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On Peter Gordon's *Adorno and Existence*

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Abstract

Espen Hammer's response to Peter Gordon's *Adorno and Existence*.

Keywords

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FOR an essentially Hegelian social philosopher of Theodor W. Adorno's ilk, few schools of modern philosophy may seem less promising than existentialism. Ideas about purportedly perennial dilemmas of the existential self, and about how certain states of mind – anxiety, most famously – may be understood independently of considerations related to social life, seem far removed from Adorno's preoccupations. In his path-breaking, elegantly conceived and executed book *Adorno and Existence*, Peter E. Gordon challenges this view. According to Gordon, Adorno was not only interested in existentialism; rather, he was deeply influenced by the encounters he had with it. Adorno was never an existentialist. However, he took existentialism extremely seriously and aimed to think through its implications for modern modes of social self-interpretation. This is a rare achievement. Gordon, it seems to me, has found a new way into Adorno, exploring a dimension of his intellectual engagement that for far too long has been under-exposed.

When analyzing Adorno's contribution in this respect, the term "existentialism" must be employed in a somewhat loose sense. Gordon deals extensively with the early Adorno's approach to Kierkegaard in the 1933 study *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*. However, he also discusses Adorno's readings of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, philosophers who, despite their interest in themes associated with existentialism, did not identify with existentialism as a movement or school of philosophy. If my overall understanding of Gordon's project is correct, it is not existentialism in the narrow sense – i.e., the "Kierkegaard to Sartre"-legacy of anti-rationalist subjectivism – that we see Adorno grappling with in his book. Rather, what interests

Gordon's Adorno and stimulates his critical involvement is a species of idealist thinking that seeks to derive existential, social, and political categories from thought itself considered as an essentially interior, subjective form of response to the world. Theorized as a species of idealism, existentialism not only attempts to derive these categories from the inner and subjective, but also promotes the idea that they deserve to be considered as more "concrete," "authentic," and ultimately binding for a responsible subject than any of the more traditional social categories of mediation and structuration.

Adorno, of course, does not sympathize with this approach. For him, the life of modern agents, including experiences of existentially relevant states and dilemmas, is one of abstraction. There can be no unmediated self from which the concrete can be extracted. Any appeal to an unmediated concrete modality is necessarily ideological or illusory.

Confronting existentialism in its idealist guise, Adorno sees it as an irrational mode of thinking. Both Kierkegaard and the phenomenologists (especially Heidegger) downplay the role and scope of reason in human life while valorizing the irrational moment of decision. The combination of ideas of the perennial, the concrete, and irrational decision seems for Adorno to have expressed a deep crisis in Western thought. This has culminated in the extremes of fascist celebration of myth, the spontaneous vitality of the racially unified body politic, while at the same time deviating radically from the rationalist line of transcendental idealism, more sympathetic to Adorno, running from Kant to the neo-Kantianism of his own early years.

As Gordon points out, while Adorno shares the existentialist ambition of ultimately escaping from the clutches of idealist thought and reaching a plateau of concreteness, he rejects both its claim to have found a *fundamentum inconcussum* in inner subjective life and its irrationalism. Only reason can disclose and perhaps mend its own disfigurements. Yet the very concept of reason needs to be radically and socially reconceived. Reason is social and historical. Any critique of reason must situate reason in the world of actual human practice and reproduction.

I find myself in complete agreement with the overall thrust of this terrific contribution to Adorno scholarship. As irrationalist thinking is on the rise both in the US and in Europe, I cannot help realizing how timely Gordon's contribution actually is. In a different shape and form, yet with the same philosophical undergirding, we are currently bystanders to the same forces and tendencies against which Adorno and other liberal progressives reacted so strongly in the 1930s.

Having outlined the background to Gordon's project, I will now turn to some of its more specific claims. In particular, I will be expressing some skepticism regarding Adorno's own approach to so-called existentialism. In short, I would have liked to see Gordon questioning some of Adorno's readings a bit more.

Of course, none of Adorno's accounts of other thinkers have producing a rational reconstruction as their goal. There is no hermeneutic principle of charity involved in his procedure; his aim is not to view a thinker in the -- from the vantage point of reason -- "best light." He takes no interest in taking apart,

and putting back together again, systems of philosophical thought. Rather, what he provides is a so-called meta-critique. In such critiques, the social pressures on theory-formation are shown to disfigure the contribution at stake, dissolving it into fragments and unresolved dialectical tensions that negatively--and sometimes obliquely--may hold up a mirror for ourselves, our situation, and our commitments. Thus, for Adorno, a figure such as Immanuel Kant is not primarily the thinker who grounded synthetic *a priori* knowledge in the pure features of the intuition and the understanding but, rather, a purveyor of the divisions, reifications, and contradictions that reason generates in the state of rationalized modernity.

When I suggest that Gordon might have done well to question some of Adorno's readings, I have to accept that in order to do so, he might have been forced to extricate himself from Adorno's own procedures. He would have had to distance himself from the exclusive emphasis on meta-critique and ask questions about the interpretive and rational plausibility of his procedures. Gordon's readings would then risk being transcendent rather than immanent.

This brings me to a simple yet important issue. Would Adorno recognize the legitimacy of more reconstructive approaches? Are rational reconstructions of a thinker incompatible with the kind of procedures we find in Adorno? Or are we allowed to accept both -- side by side, as it were? I would venture at least this hypothesis: More often than he would like to admit, Adorno makes use of, and indeed presupposes, a certain interpretive and rationally reconstructed view in order for his meta-critique to get started. Unfortunately, that initial view of where a thinker stands is occasionally not very compelling, at least not in terms of

contemporary scholarship. Too often Adorno simply builds his view of other thinkers on uncharitable, yet rationally reconstructive, readings circulating in his own intellectual environment. Yet could Adorno have done without this potentially dogmatic starting-point? Could he have conducted his meta-critique without any attention to rational reconstruction? I ask these questions because Adorno's interpretations, provided that we view them as at least partly dependent on rational reconstruction, often do precious little justice to the thinker he is confronting. While being impressed by the insights gained by his socially oriented meta-critiques – procedures, by the way, that Adorno started to adopt at a very early age when he studied the *Critique of Pure Reason* with Siegfried Kracauer – I also find myself thinking that the works of such figures as Husserl and Heidegger are a lot more valuable than what Adorno allows for.

The reading of Kierkegaard is extreme and daring and imaginative, relying heavily on Walter Benjamin's account of the baroque *Trauerspiel*, while being open to the fragile truth-content involved in the Danish thinker's return to the interior. In all of Adorno's long book on Kierkegaard, there is not a single word on Christianity, the leap of faith, or the double negation. Adorno's exclusive interest lies with the radical sense of alienation expressed in Kierkegaard's construction of the aesthetic and the so-called aesthetic stage of life (including its romanticism). When we turn to Husserl, however, about whose transcendental phenomenology Adorno wrote his *Against Epistemology* while languishing in the, for him, intellectually inhospitable Oxford of the mid-1930s, it seems that for all the wealth of resources this study contains for philosophers skeptical of foundationalism and subjective idealism, the Husserl we find in it is hardly the most plausible, interesting,

or rewarding. Adorno's Husserl is the thinker who in *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book* proclaims that the interiority of consciousness may evidently exist even if the world does not, and who in close rapport with Berkeley draws up a version of subjective idealism according to which the world of experience is a mere construct of the mind. Adorno's Husserl is also the Cartesian Husserl. For all his finesse in interpreting Adorno's approach to Husserl, Gordon accepts the basics of this reading.

Adorno did not have access to *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book*, which remained unpublished until after the war, or *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (which Husserl wrote in 1935). He cannot be blamed for ignoring those writings. Yet there are plenty of other sources, and indeed large swaths of *Ideas I*, where we find Husserl being strongly opposed to subjective idealism of the passive Humean or Berkeleyan kind, and where he vigorously dismisses the Cartesian notion of the *ego cogito* as an inert, immaterial substance. For Husserl, consciousness, by virtue of its inherent intentionality, is self-transcending. It is oriented towards the so-called *noema* (which is about meaning in a generalized sense), and the extent to which the given, *die Sache selbst*, adequately fulfills both conceptual and non-conceptual anticipations (contained in the *noema*); thus, the real, far from being any content that simply is presented in consciousness, is that which is given adequately. Moreover, as Husserl starts introducing his account of the life-world, intersubjectivity, and notion of action as central to the constitution of a cognitively accessible world, there is no longer a trace of the passive subjective idealism that Adorno finds in his work. Adorno's Husserl was a defensive yet politically suspicious *Bürger*, who

in times of crisis withdrew to a constructed inner sanctuary of certainty. I, on the other hand, think he deserves a more charitable reading.

With Heidegger the situation is quite different. Faced with numerous social and academic costs, Adorno pioneered the now widespread reading of Heidegger as a fascist thinker, and in *The Jargon of Authenticity* and the *Negative Dialectics* he accused this thinker of being of falsely trying to derive concrete social and existential categories from dubious etymological exercises and mere arbitrary hypostatization of everyday expressions. Gordon does an exceptionally good job tracing the ins and outs of these still very interesting analyses. However, when it comes to *Being and Time* and the concept of *Sein* itself, Adorno's approach may seem lacking. In particular one might take issue with readings, seemingly present in Adorno, that attribute to Heidegger a species of Neo-Platonism whereby *Sein* is some sort of higher-order object from which all other ontological orders flow or follow. While I would associate *Sein* in Heidegger with Husserl's account of generalized meaning, linking *Being and Time* with phenomenology, Gordon's Adorno thinks of the Heidegger of *Being and Time* as a subjective idealist who bases his account of the construction of reality on the foundational qualities of the ego cogito. At this point I feel that a more generous engagement with Heidegger's painstakingly developed notions of *Dasein* and its *In-der-Welt-Sein* would have been helpful. If the critique of idealism was truly essential to Adorno's own endeavor, then Heidegger's own battle with idealism deserves to be taken more seriously. Like Adorno, Heidegger started his career being deeply dissatisfied with the Neo-Kantian philosophies of the subject and consciousness offered by the Marburg School and elsewhere. Similarly, he aspired to break loose from

idealism and uncover spheres of human existence and potential for flourishing unavailable to the Kantian subject. Their paths – especially politically – diverged radically. Yet they belonged to the same generation of largely romantic rebels against the philosophical *status quo*, and Heidegger's thinking is a lot more complex than what Adorno credits him for.

The final chapter of Gordon's book may be the finest and most interesting. Here, in view of Adorno's mature thinking in *Negative Dialectics*, he returns to Kierkegaard via Adorno's late approach to him, arguing that the Danish arch-existentialist's withdrawal to the *foro interno* is genuine and perhaps even authentically motivated. In a social world evacuated of meaning, the only hope of fulfillment lies in the appeal to some sort of transcendence, a leap beyond the absurdity of contemporary, commodified existence. At this point Gordon adopts a somewhat more theological approach, treating the reader to a tour de force reading of Kafka and his "inverted theology." While Ernst Bloch attempted to see positive expressions of hope in large varieties of historical and cultural material, Adorno finds it negatively, in the unyielding focus on damaged life. Hope lies in the negation of everything that exists. To the extent that existentialism ultimately attempts to embrace that which exists affirmatively, this may ultimately be Adorno's most important and characteristic response.

Appeals to inverted theology raise the following question, which has haunted much Adorno scholarship: is there a path from melancholy acts of negation of this kind to more active attitudes of social and political involvement? Gordon's book is splendid. However, it is also quite dark. Responding to the shortcomings of existentialist despair might

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require attentiveness to more publicly available forms of resistance. Some whistling in that dark would have been helpful.