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On Peter Gordon's *Adorno and Existence*

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Abstract

Iain Macdonald's response to Peter Gordon's *Adorno and Existence*.

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READING Peter Gordon's *Adorno and Existence* makes one painfully aware of just how deficient our view of Adorno's active reception—and critical mobilization—of Kierkegaard, Husserl, and Heidegger was before this book existed. In this respect, the book gives the reader the impression of the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle finally coming together: at last it's possible to see what Adorno was really up to in his interconnecting references to idealism, existence, and phenomenology. My comments principally concern the references to inversion, reversal, and transcendence that run through the book and provide it with its central thrust, building to the discussion of “‘inverse’ theology” in chapter five and the conclusion.

The philosophical charge of the notions of inversion, reversal, and transcendence is brought out in various ways in the book. In particular, what Adorno calls “‘inverse’ theology” in a letter to Benjamin is taken to be a way of talking about freeing ourselves from the contradictions and suffering of given reality without lapsing into religious or quasi-religious forms of transcendence. The point is first made in the context of a critical reading of Kierkegaard who “misdirect[s] his resistance into theistic transcendence rather than focusing his criticism without restraint on society itself.”¹ *Contra* Kierkegaard, then, if Adorno's philosophy is in some sense an “‘inverse’ theology,” it is because it is a “‘materialist’ inversion”² of theistic transcendence prefigured in the “resolute presentation of *unhappiness*.”³ In this way, transcendence is turned upside-down and directed at this world rather than

¹ Peter E. Gordon, *Adorno and Existence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 181.

² *Adorno and Existence*, 21.

³ *Adorno and Existence*, 181.

another—or, alternatively, it remains bound to the emancipatory potential of socially unnecessary suffering in the form of its negative image or inversion. All of this seems quite right to me. As Adorno himself puts it in *Negative Dialectic*:

What will not have its law prescribed for it by given facts might yet transcend them in thickest contact with objects and in the refusal of sacrosanct transcendence. Thought transcends that to which it is bound in resistance—therein lies its freedom.⁴

Now, while I agree with this way of presenting the issue, my comments turn on the *specific sort* of this-worldly transcendence that Adorno has in mind. On this issue, Gordon provides us with several indications. I will focus on two, both of which stem from his presentation of Adorno's reading of Kafka's Odradek figure. The passage in question comes from a 1934 letter to Benjamin, quoted by Gordon:

If [Odradek's] origin lies with the father of the house, does he not then precisely represent anxious concern and danger for the latter, does he not anticipate precisely the overcoming of the creaturely state of guilt, and is not this concern ... the secret key, indeed the most indubitable promise of hope, precisely through the overcoming of the house itself? Certainly, as the other face of the world of things, Odradek is a sign of distortion—but precisely as such he is also a motif of transcendence....⁵

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), p. 17.

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondance 1928-1940*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Oxford: Polity Press, 1999), December 17, 1934, 93.

Now, presumably in order to do justice to the notion of an inverse *theology*, Gordon glosses this distorted motif of transcendence in terms of a this-worldly *messianic* meaning. “Odradek,” as Gordon puts it, “is nothing but the debased image of God as he appears in a messianic light.”⁶ Moreover, this “debased” messianic meaning is also described in terms of a transcendence that “is *not* the ideal but rather the *reflex* of an existence that suffers from reification, a longing that emerges from damaged conditions.”⁷

This view of transcendence, focused on a reflexive longing, is quite problematic, it seems to me. To put it bluntly, the trouble with this way of characterizing “non-sacrosanct” transcendence is that it risks turning it into a bad infinite. Thus, whereas Hegel criticizes the bad infinite as being the purported “beyond” of the finite, here the risk is that we reduce what is supposed to be a *good, this-worldly, real possibility* of transcendence to the status of a mere reflex, a mere longing, or an impotent “ought” (a *Sollen*, as Hegel would say) that does not in fact open onto anything specific at all. It is therefore largely an *empty* longing, *i.e.*, the mere *idea* of putting an end to suffering. Hegel specifically associates this kind of ought or unrealistic longing with the bad infinite in the *Logic*:

The infinite—in the usual sense of the bad infinite—and the *progression to infinity*, such as the ought, are the expression of a *contradiction* that presents itself as a *resolution* and a point of culmination. ... It is a flight beyond restriction that fails

to gather itself together inwardly and does not know how to bring the negative back to the positive.⁸

Thus, the problem lies in the mere *idea* of a convergence—of an “ought” and actuality—that is not, in fact, achievable. Such reflexive longing is perhaps not an entirely adequate way of formulating the notion of non-sacrosanct transcendence that informs Adorno’s materialism. More on this in a moment.

A similar problem arises at another point in the interpretation of Odradek as a figure of transcendence. As Adorno puts it, Odradek anticipates “the overcoming of the creaturely state of guilt.”⁹ Gordon glosses this in terms of an “actual ‘escape’ from our creaturely existence [that] is held out as a hope only for a life that is so painful that such an escape promises the only respite.”¹⁰ However, in addition to reinforcing the problematic notion of mere longing, now understood as an escape that is both actual and merely hoped for, there is also a reference here to Benjamin that is left somewhat out of the picture, but which may help to decipher the Adornian alternative to the empty Hegelian ought.

Essentially, the concept of “creaturely guilt”—taken from Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* book—names the historical context in which we are *created* by a tacit interpretation of humanity, by a generally unquestioned understanding of humanity’s apparently natural essence—for example, in terms of original sin or the capitalist organization of labour. Such structures produce an *apparently natural* web of necessity in

⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 120.

⁹ Adorno and Existence, 177.

¹⁰ Adorno and Existence, 178.

⁶ Adorno and Existence, 179.

⁷ Adorno and Existence, 178.

which we human creatures are caught. The guilt imposed upon us by the doctrine of original sin, or the indebtedness (*Verschuldung*, *Schuld*) of the individual to such historical forms, is precisely what makes the human being the *creature* (the *ens creatum*, the *created* being) of historically mediated “fate.” We are the beings that we are, believing certain things to be possible or impossible because of the historical presuppositions that *create* us, and which project an appearance of natural necessity onto history. Revealing this so-called “nature” to be false, a mere “second” nature and not first nature at all, is the task of critique and the concrete hope of transcendence. Overcoming creaturely guilt is therefore not just the *hope* of or *longing* for escape, it is, more specifically, expressed in the work of untangling—or better understanding the entanglement—of first and second natures.

Perhaps we can give even more substance to this concrete hope and the transcendence it promises. What is the real alternative to interpreting transcendence as a reflexive hope or longing? I’d like to quickly sketch two avenues for developing non-sacrosanct transcendence away from the risk of it lapsing into a bad infinite.

First, there is the idea that the hope in question consists in the “the overcoming of the house itself” in which Odradek lives, as Adorno puts it. Odradek, on this reading, would be less of a “debased image of God” than something that does not quite fit into the totalizing economy of the οἶκος or, alternatively, of the bourgeois interior. What might that be? Adorno gives us a hint at the end of his “Theses on Need”:

[In the classless society,] to be useless [*unnützig*] will ... no longer be shameful. ... Productivity in its genuine,

undisfigured sense will, for the first time, have a real effect on need: not by assuaging unsatisfied need with useless things, but rather because satisfied need will make it possible to relate to the world without knocking it into shape through universal usefulness [*Nützlichkeit*].¹¹

The point here would be that the hope that Odradek holds out as a possible “overcoming of the house itself” is, in fact the *same* as the possibility of escaping the capitalist regime of universal usefulness. Adorno here gives an additional critical twist to Marx’s notion of useful labour under capitalism. As Marx puts it: “If a thing is useless [*nutzlos*], so is the labour contained within it; the labour does not count as labour, and therefore creates no value.”¹²

In the “Theses on Need,” Adorno essentially defends a more positive, active notion of the useless as a potential for change held within certain objects: useless objects, of which art is an example for Adorno—but also Odradek and the marginal refuse of late capitalism—can be a positive force deployed against an economy (*i.e.*, the big capitalist ‘house’) governed entirely by merely “useful” labour organized according to the principle of exchange value. “Useless” objects are, in fact, something like the site of redemptive possibilities suppressed or missed opportunities in the current state of affairs. Odradek, on this reading, would not be a debased God, but the trace of classless society within the house of late capitalism. As such, Odradek is probably less a messianic figure and perhaps more akin to the sort of useless objects that Benjamin’s

¹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, “Theses on Need,” trans. Martin Shuster and Iain Macdonald, *Adorno Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2017), 104.

¹² Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin in association with *New Left Review*, 1976), 131.

collector gathers together in unconscious defiance of capitalist usefulness.

A second line of interpretation reinforces the first by providing a complementary reading of the inverse theology mentioned by Adorno. What if Adorno's inverse theology were not just a blanket refusal of sacrosanct transcendence, but also a setting right of what theology once deceptively promised? More specifically, what if it were an inversion of the already inverted world of theology criticized by Marx in the 1840s? As Marx puts it:

This state, this society, produce religion, which is an *inverted world-consciousness*, because they are an *inverted world*. ... The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is a demand for their *actual* happiness.¹³ [Marx here uses the adjective *verkehrt*, which Adorno sometimes uses in addition to *inverse*, as Gordon notes.]

With this passage in mind, Adorno would not merely be *mimicking* Marx's language of inversion in his own talk of an inverse theology, but actually *adding* a corrective inversion to something that is already upside-down—an inversion that puts things right-side up, and returns to us a redeemed, this-worldly notion of transcendence in the form of the concrete demand for "*actual* happiness." More generally, it seems to me, the key to Adorno's materialism—where materialism provides the framework within which inverse theology makes sense—lies not necessarily in the specific content of Marx's views, but in our more general ability to invert the various inversions that are caused by falsely sacrosanct forms of transcendence—

which, by the way, would have to include the doctrinal content of totalitarian Marxism.

In short, what's most important for Adorno is the *process* by which we generate non-sacrosanct transcendence. But this process is more than a reflexive longing. It unfolds in the untangling of first and second natures, in the philosophical and sociological diagnosis of socially unnecessary suffering, and in the questioning of universal usefulness through the figure of the useless—all of which provide a kind of theoretical portrait of how real transcendence anchors itself in actuality.

¹³ Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 131.

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