

# Can one lead a good life in a bad life?

## Adorno Prize Lecture

### Judith Butler

I am most honoured to be here on this occasion to receive the Adorno Prize.\* I would like this evening to talk to you about a question that Adorno posed, one that is still alive for us today. It is a question to which I return time and again, one that continues to make itself felt in a recurrent way. There is no easy way to answer the question, and certainly no easy way to escape its claim upon us. Adorno, of course, told us in *Minima Moralia* that 'Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen' ('Wrong life cannot be lived rightly', in Jephcott's translation),<sup>1</sup> and yet this did not lead him to despair of the possibility of morality. Indeed, we are left with the question, how does one lead a good life in a bad life? He underscored the difficulty of finding a way to pursue a good life for oneself, as oneself, in the context of a broader world that is structured by inequality, exploitation and forms of effacement. That would at least be the initial way I would reformulate his question. Indeed, as I reformulate it for you now, I am aware that it is a question that takes new form depending on the historical time in which it is formulated. So, from the beginning, we have two problems: the first is how to live one's own life well, such that we might say that we are living a good life within a world in which the good life is structurally or systematically foreclosed for so many. The second problem is, what form does this question take for us now? Or, how does the historical time in which we live condition and permeate the form of the question itself?

Before I go further, I am compelled to reflect on the terms we use. Indeed, 'the good life' is a controversial phrase, since there are so many different views on what 'the good life' (*das Richtige Leben*) might be. Many have identified the good life with economic well-being,

prosperity, or even security, but we know that both economic well-being and security can be achieved by those who are not living a good life. And this is most clear when those who claim to live the good life do so by profiting off the labour of others, or relying on an economic system that entrenches inequality. So 'the good life' has to be defined more broadly so that it does not presuppose or imply inequality, or 'the good life' has to be reconciled with other normative values. If we rely on ordinary language to tell us what the good life is, we will become confused, since the phrase has become a vector for competing schemes of value.

In fact, we might conclude rather quickly that, on the one hand, 'the good life' as a phrase belongs either to an outdated Aristotelian formulation, tied to individualistic forms of moral conduct, or, on the other hand, that 'the good life' has been too contaminated by commercial discourse to be useful to those who want to think about the relationship between morality, or ethics more broadly, and social and economic theory. When Adorno queries whether it is possible to lead a good life in a bad life, he is asking about the relation of moral conduct to social conditions, but more broadly about the relation of morality to social theory; indeed, he is also asking how the broader operations of power and domination enter into, or disrupt, our individual reflections on how best to live. In his lectures *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, he writes:

ethical conduct or moral and immoral conduct is always a social phenomenon – in other words, it makes absolutely no sense to talk about ethical and moral conduct separately from relations of human beings to each other, and an individual who exists purely for himself is an empty abstraction.<sup>2</sup>

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\* This is the text of a lecture delivered, in shortened form and in German translation, on the occasion of the award of the Adorno Prize to Judith Butler in Frankfurt on 11 September 2012. Announcement of the prize led to a campaign against awarding the prize to Butler on the grounds of her political positions on Israel and Palestine. Her response to one such criticism in *The Jerusalem Post* can be found, along with more than twenty translations into other languages, at [www.egs.edu/faculty/judith-butler/articles/i-affirm-a-judaism-that-is-not-associated-with-state-violence](http://www.egs.edu/faculty/judith-butler/articles/i-affirm-a-judaism-that-is-not-associated-with-state-violence).

Or again, ‘social categories enter into the very fibre of those of moral philosophy.’ Or, yet again, in the final sentence of the lectures:

anything that we can call morality today merges into the question of the organization of the world ... we might even say that the quest for the good life is the quest for the right form of politics, if indeed such a right form of politics lay within the realm of what can be achieved today.<sup>3</sup>

And so it makes sense to ask: which social configuration of ‘life’ enters into the question, how best to live? If I ask how best to live, or how to lead a good life, I seem to draw upon not only ideas of what is good, but also of what is living, and what is life. I must have a sense of my life in order to ask what kind of life to lead, and my life must appear to me as something I might lead, something that does not just lead me. And yet it is clear that I cannot ‘lead’ all aspects of the living organism that I am, even though I am compelled to ask: how might I lead my life? How does one lead a life when not all life processes that make up a life can be led, or when only certain aspects of a life can be directed or formed in a deliberate or reflective way, and others clearly not?

### **Biopolitics: the ungrievable**

So if the question, ‘How am I to lead a good life?’, is one of the elementary questions of morality, indeed perhaps its defining question, then it would seem that morality from its inception is bound up with biopolitics. By biopolitics, I mean those powers that organize life, even the powers that differentially dispose lives to precarity as part of a broader management of populations through governmental and non-governmental means, and that establish a set of measures for the differential valuation of life itself. In asking how to lead my life, I am already negotiating such forms of power. The most individual question of morality – how do I live this life that is mine? – is bound up with biopolitical questions distilled in forms such these: Whose lives matter? Whose lives do not matter as lives, are not recognizable as living, or count only ambiguously as alive? Such questions presume that that we cannot take for granted that all living humans bear the status of a subject who is worthy of rights and protections, with freedom and a sense of political belonging; on the contrary, such a status must be secured through political means, and where it is denied that deprivation must be made manifest. It has been my suggestion that to understand the differential way that such a status is allocated, we must

ask: whose lives are grievable, and whose are not? The biopolitical management of the ungrievable proves crucial to approaching the question, how do I lead this life? And how do I live this life within the life, the conditions of living, that structure us now? At stake is the following sort of inquiry: whose lives are already considered not lives, or only partially living, or already dead and gone, prior to any explicit destruction or abandonment?

Of course, this question becomes most acute for someone, anyone, who already understands him- or herself to be a dispensable sort of being, one who registers at an affective and corporeal level that his or her life is *not* worth safeguarding, protecting and valuing. This is someone who understands that she or he will *not* be grieved for if his or her life were lost, and so one for whom the conditional claim ‘I would not be grieved for’ is actively lived in the present moment. If it turns out that I have no certainty that I will have food or shelter, or that no social network or institution would catch me if I fall, then I come to belong to the ungrievable. This does not mean that there won’t be some who grieve for me, or that the ungrievable do not have ways of grieving for one another. It doesn’t mean that I won’t be grieved for in one corner and not in another, or that the loss doesn’t register at all. But these forms of persistence and resistance still take place within the shadow-life of the public, occasionally breaking out and contesting those schemes by which they are devalued by asserting their collective value. So, yes, the ungrievable gather sometimes in public insurgencies of grief, which is why in so many countries it is difficult to distinguish the funeral from the demonstration.

So I overstate the case, but I do it for a reason. The reason that someone will not be grieved for, or have already been established as one who is not to be grieved for, is that there is no present structure of support that will sustain that life, which implies that it is devalued, not worth supporting and protecting as a life by dominant schemes of value. The very future of my life depends upon that condition of support, so if I am not supported, then my life is established as tenuous, precarious, and in that sense not worthy to be protected from injury or loss, and so not grievable. If only a grievable life can be valued, and valued through time, then only a grievable life will be eligible for social and economic support, housing, health care, employment, rights of political expression, forms of social recognition, and the conditions for political agency (*Handlungsfähigkeit*). One must, as it were, be grievable before one is lost, before any question of

being neglected or abandoned, and one must be able to live a life knowing that the loss of this life that I am would be mourned and so every measure will be taken to forestall this loss.

From within a felt sense that one's life is ungrievable or dispensable, how does the moral question get formulated, and how does the demand for public grieving take place? In other words, how do I endeavour to lead a good life if I do not have a life to speak of, or when the life that I seek to lead is considered dispensable, or is in fact already abandoned? When the life that I lead is unliveable, a rather searing paradox follows, for the question, how do I lead a good life?, presumes that *there are lives* to be led; that is, that there are lives recognized as living and that mine is among them. Indeed, the question presumes as well that there is an *I* who has the power to pose the question reflexively, and that I also appear to myself, which means that I can appear within the field of appearance that is available to me. For the question to be viable, the one who asks it must be able to pursue whatever answer emerges. For the question to clear a path that *I* can follow, the world must be structured in such a way that my reflection and action prove not only possible but efficacious. If I am to deliberate on how best to live, then I have to presume that the life I seek to pursue can be affirmed as a life, that I can affirm it, even if it is not affirmed more generally, or even under those conditions when it is not always easy to discern whether there is a social and economic affirmation of my life. After all, this life that is mine is reflected back to me from a world that is disposed to allocate the value of life differentially, a world in which my own life is valued more or less than others. In other words, this life that is mine reflects back to me a problem of equality and power and, more broadly, the justice or injustice of the allocation of value.

So if this sort of world – what we might be compelled to call 'the bad life' – fails to reflect back my value as a living being, then I must become critical of those categories and structures that produce that form of effacement and inequality. In other words, I cannot affirm my own life without critically evaluating those structures that differentially value life itself. This practice of critique is one in which my own life is bound up with the objects that I think about. My life is this life, lived here, in the spatio-temporal horizon established by my body, but it is also out there, implicated in other living processes of which I am but one. Further, it is implicated in the power differentials that decide whose life matters more, and whose life matters less,

whose life becomes a paradigm for all living things, and whose life is a non-life within the contemporary terms that govern the value of living beings. Adorno remarks that

we need to hold fast to moral norms, to self-criticism, to the question of right and wrong, and at the same time to a sense of the fallibility of the authority that has the confidence to undertake such self-criticism.<sup>4</sup>

This 'I' may not be as knowing about itself as it claims, and it may well be true that the only terms by which this 'I' grasps itself are those that belong to a discourse that precedes and informs thought without any of us being able fully to grasp its working and its effect. And since values are defined and distributed through modes of power whose authority must be questioned, I am in a certain bind. Do I establish myself in the terms that would make my life valuable, or do I offer a critique of the reigning order of values?

So though I must and do ask, how shall I live a good life, and this aspiration is an important one, I have to think carefully about this life that is mine, that is also a broader social life, that is connected with other living beings in ways that engage me in a critical relation to the discursive orders of life and value in which I live, or, rather, in which I endeavour to live. What gives them their authority? And is that authority legitimate? Since my own life is at stake in such an inquiry, the critique of the biopolitical order is a living issue for me, and as much as the potential for living a good life is at stake, so too is the struggle to live and the struggle to live within a just world. Whether or not I can live a life that has value is not something that I can decide on my own, since it turns out that this life is and is not my own, and that this is what makes me a social creature, and a living one. The question of how to live the good life, then, is already, and from the start, bound up with this ambiguity, and is bound up with a living (*lebendig*) practice of critique.

If I am not able to establish my value in the world in any more than a transient way, then my sense of possibility is equally transient. The moral imperative to lead a good life and the reflective questions it engenders can sometimes seem very cruel and unthinking to those who live in conditions of hopelessness, and we can perhaps easily understand the cynicism that sometimes envelops the very practice of morality: why should I act morally, or even ask the question of how best to live (such that I might then be leading a good life), if my life is already not considered to be a life, if my life is already treated as a form of death, or if I belong to what Orlando Patterson has called the

realm of 'social death' – a term he used to describe the condition of living under slavery?

Because contemporary forms of economic abandonment and dispossession that follow from the institutionalization of neoliberal rationalities or the differential production of precarity cannot for the most part be analogized with slavery, it remains important to distinguish among modalities of social death. Perhaps we cannot use one word to describe the conditions under which lives becomes unliveable, yet the term 'precarity' can distinguish between modes of 'unliveability': those who, for instance, belong to imprisonment without recourse to due process; those living in war zones or under occupation, exposed to violence and destruction without recourse to safety or exit; those who undergo forced emigration and live in liminal zones, waiting for borders to open, food to arrive, and the prospect of living with documentation; those that mark the condition of being part of a dispensable or expendable workforce for whom the prospect of a stable livelihood seems increasingly remote, and who live in a daily way within a collapsed temporal horizon, suffering a sense of a damaged future in the stomach and in the bones, trying to feel but fearing more what might be felt. How can one ask how best to lead a life when one feels no power to direct life, when one is uncertain that one is alive, or when one is struggling to feel the sense that one is alive, but also fearing that feeling, and the pain of living in this way? Under contemporary conditions of forced emigration, vast populations now live with no sense of a secure future, no sense of continuing political belonging, living a sense of damaged life as part of the daily experience of neoliberalism.

I do not mean to say that the struggle for survival precedes the domain of morality or moral obligation as such, since we know that even under conditions of extreme threat, people do offer whatever acts of support are possible. We know this from some of the extraordinary reports from the concentration camps. In the work of Robert Antelme, for instance, it could be the exchange of a cigarette between those who share no common language, but find themselves in the same condition of imprisonment and peril in the KZ. Or in the work of Primo Levi, the response to the other can take the form of simply listening to, and recording, the details of the story that the other might tell, letting that story become part of an undeniable archive, the enduring trace of loss that compels the ongoing obligation to mourn. Or in the work of Charlotte Delbo, the sudden offering to another of the last piece of bread that one desperately needs for oneself. And

yet, in these same accounts, there are also those who will not extend the hand, who will take the bread for themselves, hoard the cigarette, and sometimes suffer the anguish of depriving another under conditions of radical destitution. In other words, under conditions of extreme peril and heightened precarity, the moral dilemma does not pass away; it persists precisely in the tension between wanting to live and wanting to live in a certain way with others. One is still in small and vital ways 'leading a life' as one recites or hears the story, as one affirms whatever occasion there might be to acknowledge the life and suffering of another. Even the utterance of the name can come as the most extraordinary form of recognition, especially when one has become nameless or when one's name has been replaced by a number, or when one is not addressed at all.

Hannah Arendt insisted on the crucial distinction between the desire to live and the desire to live well, or, rather, the desire to live the good life.<sup>5</sup> For Arendt, survival was not, and should not be, a goal in itself, since life itself was not an intrinsic good. Only the good life makes life worth living. She resolved that Socratic dilemma quite easily but perhaps too quickly, or so it seems to me. I am not sure her answer can work for us; nor am I convinced that it ever did quite work. For Arendt, the life of the body had for the most part to be separated from the life of the mind, which is why in *The Human Condition* she drew a distinction between the public and private spheres. The private sphere included the domain of need, the reproduction of material life, sexuality, life, death and transience. She clearly understood that the private sphere supported the public sphere of action and thought, but in her view the political had to be defined by action, including the active sense of speaking. So the verbal deed became the action of the deliberative and public space of politics. Those who entered into the public did so from the private sphere, so the public sphere depended fundamentally on the reproduction of the private and the clear passageway that led from the private to the public. Those who could not speak Greek, who came from elsewhere and whose speech was not intelligible were considered barbarians, which means that the public sphere was not conceived as a space of multilingualism and so failed to imply the practice of translation as a public obligation. And yet we can see that the efficacious verbal act depended on (a) a stable and sequestered private sphere that reproduced the masculine speaker and actor and (b) a language designated for verbal action, the defining feature of politics that could be heard and understood



because it conformed to the demands of monolingualism. The public sphere, characterized by an intelligible and efficacious set of speech acts, was thus perpetually shadowed by the problems of unrecognized labour (women and slaves) and multilingualism. And the site where both converge was precisely the situation of the slave, one who could be replaced, whose political status was null, and whose language was considered no language at all.

Of course, Arendt understood that the body was important to any conception of action, and that even those who fight in resistances or in revolutions had to undertake bodily actions to claim their rights and to create something new.<sup>6</sup> And the body was certainly important to public speech, understood as a verbal form of action. The body appears again as a central figure in her important conception of natality, which is linked with her conception of both aesthetics and politics. However, her scheme implies that the kind of action understood as ‘giving birth’ is not quite the same as the action involved in revolution, and yet both are bound together by the fact that they are different ways of creating something new, without precedent. If there is suffering in acts of political resistance or, indeed, in giving birth, it is a suffering that serves the purpose of bringing something new into the world. And yet, what do we make of that suffering that belongs to forms of labour that slowly or quickly destroy the body of the labourer, or other forms that serve no instrumental purpose at all? If we define politics restrictively as an active stance, verbal and physical, that takes place within a clearly demarcated public sphere, then it seems we are left to call ‘useless suffering’ and unrecognized labour the pre-political experiences, not actions, that exist outside the political as such. However, since any conception of the political has to take into account what operation of power demarcates the political from the pre-political, and how the distinction between public and private accords differential value to different life processes,

we have to refuse the Arendtian definition, even as it gives us much to value. Or, rather, we have to take the Arendtian distinction between the life of the body and the life of the mind as a point of departure for thinking about a different kind of bodily politics. After all, Arendt does not simply distinguish mind and body in a Cartesian sense; rather, she affirms only those forms of embodied thought and action that create something new, that undertake action with performative efficacy.

Actions that are performative are irreducible to technical applications, and they are differentiated from passive and transient forms of experience. Thus, when and where there is suffering or transience, it is there to be transformed into the life of action and thought. Such action and thought have to be performative in the illocutionary sense, modelled on aesthetic judgement, bringing something new into the world. This means that the body concerned solely with issues of survival, with the reproduction of material conditions and the satisfaction of basic needs, is not yet the ‘political’ body; the private is necessary since the political body can only emerge into the light of public space to act and think if it is well fed and well sheltered, supported by numerous pre-political actors whose action is not political. If there is no political actor who cannot assume that the private domain operates as support, then the political defined as the public is essentially dependent on the private, which means that the private is not the opposite of the political, but enters into its very definition. This well-fed body speaks openly and publicly; this body which spent the night sheltered and in the private company of others emerges always later to act in public. That private sphere becomes the very background of public action, but should it for that reason be cast as pre-political? Does it, for instance, matter whether relations of equality or dignity or non-violence exist in that shadowy background where women, children, the elderly and the slave dwell? If one sphere of inequality is disavowed in order to justify and promote another sphere of equality, then

surely we need a politics that can name and expose that very contradiction and the operation of disavowal by which it is sustained. If we accept the definition Arendt proposes between public and private, we run the risk of ratifying that disavowal.

So, what is at stake here in revisiting Arendt's account of the private and public distinction in the classical Greek *polis*? The disavowal of dependency becomes the precondition of the autonomous thinking and acting political subject, which immediately raises the question of what kind of 'autonomous' thought and action this might be. And if we agree to the private and public distinction that Arendt presents, we accept that disavowal of dependency as a precondition of politics rather than taking those mechanisms of disavowal as the objects of our own critical analysis. Indeed, it is the critique of that unacknowledged dependency that establishes the point of departure for a new body politics, one that begins with an understanding of human dependency and interdependency; one that, in other words, can account for the relation between precarity and performativity.

Indeed, what if one started with the condition of dependency and the norms that facilitate its disavowal? What difference would such a point of departure make to the idea of politics, and even to the role of performativity within the political? Is it possible to separate the agentic and active dimension of performative speech from the other dimensions of bodily life, including dependency and vulnerability, modes of the living body that cannot easily or fully be transformed into forms of unambiguous action? We would not only need to let go of the idea that verbal speech distinguishes the human from non-human animals, but we would need to affirm those dimensions of speaking that do not always reflect conscious and deliberate intention. Indeed, sometimes, as Wittgenstein remarked, we speak, we utter words,



and only later have a sense of their life. My speech does not start with my intention, though something we surely can call intention certainly gets formed as we speak. Moreover, the performativity of the human animal takes place through gesture, gait, modes of mobility; through sound and image; through various expressive means that are not reducible to public forms of verbal speech. That republican ideal is yet to give way to a broader understanding of sensate democracy. The way we gather on the street, sing or chant, or even maintain our silence, can be, is, part of the performative dimension of politics, situating speech as one bodily act among others. So bodies act when they speak, to be sure, but speaking is not the only way that bodies act – and certainly not the only way they act politically. And when public demonstrations or political actions have as their aim the opposition to failing forms of support – lack of food or shelter, unreliable or uncompensated labour – then what was previously understood as the 'background' of politics becomes its explicit object. When people gather to rally against induced conditions of precarity, they are acting performatively, giving embodied form to the Arendtian idea of concerted action. But at such moments the performativity of politics emerges from conditions of precarity, and in political opposition to that precarity. When populations are abandoned by economic or political policy, then lives are deemed unworthy of support. Over and against such policies, the contemporary politics of performativity insists upon the interdependency of living creatures as well as the ethical and political obligations that follow from any policy that deprives, or seeks to deprive, a population of a liveable life. They are also ways of enunciating and enacting value in the midst of a biopolitical scheme that threatens to devalue such populations.

Of course, this discussion brings us to another question: are we speaking only about human bodies? And can we speak about bodies at all without the environments, the machines and the complex systems of social interdependency upon which they rely, all of which form the conditions of their existence and survival? And finally, even if we come to understand and enumerate the requirements of the body, do we struggle only for those requirements to be met? As we have seen, Arendt surely opposed that view. Or do we struggle as well for bodies to thrive, and for lives to become liveable? As I hope to have suggested, we cannot struggle for a good life, a liveable life, without meeting the requirements that allow a body to persist. It is necessary to demand that bodies have what they

need to survive, for survival is surely a precondition for all other claims we make. And yet that demand proves insufficient since we survive precisely in order to live, and life, as much as it requires survival, must be *more* than survival in order to be livable.<sup>7</sup> One can survive without being able to live one's life. And in some cases, it surely does not seem worth it to survive under such conditions. So, an overarching demand must be precisely for a liveable life – that is, a life that can be lived.



How, then, do we think about a liveable life without positing a single or uniform ideal for that life? It is not a matter, in my view, of finding out what the human really is, or should be, since it has surely been made plain that humans are animals, too, and that their very bodily existence depends upon systems of support that are both human and non-human. So, to a certain extent, I follow Donna Haraway in asking us to think about the complex relationalities that constitute bodily life, and to suggest that we do not need any more ideal forms of the human; rather, we need to understand and attend to the complex set of relations without which we do not exist at all.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, there are conditions under which the kind of dependency and relationality to which I am referring seems to be unbearable. If a labourer depends on an owner who exploits that labourer, then one's dependency appears to be equivalent to one's capacity to be exploited. One might resolve that one has to do away with all dependency since the social form that dependency assumes is exploitation. And yet it would be an error to identify the contingent form that dependency takes under conditions of exploitative labour relations with the final or necessary meaning of dependency. Even if dependency always takes one social form or another, it remains something that can and does transfer among those forms, and so proves to be irreducible to any one of them. Indeed, my stronger

point is simply this: no human creature survives or persists without depending on a sustaining environment, social forms of relationality, and economic forms that presume and structure interdependency. It is true that dependency implies vulnerability, and sometimes that vulnerability is precisely a vulnerability to forms of power that threaten or diminish our existence. And yet this does not mean that we can legislate against dependency or the condition of vulnerability to social forms. Indeed, we could not begin to understand why it is so difficult to live a good life in a bad life if we were invulnerable to those forms of power that exploit or manipulate our desire to live. We desire to live, even to live well, within social organizations of life, biopolitical regimes, that sometimes establish our very lives as disposable or negligible or, worse, seek to negate our lives. If we cannot persist without social forms of life, and if the only available ones are those that work against the prospect of our living, we are in a difficult bind, if not an impossible one.

Put in yet other words, we are, as bodies, vulnerable to others and to institutions, and this vulnerability constitutes one aspect of the social modality through which bodies persist. The issue of *my* or *your* vulnerability implicates us in a broader political problem of equality and inequality, since vulnerability can be projected and denied (psychological categories), but also exploited and manipulated (social and economic categories) in the course of producing and naturalizing forms of social inequality. This is what is meant by the unequal distribution of vulnerability.

My normative aim, however, is not simply to call for an equal distribution of vulnerability, since much depends on whether the social form of vulnerability that is being distributed is itself a liveable one. In other words, one does not want everyone to have an equally unliveable life. As much as equality is a necessary goal, it remains insufficient if we do not know how best to evaluate whether or not the social form of vulnerability to be distributed is just. On the one hand, I am arguing that the disavowal of dependency and, in particular, the social form of vulnerability to which it gives rise, works to establish a distinction between those who are dependent and those who are not. And this distinction works in the service of inequality, shoring up forms of paternalism, or casting those in need in essentialist terms. On the other hand, I am suggesting that only through a concept of interdependency that affirms bodily dependency, conditions of precarity and potentials for performativity can we think a social and political world that seeks to overcome precarity in the name of liveable lives.

## Resistance

In my view, vulnerability constitutes one aspect of the political modality of the body, where the body is surely human, but understood as a human animal. Vulnerability to one another, that is to say, even when conceived as reciprocal, marks a pre-contractual dimension of our social relations. This means as well that at some level it defies that instrumental logic that claims that I will only protect your vulnerability if you protect mine (wherein politics becomes a matter of brokering a deal or making a calculation on chances). In fact, vulnerability constitutes one of the conditions of sociality and political life that cannot be contractually stipulated, and whose denial and manipulability constitutes an effort to destroy or manage an interdependent social condition of politics. As Jay Bernstein has made clear, vulnerability cannot be associated exclusively with injurability. All responsiveness to what happens is a function and effect of vulnerability, whether it is an openness to registering a history that has not yet been told, or a receptivity to what another body undergoes or has undergone, even when that body is gone. We can say that these are matters of empathy across time, but I want to suggest that part of what a body does (to use the phrase of Deleuze, derived from his reading of Spinoza)<sup>9</sup> is to open onto the body of another, or a set of others, and that for this reason bodies are not self-enclosed kinds of entities. They are always in some sense outside themselves, exploring or navigating their environment, extended and even sometimes dispossessed through the senses. If we can become lost in another, or if our tactile, motile, haptic, visual, olfactory or auditory capacities comport us beyond ourselves, that is because the body does not stay in its own place, and because dispossession of this kind characterizes bodily sense more generally. When being dispossessed in sociality is regarded as a constitutive function of what it means to live and persist, what difference does that make to the idea of politics itself?

If we return, then, to our original question, how is it that I might lead a good life in a bad life, we can rethink this moral question in light of social and political conditions without thereby eradicating the moral importance of the question. It may be that the question of how to live a good life depends upon having the power to lead a life as well as the sense of having a life, living a life or, indeed, the sense of being alive.

There is always the possibility of a cynical response, according to which the point is precisely to forget morality and its individualism and dedicate oneself to

the struggle for social justice. Pursuing this path, then, we might conclude that morality has to cede its place to politics in the broadest sense; that is, a common project to realize ideals of justice and equality in ways that are universalizable. Of course, in arriving at this conclusion, there is still a nagging and obdurate problem, namely that there is still this 'I' who must in some way enter into, negotiate and undertake a practice within a broader social and political movement. In so far as that movement seeks to displace or eradicate this 'I' and the problem of its own 'life', then another form of effacement happens, an absorption into a common norm, and so a destruction of the living 'I'. It cannot be that the question of how best to live this life, or how to lead a good life, culminates in the effacement or destruction of this 'I' and its 'life'. Or if it does, then the way the question is answered leads to the destruction of the question itself. And though I do not think that the question of morality can be posed outside of the context of social and economic life, without presupposing something about who counts as a subject of life, or as a living subject, I am quite sure that the answer to the question of how best to live cannot be rightly answered by destroying the subject of life.

And yet if we return to the claim that it is not possible to live a good life in a bad life, we see that the term 'life' occurs twice, and this is not simply incidental. If I ask how to lead a good life, then I am seeking recourse to a 'life' that would be good whether or not I was the one who might be leading it, and yet I am the one who needs to know, and so in some sense it is my life. In other words, already, from within the perspective of morality, life itself is doubled. By the time I get to the second part of the sentence, and I seek to know how to live a good life in a bad life, I am confronted with an idea of life as socially and economically organized. That social and economic organization of life is 'bad' precisely because it does not provide the conditions for a liveable life, because the liveability is unequally distributed. One might wish simply to live a good life in the midst of a bad life, finding one's own way as best as one can and disregarding the broader social and economic inequalities that are produced through specific organizations of life, but it is not so simple. After all, the life I am living, though clearly this life and not some other, is already connected with broader networks of life, and if it were not connected with such networks I could not actually live. So my own life depends on a life that is not mine, not just the life of the Other, but a broader social and economic organization of life. So my own living, my survival,



depends on this broader sense of life, one that includes organic life, living and sustaining environments, and social networks that affirm and support interdependency. They constitute who I am, which means that I cede some part of my distinctively human life in order to live, in order to be human at all.

Implicit in the question, how to live a good life in a bad life, is the idea that we might still think about what a good life might be, that we can no longer think it exclusively in terms of the good life of the individual. If there are two such 'lives' – my life and the good life, understood as a social form of life – then the life of the one is implicated in the life of the other. And this means that when we speak about social lives, we are referring to how the social traverses the individual, or even establishes the social form of individuality. At the same time the individual, no matter how intensively self-referential, is always referring to itself through a mediating form, through some media. As such, its very language for recognizing itself comes from elsewhere. The social conditions and mediates this recognition of myself that I undertake. As we know from Hegel, the 'I' who comes to recognize itself, its own life, recognizes itself always also as *another's* life. The reason why the 'I' and the 'you' are ambiguous is that they are each bound up in other systems of interdependency, what Hegel calls *Sittlichkeit*. And this means that although I perform that recognition of myself, some set of social norms are being worked out in the course of that performance that I author, and whatever is being worked out does not originate with me, even as I am not thinkable without it.

In Adorno's *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, what begins as a moral question about how to pursue the good life in a bad life culminates in the claim that there must be resistance to the bad life in order to pursue the good life. This is what he writes:

life itself is so deformed and distorted that no one is able to live the good life in it or to fulfil his destiny as a human being. Indeed, I would almost go so far as to say that, given the way that the world is organized, even the simplest demand for integrity and decency must necessarily lead almost everyone to protest.<sup>10</sup>

It is interesting that at such a moment Adorno would claim that he *almost (fast)* goes so far to say what he then says. He is not sure the formulation is quite right, but he goes ahead anyway. He overrides his hesitation, but keeps it nevertheless on the page. Can it be so simply said that the pursuit of the moral life can and must, under contemporary conditions, culminate

in protest? Can resistance be reduced to protest? Or, further, is protest for Adorno the social form that the pursuit of the good life now takes? That same speculative character continues as he remarks that

The only thing that can perhaps be said is that the good life today would consist in resistance to forms of the bad [*falsches*] life that have been seen through and critically dissected by the most progressive minds.<sup>11</sup>

In the German, Adorno refers to a 'false' life, and this is translated into English by Livingstone as 'the bad life' – of course, the difference is quite important, since for morality, the pursuit of the good life may well be a true life, but the relation between the two has yet to be explained. Further, it seems that Adorno appoints himself to the elect group of those who are progressive and capable enough to conduct the critical activity that must be pursued. Significantly, that practice of critique is rendered synonymous with 'resistance' in this sentence. And yet, as in the sentence above, some doubt lingers as he makes this set of proclamations. Both protest and resistance characterize popular struggles, mass actions, and yet in this sentence they characterize the critical capacities of a few. Adorno himself wavers slightly here. Even as he continues to clarify his speculative remarks, he makes a slightly different claim for reflexivity:

This resistance to what the world has made of us does not at all imply merely an opposition to the external world on the grounds that we would be fully entitled to resist it. ... In addition, we ought also to mobilize our own powers of resistance in order to resist those parts of us that are tempted to join in.<sup>12</sup>

What Adorno might be said to rule out at such moments is the idea of popular resistance, of forms of critique that take shape as bodies amass on the street to articulate their opposition to contemporary regimes of power. But also resistance is understood as a 'no-saying' to the part of the self that wants to go along with (*mitzuspielen*) the status quo. There is both the idea of resistance as a form of critique that only the elect few can undertake and the idea of resistance as a resistance to a part of the self that seeks to join with what is wrong, an internal check against complicity. These claims limit the idea of resistance in ways that I myself would not finally be able to accept. For me, both claims prompt further questions: what part of the self is being refused, and what part is being empowered through resistance? If I refuse that part of myself that is complicitous with the bad life, have I then made

myself pure? Have I intervened to change the structure of that social world from which I withhold myself, or have I isolated myself? Have I joined with others in a movement of resistance, and a struggle for social transformation?

These questions have, of course, been posed in regard to Adorno's views for some time – I remember a demonstration in Heidelberg in 1979 when some groups on the left were contesting Adorno, protesting his limited idea of protest! For me, and perhaps for us today, we might still query in what way resistance must do more than refuse a way of life, a position that finally abstracts the moral from the political at the expense of solidarity, producing the very smart and morally pure critic as the model of resistance. If resistance is to enact the principles of democracy for which it struggles, then resistance has to be *plural* and it has to be *embodied*. It will also entail the gathering of the ungrievable in public space, marking their existence and their demand for liveable lives, the demand to live a life *prior* to death, simply put.

Indeed, if resistance is to bring about a new way of life, a more liveable life that opposes the differential distribution of precarity, then acts of resistance will say *no* to one way of life at the same time that they say *yes* to another. For this purpose, we must reconsider for our times the performative consequences of concerted action in the Arendtian sense. Yet, in my view, the concerted action that characterizes resistance is sometimes found in the verbal speech act or the heroic fight, but it is also found in those bodily gestures of refusal, silence, movement, refusing to move, that characterize those movements that enact democratic principles of equality and economic principles of interdependency in the very action by which they call for a new way of life more radically democratic and more substantially interdependent. A social movement is itself a social form, and when a social movement calls for a new way of life, a form of liveable life, then it must, at that moment, enact the very principles it seeks to realize. This means that when it works, there is a performative enactment of radical democracy in such movements that alone can articulate what it might mean to lead a good life in the sense of a liveable life. I have tried to suggest that precarity is the condition against which several new social movements struggle. Such movements do not seek to overcome interdependency or even vulnerability as they struggle against precarity; rather, they seek to produce the conditions under which vulnerability and interdependency become liveable.

This is a politics in which performative action takes bodily and plural form, drawing critical attention to the conditions of bodily survival, persistence and flourishing within the framework of radical democracy. If I am to lead a good life, it will be a life lived with others, a life that is no life without those others. I will not lose this *I* that I am; whoever I am will be transformed by my connections with others, since my dependency on another, and my dependability, are necessary in order to live and to live well. Our shared exposure to precarity is but one ground of our potential equality and our reciprocal obligations to produce together conditions of liveable life. In avowing the need we have for one another, we avow as well basic principles that inform the social, democratic conditions of what we might still call 'the good life'. These are critical conditions of democratic life in the sense that they are part of an ongoing crisis, but also because they belong to a form of thinking and acting that responds to the urgencies of our time.

I thank you for this honour and for the time you have granted me this evening to share some of my views.

**11 September 2012, Frankfurt**

## Notes

1. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott, New Left Books, London, 1974, p. 39.
2. Theodor W. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 19.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 138, 176.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
5. Hannah Arendt, 'The Answer of Socrates', in *The Life of the Mind*, vol. I, Harcourt, 1981, pp. 168–78.
6. Hannah Arendt, 'The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern', in *Between Past and the Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1968, pp. 41–90.
7. See my 'Introduction: Precarious Life, Grievable Life', *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, Verso, London, 2009.
8. See Donna Haraway's views on complex relationalities in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, Routledge, New York and London, 1991; and *The Companion Species Manifesto*, Prickly Paradigm Press, Chicago, 2003.
9. Gilles Deleuze, 'What Can a Body Do?', in *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin, Zone, New York, 1990, pp. 217–89.
10. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, p. 167.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 167–8.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 168.