reasons that militate against such an approach.

I take negativism to be the idea that critical theory should not appeal to explicit and positive normative standards in its social critique.[2] That is, it should refrain from making positive claims about concepts such as an ideal society, human flourishing, a good life, or social justice. Since these are separate matters, of course, they constitute different domains of negativism that are not logically connected. We can thus distinguish between negativism *with regard to a particular concept* and negativism *tout court.* It is possible to hold a negativistic view with regard to human flourishing, for example, without subscribing to negativism about social justice. However, at least in critical theory, negativistic approaches to the various domains often go together, such that a critical theorist that is skeptical of positive conceptions of human flourishing is likely to look similarly upon utopian blueprints for an ideal society. I contend that this is not an accident. Although logically distinct, the negativistic views are often motivated by considerations that apply across the various domains, which I crudely

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[1] By the term "critical theory," I denote a broad class of approaches in social and political theory whose main focus is the critique and transformation of various kinds of social relations of domination, aiming at human emancipation. The tradition of the Frankfurt School in particular forms one part of what I refer to as critical theory.

[2] See Freyenhagen 2013, p. 7. This includes the view that critical theory *cannot* appeal to such standards (see section II.A).

subsume under the term "the good," following Freyenhagen.[3] Note that I do not intend the talk of explicit and positive normative standards to mean that these standards need to be transhistorically and transculturally valid, unchanging, or independent of social practices. Conceptions of internal or immanent critique, for instance, need not be negativistic in the sense discussed here (although they can be). When some critical theorists extract a notion of freedom from existing social discourses or practices and use it to criticize social structures of unfreedom, they do appeal to an explicit and positive normative standard in their social critique.

In what follows, I outline and review the motivations for negativism *tout court*, which I simply refer to as "negativism" for the remainder of this article. There has been an extensive debate about the normative foundations of social critique and about negativism in critical theory in recent decades.[4] I draw on this literature selectively, mainly attempting to systematize and consider the core arguments for and against a negativistic approach. My conclusion will be that the main arguments supporting negativism, considered below, are largely unsuccessful. Furthermore, I argue that negativism is, on the whole, damaging to the project of critical theory. Not only is it the case that critical theorists need not be afraid of explicit and positive normative standards of critique; rather, they should actively embrace them.

I. TWO TYPES OF NEGATIVISM

Since negativism as defined above is itself a negative statement, it can be spelled out in different ways. We can usefully, albeit heuristically, distinguish between two types of negativism. The first type states that while critical theory should not make *positive* claims about the good, we can nevertheless approach the good in a negative way. For example, it is often asserted that while we should not attempt to develop a positive conception of human flourishing, we can surely say what human flourishing is *not*, i.e., we can identify suffering in the world, criticizing and transforming the structures that produce it: "We may not know what absolute good is or the absolute norm, we may not

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[3] Freyenhagen 2013, p. 210. This means that in the terminology of this paper, "the good" includes conceptions of human flourishing, an ideal society, social justice, and so on. Hence, I do not follow the familiar distinction between "the good" and "the right" here. Note that of course, the practical use of this shorthand does not commit us to the existence of anything like a Platonic Form of the Good.

[4] On the normative foundations of social critique, see, e.g.: Habermas 1987; Allen 2016; Jaeggi 2018; Celikates 2018. On negativism in particular, see, e.g.: Finlayson 2002; Freyenhagen 2013; Allen 2015; Gordon 2024.

even know what man is or the human or humanity – but what the inhuman is we know very well indeed."[5] Similarly, a common position in the Marxian and Frankfurt-school critical theory tradition is that it is not the task of theory to write up "ready-made utopias"[6] or "receipts [i.e. recipes] [...] for the cook-shops of the future."[7] According to this negativistic approach to utopianism, it is the critique of existing society that will give us a glimpse of what might be possible in its place. Hence, a better future society will result not from developing blueprints, but from "*ruthless criticism of all that exists*."[8] On the young Marx's view, "it is precisely the advantage of the new trend that we do not dogmatically anticipate the world, but only want to find the new world through criticism of the old one."[9] Since this type of negativism is – not accidentally – particularly common in theories of Hegelian provenance, it can be called *dialectical* negativism.

The second type of negativism is more radical than the first. Rather than proposing to get at human flourishing, utopia, or social justice in a negative way, it seeks to rid critical theory of these categories entirely.[10] Here, unlike in the dialectical approach, negativistic social critique does not operate in the name of an indeterminable positive horizon anymore. Rather, the ambition of critical theory should be limited to analyzing relations of power and revealing the contingency of existing social arrangements. Everything else is the task of agents like social movements as opposed to critical theorists. Critical theory, on this view, should not go beyond its modest objective by telling social movements what kind of society they should strive for, or even what ills of existing society should be overcome. Foucault, for instance, describes critique as "the movement through which the subject gives itself the right to question truth concerning its power effects and to question power about its discourses of truth":[11] It is, on this view, a work of questioning and disassembling rather than constructing.[12] A similar negativistic thrust is apparent in another famous Foucauldian definition of critique: "the art of not being governed like that and at this price."[13] This type of

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[5] Adorno 1963, p. 175.

[6] Marx 1975−2004, vol. 22, p. 335.

[7] Marx 1975−2004, vol. 35, p. 17.

[8] Marx 1975−2004, vol. 3, p. 142.

[9] Marx 1975−2004, vol. 3, p. 142.

[10] Flügel−Martinsen 2021, pp. 23−24.

[11] Foucault 1996, p. 386.

[12] See also Butler 2004.

[13] Foucault 1996, p. 384. See also Vogelmann 2017a, p. 206: "[T]he negativity of emancipation is exhibited in the diagnosis of the present because critique's counter-truths emancipate us from what seemed to be universal truths, from what seemed to be unavoidable ways of being

negativism is generally prevalent in Foucauldian, (some) radical democratic, and other theories that are influenced by antihumanist and post-structuralist ideas. We can call it *radical* negativism.

Within each of these two families of negativist approaches, there are important differences. There are also different strands within, and interpretations of, the work of the most prominent authors of each family. Regarding Adorno, for instance, there is an ongoing debate about whether the normativity of his social critique is grounded at its core in a notion of immanent critique or in a negativistic opposition to human suffering, where both strands are clearly present in his work.[14] I do not intend to attach any strong interpretive claims about particular authors to the critique of negativism advanced here. Instead, I focus on the systematic claims of each of the two types of negativism, which, I take it, describe influential positions within critical theory and (at least) important strands in many of its canonical authors.

Dialectical and radical negativism share a lot in common, and the reasons to adopt either kind of negativism overlap. At the same time, there are some distinct motivations that only apply to one of these two types of negativism. In the following section, I outline various reasons to adopt a negativistic approach to social critique and discuss whether they hold up.

II. MOTIVATIONS FOR NEGATIVISM

On a fundamental level, we can distinguish between three broad motivations for negativism: first, that appealing to explicit and positive normative standards is *epistemically precarious*; second, that it is *normatively inadequate*; and third, that it is *unimportant for the project of critical theory*.[15] In this section, I outline and discuss these motivations in turn.

A. Epistemic Precariousness

Objections from epistemic precariousness challenge the epistemic reliability of the appeal to explicit and positive normative standards in grounding social critique. There

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governed and from what seemed to be necessary subjectivities. Foucault's critique does so without providing new truths to which we could hold on, without explaining how we should govern or be governed instead and without giving us new subjectivities for which to strive."

[14] See, e.g.: Finlayson 2002; Freyenhagen 2013; and Gordon 2024.

[15] This typology is adapted from Leopold (2016), who applies it to utopia in particular (see also Sörensen 2022).

appear to be two types of reasons why positive claims about concepts like human flourishing or social justice might be epistemically precarious. First, there might be something *about the referents of these concepts* that makes knowledge about them to be particularly difficult to obtain. Dialectical negativists may claim, for example, that the good escapes conceptual categories.[16] To advance an explicit conception of the good would be to entrap the ineffable in our limited concepts through identity thinking and thereby curb its radical otherness.[17] Radical negativists, on the other hand, might assert that normative standards are always effects of power that cannot be used to criticize the power relations they originate from.[18] We can call these *object-related reasons* for epistemic precariousness.

The second type of reason for epistemic precariousness is that there might be something *about us* as critical theorists in today's society that makes us unable to produce reliable positive claims about concepts like human flourishing or social justice. The most common version of this concern roughly states that existing power relations shape us so thoroughly that they deeply distort our thinking about the good. Again, very broadly, there seem to be two variants of this claim. Radical negativists tend to substantiate it by drawing on the concept of subjectivation, stating that power relations *constitute* subjects in a way that is impossible to escape. Knowledge and power are intertwined in a way that renders political theory unable to formulate a conception of the good from an objective standpoint outside hegemonic power relations. Dialectical negativists, on the other hand, tend to invoke the concept of ideology (which, in contrast to subjectivation, involves a claim to the falsehood of ideological appearances). Like radical negativists, they hold that social agents are so thoroughly implicated in the structures of capitalist modernity that thinking beyond this horizon is virtually impossible for them. "Wrong life cannot be lived rightly," according to Adorno's famous dictum, and neither can there be knowledge of the right life in a wrong society.[19] Unlike radical negativists, however, dialectical negativists think that we can at least somewhat reliably identify *social ills* in the world around us.[20] Usually, the idea is that there is something self-evident about the badness of all the suffering and inhumanity in the world, such that it would be ludicrous to ask for a further reason *why* it is bad.[21] Critical theorists should

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[16] See Adorno (1966, p. 11) and Finlayson (2002). There is an often-noted analogy to the *via negativa* in theology here.

[17] Finlayson 2002.

[18] See, e.g., Foucault in Chomsky and Foucault 2006, pp. 57–58.

[19] Adorno 1951, p. 39

[20] Here, by social ills, I simply mean negative aspects of the world that are socially caused.

[21] Freyenhagen 2013, pp. 189–191; Finlayson 2002, p. 9. As Freyenhagen (2013, p. 189) notes,

analyze the causes of these social ills, rather than appealing to a positive standard of the good that is epistemically impossible to obtain. We may call these *subject-related reasons* for epistemic precariousness.

How well do the outlined arguments for epistemic precariousness hold up? Let us begin with the subject-related reasons. A first objection is that they seem to rely on what has been called an "over-socialized" conception of human agents, which states that our thoughts and actions are almost completely determined by the social context in which we live.[22] While it is plausible that the social context *influences* and *conditions* social agents as well as their epistemic practices, the objection runs, the claim that the determination of our thought by structures of domination runs so deep that we cannot even fallibly approach a conception of the good is too strong.

As this argument is unlikely to convince negativists, though, we should proceed with a more internal critique. This objection zeroes in on the problem that the subject-related reasons for epistemic precariousness seem to prove too much.[23] In developing its social critique, critical theory is committed to developing social analyses about the society in which it is situated. Many of the social-analytical claims that critical theory typically makes, say, about tendencies or mechanisms of capitalism, are quite general in kind and require strong evidence. Moreover, they are often claims about issues where powerful agents have strong stakes and where our thinking is likely to be influenced by dominant ideologies. If structures of domination distort our thinking about normative concepts like human flourishing, social justice, or an ideal society, to such an extent that positive claims about these concepts are not at all epistemically reliable, then it also seems unlikely that we can rely on the *social-analytical* claims of critical theory. One might worry that the normative and social-analytical claims of critical theory are too dissimilar for this analogy to work. But note that the argument is only directed at the *subject-related* reasons for epistemic precariousness, i.e., the idea that *our thinking as critical theorists* is systematically distorted due to our being situated in structures of domination. Even though social-analytical and positive normative claims are different in important ways, it is unclear why an extremely powerful ideological order would not problematically affect us in our thinking about both.

This "companions in guilt" problem is even more troubling for dialectical negativists, since they also claim that we can somewhat reliably identify the *negative* aspects of our

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this is reminiscent of Bernard Williams' famous *one-thought-too-many* charge.

[22] In the case of dialectical negativism, one might also worry about an over-integrated view of society (Stahl 2023, pp. 9–10).

[23] See Stahl (2023) for a related argument.

social world. If structures of domination systematically distort our thinking about the good, then it is hard to see why they would not also distort our thinking about the social ills of the current world. In particular, it is unclear why living in a "radically evil social world"[24] would make recognizing its evil easier than recognizing good. Dialectical negativists might reply that this is because there is an inescapable human resistance to felt suffering that limits ideological rationalizations in the case of social ills. However, from a critical theory perspective, there seem to be plenty of social ills (like forms of unfreedom) that do not necessarily result in immediately felt human suffering and to which, therefore, this response would not apply (see also section II.B).

Thus, radical negativists would need to advance an argument why social analysis is not affected in the same way by the subject-related reasons for epistemic precariousness, and dialectical negativists would need to supply an additional argument why our perception of the bad is not affected in the same way either.[25] Conversely, if we think that negativistic critical theorists are right to reject the subject-related reasons for epistemic precariousness in the case of social analysis, then, absent such further arguments, we should also reject these reasons in the case of positive normative standards. Instead of being skeptics about our epistemic access to the good (and about social analysis), we can be fallibilists, acknowledging that we cannot be certain about the explanatory and normative propositions of critical theory but rejecting the view that our thinking is so distorted that we should abstain from making any positive normative claims.

What about the object-related reasons for epistemic precariousness? Concerning human flourishing in particular, although we should acknowledge that human beings do not always know what is good for them – for example, because of adaptive preferences –, it seems far-fetched to assert that we can say *nothing* of value about what constitutes a good human life. Consider, for instance, deep friendships that include experiences of communion and joy, a thorough understanding of one another, the fostering of self-knowledge, mutual trust and acceptance, a willingness to help each other out in difficult times, and the (fulfilled) desire to spend time with one another, among many other things. Almost everyone who has experienced such a friendship, as well as virtually all theoretical conceptions of human well-being, would agree that being

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[24] Freyenhagen 2013, p. 226.

[25] Regarding the second task, dialectical negativists might pursue a minimalist response. They would then have to show that our perception of the bad – unlike our perception of the good – is not *wholly* affected by structures of domination, and that this is enough for social critique to get off the ground. However, this potential response appears not to be applicable to the case of social analysis, since critical theory is clearly committed to more than minimalist claims about social analysis.

part of relationships like this is good for human beings, and it appears unconvincing to deny that we can know this. And again, the claim that we cannot have any knowledge of the human good is particularly difficult to defend for dialectical negativists, who claim at the same time that we know so well what is *bad* for human beings that even a theoretical grounding that explains why it is bad is unnecessary.

Freyenhagen, in his reconstruction and defense of Adorno's negativism, responds to a similar view as follows:

> [D]espite Adorno's negativism, he is not saying that people can never undergo positive experiences or attain goods. Rather, his claims are fourfold: (1) that such positive experiences are merely localised and often fleeting; (2) that we could not reliably tell which ones are genuine and which ones are not; (3) that they do not add up to either a good life or to knowledge of what the good life would consist in; and (4) that to say otherwise is to succumb to an illusion.[26]

In response, the first proposition does not pose a challenge to the objection advanced here, and we may grant it for the sake of argument without accepting negativism.[27] In light of the example introduced above, the second claim appears too strong. It seems that we can distinguish between genuine and fake friendships at least in most situations, and that we can somewhat reliably know that genuine friendships of the type discussed above really are good for us.[28] The same plausibly holds for other human goods like, say, physical health. Or consider a classical proposition of critical theory: that the endeavor of workers to form associations in order to resist their exploitation is not only instrumentally valuable for their social struggle, but also satisfies an intrinsic need of theirs. Marx reports about French workers: "Such things as smoking, drinking, eating, etc., are no longer means of contact or means that bring them together. Association,

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[26] Freyenhagen 2013, p. 226.

[27] At times, Freyenhagen seems to advocate an even stronger, implausible position, claiming that there are *no* instantiations of the good in current society at all: "[W]e cannot just read the good off from its manifestations in social institutions or practices, *for there are no such manifestations*, nor can we read it off from the rational potential of these institutions and practices, for they are too infected by the bads even for this." (Freyenhagen 2013, p. 10, emphasis added)

[28] A dialectical negativist might argue that current society renders genuine friendship impossible, and when we think that we have intrinsically valuable relationships with our closest friends, we are radically mistaken about this. However, this relates back to the subject-related reasons for epistemic precariousness: It seems hard to believe that we could be radically mistaken about the character of our closest relationships and at the same time accurate in our analysis of social relations of domination.

society and conversation, which again has association as its end, are enough for them; the brotherhood of man is no mere phrase with them, but a fact of life […]."[29] This also seems to suggest that we can attain, and come to know, genuine human goods within current society – in this case, precisely in resisting this society. These examples of reliably knowable human goods might appear trivial to some readers. But they are, first, to an important extent unrealized in current societies and therefore an important basis of social critique; and second, invoked here precisely because they are relatively uncontroversial and therefore well-suited to show that we can, at least in some cases, obtain reliable knowledge about human goods.[30]

Since Freyenhagen's fourth claim does not really add anything to the argument, the remaining challenge thus lies in (3). The idea here is that we may be able to experience or know about *fragments* of a good life, but we cannot attain a holistic conception of what a good life would look like. Since rejecting (2), as I have argued we should, commits negativists to the view that *some* reliable knowledge about the good is possible, one might ask why it should not be possible to build on this knowledge and fallibly approach a fuller conception of the good. Negativists would then have to claim that a good life is something *radically and essentially different* from the combination of the constituents of the good we can know about now. There seem to be two problems with this view.

First, it is not clear what reasons we have to subscribe to this view, and it may look like an *ad hoc* reaction to the challenge. One might also suspect that it amounts to an over-idealized conception of the good. The claim is reminiscent of the theological idea that our current understanding of God is fragmentary, but sometime in the future, believers will experience clear and full knowledge.[31] This similarity does not, of course, give rise to an objection by itself, but it may provide some ground for suspicion. Note that objecting to such an over-idealized view of the good, *pace* Freyenhagen, would not imply the ideological claim that "asking for a different social world is based on an

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[29] Marx 1975–2004, vol. 3, p. 313.

[30] One might read Freyenhagen's claim (2) in a different way, referring to "false positives": Some things that we assume to be human goods – say, financial wealth – are not real goods, but we cannot reliably tell which ones. The most promising candidates for these ideological goods would seem to be instrumental goods (i.e., instrumental within current society) that we fetishistically mistake for intrinsic ones. Now the claim that we have no reliable way of telling instrumental and intrinsic goods apart appears overly skeptical. If this really were the case, though, there would seem to be a symmetrical problem with ideological bads, undermining Freyenhagen's negativistic basis of critique.

[31] "For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

over-inflated sense of the good"[32] and that we should therefore be content with what we have. On the contrary, it would amount to saying that we can criticize current social structures for preventing many people from living a good life based on our current, fallible knowledge. In any case, even if the charge of over-inflation is inconclusive, it is up to negativists to provide arguments for the view that a good life is something radically and essentially different from the combination of those constituents of it we appear to know now.

Second, even if the conception of the good we can attain now were limited in this way, why should we not simply run with it, remaining open to future changes? After all, if we reject (2), then the potential problem that (3) points to is not that what we think of as human goods are actually bad, but merely that our conception might not yet contain the whole truth, as it were. In this case, the main drawback of proceeding with such a partial conception of the good would be that our critique were insufficiently radical, since it could (for now) only aim to realize those constituents of the good that we have identified so far. Still, a negativistic critique would be even less radical in the same sense, because it would not even aim at realizing a partial conception of the good, but only at minimizing the negative aspects we see in our current world. Hence, even if (3) is true, it is not clear that negativism is superior to proceeding with a partial conception of the good.

In responding to the object-related reasons for epistemic precariousness, I have mostly appealed to human flourishing as a domain of negativism. The reason is that I believe this to be the area in which we can most confidently reject the thesis of epistemic precariousness. The reader may have another domain in mind, such as social justice, in which we can be relatively confident about the epistemic reliability of some positive normative standard. Since the target of the critique advanced here is negativism *tout court*, establishing *one* domain in which the object-related reasons do not hold up suffices to show that the object-related skepticism about positive normative standards falls short.

A final worry about my response to the arguments for epistemic precariousness is that by appealing to concepts like "knowledge" of or "epistemic access" to the good, I have implicitly presupposed a realist account of normativity, begging the question against some negativists. While I cannot discuss the meta-ethics of critical theories at length here,[33] I contend that my response presupposes nothing more than negativists pressing the objection from epistemic precariousness when they claim that

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[32] Freyenhagen 2013, p. 230.

[33] See Stahl (2017) for such a discussion.

our epistemic access to the good is unreliable – and, even more clearly, nothing more than dialectical negativists in particular when they say that "what the inhuman is we know very well indeed."[34] This manner of talking about "knowledge" and "epistemic access," which I share with many negativists,[35] commits neither the negativistic objection nor my response to a realist account of normativity. This is because the knowledge in question need not be knowledge of observer-independent normative facts. If normativity is ultimately grounded in social practices or in the attitudes of participants in an ideal discourse, for instance, then the reliable knowledge that is needed to appeal to an explicit conception of the good in our social critique may be knowledge of social practices or knowledge of what participants in an ideal discourse would approve of, rather than knowledge of observer-independent normative facts. Whatever the meta-ethical grounding ultimately looks like, my claim in this section is merely that the negativistic view regarding the ideological and substantive obstacles to obtaining this knowledge is too strong. While this defense does presuppose a broadly cognitivist account of normative claims, negativists do the same when they press an objection from *epistemic* precariousness.

B. Normative Inadequacy

A second motivation for negativism is the idea that issuing positive claims about the good is in some way normatively inadequate. Again, there are several ways to substantiate this critique. Dialectical negativists' normative reason for negativism relies on the epistemic problems discussed in the previous section. Because we live in a thoroughly and essentially bad social order riddled with exploitation, oppression, and domination, we cannot gain positive knowledge about the good. If we nevertheless attempt to do so, we will inevitably reproduce the ills of the current social world and miss the radical potential of humanity that is unimaginable to us. Radical negativists tend to share the view that any explicit conception of the good will be influenced in a problematic way by structures of domination prevalent in the current social world. These claims entirely depend on the objection from epistemic precariousness. If the arguments that I have advanced against this objection in the previous section succeed, then they have no independent force. I therefore set them aside here.

In addition, some negativists put forth a different variant of the objection from normative inadequacy. They argue that for critical theorists to develop a positive

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[34] Adorno 1963, p. 175.

[35] See also Freyenhagen 2013, p. 4.

conception of the good is in some way undemocratic or paternalistic. This is thought to be because it objectionably codifies something that should be left open, on their view, either to democratic deliberation or to personal choice. Making positive statements about the good is therefore held to be equivalent to unacceptably laying claim to a status as an expert with privileged insights into the good.[36]

The normative core of the charge that appealing to explicit and positive normative standards is undemocratic or paternalistic seems to be the *violation of (collective or individual) autonomy.* However, taking this charge at face value, it is hard to see how theoretical work on conceptions of the good life, utopian blueprints, or theories of social justice might violate the autonomy of other social agents. If anything, it seems that such work might give social agents additional theoretical options that they could either adopt or reject, thereby enhancing their substantive autonomy.[37] Adherents of negativism seem to think that there is something about the social position of the critical theorist that makes this problematic. A more promising construal of this objection, developing the idea that non-negativistic critical theory is committed to claiming a problematic sort of privileged epistemic standpoint, might therefore look as follows.

First, political theory and philosophy does not possess more reliable epistemic access to plausible positive normative standards than other social agents or practices. Second, a practice in which critical theorists work on developing positive normative standards *in their role as theorists* performatively presupposes that the first premise is wrong, i.e., that political theory and philosophy does possess a privileged kind of epistemic access. Third, a practice that performatively presupposes the denial of the first premise although it is true is, in this regard, problematic. Hence, developing positive normative standards as critical theorists is, at least in one regard, problematic.

While the third premise of this argument is in need of a further explanation what, precisely, is problematic about a practice that performatively presupposes a more reliable epistemic access than it does in fact possess, and an account of the gravity of this problem, we may grant this premise. Both the first and the second premises of the argument, however, are questionable. First, although theoretical reflection is surely not the only way of epistemic access to plausible positive normative standards, it does seem to be *one* way. For example, sometimes we initially subscribe to various normative

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[36] See, e.g., Celikates 2018, pp. 119−120. A similar critique of "epistemological and ethical authoritarianism" in claiming a "privileged access to reality or ethical validity," though not the idea that any positive conception of the good entails it, can be found in Cooke (2006, pp. 20−21).

[37] Leopold 2016, pp. 119−122.

principles or aims that all seem very appealing, but theoretical argumentation can show us that they are incompatible and we must give up one of them. At least, this looks like one epistemic advantage of political theory and philosophy that cannot be easily reproduced without relying on the kind of argumentative practices that they involve. Another advantage might be that theorists simply have more time to reflect systematically on conceptions of the good than other social agents. In response, one might concede that political theory and philosophy has some epistemic advantages, but object that they are counteracted by other disadvantages, such that political theory is not overall in an epistemically privileged position. Perhaps, for example, the social position of theorists makes them particularly likely to fall for certain ideological views that neutralize any other epistemic advantages they might have.[38]

In order for an argument like this to support the first premise, it would have to be further developed. Even if this strategy were feasible, it points to a severe problem in the second premise of the argument. At most, what theorists working on positive normative standards performatively presuppose is that they have *something* of value to contribute to discussions about social critique and the aims of social transformation. This is, however, a much weaker proposition than the generalized claim to privileged epistemic access. It leaves open that the contribution of political theorists to societal debate might only be one part of a larger puzzle, as it were. Now if we were to modify the argument to accommodate this weaker presupposition, it would never get off the ground. The first premise would then have to state that political theory and philosophy have nothing of value to contribute to discussions about positive normative standards. This is a very strong, prima facie implausible claim that would require strong support. Until negativists provide such support, the objection that developing explicit and positive normative standards problematically presupposes a privileged kind of epistemic access must fail.

So far, I have argued that the objection from normative inadequacy fails to adequately support negativism. We could go further and level the charge of normative inadequacy back at negativism, at least at its dialectical variant. In particular, the rejection of a conceptual grounding of normative claims that goes beyond the pre-theoretical experience of, and identification with, physical suffering[39] seems problematic in at

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[38] Although the social positions which political philosophers and critical theorists occupy seem to vary quite a bit.

[39] See, for example, Adorno (2004, p. 365), who explicitly rejects a discursive grounding of morality, claiming that morality only survives "in the practical abhorrence of the unbearable physical agony to which individuals are exposed even with individuality about to vanish as a form of mental reflection."

least two ways. First, not all structures of domination give rise to immediate suffering. Agents can be dominated by structurally empowered "benevolent dominators" – or, perhaps, by impersonal structures – without being immediately harmed, at least for some time. Even if dialectical negativists are right that every instance of domination will *eventually* give rise to felt suffering, rejecting a conceptual grounding of normative claims still seems to run the risk of overlooking instances of domination that have not resulted in the suffering of dominated agents yet.

Second, if we rely on the pre-theoretical experience of suffering, we may be in danger of overlooking the enormous amounts of externalized harm that current social structures generate. For instance, future generations will be affected by the negative effects of anthropogenic climate change for centuries to come. This is a social problem that could not be immediately felt at the time it was first caused and that can only be properly grasped through the combination of empirical insights with conceptually structured theoretical reflection.[40] It seems that if we want to react adequately to problems like this, we cannot rely on the immediate experience of suffering alone, and we cannot do without theoretical normative concepts. One might worry that this second objection is driven by an excessive expectation of what critical theory should be able to do. Perhaps, even if dialectical negativism cannot adequately deal with intergenerational matters, we should not hold that against the approach, since no theory can capture every issue.[41] But first, this example only points to *one* especially clear case in which the criterion of immediately experienced suffering diverges from the set of phenomena that merit critique. Second, climate change is a central problem of our time, and if a critical theory that relies on immediate suffering as the sole basis of social critique cannot adequately deal with it, then this does seem to be an important disadvantage of that theory.[42]

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[40] For instance, as the famous debate about the Stern report showed, normative theoretical assumptions such as the rate of pure time preference carry extensive political implications for our actions in response to the climate crisis.

[41] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

[42] It is also not a good response for the dialectical negativist to point out that they might be able to criticize those social structures that give rise to climate change on other grounds. For instance, the dialectical negativist might hold that capitalism causes climate change, and independently criticize capitalism for causing present suffering. The problem is that it might turn out that there are real conflicts of interest between generations, in which case a critique of present suffering without taking into account future generations' interests might provide reasons to increase carbon emissions now. It appears dangerous to stake the adequacy of social critique on a hope for this kind of harmony between different generations' interests.

C. Unimportance for the Project of Critical Theory

Above, I have provisionally defined critical theory as a broad class of approaches in social and political theory whose main focus is the critique and transformation of various kinds of social relations of domination, aiming at human emancipation. There are at least two ways in which positive claims about the good may be important for this project: First, they may play a significant role in accounting for the critique of social relations of domination that critical theory intends to offer. Second, they may provide relevant guidance about the direction in which existing social structures should be transformed. Negativists either have to account for both of these roles or deny that they are important for the project of critical theory.

i. Accounting for the Grounds of Social Critique

Regarding the first role, most radical negativists simply deny that critical theory should account for the normative grounds of its critique. For some, the demand for a normative grounding of critique is even akin to a demand for an affirmative integration into hegemonic power structures.[43] Not all dialectical negativists share this wholesale rejection. Freyenhagen, for instance, agrees that accounting for the standards underlying one's normative judgments is important, but he argues that this can be an explanatory rather than a justificatory project, and that the standards need not be positive ones.[44]

In my view, there are at least two reasons why accounting for the normative grounds of its critique is important for critical theory. First, if a critical theory that is situated within current society is always *in danger* of reproducing hegemonic ideologies and structures of domination (even though the view that it is virtually guaranteed to do so is implausible), then it appears particularly important to counteract this danger. Offering a systematic account of the normative standards underlying their critique forces social critics to challenge their implicit biases and preconceived notions by explicating them and subjecting them to rigorous criticism. If critics are released from this requirement, the risk that such preconceived notions and biases find their way into their critique seems, if anything, higher.

Accounting for the normative standards of one's critique has a second important disciplining function.[45] Human desires and aims are often in tension with each other, as

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[43] Vogelmann 2021; Flügel-Martinsen 2022.

[44] Freyenhagen 2013, pp. 7–9, 200–208.

[45] "Disciplining" is meant here in a weak sense of ensuring the coherence of one's aims, rather

exemplified by the idiom "having your cake and eating it, too," which has equivalents in many languages. In particular, we have no reason to assume that this does not hold for implicit conceptions of human flourishing or of the kind of society we strive for. If we explicate these ideas and expose them to criticism, which often shows that we cannot realize all of a number of initially attractive ideals at the same time, then we can acknowledge these trade-offs and make a conscious decision about them. If we keep our aims implicit, on the other hand, we are likely to overlook many of these tensions. At best, this means that we simply leave it to chance how these trade-offs are made. In the worst case, it could cause transformative action to be entirely ineffective if it attempts to pursue contradictory aims at the same time. For those negativists who cannot, or do not want to, account for the standards of their critique, this is an important drawback of their position.

One might object that both of these arguments presuppose that social critique always carries some (implicit or explicit) normative standard, and that this assumption is implausible. Recall, though, that I refer to the term "normative standard" in a broad way that does not only include transhistorically and transculturally valid principles, but also more contextual benchmarks of evaluation. At the same time, social critique in the sense relevant here always operates at some level of abstraction; it cannot grasp each case of individual suffering in its particularity. When we criticize social structures for instantiating or causing certain *societal* ills, we therefore presuppose somewhat general normative standards in our critique. Social critique involves normative claims, and, as Freyenhagen puts it, "[t]o make normative claims is to invoke standards of judgement, and these standards are (part of) the account we give of the reasons we have. [...] This is, I take it, an ecumenical understanding of normativity – restricted as it is to a minimal core."[46]

So far, this only shows that social critique always carries a normative standard that may be important to explicate, but not necessarily a *positive* normative standard.

than, say, in the sense of conforming to dominant social norms.

[46] Freyenhagen 2013, p. 7. Marcuse (1964, pp. xl–xli) also explicitly defends the need for normative standards. Drawing on a typology by Vogelmann (2017b), one might object that my argument presupposes a particular picture of critique as "measuring" and begs the question against other pictures of critique as "disrupting" or "emancipating." How do those other types of critique perform judgments, if not by measuring? According to Vogelmann (2017b, pp. 104–105), by drawing not on standards but on Cavellian criteria. However, it is not clear why the two arguments for explicit accounting developed above – that it may challenge potential biases and explicate trade-offs underlying critical judgments – would not equally apply to *criteria* that ground social critique. Hence, it seems that this move cannot release critical theory from the importance of normative accounting.

This suffices for objecting to radical negativism, which typically rejects all explicit normative standards, but not to dialectical negativism. It seems, though, that criticizing the current state of affairs presupposes that things could be different in a way that is better than the status quo. It makes little sense, for instance, to criticize basic laws of nature, simply because they cannot be changed. This is part of the reason why critical theorists often insist that the mechanisms underlying social ills are fundamentally *not* like fixed laws of nature. Accounting for the grounds of one's critique therefore has to include showing that things could indeed be better. Note that demonstrating the historical contingency of a phenomenon, by itself, does not achieve this. Since there are irreversible processes, not everything that is human-caused can necessarily be changed today, and more importantly, the contingency of a phenomenon does not show that there is a *better* alternative available. While presenting – or at least sketching – a better alternative need not, in principle, be the only way of showing that there is one, it is the direct and often most persuasive one.

Consider an example that Freyenhagen advances against this view: "[W]hen faced with a group of youths who are pouring petrol over a cat and are about to set it on fire, I do not need to make positive suggestions about how they could spend their afternoon in order to intervene and to criticise them for what they are about to do."[47] Crucially, part of the reason why the cat-rescuer does not have to offer positive alternatives along with their criticism appears to be that they may assume it to be common knowledge that there are such alternatives, and that there is thus no need to torture cats. In the supposedly analogous case of social critique, however, claiming that there is no viable and desirable alternative to current social structures is precisely one of the most common (and most persuasive) argumentative strategies defending the status quo.[48] If we criticize the status quo with the aim of transforming it, we presuppose that there is such a positive alternative, and the most promising way of showing this seems to be to sketch one. This leads us to the second important function of explicit and positive normative standards for critical theory: offering guidance about the direction of social transformation.

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[47] Freyenhagen 2013, p. 218.

[48] For a closer analogy, consider animal experiments which are claimed to be necessary to advance treatments of cancer in humans but which cause the animals to suffer. Sketching a positive alternative to these experiments will be, if not necessary, then at least enormously helpful to press the case of a critic of these experiments. Even in this analogy, however, critics might urge to *just stop* the experiments, and this would be an intelligible demand. By contrast, on the level of a whole society, it is not clear what it would mean to "just stop."

ii. Offering Guidance About the Direction of Social Transformation

Regarding the second potential role of explicit and positive normative standards for critical theory, again, most radical negativists flatly deny that critical theory should offer guidance about the direction of social transformation.[49] For them, the role of critical theory is merely to analyze relations of power and to expose the contingency of features of social reality that appear to be necessary. It is then the task of other social agents to decide whether they want to change those features and, if they do, in what direction. For critical theory to provide theoretically grounded suggestions of desirable political aims would be to overstep its bounds in a "paternalistic" or "undemocratic" manner (see section II.B). For dialectical negativists, on the other hand, an important task of critical theory is to start from the undeniable suffering of many people in modern society and to provide an analysis and explanation of these social ills. This analysis grounds the demand that the causes of these social ills should be removed. However, on this view, critical theory should not offer a positive alternative, but only guidance of a negative kind. According to Freyenhagen, this is enough because "[w]e have every reason to try do so [to change the world], since (a) the current social world realises the bad and (b) it is difficult to see how any social world could be worse."[50]

As deeply flawed as our contemporary social reality is, the latter claim seems clearly wrong. One need only look at the multiplicity of dystopian literature to imagine (realistic) social worlds that are (much) worse than the current one. In fact, the avoidance of these worse worlds is a first crucial reason why it is important for critical theory to provide some positive guidance about the direction of desirable social change. One might wonder if negative guidance does not suffice for avoiding worse worlds, provided we reject Freyenhagen's implausible claim that there are no such worse worlds. We can, however, imagine a social world which is bad in every way that the current world is bad, but which contains none of the positive aspects of the current world (for example, no genuine friendships). It seems that a negativistic approach could not tell the difference between this imagined, clearly worse world and our current world. One might further object that this is an unrealistic example, and that it is therefore irrelevant for a social critique of the real world. However, even if we concede that critical theories do not need to cover hypothetical cases, this case is only an extreme – and therefore illustrative – instance of a more general problem: Dialectical negativism does not give us reason to avoid worlds that are worse than the current world in the respect that they contain less of its good aspects.

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[49] See Flügel-Martinsen 2021, p. 35.

[50] Freyenhagen 2013, pp. 219–220.

A second reason why it may be important for critical theory to offer guidance about the direction of social transformation is that it is likely to be much more persuasive if it is able to provide such guidance. This does not necessarily have to take the form of detailed blueprints of a future society. But considering how widespread an attitude of "capitalist realism" is,[51] a critical theory that is able to offer at least a sketch of a positive alternative to current society, or of the kind of human flourishing that we should strive to realize, is likely to be much more convincing than one that is not. Third, and relatedly, articulating a positive alternative is likely to be motivationally helpful.[52] Merely negative critique might lead to resignation and inaction, whereas having a clear vision of a desirable future can serve as a catalyst for motivation.[53]

Fourth, it is unclear whether a negativistic approach to social transformation would lead to transformative action that is ambitious enough. After all, the aim of critical theory is not just to abolish the worst features of current society, but to enable a flourishing life to all human (and, one might add, non-human) beings. A negativistic version of critical theory can, at best, only recommend social changes that aim at abolishing the ills of current society, hoping that a more positive vision will emerge in the course of this process. If this prospective utopian vision, ostensibly unbound by current epistemic limits, does not ensue, then a negativistic critical theory risks failing to achieve its aim of genuine human emancipation.

Finally, developing explicit and positive conceptions of the good can help to clarify what is at stake in certain strategic debates about the best approach to social transformation. Consider the hotly debated political demand for a universal basic income (UBI). It is contentious between various approaches within critical theory whether UBI is an adequate transitional demand that can contribute to desirable social transformation. As Kandiyali shows, the answer to this question partly depends on the vision of the kind of society that UBI is supposed to help bring about and, in particular,

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[51] I.e., the idea that even if capitalist social structures are problematic, we cannot even imagine a viable alternative to them (see Fisher 2009).

[52] Leopold 2017, pp. 23–24.

[53] Freyenhagen (2013, p. 219) cites the following situation as an example in which this may not be the case: "Non-constructive criticism could be aimed at inducing change and even achieve it. For example, when creative directors of advertising companies reject a proposed campaign and tell their employees to rework it completely, they might often not give any indication of how it could be done better or be constructive in any other way." However, the reason that proceeding like this might work for the creative directors seems to be that they simply hold a lot of power over their employees and can outsource the constructive work of developing an alternative campaign to them. Hence, the example does not seem to be a fitting analogy for the situation of critical theory.

the status of work within it.[54] If the answer to important strategic questions about social transformation like this one depends on the role of work within our conception of human flourishing, then it seems important for critical theorists to acknowledge and openly debate the underlying differences causing these disagreements, rather than just the surface-level political questions itself.

All in all, there appear to be at least two roles that explicit and positive normative standards serve for critical theory – accounting for the grounds of its critique and providing guidance about the direction of social transformation –, and multiple arguments supporting the importance of these roles for the project. Negativistic versions of critical theory cannot, and some do not even aim to, fulfill these roles adequately. Hence, it is not only the case – as I have argued in the previous sections – that the arguments supporting negativism fail, but also, we have important reasons to actively reject a negativistic approach.

III. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have first offered a definition of negativism as the idea that critical theory should not appeal to explicit and positive normative standards in its social critique. I have then described two types of negativism and reviewed three broad motivations for a negativistic approach: that appealing to explicit and positive normative standards is epistemically precarious, normatively inadequate, and unimportant for the project of critical theory. I have argued that the arguments supporting negativism are largely unsuccessful, and that we have important reasons to reject negativism in critical theory.

Even so, critical theorists may still be negativists with regard to particular domains. The argument pursued here does not rule out that there may be specific reasons why we should be skeptical with regard to positive conceptions of, say, social justice in particular. But if my argument is broadly correct, then the general skepticism about explicit and positive normative standards that is prevalent in critical theory is unwarranted. Critical theory should not only diagnose the social ills that permeate our current social world, but also give us an idea of what kind of world we should strive for.

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[54] Kandiyali 2022.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

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