

## Philosophy in Review



# Peter E. Gordon, "A Precarious Happiness: Adorno and the Sources of Normativity"

Rachel Rosner 

Volume 44, Number 3, August 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1113567ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1113567ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Rosner, R. (2024). Review of [Peter E. Gordon, "A Precarious Happiness: Adorno and the Sources of Normativity"]. *Philosophy in Review*, 44(3), 10–12.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1113567ar>

© Rachel Rosner, 2024



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**érudit**

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

**Peter E. Gordon.** *A Precarious Happiness: Adorno and the Sources of Normativity*. The University of Chicago Press, 2024. 320 pp. \$40.00 USD (Hardcover 9780226828572).

Peter Gordon's most recent book, *A Precarious Happiness: Adorno and the Sources of Normativity*, provides a brilliant, careful dismantling of three related readings of Adorno's philosophy: Fabian Freyenhagen's claim that Adorno is a total 'epistemic negativist' (16); Axel Honneth's reading that Adorno's philosophy fails because of a fatal normative deficit (12); and Jürgen Habermas's charge that Adorno's philosophy harbors an unresolved performative contradiction and lacks any normative resources (10). The stakes are high: these readings, argues Gordon, ultimately brand Adorno as lacking the necessary, justificatory normativity for social criticism, rendering him useless for critical theory today.

To dislodge these wholly negativist readings, Gordon studies three interlocking philosophical claims attributed to Adorno: the world is wholly false; we are trapped in this wholly false world; and we lack the resources for its overcoming. Gordon argues that all three claims can be disproved through attention to Adorno's core style of philosophizing and his fundamental critique of 'totalizing' accounts, shown primarily by negative dialectics and immanent critique.

At times, Gordon admits, Adorno does write that the world is wholly false (61). But to isolate such statements at their face value, and to draw the two subsequent claims above from such pronouncements is misguided, according to Gordon. This is because Adorno's philosophical style, such as writing in fragments instead of in a system and his use of rhetoric and exaggeration, demonstrates a non-totalizing way of philosophizing (28-30). Adorno challenges his readers to assemble his theses dialectically. Taking any one claim in isolation is to ignore Adorno's intrinsically dialectical method (83). Further, Adorno's negative dialectics, which seeks the 'non-identity' between concepts and their designated objects, also demonstrates a non-totalizing view of both subject and object, and even, of reason and the world (19; 46-50). There are several consequences to this idea: the subject is not an integrated, total whole, reason is not wholly constituting of its world, and the world cannot be understood by reason as a total whole. By Adorno's terms, then, it would be ideological to think that the world is wholly *anything*, whether wholly true or wholly false. This would only perpetuate the myth of totality that Adorno sought to dismantle. So, Gordon continues, by Adorno's terms, the world is not wholly false, and so we are not trapped in a wholly false world.

Gordon goes one step further. Adorno must implicitly draw on some positive standards, otherwise he could not produce negative criticism. By what measure would the bad be bad if there was also no measure of the good by which to compare it? Gordon explores this question through Adorno's method of immanent critique, which he sees as further proof that Adorno cannot be a totalizing negativist (25). Immanent critique, by Gordon's understanding, can only function by appealing to norms that are already immanent and available to us. Such norms, which Gordon understands as not fully intact norms, are as fragmentary and disharmonious as the damaged social conditions in which they inhere. Through an immanent critique of the false, Adorno also necessarily draws on some positive normative surplus within the world.



If Gordon is right on these points, the third of the three challenges above presents itself: Does Adorno's negative criticism, which implicitly refers to some standard of the good—however fragmentary and incomplete—also then offer resources for overcoming the falseness that does inhere in the world? If so, what exactly are these Adornoian resources? *Which* positive standards does Adorno implicitly draw from and are they adequate for a transformative social theory?

Here Gordon takes a further reconstructive step. The degree to which Adorno casts current conditions as damaged and inflicting suffering is the degree to which, conversely, *he must also* envision the *positive potential* inherent in the fragmentary sources of normativity he utilizes to say the false is false. Gordon offers Adorno's various terminology as names for this core positive normativity, such as 'true society,' 'the right life,' 'the reconciled condition,' 'peace,' and a 'genuinely emancipated humanity,' and settles on 'happiness,' a term used by Adorno on occasion and throughout various texts. Gordon understands Adorno's 'happiness' in a rich sense of human flourishing, as in the Greek *eudaimonia* (94-99). He also reads happiness as the necessary correlation to suffering, a theme Adorno is committed to and uses in the starkest terms throughout his *oeuvre*.

In other words, Gordon interprets Adorno's commitment to happiness in equal proportion to his commitment to show the real conditions of suffering, as the very condition for truth (142-3). Several intriguing sections on Adorno's aesthetics are developed along these lines. Gordon reads Adorno's focus on aesthetics as further materialist demonstrations that there are sources of normativity available to us even in damaged life. Works of art embody truth insofar as they remain 'open and responsive' to the fact of social suffering. Responding to despair, they can serve as a 'sign of freedom in an unfree world,' fragments of unrealized happiness (145), and in fact can only succeed if they remain fully open to the 'problems that besiege us as social beings' (155).

A positive norm of precarious happiness, which Gordon argues is useful for social theory today and is sorely lacking in much of contemporary critical theory, is unlikely to satisfy Habermasians or a deontological ethics. It is not supposed to. Adorno's insistence on our fragmentary and mediated access to normativity comes together with a diagnosis that subjective reason is shot through with the destructive effects of societal rationalization. Deontological ethics requires we access discursive concepts and, Gordon argues, such formalist approaches since Kant are only a continuation of, in Adornoian terms, 'the subject's domination over the object' (xvi). Thus, available normative standards are disfigured by an historical dialectic of this domination, and discursive concepts also bear the mark: there is no wholly intact access to wholly intact normative standards (194-5).

Through the recognition of our emphatic nature as 'sensual and embodied,' Gordon argues we can gleam fragmentary sources of normativity which are *not* equivalent to justifications but are nonetheless *available* within worldly experience (113-18). This does not provide a rationalist foundationalism or a model for post-foundational rational communication, but it does show that Adorno provides some leverage for overcoming the very negative conditions that he relentlessly criticized. Rather than reconciling to a mere genealogy of power or mere despair over failed norms, Gordon sees in Adorno a normative measurement of the failure of certain norms against a

maximalist demand for happiness that has yet to be realized.

Gordon's reconstruction of the species of normativity animating Adorno's critical philosophy opens the door to another question: By what criteria can we parse out good normativity from the bad that inflects it? What kinds of experience offer this parsing, and importantly, whose experience? In the end, Gordon explains, Adorno doesn't have an answer and instead insists on the authority of his own interpretation (214). Leaving interpretations open to revision and denying that any source of normativity speaks for or justifies itself becomes necessary. Gordon suggests allowing space for justification as a 'second-order discursive exercise in which all sources of normativity enter into an ongoing contest of rival interpretations and all participants accept some intersubjective standards of justification' (214). The question becomes: 'Can the appeal to experience be harmonized with the demand for validation?' (214-5). This would require, Gordon acknowledges, 'reconciling the two major currents of thought that have run through the history of critical theory over the past one hundred years,' and is beyond the ambitions of his current book (215).

In the end, Gordon shows Adorno's enduring relevance for contemporary critical theory not by dismantling the charge of Adorno the thoroughgoing negativist, which readers outside the Habermasian sway likely don't adhere to anyway, but by illuminating in Adorno's philosophy a tension that prefigures pressing questions in contemporary critical theory, ethics, and moral philosophy. Gordon's readers are likely to eagerly anticipate his development of these themes and can only hope it will involve further engagement with Adorno's philosophy.

**Rachel Rosner**, Bar-Ilan University & The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute