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Misinterpreting Negativism: on Peter E. Gordon's *A Precarious Happiness: Adorno and the Sources of Normativity*

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Adorno scholarship has come a long way in the last twenty years. His philosophy was long overshadowed by the accusation of being too negative. This accusation was made not just from outside of the Frankfurt School research tradition, but crucially also within it, especially from Jürgen Habermas, often portrayed as the leading figure of its "2nd generation". In Habermas's case the accusation took different forms—sometimes it is about Adorno's theory lacking the standing for social critique; sometimes it is about its lacking normative foundations; and sometimes it is about performative contradiction (between the content of saying that the social world is thoroughly distorted by ideology and the act of saying that). The upshot is meant to be the same in each case: we need a positive normative resource which then provides the standard with which to criticise our social world. That led then to various debates about what that positive standard should be—communicative action, recognition/social freedom, or the right to justification (to name three prominent answers by Habermas, Honneth, and Forst respectively). Especially in the last two decades, there has been more push-back against the accusation (and the purported positive standards). Some—including (full disclosure!) I—have insisted that Adorno's taking a negativistic stance is defensible and, indeed, preferable to the supposedly positive alternatives.

It is into this context that Gordon seeks to intervene, with his newest book. He rejects the negativistic revival of Adorno, despite accepting that the textual evidence for a negativist interpretation appear to be strong (p. 5). Like Habermas, he thinks we need a positive standard for social critique, but, unlike Habermas, Gordon thinks that such a positive standard can be found in Adorno's work. He is not alone in thinking this – Gordon Finlayson and Martin Seel are among the earlier examples of interpretations which ascribe a positive core to Adorno's philosophy. What is more specific to Gordon, is that he suggests that the 'source' of normativity of Adorno's critical theory of society is a 'maximalist demand for happiness' in the broad sense of human flourishing (pp. xvi-xviii and *passim*, especially Chapter 2). It is this demand that animates Adorno's materialist 'ethics of vulnerability' (pp. 15, 196–197). The demand for happiness is immanent in the social world, notably in certain experiences and elements that have anticipatory

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character (pp. 46, 56–57, 70, 210), pointing to complete flourishing and alluding to the good even in the distorted instances of happiness that the wrong social world affords us (pp. 54–57, 70–71). In this way, precarious happiness (or precarious experience of happiness) gives us a glimpse of complete, comprehensive happiness; and is the source for immanent social critique.

Gordon clearly thinks that an orientation towards human flourishing has much to recommend it, albeit he does not offer an independent justification of it in this book. In part, this is because he recognises that Adorno rejected demands for normative foundation (pp. xvii, 213–214). While Gordon ultimately hopes that Adorno's account of precarious happiness can be brought ‘into alignment with a theory of intersubjectivist justification’, he notes that this ‘lies well beyond the purview of this book’ (p. 215).

I will concentrate here on discussing critically Gordon's rejection of negativism. This rejection is pivotal to Gordon's re-interpretation of Adorno in the book (and the lectures on which it is based). Other topics get covered—such as Adorno's take on emphatic concepts (Chapter 2) and aesthetics (especially Chapters 5–6)—but they are all coloured by the rejection of negativism, which is the book's ‘chief argument’ (xvii).

A lot depends, unsurprisingly, what is meant by negativism. While there are some fairly agreed meanings in the relevant literature, there is also a tendency to conflate negativism with other positions or concepts. Indeed, the danger of being shipwrecked on such conflations and confusions is real, as unfortunately demonstrated by Gordon's book.

Let us begin with a statement of the three main forms of negativism ascribed to Adorno:

> *Epistemic Negativism*: we can know the wrong, the bad, illness, etc. (or parts thereof) without knowing the good, the right, what health is, etc.
>
> *Substantive Negativism*: the bad is not just knowable, but instantiated, realised in the social world, which is fundamentally wrong, bad, even pathological.
>
> *Metaethical Negativism*: knowledge of the bad (or parts thereof) is sufficient on its own—that is, without knowledge of the good (or parts thereof)—to account for the normativity of claims based on it.

Together these three main forms combine in a way that seems to make Adorno's radical critique of the modern social world possible: it is a bad social world in which we can know what is bad (and, as we will see later, *only* the bad), but this knowledge suffices to demand that the social world be overcome (and for being motivated to work towards overcoming it).

Gordon does not really engage with metaethical negativism, although, in the final analysis, I think this is where the action is (I come back to this below). His main worries, on the face of it, attach to ascribing substantive (and epistemic) negativism to Adorno. It is not always clear what exactly he is objecting to; and there is quite a bit slippage between different options. I will reconstruct and discuss three different variants in turn.

First, Gordon worries that ascribing substantive (and epistemic) negativism to Adorno is inconsistent with Adorno's commitment that the modern capitalist world is not a seamless totality but ridden by contradictions (pp. 18–20). I agree that Adorno is committed to the latter, but this is entirely compatible with ascribing substantive negativism to him. For the claim that the social world is deeply problematic ethically speaking does not exclude that it is contradictory. Indeed, one of the reasons for thinking that this world is problematic might well be (and in Adorno's case, arguably, is) that it is, and cannot but be, ridden by contradictions, such as, a contradiction between exploiting labour power and our natural world to the maximum and having to reproduce them. Such a claim is compatible with negativism, especially (as, again, is, arguably, the case for Adorno) when the persistence of these contradictions has negative effects on human beings. A substantive negativist, including a substantive negativist such as Adorno, can accept that society is ridden by contradictions; that there are experiences that are in tension with continuing the status quo (notably experiences of suffering from it); that social critique can build on these experiences and, thus, be immanent (in Gordon's sense); and that this can translate into acts of resistance or even attempts at

radical social change. In short, saying that society instantiates the bad, is not the same as saying that it is a seamless totality; and saying that we have (and need) only access to knowledge of the bad in that society, is compatible with saying that it is contradictory, and that people experience this and strive to overcome society.

Second, it, sometimes, seems that Gordon's issue with (substantive or epistemic) negativism is that he worries that ascribing it to Adorno means ascribing no hope for a different social world to him. Specifically, Gordon operates with a (perhaps somewhat idiosyncratic) conception of Gnosticism, and seems to think negativism commits one to it or amounts to the same position (see, for example, p. 77).

> *Gnosticism*: the social world is so evil that it rules out the possibility of a different one or even of its criticism. (See pp. 37, 38)

It should be obvious that none of the forms of negativism characterised above—neither epistemic nor substantive nor metaethical—implies, requires, or equates to this sort of Gnosticism. In this context, it may help to state clearly that negativism is not the same as pessimism, while Gnosticism is a form of absolute pessimism. One can think that we only can and do know what is bad about our social world and that it is a thoroughly bad social world, but still think that this bad social world can be criticised and overcome, and even be optimistic that it will be overcome. The former—epistemic and substantive negativism—are about what can be known in a specific situation and a normative judgement about that situation; the latter—affirming the possibility of being able to criticise and overcome the bad social world—is a modal claim about leaving that situation, and making it is entirely compatible with the epistemic and normative judgement. Think of an analogy (inspired by a negativist poem by Brecht): if I am in a burning house, I might think that this house is so thoroughly on fire that it cannot be salvaged and that, while I might not know what is outside the house positively, I can and do know that burning alive is a bad that we should avoid, and take this as a sufficient reason to leave the house; and I can think all this, while also thinking that it is, indeed, possible to leave the house and be optimistic that this can be achieved, despite its being difficult in various ways, given that it is so thoroughly on fire.

Third, Gordon is concerned that ascribing substantive or epistemic negativism to Adorno commits him to total normative scepticism, while such scepticism is neither independently warranted nor plausible as interpretation of what Adorno writes (pp. 6, 18, 25, 91–92). Here, Gordon's lack of real engagement with metaethical negativism becomes a problem. For unless one rejected metaethical negativism, there is no reason to think that a substantive or epistemic negativist must be a total normative sceptic. Indeed, those who have proposed a negativist reading of Adorno's works, have maintained that normative substance remains: a minimalist ethics of resistance, centred around his new categorical imperative 'to arrange [our] thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen' (Adorno 1973: 365; see Freyenhagen 2013: Chapters 5–6). And Gordon clearly knows that negativist readings of Adorno include ethical and other normative substance (pp. 16–17).

What might be driving his opposition is that he thinks we can and need to ascribe to Adorno more than a minimalist ethics (pp. 70, 197).[1] In response, it is first important to note that even a minimalist ethics is not the same as total normative scepticism. So, it is unwarranted to think—as Gordon suggests—that ascribing substantive or epistemic negativism to Adorno commits Adorno to total normative scepticism.

Moreover, one crucially important aspect of the negativism (and minimalist ethics) ascribed to Adorno is continuously overlooked by Gordon: it has a historical index. The claim is not that, according to Adorno, human beings can never know what the good is. Instead, the claim is that in our current socio-historical situation, we cannot know it. Why not? It is so for broadly Aristotelian and Hegelian reasons: the good is indexed to humanity, and we can only know the good once humanity is (fully) realised in a social formation, rather than existing in unrealised and crippled form, which is the case with our current social world (and also with past societies).

Connected to this, Adorno's negativism comes with a utopian impulse—striving and demanding that things be different. This is connected to point just made about the historical index insofar as this striving and demanding can include (and, in Adorno's case, does include) seeking a social world in which humanity is realised, where we could

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then know the good and find it instantiated. The demand that things be different is for something that currently cannot—if (epistemic) negativism is true for our historical situation—be unpacked positively in the sense of our being able to state what such human flourishing would positively consist of. As Setiya puts it evocatively:

> … we may resemble botanists studying specimens in parched soil. Deprived of water, lilies do not look or grow the way that lilies look and grow … We can tell that lilies in parched soil need water, but not what they will look like when they flower. (2024: 10, 13).

However, this historically indexed epistemic limitation is not an insurmountable (practical or philosophical) problem for us today. The negative characterisation—knowing what inhumanity is—suffices (epistemically and metaethically) for the view that our current social world should be resisted and overcome. In a future free association of the free, we could then know what humanity is (realised as it would be then), which would allow us to know what the good is, and would provide the necessary ingredients for a more than minimalist ethics—for not just a *minima moralia*, but a *magna moralia*. For now, we must and can make do with the former.

This means that, in a specific, limited way, negativism is compatible with ascribing to Adorno a *demand* for human flourishing and with the postulate that there is an unrealised potential. The problem with Gordon's account is that he thinks that statements about potential or about pointing beyond the bad social world or about elements with anticipatory character must be incompatible with negativism (for example, pp. 23, 26), while, in fact, in a specific qualified form they are perfectly compatible with it (as seen in the previous paragraph and explicated further below). Moreover, the problem is that he moves from rightly ascribing statements to Adorno in that specific qualified form to ascribing to him statements in a form that is incompatible with Adorno's works, such as speaking of a (positive) glimpse of the right life, momentary or otherwise (p. 57). For Adorno has it that 'In the right condition, … all things would differ only a little from the way they are; but *not the least* can be conceived now as it would be then' (1973: 299; my emphasis).

Let me unpack this. A historically indexed negativist is perfectly entitled to make statements such as this one:

> This is a thoroughly bad social world, in which we cannot know what the human good or even what (realised) humanity is, but this badness alludes to a different social world in which it would be overcome and in which the potential for humanity is realised. From within our wrong life, we cannot *positively* say what this alternative world and realising the human potential would be like, but we can say what it would *not* be like, at least insofar as we can say that it would not be like what we encounter in this social world. In this way, there is even *some* evidence in our current experience as to what the fulfilment of the human potential would be, albeit only evidence of the negative sort: evidence of what this fulfilment would *not* be. We do not, and cannot, get a (positive) glimpse of the right life in the wrong one.

As I will return to below, it might help to understand such a negativist—and, I submit, Adorno—as operating with a *tripartite* (bad, neutral, good), rather than a two-part (bad, good) *normative logic*: the contrary of the bad is a state of a certain kind of survival, but that state still falls short of the good; when we know the bad, we might know what such state of survival is, but we have not gained yet sufficient insight into the good to know it positively; still, knowing what the good is not (i.e., knowing what the bad is), will go a long way in knowing what to avoid and what to do, and we can still allude to and aim for something beyond the state of survival, even if we cannot positively say what it is. (Consider a parallel to the World Health Organization's famous definition of health, which is also tripartite: health is not merely the absence of illness and infirmity, but a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being. Even without knowing what such complete state would be, medicine and society can do a lot to alleviate or cure disease and infirmity; and we can thereby allude to and work towards gaining knowledge of this complete state of wellbeing and towards making it a reality.)

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Gordon's own characterisation comes sometimes close to this form of negativism, such as when drawing the following lesson from Adorno's new categorical imperative: 'material suffering becomes the negative standard against which all possible happiness must find its measure' (p. 203); and commenting 'the concept of happiness resembles a Kantian postulate' (p. 95). Here the avoidance of material suffering (and a second Auschwitz) is seen as a necessary condition for happiness, and given normative and metaethical priority over the good (whatever happiness is, it is *not that*). And the talk of postulate is telling: Kant's whole point about freedom, God, and (immortality of) the soul as postulates was that we can have no knowledge of their inner workings or nature; that they transcend the bounds of what we can make sense of. Similarly with negativism and the good—with the one key difference being the historical index in case of negativism; contrary to the ahistorical, a priori status of Kant's epistemic block.

Epistemic negativism in Adorno's case is, then, not scepticism about the (possible) existence of positive norms. It is not a metaphysical thesis and especially not an ahistorical thesis. Instead, it is a thesis about what we can know in a particular socio-historical situation—a thesis that is compatible not just with the existence of positive norms, but also with (possible future) knowledge of such norms in a different (possible future) socio-historical situation.

In relation to these considerations, there is a central inconsistency running through Gordon's book. On the one hand, he ascribes to Adorno this view:

> … a happiness that is distorted (*verstellt*) in any fashion is not genuine happiness at all, though it may serve as an anticipation or "trace" of a universal fulfilment that is not yet at hand. (p. 71)

On the other hand, Gordon thinks it is mistaken to assume that 'no imperfect version of x can count as an x', that no 'imperfect experience of the good can really count as a genuine instance of the good' (p. 85). He thinks that this is mistaken because the human world in general is marked by damage, such that the first quotation above would then rule out any access to the genuine good. And because Gordon thinks that Adorno recognises this about the 'constitution of the human world' (p. 90), Gordon ultimately thinks that despite the 'compromised' nature of happiness (or experiences thereof) in today's wrong social world (p. 195), Adorno accepts that they are genuine instances of happiness (or genuine experience thereof)—fleeting, precarious, but genuine. This suggests that Gordon implicitly resolves the inconsistency between ascribing to Adorno both the view that 'distorted happiness is not genuine happiness at all' and the view 'that distorted happiness is in a precarious fashion genuine happiness', by siding with the latter.

This strikes me as a mistake. As emphasised above, Adorno is making a historically indexed claim about the constitution of a particular social world (and not one about the constitution of the human world as such). Moreover, Gordon again conflates two points: accepting the claim about lacking access to genuine happiness with the claim that the imperfect experiences 'must wholly lack any merit' (p. 90) in virtue of not sufficing to give us access to genuine happiness. Even if the experiences do not give us access to the real (positive) thing ('genuine happiness'), this does not mean they are without merit. Among other merits they might have, is one that Gordon himself notes: such experiences may serve as an anticipation or 'trace' of a universal fulfilment that is not yet at hand, but should be. They may serve, in other words, as utopian impulse that things should be different, albeit not as positive glimpses of how it would be then.

Overall, it, perhaps, makes best sense of Gordon's position that he rejects metaethical negativism, and this is why he cannot see that epistemic and substantive negativism does not lead to total normative scepticism (and that negativism is compatible with alluding to potential for a realised humanity and its genuine happiness). Yet, while rejecting meta-ethical negativism makes his position more intelligible, the problem is then that Gordon seems to simply assume what needs to be shown: that metaethical negativism is untenable.

The closest Gordon comes to providing the beginning of an argument against meta-ethical negativism is when he complains that we need 'contrasting normative standards' to be able to identify the false, wrong or bad as false, wrong, or bad. This is a known objection to meta-ethical negativism, but there is an existing response in the literature: we might indeed require contrasts for identifying something as bad, but different degrees (and dimensions) of

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badness suffice for this (Freyenhagen 2013: 225–228). Similarly, a tripartite logic (bad, neutral, good) can allow identification of the bad without knowledge of the good. There is no rejoinder in Gordon's book to this existing response on behalf of (meta-ethical) negativism. Instead, his rejection of the latter mainly seems to function as a background assumption, much as it does with Habermas and others.

Generally, one of the main concerns I had while reading Gordon's book is the lack of questioning of the framing imposed by Habermas and those following in his wake onto debates about Adorno. Implicitly ruling out metaethical negativism is one aspect of this. Another aspect is to accept that social critique must be about measuring using a standard (for example, p. 117)—thinking of the social critic as akin to a surveyor who ultimately relies on the standard meter traditionally kept in Paris. Gordon does not even mention that this is a contestable and indeed contested picture of social critique. In the literature, there are other ways of thinking about social critique, including about Adorno's version thereof (see, notably, Vogelmann 2017).

In sum, (Adorno's) negativism is neither the same as nor committed to (i) a view of society as seamless totality without contradictions; (ii) pessimism; (iii) Gnosticism; (iv) total normative scepticism; or (v) the view that human beings can never know the good. Yet, Gordon, in this book, conflates or confuses negativism with one, the other, or all of them—and that then fuels the worries he directs at negativism, when, actually, these are orthogonal to it.

Having said this, Gordon's book contains an important challenge to Adorno's negativism. This challenge is a philosophical, rather than an interpretative one, but to see what it is about, consider this passage from one of Adorno's lectures, which Gordon also quotes (p. 5; see also pp. 194–5):

> We may not know what absolute good is or the absolute norm, we may not even know what man is or the human or humanity – but what the inhuman is we know very well indeed. (Adorno 2000: 175).

This passage suggests Adorno subscribes to a particularly radical version of epistemic negativism, which we might capture as follows:

> *Asymmetry Thesis*: while our current social context prevents us from knowing what humanity and its good are, it does not prevent us from knowing what inhumanity and the bad are.

The challenge is what, if anything, could justify that asymmetry: If we live in a delusional system—a *Verblendungszusammenhang*—why should this prevent us *only* from gaining knowledge of the good, *not also* from gaining knowledge of the bad (partial or otherwise)? Or to put it in the language Gordon uses at some point:

> … it is hard to see why such a global description would provide us with a specific warrant for singling out only one class of concepts as lacking in credibility. (p. 90)

Gordon identifies this not explicitly as a challenge to negativism, but others do so (Hemmerich 2024); and we can understand what he says to include this challenge.

So, what warrant could there be for the Asymmetry Thesis that we can know inhumanity (and the bad) but not humanity (and the human good) in our social world, given Adorno's global description of that world as delusional? As far as I can tell, Adorno does not explicitly or directly address that challenge. There is some evidence that he thinks that the negative connects to visceral bodily reactions that can be rationalised away in our conscious engagement with them or out of which we might even be habituated to some extent, but which cannot be completely eliminated and to which we would do well to remain responsive. This is (part of) what Adorno means when saying, after introducing the new categorical imperative, that ‘It is in the unvarnished materialistic motive only that morality survives’; or when, earlier in *Negative Dialectics*, he affirms that ‘Woe speaks: “Go.”’ (1973: 365, 203).

However, in a way that just transposes the challenge: it is not clear why we should accept that only woe speaks ‘go’ in our social world and not also that joy speaks ‘come’; or that we have only visceral reactions (in this social

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world) to the negative, but not to the positive (or at least none which we can make legitimate use of in a critical theory of society). So, the Asymmetry Thesis seems to remain unwarranted.

It is here where Gordon's book might—somewhat inadvertently—provide a hint to a possible solution. Gordon emphasises that Adorno's account of flourishing is '*comprehensive* in the sense that it envisions a state of affairs that would satisfy all human needs and desires at once' (p. 97; Gordon's italics; see also p. 99); and in the sense of applying 'across the full range of Adorno's philosophical interests' (p. 193), notably encompassing aesthetics, and thereby human needs and desires to do with aesthetics. One way to put this point, would be to say that Adorno is a certain kind of holist about the (human) good—whatever it is, the good must fit together as a comprehensive multidimensional whole. (This might have to do with the Aristotelian-Hegelian background of his thought, and the long tradition of thinking of the virtues as forming a unity, such that it would be wrong to ask about what courage is in complete isolation of asking what generosity, prudence, etc. are.)

Against the background of such holism, the Asymmetry Thesis might become more plausible and defensible, especially if we also add the Hegelian point about not being able to anticipate something philosophically that has not yet taken on social reality (about the owl of the Miverva's only flying after the day's work is done). Adorno might be read to say either that the bad forms itself a comprehensive whole, but we have encountered it already as realised in social reality (notably in Auschwitz), and hence can know the bad; or that the bad does not form a comprehensive whole but only the good does, such that knowledge of the bad can be partial, even while knowledge of the good cannot be partial. Either way, the good qua comprehensive whole has not yet been realised in social reality (past or present). Whatever partial elements of the good we might encounter in our current or past social worlds, it cannot be anticipated philosophically how these fit together into a comprehensive whole, before it becomes social reality qua comprehensive whole in a possible future social world. And for this reason, we can only know the bad, but not the good in our social world. That world is one which prevents the formation of the comprehensive whole that is the (human) good. We have reason to want to overcome our social world in virtue of this fundamental defect and the evils that come with it. There is no need to appeal to anything positive—be it communicative action or even precarious happiness. Instead of lamenting the epistemic limitations of our current historical situation and seeking harbour where there is none, we should embrace the freedom of thought to negate all and head for the open ocean.

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ENDNOTE

[1] One of the reasons why Gordon thinks that 'Adorno offers something more substantial than a negative ethics of living less wrongly' is that 'he provides us with a portrait of the *morally responsive personality*' (p. 197; Gordon's italics). This presents a false alternative. Providing guidance as to how to live less wrongly is compatible with, indeed perhaps requires, providing a portrait of a morally responsive personality—one attuned to the demands and difficulties of living less wrongly in a thoroughly wrong social world that tends to induce coldness, i.e., being morally non-responsive, in its subjects. Note also that what it is to have a morally responsive personality in such a world might be different, in part or even whole, than what it is to have a morally responsive personality in a world that is not thoroughly bad and allows right living. Autobiographical works like Primo Levi's *If this is a Man*, literature or films (even popular ones such as *Red Dust* (2005)) give us a glimpse of how a certain hardness might be required for surviving and resistance in the former, while, we can imagine or hope, it might not be part of the morally responsive personality in the latter. Perhaps that is (part of what) Adorno means when writing that even the most critical individuals in this world would be different in a state of freedom than they are now—indeed, that they would be too damaged for this different state, such that they would find it unbearable (Adorno 1973: 352).

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