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**Response to Critics**  
***Adorno and Existence***

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**Abstract**

Peter Gordon's response to Espen Hammer, Gordon Finlayson, and Iain Macdonald.

**Keywords**

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FOR any author it is a true gift to receive genuinely discerning and critical remarks that open up one's work in unexpected ways to reveal themes and problems the author may have never anticipated. I am deeply grateful to Espen Hammer, Iain Macdonald, and Gordon Finlayson for their commentaries on my book, *Adorno and Existence*. They have stated their views with remarkable generosity, though the challenges they have presented are considerable. My only regret is that I could not benefit from this criticism before publishing the book (though I should note that Espen Hammer did offer a great many discerning comments on the manuscript, and the book is far better than it might have been thanks to his insights along with those of the other readers whose names appear in the acknowledgements). But the general truism holds true that no work is ever truly complete. Much in the spirit of Adorno, I have never felt that anything I write is definitive or without blemish. In my own critical encounters with Adorno, I never consider myself more than an eternal student, so I would prefer to think of this book as merely a stopover on my own endless *Erziehungsweg*.<sup>1</sup>

It seems most fruitful and most interesting for readers to eschew the method of responding to each and every point that was raised during the book panel. I will instead offer my own commentary under three broad themes: 1) In the first section below, I respond to methodological concerns (raised chiefly by Finlayson and Hammer) as to whether Adorno's readings should count as genuine works of immanent criticism, or whether they remain too mired in socio-cultural polemic. 2) I will then take up these questions by focusing on

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Professor Edward Baring (Drew University) for his discerning comments on this response. Needless to say all errors here are entirely my own.

Adorno's criticisms of Husserl and then Heidegger, with special attention Adorno's controversial claim that both philosophers remained in some fashion, either overtly or covertly, confined to a kind of philosophical idealism. 3) In the third and final portion of this paper, I respond to concerns raised chiefly by Macdonald, though also by Hammer, regarding the status of religion in my interpretation, namely, the question as to whether I am "theologizing" Adorno, and whether we should instead adopt a more materialist perspective on Adorno's readings, especially though not exclusively his readings of Kierkegaard and Kafka's "Odradek."

### **Immanent Critique or Meta-Critique?**

Before I address these concerns, however, it seems appropriate to note a general theme that has emerged not only from these three commentaries, but also from several of the recently published reviews.<sup>2</sup> In at least some of these reviews, critics have observed (in more or less muted tones of dissatisfaction) that the book confines itself to mere exposition and that it shies away from the philosophically more compelling question as to whether Adorno's criticisms were at all justified. Let me respond to this with a general

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<sup>2</sup> Recent reviews of the book include the one by Christian Skirke, in the Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews (on-line; posted 23 March, 2017) at <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/adorno-and-existence/>; Andrew Bowie in *The Journal of the History of Philosophy*. Volume 55, Number 3 (July, 2017): 550-551; Richard Westerman on the website of the *Canadian Society for Continental Philosophy* (on-line; posted 29 August, 2017) at <https://www.c-scp.org/2017/08/29/peter-gordon-adorno-and-existence/>; and Samuel Freeman in *The New York Review of Books* in the print edition (23 March, 2017) but also available on-line. I also want to thank the panel on my book at New York University that also convened in the spring of 2017 with comments by Tamsin Shaw (NYU) and Hent de Vries (Johns Hopkins Center for the Humanities).

remark on method. In the history of philosophy, there remains a considerable difference between merely historical reconstruction and critical engagement.<sup>3</sup> This is a distinction that has always remained of great interest to me, perhaps because I trained both in intellectual history and philosophy, and I often find myself crossing the well-policed boundary between the two disciplines.

Critical theory itself, of course, insists on the dialectical relation between social conditions and philosophical appeals to truth. Properly understood, such a dialectical relation forbids us to consider either social conditions or philosophical meaning in their full independence. But this non-reductive and dialectical understanding often comes into conflict with the disciplinary and institutional distinctions that have solidified methodological norms in the modern research university. Historical narratives as constructed by intellectual historians all too often remain indifferent to questions of validity, while philosophical work all too often remains blind to the historical conditions that subtend philosophical meaning.

More frequently than I would like, I find myself at loggerheads with intellectual historians who believe that historicist explanatory methods can displace or serve as satisfactory substitutes for philosophical criticism. Needless to say, this kind of reductive historicism holds little appeal for me in part because it often seems driven by a kind of anti-philosophical *ressentiment*, and, more importantly, (to state the matter as plainly as possible), it strikes me as conceptually incoherent. There is no such thing as a purely historicist

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<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., *Philosophy in History: Essays in the Historiography of Philosophy* edited by Richard Rorty, Jerome B. Schneewind, Quentin Skinner (Cambridge, 1984).

reconstruction that has not already committed itself implicitly or explicitly to an interpretative stand as to how a philosophical text should be construed. Historicists who believe they can bracket out their own interpretations for the sake of a purely “historical” reconstruction typically appeal to the notion of a past context or horizon of meaning that remains somehow distinct from our own present-day horizon. This begs the question as to how a past context remains accessible *at all*, if we could not reach it by means of an interpretative breach through ostensibly distinctive horizons of meaning. Historicism that disavows the independent moment of context-transcending critical engagement with all meaning, both past and present, is merely interpretation in bad faith. It is entirely understandable if the broadly historical and narrative strategy that was adopted in *Adorno and Existence* may have left some critics feeling dissatisfied.

All the same, the book is a preliminary overture. If I had taken care to address the deeper questions of philosophical validity with all the attention they truly demand, the fruits of my labor would have been remarkably different on several counts. Most importantly, it would have belabored extraordinarily technical matters far exceeding a rather rudimentary problem that in my view confronts us in the current literature. If I assigned myself the task of spinning out a largely synthetic or reconstructive narrative of Adorno’s encounter with existentialism and phenomenology, this is chiefly because even the basic contours of this encounter remain neglected and poorly understood. At nearly every step I recognized moments that might have been developed, and specific weaknesses in Adorno’s assessment that might have been challenged. But I placed most of these concerns aside, not for lack of philosophical interest but chiefly because my

aims were far more modest in scope. I trust that the evaluative labor will receive further and far more attention in the future. Still, it seems to me that this facet of Adorno's legacy has been too frequently dismissed without pausing to exercise a measure of interpretative charity. It could be that my own charity goes too far, though it should be said that throughout the book I do take care to acknowledge those moments when I feel Adorno has lapsed from philosophical criticism into mere polemic. When it comes to Adorno's *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*, for example, I suggest that it indulges far too often in a kind of "culturalist" reductionism. When Adorno is not charitable, I am not charitable back. Although these preliminary comments can hardly do justice to the ongoing debate between historicist and critical-rational modes of inquiry, this is not the place to pursue that debate at greater length. Instead, I turn below to the two major themes that arise in the commentaries by Espen Hammer, Iain Macdonald, and Gordon Finlayson.

The question as to whether Adorno's criticism was fair breaks down into three distinct concerns: a) the status of "immanent" vs. "meta" criticism; b) the accuracy of the interpretation of Husserl; and c) the accuracy of the interpretation of Heidegger.

A major question arises as to whether Adorno's writings on Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Husserl are best described as exercises in "immanent criticism" or "metacriticism." I think the answer is less clear than one might suppose. Insofar as Adorno never treats philosophy as a pristine practice wholly dissociated from social-historical conditions, the proposal that he ever exercised anything like a *strictly* immanent critique of philosophical argumentation strikes me as implausible. So when I occasionally call these

exercises in *immanent* critique this is indeed misleading. Yet I worry that the notion of a *Metakritik* (which he used for his Husserl book) has the unfortunate effect of confirming the received view that these writings belong to the genre of cultural or sociological polemic. The "meta" disburdens us of the "immanent" and encourages us to forget Adorno's typical habit of reading the social thematics *in and through* an internalist engagement with formal argumentation. The famous methodological statement in *Aesthetic Theory* tells us that in the interpretation of works of art, problems of society return as immanent problems of form. What Adorno said of aesthetic interpretation goes for philosophy as well; in a proper understanding of his interpretative method, the apparent distinction between metacritique and immanent critique is too abstract, and upon further reflection cannot be sustained. For Adorno the broadly varied tradition of thought that can be traced from Kierkegaard through Husserl to Heidegger can be characterized as "the philosophy of bourgeois interiority" precisely because this term helps us to sustain the dialectic between immanent and metacritical perspectives. For Adorno, as for Hegel, philosophy is "its own time comprehended in thoughts."<sup>4</sup> It follows that there is some warrant for characterizing philosophical arguments in such a way as to make their social physiognomy legible.

There is a genuine worry here. We want to know whether Adorno's interpretations were steered in advance by his own unshakable opinions, and whether these opinions were so prejudicial that they inhibited him from discerning any

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<sup>4</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, edited by Allen W. Wood, translated by H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 21.

countervailing evidence in the philosophical texts themselves. If the latter were truly the case then we should indeed conclude that little in Adorno's interpretations could qualify as "immanent" at all. But it is precisely on this point that we must take care to note the crucial fact: Adorno's interpretations are not specimens of unremitting hostility; they are rich with philosophical ambivalence, and it is precisely this irreducible ambivalence *within* Adorno's own philosophical interpretations that we should consider most instructive. This was the chief message of my book.

### Adorno on Husserl

Regarding Adorno's interpretation of Husserlian phenomenology, it is of course commonplace in the history of twentieth century criticism that at a certain point in his career Husserl lapsed into a species of idealism. The charge can be found with almost mind-numbing repetition in Heidegger's early work up through *Sein und Zeit*, and it becomes a theme with variations played out on numerous keys by philosophers as diverse as Sartre, Kolakowski, and Merleau-Ponty. In the preface to *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that "Husserl's transcendental is not Kant's."<sup>5</sup> But he also notes that Husserl had to confront a host of "existential dissidents." This was Merleau-Ponty's term for those who disagreed with Husserl precisely because they suspected him of drawing too close to idealism especially in the phase of *Ideen I*. On the sources of this disagreement Merleau-Ponty was especially eloquent:

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<sup>5</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*. Colin Smith, trans. (New York: Routledge, 2002), xv.

Husserl's entire misunderstanding with his interpreters, ...and ultimately with himself, comes from the fact that we must—precisely in order to see the world and to grasp it as a paradox—rupture our familiarity with it, and this rupture can teach us nothing except the unmotivated springing forth of the world.

Merleau-Ponty is careful to note that the phenomenological reduction does not efface the world, nor can it return the subject to the immanence of consciousness, since the natural attitude is not (and *cannot* be) wholly annulled; it is merely "suspended." Reflection, he writes, does not "withdraw from the world toward the unity of consciousness as the foundation of the world; rather, it steps back in order to see transcendence spring forth and it loosens the intentional threads that connect us to the world in order to make them appear." But Merleau-Ponty concludes this seeming defense of Husserl with the paradoxical remark that "The most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction."<sup>6</sup> This is a brilliant *aperçu* not least because it attempts to rescue Husserl from the idealism that lurks in his argumentation at least as a *susceptibility*, if not as a forthright affirmation. All of this is to say that in charging Husserl with idealism Adorno was hardly alone. The charge goes back at least to Heidegger himself, and if Adorno disagreed with Heidegger on nothing else, he at least agreed with him on this: that Husserl's transcendental phenomenology did not just *loosen* the threads of intentionality, but break them entirely.

Entering the waters of controversy as to whether Husserl was a realist or an idealist is a task for which I will confess I

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<sup>6</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, lxxvii.

have neither the requisite knowledge nor courage. It is of course true that on this point Husserl tried to defend himself against the charge of idealism. Consider, for example, the well-known 1934 letter to Abbé Baudin: “No ordinary ‘realist’ has ever been as realistic and concrete as I, the phenomenological ‘idealist’ (a word which by the way I no longer use).”<sup>7</sup> A skeptic might respond to Husserl’s defensive letter that it represents little more than an attempt to square the circle. Needless to say, Husserl’s stance was indeed complex, and I can hardly resolve the dilemma here except to recall one of the more notorious statements from *Ideas I* that left Husserl vulnerable to the charge of idealism:

The whole spatio-temporal world in which man and the human ego claim to belong as subordinate singular realities, is according to its own meaning mere intentional being, a being, therefore, which has the merely secondary, relative sense of a being for consciousness. It is a being which consciousness in own experiences posits, and is, in principle, intuitable and determinable only as the element common to the (harmoniously) motivated appearance manifolds, *but over and beyond this is just nothing at all.*<sup>8</sup>

Although recent scholars such as Dan Zahavi have worked to redeem Husserl from the accusation of rampant idealism, and have helped us to identify in the later Husserl realist themes of social being and embodiment that are typically associated with phenomenological “dissidents” such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, the claim that through the *epoché* consciousness

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted from Iso Kern, *Husserl und Kant : eine Untersuchung über Husserls Verhältnis zu Kant und zum Neukantianismus*. (Den Haag : M. Nijhoff, 1964), 276, note.

<sup>8</sup> Husserl, *Ideas*. Boyce-Gibson, trans.; 139.

“posits” a mode of being which “over and beyond this is just nothing at all” obviously courts controversy. When Adorno accuses Husserl of locking the ego away in the cabinet of consciousness and throwing away the key, it is precisely passages such as this one that he had in mind.

### Adorno on Heidegger

Regarding Heidegger, the charge of idealism is perhaps even more controversial.

Hammer worries that “at times” I seem “to confirm the idea of *Being* as involving some sort of objecthood.” Interestingly, Gordon Finlayson has what we might say is the opposite worry. He, too, expresses some skepticism regarding Adorno’s interpretation of Heidegger, and he is especially concerned about Adorno’s claim that fundamental ontology “lapses back into subjective idealism.” Finlayson likens this to a “perversity argument,” that is simplistic and “lacking in nuance.” So where Espen Hammer fears that I construe Being as an object, Finlayson fears that I have not taken sufficient care to distance myself from Adorno’s mistaken reading of Heidegger as an idealist.

But the charge that existential ontology sustains an unacknowledged bond with idealism is not as implausible as it may seem. Rather than reading Being as an object, I follow Adorno (and Gilbert Ryle, and many other more recent Heidegger scholars such as William Blattner in his excellent book, *Heidegger’s Temporal Idealism*) in construing existential ontology as a doctrine that places a certain existential spin on

transcendental idealism.<sup>9</sup> This point demands further explanation.

In *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger introduces the *Seinsfrage* as an inquiry into the *sense* of Being, i.e., *vom Sinn des Seins*. This sense of being is implicit in all world-disclosure and it serves as a transcendental condition; i.e., it is a condition for the world's being disclosed at all. He suggests that this inquiry must take as its point of departure that specific factual being that exists with an *understanding* of Being (or *Seinsverständnis*). The *Seinsfrage* is accordingly the question into the *understanding* of Being that belongs distinctively to Dasein as the Being for whom Being is already “at issue.” Now, if this sounds a lot like an inquiry into transcendental conditions in the Kantian sense, Heidegger openly confirms our suspicions when he says that Being is the *transcendens*, pure and simple. It is true of course that Heidegger wishes to break free of the transcendental idealist dogma that the conditions for the intelligibility of world-disclosure are mental. Where Kant grounds the conditions for intelligibility in the pure categories of understanding and the pure forms of intuition, Heidegger is an externalist. He locates these conditions not in the realm of the mental but rather in Dasein's ongoing comportment (its *Bewandtnis*), that is, in the ecstatic and thrown facticity of its own *being-in-the-world*. For Heidegger the conditions for intelligibility are not intellectual but eminently *practical*.

Broadly speaking, then, Heidegger has affected a shift from cognition to practice. This is the main thrust, of course, of the influential interpretation of *Being and Time* Division One

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<sup>9</sup> William D. Blattner, *Heidegger's Temporal Idealism*. (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

in the brilliant commentary by the late Hubert Dreyfus, whose work I deeply admire and from whom I learned a great deal. (I deeply regret his passing.) But this shift to practice (or, what Dreyfus called “skillful coping”) is hardly sufficient to free Heidegger's fundamental ontology of the taint of idealism. Since Being belongs to Dasein as a *Seinsverständnis*, it follows that Being and the whole of the world as disclosed in virtue of Being remains in a very important sense *dependent on* Dasein.

When Adorno indicts existential ontology as crypto-idealist, we should recall that Heidegger *himself* characterized this thesis of Dasein-dependency as a species of idealism. In section 43, for example, Heidegger writes: “only as long as Dasein is (that is, only as long as an understanding of being is ontically possible) ‘is there’ Being.” He then explains that idealism is a clear “advantage” over realism if one understands idealism as the theory that “Being and Reality are only ‘in the consciousness.’” Now, we should grant that Heidegger places the phrase, “in the consciousness” in inverted commas, as if to make clear his embarrassment at the idealist implications of the phrase. But elsewhere he shrugs off the embarrassment and welcomes the characterization of idealism as suitable for his project:

If what the term “idealism” says, amounts to the understanding that Being can never be explained by entities but is already that which is “transcendental” for every entity, *then idealism affords the only correct possibility for a philosophical problematic*. If so, Aristotle was no less an idealist than Kant.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer), 208.

Now, it is clear that Heidegger willingly surrenders the mind-centered version of idealism, but as this passage suggests, he only rejects an idealism of the “mental” in favor of a species of idealism that grounds world-disclosure in Dasein. Dreyfus, I should note, offered a plausible defense against this conclusion, and argued for what he called Heidegger’s “robust realism.” He argued that even while Dasein’s *Seinsverständnis* is indeed the condition for the disclosure of entities, those entities *nonetheless* in some sense *might be said to exist independent of the event of their disclosure*.<sup>11</sup> Heidegger’s claim (which I quoted above) looks as if it supports Dreyfus here: only as long as Dasein is, ‘is there’ Being. But it is still a puzzling line and it leaves itself open to various interpretations.<sup>12</sup> As Dreyfus notes, the argumentation in *Being and Time* seems to leave itself open to readings that would make its author a robust realist, or a transcendental idealist, or a “deflationary” realist.” Dreyfus opts for the first of these three possibilities.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The two key essays by Dreyfus on this theme are “Heidegger’s Hermeneutic Realism,” 94-108, and “How Heidegger Defends the Correspondence Theory of Truth with respect to the Entities of Natural Science,” 109-124, both in Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Background Practices: Essays on the Understanding of Being*. Mark Wrathall, ed. (Oxford University Press, 2017). Many of my own views on Heidegger developed out of my long engagement with Dreyfus’s work, and especially the latter essay, which I was grateful to read in draft form at least a decade before its publication. Readers of my earlier book, *Continental Divide*, will detect the rejoinder the Dreyfus between the lines.

<sup>12</sup> For my rejoinder to Dreyfus, see Peter E. Gordon, “Science, Realism, and the Unworlding of the World” in *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, Mark Wrathall and Hubert Dreyfus, Eds. (Blackwell, 2006): 425-444; and also my later remarks on the same issue, in “The Empire of Signs: Heidegger’s Remarks on Neo-Kantianism” *The Cambridge Companion to Being and Time*, ed. Mark Wrathall (Cambridge University Press, 2013): 223-238.

<sup>13</sup> Dreyfus, “How Heidegger Defends the Correspondence Theory of Truth with respect to the Entities of Natural Science,” 113.

In response to Dreyfus, at least two points need to be made. First, if Dreyfus is right, then we are still free to call Heidegger a realist, but it should be clear that he is a realist in the same sense that Kant was a realist, i.e., this is a realism that still fits comfortably within the broader framework of transcendental idealism. Kant himself insisted (on pain of Berkeleyan embarrassment) that *things in themselves* remain independent of the subject even though those same things *as appearances* are transcendently ideal. But nomenclature does not get us to the core of the issue. The second and more serious reason to worry about Heidegger’s status as a realist is that Heidegger goes much *further* than Kant. Kant was only speaking to intelligibility conditions; Heidegger was addressing ontological conditions. Dreyfus is especially revealing on just this point because in his celebrated interpretation of Division One of *Sein und Zeit* he construes “Being” as the “intelligibility” of entities.<sup>14</sup> But that puts a strongly epistemological spin on an inquiry that Heidegger himself considered ontological. Heidegger is *not* saying that only the intelligibility of an entity depends on Dasein. He says its very *thereness*, its being-there *at all*, depends in some deep sense on Dasein as the site of world disclosure. This ontological spin gets Heidegger into trouble when he tries to speak about the purely natural realm

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<sup>14</sup> It is worth reading the helpful definition that Dreyfus provides for readers in the glossary that appears in preface to his book: “*Sein* will be translated as *being* (with a lower-case *b*). Being is “that on the basis of which beings are already understood.” Being is not a substance, a process, an event, or anything that we normally come across; rather, it is a fundamental aspect of entities, viz. their *intelligibility*.” Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-world: A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time, Division I*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), xi. It seems to me an open question as to whether the English term “intelligibility” places an intellectualist or epistemological spin on Heidegger’s work, or whether this intellectualist (and implicitly idealist) emphasis is already there in Heidegger’s own project.



of brute things beyond Dasein's sphere of historicity and care. In *History of the Concept of Time*, Heidegger goes so far as to say that nature in this sense is the "unintelligible [*unverständlich*] pure and simple."<sup>15</sup> This is a remarkable claim that dances right up to the edge of absurdity, since it would seem to imply that Heidegger's philosophical lessons have a merely "cultural" sphere of application and leave nature itself wholly unblemished. For a philosopher who was trying to bring Dasein back into communion with the *Weltlichkeit der Welt* this would be a startling consequence indeed.

To conclude with the first portion of my remarks, I would certainly agree with Gordon Finlayson, who observes that much of Adorno's criticism of Heidegger is not entirely original. This is no doubt as true of Adorno's interpretation of Heidegger as it is of Adorno's interpretation of Husserl, but if the criticism is correct, it is not clear what the charge of unoriginality is supposed to convey. As I note in the book, the philosophical claim that Heidegger remained bound to idealism whether by lapse or by design is a familiar one. It was also the opinion of both Gilbert Ryle (whom Adorno encountered during his brief and unhappy stay at Oxford) and Günther Anders-Stern (whose polemic against the "pseudo-concreteness" of existential ontology ranks among one of the very few pieces of secondary literature Adorno deemed worthy of citing in the rather impoverished reference apparatus to *Negative Dialektik*). It is worth emphasizing that Adorno's verdict on existential ontology remained complex. As Andrew Bowie has noted in his brief review, Adorno expressed a measure of praise in his 1963-44 lectures ('Fragen der

Dialektik') for the "pluralistic, antisystematic motivation in the approach of the ontology."<sup>16</sup> But Adorno's conflicted verdict on Heidegger's existential ontology is not a challenge to my interpretation; it is precisely this philosophical ambivalence that strikes me as so revealing. Adorno could never overcome this ambivalence. In the 1965 lecture course, "Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems," he complained of "how inconsistent his [Heidegger's] thought is," and warned his students that especially on the question of death Heidegger's philosophy "is organized by privilege and the need for control."<sup>17</sup> How such a remark might be squared with the seemingly favorable remark on the "pluralistic" nature of Heidegger's ontology is a question that surely deserves further attention.

Whatever one makes of these specific moments of ambivalence, it is clear that Adorno could not cease grappling with existential ontology because he discerned in its own philosophical difficulties an important lesson regarding the challenge of breaking free of idealism's magic circle, even while he acknowledged the necessarily *conceptual* character of his own critical efforts. In registering his ambivalence Adorno was hardly unique. The complaint that Heidegger remains a thinker of "subjective immanence," for example, emerged as something of an obsession for Emmanuel Lévinas: it appears as early as the 1935 essay, "De l'évasion," and it assumed rather dramatic or even grandiose proportion by 1961 in *Totalité et l'infini* (though even here we cannot fail to note how Lévinas works *with and within* the existential-

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<sup>15</sup> Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*. Theodore Kisiel, trans. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 298.

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<sup>16</sup> Adorno, "Fragen der Dialektik," Adorno Archiv, Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 8965), quoted by Andrew Bowie, "Peter E. Gordon, *Adorno and Existence*" (Review). *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 55, 3 (July 2017), 550-551.

<sup>17</sup> Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*. Rolf Tiedemann, ed. Edmund Jephcott, trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 130.

phenomenological framework to forge the instruments for its critical overcoming). Consider, too, Derrida's "*Ousia et Grammé*" (1968) in which the deeply conflicted status of existential ontology, poised between humanism and anti-humanism, between subjective power and openness to Being, serves as the object lesson for a masterful performance of deconstructive interpretation.<sup>18</sup> One is tempted to say that the 1960s saw the *aqua alta* for assaults on Heidegger's alleged complicity in the manifold traditions of idealism he allegedly wished to destroy. Unlike Finlayson, however, I am not troubled in the least at Adorno's apparently "epigonal" status in this broader philosophical tradition of Heidegger-criticism. That so many other readers of Heidegger arrived at a similar place of discontent does not suffice to prove that they were correct, but it should encourage us to entertain the thought that they were not wrong.

### Adorno and Theology

Now I will turn from the worry of the accuracy of Adorno's readings of both transcendental and existential phenomenology to the second major theme that emerges from the comments, namely, the status of the "theological." On this point, I'm especially grateful to Espen Hammer and to Iain Macdonald for affording me the opportunity to clarify what may not be evident in the book itself. I do not consider my interpretation of Adorno in any sense a gesture of "theologizing." Although I take seriously his enduring fascination with Kierkegaard, and I would insist that this engagement sheds a helpful light on Adorno's own

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<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida, "*Ousia et grammè. Note sur une note de Sein une Zeit.*" First published in *L'endurance de la pensée*. In honor of Jean Beaufret (Plon, 1968); republished in *Marges de la philosophie*. (Minuit, 1972): 31-78.

philosophical commitments, I do not believe that this should prompt us to see in Adorno a crypto-theologian or even an advocate of negative theology (a characterization that Gershom Scholem proposed to Adorno in a letter shortly after reading *Minima Moralia*). On the contrary, I believe that Adorno makes philosophical *use* of theological concepts but with a *materialist intent*. Here we should take our cues from Adorno's well-known statement in his conversation with Eugen Kogon, in "Offenbarung und autonome Vernunft," where he declares (in a striking interpretation of Walter Benjamin's chessplaying Turk) that "nothing of theological content will survive without transformation, every single item of this content has to stand to the challenge of migrating into the secular, the profane. [*Nichts an theologischem Gehalt wird unverwandelt fortbestehen; ein jeglicher wird der Probe sich stellen müssen, ins Säkulare, Profane einzuwandern.*]"<sup>19</sup>

Much depends on our interpretation of this famous phrase. For all of his many allusions to the conceptual archives of religion and the *theologoumena* that he may deploy to motivate his claims, Adorno does not enlist religion in the *substantive* sense as the necessary complement to a modernity that might otherwise suffer a fatal deficit in moral insight or moral motivation. The original title of his dialogue with Kogon suggests that it was *autonomous* reason that Adorno wished to defend. This "secularization-proviso," as Adorno conceives it does not open itself to the thought that we remain in any sense dependent on religion. Nor does it seem to endorse the Rawlsian-Habermasian notion of a "translation proviso," according to which the public sphere might benefit from the

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<sup>19</sup> *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. H.W. Pickford (New York: Columbia, 1998), 136.

normative lessons of religion *provided* that in due course those lessons are articulated in terms that remain neutral with respect to comprehensive doctrines. In “Revelation and autonomous Reason,” Adorno explicitly says that key precepts of traditional religion “cannot simply be translated” into a modern idiom because social and historical conditions have radically changed.<sup>20</sup>

More often than not, Adorno deployed theological concepts in a dialectical manner. He invoked them but simultaneously annulled their original sense. This is the meaning of his concluding remark in *Minima Moralia*, that “besides the demand [...] placed on thought, the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.” Needless to say such an oblique appeal to religious categories could still inspire Gershom Scholem to characterize the book as an exercise in “negative theology.” But elsewhere in Adorno’s work the determinate negation of theology resists even this characterization. Consider the remark about Beethoven’s piano sonata *Les Adieux*, in which Adorno hears “trotting horse hooves” in the first movement, and, although he admits this is an “evanescently fleeting association,” he then adds that they “carry a greater guarantee of hope than the four Gospels.”<sup>21</sup>

All of this returns us to the question of an “inverse theology,” the phrase Adorno used in his correspondence with Benjamin to describe the Kierkegaard book and then attached to the image of Odradek in Kafka’s *Sorge des Hausvaters*. Iain Macdonald has offered a superb reading of Odradek that I

hope does not conflict with my own. There is clearly an over-determination to Kafka’s imagery that resists decryption. But we still need to ask why Adorno wished to describe this as an “inverse Theologie.” Notice that in the original letter Adorno did not write “verkehrte Theologie,” he wrote “inverse.” And he placed this word in inverted commas.<sup>22</sup> I agree with Macdonald that the metaphor of inversion seems to invoke Marx, who wrote in his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (Introduction) that religion is the “inverted consciousness of this world” and it is “the *fantastic realization* of the human essence” which in this world has not acquired its “true reality.”<sup>23</sup> (It should be noted, however, that Marx uses the term *verkerete* rather than *inverse*, and I will leave aside the question as to whether this difference is of any philosophical significance.) I would say that Odradek is the conceptual figure for an *inverse theology*, the debased image of God whose failed transcendence marks the imperfection of the social world itself. In his letter to Benjamin, Adorno writes that “only to a life that is perverted in thingly form” [*bloß dem dinghaft verkehrten Leben*] are we promised “an escape from the overall context of nature.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> For the original German, see *Adorno-Benjamin Briefwechsel, 1928-1940*. Ed. Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1994), 74; letter dated December 17, 1934. For a discussion of this phrase see Gordon, *Adorno and Existence*, 174-182.

<sup>23</sup> “The foundation of irreligious criticism is: *Man makes religion*, religion does not make man. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. But *man* is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is *the world of man* – state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an *inverted consciousness of the world*, because they are an *inverted world*.” Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right.’* “Introduction” Joseph O’Malley, trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 131.

<sup>24</sup> Gordon, *Adorno and Existence*, quoted from 178.

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<sup>20</sup> “Reason and Revelation,” my emphasis. trans. Mendieta. 173.

<sup>21</sup> See Berthold Hoeckner, *Programming the Absolute* (Princeton); who quotes Adorno, *Aesthetische Theorie*, 531 (258 translation modified); and *Beethoven*, 250 (174).

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In such passages Adorno already anticipates his latent disagreement with (the later) Horkheimer, who seems to have developed a far less dialectical appreciation of theism as a preserve of critical resistance that atheism abandoned. Adorno was surely not Horkheimer and their differences on this question were profound. In sum, I agree with Iain Macdonald that Adorno's use of the theological expresses an *inverse* and not a negative theology. What Adorno eventually discovered in Kierkegaard, however, was a critical principle that offered conceptual leverage against the mere givenness of an existence "perverted in thingly form." Only this can explain Adorno's late reversal of opinion in the 1963 lecture, "Kierkegaard noch einmal" in which the Danish opponent of Hegelian systematicity emerges as an early critic of bourgeois reification and the totally administered society. Even here, however, Adorno did not embrace a substantive religious metaphysics; he appealed only to the conceptual *archive* of religion, which became for him a critical pivot—against existential ontology, and against hopelessness. But he did so from *within a thinking that remained* to an extraordinary degree materialist in orientation, though it was never materialist in the "dogmatic sense" (a point he hastened to clarify in his letter to Scholem shortly after the publication of *Negative Dialectics*). I will conclude by quoting one sentence from my book: "The counterfactual appeal to a standpoint removed from existence does not contradict Adorno's materialism; it completes it."<sup>25</sup>

I offer my sincere thanks once again to Espen Hammer, Iain Macdonald, and Gordon Finlayson.

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<sup>25</sup> Gordon, *Adorno and Existence*, 197.