



Adorno Damned by a Devotee?
Review of Alastair Morgan, *Adorno's Concept of Life*

Nicholas Joll

Universities of Essex & Hertfordshire, UK

Alastair Morgan (2007), *Adorno's Concept of Life*

London and New York: Continuum

ISBN-13: 978 08264 9613 3

Pp. xi + 163

[Amended: 27 March 2009]

Adorno defended Bach against his devotees (Adorno 1981: 133–46). If Adorno is to be defended today, it is in large part against his successors. Many of his successors in Critical Theory reject a good deal of Adorno or at the least believe his work requires fundamental reconception. That said, in recent years there has been an attempt to rehabilitate or newly appreciate Adorno. Contributors to that reaction include Jay Bernstein, Brian O'Connor, Espen Hammer, Axel Honneth, and Simon Jarvis.¹ Alastair Morgan's *Adorno's Concept of Life* aspires to be a part of that revival. For the book is very sympathetic to Adorno and refers, often approvingly, to all the revivalists just mentioned. This review will consider the nature and worth of Morgan's particular project, the implementation of that project, and the happiness of the implementation.

Morgan's project is bipartite. Firstly, he means 'to trace the different ways that Adorno's thought circles around the concept of life, and to suggest substantive ways beyond Adorno's strictly negative philosophy when thinking of the concept of life' (1).² Secondly, Morgan means to take the conception of life thereby won and deploy it as 'an intervention in the recent debates

¹ See especially: Bernstein 2001; O'Connor 2004; Hammer 2000, 2006; Honneth 2005; Jarvis 1998.

² I refer to pages of Morgan's book thus – that is, simply by number or numbers.

that have revitalized philosophical interest in the concept of life' (1). Chapters one to eight, which comprise the great majority of the book, pursue the first aim. Only Morgan's (short) Conclusion prosecutes his second goal.

Certainly the notion of life is important to Adorno. What matters to him most evidently, and indeed apparently almost exclusively, is the idea of damaged life (*beschädigten Leben*) or of life that does not live.³ For Adorno does seem almost entirely to lack a positively normative conception of life, which is to say, an account of the nature of – the, a – good life. Yet as Morgan notes (2), such an account seems necessary to substantiate claims about damaged life. Adorno's position is principled, however. He holds that, 'Our perspective of life [*Der Blick aufs Leben*] has passed into an ideology' (Adorno 1978: 15). More: Adorno maintains that the good life should be delineated only by extrapolating from damaged lives; and such an extrapolation should stop short of all but the most rudimentary identification of features of a good life (ibidem, pp. 15–18, 155–7). Thus 'utopia', 'the reconciled condition' or 'the rational identity' of things is not to be 'positively pictured' (see Adorno 1990: 147–151 and 207). In this last, more general and somewhat Hegelian and Marxian view, one finds the Adornian version of 'the normativity problem' in Critical Theory: the problem of how such theory justifies its normative statements. The specifics of Adorno's treatment of the concept of life have received little extended attention, however (Bernstein's *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* being a major exception). So Morgan's project is welcome.

By exploring the influence of various forms of the 'philosophy of life' (*Lebensphilosophie*) on Adorno's earliest work, Morgan's opening chapter introduces Adorno's thinking about the notion of life. Morgan identifies Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Dilthey, Spengler, and Bergson as *Lebensphilosophen* who had some effect, in one way or another, on Adorno. Morgan restricts sustained attention to Nietzsche. He proposes that Adorno owes much to Nietzsche's 'conception of human life where[by] all classifications and processes are due to serving the needs and drives to dominate and master the external world' (18; *sic*). Morgan acknowledges that this affinity is well known. He proceeds to disclose, rather vaguely, some differences between Adorno and Nietzsche (19) – differences to do with how

for Nietzsche, life is always something more than human, and this is to be welcomed [that is, is welcomed by Nietzsche], whereas for Adorno, human life is the fundamental concern.

³ The notion of damaged life owes, most explicitly, to the subtitle of Adorno's *Minima Moralia: Reflections on Damaged Life*. As Morgan notes, the epigraph to the first part of *Minima Moralia* is Ferdinand Kürnberger's, 'Life does not live'. The phrase 'Minima Moralia', which suggests pieces or fragments of morality, alludes to *Magna Moralia*, a work once commonly attributed to Aristotle.

Morgan proceeds to Adorno's appropriation of Freud's views on narcissism and instinctual repression. That exploration is brief. But Morgan does bring out how a psychoanalytic conception might substantiate the concept of damaged life. The idea is that, in capitalist modernity, individuals narcissistically identify with the 'commodified culture' (23) that dominates them. Morgan does not try to determine whether this conception is true. Instead he turns, in his second chapter, to Adorno's more explicit notion of damaged life.

According to Morgan, Adorno advances a

negative ontology of life: an ontology of 'the false state of things', which gives an account of the reduction of experience in modernity that culminates in the death-in-life encapsulated by Auschwitz. (39; 'ontology of the false state of things' is Adorno's phrase).

Morgan elaborates as follows. In the extermination camps, but also to a lesser extent more generally, 'The individual becomes both completely isolated and exchangeable and as a specimen has no representative function even its total fungibility' (26). Instead of probing these ideas directly, Morgan considers 'an important development of Adorno's thoughts on the relation between life and death in modern societies', a development owing to Giorgio Agamben (29). The chapter does come to interrogate Adorno, however. Morgan writes (31):

The problem for Adorno, then, is that in his critique of everyday life in modernity, and in his account of the tendencies towards total reification within modern societies that culminates [*sic*] in the death in life in Auschwitz, there is little space for the critical rationality demanded by a meta-reflection on the process of enlightenment thinking.

That is: seeming to find all rationality complicit in the pathologies of modernity, Adorno's account of that pathology threatens to fall within its own diagnosis. That worry is common in the literature on Adorno. Yet Morgan hardly explicates or evaluates it. The remainder of the chapter adds new elements – principally Benjamin's distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* – rather than clarifying the existing ones. One of the points left under-explicated is Adorno's refusal to give a more positive account of life. Early pages of Morgan's book do impart that Adorno eschews any 'foundational' ontology or – a Heideggerian term – 'fundamental ontology' (14, 18, 39, 48, 96; compare also p. 1). One gathers that the thought is this: Adorno opposes any ahistorical philosophical account of what there is. Adorno does mount that opposition (for a glimpse of it, see Adorno 1990: 54 and 136). But more needs to be said about the refusal of a more positive concept of life, at least given the centrality of that refusal to Morgan's undertaking.

Chapter three, 'Adorno's Critique of Phenomenology', begins a search for a concept of life that, while extractable or perhaps extrapolatable from Adorno, is more 'affirmative' and even

'ontological or emphatic' (39). Morgan's search proceeds through an examination of Adorno's criticisms of phenomenology (here represented by Husserl and Heidegger but also by Bergson). That exploration seems to urge three main points.

- (A) Adorno shares with phenomenology 'the attempt to construct a philosophy which would not suppress or dominate objectivity [...] a philosophy [...] orientated towards objectivity as non-identical with the subject' (39).
- (B) Adorno thinks phenomenology fails to be such a philosophy.
- (C) But Adorno's criticisms of phenomenology impart neither how he conceives objects nor how his 'negative dialectic' can 'orient us towards objectivity' in a satisfactory way. (A satisfactory account is defined as one that evades (I) the 'irrationalist immersion in the life of things' of some *Lebensphilosophie*, and, slightly darkly, (II) 'the idealist hypostasis of a realm beyond human meditation'.)

To the limited extent that he makes any notion of objectivity clear, Morgan establishes A and B. As to C, it is true that the most pertinent Adornian notions, namely nonidentity (*Nichtidentität*), the primacy of the object (*Vorrang des Objekts*), mediation (*Vermittlung*), and 'metaphysical experience', are not fully disclosed in Adorno's criticisms of Bergson, Husserl and Heidegger. The burden of unpacking these notions, together with their import for Adorno's concept of life, falls to the remaining chapters of Morgan's book. So too does explanation of Adorno's negativism (as one may call it) about the concept of life. One might have expected the third chapter, at least in the section called 'Critique of Ontology', to elaborate upon that attitude. Yet what emerges from that section is the very deferral of explanation just mentioned.

Chapter four, 'Dialectics and Life', engages the notion of negative dialectic, and, thereby, that of nonidentity. Morgan approaches negative dialectic through Hegel's conception of experience. That approach makes sense (compare Jarvis 1998: 157–74 and O'Connor 2004: 30ff and *passim*); but Morgan makes it unproductive. He presents nonidentity as: somehow owing to a historicity of concepts and objects; the impossibility of any 'complete attempt to identify the object as such'; 'the inevitable difference between the concept and what it wants to express, the truth of the object'; and as 'a reflection of contradictions in social reality' (all 52–3). Morgan's (limited) development of these ideas conspicuously fails to explain the idea of a nonidentity between concept(s) and object(s). Is it that any predication misses something in its referent? That no *set* of predications can express everything true of an object? That no category, as against concept, can do either of those things? Do concepts somehow affect the very nature of their objects? Morgan's discussion little touches these questions.

Armed in this fashion – that is, hardly armed at all – Morgan takes issue with a paper by Brian O'Connor that criticises Adorno. Here is O'Connor.

It seems to me that mediation (in the sense that Adorno uses the term) conflates, rather than synthesizes, two very different claims: first, a materialist claim about the priority of non-conceptuality, and second, an idealist claim about the conceptual nature of experience. The result is that we find two competing strands of thought which ultimately prevent Adorno from resolving what he sees as the various problems of representationism. (O'Connor 1999: 91, quoted by Morgan on 57).⁴

Morgan thinks these lines saddle Adorno with a Hegelian notion of synthesis. But obviously all O'Connor means by 'synthesis' is the coherent unification of two ideas into one, or the acceptance of two non-contradictory ideas. Morgan does proceed to make some play with the notion of contradiction – though not, I submit, to any result. Additionally, Morgan objects that O'Connor misunderstands Adorno's conception of how objects are mediated. Adornian mediation, Morgan claims, obtains *between* subjects and objects and not *within* any object. It may be possible to interpret that latter idea in a manner that is both true to Adorno and philosophically considerable. Possessed of such an interpretation, one might make sense of Morgan. Without such a prior comprehension, the reader is left uncomprehending and O'Connor remains untouched.

Chapter five, 'Suffering Life', explores the place of suffering in Adorno's concept of life. After a venture into Adorno's cryptic notion of 'the addendum', Morgan turns to accounts provided by others. He begins with work on 'affective life' by Emmanuel Levinas and Michel Henry. 'Affective life' denotes a bodily, nonconceptual relation to the world. Ultimately, however, Morgan worries that these two accounts – and the one provided by Merleau-Ponty, whom Morgan brings in as well – are too ahistorical and idealistic (83–4). As a result, the next chapter shifts attention. That sixth chapter considers Jay Bernstein's Adornian account of life, and, most especially and within that account, the notion of 'anthropomorphic nature'.

Morgan is puzzled that Bernstein uses 'anthropomorphic nature' to name a view whereby humanity 'moulds itself and adapts itself to nature, rather than vice versa' (86). In fact, Bernstein stresses not only that humans are natural (animal) beings, but also that nature 'moulds itself' to humanity. Anthropomorphic nature is nature as disclosed through the faculties of human animals, faculties that are natural but also in some measure cultural and historical (see, in Bernstein's *Adorno*, p. 191 especially). Morgan's main target, however, is Bernstein's use of the notion of material inference. Bernstein uses that idea, adapted from Robert Brandom, to press a view that, rather brutally summarised, is as follows. Were our life not damaged, then perception of injury, of

⁴ Morgan notes that since writing the article O'Connor has found Adorno more sympathetic.

injured life, would always both motivate and justify remedial action. Morgan wonders why the 'inference' that would or should be drawn could not be a different, even a violent, one (89). This criticism is not new.⁵ Worse, Morgan's version of it barely engages Bernstein's elaborate ethical inflection of Brandom (Bernstein 2001 and especially therein chapter six).

'The Possibility of Living Today', Morgan's seventh chapter, tries to clarify Adorno's concept of life via Adorno's views on several topics. Those topics include freedom, 'metaphysical experience' (Adorno's term), and reconciliation. The eighth and last chapter, 'Exhausted Life', works towards the same goal by examining 'figures of exhaustion' (Morgan's term) to be found in Adorno's treatments of Beckett, Proust, Kafka and other authors and topics. Morgan's emerging contention is as follows. It is through 'a dissolution of subjectivity' (119) that Adorno figures both what is wrong with contemporary experience/life and what a better life might be like. That dissolution, which Morgan anticipates as a 'letting-go' (63), and presents later as 'an opening to a new form of subjectivity' or to 'the possibility of non-identity' (120), is not made adequately clear. Rather, by repeatedly deferring explanation, Morgan simply piles up, or at best simply interconnects, a series of difficult concepts.

Morgan's chapters, then, leave much obscure. Consequently, his Conclusion has poor prospects. That conclusion seeks to answer the question, 'What is the relevance of Adorno's reflections upon the concept of life for contemporary philosophy?' (124) Contemporary philosophy, at least in the form of 'recent debates that have revitalized philosophical interest in the concept of life' (1), turns out to consist of Gilles Deleuze and, perhaps, of commentators upon Deleuze. (Curiously, however, Deleuze does not make it into the book's index.) One wonders whether some other recent philosophers might not have had something interesting to say about the concept of life. One thinks of Philippa Foot, of virtue ethics more generally, and, although he is less recent, of Wittgenstein. Some discussions of the wrongness of killing and the goodness of life, such as one can find in writing on euthanasia, might be relevant too. So too might (non-Deleuzian) philosophy of biology.

Having introduced Deleuze, Morgan asks whether – after all! – there is 'any reason we should think through Adorno's philosophy in relation to the concept of life' (129). To answer that question, Morgan summarises his chapters. Additionally, he gives us the following thoughts (137), thoughts he takes to tell against Deleuze.

Adorno's philosophy enables us to think such an opening [an opening 'marked physically, that enables a perspective to be forged which reveals the damage done to life within

⁵ See Hammer 2002 and Smith 2003.

capitalism'], as a possibility of living, which would be at home in its own fallibility, in a distanced nearness with objectivity, but does not reduce this opening to a dissolution of the subject into a process of life beyond itself.

Morgan has not really explained any of this. Indeed: in his book, little is explained, illuminated, cogently criticised or cogently supported. Little is cogently criticised or supported because little is cogent but also for two other reasons. First, and as indicated by the littering of the text with the phrase 'for Adorno', Morgan is largely uncritical of Adorno. Second, Morgan's book fits a description Adorno gave of Heidegger's philosophy. The book is 'like a highly developed credit system: one concept borrows from the other', and payment is never made (Adorno 1990: 76).

The way in which Morgan writes contributes to the problems just identified. His use of commas is idiosyncratic at best (see for instance pages 6, 54, 58, and 92). In other respects, Morgan's prose is unarguably ungrammatical (see for instance 8, 17, 25, 27, 28). Further, his text is full of simple – pointless and almost certainly unnoticed – ambiguity (8, 9, 11, 15, 23, 32, 61). One cause of the ambiguity, and of a verbosity to the writing, is lazy use of the phrase 'in terms of'. The mean frequency of Morgan's use of that phrase is more than once every two pages. Another cause of vagueness is repetition of the epithet 'a certain' (70, 88, 94, 127). Adorno himself had what he took to be weighty reasons for avoiding conventional philosophical style. Those reasons may or may not be good ones.⁶ Yet Adorno did not try to justify the sort of writing one finds in *Adorno's Concept of Life*. Possibly I have misread, misunderstood, or simply missed some points in Morgan's book (and perhaps I should stress that this review does not attempt to treat every element of the book). If so, however, much of the blame is Morgan's.

Much of the material examined in Morgan's book does bear upon Adorno's concept of life. Further, in trying to understand Adorno's often difficult ideas, and in attempting to derive philosophical insight from them, *Adorno's Concept of Life* enlists an impressive number of sources and conceptions. Yet the book – a rather expensive book – achieves very little. For that reason, it cannot be said to contribute to a revival of Adorno. Adorno deserves better service.⁷

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W. (1978) *Minima Moralia: Reflections on Damaged Life*. London: Verso. Trans. E. F. N. Jephcott.

⁶ See Joll 2008, forthcoming.

⁷ I thank María del Mar Medina for comments upon a draft of this review. All views remain my own.

- Adorno, Theodor W. (1981) 'Bach Defended Against his Devotees', in T. W. Adorno (1981) *Prisms*. MIT Press. Trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber.
- Adorno, Theodor W. (1990) *Negative Dialectics*. London: Routledge. Trans. E. B. Ashton.
- Bernstein, Jay (2001) *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hammer, Espen (2002) Review of Bernstein, Jay, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*. *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=1247>.
- Hammer, Espen (2006) *Adorno and the Political*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Honneth, Axel (2005) 'A Physiognomy of the Capitalist Form of Life: A Sketch of Adorno's Social Theory'. *Constellations*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 50–64.
- Jarvis, Simon (1998) *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Joll, Nicholas (2008) 'How Should Philosophy Be Clear? Loaded Clarity, Default Clarity, and Adorno', forthcoming in *Telos*.
- O'Connor, Brian (1999) 'The Concept of Mediation in Hegel and Adorno'. *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain*, v. 39/40, pp. 84–96.
- O'Connor, Brian (2004) *Adorno's Negative Dialectic. Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality*. Cambridge, Ma. and London: MIT Press.
- Smith, Nick (2003) 'Making Adorno's Ethics and Politics Explicit'. *Social Theory and Practice*, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 487–98.