In this book, Alastair Morgan presents a clear and detailed examination of the senses in which a philosophy of life informs Adorno’s philosophy and the important role it plays in regards to it, albeit, a role not frequently commenting upon, and indeed, not rendered formally significant, even by Adorno himself. In seeking to outline the philosophy of life informing Adorno’s work, this book does a great service to the scope and possibilities in the recent revival of life philosophies, as well as to how to interpret Adorno’s materialism in the changed context of post-quantum philosophies of science and complexity approaches in the human sciences. As Morgan points out, Adorno’s adherence to the life concept is not in the strong tradition of *lebensphilosophie* of the sort that informed Bergson’s *élan vital*, where life was theorised as an ahistorical metaphysical postulate, characteristic of a deep inner animating psychic principle; neither was it seen in the way used by Klages, who postulated a collective unconscious prior to history; nor even in the sense of Dilthey Simmel, or Lukács, who theorised life philosophy as pre-reflective experience in some sense prior to discursive mediation, which posited life as prior to the conceptual, enabling direct veridical access through either intuition (Bergson), or reduction (phenomenology, positivism), to explaining the noumenal world. In the sense that Morgan sees Adorno as incorporating a life concept, it is neither metaphysical in the strong senses here suggested, nor does it speak to an ahistorical, invariant, life-force, played out, as in Oswald Spengler, or even in a different sense, as in Hegel, through a philosophy of history, which portrays the unfolding of living forms within history, the rise and fall of civilisations, or the progress of historical cultures, or forms of life. The sense in which Morgan detects a life philosophy in Adorno is closest to the way Nietzsche utilised the concept, which Herbert Schnädelbach (1984) defines as an ethical life philosophy, and which Morgan (p. 9) defines as “a philosophy which identifies a normativity in the contrast between all that is living and all that is dead.” In this sense, says Morgan (p. 9) “Life…becomes the grounding for all values and norms.” Although Schnädelbach sees Nietzsche as pivotal in promoting this idea of life philosophy as a general normative concept of life and living, Morgan claims that Adorno differs in significant senses in his own appropriation, and it is indeed central to his own use of the life concept, that his critique of Nietzsche proceeds.

What is noteworthy here is the nuanced and detailed treatment of life philosophy, and the life concept in Morgan’s treatment in relation to Adorno. The function of a philosophy of life for Adorno, in short, is to classify his variant of speculative materialism as a conception of material experience itself lived always within the mediated and reflexive particularities of historical time and space. In Adorno’s sense, this was a materialism which within the orbit of the neo-Kantianism which dominated Adorno’s work, was always mediated through culture and conceptuality, and where the ‘fast routes’ to hard realist objectivity and veridical access to the noumenal were not seen by him as tenable, involving claims to truth which went beyond the bounds of what was legitimately warranted. Although generally within the neo-Kantian theatre, Adorno parted company with Kant’s own method of attaining objectivity, rejecting the possibilities that such objectivity of the world could be achieved through
the application of universally valid laws of reason. For Adorno, this move simply constituted a form of domination. Similarly, he rejected Bergson’s ‘intuitionism’, Husserl’s ‘phenomenological reduction’ via the concept of ‘intentionality’, or the ‘protocol sentences’ of positivism, in their claims to know the real without mediation and reflexiveness. Ultimately, what grounded a limited, that is, a mediated objectivity, was life itself, or rather, the experience of life, which was, for Adorno, inscribed through suffering, torture and various myriad forms of debasement characteristic of what he referred to as ‘damaged life’ and yet always potentially reconciled or redeemed through new and different possibilities that life could be other; could be different; could be better; or at least - phrased negatively - where such suffering could be avoided and where life could be lived in an infinite variety of other ways. It is to this concept of ‘experience’ as a “pre-predictive mode of humans relating to the world” (Morgan, p. 2) that the ontological concept of life has relevance. Hence, it was the impossibility of escaping conceptual mediation that characterises Adorno’s solution to Kant’s paradox in reinstating life experience as the indirect route by which the real is apprehended and understood. As Morgan shows, such a concept of life enables Adorno to construct a normative theory which permits him to delineate the contours of a ‘damaged life,’ as exemplified by Auschwitz, and to postulate more fundamentally enriched modes of living, without – hopefully – presuming an essential, ahistorical way of life that in some sense constitutes a ‘natural way of living.’ In this, life does not figure as a substantive demand to live in one particular way, but as a more general ontological conception of the possibility of living differently. A major recurring theme throughout the book is concerned with how Adorno can maintain such a normative conception of life as something which can be fulfilled, and yet avoid essentialist presumptions of life as a ‘natural entity’ or ‘state’, that is prior to history or society; or as linked to a productive utopia of human perfection, in the sense of those bad and dangerous readings of Hegel or Marx.

In terms of outlining Adorno’s uses of life philosophy as the core characteristic of his materialism, Morgan gives a wonderfully clear and nuanced account, relating Adorno’s insights to Freud, Husserl, Nietzsche, Henry, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Bergson, Deleuze and others as well. It is in the engagement with Nietzsche, and with Deleuze, that I find most intriguuing, and possibly – even - most suspect. By tracing the contours of these engagements one can see, I think, the real depth that Morgan achieves in considering Adorno’s oeuvre, as well as some of the unresolved issues of his materialist philosophy. Possibly, also, we can find one or two unresolved or unclearly understood issues, in relation to Morgan’s own understanding, especially, in relation to Deleuze’s appropriation of life philosophy and its relevance for the revival of complexity theories in recent years.

Although, as Morgan recounts, Adorno takes his account of life from Nietzsche, for Adorno life refers to human life whereas for Nietzsche it refers to life itself. While such a difference can be seen as important, the overall similarities between Adorno and Nietzsche in relation to the concept of life they invoke are both striking and significant. For both develop a concept of life as a force which is fundamentally concerned to survive and proper, and which involves dominating and mastering the external world. This is what, as is well noted, makes Adorno’s anthropology similar to Nietzsche’s, premised upon notions of power and domination. It is the reason also why both eschewed naturalistic views of knowledge and opposed correspondence theories of truth, or understandings of truth as emerging under the burdens of rigorous
enquiry, for both saw knowledge as emerging in the cut and thrust of history, and as warped and affected in relation to interest and ideology. Both were also neo-Kantian in the same way seeing the objective world as accessible through mediation and reflexivity. Although Morgan sees Adorno and Nietzsche as diverging “quite sharply” (p. 18), it is largely related to the particular way that the life concept is utilised, rather than its general function or scope within their theories. For Adorno, like Nietzsche, life emerges in the quest for survival, defined as self-preservation, in the sense of the necessity of battling the objective ‘facticity’ of the world and rendering it to one’s purpose. But whereas Adorno represents the struggle for existence in terms of self-preservation, and sees such self-preservation as confined to humanity, for Nietzsche, the life concept “was not dependent on human self-preservation” (p. 19). In addition, Nietzsche argues forcefully that there is more to life than self-preservation, or rather, that the concept of self-preservation is inadequate. To illustrate this point, Morgan usefully cites Nietzsche from the *Will to Power* (p. 345)

One cannot ascribe the most basic and primeval activities of protoplasm to a will to self-preservation, for it takes unto itself absurdly more than would be required to preserve it: and above all, it does not thereby ‘preserve itself’, it falls apart – The drive that rules here has to explain precisely this absence of desire for self-preservation.

For Nietzsche, says Morgan (p. 19) “human subjectivity is an epiphenomenon of the process of life which is ruled fundamentally by a will to power.” Yet, Morgan misunderstands Nietzsche when he sees such life as a ground comprising “competing suprahuman drives and instincts.” The better way to understand Nietzsche here is simply to see the application of the life concept to *all* of life, rather than to merely *human* life, and to see struggles for existence as not simply involving self-preservation, but also other motives, variable depending upon context, sometimes involving competition over material resources; sometimes not. Nietzsche’s real point is that particular forms of subjectivity, and particular forms of morality, have emerged as the historical outcome of certain social forces of historical evolution. If this is so, then the widespread view of Nietzsche as an individualist, that is, as someone who sees the individual as constituted by a bundle of instincts and drives, and who constitutes the foundational assumption of his thinking, is mistaken, and needs revision. In this sense, too, it is stretching things to describe Nietzsche as representing the subject as the epiphenomenon of struggle, or as representing life as some ‘suprahuman’ drive over and above human life, of which human life is but the passive plaything. It seems to me, indeed, that Nietzsche is more materialist here than Adorno. There is a sense in which Adorno, in sharply differentiating human life from life itself, is guilty of anthropomorphising life. Perhaps Nietzsche, also, avoids the accusation sometimes identified with Adorno (of *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, for instance) that there is an original ‘inner’ nature that has been the victim of a fundamental repression. It is in this sense, that Adorno has been accused, as Morgan notes (p. 21), citing Joel Whitebrook (1995) of ‘bad utopianism.’ For, in the extract cited by Morgan, as Whitebrook (1995: 151) notes, “…it would follow from the argument that nothing short of remaining in or recapturing the original state and fulfilling ‘the instinct for complete, universal and undivided happiness’ could prevent the dialectic of enlightenment from unfolding. *This is the tacit omnipotent*
requirement that constitutes the psychoanalytically formulated bad utopianism on which the entire construction rests.”

In *Minima Moralia*, also, as Morgan notes, Adorno accuses Nietzsche of confusing “hope for truth” alluding in part to a relativism which is often claimed, and which I think Morgan shares, in Nietzsche’s writing on politics and the future. Again, while this is a typical reading of Nietzsche within Anglo-America representations, it is surprising to see someone like Morgan share such a view. The confusion of hope and truth represents only Nietzsche’s normative quest for a moral order that will need to be constructed in a future of unchartered waters. What Nietzsche was aware of was that in all such moral creeds, there is a confusion of hope and truth. Although purely descriptive claims might retain a distinction between hope and truth, in relation to the normative construction of a world without foundations, how could they possibly be kept a part. For Nietzsche, the future will need to be contingently configured according to a constellation of precepts and concepts which I think he realised full well, could not be predicted or commented upon in advance. Thus, while his account of the past is merely genealogical, the challenge to the Superman – possibly – is both metaphysical and moral.

By suggesting here that Morgan misinterprets Nietzsche, and that the issues he identifies are possibly contentious, and therefore correctable, then possibly a more positive turn toward Nietzsche could be seen as assisting in correcting the problems in Adorno’s own account as briefly alluded to above. Perhaps, if one other potential area for debate is alluded to, in Morgan’s at all times very scholarly and fine-grained account, it might be in the way he treats Deleuze, and the contemporary interest in complexity theories. While his account of Deleuze as a virtual space-traveller is by now familiar, a tendency to compare Deleuze unfavourably with Aristoleanism, and the claimed implications or consequences of a turn to Deleuze, might be seen just as just a trifle far-fetched. The assertion of an ontological ‘relationism’, drawing on Spinoza, Bergson, and Nietzsche, over a substantionalism, based on Aristotle, and retained in a modified form in the mechanistic philosophies of the Enlightenment, is interpreted by Morgan as leading to a peculiar abandonment of history and society, and some confused thinking over substance and its significance to philosophies of history and change. As Morgan notes, Adorno’s reliance on the classical notion of substance sharply separates him from Deleuze, and also ties him to an enlightenment mode of thinking, which fundamentally ties his conception of life to an essentialist metaphysics. Substance represents, as Aristotle clearly intended, and as Galileo and Newton also understood, an ahistorical foundation which grounds identity and constitutes the basis for an individualistic reduction and grounding within all historical approaches characteristic of enlightenment thinking. Morgan understands that there is an issue around this, for he states (p. 134) that it is “the oscillation between life as process, and objects as substance, that is insufficiently elaborated [in Adorno’s work]”. This is ultimately, for him, what keeps Adorno within the tradition of speculative rather than metaphysical materialism, “for it does not enable a full theorisation of the non-conceptual,” and what differentiates his approach from Deleuze, and from complexity theories. He points out that Harman (2005) has sought to integrate a materialist metaphysics which considers objects as both ‘substances’ and ‘relations’, thus not ‘dissolving’ individuals, or objects, within a process of inorganic life represented a pure becoming, which is seen as the ‘error’ of Deleuze. The error here in my view is that in abolishing substance, Deleuze would have readily
conceded that he wasn’t denying the reality of objects independent of relations. But, crucially, here, Deleuze would not agree with Harman’s (2005: p. 85) claim, supported by Morgan (p. 134), that “[a]n object is a “substance”, not because it is ultimate and indestructible, but simply because it can never be identified with any (or even all) of its relations with other entities.” What characterizes a substance is not the mere existence of an object which is necessarily irreducible to its relations at any particular point in space and time, but the independent ontological existence of an object in space and time; hence, its essence (ousia), or that which really is, as something prior to its relations. Because Deleuze was concerned to write philosophy, and not history, although objects for him, like his friend Foucault, were understood to come into being historically, an understanding of their ontological origination and maintenance was through their relations. In this view, everything is historical, and maintains being because of its relations, or, in a somewhat more casual terminology, in relation to the niche that it occupies. Building on Spinoza and Nietzsche and Bergson, this was the key point of the theory of affects, or combinations, whereby it is the configurative context or constellation which is the crucial ontological dimension, and not the ahistorical being of an invariant substance or atom, which is ontologically independent of its surroundings in its fundamental essence. While actuality and potentiality are denied in relation to essence, neither Deleuze, Foucault nor Nietzsche need deny that things and objects maintain a historically constituted being which is constituted through emergence and is irreducible to its parts, just as it is irreversible in time. This is entailed, in fact, in thermodynamical representations like those of Ilya Prigogine and those complexity theorists who model their work on post-quantum formulations of physics and chemistry. Such a representation explains why the object can be unique and irreducible but also historical, and yet without essence or substance. While an historian, like Foucault, would understand that in practice, objects, or subjects, have each in their own way, their readiness, their being, their state and stage of development, and their potentiality, in a pure philosophical sense, there is no state of ‘actuality’ which constitutes part of their essence, prior to history, and therefore, no ‘potentiality’ which parallels that actuality. While actuality and potentiality must alter their meanings in relation to an historical ontology, they are no longer theorisable in the sense entailed by Aristotle. It is in this sense that chance and immanence take on a different sense, and can contribute to the enrichment of a materialist theory of history.

Although, on specifics like this, in relation to Deleuze and complexity theories, I believe a different conclusion could have been arrived at, none of my quibbles detract from the thoroughly scholarly and impressive way Morgan argues his thesis, and richer understanding of Adorno we have as a result. It is a study which not only relates him impressively to contemporary movements in ideas, but one which outlines in an original and subtle way the intricacies of Adorno’s philosophy, with chapters covering all of the core concepts of ‘damaged life’, of ‘suffering’, of ‘exhaustion’, ‘dialectics’, and of ‘the possibility of living today’. This is a book that all those interested in Adorno, life philosophy, or materialism, should read.

1 In this sense, this view contradicts Peter Hallward (2006: 162) when he claims that “there is no place for him [Deleuze] to account for cumulative transformation or novelty in terms of actual materials or tendencies, precisely because there is no concept of actuality within Deleuze’s philosophy.” Although correct about Deleuze in relation to the Aristotelian conception of ‘actuality’, it is not clear that a
conception is not present within his work that can be explained in relation to the historical ontology he develops. As for 'cumulative transformation' and 'novelty', a quick course on Prigoginian thermodynamics would explain the error in this statement and the different ways that transformation and novelty can be theorised within complexity approaches (see Kondepudi and Prigogine, 1998)

References:


