



Volume 2, Issue 1, September 2018

On Peter Gordon's *Adorno and Existence*

Gordon Finlayson

University of Sussex
J.G.Finlayson@sussex.ac.uk

Abstract

Gordon Finlayson's response to Peter Gordon's *Adorno and Existence*.

Keywords

Theodor W. Adorno; Peter E. Gordon, existentialism, *Adorno and Existence*; philosophy

FIRST of all, I want to thank Peter E. Gordon for writing this intriguing little book, and for giving me the opportunity for thinking about aspects of Adorno's work that I (in common with many scholars) have neglected; and also Henry Pickford for organizing this wonderful conference and setting up this panel.

I intend to explore two sets of questions. The first concerns the fairness of Adorno's criticism of Husserl, Heidegger (and Sartre). The second concerns whether Adorno's approach to them can be understood as immanent criticism, more specifically 'immanent criticism' as 'redemptive criticism'.

In the preface Gordon admits that he cleaves mainly to exposition of Adorno's peculiar take on the philosophers of 'existence': Kierkegaard, Husserl and Heidegger. There is no doubt that he succeeds in laying out the significance of Adorno's critique of the traditions of existentialism, transcendental phenomenology, and fundamental ontology, for the development of Adorno's own project. In this he has done Adorno scholarship a great service. No one has laid out more clearly the way in which Adorno develops his own project of *Negative Dialectics*, and finds his own distinctive philosophical voice, through his early critique of Husserl's phenomenology. Gordon rightly points out that Adorno's approach to criticism always involves uncovering a truth moment in what it criticizes. Adorno's criticisms of phenomenology, for example, are "redemptive," insofar as they

aim to uncover and fulfill an "unrealized promise".¹ Gordon quite brilliantly shows that running throughout the Husserl book "is the bold claim that phenomenology wished to break free of constitutive subjectivity, and to do so it deployed the categories that belong to the subject itself."² This claim, as he rightly contends, anticipates the task Adorno sets himself in *Negative Dialectics* "to break through the delusion of constitutive subjectivity by means of the power of the subject."³

Gordon almost apologetically acknowledges that he seldom ventures into "the more forbidding terrain of philosophical criticism."⁴ Actually this is not quite true. For he also claims that he offers an interpretation that "elucidates Adorno's argument in such a way as to lend those arguments renewed force."⁵

In the case of some of Adorno's criticisms of Heidegger, and all of his criticisms of Husserl, I do not think that strategy – attempting to reconstruct and defend Adorno's arguments against Husserl and Heidegger, rather than taking up a critical distance toward them – is advisable. Philosophically reconstructing Adorno's critique of Husserl, such that it gets a purchase on its target, is tough, if not impossible. It is far easier, and in my view far less forbidding, simply calling Adorno out on his egregious misconceptions, where he is guilty of them.

¹ Peter Eli Gordon, *Adorno and Existence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016). 6, 167.

² *Ibid.*, 81.

³ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

It seems that Gordon, out of respect and admiration for Adorno, hesitates to criticize him at the very moments where his analysis has brought to light a particularly ‘counterintuitive,’ ‘bold,’ ‘controversial,’ or downright egregious statement by Adorno, namely moments where Adorno’s views call for criticism.⁶ At those very moments he swerves away from either criticism or defense of Adorno’s arguments, and tends instead to highlight their significance for the development of his own thought. He may be right about the development question, but he avoids the critical issues. Thus, I feel that, as well as he expounds them, Gordon does not in the end succeed in *defending* Adorno’s objections to Husserl and Heidegger. That said, I do not think anyone could, and it nevertheless redounds to the author’s credit that his exposition shines a bright light on where Adorno’s arguments fail.

At each of those crucial junctures, I wanted to say: “Come on! What do you really think? What were you just about to say?” Therefore, in my response, I present what I take to be the critical unconscious of *Adorno & Existence*, in five theses, none of which are explicitly stated or endorsed by Gordon. I do not know whether he would even accept them as I present them here. But they are lessons I drew from his book, which I approached in the spirit of Adorno. For, to borrow an idea from *Aesthetic Theory*, what this work says, is not only what its words say.⁷

Thesis One: Adorno’s Universal Argument

⁶ Ibid., 3, 39, 81, 101, 129.

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. (London: Athlone Press, 1997). 184.

Adorno has one universal – universal in the pejorative retail sense of ‘one-size-fits-all’ – philosophical argument against those he dubs the philosophers of existence, which seems to be a version of Hegel’s criticism of Kant. Crudely put, the objection is that there is too much subject in the object. Or to put it in Hegel’s words: “the ‘I’ is the crucible and the fire which consumes the loose plurality of sense and reduces it to unity.”⁸

There are two basic modes in which Adorno levies this criticism:

Mode 1. You are a subjective idealist!

This is a criticism he makes both of Husserl, and of Hegel. The trouble is that merely to lodge a “complaint” about Husserl’s idealism or “idealistic tendencies” after 1902, and about Hegel’s after 1802, is to push at an open door, since they explicitly acknowledge that they are idealists.⁹ It is thus not a criticism to call them ‘idealists.’ It is, however, a criticism to claim that their respective idealisms are “subjective” or “solipsistic” a charge which each of them would fiercely resist.

Mode 2. You say you reject subjective idealism or that you are trying to escape it, but in the end you are just another subjective idealist; you fall right back into it!

Adorno levies this criticism against Husserl and Heidegger.¹⁰ It resembles what A.O. Hirschman calls a

⁸ Hegel, G.W.F. *Werke* 5. Eds. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main) 69.

⁹ Ibid., 60.

¹⁰ See Gordon, *Adorno and Existence*, 101 109 127, 142, 145, 152.

‘perversity thesis’ in his book the *Rhetoric of Reaction*. A perversity thesis is a knock down argument: simple and devastating if true, but also sweeping, simplistic, and lacking in nuance. It is a favored critical weapon of Adorno’s. As an example, Gordon accurately paraphrases Adorno’s somewhat jaundiced view of Sartre: “The French existentialists, then notwithstanding their strong ethic of political action, are no less bourgeois and quietist than their German analogues.”¹¹ Note that Gordon uses free indirect speech here. It is as if not just Adorno, but also the author himself, believes this. It reads like a statement of fact by the author, not as a report of one of Adorno’s typically counterintuitive and challenging claims. Sartre might be consumed with bourgeois self-contempt, but one can hardly think of a more anti-bourgeois thinker than he, or for that matter, Camus. Sartre himself may have proved to be a useless partisan, falling asleep in his chair (to Camus’ great amusement) when charged with the task of guarding the Comédie-Française, but he was no quietist. He was a member of the Communist party until 1956 and an avowed supporter of Maoism and anarchism. He defended violence as a tool of the oppressed. The charge that Sartre is bourgeois and quietist (*malgré lui*) needs more careful elaboration. While the free indirect style of the author affords the author concision, which is commendable, it sometimes draws him into defending the indefensible. It does not permit him the critical distance that Adorno’s playful hyperbolic style demands. For, in my view – I think Gillian Rose first pointed this out – Adorno’s statements are intended to shock and to provoke readers into rethinking their first thoughts and questioning their assumptions. When offered as straightforward assertions and taken at face value,

¹¹ Gordon, *Adorno and Existence*, 141.

however, they appear flat-footed untruths, and their truth content vanishes.

Thesis Two: Adorno preaches Immanent Criticism but does not always practice it.

Throughout the book Gordon claims that Adorno’s approach is one of “immanent criticism”. Most critics would agree with him. Not I. In my view, Adorno pays lip service to immanent criticism, in that he makes grand programmatic methodological statements about the virtues of immanent criticism, but for the most part does not practice what he preaches. I say ‘for the most part’ because you can understand a perversity thesis as a kind – a particularly crude kind – of immanent criticism. To succeed, such criticism must show that a philosophy completely fails to realize its own avowed aim, and thus fails on its own terms.

Adorno tries this often with Husserl and rarely if ever succeeds. For example, Adorno’s criticism of Husserl in the *Metacritique* backfires, because he does not correctly identify the aims of Husserl’s project. “Running through the Husserl book from beginning to end is the bold claim that phenomenology wished to break free of constitutive subjectivity...”¹² For one thing, there is no breaking free of subjectivity insofar as it is “constitutive” (necessary or necessary and sufficient) for, say, knowledge of objects. For another, it is obviously wrong. Husserl’s declared aim, if anything is to *explicate* the features of constitutive subjectivity, in the service of *first philosophy*, and the Cartesian/Platonic aim

¹² Theodor W. Adorno and Willis Domingo, *Against Epistemology: a Metacritique* (Oxford: Wiley, 2014). 81.

for attaining apodictically certain knowledge of universal and necessary truths.

So Adorno misidentifies every aim of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. As for Husserl's true aims, Adorno repudiates them all. For example, he rejects the whole Cartesian/Platonic project that animates Husserl of aiming at absolute universal knowledge on the basis of indubitable insight. He rejects the very idea of first philosophy that Husserl presupposes. Indeed, he rejects the whole idea of transcendental idealism. On these grounds alone, it is nearer to the truth to say that Adorno's criticisms of Husserl are not immanent, and that they are better described as external or transcendent criticisms. This might be why Max Horkheimer, who was later to be his best and lifelong friend, refused to publish the long article on Husserl that Adorno submitted to the *Journal for Social Research* when he was in Oxford, because rightly saw that "it does not do justice to the ...different...levels of meaning in Husserl's analyses..."¹³

Adorno makes a similar move with Heidegger's philosophy which he convicts of failing to realize *its* aim: "it is a philosophy that strives for the object, but remains caught in the idealistic trap of subjectivity."¹⁴ In Heidegger's case, Adorno's criticism is differently modulated because both Heidegger and Adorno reject the avowed aims of Husserl's idealism. To that extent the perversity thesis would be a knockdown argument against Heidegger, if true. However, it is clearly one thing to say that *Being and Time* is overly preoccupied with *Dasein* and to that extent anthropocentric

¹³ Stefan Müller-Doom, *Adorno: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Rodney Livingston. (Cambridge: 2008) 204.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

(which Heidegger denies), but quite another to claim that his philosophy is "solipsistic" or "subjectively ideal."¹⁵ For Heidegger, *Dasein* is *Mitsein*, and *Dasein's* basic state is being-in-the-world.¹⁶ It is not just a disguised subject.

In my view, Adorno practices immanent criticism occasionally, but also deploys many other kinds of criticism. Adorno is a versatile critic. He has a variety of critical weapons, and he uses whichever one comes to hand, or whichever one will best fell his opponent. These include, but are not limited to: irony, sarcasm, deflation, *ad hominem* insults and high-moral castigation. Many of his criticisms are good ones. The question of what makes a criticism good is a complex one that I cannot answer here. Suffice it to say that criticisms are not always, or even mostly, the better for being immanent criticisms. There are many ways to criticize well, as Adorno's critical practice testifies.

Thesis Three: Adorno is a very bad reader of philosophy

Adorno's lack of success in turning perversity theses into immanent criticisms, is in part due to his being a very bad reader of other philosophers.¹⁷ He does not take the time and effort to correctly identify their avowed aims. That would require patience, effort and hermeneutic charity. All of his writing on Heidegger expresses his almost childlike inability to contain his anger and revulsion. This is as true of his amusing

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 144, 153. Thanks to my colleague Mahon O'Brien for discussion on this point.

¹⁶ Manfred Stassen, *Martin Heidegger. Philosophical and Political Writings* (New York: Continuum, 2004). 169.

¹⁷ Gordon, *Adorno and Existence*, 161, 171.

comments on 'Why We Remain in the Provinces?' as it is of his critical remarks on *Being and Time*. Adorno's irrepressible and forceful philosophical personality are again evidenced in the introduction to the *Metacritique*, which reads like an early version of *Negative Dialectics*, and has little if anything to do with Husserl's work. Adorno's caveat that Husserl is the 'occasion' of the *Metacritique* and not its 'object' reads like disingenuous post-hoc rationalization.¹⁸

Thesis Four: Adorno's thought is more like Heidegger's than he gives on

As Gordon rightly notes, Adorno ironically castigates Heidegger for being a terrible reader of other writers, especially Hölderlin, upon whom, Adorno contends, he arbitrarily imposes his own "aesthetic and political preferences," wholly inappropriate ones given that he was Nazi with a penchant for pastoral.¹⁹ He also points out that Heidegger had the bad habit of narcissistically reading his own philosophical project of fundamental ontology into other thinkers like Kant and Nietzsche. However, this is the pot calling the kettle black, for that is exactly what Adorno does when he reads Husserl as attempting to break free of "the sphere of constitutive subjectivity with the help of the same categories," and when he convicts Heidegger of ailing to make contact with the object and instead relapsing into subjective idealism.²⁰ This bears out the truth of the guiding idea of Gordon's interpretation, namely "that Adorno sees in existentialism a failed attempt to break free of idealism" and that "Adorno conceives his own philosophical effort as the successful realization of the very

same task."²¹ One suspects that Adorno's animus against Heidegger may indeed be subconsciously motivated, not only by his abhorrence at Heidegger's politics, but also to some extent by what Freud called "the narcissism of small differences."²² They have a lot of common enemies: the whole idealist tradition of post-Cartesian philosophy, the whole tradition of metaphysics since at least Plato, and in several respects their respective diagnoses of the age agree. This is remarkable given the stark differences in temperament and outlook between the urbane and modern critical theorist from Frankfurt, and the scholastically trained philosopher from Freiburg.

Thesis Five: Adorno and Odradek

Adorno's materialism, and more broadly, his philosophy of non-identity, while it is wholly unique, is mostly made up of bits taken from elsewhere – Benjamin, Lukács, Horkheimer, Sohn-Rethel, Schoenberg etc. – and reconfigured in a novel way. In this respect, one might say that Adorno's philosophical project bears a striking resemblance to Kafka's Odradek, on whose significance for Adorno Gordon lays particular emphasis:

One is tempted to believe that the creature once had some sort of intelligible shape and is now only a broken-down remnant. Yet this does not seem to be the case; ...nowhere is there an unfinished or broken surface to suggest anything of the kind; the whole thing looks senseless enough, but in its own way perfectly finished. In any case, close scrutiny is

¹⁸ Adorno, *Against Epistemology: a Metacritique*, 39.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 116-119.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 81, 170.

²¹ Gordon, *Adorno and Existence*, 127.

²² Freud, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, 474.

impossible, since Odradek is extraordinarily nimble and can never be laid hold of.²³

That is much like my experience of interpreting Adorno's philosophy: it is what makes it so challenging, and also frustrating. Benjamin once wrote that there is a cloudy spot at the heart of every one of Kafka's stories, which makes it impossible to paraphrase. That seems not just true of Kafka, but also of Adorno. Perhaps that is why Adorno held Kafka so dear, and why reading Kafka is such a useful 'learning resource' for trying to understand Adorno. Kafka once wrote: "The fact that there is none other than a constructed world [eine geistige Welt] takes *from* us hope, while giving **to** us certainty."²⁴ Adorno would agree, and saw his philosophy as a kind of antidote. Adorno's whole philosophy is a self-consciously failed attempt to give back the hope that, in Adorno's view, the idealist philosophical tradition from Kant to Heidegger traded in too cheaply for certainty. So while Adorno's materialism, his idea of non-identity thinking, and his negative dialectic appear odd, difficult and elusive, they, together with the practical aspects of Adorno's thinking, the utopian power he invests in the notion of non-identity and the somatic, can be understood from the other side, as the correlates of his unswerving critique of subjective idealism. Having shown this so clearly is the abiding achievement Gordon's book.

²³ Ibid., 176.

²⁴ Franz Kafka, *The Zürau Aphorisms*, trans. Michael Hoffman. (New York: Schocken, 2006) 64.

Works Cited

- Freud, Sigmund. *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 14, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag 1999.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Philosophical and Political Writings*, Edited by M Stassen. 1st ed. New York: Continuum, 2004.
- Hirschman, Albert O. *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Husserl, Edmund. *The Idea of Phenomenology*. Translated by Lee Hardy. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999.
- Kafka, Franz. *The Zürau Aphorisms*. Translated by Michael Hoffman. New York: Schocken, 2006.
- Müller-Doom, Stefan. *Adorno. An Intellectual Biography*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008.
- Adorno, T. W. *Against Epistemology. A Metacritique*. London: Basil Blackwell, 1982.
- Adorno, T. W. *Minima Moralia*. Translated by Edmond Jephcott. London: New Left Books, 1974.
- Adorno T. W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. London: Athlone Press, 1997.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Werke* 5. Eds. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp,
- Gilbert, Ryle. "Review of Sein un Zeit." *Mind*, vol. 38, no. 151, 1929, pp. 335–370. *Jul*.