

Peter E. Gordon. *A Precarious Happiness: Adorno and the Sources of Normativity*. The University of Chicago Press 2023. 320 pp. \$40.00 USD (Hardcover 9780226828572); \$39.99 USD (eBook 9780226829197).

This book presents a comprehensive interpretation of Adorno's work and normative assumptions. As such, it is an alternative to a prevailing reading of Adorno that portrays him as a gnostic and his diagnostic of modernity as thoroughly negative. Gordon's book grew from three lectures he presented in 2019 at the Goethe University, Frankfurt, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Adorno's death. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 correspond broadly to the three lectures.

What is the negative interpretation of Adorno's social philosophy, and why has it enjoyed much authority? Gordon exemplifies this approach with references to the interpretations of Jurgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, and Fabian Freyenhagen. The three accuse Adorno of a "totalizing skepticism" towards the ideals of the Enlightenment, which he allegedly described as totalitarian and lacking in immanent sources of normativity. Adorno is a "thorough negativist," not only in a substantive form (society is fundamentally flawed) but also in an epistemic form (we cannot even know the good). Gordon summarizes this interpretation: Adorno is "a philosopher that sees us as living in a social order that is thoroughly false" (18). It is this "thoroughness" that will be Gordon's target.

Among other sources, this reading relies on the authority of Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which was first published in the aftermath of WW II but written during the last years of the war from their exile in California, and of Adorno's last published work, titled *Negative Dialectics*. Gordon considers this interpretation inadequate. He offers three main reasons for his rejection of the "negativistic" reading: (1) It attributes to Adorno a uniform understanding of social life, but in many of his writings, Adorno explicitly rejects such a view and claims instead that the task of philosophy is to interpret a reality that is incomplete, contradictory and fragmentary; (2) the negativistic interpretation does not raise to the challenge of self-reflexivity, or in other words, the negativistic interpretation cannot account for the emergence of a critical theory such as Adorno's; (3) Adorno was an important participant in the political culture of West Germany, in public speeches, in the press, and on the radio. That would contradict a wholesome and indiscriminate criticism of Adorno's contemporary society. "Adorno sees society as a broken or fragmented landscape." In this landscape, writes Gordon, some norms confirm society as it is, while others challenge it. The last ones have "a normative and anticipatory status." Adorno's



strategy is one of “immanent criticism,” an approach that traces back to Hegel and Marx. Using as an example Marx’s article “On the Jewish Question” (1844), Gordon shows that Marx supports the emancipatory values of civic inclusion and equality but criticizes the mere formal instantiation of those values. Borrowing a concept from Axel Honneth, Gordon speaks of “normative surplus” when the organizing values of a society have implications that cannot be fully implemented in its current structure (33).

Gordon recognizes that Adorno could hardly be characterized as a Marxist and that his interests in abstract music and literature have played a role in portraying him as lost in “aesthetic abstraction.” Indeed, Gordon notes that half of Adorno’s collected works deal with questions of music and several additional volumes with problems of literature. However, Gordon shows that a work of art is more than mere ideology for Adorno. A work of art contains a normative surplus so far as it is a promise of happiness.

The last paragraph of the Introduction summarizes the plan for his work. Having shown that the interpretation of Adorno’s work as negative is open to criticism, Gordon offers a comprehensive counterinterpretation that is supposed to match Adorno’s intentions better. This interpretation depends on a strong premise that even in our present situation, we can identify moments of happiness, which serve as rehearsals for the right life even if they remain rare (40).

Chapter 1 unpacks the concept of immanent critique. Gordon structures the chapter as a series of insights that explore Adorno’s study of Beethoven’s opera *Fidelio*, his preference for the fragmentary and the “micrological glance” that he claims stands in precise opposition to what the totality appears to show (46), the correlative idea of “the non-identical” which is the basis for the practice of immanent critique and which Adorno assimilates to the Kantian “thing in itself.”

Chapter 2 studies the relationship of Adorno’s idea of immanent criticism with a philosophical anthropology centered on the notion of flourishing or maximal human fulfillment (69). Immanent criticism provides a warrant for the promise of human flourishing. This notion is utterly different from the elan of capitalistic society and its imperative of maximizing utility. Gordon explains that Adorno speaks of the concept of human flourishing in a materialist sense. Adorno has in mind “an exceptionally rich kind of human fulfillment” (71), involving all our capabilities, starting with the bodily ones, and until the most exquisite intellectual and aesthetic experiences. We know of those experiences in a fragmentary way. To address the mediation between our limited but important experiences of happiness and fulfillment with the postulated anthropology of unbounded

fulfillment, Adorno employs the term “emphatic.” Adorno uses “emphatic” to refer to a conceptual standard he can pinpoint to only partial and uncertain validation. Gordon explains that such a standard allows us to uncover if a given phenomenon fulfills its concept. Adorno writes of the “emphatic concept of experience” or the “emphatic concept of human being.” The way the “emphatical” functions in Adorno’s thought is presented in the following quote: “The judgment that someone is a free man is related, though emphatically, to the concept of freedom...it nourishes the idea of a condition in which the individuals would have qualities, which here and now could be ascribed to no one” (Adorno, quoted in Gordon 81). Gordon brings additional examples regarding art (82) and progress (83).

Chapter 3 deals with the question of what sort of materialism Adorno embraces. Gordon begins by reviewing Adorno’s critical appropriation of Marx and Marxism. Instead of Marx’s, Adorno’s materialism is based on the object’s priority and is best served not by abandoning the subject but by absorbing the lessons of idealism itself (110). But the object is more than our knowledge of it (111). There is a constitutive asymmetry that Adorno tries to express with a formulation that reminds Hegel’s *Phenomenology*: “The subject is object in a ... more radical sense than [the] object ... is also subject” (Adorno, quoted by Gordon, 111). The turn to the object culminates in a new theory of experience. Experiences, in an emphatic way, break through the crust of reified and conventional concepts and perceptions, thus allowing us to glimpse things in their singularity instead of the already given and socially conformant view of the object (116). Gordon acknowledges that this idea is one of the most intriguing ideas that Adorno has ever written.

In Chapter 4, Gordon draws from his account of Adorno’s materialism and human flourishing to show how both culminate in an original formulation of materialistic normative obligation. Chapters 5 and 6 deal with Adorno’s aesthetics. In addition to exposing the main features of Adorno’s aesthetics and its role in the architecture of his thought, Gordon engages in chapter 6 in an analysis of four instances of aesthetic experience, choosing from among Adorno’s musicological studies dealing with Beethoven, Mahler, and the second Viennese school.

The last chapter examines the problem of contemporary social criticism in light of Adorno’s work. Gordon restates his hypothesis that any answer to the normativity question in Adorno should consider the totality of his work and the full range of his intellectual interests. The standard that emerges from this examination is happiness or human flourishing in the form of an emphatic concept, i.e., a concept that designates the highest norm we can use to judge particular cases of

failure.

Social criticism begins with a simple insight: things in society are not as they should be. However, the social critic must move ahead and specify the deficiencies of social reality. The social critic must practice “self-detachment from the weight of the factual” (195). Gordon also shows that following the practice of left Hegelians and Marx, Adorno is committed to an immanent critique. However, Adorno’s formulation of immanence stays general and abstract. Gordon quotes Adorno, saying, “We shall develop for the world new principles from the existing principles of the world” (194).

Adorno’s ethics is anti-foundationalist, but instead of adopting a skeptical position, he adopts what Gordon calls “an ethics of vulnerability.” Reviewing the studies in Adorno’s edited volume on *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), Adorno concludes that authoritarian and potentially fascist personalities are characterized by a fetishistic tendency to hardness and coolness, which renders the individual unable to have an authentic experience. Meanwhile, the non-authoritarian personality is open to vulnerability and experience. This relates also to a well-known statement by Adorno that re-formulates Kant’s “categorical imperative.” Adorno’s imperative reads: “Hitler has imposed a new *categorical imperative* upon humanity in the state of their unfreedom: to arrange their thinking and conduct so that Auschwitz never repeat itself, that nothing similar may happen again” (Adorno, quoted by Gordon 201). Gordon states that the meaning of this imperative requires a more detailed discussion to reconcile it with the materialistic aspects of Adorno’s philosophy (204-205). Gordon rejects an interpretation presenting these two criteria as stages of a particular development. He believes that this is a position that Adorno would flatly refuse. For Adorno, there is a continuity between the regular features of contemporary society and the extreme conditions that made Auschwitz possible. Adorno’s imperative is, therefore, not a minimalist criterion; on the contrary, it has maximalist implications for how we organize our social lives (205).

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