

This Side of the Pleasure Principle

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“He alone who could situate utopia in blind somatic pleasure [...] has a stable and valid idea of truth.” This surely ranks among the more memorable and provocative statements in Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*; it appears in the reflection (§ 37) in which the author offers critical remarks on the more repressive or anti-utopian themes in psychoanalysis. The title itself is intended as a sly riposte to Freud, whose *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) introduced the controversial idea of a destructive instinct (*Tödestrieb*) alongside the instinct for pleasure (*Lustprinzip*) or libido. Written in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, Freud’s revisionist argument for a second and competing instinct of aggression arguably marked a conservative turn in psychoanalytic theory, insofar as it prepared the theoretical terrain for the idea that civilization can only survive if it represses the instinct for aggression that is a piece of the human being’s own psychic constitution. Adorno rejects this conservative theme as a sign of Freud’s “unenlightened Enlightenment.” On the one hand, Freud was the great opponent of bourgeois moralism; he endorsed the maligned ideal of human happiness as a “critical standard” for his work. On the other hand, Freud reconfirmed the that very same moralism as a social necessity. In modern culture, Adorno writes, psychoanalysis is poised in ambivalence—between a “desire for the open emancipation of the oppressed, and apology for open oppression.” In my own ongoing encounter with *Minima Moralia*, these critical reflections on psychoanalysis remain of greatest importance, not least because they offer a corrective to the dominant interpretation of Adorno as an embittered negativist who looks upon modern society as a place of unremitting darkness in which true happiness is impossible and “life is not lived.” In his rejoinder to Freud, Adorno appears in a different and unfamiliar light: he aligns himself with “blind somatic pleasure” as if it furnished the key to unrealized utopia. Perhaps nowhere else in the book does its author provide such a forthright confirmation of what he has announced in the opening dedication to his friend Max Horkheimer, namely, that his “melancholy science” remains faithful to philosophy’s ancient task: “the teaching of the right life.”

As someone who feels an ongoing connection to the tradition of critical theory, I find this particular reflection from *Minima Moralia* especially instructive. It reminds us that social criticism remains committed to a standard of human happiness even if the surrounding world has miserably failed that standard. Few aphorisms in the book so vividly express this commitment and thereby underscore the normative ideal of a life worth living that still animates critical theory. Most striking of all is Adorno’s concluding suggestion that in modern culture, the imperative of repression imposes itself on us from two directions: the moralist’s hostility to pleasure and the unbeliever’s hostility to paradise. Although he lies at the furthest remove from any religious faith, Adorno resists the crude dualism between materialism and metaphysics. He recognizes that the religious longing for ultimate fulfillment is not merely annulled in the simplest demand for material pleasure but finds its dialectical realization. Metaphysics is honoured at the moment of its fall.

Biography

Peter E. Gordon is the Amabel B. James Professor of History and Faculty Affiliate in Germanic Languages and Literatures and in the Department of Philosophy at Harvard University. A frequent contributor of reviews and criticism to periodicals such as *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The Boston Review*, and *The New York Review of Books*, he is the author of several books on critical theory and the history of modern European philosophy, including *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: between Judaism and German Philosophy* (2003); *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (2010); *Adorno and Existence* (2016); and *Migrants in the Profane: Critical Theory and the Question of Secularization* (2020). He has also co-edited several volumes, including *The Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School*, with Espen Hammer and Axel Honneth (2018).