

REVIEW ARTICLE

Alastair Morgan, *Adorno's Concept of Life*

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Alistair Morgan's *Adorno's Concept of Life* has two main aims. First, to offer an interpretation of Adorno's philosophy through a consideration of his engagement with the concept of life; and second, to use this interpretation as the basis for an intervention into contemporary debates surrounding that very same concept. In its design this is an excellent project. Little has been written on the topic, and Morgan's promise to look as far afield as McDowell and Bergson is enticing. In its execution, however, *Adorno's Concept of Life* is disappointing. Sloppy writing, a distinctly uncritical edge, and a seemingly strong aversion to definition and explanation all detract from what should have been a valuable contribution to the expanding field of Adorno studies.

The driving force behind Morgan's book is the idea that 'life-philosophy' (*Lebensphilosophie*), and the concept of life more generally, are of central importance to Adorno's work. As is well known, Adorno was vigorous in his opposition to what he saw as "the irrationalism of philosophies of life" (p.1). However, argues Morgan, beneath this hostility lies a greater affinity: "the general motives and concerns of such a philosophy are not as distant from Adorno's work as first appears" (p.1).

The book commences with an attempt to further trace the differences and similarities between Adorno's work and that of *Lebensphilosophie* in the hope that something of Adorno's own concept of life will begin to emerge. Morgan is clear in his argument that what ties Adorno to *Lebensphilosophie* is a shared sense that "modern forms of thought and modes of understanding" (p.10) amount to a suppression of life; that modern life is in some sense *damaged life—life that does not live*. He is also reasonably clear in delineating some of the key differences between the two: for example, Adorno's argument that a concept of life must be conceived historically and therefore cannot simply involve, as a great deal of life-philosophy invariably does, an appeal to some naturalistic or fundamentally ontological version of it. However, even at this early stage, many of the problems that plague the book as a whole are evident. I am thinking in particular of Morgan's tendency to defer the moment of explanation while promising just the opposite. After nicely setting up what is essentially *the* issue for Adorno's concept of life—namely, how to find a way beyond damaged life that does not rely on a naturalistic concept of life itself (p.17)—Morgan turns to a discussion of Adorno's philosophical anthropology and its relation to Nietzsche and Freud. The promise is that such a move will begin to reveal Adorno's response to this issue. Although the discussion that follows is interesting, it is not at all clear which part of Adorno's response, if any, it is supposed to open up. The idea that narcissism is the key to understanding the persistence of damaged life (humans are said to come to identify with and desire that which controls and manipulates them) is genuinely fascinating (p.23). But it is of little help to the task at hand.

Neither, unfortunately, is the direction Morgan next takes his book. Rather than continue to attempt to chart Adorno's route beyond damaged life, Morgan backtracks to the concept of damaged life itself, and in particular to an explanation of what Adorno might mean by it. Insofar as this serves to clarify a difficult concept, this detour is welcome. One wonders, however, whether to aid flow Morgan might not have been better served treating the problem earlier.

In Morgan's earlier discussion of *Lebensphilosophie*, it was made clear that damaged life refers in some sense to a loss of "the full experiential richness of life" at the hands of the "technological, schematized modes of human thought" (p.10), which dominate capitalist modernity. Now, Morgan means to put some flesh on these bones, first in relation to the role of Auschwitz as the "apotheosis of damaged life" (p.24), and second in relation to the decay of experience in modernity more generally. Though Morgan speaks to each, in the end, it is difficult to say that he has actually achieved his goal. Rather, what we are left with is a number of different suggestions and hints as to what damaged life might mean, but no real attempt to consolidate or differentiate between them; nor for that matter—and this is a serious problem with Morgan's book throughout—to evaluate their plausibility. The concept of damaged life is left vague, at times appearing to refer to something as general as any life under any domination, and at others to something as specific as Agamben's notions of bare-life and death-in-life (pp.25-28). Morgan is on the right track when he connects the concept to "the process of exchange and abstraction characteristic of capitalist societies" (p.31). Unfortunately, however, he never really follows through on this connection.

As Morgan mentions several times, Adorno refuses to offer a positive concept of life, believing "that there can be no account given of a fulfilled experience from the position of damaged life itself" (p.2). The remainder of Morgan's book is an attempt "to suggest substantive ways beyond Adorno's strictly negative philosophy when thinking of the concept of life" (p.1), beginning with the latter's critique of phenomenology.

As was the case with *Lebensphilosophie*, Morgan takes the similarities and differences between Adorno and phenomenology to be instructive. What both share, Morgan notes, "is the attempt to construct a philosophy which would not suppress or dominate objectivity. This would be a philosophy which is orientated towards objectivity as non-identical with the subject" (p.39). Where there is disagreement, on the other hand, is in how to achieve this; in how to move beyond an oppressive version of subject-object thinking. Adorno's major complaint against someone like Bergson revolves around the lack of adequate social and historical mediation in the latter's thought. In an attempt to reconnect reason with the life of things, Bergson's philosophy appeals to a pre-reflective mode of being, a mode of being prior to the work of conceptual classification. But for Adorno, separation from conceptuality in the manner here proposed is an impossibility and in fact only ends up reinforcing, by leaving it untouched, the dominance of conceptual classification. For Adorno, the only way to break through the concept is with the power of the concept itself. Morgan sums this up nicely when he notes that "Adorno's persistent theme in this critique [of phenomenology] is that there is no simple escape from the binding concepts of identity thinking, and that any theoretical attempt to move beyond the current state of thought must reflect upon its own restricted nature" (p. 51). Insofar as this part of the book makes clear this crucial difference between phenomenology and Adorno, Morgan is to be commended.

From here, Morgan sets out to demonstrate the way in which Adorno's negative dialectical thinking might be said to succeed where phenomenology fails (p.51). Given the notorious complexity of Adorno's negative dialectics—especially the complexity of such concepts as the non-identical—one could be forgiven for thinking a good portion of the rest of Morgan's book, would be devoted to an in depth analysis of Adorno's writings on the matter, as well as a comprehensive engagement with the relevant secondary literature. But that is not the case.

As in previous sections, Morgan chooses rather to divert us through the work of a number of other philosophers. There is, I think, a lot to be said for this approach. A worthy complaint against much Adorno scholarship is that it all too often remains internal to Adorno's work and fails thereby to demonstrate its true significance.

Certainly, there is no risk of Morgan committing this error. At the same time, however, there are a number of dangers in approaching Adorno in this way. For example, in introducing so many different thinkers (in Morgan's case, the list is truly staggering) Adorno's own work can easily be forgotten. We hear from Dilthey, Agamben, Nietzsche, Deleuze, Beckett, Benjamin, Merleau-Ponty, Proust, Kafka, but never really from Adorno himself. Morgan's book, I would suggest, falls prey to this danger.

In 'Dialectics and Life' (Morgan's fourth chapter), for example, it is Hegel, Marx, and Benjamin that steal the show. To be sure, all three figures are crucial in helping us understand Adorno, but without hearing sufficiently from Adorno himself the exercise turns unproductive. Explanation and analysis of Morgan's key point—that negative dialectical thought initiates “a turning towards the object that doesn't rest with the object as it is constructed by the categories of the understanding in Kantian terms, but attempts to undo the damage done to the object by concepts” (p.53)—is left hanging. Later in the chapter we are told that this turning involves an “immersion in objectivity;” a “surrender to the object by a subject that attempts to suspend its identifying procedures” (p.63). But once again, further explanation is lacking. How does one surrender oneself to objectivity exactly? Is not some trace of identification always necessary? How else would one know that one had experienced the non-identical if not by identifying it? Some of these questions Adorno may be able to answer, some perhaps not. The problem, however, is that Morgan fails to even consider them.

Key terms such as objectivity, non-identity, negativity, and mediation remain desperately under-theorised in Morgan's book. Rather than taking the opportunity to work through them and clarify their precise role within his argument, Morgan's final few chapters merely add more concepts to the pile. Through sections devoted to suffering, natural life, mimesis, the shudder, possibility, negative redemption, and exhaustion (to name but a few) Morgan's argument becomes increasingly difficult to locate.

In the chapter devoted to suffering, Morgan enlists the help of Michel Henry and Emmanuel Levinas both of whom tie suffering to “an ineliminable material moment within conceptual thought” (p.4). At this point I have to confess—and there is every possibility the fault is all mine—I struggle to follow Morgan's thinking. Clearly he is trying to emphasise the importance for Adorno of the body and of materiality to both human thought and life, as well as the way in which our tendency to forget these things is tied to the domination of objectivity, the suppression of the non-identical, and ultimately to suffering. But exactly how this all fits together, especially in the context of Morgan's wider argument, is difficult to say with any certainty. Morgan, it seems to me, simply does not make it clear enough.

Morgan's engagement with the notion of natural life fares much better. Here he examines aspects of J.M. Bernstein's influential study, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (2001), a book which shares many of the same concerns as Morgan's, albeit differently cast. Morgan's engagement with Bernstein is welcome, not only because Morgan tends to overlook previous Adorno scholarship, but because Bernstein's book—a book which places Adorno in the same arena as more contemporary thinkers such as John McDowell—opens up that very scholarship in new and interesting ways (not least of all to conversation with certain strains of analytic philosophy).

Morgan is critical of Bernstein; in particular, of his attempt to gloss “Adorno's project in terms of thinking the non-identical...as a re-enchantment of nature” (p.4). This, he argues, is at odds with Adorno's own thinking, as it would seem to imply some sort of underlying, ahistorical nature awaiting recovery (p.90). Morgan makes a good point, but to do Bernstein's elaborate, near five-hundred page argument justice, more than a few pages of analysis are required. Though Morgan might disagree, his book could have done a lot worse than make its disagreement with Bernstein its central, if not sole, focus.

In a final effort to construct Adorno's concept of life, Morgan's discussion introduces a number of intriguing concepts, including negative redemption and exhaustion. With the former, Morgan helps Adorno model a changed notion of reconciliation, one that instead of completion and fulfilment, consists of error, fallibility,

and incompleteness; a fulfilment that remains “fundamentally unfulfilled, in that it changes the very concept of fulfilment” (p.5). In terms of both reason and society, reconciliation in this new sense “would be that state in which what was alien to thought and identification remains in its difference in thought....Error, fallibility, the fact that thought fails in its identifications, would all still be the marks of a reconciled society, but these would be constitutive characteristics of a rational experience” (p.110). In many respects, this notion of negative redemption penetrates to the very core of Adorno’s thinking, and I can easily see how it might be connected to a changed concept of life. Like much of *Adorno’s Concept of Life*, however, the hope that Morgan might further develop this initial flash of brilliance is quickly extinguished—he has already moved on.

What recommends *Adorno’s Concept of Life* is its originality, its willingness to draw from figures, particularly philosophical ones, with whom Adorno is not always associated. For too long Adorno scholarship has been caught between Habermasian and post-Habermasian critical theory on the one hand and postmodern cultural theory on the other. While both have produced valuable studies in their own right, they have not, it is fair to say, been particularly good at considering the *philosophical* depth of Adorno’s work. Insofar as it helps redress this imbalance, Morgan’s book is to be commended. It is not, then, Morgan’s project that is flawed, but its execution. The tendency to defer explanation, the inability to adequately clarify key concepts, and the distinct lack of a critical perspective mean that the considerable promise of *Adorno’s Concept of Life* remains unfulfilled.

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