

# MUST CRITICISM BE CONSTRUCTIVE?

by

RAYMOND GEUSS



The Lindley Lecture  
The University of Kansas  
October 1, 2012

The E. H. Lindley Memorial Lectureship Fund was established in 1941 in memory of Ernest H. Lindley, Chancellor of the University of Kansas from 1920 to 1939. In February 1941 Mr. Roy Roberts, the chairman of the committee in charge, suggested in the *Graduate Magazine* that

the Chancellor should invite to the University for a lecture or a series of lectures, some outstanding national or world figure to speak on "Values of Living" -- just as the late Chancellor proposed to do in his courses "The Human Situation" and "Plan for Living."

In the following June Mr. Roberts circulated a letter on behalf of the Committee, proposing in somewhat broader terms that

The income from this fund should be spent in a quest of social betterment by bringing to the University each year outstanding world leaders for a lecture or series of lectures, yet with a design so broad in its outline that in the years to come, if it is deemed wise, this living memorial could take some more desirable form.

The fund was allowed to accumulate until 1954, when Professor Richard McKeon lectured on "Human Rights and International Relations." The next lecture was given in 1959 by Professor Everett C. Hughes, and has been published by the University of Kansas School of Law as part of his book *Student's Culture and Perspectives: Lectures on Medical and General Education*. The selection of lectures for the Lindley series has since been delegated to the Department of Philosophy.

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# Must Criticism be constructive?

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There is a widely held view — at any rate it is widely held in many contemporary Anglo-American societies — that ‘*merely* negative’ criticism is somehow defective, objectionable, or inappropriate. It is part of the responsibility of a critic, it is assumed, not *simply* to denigrate some institution, social arrangement, or form of action, but to do so while providing at least the suggestion of a ‘preferable’ way of acting, or a ‘better’ way of organising some sector of the society. While this view is widely shared, it is perhaps not unimportant to recall that it is not *universally* held. One might think, for instance, of Bakunin who notoriously claimed ‘*Die Lust an der Zerstörung ist auch eine schaffende Lust*’ [‘The pleasure in destruction is itself a creative pleasure’]<sup>1</sup>, or of Adorno who insisted that, because of the almost limitless ability of modern societies to co-opt even severe kinds of criticism, philosophy must be a relentlessly negative form of argumentative activity<sup>2</sup>. Common reactions to these examples illustrate perhaps the discomfort which the idea of non-constructive criticism arouses. One might, of course, argue that the very idea of *completely* negative criticism, like its mirror image, absolutely well-founded knowledge, is conceptually incoherent, but the most usual source of unease is not, I think, so much that there is anything *conceptually* inappropriate with the idea of completely negative criticism. Rather there is a fear that it is an anarchic abdication of responsibility on the part of the critic, so the suspicion is a moral rather than specifically epistemological or cognitive one.

In what follows I would like to discuss three interconnected questions:

1. What is ‘criticism’? How do we use the term? What are its main characteristics?

2. In everyday life we use the term ‘criticism’ in a variety of ways: there is social criticism, aesthetic criticism, the moral criticism of individuals and their actions, cultural criticism — nowadays many newspapers have food and restaurant critics. Is there a single unitary sense of ‘criticism’ that can be found in the forms of ‘criticism’ actually practised in these different domains of human life?

### 3. Must criticism be constructive? What is supposed to be wrong with it, if it is not constructive?

As far as these first two questions are concerned, I would like to suggest that there is no *single* invariable notion of ‘criticism’ which could be the object of strict formal definition, giving necessary and sufficient conditions, but also that this does not really matter, because such formal definitions are not possible in most of the more important realms of human life, and neither human life itself nor philosophy is any the worse for this. Nevertheless, although there is no single concept of ‘criticism’ that designates the *same* activity in the domains of ethics, politics, and art, there are certain paradigmatic cases, and these represent ideally or fully developed instances of ‘criticism’. Something can perfectly legitimately be called ‘criticism’ that does not satisfy *all* the conditions which the idea type does. I claim that we should think of ‘criticism’ in its fullest possible form as comprised of four analytically (although not always really) distinct elements, aspects, or non-temporal stages. Another way of thinking about this is to think of our usual usage of ‘criticism’ as located at the point of intersection of four dimensions. I will call the first of these four the ‘structural’ or ‘analytic’ dimension, the second the ‘evaluative’ dimension, and the third the dimension of ‘argumentative connectivity’ and the fourth the ‘performative’ dimension.

The first dimension is that in which ‘criticise’ is related to ‘analyse’, ‘distinguish’, ‘differentiate’. ‘Criticise’ (and related terms) derive from the Greek word κρινω and originally meant simply ‘separate, distinguish’, that is, the process of taking a complex apart in thought and specifying its constituent parts or elements. The term ‘criticism’ was then also used to refer to the results of that process. Such analysis will never be strictly value-free, because I will be making the distinctions I do in the context of a specific value-driven process of some kind, and might make different distinctions in the context of another process of enquiry, but it will also not be the case that by virtue of engaging in ‘criticism’ of this kind, I am in any way presupposing or expressing a *negative* attitude toward or a negative judgment about the object of criticism. ‘Critique’ in this sense is self-evidently an activity of virtually universal application in all fields of human endeavour. So I can perfectly reasonably be said to be engaged in ‘literary criticism’, if I analyse the parts of a poem, or, for instance, specify its metre, regardless of whatever particularly evaluative attitude I might have toward it. If the poem is in the Alkaic strophe, and I state that this is the case and helpfully write out the scansion, that is a rudimentary form of literary criticism, whether I especially *like* poetry written in the Alkaic strophe in general or not, or am indifferent on this issue, and whether I

like *this* particular use of the Alcaic strophe or not (or am indifferent to it). There might be a point in analysing the poem without explicitly judging it because in doing this I may be helping readers (or listeners) to pay attention to features of the work which they might otherwise overlook or fail to notice. This may allow readers (or listeners) to acquire an enhanced engagement with the poem, whether this meant that as a result a given reader or listener came to evaluate the poem more *or less* positively than before, or whether the evaluation remains unchanged. In addition, even if the analysis does not change my evaluation, it may help me to understand *why* I like or dislike the poem. Since for many people understanding why I have the reaction to a poem which I in fact have is part of the process of proper engagement with it, analysis may form part of the normal process of aesthetic appropriation.<sup>3</sup>

The second of the four dimensions is one in which ‘criticise’ means to have or adopt an attitude or to judge, usually the attitude in question is a determinedly negative one toward something. So along this dimension ‘criticise’ is related to terms like ‘dislike’, ‘disapprove of’, etc. It is in fact an exceedingly peculiar, but undeniable, fact that a term which originally (in the ancient world) referred merely to the process of separating that which was distinct, eventually developed in the direction of acquiring a distinctly *negative* connotation<sup>4</sup>. To be sure, in this case there does seem to be a difference in at least our linguistic usage between the cases of criticism of forms of human action and criticism of art. It would be perfectly normal to speak of a ‘critical’ attitude toward a work of art, meaning by that a discriminating attitude *even if* that resulted in a finally *positive* evaluation of the work. On the other hand, we would, I think, *never* describe a laudatory or approving attitude toward a human action, a piece of legislation, or a social practice or institution as an instance of ‘critique’.

What exactly does ‘negative attitude’ mean in the above? One obvious thing it can mean is that I explicitly formulate a proposition to the effect that the (criticised) object (or action or institution) in question has some defect or that I dislike it, think it is unfit for purpose, reject it, will not tolerate it, etc. I may formulate this proposition without ever uttering it, merely affirming it mentally, or I may state it repeatedly and out loud to all and sundry. Of course, though, I may develop a ‘negative attitude’ toward something without ever formulating anything specifically in a proposition. Finally, I might *act* in a certain way which could be construed as a form of criticism. So, if I ostentatiously spit when I see you approach, or draw a moustache on your picture, or whistle a parody of your latest musical composition, or do a comic imitation of some of your mannerisms, these might be construed as very much like criticisms. To

use the classic example drawn from one of the Icelandic sagas, suppose you as a host give me dinner and, as I take my leave, you ask ‘How was my dinner?’ If I thereupon vomit up the entire contents of my stomach on you, it does not seem utterly fanciful to see this as a kind of criticism-embodied-in- action (not words), *even if I explicitly and truthfully deny that I found the food revolting.*

This idea that I might criticise merely by acting without saying anything, brings me to the third of my three dimensions. In cases of ‘full-blown’ criticism the first and second of these aspects are explicitly connected. I would not usually think I had in front of me a case of ‘criticism’ — or at any rate of ‘criticism’ in the full-blown sense—if I *simply* tell you how the object is structured or if I *merely* have (or even express) disapproval, or even if I *both* have an analysis *and also* have an evaluative attitude, but don’t make any attempt to connect the two. To engage in criticism means not merely that I have an analysis and a judgment, but that I cite structural or other aspects of the thing in question *as reasons* for my approval or disapproval, or I *argue from* the account I give of the object in question *to* my judgment about it. So criticism has to have a kind of argumentative connectivity. Obviously, in most cases the notion of ‘argue’ here will encompass a significantly larger range of ways of acting than those usually countenanced by formal logic or by standard views about scientific inference. Usually in the argument I will appeal to what we now call ‘normative’ notions such as good or bad, better or worse, worthy, suitable, fitting. Obviously there will be questions about the status of any of these normative notions. Do ‘good, better, bad, worse’ mean ‘better’ or ‘worse’ in *my* estimation, or can they claim some more general authority?

The fourth, performative, dimension is one in which ‘criticise’ is connected with terms such as ‘vote against’ or ‘vote down’ a proposal or, ‘to denounce’ an action or a person, or ‘indict’ or ‘prosecute’ a person. All of these things (‘indict’, ‘vote down’ etc.) are in the first instance public actions. In many case they are not merely ‘public’, but also institutionalised, that is, they are governed by specifiable, repeatable practices of a certain kind. To ‘indict’ someone (for a crime) is not *necessarily* to disapprove of, or reject. or distance oneself from, what that person did on grounds that have to do with the way in which you think that action can be analysed. Rather to ‘indict’ someone is to satisfy particular specific *legal* requirements which will be given by the legal system in force. This might mean shouting out ‘Thief’ in a bazaar, or pronouncing an accusation in front of a certain number of witnesses or a magistrate, or filing a written brief in a certain specified form, or whatever. Often in these formal contexts there must be a specified object of criticism (e.g. a person who is indicted as



criminal) and an institutional set of consequences. If you are *successfully* indicted, you pay a fine, go to jail, or come under the guillotine. The action in question formally specifies the person or thing criticised and will often *connect* it specifically with particular envisaged changes of status, actions etc. If I am a member of a committee to award the prize for the best novel of the year, my vote must be for a particular work, and if enough others vote my way, the work I endorse will receive the prize.

There is, to be sure, usually a kind of institutional intention which goes with many of these actions. If I ‘vote down’ a proposal, the institutional action I perform is, as it would be natural for us to say, ‘expressive of’ my own, underlying, (individual, ‘mental’) critically articulated disapproval of the proposal, or if I vote to give the prize to a certain work, that will usually be because I admire that work. Usually, but not always. When such institutional structures are formally established, this can allow the ‘official’ intention embodied in the speech act to deviate significantly from the real psychic state of the person actually performing the action. Not every Public Prosecutor who initiates proceedings against someone who violates a law must actually disapprove of what the criminal has done. He (or she) might, as they say, ‘just be doing my job’.

We started with three questions, and have said something about the first two. The third question concerned the notion of ‘constructive’ criticism. The intuition behind the idea of ‘constructive’ criticism is that the object criticised should really be able to be improved by reference to a form of action guided by the criticism itself, and it also seems to be assumed that there can be some consensus on what counts as ‘improvement’. So I may criticise the medical authorities for permitting an unqualified surgeon to operate on the grounds that he was permitted to kill my aunt in what was billed as a routine operation. The model here is that there are three items: a critic — in this case, me — an object (person, action, institution) criticised<sup>5</sup> — in this case, the complex fact that an incompetent surgeon killed my aunt — and a ‘target-agent’ to whom the criticism is addressed or directed — in Britain this would be the General Medical Council. It is constructive criticism to the extent to which the ‘object’ could have been ‘improved’ — my aunt would not have died — if the target-agent, the Medical Council, had been guided by what I am now saying in my critical remarks, i.e. had not allowed an incompetent surgeon to operate. Here we assume that there would be some consensus that in the relevant context, the situation would have been ‘better’ had my auntie survived the operation rather than dying. The target-agent to whom the criticism is directed will be some individual (or some group of people) who stands in a special relation to the object criticised, so that in criticising the object the critic is also in some sense calling the attention of the target-agent to

deficiencies in the object, which are thereby presented as being the target-agent's job to remedy. The most obvious reason for connecting criticism with a particular target-agent (or agents) is that this person (or these people) can be held in some way responsible for the existing state of the object by virtue of which it is deemed worthy of being criticised, and could by adopting the criticism in question, act or have acted so as to improve the object and remove the grounds for the criticism. I merely note that the second and third of the three items, that is, the object of criticism and the target, may in some cases be the same. Instead of criticising the medical authorities for letting the surgeon operate, I could criticise him (directly) for operating when unqualified. Finally, if I were such a surgeon myself I could engage in self-criticism in which all three items were the same.

'Constructive' criticism then goes beyond simple forms of 'full-blown criticism' that have just been described in that such full-blown 'criticism' requires that one be able to specify what is wrong with the object, whereas 'constructive' criticism requires in addition that either a weaker or a stronger further condition be satisfied. The weaker condition is that one could also specify concretely what else would have to be changed in the world in order for the object to escape the criticism. The stronger condition is that one be able to specify what concrete steps the target-agent would have to undertake actually to remedy what is wrong.

To start with the weaker condition, suppose that I criticise the surgeon for killing my auntie, it seems plausible, then, to distinguish two things:

a) If this object *lacked* features ABC, it would escape criticism  
[Thus: If my auntie lacked the property of now being dead, I would have no complaint about the surgeon (or if I did have a complaint it would be a slightly different one, for instance, that he put her life at risk by operating despite being incompetent).]  
and :

b) *This* — {XYZ} — is my positive alternative to the criticised object.  
[That is, I can tell you concretely, and that presumably means in medical terms, what would have to be true for my auntie to have escaped death and still be alive.]

Statement 'a)' satisfies the condition of 'argumentative connectivity' which I formulated above: I disapprove of the object in question *because* I have reasons which I can specify and they are ABC. So 'a)' is something any instance of full-blown criticism will satisfy; 'b)' is the 'weaker' version of the additional requirement which has to be satisfied to speak of 'constructive' criticism. It is my assumption that I can have a) without b), that is,

that I can have the ability to specify in relatively *general terms* ('criteria' if one will) what is wrong with an object *without* necessarily being able to specify what *particular* configuration (of this object or one sufficiently like it) could exist which would escape condemnation by reference to those general criteria. I can say my auntie ought not to be dead and this is grounds to criticise the surgeon even though I cannot specify what would be required physiologically for her still to be alive. A fortiori, I need not be able myself actually to produce an object or bring about a state of affairs which would escape the relevant criticism, or even know how to describe the process of bringing the better state of affairs into existence. That brings us to the stronger thesis: It is not a necessary condition of criticising the surgeon that I be able to tell him how he *should* have operated (rather than the way in which he *did* operate), or that I could myself have performed the procedure successfully.

The stronger version of 'constructive criticism,' that is, adds to the above the further requirement:

- c) that I can tell an appropriately constituted agent, the 'target-agent', *how* exactly he or she or they should go about producing an object or bringing about a state of affairs that is better (improved, not subject to criticism etc.)

Think of the example: The world is overpopulated and resources are scarce. In addition, current policies of consumption are squandering existing resources, and also polluting the environment to an unacceptable extent. I now 'criticise' the Directors of British Petroleum for some policy which their corporation has adopted. This is a form of 'criticism' in the last and fullest sense I distinguished. The Directors of British Petroleum are the target-agents because they are responsible for the current policy, and also (in some sense, although that would require considerable further analysis) 'could' change it. I can point out *to them* features their policies would have to lack in order to escape the criticism I level at them. They would have to be less wasteful, more focused on satisfaction of real human needs, more likely to generate in consumers attitudes of prudence and moderation, etc. Now it might well be the case that such policies are not actually 'realistically' possible, given the fact that the energy sector is part of an economy where a certain motive and incentive structure is operative — this is why I flagged '*could*' in '*could change <the policy>*' above. '*Could*' under what conditions? One might easily imagine that the Directors of BP (perfectly reasonably from their point of view) rejected my criticism as not 'constructive'. The basic point of my criticism might well be something they could not change, given the constraints of the market economy under

which they operate. If they changed their specific policies, the Directors could argue, they would go bankrupt and their place simply be taken by Shell and other companies who would have to pursue the same criticised policies, and what would be the point of that? Also my criticism might be such that to answer it would require that they and their whole organisation simply *not exist at all in anything like its present form*. The only solution, that is, might be that entities like BP be abolished and, thus, that people like those on the Board of Directors simply have a completely different social role, that they not be Directors of international corporations but have ‘*honest*’ jobs (and hence also completely different desires, beliefs, attitudes, powers, etc.). It is not difficult to see how the current Directors of BP might well fail to see *this* as ‘constructive criticism’ in the usual sense of that term, because a situation in which they do not exist might fail to register with them as an improvement and hence something they could reasonably be expected to want. But then that might well be *their* problem. Equally they might argue that it was even beyond their power to abolish themselves; they could, resign, but that would simply mean, as above, that others would take their places. A change of personnel without a change of roles, structures or policy imperatives would be no improvement. What might count as ‘constructive’ *for us*, i.e. what we could do something about, given our identities and possibilities, need not be the same as what is constructive *for them* (given their identity and situation). What counts as ‘constructive’ is thus relative to some notion of what is not merely ‘logically’ but ‘realistically possible,’ and that in turn depends on what can ‘realistically’ be expected of different possible target-agents. Appeal, for instance by the Directors of BP, to the requirement that criticism be ‘constructive’ can thus often have the function of trying to shift the *onus probandi* in a particular way. I, as critic, am required to formulate my criticism in a way that is shaped to the perspective and the action-related demands of the target-agents. I must criticise them (and their actions, the institutions in which they participate etc.) in a way that conforms to what ‘they’ define as what they can ‘reasonably’ be expected to do and results they can ‘reasonably’ be expected to accept.

This shows the extreme importance in criticism of notions like possibility and necessity, of alternative identities and courses of action, and of assumptions about *which* points in what framework are taken to be fixed and which are taken to be variable. This in turn raises important general issues about the malleability of human nature and institutions, and the possible limits of such malleability, utopianism, tragic or otherwise irresolvable forms of conflict, and the ‘substitutivity’ of goods, services, practices and institutions. Certainly the idea of ‘constructive criticism’ seems to be closely connected with the notion of substitutivity.

By ‘substitutivity’ I mean in the simplest case that one object or process can stand in for or take the place of another. I can take the sugar cube out of the bowl with a special set of tongs, but if there are no tongs, I could also use a spoon (i.e. ‘substitute’ a spoon for the tongs). Even if there is no spoon, I could in principle fall back on the use of my fingers, which is slightly less hygienic, but no less effective. A standard kind of ‘constructive criticism’ would be a case in which I tell a child not to take the sugar cube with its fingers, because that is unhygienic, *but rather* to use the tongs. Here I am saying that the tongs is a viable substitute for the use of fingers in this context, and one that has certain advantages. Similarly in many, although perhaps not strictly *all*, cases I can substitute a fork for a set of chop sticks, or vice versa. Action-related forms of criticism would seem to depend very heavily on claims to the effect that the criticised object, process, institution (etc.) *could be replaced* by some other, i.e. that there *is* a possible substitute for it.

The idea of substituting one thing or process for another is deeply rooted in human social institutions and thinking, and it is not obvious how we could get along without it.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, there is a certain ‘natural’ tendency we have to fall for an illusion about substitutivity. This illusion is the view that items (things, processes, institutions, practices, etc.) can be treated for the purposes of substitution atomistically. This means that one can ignore the wider context within which the item in question stands, and discuss possible substitutes for it relative to *one* narrowly specified use or function. It is not, however, the case that this narrow focus always makes sense. It is true that one can ‘in principle’ use *either* the Western combination of knife, fork, and spoon *or* chopsticks for eating most of the normal kinds of food with which we in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century will be confronted, but two qualifications need to be added. First, this assumes that the ‘food’ in question will admit of being eaten in either way. This is true of rice, potatoes, most vegetables, but not for instance soup or honey which can be eaten with a spoon but not with chopsticks<sup>7</sup>. So one must take account of the way in which the item in question ‘fits into’ a wider human context, if it is a utensil to eat, then it must fit into kind of food that will be eaten and the way in which that food is prepared. The second qualification concerns one specific aspect of the ‘total context’ within which (potential) substitution might take place. Chopsticks might be usable ‘in principle’ to eat rice, and they might even be *actually* usable by my thousands of millions of people in the Orient and hundreds of thousands in the West, but they are *not* usable, and hence could not substitute for knife/fork/spoon, *unless* the agents who are to use them have certain specific form of manual dexterity to operate chopsticks (or knife/fork/spoon). Motor vehicles can replace horses and wagons only if people develop the

new skills that are required to drive the new vehicles, and these skills need to be cultivate, sometimes at some cost and do not come from nowhere. Part of the ‘context’ that must be taken into account is the relevant forms of habitual human action.

It is easy to see how this argument can then be expanded, because there is not ‘in principle’ any determinate, natural stopping place at which features of the context became irrelevant. Or perhaps as Heidegger claims there is only *one* non-arbitrary stopping point and that is my own death (or rather my relation-in-living to my own death). This is something that is not further contextualisable (for me), where substitutivity reaches its limits<sup>8</sup>.

So, it makes no sense to think about substitutivity of items apart from their context and that context is open-ended. This may be one of the reasons why the scope of criticism seems naturally to expand, and why repressive regimes often react hysterically to what seem to be very minor forms of criticism; once it starts there is no telling where it will go (and where it will end). One especially important aspect of this ‘context’ is the possible *other* forms of value the old object had. Independently of their efficiency as tools for eating, spoons and forks might even have valued aesthetic properties which the simpler chopsticks lack; elaborate, durable, distinctively shaped, metal forks might even have acquired sentimental (i.e. not aesthetic) value as mementoes of the past, something ephemeral and historically anonymous chopsticks lack. Since people for various reasons often value a sense of continuity, some things might be considered to have intrinsic value merely because they are old and familiar<sup>9</sup>. There will then be costs associated with any substitution, both the cost of the new item that is to be provided and of the transition to the new mode of provision.

‘Constructive criticism’ doesn’t just mean that I can name or describe something that is *in some sense* substitutable for something else, difficult as it is to isolate a fixed context for this claim, but the new constructive suggestion has to be of something both substitutable and *better*. The less fixed the context, the more difficult it will be always to get agreed-on judgments that a substitute is (overall?) better.

Even completely radical forms of political criticism will need at least to some extent to be committed to *some* kind of substitutivity, unless it becomes theological. It will not, of course, be the case that one can atomistically compare the *new* structure of the stock-market after a revolution with the structure before, because there may be no stock-market after the revolution. There may be no banking system we could recognise, but there will still be forms of future-oriented cooperation. At some sufficiently general level there will have to be a new way of providing foodstuffs to the population which will replace the old way. It might also be the case

that it is possible *only retrospectively* to see that the new form of agricultural production really does ‘substitute’ for an older form, but that is a different issue. The more one thinks about radical substitution, the more one must confront the question of the interconnection of human tastes/desires/needs, on the one hand, and ways through which these tastes are satisfied on the other. I mean by ‘interconnection’ a relation of influence that is specifically construed as operating in both directions. Given that we have certain tastes, we wish to satisfy them in certain ways with certain objects, processes, forms of human interaction, but those forms of interaction, processes, objects etc, in their turn strongly influence the tastes/desires/aspirations/needs which we acquire.

In the political realm appeals to the need for ‘constructive’ criticism can *in principle* represent a (generally laudable) attempt to remind human agents of the imperative nature of Tschernyshevsky’s (and later Lenin’s) central question ‘What is to be *done*?’<sup>10</sup>; *in fact*, however, the demand for ‘constructive criticism’ can also function as a repressive attempt to shift the *onus probandi* — I can’t criticise the surgeon because I couldn’t explain in detail how he ought to have operated (beyond saying that he ought not to have killed my auntie). The demand for constructive criticism can also divert attention from the very possibility of radical criticism, because who would have the knowledge of the world as a whole and skill and practical wisdom needed for *that*?

To return, in concluding, to the question we set out from about the vague unease that is generated by non-constructive forms of criticism, it is probably as much an illusion to think that a philosopher can be sheerly negative in relation to our given beliefs, practices, institutions, and habits, as it is to think that he or she can attain an absolutely grounded, complete and finally correct picture of the world. The demands, by people like Adorno, for radically negative forms of critical philosophy are better understood, as he himself frequently suggests, not as theses, but as indicators of a direction, as ‘exaggerations’<sup>11</sup> presented in order to draw people’s attention to certain facts we would be likely otherwise to overlook. One such fact is that historically variable, but very substantial, assumptions about what it is reasonable (or even possible) to expect of people lie hidden in our everyday language, in so-called ‘common sense’, and in our usual ways of thinking about human action. Failing to question these means taking them for granted, and that is a moral and political act. Accepting the demand that criticism be constructive can be just as much an abdication of the responsibility of the critic as mindless destructiveness is. Which of the two attitudes is appropriate can’t be settled *apriori*.

## Notes

1. See R. Wagner *Mein Leben* (as cited in *Unterhaltungen mit Bakunin* ed. A. Lehning (Leipzig: Reclam, 1989), pp. 104-112
2. Adorno *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt, 1966)
3. See Adorno *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt, 1969)
4. If one wished to multiply distinctions, one could actually distinguish three items here: a) analysis, b) judgment, c) specifically *negative* evaluative judgment. So the sake of simplicity I shall refrain from pursuing this here.
5. Obviously, the term 'object' is used in a very broad sense
6. Thus, in Sophokles' *Antigone*, (ll. 905ff.) Antigone gives as the main reason for her determination to bury her dead brother Polyneikes that her brother is irreplaceable in contrast to a possible husband or child. If she lost a husband, she says, she could always get another, the same is true of a child, but, given that her mother and father are dead, there cannot be a substitute for her brother. For that matter one might argue that the very earliest work in the Western canon *The Iliad* is nothing but an extended meditation on what can and what cannot be substituted for what else. If Agamemnon has to give his slave-girl up, who will replace her? Agamemnon claims later that not even his wife would be a satisfactory substitute. Is gold a good substitute for bronze (VI.235ff.) or armour worth nine oxen a good exchange for armour worth a hundred? Can Patroklos be an adequate substitute for Achilles on the field of battle? How about if he is wearing Achilles' armour? Is dead Hektor a good substitute for live Patroklos?
7. In thinking about all these examples, which are perhaps not ideally suited to illustrate my point, one should abstract from the fact that most humans naturally have fingers and opposable thumbs which can also (in emergencies) be used to transfer food to the mouth.
8. Heidegger *Sein und Zeit* §§ 46-53 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1963), pp. 235-67.
9. Nowadays, of course, in the age of mass advertising, the reverse of this will also present, namely a desperate desire to acquire what is 'new' even if it is no more efficient, as anyone can testify who has watched someone struggle in vain with a new gadget, such as an electronic agenda, while defensively asserting that it 'really' is better than the old way of noting appointments (writing them down with a pencil or pen in a diary) when this is palpably not the case.
10. It is, of course, slightly ironic, at any rate for someone who adopts the perspective proposed in this essay that *What is to be Done?* is the title of a *novel* (N.G. Tschernyschewski *Was tun?* [Aufbau-Verlag 1986]).
11. Adorno *Eingriffe* (Frankfurt, 1963) p. 152



The following lectures have been published in individual pamphlet form and may be obtained from the Department of Philosophy at a price of \$5.00 plus \$1.00 for handling (\$6.00 per lecture).

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(\*) Pamphlet out of print.