Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis or dissertation as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis or dissertation. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

Signature: _____

Jordan Daniels Date

Figurations of Nature in Kant and Adorno

By

Jordan Daniels
Doctor of Philosophy
Philosophy

Dilek Huseyinzadegan
Advisor

Elizabeth Goodstein
Committee Member

Rachel Jones
Committee Member

John T. Lysaker
Committee Member

Andrew J. Mitchell
Committee Member

Rocío Zambrana
Committee Member

Accepted:

Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.
Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

Date

Figurations of Nature in Kant and Adorno

By

Jordan Daniels

M.A., The New School for Social Research, 2012

Advisor: Dilek Huseyinzadegan, Ph.D.

An abstract of
a dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Philosophy
2021

Abstract

Figurations of Nature in Kant and Adorno

By

Jordan Daniels

At a time when the effects of human activity on the environment have never been a more urgent issue, I propose that looking anew at the concept of natural beauty in the works of Immanuel Kant and Theodor Adorno will help us better understand the relationship between human beings and nature today. By drawing out the ethical and political consequences of different conceptualizations of nature, the dissertation bridges the strict division between aesthetics and theoretical philosophy. While Kant is known for intensifying the separation between these spheres, I argue that Adorno takes up Kant's elaborations of aesthetics and natural beauty in order to transform them, underlining their determination in and by history. Ultimately, by bringing the concerns of aesthetics to bear on the question of nature, I argue that we can better articulate the blockages that seemingly condemn the contemporary relationship between human beings and nature to be one of mutual destruction.

While contemporary debates in environmental aesthetics largely take an ahistorical approach to the aesthetic experience of nature, defining it as the aesthetic experience of "nature itself," of nature "in its own terms," Kant and Adorno's accounts of nature challenge and deepen what counts as an aesthetic experience of nature by complicating the discipline's foundational distinction of the natural against the artificial. Nature is grasped by human knowers and is therefore shaped by a distinct historical community, and yet, as Kant and Adorno both assert, human concepts do not exhaust nature. Drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin, Adorno conceptualizes a further tension: natural beauty might offer a false aesthetic comfort in an escape *from* history and human agency, or, if properly recognized as itself historical, natural beauty can serve to reorient us *toward* history and human agency. Ultimately, I propose that the experience of natural beauty is expressive of social historical content, offering a vision of a different relationship with nature and disclosing ethical claims on us to act in this world.

Figurations of Nature in Kant and Adorno

By

Jordan Daniels

M.A., The New School for Social Research, 2012

Advisor: Dilek Huseyinzadegan, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Philosophy
2021

Acknowledgements

I found a vibrant home in the Department of Philosophy at Emory University. I first and foremost want to thank my advisor, Dilek Huseyinzadegan, whose strength of will inspired me and kept me attached to reality throughout this process. I credit her with teaching me that Kant's aporetic and experimental thinking are virtues, and I appreciate that she believes philosophy should not rest in Königsberg (or Europe). From the minute details to the big picture of this dissertation, she has given me guidance and attention and I am deeply grateful for her mentorship and her investment in me. This extends beyond the dissertation. I also deeply appreciate Liz Goodstein, John Lysaker, and Andrew Mitchell for our conversations over the years. I value all the courses I've taken with these thinkers I respect, from Benjamin's *Arcades Project* to Musil and Modernism, to Aesthetics and Critical Theory, and Schelling and Heidegger, respectively. I am so grateful for Rocío Zambrana's attention and insight, and to Rachel Jones, whose support has been crucial in so many ways and who I greatly admire.

My family has also been a source of longstanding support and good cheer. Thanks to my parents, Nancy and Stewart Daniels, and to my sister, Alex, for goofing with me but also sometimes wanting to talk about the world, art, and human behavior. Also, I have met some of my favorite people since moving to Atlanta, and I credit them with making my time here enriching both in classrooms and on dancefloors. At Emory, I thank Mukasa Mubirumusoke for being my first friend and consistent

interlocutor. I'm particularly grateful to Katie Howard, for the freshness and frankness of her thinking and the strength of her character; to Omar Quiñonez, who always leans into the intricacies of complex concepts and inspires others to do the same; and to Lilyana Levy, a cherished co-conspirator. Outside of philosophy, I am extremely lucky to count Alexis Wang, Maria Corrigan, Violeta Ruiz Espigares, Emily Clayton, and Janina Lodyga as friends; their loyalty and intelligence have shaped me as a person and a thinker, and I'm grateful for the lives we built together in New York, Atlanta, and Berlin. Exchanging work and ideas with Alexis has continually inspired me (not counting a failed attempt at a noise band at 18), and Maria, in demanding I read several chapters of the dissertation out loud to her, has given me a gift I can never repay. Lastly, I thank Jay Simon for his love and his taste for the good things in life.

Table of Contents

Introduction

In many ways, the contemporary pandemic we are all experiencing is new. Fatalistic attempts to make out "nature's revenge," however, are not. Ranging from a vision of cosmic justice (as Pope Francis recently suggested) to smug Malthusian intimations ("nature is healing; we are the virus"), many macabre interpretations of the current global health crisis are amplifications of common reactions to anthropogenic global warming: we are finally getting what we deserve.[1] Found in the popular imagination *and* environmental philosophy, these interpretations are tempting but dangerous: by promoting a blanket sense of humanity's collective sinfulness and guilt, not only do they paper over

[1] English-language news outlets widely reported on the Pope's connection of the COVID-19 pandemic with the ecological issues in his interview with *The Tablet*: "There is an expression in Spanish: 'God always forgives, we forgive sometimes, but nature never forgives.' We did not respond to the partial catastrophes. Who now speaks of the fires in Australia, or remembers that 18 months ago a boat could cross the North Pole because the glaciers had all melted? Who speaks now of the floods? I don't know if these are the revenge of nature, but they are certainly nature's responses." For the full interview with Austen Ivereigh, see "Pope Francis Says Pandemic Can Be a 'Place of Conversion,'" *The Tablet: The International Catholic News Weekly*, April 8, 2020. https://www.thetablet.co.uk/features/2/17845/pope-francis-says-pandemic-can-be-a-place-of-conversion-. For a discussion of both earnest and satirical tweets on universal guilt towards nature, see Delilah Friedler, "'Nature Is Healing, We Are the Virus' Memes," *Mother Jones*. Plague Comforts, May 19, 2020. https://www.motherjones.com/coronavirus-updates/2020/05/plague-comforts-nature-is-healing-we-are-the-virus-memes/.

the specific practices and interests that are responsible for extreme environmental degradation, but they promote a sense of righteousness—indeed a *naturalness*—in the human suffering that results. Such interpretations of the pandemic and our contemporary ecological crisis carry metaphysical and indeed theological baggage.

The environmental humanities offer alternatives to this ontologically fallen and sinful narrative while still trying to come to grips with the fact that human activity has changed life on earth at a geological level. In the recent volume edited by Jason Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?*, contributors from a range of disciplines argue that it is not a homogenized "humanity" that instigated a new geological epoch, the "Anthropocene," but capitalist actors and systems of production, consumption, and exploitation—hence, "Capitalocene."[2] While historian Dipesh Chakrabarty shares their worry about obfuscating historical actors, the challenge of his article, "The Climate of History," still might stand: global warming defies our model of history based on historical agents, and because the Anthropocene is larger than industrial capitalism (and even socialism), our ecological predicament now demands thinking of humanity as a unified "species."[3]

Kyle Whyte, however, further complicates the novelty of our ecological moment in aptly titled works such as, "Climate Change: An Unprecedentedly Old Catastrophe," "Is it Colonial Déjà Vu? Indigenous Peoples and Climate Injustice," and "Our Ancestor's Dystopia Now: Indigenous

---

[2] *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland, California: Kairos PM Press, 2016). See also Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2017).

[3] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 197–222.

Conservation and the Anthropocene."[4] Whyte argues that contemporary discussions of global climate disruption largely ignore recent history, wherein Indigenous peoples were subject to both colonial and capitalist-driven anthropogenic environmental change and forced displacement to unfamiliar environments. This disavowal not only affects the historical accuracy of contemporary climate discussions but inflects ongoing struggles as well, as Indigenous communities around the world continue to lead efforts to combat the expropriation and destructive uses of land and natural resources.

In agreement with Whyte, Axelle Karera demands that we refuse to "lose sight of those for whom both the Anthropocene and its apocalyptic imaginaries do not necessarily hold any emancipating value," pointing to the absence of race in major works on Anthropocene ethics.[5] Karera charges that homogenizing a collective (albeit futural) subject of the Anthropocene sanctions the erasure of anti-black racial oppression.

At issue in these criticisms of the monolithic humanity that emerges in relation to the admittedly global threat is that, given the fact of anthropogenic climate change, how ought we to think about our relationships with nature? What kinds of relationships with nature have brought us to this point? Furthermore, who is this "we" that emerges in these questions?

---

[4] Kyle Whyte, "Climate Change: An Unprecedentedly Old Catastrophe," *Biopolitical Philosophy*, January 16, 2019, https://biopoliticalphilosophy.com/2019/01/16/climate-change-an-unprecedentedly-old-catastrophe/; "Is It Colonial Déjà Vu? Indigenous Peoples and Climate Injustice," in *Humanities for the Environment: Integrating Knowledges, Forging New Constellations of Practice*, eds. Joni Adamson and Michael Davis (New York: Earthscan Publications (Routledge), 2017), 88-104; "Our Ancestors' Dystopia Now: Indigenous Conservation and the Anthropocene," in *Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, eds. Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen, and Michelle Niemann (New York: Routledge, 2017), 206–15.

[5] Axelle Karera, "Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 7, no. 1 (2019), 34.

Both public discourse concerning "nature's revenge" and academic discussions of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene reveal how interwoven our conceptions of nature, history, agency, and ethical responsibility are. Far beyond the issue of scientific evidence for global warming, the current moment demands that we confront a host of problems regarding how we envisage nature, the aptness or failure of our conceptions of history in relation to nature, and what forms of action can do justice to both the ecological and social disasters "we" now face with differing degrees of vulnerability. This also involves reckoning with the legacy of Eurocentric practices and thought concerning nature, because this baggage continues to inform ongoing harmful policies *and* the all-too-common sense that humanity is reaping what it has sown.

In this dissertation, I suggest that Theodor Adorno—from his vantage point on the implosion of Europe—offers insights into precisely this cluster of issues. Adorno parses divergent conceptualizations of nature from within European rationality, providing resources for understanding nature that resonate with critiques from contemporary global perspectives. Moreover, I argue that Adorno proves indispensable precisely because he acknowledges the force of ideology within nature and natural beauty without discounting the domain of aesthetics entirely. In respect to both these lines of analysis, Immanuel Kant is an instructive and fraught figure, and although elements of Kant's philosophy exemplify the debasement and instrumentalization of nature, Adorno also finds valuable touchstones for conceptualizing nature in Kant.

First among these illuminating figurations of nature, Adorno takes Kant's distinction of scientific knowledge from the truth of nature as it is "in-itself" to be a significant moment of epistemic humility, one that also expresses a historical sense of loss. While grounding the objectivity of the

sciences, Kant gives voice to the meta-scientific feeling that "while we are putting out our nets and catching more and more things in them, there is a sense in which nature itself seems to keep receding from us; and the more we take possession of nature, the more its real essence becomes alien to us."[6] Adorno thereby emphasizes the historicity of our relations to nature, along both material and cognitive axes.

Second, Adorno returns to Kant's articulation of natural beauty as not only a site of aesthetic pleasure, but as a crucial resource for critical reflection upon human beings' relation to nature. Adorno seeks to recover the significance of natural beauty within aesthetics, and, drawing on Walter Benjamin, he also formulates an account of the aesthetic experience of nature that reorients us to history. This is pressingly important because, as many note in the environmental humanities, aesthetic value has long been a component of the conservation movement, especially in the United States. Now a global phenomenon, internationally funded efforts to protect spectacular wildlife, wilderness, and "natural beauty" often repeat the colonial infliction of dispossession and impoverishment on local people. Charged images of nature also figure into the fatalistic intimations of "nature's revenge," as in the Pope's evocative apocalyptic hellscape; he conjured to the mind images of the fires in Australia, melting glaciers, and floods in a single breath. Alternately, the "We are the virus" contingent delightedly shared images of swans—and even dolphins—returning to Venice, and an endangered Malabar civet returning to the empty Indian city of Meppayur, as proof that "Nature is healing itself." Reinforcing the narrative that a homogenized humanity is to blame, all these photos were inaccurate or doctored.

---

[6] Theodor W. Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 176.

With the proliferation of images of natural beauty today, aesthetic figurations of nature can clearly be used as alibis for avoiding specific historical injustices or as tools for manipulation. At the same time, as Adorno suggests, if its potential "ideological aspect" is acknowledged, natural beauty and the aesthetic experience of nature can foster the recognition of alternative forms of interaction between human beings and nature, beyond that of exploitation and domination.

To the first epistemic issue regarding nature, nothing in this set of problems is simple, including what we mean by nature. Kate Soper points out that recent environmental thought gets caught between a strictly realist or a post-modern "culturalist" conception of nature: either nature is the non-culturally dependent system of natural laws studied by the natural sciences *or* it is an effect of historical discourses.[7] Soper advocates a realist conception of nature that is sensitive to cultural-historical deployments of the " natural," but because of the necessity of scientific evidence in ecological and conservationist arguments, she cautions against any account of nature that is so historicist as to jeopardize the objectivity of science's claims. For Steven Vogel, however, the concept of nature should be altogether abandoned.[8] The history of the concept of nature is so long, so fraught, and so self-contradictory that, at best, it can only be a nuisance. Indeed, "nature" becomes actively harmful because of its tendency to refer to that which is absolutely independent of humanity, which obscures our activity involved in both the conceptualization and material interaction with nature. These concerns boil down to the question of if we acknowledge the historicity of knowledge, does that mean

---

[7] Kate Soper, *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics, and the Non-Human* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1995).

[8] Steven Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2016).

we are saying something like nature is not real? For Soper this prospect threatens environmentalism's aims, while for Vogel it frees environmentalism to focus on "built environments," leaving nature behind. For Adorno's critical theory, the concept of nature as an object of domination and as a symptom of obfuscation remains too useful for both environmental and social analysis to be abandoned now.

Contemporary environmentalism also acknowledges the importance of the aesthetic experience of nature for its aims, although many thinkers in contemporary environmental aesthetics acknowledge it is valuable in its own right. Environmental aesthetics is a growing body of thought committed to the idea that the aesthetic experience of nature should not be directly cribbed from the aesthetic experience of art objects. That Theodor Adorno would agree may surprise those who know him as one of the preeminent philosophers of modernist art, even those who specialize in Adornian aesthetics. Adorno's historicism serves to challenge and deepen environmental aesthetics, which has developed predominantly in Anglophone analytic contexts. Mainstream environmental aesthetics has yet to grapple with historically-inflected questions demanded by our ecological moment. Might the aesthetic experience of nature change in the Anthropocene? What can natural beauty mean in the Capitalocene? What should it mean? What can it *do*?

In Chapter 1, I bring Adorno's concerns to bear on contemporary debates in environmental aesthetics. In line with those who prioritize the objectivity of aesthetic judgments of nature and therefore argue that scientific knowledge of nature is required for an appropriate aesthetic experience of nature, I argue Adorno supplements what counts as relevant knowledge with the speculative and real history of nature's domination, including decolonial histories of environmental displacement. At

the same time, drawing on Kant's account of mediated desire in disinterestedness, Adorno will retain the subjective element of aesthetic experience whereby aesthetic judgment is not reducible to conceptual knowledge. Ultimately, Kant and Adorno's accounts of nature complicate and enrich what counts as an aesthetic experience of nature by complicating in turn the discipline's foundational distinction of the natural against the artificial. I propose that the experience of natural beauty is thus directly expressive of social historical content.

In Chapter 2, I turn to the question of what is nature for Adorno. I examine Adorno's conceptual model of "natural-history" that harnesses both the realist claim about nature's actuality as well as the historicist's attention to the specificity of nature's appearance in different epochs and cultures. Nature can be both real and historical. Second, I unpack how in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer analyze the history of Western rationality through the lens of the domination of nature. This speculative history allows for attention to the victims of "progress," including nature external to and within the human subject, as well as other living human beings. Carrying over from the idea of natural-history is Adorno's concern to disrupt the strict conceptual dualism between nature as *myth*—as "what has always been"—and history as *enlightenment*—as the advent of the "qualitatively new"—because this opposition perpetuates the sense that elements of social reality are unalterable. In line with these interests, I demonstrate how Adorno and Horkheimer trace the primal fear of nature as the motor for enlightenment's emergence, its achievements, and ultimately its relapse into the myth it seeks to escape.

In Chapter 3, I argue that while the Copernican revolution features the doubling down on the identity of the subject over and against the diversity of nature, Adorno celebrates Kant because he

holds onto the memory that reason cannot fully exhaust nature. Kant blocks reason from having a grip on reality as it is in-itself, and instead—with the total authority of powerful critical reason—restricts knowledge to the world of human understanding. This block, however, is not identical to sanguine, positivistic enlightenment thinking's proscription of myth, but an expression of "metaphysical mourning, a kind of memory of what is best, of something we must not forget, but that we are nevertheless compelled to forget."[9] Kant's block reflects the experience that the essence of nature increasingly eludes us as we more fully determine it, both as the object of knowledge and experimentation in the natural sciences and as the object of experience as determined by the categories. Nature, reified and alienated, appears only as that which we can control, but Kant's preservation of things-in-themselves memorializes the alien aspect of nature that is lost both in the following idealisms as well as in positivism.

It is in relation to these tensions, I argue in Chapter 4, that the aesthetic becomes a *repository* for nature's significance beyond its objectification in the natural sciences and its instrumental status. Aesthetic rationality and natural beauty function as counterparts to the "nature-dominating *ratio*" that Kant lends validity to with one hand while restraining it with the other.[10] While some Adorno scholars have quite productively tracked Adorno's inheritance of Kant's aesthetics, they do so in a way that overlooks the significance of the aesthetic experience of nature in both Kant and Adorno. In order to account for Adorno's complex relationship to Kantian aesthetics while making space for an aesthetics of nature, I examine four crucial Kantian concepts that inform Adorno's aesthetic theory in relation

[9] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 176.
[10] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 2002), 139.

to the figuration of nature they forge: morality, freedom, history, and aesthetic rationality. First, according to Adorno, Kant's translation of practical reason into a formalistic system, while undertaken for the sake of salvaging ethical bonds from moral skepticism, further crystallizes the domination of nature. Second, while Kant ostensibly aims to further freedom, his interpretation of enlightenment redirects freedom to the realm of thought and away from that of action. This substitution is made possible by Kant's formulation of history as nature, through which he naturalizes progress in hopes of demanding civil obedience. I argue that despite Kant's formalization of practical reason, translation of freedom into obedience, and naturalization of history, Adorno returns to Kant in order to describe aesthetic theory because for Kant aesthetic rationality takes shape *against* these forms. For Kant—and for Adorno, I claim—aesthetic rationality is not merely formal, it does not demand obedience in the practical realm, and it does not speculatively freeze history as nature. Rather, aesthetic rationality harnesses both sensuous, mimetic involvement in the object and a *block* on all claims of a total grip of the object.

In Chapter 5, I expand upon Adorno's analysis of the demotion of natural beauty in the hierarchy of aesthetic concerns following Kant. Recent scholars have acknowledged that natural beauty is important in Adornian aesthetics, but many do so, again, in a manner that repeats the subordination of natural beauty and the aesthetic experience of nature to that of art. Against this tendency, I demonstrate that not only does Adorno contest the inferiority of the aesthetic experience of nature, but his unconventional description and theoretical articulation of natural beauty is especially pertinent for our time of climate crisis. By unpacking his endorsement of Walter Benjamin's casting both nature and history in terms of transience, I argue that Adorno proposes an experience of natural beauty that

demands remembrance rather than mere aesthetic mollification. Instead of a false escape into pure, untouched nature, Adorno expands the concept of natural beauty so that expresses social historical content, offers a vision of a different relationship with nature, and discloses ethical claims on us to act in this world. This is most appropriate given our historical and ecological moment.

Adorno thus offers a philosophy of nature that contests the collective sense of humanity's guilt and the *naturalness* of both human and non-human suffering. Instead, philosophical analysis of specific historical figurations of nature and the aesthetic experience of nature itself serve to reorient us towards history and, crucially, towards the present.

Chapter 1

Adorno, Kant, and Environmental Aesthetics Today

Environmental aesthetics can be said to be split along the lines of objectivist and subjectivist camps. On the side of objective aesthetics, proponents of scientific cognitivism such as Allen Carlson and Yuriko Saito argue that analogous to art, it is necessary to know what a natural object is in order to have a proper aesthetic experience of it.[1] Just like one must be familiar with the norms and significance of Cubism to appreciate Picasso's *Guernica* properly, so must one have a general scientific or "common sense" knowledge of the natural object in question in order to aesthetically appreciate it properly—to "see" it correctly—and this provides the grounds for the objectivity of aesthetic judgments of nature.[2]

---

[1] See Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art, and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2000), and several essays discussing scientific cognitivism, including Saito's influential piece, "Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms," are reprinted in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, eds. A. Carlson and A. Berleant (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2004).

[2] The example of *Guernica* comes from Carlson's discussion of Kendall L. Walton's important article, "Categories of Art." See Allen Carlson, "Nature, Aesthetic Judgment, Objectivity," *The Journal of Aesthetics*

On the side of subjective aesthetics, some, like Malcolm Budd, contest the view that background scientific knowledge is requisite to appreciate nature, arguing that it misses what is properly "aesthetic" about the aesthetic experience of nature.[3] For Budd and other non-cognitivists, the minimum conditions for the aesthetic quality of nature are said to be on the side of the beholder, the subject, via disinterestedness. Still others, like Arnold Berleant, suggest foregoing both disinterestedness and scientific knowledge in favor of a description of immersive experience.[4]

Into this conversation, I introduce Adorno's treatment of natural beauty and his critique of exclusively objective or subjective aesthetics. In line with the scientific cognitivist position, Adorno agrees that truth is central for the aesthetic experience of nature. I suggest, however, that Adorno supplements the natural sciences as the exclusive source for knowledge of nature with the speculative and real history of nature's domination. On the other hand, not content with one-sidedly objectivist aesthetics, I argue that Adorno also seeks to retain the subjectivist moment, wherein the aesthetic experience is irreducible to discursive knowledge as well as mere subjective agreeableness. This is Adorno's third *Critique* Kantian intuition, although his inheritance of Kant's aesthetics is not easy or uncontested.

---

and Art Criticism 40, no. 1 (1981): 15-27; Kendall L. Walton, "Categories of Art," *The Philosophical Review* 79, no. 3 (1970): 334-67.

[3] Malcom Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature: Essays on the Aesthetics of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2005.

[4] See Berleant's essay, "The Aesthetics of Art and Nature," in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, eds. A. Carlson and A. Berleant (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2004), as well as *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1992), *Aesthetics and Environment: Theme and Variations on Art and Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005) and *Aesthetics Beyond the Arts: New and Recent Essays* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012).

In one sense, my argument for Adorno's importance for environmental aesthetics can be understood to be following through on Jonathan Maskit's suggestion that instead of the standard cognitivist vs. non-cognitivist division in the field, we should acknowledge a more fundamental—and possibly more productive—distinction already framing debates about the aesthetic experience of nature: that of universalism versus cultural historicism, which largely maps onto the Analytic and Continental traditions respectively.[5] The cognitivist and non-cognitivist positions both agree in that they are trying to provide the criteria for the "most appropriate" manner in which to experience nature aesthetically. Whether doubling down on scientific concepts (Allen Carlson, Yuriko Saito) or also emotions (Noël Carroll) and the imagination (Emily Brady and Ronald Hepburn), both sides in the debate share the aspiration to provide the best possible *analytic* account of the aesthetic experience of nature.[6] In striving to articulate a kind of normative account of the aesthetic experience of nature, Maskit argues that they tend toward "both monism and individualism," and while certainly not every thinker working in this tradition is guilty of this, beginning from a culturally historicist position is "more inclined to be pluralist."[7] In what follows, I aim to correct the manner in which environmental aesthetics has minimized or overlooked 1) the historically shifting meaning of the terms involved, 2) the cultural diversity of the experience, and 3) the very historicity of the aesthetic experience of nature

---

[5] See Jonathan Maskit, "On Universalism and Cultural Historicism in Environmental Aesthetics," in *Environmental Aesthetics: Crossing Divides and Breaking Ground*, eds. Martin Drenthen and Jozef Keulartz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014): 41-60.

[6] Examples of these authors' positions can be found in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, edited by Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2004). See particularly Noël Carroll, "On Being Moved by Nature: Between Religion and Natural History" (pgs. 89-107); Emily Brady, "Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature" (pgs. 156-169); and Ronald Hepburn, "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty" (pgs. 43-62).

[7] Maskit, "On Universalism and Cultural Historicism in Environmental Aesthetics," 48.

itself. Moreover, I aim to show that highlighting the historical nature of aesthetic experience also opens up new questions, such as the ones which I shared in the introduction: Can we talk about natural beauty in the age of extreme global warming? And how *should* we talk about natural beauty at this ecological moment?

In section 1, I join Marta Tafalla in examining how Ronald Hepburn, writing a few years before the publication of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, inaugurated the field now recognized as environmental aesthetics. I expand upon and complicate her comparative reading of Hepburn and Adorno in order to introduce some of the themes and tensions that shape environmental aesthetics over the next several decades.

In section 2, I argue that Yuriko Saito, an avowed proponent of scientific cognitivism, gives a compelling moral argument for the importance of objectivity for aesthetic judgments, but that she, like Carlson, ultimately errs in conflating the scientific knowledge of nature with the truth of nature, even when she pluralistically includes other cultural discourses. By hitching aesthetic experience primarily to scientific knowledge of its object, scientific cognitivism also promotes a reductive account of aesthetic experience. To this, I contend that Adorno's addition of historical knowledge, cued to the domination of nature, counts as relevant to the aesthetic experience of nature and further aligns with decolonial contestations of scientific cognitivism's founding premises. While the cognitivist would dispute the status of this knowledge as being about nature in its own terms and as perhaps being in line with associationist or anthropocentric aesthetic doctrines, I argue that the distinction between the natural and the artificial, never having been accurate and especially now under conditions of global anthropogenic climate change, does not stand.

In section 3, I lay out some contestations of Saito and Carlson's hitching of the aesthetics of nature to scientific knowledge that err on the side of being either too transcendental or not distinctively aesthetic enough. To the former I show how, in order to recover what is properly aesthetic in the aesthetic experience of nature, Malcolm Budd draws on Kant's notion of disinterestedness. Such an account remains limited, however, and I argue that placing all the emphasis on the transcendental conditions of aesthetic experience excludes the kind of historical consciousness that can and does inform our aesthetic experiences of nature, especially today. At the same time, I agree with Adorno that some mediation of interest or desire is required to hold off the dissolution of aesthetic experience into experience in general, as happens, for example, when Arnold Berleant contests both scientific cognitivism and the subjective requirement of disinterestedness.

Section 1: Natural Beauty Revived

In her 2011 article, "Rehabilitating the Aesthetics of Nature: Hepburn and Adorno," Marta Tafalla notes the remarkable fact that over 50 years ago Ronald Hepburn and Theodor Adorno published works addressing the longstanding exclusion of natural beauty from philosophical aesthetics within four years of each other.[8] Hepburn's groundbreaking 1966 paper, "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty," inaugurated the subdiscipline of environmental aesthetics within the

[8] Marta Tafalla, "Rehabilitating the Aesthetics of Nature: Hepburn and Adorno," *Environmental Ethics* 33, no. 1 (2011): 45-56.

Anglo-American tradition.[9] For the most part, in the Continental tradition, however, Adorno's call in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) to redress the "repression" of natural beauty within aesthetics has only been taken up as a subsidiary concern, and much more attention has been paid to his discussion of the modernist artwork. Tafalla sets Hepburn and Adorno (as well as the Analytic and Continental traditions) in dialogue in hopes of establishing a research agenda for the discipline of environmental aesthetics, one that is more complex than either thinker or tradition independent of one another. She does this by posing four questions to both Hepburn and Adorno, namely: 1) Why should aesthetics reflect on natural beauty? 2) Why was the aesthetics of nature forgotten? 3) How are nature and art different? And, 4) What would the fundamental concept for an aesthetics of nature be? By way of introduction to some of the defining issues of environmental aesthetics today, I explore the affinities and amplify the divergences that Tafalla identifies in these two thinkers, both of whom seek to rescue the aesthetics of nature from ignominy.

Answering the first question as to why aesthetics should reflect on natural beauty, Tafalla notes that for Hepburn and Adorno, there are benefits for both aesthetics and the relationship between humans and nature. To the former, Hepburn argues that by neglecting the study of natural beauty, aesthetics has deprived itself of a rich and important set of material to think through. Not only is philosophy thereby impoverished, but this restriction makes the aesthetic experiences of nature themselves less available—"the experiences are felt, in an embarrassed way, as off-the-map; and, since

[9] Ronald Hepburn, "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty," first appeared in *British Analytical Philosophy*, eds. Bernard Williams and Alan Montefiore (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966): 285-310. All citations refer to the reprinted edition in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, edited by Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2004): 43-62.

off the map, seldom visited," as he puts it.[10] The relative dignity or indignity of the aesthetic experience of nature has further ramifications for the relationship between human beings and nature for Hepburn, which aligns with Adorno's attention to the domination of nature playing out in every cognitive activity. Tafalla overstates the simplicity of the relationship between the aesthetics of nature and practices of exploitation for Adorno when she suggests that "a consideration of natural beauty could have acted to slow down this exploitation because the aesthetic experience of nature offers humans the possibility of conceiving nature not only as a means to our own ends, but also as a source of beauty that should be respected for itself."[11] This hypothetical ability of natural beauty to have halted the industrial exploitation of nature glosses over Adorno's realistic understanding of the interests and power of capitalism, as well as his analysis of natural beauty as potentially "an alibi" for broader systems of destruction and expropriation.[12] She is right that Adorno suggests that the experience of natural beauty is one in which human beings *might* "learn to admire and respect what is different and to understand that there should be a limit to their actions."[13] One critical lacuna in her Adornian answer to why aesthetics should reflect on natural beauty is precisely his attention to the ways in which it redirects energies *away* from the political (and ecological) transformations by providing a limited and

[10] Hepburn, "Neglect of Natural Beauty," 45.
[11] Tafalla, "Rehabilitating the Aesthetics of Nature: Hepburn and Adorno," 47-48.
[12] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 2002), 65. Adorno's criticism of the use of natural beauty aligns with the way some allege that conservationists merely promote what amounts to a "Holocene theme park" and fail to engage in larger structural critiques. See Gaia Vince, *Adventures in the Anthropocene: A Journey to the Heart of the Planet We Made* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2014), 257.
[13] Tafalla, "Rehabilitating the Aesthetics of Nature," 48.

merely aesthetic satisfaction. From the beginning, Adorno's treatment of natural beauty is already more fraught, more entangled with "extra-aesthetical" issues than Hepburn's.

It is in response to the second question, in accounting for why the aesthetics of nature was forgotten, that Tafalla identifies the two thinkers' greatest divergence. What for Hepburn is an instance of neglect—a point underscored by his title—is for Adorno a charged and prolonged "repression."[14] For Hepburn, the issue is less central and less interesting: from Wordsworth's peak, aesthetic experiences of nature sharply declined in Romantic literature itself—as Coleridge laments, speaking of the natural phenomena that used to inspire him, "I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!"[15] In culture more broadly, aesthetic experiences of nature devolved to "the forced ecstasies and hypocrisies of a fashionable and trivialized nature cult."[16] (Adorno agrees that as natural beauty becomes a trope of popular culture, it is "vitiated as the inevitable consequence of its expansion.[17]") Hepburn for the most part simply describes nature's demotion to mute object or fetish, made possible by the sense that nature itself is no longer the proper scene or partner for human aspirations; he also credits the multiple perspectives made available by the sciences—via microscope and telescope—for the increase in "bewilderment and loss of nerve" over the aesthetic interpretation of nature.[18] Internal to aesthetics, Hepburn points to the ascendency of theories that took art—newly autonomous—as the base case

---

[14] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 62.
[15] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Dejection: An Ode," https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43973/dejection-an-ode, accessed June 4, 2020.
[16] Hepburn, "Neglect of Natural Beauty," 43.
[17] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 71.
[18] Hepburn, "Neglect of Natural Beauty," 44.

and, after briefly applying their categories to nature, left the natural world behind as aesthetically uninteresting.

What Hepburn portrays as the facts of nature's exclusion, Adorno takes as a phenomenon demanding further explanation. Natural beauty was repressed in aesthetics "as a result of the burgeoning domination of the concept of freedom and human dignity […] in accord with this concept nothing in the world is worthy of attention except that for which the autonomous subject has itself to thank."[19] Admittedly quite different from the English dejection experience Hepburn draws on, for Adorno, natural beauty is subjected to the "terror of idealism's scorn" via Schiller and especially Hegel. The broad point I want to emphasize in Adorno's aesthetics of nature is that it, like all aesthetic experience, must be read in relation to the social whole, which includes the social and political organization of life and the philosophical discourses that emerge out of that life. Adorno's aesthetic theory is part and parcel of his *critical* theory, and while many contemporary thinkers of environmental aesthetics relate the aesthetic experience of nature to larger questions of environmental ethics, these themes are baked in from the start given Adorno's cultural historicist and critical orientation. Adorno's aesthetics of nature will thus depend on analysis of the culturally and historically specific social whole, and his analysis of the aesthetic experience of nature will in turn reveal features of that social totality. It is in this sense that Adorno writes: "Karl Kraus sought to rescue linguistic objects as part of his vindication of what capitalism has oppressed: animal, landscape, woman. The reorientation of aesthetic theory toward natural beauty is allied with Kraus's effort."[20] The aesthetics of nature is at

[19] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 62.
[20] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 63.

once an ethically and politically charged salvaging operation, testing and contesting the hierarchical valuations of today's social order.

In her answer to the third guiding question about how nature and art are different, Tafalla argues that Adorno, in agreement with Hepburn, maintains that natural beauty is not reducible to a theory of art. This is true though under-recognized in Adorno scholarship, where for the most part Adorno is believed to unequivocally privilege the artwork.[21] The irreducibility of the aesthetics of nature to that of art becomes the founding premise of the field of environmental aesthetics: if the aim is to develop an aesthetic theory of natural beauty, one cannot simply develop a theory that takes the art object as its paradigm and extend it to natural beauty. With fairness, Tafalla credits Hepburn with examining this question more "systematically" than Adorno thanks to his analytic method, coming up with three fundamental differences. For Hepburn, first, because works of art are human products and nature is not, there must be differences in how we appreciate them. Tafalla writes, "When the stone is a human creation, we think about it and interpret it within a context that includes an artist, a language, a culture, a moment in time, a set of social circumstances. In contrast, if it is a natural object, we think of the natural forces that created it, and that opens up an experience of confronting the differences between it and us, an experience of otherness that only nature can offer us."[22] This lays the groundwork for the predominant scientific cognitivist position in environmental aesthetics, which holds that just

[21] See Chapter 5, "Natural Beauty on This Sad Earth." Espen Hammer and Donald Burke are the exceptions in the scholarship, see Hammer, *Adorno's Modernism: Art, Experience, and Catastrophe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), and Burke, "Adorno's Aesthetic Rationality: On the Dialectic of Natural and Artistic Beauty," in *Critical Ecologies: The Frankfurt School and Contemporary Environmental Crises*, ed. Andrew Biro (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).
[22] Tafalla, "Rehabilitating the Aesthetics of Nature," 50.

as it is necessary to appreciate an art object within a cultural context, it is necessary to appreciate a natural object with reference to objective, scientific knowledge about that object. Contrary to the dualism Tafalla suggests here, for Adorno, sets of social circumstances are *also* relevant to the aesthetic experience of nature. This is a consequence of both Adorno's historicism and the imbrication of his aesthetic theory with critical theory more broadly.

Second, Hepburn gives a rich description of the mutual involvement of spectator and object; the aesthetic experience of nature is often better characterized by envelopment and movement. This has parallels to the aesthetic experience of built environments, architecture, and more avant-garde forms of art that Adorno discusses but Hepburn does not. For the most part, the model of aesthetic experience Hepburn tries to move beyond is that of confronting aesthetic objects "as a static, disengaged observer."[23] Against this, Hepburn gestures towards the diversity of possibilities for experiencing oneself aesthetically "in an unusual and vivid way," because "we are *in* nature and part *of* nature; we do not stand over against it as over against a painting on a wall."[24] Hiking through the woods, for example, involves more multidimensional and ambient forms of experience compared to how our attention is directed upon traditional artworks in a museum or gallery.

The third feature is related to the second but important enough to merit a separate articulation. For Hepburn, art objects, whether explicitly or implicitly, are framed or set apart: "works of art are first and foremost bounded objects, […] their aesthetic characteristics are determined by their internal structure, the interplay of their elements."[25] Natural objects and environments, however, lack such a

[23] Hepburn, "Neglect of Natural Beauty," 45.
[24] Hepburn, "Neglect of Natural Beauty," 45.
[25] Hepburn, "Neglect of Natural Beauty," 46.

frame; this means, for Hepburn, that "a sound or a visible intrusion from beyond the original boundaries of our attention can challenge us to integrate it in our overall experience, to modify that experience so as to make room for it." While one need not accommodate every contingent element in the experience of a natural expanse, for Hepburn, the question of integrating unforeseen intrusions challenges our creativity, "set[s] a task; and when things go well with us, we experience a sudden expansion of imagination that can be memorable in its own right."[26]

Hepburn's description of this imaginative expansion is quite stimulating, but the static, disengaged observer and the necessarily framed art object are elements *already* contested from within artistic developments in 1966. For Hepburn, "a chance train whistle cannot be integrated into the music of a string quartet; it merely interferes with its appreciation," but for John Cage, composing the "silent" musical piece *4'33"* in 1952, the artwork's strict separation from the aleatory was itself a subject for artistic investigation.[27] In the piece, the performer closes and opens the keyboard lid to mark the three movements without touching a single key, and the audience listens to the noises of the environment outside the walls—perhaps a chance siren—and their own rustling movements in their

[26] Hepburn, "Neglect of Natural Beauty," 46. Tafalla connects Adorno's discussion of the cultural landscape to this point about the framelessness of nature, further aligning him with contemporary discussions. Incipient in Hepburn's account of the framelessness of nature, Allen Carlson will develop a full-fledged critique of the landscape painting as model for aesthetic appreciation of natural environments. For Carlson, the landscape painting overdetermines the experience of seeing a real forest or valley, freezing it into a reductive image. Adorno criticized landscape painting on similar grounds, as Tafalla cites, because whatever is imagistic in natural beauty includes a distance and magnitude not transferable to the two dimensions of visual art: "Nature, as something beautiful, cannot be copied. For natural beauty as something that appears is itself image. Its portrayal is a tautology that, by objectifying what appears, eliminates it'" (*Aesthetic Theory*, 87).

[27] Hepburn, "Neglect of Natural Beauty," 46.

seats. In his discussion of Cage's piece in the 1958 lectures on *Aesthetics*, Adorno describes something similar to Hepburn's analysis of what qualifies the aesthetic experience of nature:

> If you listen to this peculiar thing, then you too—and that is really something that gives much food for thought—will certainly not have the impression of something meaningless but, rather, through this negative principle, have the impression of an extremely integrated quality, if you will, even a very strong necessity. And you will even perceive, through this complete surrender to chance, a form of expression—a desperate utterance of wildly protesting expression—that goes very far beyond what one knows from traditional expressive works of art.[28]

I bring this up not to challenge Tafalla's suggestion that Adorno and Hepburn agree that natural beauty is irreducible to a theory of art, but instead to point out that what Hepburn attributes to the aesthetic experience nature is not exclusive to it. Not only is art capable of facilitating the framelessness, envelopment, and perspectival movement that Hepburn attributes to the aesthetic experience of nature, but for Adorno it can promote a new form of expressiveness. Both Hepburn and Adorno reject the expression theory of art in which an art object must be interpreted via the intentions of the artist, but given the possibility for new modes of expressiveness that do not rely on human motives, nature too could be capable of expression. In fact, this becomes a crucial feature of Adorno's aesthetics of nature.

In response to the final guiding question, asking what the fundamental concept for an aesthetics of nature would be according to Adorno and Hepburn, Tafalla turns to Hepburn's

---

[28] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetics*, ed. Eberhard Ortland, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity, 2018 [1958]), 83-84. Although he was later more skeptical towards Cage, in the lectures he avows, "I believe one must extrapolate theory from the most advanced tendencies of development, not vice versa," meaning Cage and the piece, *4'33"* (84).

meditations on different possibilities inherent in the idea of *unity*, though he warns that this only illuminates some experiences of nature—those aesthetic experiences of "sheer plurality, in the stars of the night sky, in a birdsong without beginning, middle, or end" are no less valid.[29] For Hepburn, unity can refer to an "experience of humanization or spiritualization," in which nature's foreignness is overlaid with something more familiarly human, but attempts to do so can also lead to the vivid emotional recognition of precisely nature's foreignness—this experience is still in a sense being "one" with nature, albeit with a sublime, uncanny element. The most generative meaning of unity in Hepburn refers to "an integrated aesthetic experience of nature," in which one strives to incorporate the totality of their sensual experience of nature, the greatest possible space, and even scientific knowledge of that environment. This unity builds on the challenge, the "task," to heed and regard as meaningful not only unexpected elements, but relevant facts about the object or space in question. That such elements include knowledge is significant, and Hepburn marks this as "the desire for a certain integrity or 'truth' in our aesthetic experience of nature."[30] He describes this in an influential scene:

> Suppose I am walking over a wide expanse of sand and mud. The quality of the scene is perhaps that of wild, glad emptiness. But suppose that I bring to bear upon the scene my knowledge that this is a tidal basin, the tide being out. The realization is not aesthetically irrelevant. I see myself now as virtually walking on what is for half the day seabed. The wild glad emptiness may be tempered by a disturbing weirdness.[31]

[29] Hepburn, "Neglect of Natural Beauty," 49.
[30] Hepburn, "Neglect of Natural Beauty," 49.
[31] Hepburn, "Neglect of Natural Beauty," 50.

The issue of truth in the aesthetic experience of nature becomes one of the most controversial and defining discussions in environmental aesthetics. Hepburn insists, however, that the understanding informing the shift of mood on the seabed is not "theoretical 'knowledge about' the object or scene."[32] Instead he casts such rising to the "challenge to integrate" in terms of virtue: this striving marks an "aesthetically courageous person."[33]

Truth is also a fundamental category for Adorno, and one that it is intricately connected to the final affinity Tafalla points out between Hepburn and Adorno, namely reconciliation. For Hepburn such a reconciliation signals that "a cease-fire has been negotiated in our struggle with nature," but he emphasizes nature as that "from which we wrest our food, from which we have to protect ourselves in order to live, which refuses to sustain our individual lives beyond a limited term, to which we are finally 'united'" in death.[34] Adorno agrees with Hepburn that the aesthetic attitude towards nature is an "achievement," i.e., that it requires a host of historical and technological preconditions. Also vital for Adorno, however, is the domination and denigration of nature in the philosophical, scientific, and material practices of Western civilization; it is against the sense of control over nature that the aesthetic experience of it emerges, and so reconciliation with nature involves questions of justice. It is precisely in relation to these themes, I argue, that Adorno contributes to environmental aesthetics *today*. And so I turn from the advent of environmental aesthetics to some of its developments.

---

[32] Hepburn, "Neglect of Natural Beauty," 50.
[33] Hepburn, "Neglect of Natural Beauty," 49.
[34] Hepburn, "Neglect of Natural Beauty," 51.

Section 2: Cognitivist Approaches to "Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms"

Picking up on Hepburn's preliminary consideration of the "truth" at play in our aesthetic experiences of nature, Allen Carlson and Yuriko Saito, along with Marcia Muelder Eaton and Holmes Rolston III, and later, Patricia Matthews, are among the best-known proponents of the scientific cognitivist approach to the aesthetics of nature.[35] While they agree that scientific knowledge is requisite for a proper aesthetic experience of nature, in this chapter I will hew closest to the representative and compelling 1998 article, "Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms," by Yuriko Saito.[36] I focus on Saito here because while she promotes the objectivity inherent in the cognitivist position, (1) she argues further that there is a *moral* reason in aiming at the appropriate aesthetic response, and (2) she expands the category of relevant knowledge of "nature on its own terms" to include Indigenous discourses, mythology, and folklore. I take this to be both an advance and a complication of the standard cognitivist claim, because, as Maskit acknowledges, "Saito seems far more open to cultural pluralism than many."[37]

In her influential essay, "Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms," Yuriko Saito explicitly aligns herself with Allen Carlson in wagering that by looking at the way we appropriately appreciate a

---

[35] See Marcia Muelder Eaton, "Fact and Fiction in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature" (pgs. 170-181) and Holmes Rolston III, "The Aesthetic Experience of Forests" (pgs. 182-196), both in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, eds. A. Carlson and A. Berleant (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2004), as well as Patricia Matthews, "Scientific Knowledge and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (2002): 37-48.

[36] Yuriko Saito, "Appreciating Nature on its Own Terms," originally appearing in *Environmental Ethics* 20 (1998): 135–49. I refer to the reprinted version appearing in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, eds. A. Carlson and A. Berleant (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2004): 141-155.

[37] Maskit, "On Universalism and Cultural Historicism in Environmental Aesthetics," 54.

work of art, we can come up with the criteria of what constitutes the appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature. In the proper aesthetic appreciation of art, we "must have a relevant sensory experience of the object," which includes attention to the visual form of a painting or aural textures of a piece of music's arrangement, for instance.[38] Along with the perceptual experience, she argues, we must understand the art object to occupy a position in a cultural and historical context. We also must recognize its artistic medium, and its creator. This, she says, is what it takes to "interpret the art object on its own terms."[39]

The common reason for placing artworks in these contexts and taking stock of the relevant facts is to avoid "mistaken" evaluations of the artwork, such as regarding the modernist artworks as the result of poor technical skills or, as Saito offers as an example, "criticizing Japanese bamboo flute music for being less dramatic and powerful than a Western symphony."[40] Such aesthetic judgments would be *objectively* wrong, as Carlson argues in "Nature, Aesthetic Judgment, Objectivity," the result of judging the perceptual properties of an artwork in accord with an incorrect category. Saito notes that the correct interpretation might not guarantee a maximally satisfying aesthetic experience, and that sometimes an "incorrect" experience might be more aesthetically interesting. Against this possibility, Saito cautions that not only are such incorrect though lively aesthetic experiences cognitively inappropriate, but they are *morally* inappropriate. Drawing on Dewey's elaboration of the moral function of art to remove prejudice, Saito suggests that appreciating art on its own terms lets us "cultivate this moral capacity of recognizing and understanding the other's reality through sympathetic

[38] Saito, "Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms," 141.
[39] Saito, "Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms," 141.
[40] Saito, "Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms," 141.

imagination."[41] This is thus one argument for the ethical value of objective aesthetics: there is moral value in understanding the artwork according to its context and "what it is" rather than via what Adorno deems the "vulgar subjective categories," which define aesthetics in terms of the beholder's reaction.[42]

Analogously, Saito suggests that the appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature will include this "willingness to submit to nature's guidance, [….] instead of imposing our story upon it."[43] She first argues that aesthetic formalism and historical associations fail to enact this moral sensitivity to nature's "own terms." Formalism involves the shallow appreciation of nature according to perceptual features and formal criteria derived from human tastes, while the latter camp, associationism, amounts to connecting the value of some natural feature to its role as a site for human history. Against formalism, Saito echoes Carlson's criticism of the persistence of the picturesque in determining the value of a landscape, where "*exclusive* attention to its pictorial surface falsifies nature's aesthetic value," and, neglecting the other sensory elements of the experience and privileging only the spectacular and beautiful, has real consequences for ecologically important but not "scenic" habitats.[44] Associationism, Saito suggests, operates according to the Lockean theory of nature, wherein nature, on its own and uncultivated, is a waste, and cultivation, or the attachment of human drama to nature, affords nature value. The Gettysburg Wheatfield, for example, is significant not for its qualities as a field, but as the place where significant battles in the American Civil War took place.

---

[41] Saito, "Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms," 142.
[42] Adorno, *Aesthetics*, 200.
[43] Saito, "Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms," 142.
[44] Saito, "Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms," 144.

Against these predominant ways of appreciating nature, Saito argues that science, along with certain kinds of mythology and folklore, guide our appreciation of nature "for what it is" in a manner that satisfies the objectivity requirement that she has further cast as a moral criterion. For Saito, what marks natural science, folklore, and myth is that they listen "to nature *as nature.*" Carlson's definition, at its narrowest, speaks to the importance of "scientific knowledge, the paradigm of objectivity" for our aesthetic appreciation of nature,[45] and at its broadest includes the "common sense" understanding of nature that comes from intelligent observation, such as from naturalists John Muir and Aldo Leopold.[46] Alongside these, Saito includes other "often indigenous" discourses, because these, unlike the associationist view, involve the recognition of nature's "own reality apart from us. [They acknowledge] that a natural object has its own unique history and function independent of the historical/cultural/literary significance given by humanity, as well as its specific perceptual features."[47]

The first point to make, however, is the difficulty of casting the natural sciences as offering unmediated access to something like "nature's own story." We might call this the general, cultural-historicist point: scientific activity is a set of historical and cultural practices, and as a human practice, it is important to acknowledge how the institutions of science exist within a broader social-political context and history. Adorno and Max Horkheimer show in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that science is a properly human attempt to make nature answer questions posed to it; Paul Feyerabend explores this

[45] Allen Carlson, "Requirements for an Adequate Aesthetics of Nature," *Environmental Philosophy* 4, no. 1 & 2, Special Issue: Environmental Aesthetics and Ecological Restoration (2007): 13.
[46] Allen Carlson, "Nature, Aesthetic Judgment, Objectivity," 25.
[47] Saito, "Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms," 145.

point even more puckishly in analytic discussions of the philosophy of science.[48] One would be idealizing the natural sciences if one refused to acknowledge how the "pure" pursuit of knowledge is interwoven into a larger system determined by particular social groups and their interests, to the disadvantage of the poor and the global south, for instance.[49] Even if not necessarily a motivator for researchers, the use-value of the knowledge they produce is essential for their funders.

While she certainly does not speak to specific charges that challenge the proclaimed ethical neutrality of the sciences, Saito does address some of concerns about the epistemological neutrality of science, such as the critical contention that science is anthropocentric in its conceptual framework and some of its practical applications. Responding to Stanley Godlovitch's objection that in science, "the object is still ours in a way; a complex artifact hewn out of the cryptic morass" and that science "offers us only a gallery of our own articulated images,"[50] Saito grants the basic historicist point that knowledge produced by the natural sciences is at the same time a cultural product. Even so, she suggests that there are different degrees of effort made "to understand the other," and that "scientific

---

[48] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007); see Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (New York: Verso, 2010).

[49] Presently protests are being held at Maunakea, a sacred volcano on Hawai'i which, although technically "ceded land" intended to be kept in a trust to benefit future native Hawai'ians, is managed by the University of Hawai'i. Local activists oppose building the gigantic Thirty Meter Telescope—which would be the thirteenth on the sacred site—for both religious and conservationist reasons. Alternative locations exist for the telescope, and promises that no more would be telescopes would be built precede this conflict. Even though Saiko does grant Indigenous discourses the status of knowledge, her cognitivist positions seems not only not helpful but potentially harmful in the case of Maunakea, where counter-protesters in favor of the telescope point to the "sacredness" of the pursuit of knowledge.

[50] Saito, "Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms," 147. Saito remains skeptical about Godlovitch's suggestion that instead of seeking objective correctness, awe and the ineffable mysteriousness of nature is the most appropriate attitude toward nature, especially because such attitude would seem to preclude sympathy towards it.

stories we tell about nature, I believe, rate high on this scale. Unlike associationist appreciation, they are stories of natural objects' own lives, suggested by their specific perceptible features, even if they must be told by means of *our* images and vocabulary."[51]

The next issue also challenges the neutral status of the sciences: having ceded some ground to cultural historicism, Saito further opens the gate to more culturally pluralistic accounts of nature. Her expansive cognitivism thus aligns the natural scientific explanation with Indigenous narratives as giving accounts of nature "on its own terms," but in doing so she papers over how the scientific worldview actively positions the latter as mythology, and how the latter may include accounts of nature in which the attempt to understand nature "for what it is, *apart from human presence and involvement*" is to impose a colonial and heavily loaded worldview.[52] Borrowing Jim Cheney's term of bioregional narrative, Saito values Native American accounts of nature because, being tied to place, they can afford "specific attention" to "individual features" of natural objects local to the region.[53] Vanessa Watts, in "Indigenous Thought-Place," describes the relationship between land and understanding quite differently when she challenges the very separation of human presence and agency from that of nature as the colonial imposition of an "epistemological-ontological divide," whereby thought and ideas are reserved for humans. Speaking to the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe cosmologies, she describes how "habitats and ecosystems are better understood as societies from an Indigenous point of view; meaning they have ethical structures, inter-species treaties and agreements, and further their ability to interpret,

---

[51] Saito, "Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms," 147.
[52] Saito, "Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms," 146.
[53] Saito, "Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms," 151. Cf. Jim Cheney, "Postmodern Environmental Ethics: Ethics of Bioregional Narrative," *Environmental Ethics* 11, no. 2 (1989): 117-134.

understand, and implement."[54] Watts' account of Indigenous ontology disputes the disenchanted separation of what is natural and what is human—which is baked into Saito's premise of nature "for what it is, *apart from human presence and involvement*"—and Watts also gives a history of how, through political and epistemological colonization, this alternate conception of agency, land, and the human has been and continues to be deprived of its truth status.

Watts' account of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe cosmologies highlights the cultural specificity of the sciences and of the dualistic premise undergirding the scientific cognitivist view. The problem for Saito is that while trying to open up the objectivity of the aesthetic experience of nature to pluralistic accounts of "what nature is," she projects the scientific and culturally specific account of nature as separable from human presence and involvement onto these narratives.[55] This is important because Watts specifically cautions about the way major historical Indigenous events—such as the fall of Sky Woman to the back of the turtle, or the meeting of the Three Sisters, Corn, Bean, and Squash, who decided on a specific way to live together—are translated from *historical events* to fables, principles, or morals, as a kind of "gateway for non-Indigenous thinkers to re-imagine their world."[56] In translating the stories from historical events to abstracted principles, she warns, "non-Indigenous people also keep control over what agency is and how it is dispersed in the hands of humans," thereby

---

[54] Vanessa Watts, "Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency Amongst Humans and Non-Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European World Tour!)," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 1 (2013): 23. Place, like other non-human beings, has agency, and "human thought and action are therefore derived from a literal expression of particular places and historical events."

[55] For Saito, relating aesthetic experience to discourses that try to explain nature apart from its relevance to human history bears a moral valence, which is actually the "ultimate rationale appreciating any object appropriately, that is, on its own terms." Saito, "Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms," 146.

[56] Watts, "Indigenous Place-Thought," 26.

perpetuating the strict division between nature and human being.[57] Saito's attempt to expand the cognitivist position remains limited by the ahistorical framing division of nature as "apart from human presence and involvement." The central question for objectivist aesthetics about what discourses afford us an account of "what nature is" has slipped quite quickly into a set of other questions, like whether "what nature is" can be separated from human activity and involvement in the first place, and what the cultural, historical, and epistemological conditions for that separation are.

For all these issues plaguing the objectivist faction of environmental aesthetics, I would like to suggest with Adorno that rather than throwing out knowledge and objectivity as a touchstone in aesthetic experience, *more* forms of knowledge should be included as relevant for our "proper" aesthetic experiences of nature. In order to achieve a *more objective* aesthetics of nature, I argue that far from being an anthropocentric imposition on nature's story, historical knowledge corrects the way environmental aesthetics has minimized or overlooked the culturally and historically shifting meaning of nature. One branch of relevant historical knowledge is Critical Theory's speculative histories, which trace how Western rationality is connected to the progressive disenchantment and domination of nature and are thus helpful in plotting from *within* Western rationality how the terms of the aesthetic experience of nature have emerged in history. Similarly, decolonial critical histories mark the premises and terms of environmental aesthetics as culturally and historically specific from *outside* Eurocentric rationality. Furthermore, Watts' attention to both the historical and *ongoing* "colonial interpretations of nature/creation that act to center the human and peripherate nature into an exclusionary relationship" allows her to critically intervene as colonial epistemological frameworks continue to

[57] Watts, "Indigenous Place-Thought," 26.

absorb Indigenous narratives inappropriately and inadequately.[58] The inclusion of decolonial perspectives in discussions of the aesthetics of nature would serve to prevent the misuse and misappropriation of those knowledges, perhaps even allowing for actual cultural pluralism regarding experiences of nature.

The truth of these critical and decolonial histories is essential for a more accurate grasp of the terms of the aesthetic experience of nature, but I further argue that *only* a historical consciousness with knowledge of the expansionist colonial project can "correctly" see certain aesthetic objects. Carlson and Saito's definition of the aesthetic experience of nature is the appreciation of the perceptual features of an aesthetic object in accord with its proper concept, where "just as the knowledge provided by art historians and art critics is necessary for the appropriate aesthetic appreciation of works of art, the knowledge provided by natural historians and scientists is necessary" for *guiding perception*, as Carlson puts it.[59] When hiking through the Georgia woods, for instance, the path often turns to red clay, kudzu covers trees. An object of nostalgia for some, Georgia's infamous red clay is the result of topsoil

---

[58] Watts, "Indigenous Place-Thought," 26. Kyle Whyte notes a pattern of three different pre-scripted roles he has witnessed Indigenous speakers being asked to play in the discourse on the Anthropocene: 1) as disruptors or affirmers of some non-Indigenous approach to the Anthropocene; 2) as the "skeletons in the closet" to conservation environmentalism; and 3) as "Holocene survivors" whose wisdom might guide the rest of humanity. His point is not to further exclude Indigenous peoples from dialogues about the Anthropocene but to try to find the value of the "mega-concept" like the Anthropocene for Indigenous peoples, especially when the projects that invite Indigenous speakers often only selectively emphasize Indigenous history. By making environmental aesthetics responsible to decolonial and Indigenous perspectives, I seek to center this history in discussions of the aesthetic experience of nature. Kyle Whyte, "The Roles for Indigenous People in Anthropocene Dialogues: Some Critical Notes and a Question," *Inhabiting the Anthropocene*, (January 25, 2017): https://inhabitingtheanthropocene.com/2017/01/25/the-roles-for-indigenous-peoples-in-anthropocene-dialogues-some-critical-notes-and-a-question/ accessed May 15, 2020.

[59] Allen Carlson, "Budd and Brady on the Aesthetics of Nature," review of *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature: Essays on the Aesthetics of Nature* by Malcom Budd and *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* by Emily Brady, *The Philosophical Quarterly* 55, no. 218 (2005): 107.

erosion, itself the product of King Cotton and chattel slavery, which in turn were enabled by the forced removal of the Muscogee Nation. It is not uncommon to come upon a "vine barren," a stretch of land where nearly every element of flora—not to mention any stray telephone pole or truck—is covered in kudzu; these acres of kudzu-covered forest appear either lush and vibrant or strangled, suffocated.[60] Kudzu, first introduced at the 1876 World's Fair Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, was promoted by the governmental Soil Conservation Service in the 1930's in response to the topsoil erosion from decades of cotton monoculture.[61] I argue that knowledge of these natural-colonial histories informs our aesthetic experience of perceptual qualities; our very perception of the lovely red clay, the verdant kudzu valleys, is not only affected but more or less *correct* based on the knowledge of the transformation of habitats brought about, both intentionally and accidentally, by the removal of Indigenous peoples, large-scale cotton production, the enslavement of millions of people of African descent, and global trade occurring after European contact with the Americas. The clay, the kudzu, and the landscape take on different aesthetic qualities when such histories are remembered.

Some may object that my example is not playing fair—that the Georgia woods are not wilderness proper, therefore they are not the aesthetic natural objects environmental aesthetics is concerned with.[62] All scientific cognitivists agree on environmental aesthetics' *Ur*-distinction: that

---

[60] For conflicting accounts of kudzu's effects on local flora, see Brian Barth, "How Kudzu, 'The Vine that Ate the South,' Put Southern Agriculture on the Skids," *Modern Farmer*, Oct. 13, 2016 https://modernfarmer.com/2016/10/kudzu/, and Bill Finch, "The True Story of Kudzu, the Vine that Never Truly Ate the South," *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 2015, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/true-story-kudzu-vine-ate-south-180956325/.

[61] Finch, "The True Story of Kudzu, the Vine that Never Truly Ate the South."

[62] The concept of wilderness is challenged in decolonial, feminist, and environmental historical grounds. For the latter, see William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), as well as the volume he edited, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the*

"nature" is to refer to that which is *not* human artifacts.[63] Given the extent of human-triggered climate change, however, it makes sense, along with Ronald Moore, to "admit that, in our modern world, most of what we want to call 'natural' is already, to some degree, [hu]man-made."[64] Not only have nature's "own terms" never existed as divorced from human ones, but such a distinction between nature and human activity certainly cannot be said to hold today, given anthropogenic climate change. Thus, I would argue that relevant knowledge for an objective and more correct aesthetic experience of witnessing, say, a pod of whales is the understanding of the contemporary endangerment of the species and of these very individuals one is regarding aesthetically. Compared to a formalist appreciation of the whales' shape and proportion, or the scientific cognitivist appreciation of the scene based on knowledge that whales are mammals and not fish, it seems both a more correct and more serious appreciation of the whales and their slow grace to include knowledge of the dwindling numbers following commercial whale hunts, and that although numbers started to rise after its banning, now the acidification of the seas threaten their food source. Anecdotally, I would argue that the knowledge of climate change has already informed real people's aesthetic experiences of nature in the age of global warming, as evidenced by the timbre of melancholy and worry that certain parks and animals might not be around for one's children to see.

Human Place in Nature (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), featuring his famous essay, "The Trouble with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," 69-90.

[63] The footnote to Ronald Hepburn's first sentence in "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty" reads: "By "nature" I shall mean all objects that are not human artifacts. This will of course include living creatures. I can afford to ignore for the purposes of this study the many possible disputes over natural objects that have received a marked, though limited, transformation at human hands" (59).

[64] Ronald Moore, *Natural Beauty: A Theory of Aesthetics Beyond the Arts* (Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2008), 32.

Section 3: Dynamics of Disinterestedness

I turn now to Adorno's critique of objective aesthetics, having just argued that in a certain fashion, Adorno is on board with the objectivist aesthetics of nature that involves historical knowledge and, also, remembrance. The general problem with objective aesthetics is that in striving for universalism, it misses the specific quality of the aesthetic—as if knowing that *Guernica* is a cubist painting is the same as experiencing it aesthetically, or as if knowing the history of an environment directly amounted to an aesthetic experience of it. One way that Adorno articulates this problem with objective aesthetics, as he writes in *Aesthetic Theory*, is that it "overlooks the mediatedness of art by the subject."[65] At first glance, this is difficult to translate into the aesthetic experience of nature because art is a human practice, mediated by the subject's spontaneity in its creation, its reception, and its relation to the social whole. While art is indeed a privileged domain for Adorno, the natural aesthetic object is *also* mediated, both by historical and cultural forms and by the perceiving historical subject of the aesthetic experience.

The problem with subjective aesthetics, however, is that in trying to distinguish itself from non-aesthetic thinking, it either foregoes a rich account of the aesthetic object or ends up in mere relativism: Adorno cautions, "it is either abstractly transcendental or arbitrary in its dependence on individual taste."[66] In what follows, I argue that this criticism maps on to Malcolm Budd and Arnold Berleant's respective influential responses to scientific cognitivism, but their argument over the

[65] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 166.
[66] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 166.

Kantian notion of disinterestedness helps solve the problem of how to make the objectivist aesthetics properly aesthetic.

Budd's inclusion of disinterestedness as a feature of the aesthetic experience of nature succeeds in refocusing the conversation to what makes the experience aesthetic in the first place. Budd defines aesthetic experience as a positive or negative response to the experienced properties of an object, where this reaction is not related to satisfying a desire for the existence or non-existence of some state of affairs in which the item figures but is "in itself (in abstraction from any personal relation that might obtain between subject and object)."[67] Against scientific cognitivism's contention that appreciation is to be guided by knowledge and specific concepts, Budd's definition of aesthetic experience as a disinterested positive or negative response to perceptual properties rightfully distinguishes aesthetic experience from the rationalist exercise of merely applying the proper category to a given object: Cubism to *Guernica*, mammal to whale. Budd sharpens the meaning of "aesthetic appreciation" and judging something to be "aesthetically valuable" by emphasizing that it is the special register of pleasure or displeasure that marks the aesthetic and underscoring that this pleasure is not identical to mere pleasure in sensing.

While he also objects to scientific cognitivism, Arnold Berleant stops just short of arguing that disinterestedness should be *abandoned* in philosophical aesthetics, and that this has special consequences for the aesthetics of nature in particular. For Berleant, the disinterested mode of aesthetic contemplation fails to grasp what is unique to the aesthetic appreciation of nature. Disinterestedness's baggage includes: 1) an emphasis on passive contemplation that arises out of philosophy's foundational

[67] Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, 14.

intellectualism rather than actual aesthetic experiences of artworks or nature; 2) "psychical distance" which removes the aesthetic from the practical life-world; and 3) universality, which, even if subjective, subtends the "invidious distinctions of high and low art, decorative and fine art, or popular and serious art."[68] Explicitly opposed to universalist and objectivist aims, as well as Kant's objective-subjective hybrids, Berleant develops an "aesthetics of engagement" to better account for what actually occurs in aesthetic experience.

While disinterestedness was instrumental in securing aesthetic autonomy, having originated out of moral debates in the latter half of the eighteenth century, Berleant suggests disinterestedness now warps a fair account of aesthetic experience as dictated by current post-modern art and nature.[69] (Unlike Hepburn, Berleant writes in the wake of John Cage.) Ultimately, instead of the special attitude attached to disinterestedness, Berleant suggests a program of "naturalizing" aesthetics, which means "recognizing its association and continuity with other regions of experience," while also "identifying the aesthetic as a critical dimension of the value that binds together the many domains of the human world."[70] Berleant contests the conventional models for describing what the aesthetic experience of nature is, which he describes as "perceiving environment from within, as it were, looking not at it but

---

[68] Berleant, *Re-Thinking Aesthetics: Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts*, 47.

[69] Berleant draws on the Jerome Stolnitz's important piece, "On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness,'" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20, no. 2 (Winter 1961), 131–43. Stolnitz argues that starting in a theological context, Shaftesbury (among others) articulated a model of the disinterested love of and devotion to God, which differed from the baser motivation for serving God out of one's own interests. The idea of the disinterested love of God conveyed the sense that this love was valuable for its own sake, and the concept migrated to British conversations concerning aesthetics, eventually being installed in Kant's transcendental analysis of the beautiful.

[70] Berleant, "The Aesthetics of Art and Nature," 76.

being *in* it."[71] Against Budd's criticism that this is not properly the aesthetic at all,[72] Berleant challenges that this condition is "intensely and inescapably aesthetic."[73] Appreciation of nature "on its own terms" for Berleant comes down to the quality of engagement with nature: "a sensory immersion in the natural world, […] joined with acute perceptual consciousness and enhanced by the felt understanding of assimilated knowledge, such occasions can become clear peaks in a cloudy world, high points in a life dulled by habit and defensive disregard."[74]

Berleant's aesthetics of engagement speaks to a degree of sensory saturation and intensity that might characterize some aesthetic experiences, but ultimately his account fails to differentiate aesthetic experience from just any other sensual experience, and merely asserting that it is aesthetic slides back into the subjective relativism that forfeits what is singularly powerful in the aesthetic. Berleant's historicist commitment to rethinking aesthetic experience in light of developments in contemporary art is commendable, but these arts as a model should be further analyzed.

Adorno, predictably, has a dialectical approach to the concept of disinterestedness, especially as expressed in relation to the question of beauty. On the one hand, Adorno would agree with Berleant's criticism of *basing* aesthetics on disinterestedness insofar as it privileges a subjective attitude that is supposed to be "largely independent of the supposed randomness of the object."[75] On the other hand, "Kant was the first to achieve the insight, never since forgotten, that aesthetic comportment is free from immediate desire; he snatched art away from that avaricious philistinism that always wants

---

[71] Berleant, "The Aesthetics of Art and Nature," 83.
[72] Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, 111.
[73] Berleant, "The Aesthetics of Art and Nature," 83.
[74] Berleant, "The Aesthetics of Art and Nature," 83.
[75] Adorno, *Aesthetics*, 166.

to touch it and taste it."[76] Art and aesthetic comportment—relevant also to nature—is distinct from the pleasure in having or consuming the object. While Adorno thinks that Kant "transcendentally arrested this condition, which is a historical process,"[77] these concepts cannot be jettisoned as Berleant seems to suggest, because "only thus can one become aware of that strange interplay of forces between desire and the prohibition of desire which, in fact, essentially encompasses all beauty since Plato's definition in *Phaedrus*."[78] Without this element of desire, specifically "in a negated form," Adorno writes, "then the concept of beauty itself becomes stale and empty."[79] This plays out in Adorno's later evaluation of John Cage, for instance, along with his analysis of Happenings; it is possible for these artworks to suffer so strong an "allergy to aura, from which no art today is able to escape," that the artworks might regress to the "barbaric literalness of what is aesthetically the case."[80] Cage's work still explores the form of composition in its three movements, but in the Happenings of the 1960s Adorno alleges that art sacrifices the *critical* element of the aesthetic, its ability to stand apart and thus illuminate the logics, structures, and *interests* that typically hold in reality. This holds even truer for a more recent example like Rirkrit Tiravanija's exhibition *Untitled (Free)* at 303 Gallery in New York, at which the artist cooked and served curry to visitors. Cooking and serving the food in the gallery *was* the art piece; the audience was not (even) menaced with flashing lights, ominous sounds, or electric lawnmowers as in the orchestrated experimental chaos of Happenings. In these pieces, out of hostility to the boundaries that had demarcated art, art thus "becomes its own enemy, the direct and false

[76] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 10.
[77] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 10.
[78] Adorno, *Aesthetics*, 32.
[79] Adorno, *Aesthetics*, 32.
[80] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 103.

continuation of purposeful rationality."[81] As *Untitled (Free)* undoes the distance between the artist, art, and the audience, it also forfeits a sense of otherness from which to encounter reality as something jarring. It becomes, as one patron describes, "a nice experience."[82]

Adorno's criticism of an aesthetics based on unmediated desire is instructive for the aesthetic appreciation of nature. In dismissing distance and aura from a more thoroughgoing engagement with nature, Berleant vitiates the significance of an aesthetic experience of nature that holds back or is distinguishable from the predominant instrumentalization or exploitation of nature. Emily Brady explores the significance of such distinctions in relation to debates about how to best frame and promote nature conservation.[83] Focusing on the particular case of whether windsurfing was to be allowed on Wastwater, a lake in the Lake District National Park in England, Brady suggests it is important to move beyond appreciating nature as a means to pleasure. Brady distinguishes between the hedonistic model of the aesthetic with the disinterested model; in the hedonistic model, nature is aesthetically valuable based on the pleasures it affords, while, in the disinterested model, the aesthetic qualities of nature are appreciated as "having a value apart from any ends."[84] Brady ultimately argues that understanding aesthetic appreciation as fundamentally disinterested allows us an orientation towards nature that "backgrounds the concerns of self-interest and utility […] and foregrounds its

[81] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 103.
[82] "Rirkrit Tiravanija: Cooking Up an Art Experience." *Inside/Out: A MoMA/MoMA PS1 Blog*, February 3, 2012. https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/02/03/rirkrit-tiravanija-cooking-up-an-art-experience/#:~:text=Rirkrit%20Tiravanija.,303%20Gallery%20in%20New%20York.
[83] Emily Brady, "Don't Eat the Daisies: Disinterestedness and the Situated Aesthetic," *Environmental Values* 7, no. 1 (1998): 97–114.
[84] Brady, "Don't Eat the Daisies," 99.

aesthetic qualities in their own right."[85] Berleant forfeits the ability to make these distinctions, and without space in his account for the nuanced mediation of desire befitting the aesthetic, one is left with something smacking of subjective relativism, where the aesthetic is merely a matter of touching, tasting, or sensuous intensity.

Against Berleant, Budd's inclusion of disinterested pleasure, displeasure, and a range of aesthetic affects in between therefore affirms the irreducibility of aesthetic experience to mere knowledge, on the one hand, and experience in general, on the other. But there is a hitch: Budd's transcendental requirements, although done in the name of a "*freedom"* not enjoyed by the aesthetic experience of art, actually serve to *flatten* what counts as aesthetic experiences of nature.[86] Budd offers a version of the aesthetic experience of nature that remains abstractly transcendental, and thus it weakens both the natural aesthetic object and the aesthetic subject, which are, just like in the aesthetic experience of art, "highly organized," "concrete," and "saturated with historical experiences."[87] I turn now to Budd's transcendental requirements, which do not do justice to the breadth and depth of aesthetic experiences of nature, the historically shifting nature of the terms involved, and the very historicity of aesthetic experience itself.

Like Carlson and Saito, Budd follows Ronald Hepburn in defining the aesthetic experience of nature as an aesthetic response to nature *as* nature, and not as if it were art. Furthermore, like Carlson and Saito, the aesthetic experience of nature should be "true to what nature actually is."[88] Budd,

---

[85] Brady, "Don't Eat the Daisies," 109.
[86] Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, 91.
[87] Adorno, *Aesthetics*, 203.
[88] Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, 91.

however, has a non-cognitive, distinctly Kantian interpretation of the issue, in that everything hangs on the aesthetic conditions brought by the subject to the aesthetic experience. Budd's approach borrows from Kant because the "naturalness" of the aesthetic experience of nature lies in an element we bring to the experience—it is *subjectively* oriented. Not only must it *be* natural, but Budd locates the naturalness of the aesthetic experience of nature in the requirement that we must *experience* the object *as* natural. The aesthetic experience of nature requires the relevant description of the object or state of affairs *as* natural. Budd argues that "what you experience when you experience an item under one description is not the same as what you experience if you experience that item under another, incompatible, description."[89] As Budd points out, the phenomenology of an experience depends on what we experience something *as*, and these descriptions both constrain and enable particular qualities that might appear. Because the aesthetic experience of nature depends on whether or not we describe the object *as* natural *within* the experience, it is possible to have an aesthetic experience of a natural object which is not yet an aesthetic experience of nature. Carlson agrees with the importance of Budd's intervention, including it as "Budd's As Nature Constraint" in his account of the requirements for an adequate aesthetics of nature; nature must not be appreciated as if it were an artifact. [90]

Budd countenances an interesting wrinkle: given that so much of our natural environment "displays, for better or worse, the influence of humanity," he allows that "if some segment of the natural environment has been affected by humanity, it can still be appreciated aesthetically as nature, but appreciation of it by one who is aware of its non-pristine character is liable to be appreciation of

[89] Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, 12.
[90] See Carlson, "The Requirements for an Adequate Aesthetics of Nature," 3.

it as *nature affected by humanity*."[91] Budd further argues that in many cases—the most visceral being an animal in a zoo—one can choose to focus one's interest on the natural element. Thus, "[at] a zoo you cannot appreciate an animal in its natural environment. But it does not follow that your appreciation must be of a caged animal—an animal as caged. Rather, you can ignore its surroundings and appreciate the animal itself (within the severe limits imposed by its captive state)."[92] Budd thus includes space for the kind of aesthetic appreciation of nature I argue is most appropriate for our moment of anthropogenic climate change, but he also weakens it. While granting the validity of the aesthetic experience of nature affected by humanity, he does so in a way that sanctions tabling—"ignoring"—the knowledge of the cagedness of the animal, the acknowledgement of the imbrication of human activity and nature in the given natural aesthetic object. Although focusing on the "natural" element of the caged animal certainly speaks to one relevant moment in the overall aesthetic experience, the exclusion of the artificial ultimately provides a very narrow and incomplete account of the aesthetic experience in question.

This example highlights the tension that Allen Carlson also notes in Budd's work; while Budd resists scientific cognitivism in the name of a greater freedom in the aesthetic experience of nature than that of art, he also acknowledges a spectrum of "enhanced" or "diminished" aesthetic appreciation of nature, where knowledge—that the muddy expanse is a seabed, for instance—changes the quality of one's aesthetic response. For Carlson, this acknowledgement means that Budd reveals himself as committed despite himself to the scientific cognitivist view that scientific knowledge is necessary for a

[91] Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, 7.
[92] Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, 8.

"proper" aesthetic experience of nature. In a similar vein, the "abstractly transcendental" aesthetic experience of nature Budd has outlined would be directly served by Adorno's criticism of Kant. Though Adorno explicitly discusses art here, his point also holds for natural objects of aesthetic experience:

> people do not relate works of art, in the form in which they normally encounter them, to those most general of categories, and […] they do not come about through those most general categories; rather, the works of art are in themselves highly qualified, articulated, and—let me add—the aesthetic subject, namely the subject that, alone, is capable of experiencing works of art in a meaningful way, is likewise a highly organized, concrete subject saturated with historical experiences and cannot be compared to that general transcendental subject.[93]

Budd's focus on the subjective conditions of the aesthetic experience of nature, namely his emphasis on some mediated form of pleasure or displeasure and the requirement that one experience the aesthetic natural object as natural, is useful but not sufficient to account for the aesthetic experience of nature.

What spurs on the debate between the cognitivists and non-cognitivists is what Adorno describes as the "dilemma of aesthetics," namely that aesthetics "can be constituted neither from above nor from below, neither from concepts nor from aconceptual experience." So far, so Kantian. Adorno continues, though: "The only possibility for aesthetics beyond this miserable alternative is the philosophical insight that fact and concept are not polar opposites but mediated reciprocally in one another."[94] For facts and concepts to be mediated, it follows that that concepts themselves, whether from the natural sciences or from aesthetics (like disinterestedness), be placed in historical contexts,

[93] Adorno, *Aesthetics*, 203.
[94] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 343.

while the facts and pleasures of aesthetic experience must be analyzed and interpreted. The next chapter will be just such a dual treatment of *nature*.

Chapter 2

Natural-History and Figurations of Nature

In order to introduce the multiform figurations of nature in Adorno, I will begin with a serious charge against him. In Chapter 1, I argued that Adorno is committed to historicism in the sense that concepts and experiences of nature must be understood as originating in local, culturally specific contexts, but in *Against Nature*, Steven Vogel argues that Adorno remains beholden to a species of materialism that asserts the existence of a substrate underlying human activity, to wit, "nature" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and then the "non-identical" in *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory*.[1] The problem, Vogel suggests, is that in criticizing the natural sciences or social practices as dominating nature, Adorno and Horkheimer simultaneously posit nature as an unmediated, self-evident, existent thing. Adorno and Horkheimer must appeal to "nature" as dominated by enlightenment reason and natural

[1] Steven Vogel, *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory* (Albany: State University of New York, 1996), 69.

sciences, Vogel argues (echoing Habermas), because their critique of enlightenment reason is so extensive "that it threatens to swallow itself" and their own normative grounds rely on the "very Enlightenment values they claim to be questioning."[2] In order to avoid this circularity, Adorno and Horkheimer must wring all their normative content out of the suffering of "nature," but Vogel takes issue with the status of the knowledge claims about the nature being harmed. Having rejected natural science, he claims, they offer very little beyond vague appeals to animism as to how such claims might be justified. Vogel takes their criticism of natural science to be identical with a rejection of it full stop.

With an eye to grounding an effective critical social theory, Vogel frames his discussion of nature via two opposing camps: he is, per his title, against nature in both cases. On the one hand is the Hegelian tradition—which Vogel endorses—that insists on active production of the material world, knowledge claims, and societal values. Nature, from this perspective, stands in for the places the social character of this world has been hidden or "reified." On the other hand are the Romantic and *Lebensphilosophie* traditions, which assert the extra-discursive reality of nature, both inner and outer, as that from which we have become alienated.[3] This line of argument criticizes human practices on very different grounds: instrumental reason, the natural sciences, and technology violate nature's otherness; they fail to respect the distinct ontological irreducible to human values and aims. Vogel designates the deepest problem with this position to be in its explanation of:

> how it can itself come to *know* the nature that it claims dominative worldviews fail to comprehend. Its naturalism stands in conflict with its claims about the absolute otherness of nature, and the result is either incoherence or vacuity: either it grounds its critique in substantive

[2] Vogel, *Against Nature*, 3.
[3] Kate Soper also identifies Adorno and Horkheimer with the Romantic camp, see *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics, and the Non-Human* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1995), 30.

> claims about nature without being able to explain how such claims are possible or could avoid the trap of again denying nature's otherness, or else it makes no such claims and so leaves its critique utterly empty.[4]

In the spirit of Habermas, Vogel condemns Horkheimer and Adorno for crimes of insufficient normative grounding and performative contradiction, and he reprimands them with Hegel's famous rejoinder to Kantian limits of reason: the assertion of that which is beyond our cognition is at the same time formulated by our very concepts, thus it is intelligible and cognizable. This holds true, Vogel suggests, for any claim Adorno makes about nature.

In what follows, I argue that Adorno harnesses both perspectives in order to *denaturalize history* and to *interpret nature within and as history*. In Section 1, I turn to Adorno's "Idea of Natural-History" lecture for an early formulation of how we can think "nature" without reinforcing the traditional dualism of nature and history. The philosophical program opened up by the idea of *Naturgeschichte*, "natural-history," allows for a critique of social conditions that purport to be natural without lapsing into anti-realism (Soper's concern), while also speaking directly to Vogel's worry about the naturalization and obfuscation of nature as a social category. In Section 2, I argue that these concerns continue to animate Adorno and Horkheimer's method of speculative history in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and that the domination of nature becomes a key through which to understand and illuminate both history and the present. The philosophical interpretation of historically shifting figurations of nature is in service of revealing both the oppressive contemporary conditions of life and their historical, and thus changeable, status. In line with this method, in Section 3, I unpack some of these historical figurations of nature and trace how Adorno and Horkheimer identify the primal fear

[4] Vogel, *Against Nature*, 7.

of nature as the motor for enlightenment's emergence, its achievements, and ultimately its relapse into the myth it seeks to escape. While this fear fuels the movement of the domination of external nature, it also informs the development of what Adorno and Horkheimer call instrumental reason, a form of rationality that proscribes its own ability to posit and evaluate ends. I then turn in Section 4 to Adorno and Horkheimer's excursus on Odysseus, the proto-bourgeois allegorical figure. Adorno and Horkheimer interpret Odysseus's introversion of sacrifice as a failed bid to escape domination by nature. Odysseus stands for the renunciation of primal desires and mythical necessity for the sake of freedom, and as such Odysseus stages the development of the subject itself. In this figure, however, Adorno and Horkheimer gloss the forfeit of flourishing for survival, the re-entrenchment of natural needs, and the compulsive quality of instrumental thinking, features that are also instantiated in our contemporary "enlightened earth." By tracing these historical figurations of nature, Adorno and Horkheimer challenge the naturalness of the way life is organized today.

Section 1: The Idea of Natural-History

What *is* nature for Adorno? The answer is far from simple. Nature is not, for instance, simply the set of objects that are not artifacts. Rather, what the concept "nature" refers to is determined in, by, and against history, as Adorno describes via the critical concept of *Naturgeschichte*, natural-history. I aim now to present how even in Adorno's early lecture, "The Idea of Natural-History," Adorno already lays out his project of an alternative conceptuality, philosophical method, and the importance of the reconstitution of the category of nature. At the heart of this undertaking is the aim to interrupt the

perception that elements of social reality are ontologically unchangeable, which is supported by the strict conceptual dualism between nature as "what has always been" and history as the advent of the "qualitatively new." The objectives he presents in the lecture on "natural-history" take on greater specificity in his later works, but the early address helpfully illuminates the centrality of nature throughout his whole oeuvre.

Adorno first presented "The Idea of Natural-History" as a lecture at a meeting of the Frankfurt chapter of the Kant Society on July 15, 1932.[5] The purpose of his essay, he avows, is "to dialectically overcome the usual antithesis of nature and history."[6] This means that neither the concept of nature nor that of history have strict and final definitions, and instead he intends to "[push] these concepts to a point where they are mediated in their apparent difference."[7] On the one hand, he specifically wants to unravel the identity of nature and myth, where nature bears the principle of necessity and repetition that was a main feature of mythical explanation—nature as "what has always been, what as fatefully arranged predetermined being underlies history and appears in history; it is substance in history."[8] History, on the other hand, is the layer of human activity that intervenes on that substance; it is the mode of acting that introduces the qualitatively *new*: "it is movement that does not play itself out in mere identity, mere reproduction of what has always been, but rather one in which the new

---

[5] Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Introduction to 'The Idea of Natural-History,'" in *Things Beyond Resemblance*, 236.

[6] Theodor Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," in *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 252. See Hullot-Kentor for the importance of Kant in the development of the term, "*Naturgeschichte*," in his "Introduction to 'The Idea of Natural-History,'" in *Things Beyond Resemblance,* 238-9.

[7] Adorno, "Idea of Natural-History," 252-3.

[8] Adorno, "Idea of Natural-History," 253.

occurs, it is a movement that gains its true character through what appears in it as new."[9] The dualism of nature and history here prefigures that of myth and enlightenment in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where unchanging immanence stands on one side and human progress stands on the other.

While Deborah Cook and Thomas Whyman agree that the figure of natural-history runs throughout Adorno's work, it bears mentioning that Robert Hullot-Kentor considers Adorno's retrieval of the term natural-history to be a youthful and regressive mistake—even though the concept recurs in the later *Negative Dialectics*, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-65*, and *Aesthetic Theory*.[10] Hullot-Kentor's dismissal of the essay is based on his contention that it is irretrievably contaminated by the phenomenological discourse in which it intervenes. While Adorno ultimately argues that phenomenological premises must be abandoned, Hullot-Kentor counters that Adorno's criticisms and ultimate retention of the term natural-history concede too much to phenomenology.

Put briefly, the lecture begins by discussing early phenomenology, in relation to which Adorno quickly credits Martin Heidegger for showing the tension and entwinement of being and historical facticity—that is, for also complicating the strict dualism wherein being is substance and time is an incidental or secondary quality of being. For Heidegger, time and historicity are the central modes for understanding the being of beings—how human beings *are*, how they exist in the world. While the category of historicity is crucial in Heidegger's recasting of being, Adorno argues that it remains extremely limited because it fails to fully account for the "problem of historical contingency."[11] Not

---

[9] Adorno, "Idea of Natural-History," 256.

[10] See Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2014), and Tom Whyman, "Understanding Adorno on 'Natural-History,'" *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 24, no. 4 (2016): 452-472.

[11] Adorno, "Idea of Natural-History," 256.

only does the concept of historicity do too little to explain the diversity of phenomena in history, but ontology ultimately turns the historical fact into a *natural* one.[12] For Adorno, Heidegger's inscription of history and historicity into the ontological description of being only seems radical because, in the phenomenological perspective, history is precisely that which takes on the weight of the intractable law of nature, of necessity, of fate. Ontology thus preserves the experience of history as *given*; it is that into which one is *thrown*. From the perspective of *Dasein*, historical conditions, indeed, the very structures of being—which thus retain, for Adorno, an unreflected-upon subjective orientation—bear the mythical principles of necessity, repetition, and thus fate. Historical situations appear ineluctable, impervious to human intervention. Instead of questions of history's *contingent* conditions, beings' responses to the givenness of their lives are given more importance. And so while Heidegger has complicated the simplistic dualism whereby the eternal nature of substantial being opposes the changing, secondary qualities of time, he does so in a way that converts the contingency of historical conditions into the pseudo-natural given.

Hullot-Kentor maintains rather provocatively that, "'Natural-history,' as an unconscious reflection of Heidegger, is an unreflected mythical element in Adorno's essay. It is the form of the young Adorno's autonomy: quintessential dialectic of enlightenment, that is, self-assertion as self-

[12] Adorno strongest accusation against phenomenology's methodological strategy is that it is insufficient for explaining reality but through a terminological slight-of-hand, it inscribes that failure as codified, essential, phenomenological feature: "I mean nothing else than that the attempt of neo-ontological thought to come to terms with the unreachability of the empirical continually operates according to one schema: precisely where an element fails to dissolve into determinations of thought and cannot be made transparent but rather retains its pure thereness, precisely at this point the resistance of the phenomenon is transformed into a universal concept and its resistance as such is endowed with ontological value" ("Idea of Natural-History," 257).

denial."[13] (The charge of "quintessential dialectic of enlightenment" will be further explained in the discussion of Odysseus in the last section of this chapter.) Hullot-Kentor suggests that in order to defeat ontology, Adorno succumbs to it by hewing too closely to Heidegger's ontological terminology, deploying fetishistic neologisms in a manner he will later critique in *Jargon of Authenticity*. Against these charges, in the fifth chapter of this dissertation I will demonstrate that Adorno's account of natural-history is rather an inheritance of the Benjaminian theme of transience and mourning. In this chapter, however, it is sufficient to illustrate the continuity of the idea of natural-history with the dialectic between myth and enlightenment, the subject of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which I will do in the next sections.

Adorno's next move is to suggest that like Heidegger's fundamental ontology, vulgar historical perspectives (e.g., dogmatic "Diamat") also fail to account for "the concrete issues" that make up historical events, and if they do purport to exhaustively describe them, it is only by borrowing logic or inscribing content from outside the bounds of their original principles or purview. Additionally, conceiving of history as constitutively progressive or emancipatory slides quickly into triumphalism of the present, where the suffering of the past or present is trivialized or justified in the name of overall progress.[14] Following the failures of both phenomenology and vulgar Marxism, Adorno then starts afresh on his attempt to develop this expansive, dialectical concept of natural-history via Georg Lukács's concept of second nature and Walter Benjamin's exposition of allegory and transience in *The*

[13] Hullot-Kentor, "Introduction to 'The Idea of Natural-History,'" 241.

[14] See Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), for some theoretical and ethical consequences of using the idea of progress and cultural learning in grounding norms, such as casting colonized peoples and their forms of knowing as backward.

Origin of German Tragic Drama.

Again, Adorno's aim is to undermine the strict conceptual dualism between nature as "what has always been" and history as the advent of the "qualitatively new" because such a division serves the perception that elements of social reality are unchangeable. In order to complicate these views and the cosmic quietism or sanguine endorsement of history's bloodstained unfolding they underwrite, Adorno assigns a twofold task to philosophy: "*to comprehend historical being in its most extreme historical determinacy, where it is most historical, as natural being*," and, "*to comprehend nature as a historical being where it seems to rest most deeply in itself as nature.*"[15]

First, to comprehend historical being "as nature" involves the awareness that historical conditions appear to us as given and fated. Adorno here draws on Georg Lukács's formulation of "second nature," where, as Steven Vogel clarifies, second nature names the "basic propensity for the institutions and policies of the capitalist social order to appear as eternal and unalterable givens, in which their source in human interaction is systematically hidden."[16]

For Lukács, second nature amounts to the modern alienated world, overpowering and impossible to understand not because it is speechless, as with "first nature," but because "it is a petrified estranged complex of meaning that is no longer able to awaken inwardness."[17] In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács draws on Hegel's use of the term "second nature" and his eulogy of a lost social totality

[15] Adorno, "Idea of Natural-History," 260, Adorno's emphasis.
[16] Steven Vogel, *Against Nature,* 17.
[17] Adorno, "Idea of Natural-History," 261-2.

to describe the "historico-philosophical" conditions for the emergence of the epic and the novel.[18] Compared to the "integrated" civilization of ancient Greek life, Lukács describes the homelessness of the modern subject in "the world of convention, a world from whose all-embracing power only the innermost recesses of the soul are exempt, a world which is present everywhere in a multiplicity of forms too complex for understanding."[19] For Adorno, Lukács offers a correction to the ontological position in positing that although history is experienced as a host of incomprehensible forces on par with nature, it can also appear as the result of *unfated* history. While historical forces might appear as nature, by formulating it thus Lukács at the same time opens up the possibility of *denaturalizing* history to reveal its *historical* and thus changeable quality. Whereas in phenomenology historical contingency confronts the subject as fate, Lukács describes the modern subject "who experiences his self-made environment as a prison instead of as a parental home."[20] By emphasizing the *self-made* aspect of the constructed social world, Lukács opens the space for a release from history as fate and doom. At the same time, at least in *Theory of the Novel*, Lukács denies the possibility of a language or entry point for decoding the alienated world and bringing second nature "back to life," barring the return of the original spiritual element that gave rise to the laws and alienated meanings of second nature in the first

[18] As Susan Buck-Morss notes, this term is found in Hegel, and she additionally cites Max Horkheimer tracing the first usage of this term to Democritus; see *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 56, 56n94.

[19] Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1971), 62.

[20] Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 64, emphasis added. Adorno holds that "first nature" for Lukács is nature as object of the natural sciences, but it seems that Lukács also grasped the aesthetic sensibility for nature that Adorno will come to analyze in natural beauty. The full quote from Lukács reads: "Estrangement from nature (the first nature), the modern sentimental attitude to nature, is only a projection of man's experience of his self-made environment as a prison instead of as a parental home" (64).

place. Lukács does not even seem certain that this "metaphysical act," the return of totality, is possible. For Adorno, Lukács's contribution of rendering alienated history as possibly *legible* and unfated slides all too quickly into an infinite deferral of the problem of second nature and its comprehension.

Lukács thus relies too heavily on a theological solution to effect the shift in meaning he describes. It is Benjamin who "marks the decisive turning point in the formulation of the problem of natural-history" because he brings "the resurrection of second nature out of infinite distance into infinite closeness and made it an object of philosophical interpretation."[21] Via the concept of natural-history, Benjamin redirects philosophy to the task of "awakening [the] enciphered and petrified object."[22] Benjamin and Adorno thereby reorient philosophy towards interpreting objects—including conceptual constellations—in a mode responsive to their social and historical specificity. Adorno quotes extensively from Benjamin's *Origin of German Trauerspiel*, thereby drawing on the themes of reading allegorically and mourning to the task of constructing history.[23]

I will go into great detail in Chapter 5 on how important Benjamin's accounts allegory and mourning are throughout Adorno's philosophy and especially his account of natural beauty, but for now it is crucial to emphasize that, alongside understanding that history appears to us as fateful nature,

---

[21] Adorno, "Idea of Natural-History," 262.

[22] Adorno, "Idea of Natural-History," 262.

[23] Susan Buck-Morss argues that in addition to the references to Benjamin's *Origin of German Trauerspiel*, Adorno's "Natural-History" speech shows the direct influence of discussions with Benjamin in 1929 at Königstein, where Benjamin laid out the plan for his *Arcades Project*. For a discussion of Benjamin in relation to Adorno's "Natural History," see Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991), 59, 66. For an extended discussion of natural-history and the task of interpreting living history via the interpretation of industrial objects as fossils in Benjamin, see *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Chapter 3, entitled, "Natural History: Fossil," and for Benjamin's critique of progress "as the fetishization of modern temporality, which is an endless repetition of the 'new' as the 'always-the-same,'" see *The Dialectics of Seeing,* Chapter 4, "Mythic History" (57).

there is much to be gleaned from understanding nature "as history." To see nature "as history" entails recognizing that our relation to the material world has historical consequences. Like our evolving conceptions of nature, nature itself *really* changes; species become extinct (through "natural" and human intervention), new ones are created through genetic modification, the earth's air and water become polluted, and human biological qualities themselves are formed and transformed via mutable social practices.

In the concept of natural-history, Adorno makes space for both the realist and culturalist positions: nature really *is* transformed, both nature external to us and human nature. But likewise, both nature and history appear to us in historically-determined and contingent forms, some of which serve vested interests and the perpetuation of the status quo.

Section 2: From Natural-History to Speculative History

Given the dialectical spin Adorno brings to the concept of nature, what are we to make of the speculative history in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which explicitly focuses on the domination of nature? In "On the Critique of the Philosophy of History" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer make clear how central the domination of nature—and thus the term nature—is to the project of critical theory:

> A philosophical interpretation of world history would have to show how, despite all the detours and resistances, the systematic domination over nature has been asserted more and more decisively and has

> integrated all internal human characteristics. Economic, political, and cultural forms would have to be derived from this position.[24]

In this section, I will explain why the domination of nature is the central lens through which to read both world history and the history of philosophy.

Adorno's dialectical operations in the "Idea of Natural-History" prefigure *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as the concept of natural-history clearly anticipates one of Adorno and Horkheimer's central theses, namely: "Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology."[25] In both, Adorno aims to reveal the falsity of the conceptual polarity between the eternally, necessarily recurring (nature/myth) and human progress or effectuality and history (history/enlightenment). Drawing on Adorno's criticism of traditional models of history in the "Idea of Natural-History," Dilek Huseyinzadegan presents such operations as being part of the larger project of a critical philosophy of history, which she argues seeks to reveal both the *necessity* and the *contingency* of contemporary socio-political reality. Such a critical philosophy of history provides an account of the trends of reason that determine current social and political conditions, while also disputing a grand telos in history and allowing for the possibility that things could have been and could be otherwise. Revealing these two elements—in both formal philosophical systems and more mundane ideologies—becomes critical philosophy's very task. Its method, she argues, drawing from Adorno's essay, "The Actuality of Philosophy," is "to construct keys—critical interpretations—that fit a given problem perfectly, describing it succinctly and structurally, so that once such an interpretation is provided, the question

---

[24] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007), 186.
[25] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, *xviii*.

at hand is either transformed or disappears altogether."[26] Huseyinzadegan argues that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is one example of this critical philosophy of history, and that the domination of nature functions as "the interpretive key that unlocks the Enlightenment and its cultural-political legacy."[27]

Huseyinzadegan also cautions that sole emphasis on enlightenment reason's entanglement with domination results in the very teleological philosophy of history that Adorno and Horkheimer aim to disrupt. This interpretation aptly describes Habermas's famous intervention against his mentors in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, where he alleges that their account of reason is so damning as to undermine reason's validity entirely, thereby undercutting their ability to normatively ground their own critique.[28] If we also remain focused on what she calls the *contingent* element of their philosophy of history—what I in this chapter identify with the critical disputation of false mythical necessity inherent in Lukács's second nature—we can buy into Adorno and Horkheimer's account of the historical ascendance of the form of rationality that seeks mastery over nature, without maintaining that it is necessarily the only possible formation of reason.

What then is unlocked by the "key" of the domination of nature? *Dialectic of Enlightenment* provides interpretations of history that foreground reason's compulsive efforts to overcome the alterity and indeterminacy of nature, both inner and outer. The general thrust of this speculative history of European rationality is that myth (already enlightenment) fixes the power of excessive nature into cyclical systems, and enlightenment (overdetermined by mythical fear) is driven to extirpate

---

[26] Dilek Huseyinzadegan, "Between Necessity and Contingency: A Critical Philosophy of History in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," *Epoché* 22, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 476.
[27] Huseyinzadegan, "Between Necessity and Contingency," 478.
[28] Jürgen Habermas, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Horkheimer and Adorno," in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 106-130.

animism—the belief in the living power of nature—by rooting out and debunking any hint of magical or mythological residue. Reason's compulsive skepticism, albeit connected to enlightenment's emancipatory aims, is driven by the residual primal fear of nature and ultimately results in domination of human life by natural needs and what seem to be ineluctable, irrational social forces—or second nature, as in "Idea of Natural-History." Another way of putting this is that the "key" of the domination of nature allows Adorno and Horkheimer to relate the disenchantment of living nature on the one hand to the release of destructive "natural" forces on the other. Tracking the shifting meaning and appearance of nature is a particularly fruitful line of inquiry because it touches on historical constellations of conceptuality, material practices, and the links between them.

Before I explore their account of the domination of nature in greater detail, I will first emphasize the significance of the strategy behind such a mode of philosophizing. When myth and enlightenment—like nature and history—are fashioned as internally reliant on one another for their meaning, the presuppositions and structures of our contemporary reason appear in a more historically charged light. In effecting a redefinition of myth as enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer seek to undermine the common characterization of myth as backwards superstition or spiritual enthusiasm, and enlightenment as salvation. This move ultimately undercuts reason's *contemporary* claims of neutrality and self-sufficiency, and it already suggests a dialectical interplay of the aesthetic, epistemological, and ethical registers. As Simon Jarvis emphasizes, the work is a collection of fragments.[29] The fragmentary, historical character of their account is an attempt to expose similarities

[29] Noting the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*'s original title, *Philosophical Fragments*, Jarvis emphasizes this element in his chapter on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 21-22.

between the supposedly mythic—unchanging and naturalized—past and contemporary life, purportedly independent of it. They present reason as a series of historical constellations responding to distinct pressures, and they identify the same fear of nature's power and indeterminacy as spurring both myth and enlightenment, which in turn produces different pictures of nature and the subject in their shifting historical relations.

Not only, as Huseyinzadegan argues, is this method supposed to reveal the contingency and necessity of historical reality, but also—and this is crucial—speculative history is supposed to reveal the present in a different light; it is to shock or startle one into seeing the *now* anew. To understand this aspect of speculative history in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, we must make the connection to Walter Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image. The dialectical image, Benjamin cryptically explains, "is that wherein *what has been* comes together in a flash with *the now* to form a constellation."[30] Susan Buck-Morss has documented that in 1929 Benjamin shared notes with Adorno and Horkheimer for the *Arcades Project*, the central concern of which is the illumination of a revelatory knowledge out of the reified past and its mute objects. While Adorno would come to fight with Benjamin over a satisfying account of *how* a dialectical image comes to accomplish such a feat, the illuminative function of the dialectical image is incorporated into Adorno and Horkheimer's speculative history, which operates by challenging the perceptions that the past is entirely past or that the past has been sublated in history's progressive development.[31]

---

[30] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project,* trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002), 463, [N3, 1].

[31] Cf. note 23 above. These citations come from Benjamin's notes for an essay entitled "Paris Arcades: A Dialectical Fairyland" [*Pariser Passagen: Eine dialektische Feerie*], which, while hidden with the rest of Benjamin's *Arcades Project* in the Bibliothèque Nationale for years after the war, was among the texts

In the dialectical image and Adorno and Horkheimer's *speculative* history (with emphasis on the act of seeing inherent in speculation), history and the present become politically and ethically charged—"*what has been* comes together in a flash with *the now.*" Both a typical positivist causal account and an ideological progressive account of history yield the same result: they both disavow exactly this sense of political implication, and thus they hide the way in which they serve their political function of maintaining the status quo.[32] Benjamin wants to further purge historical materialism of its progressivist slant, arguing that it too "must renounce the epic element in history." For Benjamin, as well as Adorno and Horkheimer, a historical materialism deserving of the name "blasts the epoch out of the reified 'continuity of history.' But it also explodes the homogeneity of the epoch, interspersing it with ruins—that is, with the present."[33] The attention to and urgency of the present, while remaining sensitive to the unredeemed suffering of the past, is a fundamental readjustment in the kind of meaning history might have. In other words, the political orientation to the present and future

---

Benjamin read to Adorno and Horkheimer at Königstein and Frankfurt in 1929. Susan Buck-Morss also documents how Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image not only informed Adorno's "Natural-History" essay but made appearances in Adorno's own work—notably his *Kierkegaard* monograph—before the term became a source of strife for the two friends. For Buck-Morss's discussion of the conflict between Adorno and Benjamin over the dialectical image, see *The Origins of Negative Dialectics*, Chapter 9.

[32] In his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin includes a passage from a letter from Adorno (Wiesengrund), dated August 5, 1935: "With the vitiation of their use value, the alienated things are hollowed out and, as ciphers, they draw in meanings. Subjectivity takes possession of them insofar as it invests them with intentions of desire and fear. And insofar as defunct things stand in as images of subjective intentions, these latter present themselves as immemorial and eternal. Dialectical images are constellated between alienated things and incoming and disappearing meaning, are instantiated in the moment of indifference between death and meaning. While things in appearance are awakened to what is newest, death transforms the meanings to what is most ancient" (466, [N5, 2]). Benjamin then adds, "With regard to these reflections, it should be kept in mind that, in the nineteenth century, the number of 'hollowed-out' things increases at a rate and on a scale that was previously unknown, for technical progress is continually withdrawing newly introduced objects from circulation" (466, [N5, 2]).

[33] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 474, [N9a, 60].

informs what appears *as* history, just as an attitude towards history—as fated doom or as standing in need of redemption, for example—informs how one regards the logics and perceptual domains of contemporary experience. Benjamin seeks to bring about a "Copernican revolution in historical perception," where "politics attains primacy over history,"[34] a goal that is echoed in Horkheimer's famous avowal in 1937 that the goal of critical theory is not "merely an increase of knowledge as such," but the "emancipation of the human being from relations of enslavement."[35] All these thinkers contest the illusion of neutrality in merely "getting the facts right."[36]

Adorno and Horkheimer's speculative history is thus not the assertion of a *necessarily* or *totally* regressive arc of history—contra Habermas, Vogel, and Soper. Instead, as Adorno frames it in the *History and Freedom Lectures* from 1964-65, "the task is both to construct *and* to deny universal history… The domination of nature—which incidentally is mentioned in one of Benjamin's theses—welds the discontinuous, hopelessly splintered elements and phases of history together into a unity while at the same time its own pressure senselessly tears them asunder once more."[37] Attention to the domination of nature allows one to grasp history as "continuous *in* discontinuity," which renders both history and the present unfated and changeable.[38]

---

[34] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 883 [<h°, 2>], cf. [K1, 2].

[35] Max Horkheimer, in the "Nachtrag" to "Traditional and Critical Theory," *Kritische Theorie*, 2, (Frankfurt am Main, 1968), 194, my translation.

[36] Benjamin's concerns about disrupting the progressivist account of history animate much of his oeuvre, from the recovery of post-Reformation allegory in the *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* to the famous "Theses on the Philosophy of History," written in the last year of his life and subject to much controversy among his friends Adorno, Hannah Arendt, and Gershom Scholem. See Samantha Rose Hill, "Walter Benjamin's Last Work," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, December 9, 2019, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/walter-benjamins-last-work/.

[37] Theodor Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Malden, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2006), 93.

[38] Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, 92.

Section 3: Fear of Nature and the Nature of Fear

Having shown that tracing the shapes of the domination of nature reveals the necessity and contingency of history while illuminating the order of the present, we are now equipped to explore the speculative account in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where nature is increasingly figured as the object of human thought and practice. In this section, I will focus on the fear of nature's power that persists in new and unchecked forms in enlightenment thinking. Central to the dialectic of enlightenment is the containment of excessive nature for the sake of knowledge and control. It is ultimately the persistence of this fear that overdetermines skeptical enlightenment rationality, resulting in both a rationality afraid of indeterminacy and nature, and a material world that is overrun by natural needs. By tracing the modes by which nature has been conceived, Adorno and Horkheimer identify a pattern wherein nature is increasingly understood in terms of the human subject.

The first amorphous and terrifying figuration of nature is *mana*; it is "embodied nature as a universal power."[39] Adorno and Horkheimer suggest that precisely this indeterminate force persists beyond prehistory; even in the world of the ancient Greeks, "primal and undifferentiated, [*mana*] is everything unknown and alien; it is that which transcends the bounds of experience, the part of things which is more than their immediately perceived existence."[40] The principle of *mana* speaks to the early perception of nature's power over and against human beings. Shamans would influence this power through mimetic rituals, in which they become or channel the force that is feared in order to sway it through imitation. These magical rites notably imply "specific representation. What is done to the

[39] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 12.
[40] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 10.

spear, the hair, the name of the enemy, is also to befall his person; the sacrificial animal is slain in place of the god."[41]

Such speculation concerning "primitive man" should certainly invite suspicion as the figure is invoked historically to justify colonial, expansionist projects in the name of enlightenment. Nevertheless, the function of *mana* within Adorno and Horkheimer's speculative history is to emphasize the fear of the threatening power of nature that characterizes both magic *and* enlightenment. The fear of nature jumpstarts the movement whereby knowledge is a form of control, and magic is the site-specific means for influencing nature and its dangers. The overwhelming and mysterious power of nature as a broad force gives additional charge to its particular threats, and magic contests these specific iterations of nature's power through the mimetic wielding of that same power. For Adorno and Horkheimer, it is the continuing fear of nature's power that constitutes myth's opposition to magic. Magic remains too beholden to nature's terms, as it were, and myth's project becomes the separation of the larger force of nature and its "individual link."[42]

Pitting itself against magic's local negotiations with nature, myth arises as a systematic organon of knowledge about the world and its causes. What distinguishes myth is that instead of the specificity intrinsic to magic, it provides overarching explanations of natural events. Its constitutive principle is immanence, "the explanation of every event as repetition."[43] The hierarchy of the Pantheon still allows place for the old gods and the older magical rites meant to placate them, but their powers are limited and archaic in comparison with the universal reach of the new guard, whose actions account for the

[41] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 6.
[42] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 10.
[43] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 12.

motion of the sun, the stars, and the seasons. Not only are these "dark, chthonic gods of the original inhabitants" generally suppliant and relatively ineffectual, but they are "banished to the hell into which the earth is transformed under the religions of Indra and Zeus, with their worship of sun and light."[44] Under the rule of the Olympians, the old gods appear as mere superstitions, or weak shadows with outdated claims that must be formally mediated by the new authorities. And just as all gods reign over their respective domains, Zeus presides centrally over his court, adjudicating any dispute (or deputizing proxies) with sovereign power. The ruling gods become more abstract, their principles and dominions more total and yet also more rule-bound and determinate. Instead of itself being the source of overwhelming forces, the earth becomes a stage for their powers, whims, and routines—Persephone returns to Hades after every harvest and Demeter withholds the earth's fertility, Helios drives his golden chariot to make the day. Crucially, Adorno and Horkheimer position myth not as irrationality but as *knowledge*—"myth is already enlightenment"—and they further link both science and myth to the same root, this fear of nature: "The doubling of nature into appearance and essence, effect and force, made possible by myth no less than by science, springs from human fear, the expression of which becomes its explanation."[45]

In this way, Adorno and Horkheimer present myth as the progressive ordering of the disparate, local negotiations with nature's power through *repeatability*, in such a way that the old truths appear false, laughably middling, or brutally archaic. Enlightenment will retain iterability as a virtue, and when with time the new gods themselves become the next targets of this enlightening process, myth

[44] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 10.
[45] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 10.

itself appears to be mere anthropomorphic projection. While the "solar, patriarchal myth was itself an enlightenment," they write, it had to "[pay] a price."[46] This price is the afterlife, the perpetuation, of myth's hostility toward the asserted insufficiency of magical, mimetic practices:

> Mythology itself set in motion the endless process of enlightenment by which, with ineluctable necessity, every definite theoretical view is subjected to the annihilating criticism that it is only a belief, until even the concepts of mind, truth, and, indeed, enlightenment itself have been reduced to animistic magic.[47]

The mythological intervention into the magical world-view initiates the drive to extirpate animism, the belief in the living power of nature, which thus entails myth's own doom. Adorno and Horkheimer suggest that the enlightenment takes this mythological compulsion into overdrive, rooting out and unmasking any hint of magical or mythological residue. This is one manner in which "enlightenment reverts to mythology"—it is *overdetermined* by mythical fear. The active, affective, passionate hostility towards the appearance of falsity is the disavowed counterpart of the increasing clarity and neutrality of the enlightened organon of thought, and the unchecked fear of the mythological project causes reason itself to be viewed—to view itself—with suspicion. It is myth's enlightening and skeptical kernel that motivated philosophical and scientific paradigm shifts, but it is also that which threatens to corrode any substantial value as itself anthropomorphic projection.

From shamans imitating nature in order to share in and control its power to the universal hierarchy of the Olympian pantheon, a crucial element of this transition from the mimetic practices of magic to conceiving of nature in terms of iterable principles is the definition of nature in terms

---

[46] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 7.
[47] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 7, my emphasis.

originating from the side of the human subject, rather than that of nature. The magical conception of nature remains too specific, too particular, and the embodied imitation of nature also remains at that level of particularity. The transition to myth and scientific thought features the use of abstract categories found on the side of the subject. This movement away from describing nature and relating to nature in its own terms, that is *mimetically*, becomes more explicit in the scientific method of enlightenment thought and what Adorno and Horkheimer call "instrumental reason."

Instrumental reason is the form of knowledge that primarily calculates according to the principle of repeatability and is connected to modern scientific method and technology. As technology, it "aims to produce neither concepts nor images, nor the joy of understanding, but method, exploitation of the labor of others, capital."[48] Not only is this kind of thinking democratically impervious to who makes use of it—it serves researchers' pursuit of knowledge as well as political engineers' more nefarious aims—but it informs the qualities by which the objects of this knowledge are known. Science's objects only appear in the terms sanctioned by the virtue of universal iterability, and particular qualities are jettisoned as secondary, extraneous, or unsound.

In the progression from magic to myth and then to enlightened scientific method, both the identity of the subject and the identity of the object become increasingly ossified, unified, and disenchanted; nature is transformed from amorphous power to substrate, matter for manipulation. Identity develops both on the side of the subject and the object—the self and the concept become more self-same as nature also becomes more abstract. Nature as substance, mere stuff, or matter is a far cry from the specificity of nature and the subject's imitation of that specificity present in magical,

[48] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1, my emphasis.

mimetic rationality. Again, Adorno and Horkheimer use the language of price: "Human beings purchase the increase in their power with estrangement from that over which it is exerted…In their transformation the essence of things is revealed as always the same, a substrate of domination. This identity constitutes the unity of nature. Neither it nor the unity of the subject was presupposed by magical incantation."[49]

The transition in the figuration of nature and the conception of the subject amounts to stripping what is living out of nature on the side of *both* the subject and object, and replacing this indeterminacy of living nature with unity. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the identity of nature, or the possibility of conceiving of nature as a unity, is the result of defining nature in terms of the subject. I will return to this theme in the next chapter, but it bears emphasizing now that at stake here is the thought that *concepts are adequate to nature*, that thinking can exhaustively know nature, which Adorno and Horkheimer link to the disenchantment of nature: "It is the identity of mind and its correlative, the unity of nature, which subdues the abundance of qualities. Nature, stripped of qualities, becomes the chaotic stuff of mere classification, and the all-powerful self becomes a mere having, an abstract identity."[50] This is, in essence, what Adorno will later call "identity thinking," the form of thinking that "says what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what, accordingly, it is not itself."[51] As Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*, "The more relentlessly our identitarian thinking besets its object, the farther will it take us from the identity of the object."[52]

---

[49] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 6.
[50] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 6.
[51] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1973), 149.
[52] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 149.

While an unmitigated return to magical practices and the magical non-identical subject is on the whole not possible (because in contemporary historical contexts, their meanings will have changed), Adorno and Horkheimer do point out the utopian moment contained within mimesis, the imitative behavior that in magic sought to influence and channel nature's power through an "individual link." Mimesis in this context means that the knowing subject *imitates* the natural phenomenon it seeks to know; the subject and nature are not fully rationalized, disenchanted, and abstract, and cognition is more object-dependent. This feature of mimesis will be important especially for Adorno's aesthetic theory and the form of aesthetic rationality that he suggests is operative in artworks. This mimetic rationality is what is "tabooed" by the dominant forms of enlightenment rationality, which privileges the adequation of nature to categories of the subject. Speaking about the self that learns to equate truth with classifying thought, "without whose fixed distinctions it cannot exist," Adorno writes: "Along with mimetic magic *it tabooed the knowledge which really apprehends the object*."[53] Mimetic knowledge "which really apprehends the object," which seeks to understand nature in its own terms, we might say, will return in aesthetic experience but as heavily qualified, as cordoned off from knowledge proper in the realm of the aesthetic. This theme will return in final two chapters.

While it does seem at times as if Adorno and Horkheimer conflate the instrumental nature of reason with disenchantment, it bears mentioning that the problem according to them is the *supremacy* of instrumentality in social life, rather than the local deployment of instrumental reasoning in

[53] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 10, emphasis added. Mimetic rationality contrasts with modern scientific reality, where the "'happy match' between human understanding and the nature of things that [Bacon] envisaged is a patriarchal one: the mind, conquering superstition, is to rule over disenchanted nature" (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1).

appropriate situations.[54] To confuse their critique of the *supremacy* of instrumentality with the critique of instrumental reason full stop would actually paper over the distinct interests of classes and political orders. While instrumental reasoning is not necessarily damaging, and Adorno and Horkheimer do not deny the enlightenment's utopian aims and the power brought about by scientific reason, the danger of instrumentality stems from enlightenment's wariness towards its own enthusiasms. This residual fear of mythical remnants translates into the skepticism towards substantial claims, ranging from the metaphysical to the ethical.

Adorno and Horkheimer identify a kind of tragic irony in the enlightenment's efforts to free itself from myth. As discussed above, a feature of the mythic principle of repetition is necessity or fate, and it is just this sense of fate or doom that enlightenment thinking seeks to free itself from. As in a tragic drama, enlightenment's efforts to free itself from this mythical sense of necessity only further seals its fate; enlightenment actually *reinscribes* fate within itself, in that the determination of any particular becomes preordained, in the thrall of powers greater than it. Again, in defiance of the dualism between myth and enlightened modernity, Adorno and Horkheimer connect two historically discrete phenomena so that their similarities might be revealed: the "principle of the fated necessity which caused the downfall of the mythical hero […] finally evolved as the logical conclusion from the oracular utterance."[55] Not only does the sense of fate delivered by the mythical oracle return in the formal logic of every rationalistic system of Western philosophy—the finality of a "QED" declared at the end of a proof mirrors the authoritative word of the sibyl—but we can extend this point to the less

[54] Thanks to Jason Walsh for the questions about the status of instrumental reason.
[55] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 8.

formal progressivist logics of capitalism and liberalism discussed in the previous section. When presented as the *natural* and the *logical* conclusion of civilization and therefore as the systems best facilitating freedom, they are also fashioned as ineluctable, and other possible forms of organizing life are rendered fantastical or delusional.

This reinscription of fate, the stakes of which are enlightenment's own aims of emancipation and human happiness, is connected to another element of mythical rationality: "wrath against those of insufficient righteousness."[56] This wrath is connected to the originary fear of nature, which translates into a more generalized fear of otherness or indeterminacy. By insufficiently recognizing these sources of its actions, enlightenment dooms itself:

> Just as myths already entail enlightenment, with every step enlightenment entangles itself more deeply in mythology. Receiving all its subject matter from myths, in order to destroy them, it falls as judge under the spell of myth. It seeks to escape the trial of fate and retribution by itself exacting retribution on that trial. In myths, everything that happens must atone for the fact of having happened. It is no different in enlightenment: no sooner has a fact been established than it is rendered insignificant.[57]

In the desire to be free from the principle of fated necessity, enlightenment gets drawn into the cycle of compulsively attacking any contingency or residually significant category involved in a claim. Where enlightenment is incapable of acknowledging its dependence upon myth, it is doomed to a furious skepticism towards all objects and conclusions that appear too reliant on those objects. The attempted evasion of fate only inscribes it more deeply within rationality itself.

---

[56] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 8.
[57] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 8.

Adorno and Horkheimer illuminate a continuity between the first (speculative) origin of thought and the present; by doing so they call for contemplation of the present and future directions of thought. In this account, then, there is a doubling of fear, which itself appears as both a *mythical remnant* and a *natural compulsion*. They first cite the primal fear of nature and its indeterminate power, then, second, the persistence of nature's power via the persistence of that fear:

> Humans believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown. This has determined the path of demythologization, of enlightenment, which equates the living with the nonliving as myth had equated the nonliving with the living. Enlightenment is mythical fear radicalized. The pure immanence of positivism, its ultimate product, is nothing other than a form of universal taboo. Nothing is allowed to remain outside, since the mere idea of the "outside" is the real source of fear.[58]

Out of fear, disenchanting demythologization specifically deploys conceptual categories—the nonliving—to explain and name what is unique and living, whereas under myth all that was not living was organized and animated by nature's powerful divinities. In his influential work, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, Jay Bernstein argues that this central living/non-living distinction "is necessary to even begin making the kinds of discriminations necessary for ethical life."[59]

By placing radicalized mythical fear at the heart of enlightenment reason, Adorno and Horkheimer acknowledge the enlightenment's emancipatory aims, the conflation of those aims with hopes of mastery, and the contemporary state of social, political—and, I would add, environmental—life as one of catastrophe. This is one sense in which Adorno and Horkheimer mean the declaration

---

[58] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 11.

[59] J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 198. Cf. Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 42-43.

that opens *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity."[60] In the next section, I will show how in addition to increasingly defining external—living, powerful, indeterminate—nature in terms of the human subject, the subject *itself* is shaped by this fear.

Section 4: Odysseus and Nature's Sacrifice

Having given an account of how a rationality afraid of indeterminacy and nature has developed, I will next turn to Adorno and Horkheimer's excursus on Odysseus, whose epic journey stages the emergence of the subject as we know it. I will argue that far from being a reactive or romantic lament about the loss of true nature (contra Soper and Vogel), the figure of Odysseus must be understood in relation to the contemporary logic governing social life, wherein the social world is overrun by natural needs. The romantic misunderstanding of Adorno and Horkheimer results from isolating the figure of Odysseus from the broader critique of social reality. Rather, in keeping with the preceding sections in this chapter, the figure of Odysseus must be read in relation to the "contemporary situation."

And what is this situation? Writing in exile during the Second World War, Adorno and Horkheimer seek to answer one concrete question in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: how is it that at the very moment when the technological means appear that might release people from natural needs,

[60] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1.

instead social stratification, fascism, and world war reign? Hunger, shelter insecurity, ethnic aggressions, and the question of survival are features of both new and old nation-states, liberal and not, across the globe. The present social-political landscape features an abundance of wealth, food, and technological advancement, but also increasingly large disparities between those who benefit from such advances and those who do not. Instead of the amelioration of natural needs, the persistence of natural needs are institutionalized in a self-mystifying way, and poverty is used as a tool by the powerful: "Poverty as the antithesis between power and impotence is growing beyond measure, together with the capacity permanently to abolish poverty. From the commanding heights of the economy to the latest professional rackets, the tangled mass of cliques and institutions which ensures the indefinite continuation of the status quo is impenetrable to each individual."[61] Alongside the development of the rationalized world, which features unprecedented technologies and possibilities for production and distribution, the irrational, opaque, and capital-oriented organization of interests checks the emancipatory possibility of such developments. Both the power to affect the world and the power to comprehend the world continue to be unavailable to the individual, and needs dictated by mere survival remain the pressing logic of life on both an individual and national level. The ascendance of survival as dominant logic, the consequent forfeit of more expansive natural ends, and the domination of nature are elements of how nature is "released" in the social realm.

Indeed, it is the very development of the system's capacity to satisfy natural needs that perpetuates the increasing dominance of natural needs for the expanding precarious population. And

[61] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 30. The footnote reveals that the term "poverty" replaces the "increasing misery" of the 1944 edition. This suggests increased emphasis on economic factors over or alongside national-political ones.

this "enslavement to nature of people today," they write, is connected to "social progress" itself: "The increase in economic productivity which creates the conditions for a more just world also affords the technical apparatus and the social groups controlling it a disproportionate advantage over the rest of the population."[62] Reason's transformation into a calculating tool combines with the overdetermining power of particular interest groups; unprecedented dominion over nature is coupled with the *release of compulsive nature* in that natural needs now dominate the ends of life.[63] Also, as in the last section, dominant positivistic reason has abdicated its authority to make claims outside the purview of iterable facts. This instrumental reason thereby forfeits knowing (and knowing itself as) living nature, and by that very move lends itself the authority to demand universal—*compulsory*—assent; "Precisely by virtue of its irresistible logic, thought, in whose compulsive mechanism nature is reflected and perpetuated, also reflects itself as a nature oblivious of itself, as a mechanism of compulsion."[64]

In the previous section, I analyzed how enlightenment thought, compelled by the fear of nature, illusion, and otherness, disenchants nature and increasingly defines nature in terms of the subject. In this section, I focus on the transformation of nature *within* the subject, which, in turn, reflects the logic of the social whole. For Adorno and Horkheimer, Odysseus is a transitional figure in the dialectic of enlightenment within whom just this kind of transformation is staged. Straddling the oral tradition of the mythic cult and the written epic of Homer, Odysseus uses his wits, his powers of

---

[62] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xvii.
[63] Cook points out that although Adorno seems to agree with Freud (in *Civilization and its Discontents*) that "civilization primarily consists in the attempts of human beings to make 'the earth serviceable to them', and to protect them 'against the violence of the forces of nature,'" Adorno emphasizes the "compulsive character of self-preservation, arguing that, in our stubborn attempts to 'break the compulsion of nature by breaking nature', we simply succumb more deeply to that compulsion" (*Adorno on Nature*, 21).
[64] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 31.

manipulation and charm, and his stamina for suffering to survive the myriad of archaic monsters and desires that lie between him and his home. Although his violent confrontations with the mythical characters who threaten or seduce him (often both), with his own crew, and with himself are brutal to contemporary readers, the logic of survival at any cost is yet a familiar one. As Jay Bernstein argues, Horkheimer and Adorno's deployment of Odysseus makes visible "the overlap between Odysseus, who is presented as a proto-bourgeois right down to his penchant for do-it-yourself (in his bed building), and ourselves."[65] Their descriptions of Odysseus are meant to resonate with contemporary tropes—"*what has been* comes together in a flash with *the now,*" we could say:

> The nimble-witted man survives only at the cost of his own dream, which he forfeits by disintegrating his own magic along with that of the powers outside him. He can never have the whole, he must always be able to wait, to be patient, to renounce; he may not eat the lotus or the cattle of Hyperion [….] He wriggles through—that is his survival, and all the renown he gains in his own and others' eyes merely confirms that the honor of heroism is won only by the humbling of the urge to attain entire, universal, undivided happiness.[66]

The substitution in the present-day neoliberal marketplace would be that there is no sense of a dream lost; rather the grind *is* the dream. In any case, the violence of Odysseus's losses and the ravaged nature of his life are, in their extremeness, supposed to challenge the naturalness with which we might otherwise regard the sacrifice of happiness for survival.

While the mythical forces—and their demands for sacrifice—are pacified, tricked, and at times surrendered to in this story of subjection, the outstanding feature Adorno and Horkheimer fasten upon is the *introversion* of sacrifice in the subject. A key element of this introversion of sacrifice is the

---

[65] Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, 84n14.
[66] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 45.

sacrifice of one's own nature, via the deferral of happiness and the denial of primal instincts for the sake of one's immediate survival. While the denial of instinct is of course not inherently objectionable, Adorno and Horkheimer trace how in Odysseus—and indeed in the capitalist organization of life—this denial of inner nature is connected to the aim of dominating others. These two elements, the replacement of mere survival for fulfillment and the denial of one's own nature for the sake of dominating external nature and other human beings, are what I call the sacrifice of nonreductive nature, and they facilitate the release of nature as the drive for survival. By tracking this switch in the elaboration of the cunning of reason, Adorno and Horkheimer place the relationship to nature at the center of the destructive and ultimately regressive aspect of enlightenment thinking.

To begin with, for Adorno and Horkheimer, the mythic order hinges on sacrifice. One seeks favors or atones for offenses to the gods by giving something up. Lest we perpetuate the dualism between the mythical world of sacrifice and enlightened modernity, Simon Jarvis points out three ways in which sacrifice anticipates features of the contemporary world. First, sacrifice in the mythical order prefigures commodity exchange, "because in it one object or creature may be substituted for another incommensurable with it."[67] Second, and relatedly, sacrifice is also already a manifestation of identity thinking, because the object of sacrifice is known not in its particularity but by virtue of its function in the exchange. Thus, internal to the ostensibly mythical act of pacifying the gods, Adorno and Horkheimer identify a moment of enlightenment's mastery over myth; again, "myth was already enlightenment." In sacrifice, the exchange of the sacrificial object for favors is a form of cheating the gods out of what they originally claim, thus spelling the triumph of reason and human ends over the

[67] Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, 29.

powers of nature and the gods (fateful nature's proxies or avatars). Sacrifice is thus a sacred act of deception; "If exchange represents the secularization of sacrifice, the sacrifice itself, like the magic schema of rational exchange, appears as a human contrivance intended to control the gods, who are overthrown precisely by the system created to honor them."[68] Not only do the substitutability of the object and the subsumptive logic of sacrifice outlive properly mythic practices, but these principles predominantly structure the contemporary rationalized world.

The third feature that Jarvis emphasizes—and the primary concern of this section—is that sacrifice is fundamental in the very constitution of the subject, and this relates specifically to the emergence of wily Odysseus as hero of the Greek world—"that man skilled in all ways of contending,"[69] the "man of twists and turns."[70] "The history of civilization," Adorno and Horkheimer write, "is the history of the introversion of sacrifice—in other words, the history of renunciation."[71] Resonating strongly with both Nietzsche and Freud, they suggest that the sleight-of-hand involved in sacrifice is replicated at the level of "the ego, which owes its existence to the sacrifice of the present moment to the future."[72] The emergent self must exchange certain prospects and instincts for its own preservation, and Odysseus stands for the subject in transition who enacts this mythic principle within the self, thereby constituting the self as we would recognize it.

Odysseus is more than just a figure of repression, however, because the mythical world that he seeks to break out of is more than the all-too-recognizable logics of sacrifice and substitution that Jarvis

---

[68] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 40.
[69] Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 1.
[70] Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Classics, 1996), 1.
[71] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 42.
[72] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 42.

describes. While his lot is determined by the supernatural forces of Poseidon's wrath and Athena's favors, all the mythical creatures he meets, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, are personifications of the legal status of "the natural relationship between strength and powerlessness."[73] As such, each mythical figure claims the right to whatever unfortunate soul washes up on her island or within his domain on the basis of their *natural* superiority; each is thus the literal embodiment of nature as fate, and of embodiment *as* fate. Adorno and Horkheimer liken the compulsory nature of their demands to the inescapable cycle of a curse: with each and every castaway, they are compelled—they are *doomed*—to repeat their demands of what is owed them. Against these claims, Odysseus's attempt to escape the mythical inevitability or "natural law" of the domination of the weak by the strong is itself emancipatory.[74]

The issue, though, is *how* Odysseus attempts to free himself from mythical nature's claims on him. He does not directly contest its rights. Rather, in lieu of a direct sacrifice to pacify the offended gods' wrath and the monsters' legal claim to dominate and consume the weak, Odysseus survives by trickery, by legalism; it is only by rendering up what is theirs while finding a loophole in their logic that Odysseus challenges the mythical dominance of nature and survives.[75] Though he calculates his losses, he ultimately abides by the rules of the mythical figures: Scylla and Charybdis *do* snatch some of his crew; he hears the Sirens' song and *does* try to throw himself upon their rocks, though his clever bonds restrain him against himself. In other words, in order to escape mythical necessity and its logic

[73] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 45.
[74] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 46.
[75] It is this logic that Hullot-Kentor accuses Adorno of in the "Idea of Natural-History" essay, cf. this chapter, 4-6.

of sacrifice, Odysseus reinscribes the logic of sacrifice *within* himself. "The formula for Odysseus's cunning," write Adorno and Horkheimer, "is that the detached, instrumental mind, by submissively embracing nature, renders to nature what is hers and thereby cheats her."[76] Simply put, in order to escape being dominated *by* nature, Odysseus internalizes domination and restrains himself, reshaping his own nature.

Odysseus therefore does not represent a clean break from myth into epic, although the written Homeric texts do mark a drastic shift from the oral or ritualistic transmission of myth. We can call crafty Odysseus a transitional and not simply an epic figure because he does not manage to escape myth altogether. Rather, he marks for Adorno and Horkheimer the introversion of its logic: "Cunning originates in the cult. Odysseus himself acts as both victim and priest. By calculating the risk he incurs as victim, he is able to negate the power to which the risk exposes him. By such bargaining he retrieves the life he has staked."[77] Thus the epic as form is not a simple progression beyond mythic practice, because it retains its logics of exchange. And while he does manage to return home thanks to his human dissimulation, cleverness, and willingness to suffer, myth persists in making him pay for it: he loses his

[76] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 45.

[77] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 42. Adorno and Horkheimer posit a few kinds of split consciousness—or outright, cynical calculation—at work in sacrifice. First, they suggest the priest claims authority to deceive not only the cultic members but the gods whom they serve at the same time. At the same time, however, they suggest that members of the cult may have also been in on the ruse. This serves to further complicate the dualism of brutal myth and calculating reason: "deception, cunning, and rationality do not form a simple antithesis to the archaism of sacrifice. Only the moment of fraud in sacrifice, perhaps the innermost reason for the illusory character of myth, is raised to self-consciousness through Odysseus. The awareness that the symbolic communication with the deity through sacrifice was not real must have been age-old," 40.

crew, his faithfulness to Penelope, and his well-being in the process. The human subject of the epic, the epic hero, is not free.

Adorno and Horkheimer pointedly connect this subjection to nature's forces and the internalization of subjection with the domination of others. Comparing Odysseus to Robinson Crusoe and contemporary logics—where again "*what has been* comes together in a flash with *the now*"—Adorno and Horkheimer propose that his "defenselessness against the foaming sea sounds like a legitimation of the enrichment of the voyager at the expense of indigenous inhabitants. Bourgeois economics later enshrined this principle in the concept of risk: the possibility of foundering is seen as a moral justification for profit."[78] Identifying the justifications internal to modernity's colonial project in this ancient text, Adorno and Horkheimer unearth the central logic justifying contemporary capitalist ventures: "Odysseus lives according to the ancient principle which originally constituted bourgeois society. One had to choose between cheating and going under."[79]

Having focused on the prevalence of risk and sacrifice, the question still is *what* is it that Odysseus sacrifices in his attempts to free himself from the claims that nature as domination makes on him? In the passage quoted above—"[the nimble-witted man] wriggles through—that is his survival, and all the renown he gains in his own and others' eyes merely confirms that the honor of heroism is won only by the humbling of the urge to attain entire, universal, undivided happiness"—the reference to "undivided happiness" could sound like a moment of romantic wistfulness, of nostalgia for a time before such a compromise, before the reality principle and the formation of an

[78] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 48.
[79] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 48-49.

ego.[80] But this is certainly not what they mean—they praise Odysseus's horror when his shipmates are turned to beasts by Circe and the clear-sighted rejection of the pleasures of the Lotus-eaters: "it is only an illusion of bliss, a dull aimless vegetating, as impoverished as the life of animals. At best, it would be an absence of the awareness of unhappiness."[81] They neither lament the sacrifice nor promote the recovery of the archaic drives manifested in these horrifying—and yet tempting—episodes.

Instead of focusing on the content of what this "undivided happiness" might point to or whether it relates to anything real at all, we should instead read this passage as a structure of resignation, where *survival* is substituted as the aim of life rather than *that for which life is worth living.* This substitution in the subject will mirror the compromise at the heart of enlightenment itself: in trying to elude and overcome myth, enlightenment ends up *sacrificing what were ostensibly its aims in the first place*—freedom from domination, something they call happiness elsewhere. Still, how are we to understand this?

The previous section featured an account of how this sacrifice came about in terms of enlightenment reason's fearful skepticism, and it ended with the point that via the objectivizing perspective of science, external nature is rendered in terms of the non-living. Abstract categories, drawn from the subject, are then applied to living nature. With Odysseus, Adorno and Horkheimer extend this domination of the living in relation to *internal* nature. "Self-mastery" is the domination of what is living in the subject itself:

> The human being's mastery of itself, on which the self is founded, practically always involves the annihilation of the subject in whose service that mastery is maintained, because the substance which is

[80] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 45.
[81] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 49.

> mastered, suppressed, and disintegrated by self-preservation is nothing other than the living entity, of which the achievements of self-preservation can only be defined as functions—in other words, self-preservation destroys the very thing which is to be preserved.[82]

This is certainly a clue: what is left after the forfeiture of the original aims that marked the living being from the outset is the reduction of life to functions. That is to say, individual functions—metabolic, biological, cognitive, even—are construed as separate tasks, and not as part of a holistic unity typical of flourishing.

Deborah Cook, in the course of her larger argument concerning the emancipatory yet natural status of reason, expands upon another element that is sacrificed via the figure of Odysseus: she connects the self-mastery of the living human being with a crucial *linguistic* point.[83] Adorno and Horkheimer write that "within the sphere of ideas in which mythical figures executed the unalterable edicts of fate… the word was thought to have direct power over the thing, expression merged with intention."[84] In his encounter with the prehistoric Polyphemus, whose race lives isolated from one another, devoid of community, Odysseus discovers that the Cyclops not only eats his meat raw but eats humans as well. Odysseus ultimately saves his own life by divorcing the meaning of the word from its effect; he plays on the double meaning of "*Oudeis*," which sounds both like his name and "no one," so that when the monster calls for help, his avowals that "*Nobody*, friends…Nobody's killing me now by fraud and not by force!" (9.454-55) send the neighboring Cyclopses off muttering.[85]

---

[82] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 43.
[83] Cook, *Adorno on Nature,* 67. Cook connects Adorno's naturalist account of the evolution of reason to Darwin while also emphasizing its liberatory function.
[84] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 47.
[85] Homer, *The Odyssey*, tr. Robert Fagles.

What seems to be a point about a linguistic shift actually relates to the guiding theme of conceptualizing nature. The mythical monsters, again, are personifications of the inevitability of fate, the overriding power of both external and internal nature. In magic and myth, sacred words named and controlled these forces: the very "fixity" of words was used in order to challenge fate and nature. This corresponds to an etymological theory about taboos on the name of the bear: in earlier hunting societies with a lot of contact with bears (who also used to be much more carnivorous than today), euphemisms for the ferocious creatures such as "brown" in Germanic territories, "licker" in Baltic languages, or "honey eater" in Slavic, came to predominate, for fear that uttering the proper name of the creature—based on the Indo-European root of **rks-*, **arks-*, or **orks-*, which become ancient Latin *ursus, Greek arktos,* Persian *khers,* Sanskrit *rksah,* and modern French *ours* and Greek *arkouda*—would summon it.[86] Against this strong connection between word and world, where words affected and might even control nature, Adorno and Horkheimer suggest that Odysseus discovered what in "developed bourgeois society" is called *formalism*, the self-conscious abstraction of words from their contents. The ability of words to designate, however, "is bought at the cost of distancing themselves from any particular content which fulfills them, so that they refer from a distance to all possible contents, both to nobody and to Odysseus himself."[87]

---

[86] For more on taboos about the name of the bear, see Michel Pastoureau, *The Bear: History of a Fallen King*, trans. George Holoch (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2011), 49-51. Also relevant is that in these pagan societies, cultic and religious life mapped onto the bear's seasonal cycles and often involved rituals in which men "played the bear."

[87] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 47. This phenomenon and its role in the constitution of subjectivity is also treated by Hegel in the section on court culture and Diderot's novella, *Rameau's Nephew*, in the Divided Spirit section of the *Phenomenology*. There as well, the discovery of the abstractness of words is connected to a problematic experience of the abstractness of the self.

On this long journey home, not only does Odysseus sacrifice archaic (natural) desires, but in the process he learns the linguistic distancing between word and fate, or thought and nature. This insight extends to himself, and this is another sense in which we can understand the model of the sacrifice of oneself as a natural being in a nonreductive sense. As Cook writes, this is a pyrrhic victory in that Odysseus achieves a "sense of himself as distinct from nature," but "it was bought at the cost of self-denial, the denial of nature in himself."[88] The ego is thus rendered "devoid of content [….] Ironically, the self sacrifices itself in the very name of survival by opposing itself to nature both within and without."[89] It is in this sense that we can understand Adorno and Horkheimer's pronouncement: "The subjective mind which disintegrates the spiritualization of nature masters spiritless nature only by imitating its rigidity, disintegrating itself as animistic [….] The pattern of Odysseus's guile is mastery by such adaptation."[90] In disenchanting external nature in order to master it, the self and enlightenment reason render themselves as disenchanted, as explicable in definite, iterable terms.

Again, however, I want to caution that when separated from the critical social theory in their diagnosis, such an account devolves into a lament against civilization. Adorno and Horkheimer's critique is much more specific than the romantic railing against civilization in general. Their use of Odysseus to stage the introversion of sacrifice serves to illuminate the primacy and predominance of sacrifice in our modern world. This is not a tale of a kind of ego formation in general but *within* class society, and what is sacrificed is the subject's status as a natural being in a nonreductive sense. They write:

---

[88] Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 68.
[89] Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 68.
[90] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 44-45.

> In class society, the self's hostility to sacrifice included a sacrifice of the self, since it was paid for by a denial of nature in the human being for the sake of mastery over extrahuman nature and over other human beings. This very denial, the core of all civilizing rationality, is the germ cell of proliferating mythical irrationality: with the denial of nature in human beings, not only the *telos* of the external mastery of nature but also the *telos* of one's own life becomes confused and opaque.[91]

In this dense passage, all the themes of this chapter are interwoven; the denial of nature takes many forms, such as the conceptual account of reason in the prior section or the more material account of the subject in this one. In both cases, they are not explaining the development of reason or of the subject in a vacuum, but rather in this very world in which they are writing, where colonial expansion, capitalist exploitation, the atom bomb, and environmental devastation occur. With the denial of living nature in the self, the ends for which one lives become confused. The destructive relationship to nature lies at the root of social problems threatening the very end of civilization: "At the moment when human beings cut themselves off from the consciousness of themselves as nature, all the purposes for which they keep themselves alive—social progress, the heightening of material and intellectual forces, indeed, consciousness itself—become void, and the enthronement of the means as the end, which in late capitalism is taking on the character of overt madness, is already detectable in the earliest history of subjectivity."[92] And this only rings more true for today's ecological disaster.

It is in this sense that Adorno and Horkheimer call for a different tack, one which I will unpack further over the course of this work.

> Enlightenment is more than enlightenment, it is nature made audible in its estrangement. In mind's self-recognition as nature divided from itself, *nature*, as in prehistory, *is calling to itself*, but no longer directly

[91] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 42.
[92] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 42-43.

> by its supposed name, which, in the guise of *mana*, means omnipotence, but *as something blind and mutilated*. In the mastery of nature, without which mind does not exist, enslavement to nature persists. *By modestly confessing itself to be power and thus being taken back into nature, mind rids itself of the very claim to mastery which had enslaved it to nature*.[93]

Although still somewhat vague, Adorno and Horkheimer frame the readjustment of enlightenment in terms of nature *and* reflection; thought has the opportunity to recognize itself as both the domination of nature *and* as that alienated nature, which might allow for enlightenment's central emancipatory aims of freedom from domination. Nature is only available as something blind and mutilated, though, and it is tracing these mutilated forms that the domination of nature might be recognized as what it is, and possibly changed.

[93] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 31, my emphasis.

Chapter 3

Kant, Phenomenal Nature, and Metaphysical Mourning

In Chapter 2, I argue that in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the misrecognized fear of the overwhelming power of nature is parlayed into enlightenment reason's compulsive and hostile efforts to unmask any remnants of myth as anthropomorphic error. Kant's critical philosophy is no exception; motivated by Hume's skeptical analysis of objectivity, Kant seeks to rescue the dignity of knowledge—that is, objectivity—through the subject. I will now turn to Kant, a thinker of singular importance for Adorno, because of his critical and dialectical articulation of the subject's relation to nature. In this chapter I argue that despite Kant's ostensive "subjective turn" in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he is a crucial figure in Adorno's thinking because of what Adorno calls *the doctrine of the block*, which, epitomized by the distinction between things-in-themselves (noumena) and things as they appear to us (phenomena), expresses reason's humble self-restraint in the face of nature's "essence." While recasting the knowledge of nature in terms of the subject, Kant also *blocks* reason from having

a total grip on nature full stop. Ultimately, I argue, Adorno teases a crucial and productive tension out of the absolute priority of the subject one the one hand, wherein nature is only intelligible via the subject's concepts and activities, and Kant's emphatic denial that such intelligibility exhausts nature, or that which is not identical to the subject, on the other.

To work up to the aporetic status of nature in Kant that proves so valuable to Adorno's philosophy, in the first section I set up the problem and the stakes of speculative reason's foibles, especially against the historical backdrop of the natural sciences' successful productivity. Kant's Copernican solution is continuous with the enlightenment's skeptical fear of falsehood and heteronomy. Unlike the unadulterated positive sciences, however, Kant attempts to retrieve reason's broad metaphysical authority by recasting it as critical, self-limiting reason, which, nevertheless, has absolute authority over itself. In the second section, I argue that Kant epistemologically justifies the ontology of the natural sciences. I focus on the prevalence of unity and synthesis in Kant's attempt to bring reason to heel, which has the effect of producing a unified and lifeless conception of nature. In the third and final section, I unpack Kant's doctrine of the block, based on Adorno's 1959 lecture course on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, written some 15 years after the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and 10 years after his return to Germany.

In these next two sections, I will present evidence that, given the last chapter, would seem to damn Kant in Adorno's eyes. Far from condemning the natural sciences' complicity with the domination of nature, Kant fully endorses it and seeks to refigure metaphysics in their image. Next, Kant further disenchants the knowable object, casting it in transcendental, general terms and categories. Far from downplaying these elements, they are all the more valuable to examine *because* of

Adorno's deployment of Kantian themes and elements. These aporetic or contradictory moments are proof of Kant's "seriousness," according to Adorno, and they are crucial for understanding the function and significance of aesthetics and natural beauty in the two thinkers.

Section 1: Metaphysics (Taking) After the Natural Sciences

In this section, I show that while for Adorno Kant's critical turn is a prime example of the enlightenment's overdetermination by skeptical—and thus mythological—fear, Kant at the same time makes a kind of glorious last stand where truth is not yet itself subjected to the enlightenment's withering skepticism. Kant picks up the mantle of ruthlessly pursuing the appearance of false belief in reason itself, but because it is *reason* that appraises itself in his critical project, he retains reason "as a concept that represents the sole, true authority from which all critique emanates."[1] In terms of the general dialectic of enlightenment, Adorno discerns in Kant's philosophy the compulsive drive to root out error and mythical illusion. This hostility towards illusion appears alongside the measured intervention to salvage certain concepts from this process, such as the concept truth itself. Adorno writes, "the movement of the Enlightenment can only achieve fulfillment if its own meaning, that is, the idea of truth, is retained; and if, in the midst of the dialectical movement to which these concepts are subjected, the concepts still survive. This glorious insight is present in Kant."[2] Kant's "glorious

[1] Theodor W. Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (1959),* ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 120.
[2] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 120.

insight" is his understanding that in order for the enlightenment to remain just that—i.e., emancipatory, beneficial, and meaningful—it must *rescue* certain concepts from its own skeptical trajectory.[3] One such concept is that of truth, irreducible to mere correctness. In this section, I focus on the tension between Kant's remaking metaphysics in the image of the natural sciences and his critical emphasis on the power of reason to restrain itself and set its own limits. I want to emphasize that far from being a transcendental, ideal philosophical problem far removed from the real world, both Kant's turn to the natural sciences and the crisis of objectivity he responds to are determined by empirical, historical forces and not decided upon in a vacuum, as it were. Explicitly at stake for the natural sciences is the mastery of nature, a goal which Kant both concedes and complicates.

As discussed in the previous chapter, for Adorno and Horkheimer, a central impulse of the enlightenment is expressed in the skeptical inflection of the question of how to account for knowledge, which is an iteration of the mythical hostility towards error. At the moment of Kant's intervention, this problem is: how can one establish a trustworthy and necessary relation between a knowing subject and the object of knowledge without relying on an all too expedient theological or dogmatic justification that, upon scrutiny, appears to be an illusory anthropomorphic projection? This relation would function as a ground for our judgments, guaranteeing that our judgments are tied to the

[3] For emphasis on Kant's *Rettung* and Adorno's own method in *Aesthetic Theory* (which will feature strongly in the next chapter), see Ross Wilson, "Dialectical Aesthetics and the Kantian *Rettung*: On Adorno's Aesthetic Theory," *New German Critique* 35, no. 2 (2008): 55–69. Gerhard Richter discusses the Benjamin's ambivalent understanding of the concept of *Rettung*, which is not merely affirmation but also involves the "repetition and cementing of a given state of affairs"; see Richter, *Afterness*: *Figures of Following in Modern Thought and Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 76. Richter also suggests that Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* grapples with, in addition to Hegel's method, "Benjamin's uneasy relation to the demands of *Rettung,*" 81.

empirical world and reflect knowledge of that world. As avowed in the *Prolegomena,* Hume famously interrupted Kant's "dogmatic slumber" when he coldly undermined of the self and causality, demoting the seeming manifestness of them to mere habit and the rationalist defense of them to wishful sophistry. Hume thus throws into question the emphatic and dignified truth of both the empirical sciences and assumptions of identity, depriving these pillars of the enlightenment—crucial in orienting human experience—of their authority. Kant takes the enlightenment seriously enough to not dismiss Hume's skeptical undermining of speculative reason, but he takes reason seriously enough to not forsake it for bald empiricism and metaphysical indifference. Neither the empiricists nor the rationalists can provide a satisfactory account of knowledge: either knowledge would be merely empirical and *unlawful* (and therefore undeserving of the name of *truth*), or it would remain a dogmatic and ultimately scholastic affair, relying on unjustifiable terms for conveying the intelligibility of objects existing in the world to the knowing subjects. These are what Quill Kukla calls "the twin threats of humiliating skepticism and hubristic dogmatism."[4]

Hume's assault on the nature of causality in no way impedes the practical sciences from making use of the principle of causation. His epistemological intervention, however, entails that truth for human knowers is itself at stake. Hume marks a moment where the enlightenment dissects that in the name of which it strives, an instance of radical enlightenment as discussed in the previous chapter. At Hume's skeptical urging, then, Kant seeks to extirpate the residual divine—if not animistic—explanatory power in the question of knowledge. Kant is also committed, nevertheless, to an account

[4] Quill Rebecca Kukla, "Introduction," in *Aesthetics and Cognition in Kant's Critical Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3.

of knowledge that is truly lawful and necessary, and which might afford the respect befitting the laws discovered by the sciences.

In order to square this circle, Kant demands no less than a revolution within metaphysics—one that takes its cue from the natural sciences, perhaps surprisingly. Tempering the prose of the first Preface, he begins his second Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason* with a telling comparison between the natural sciences and metaphysics. The problem is that metaphysics has not yet itself become a science. Speculative reason's method of spinning arguments about the nature of "what is" from mere concepts has succeeded in miring itself in exasperating irrelevance, especially in the face of the achievements of other sciences. Individual sciences have been busily *producing* knowledge, and their success in calculating what appears to be lawful and necessary in the changing natural world relies on informed, iterable, empirical experimentation and, in mathematics, on solid systematic proofs. The pursuit of knowledge has fractured into specialized lines of inquiry, and while that is fine for the individual sciences involved, it is increasingly difficult to have a coherent understanding of the whole—especially one that includes moral, ethical, and religious values. Metaphysics had before been able to offer an account of a whole that included the immortality of the soul, God, and freedom, but its attempts to properly order the new mechanistic world of scientific knowledge alongside traditional metaphysical objects fails and threatens to seal its own irrelevance. Kant however is adamant that metaphysical questions cannot be abandoned full stop; despite its problems, metaphysics "would remain even if all [other sciences] were swallowed up by an all-consuming barbarism" (KrV, B xiv).[5]

[5] For all citations of Kant's works, per custom I will refer to the Akedemieausgabe pagination and will designate the abbreviated title of the work, in addition to naming the translation used. For references to the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (*Critique of Pure Reason*), I also designate the page number in the original

For Adorno, the question of the persistence of metaphysics, just like the conundrum it finds itself in, is historical and material.

In contrast to the confusions of metaphysics, Kant heaps praise upon mathematics and the natural sciences. He specifically attributes their successes to powerful assertiveness and confidence; in mathematics, Thales (or some real mathematician beneath the legend, Kant suggests) demonstrated the isosceles triangle upon the strength of "what he himself had put into it in accordance with its concept" (KrV, B xii). In the realm of physics centuries later, Bacon, Galileo, and Torricelli vigorously experimented on nature, testing the hypotheses about physical laws that they constructed. What Kant takes to be common to these heroes of both mathematics and the natural sciences is that, "they comprehended that reason has insight only into what it itself produces according to its own design; that it must take the lead with principles for its judgments according to constant laws and *compel nature to answer its questions, rather than letting nature guide its movements by keeping reason, as it were, in leading strings [Leitbande]*" (KrV, B xiii, my emphasis). Leading strings, the leash-like straps attached to children's clothing in 17th and 18th century Europe, both supported the child learning to walk and kept her from straying too far—or into danger, as caretakers understood it.[6] For Kant, however, the

---

first (A) and second (B) editions. *Kritik der reinen Vernunft, Gesammelte Schriften* (Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin: De Gruyter: 1900ff). *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[6] Elsewhere, in his *Pädagogik*, Kant suggests that mechanical aids should not be used in helping young children learn to walk: "It is customary to employ leading strings and go-carts in order to teach children how to walk. But it is striking that one should want to teach children how to walk, as if any human being could not have walked for lack of instruction. Leading strings are particularly harmful" (P, AA 9: 461). Kant may have picked up this allergy to teaching toddlers how to walk from Rousseau, who writes in *Émile*, "Émile shall have no head-pads, no go-carts, no leading strings; or at least as soon as he can put one foot before another he shall only be supported along pavements, and he shall be taken quickly across them" (trans. Barbara Foxley, Auckland, New Zealand: Floating Press, 2019), 42.

model of following nature—instead of demanding answers from it—evinces weakness and self-infantilization. (Kant's hostility towards crutches will return in the next chapter's discussion of his "What is Enlightenment?" essay.)

The previous chapter should make Kant's metaphors ring particularly sharply.[7] Indeed, on the first page of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer cite Bacon as "the father of experimental philosophy" who brought the motifs of liberation from fear, achievement of mastery, and "overthrow[ing] fantasy with knowledge" together in his project of, now citing Bacon, "the happy match between the mind of man and the nature of things."[8] What Kant finds exemplary in the methods of Bacon, Galileo, and Torricelli is that they wrest knowledge from nature in a show of power and calculating strategy, which signals a new degree of maturity and self-determination. Reason seeks and requires necessity in its laws by its own nature, but nature does not lend itself to the elaboration of necessary laws unless guided by a strong hand. The metaphors continue as reason, in order to be informed by nature:

> must approach nature with its principles in one hand, according to which alone the agreement among appearances can count as laws, and, in the other hand, the experiments thought out in accordance with these principles—yet in order to be instructed by nature not like a pupil, who has recited to him whatever the teacher wants to say, but like an appointed judge who compels witnesses to answer the questions he puts to them. (KrV, B xiii)

---

[7] Speaking on the homeliness of Kant's comparisons, such as the famous imagined 300 thalers versus the 300 real ones, Adorno suggests, "A fundamental analysis of the metaphoric language of Kant's philosophy would undoubtedly be a fruitful undertaking, for the similes and metaphors in a text are not neutral, but reveal something of its deepest intentions, intentions that are mostly imposed on the author" (*Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 26). This chapter features attention to some colorful ones in the first *Critique*.

[8] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007), 1-2.

Here, Kant emphasizes the more antagonistic possibilities of juridical and pedagogical power in his depiction of the contemporary sciences. He regards with respect that the authoritative assertion of first principles, definitions, and the isolation of variables set the terms for proofs and experiments in both mathematics and the natural sciences. At stake in these metaphors is reason's freedom from nature and, conversely, nature's subjection to reason; "this is how natural science was first brought to the secure course of a science after groping about for so many centuries" (KrV, B xiv). Knowledge is predicated upon reason's disconnect from the nature it seeks to know and the overt imposition of its aims and standards upon that nature.

The historical elements just outlined—the ascendance of the natural sciences, metaphysics' scholasticism and irrelevance, the threat of relativism towards formerly-anchoring values—was for Kant to be countered in the field of philosophy. Kant's intervention, however, is not itself a straightforward metaphysical foray or correction, employing the traditional speculative reason as its weapon. As the natural sciences are *self-evidently* "well-grounded," Kant suggests *modelling the standard of certain knowledge after their example*. Mathematics and natural science "have become what they now are through a revolution brought about all at once, […] remarkable enough that we might *reflect* on the essential element in the change in the ways of thinking that has been so far advantageous to them, and, at least *as an experiment*, imitate it insofar as their analogy with metaphysics, as rational cognition, might permit" (KrV, B xvi, my emphasis). Kant not only calls upon philosophy to reflect upon the assertive sciences in order to model itself after them, but he couches his very approach as itself an

experiment.[9] Kant frames his solution in somewhat humble way: the natural sciences rise from mere loyal subjects to the exemplary figures that metaphysics must emulate in order to reign herself in.[10]

This experimental enterprise entails the famous Copernican turn, which, Kant argues, provides a better and simpler solution to the problems of metaphysics:

> Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the object; but all attempts to find out something about them *a priori* through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. *Hence let us once try whether we do*

[9] In a footnote to the Preface of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant proposes first a hypothesis and then proof: "the central laws of the motion of the heavenly bodies established with certainty what Copernicus assumed at the beginning only as a hypothesis, and at the same time they proved the invisible force (of Newtonian attraction) that binds the universe, which would have remained forever undiscovered if Copernicus has not ventured, in a manner contradictory to the senses yet true, to seek for the observed movements not in the objects of the heavens but in their observer. *In this Preface I propose the transformation in our way of thinking presented in criticism merely as a hypothesis*, analogous to that other hypothesis, only in order to draw our notice to the first attempts at such a transformation, which are always hypothetical, even though in the treatise itself it will be proved not only hypothetically by rather apodictically from the constitution of our representations of space and time and from the elementary concepts of the understanding" (KrV, B xxii, my emphasis).

[10] Another colorful metaphor Kant employs in the first edition preface involves a lampoon of metaphysics, the former "queen of all the sciences" (KrV, A iix). Having aspired to truth about the highest things—the unchanging, being as such, that which is beyond experience—she now stands in great disarray or, as Kant says with as much pathos as he can muster, "despised on all sides," "outcast and forsaken," mourning like Hecuba (KrV, A iix). First, she ruled as a despot with ancient barbaric compulsion—heteronomously and with superstition. Moving against the ancient vestiges of faith upon which knowledge was based, the ever-quibbling dogmatists wage anarchic civil war upon each other, while the nomadic tribes of skeptics make continual raids on any apparent stable ground the dogmatists manage to achieve. Even after Locke was supposed to put an end to these scholastic wars by demoting the origins of metaphysics to a common birth (viz., the "rabble" of common experience) in his "physiology" of human understanding, the key questions about the world, God, and the soul persist in a manner that belie such an "ignoble" explanation, and despotic dogmatism again reigns ascendant (KrV, A ix). Speculative reason was to reach the truth on the strength of its arguments via logic and the unpacking of the concepts of those eternal objects, yet it has almost succeeded in discrediting itself entirely. Kant gestures towards a kind of metaphysical fatigue: "Now after all paths (as we persuade ourselves) have been tried in vain, what rules is tedium and complete **indifferentism**, the mother of chaos and night in the sciences, but," Kant cheerfully notes, this metaphysical fatigue is "at the same time also the origin, or at least the prelude, of their incipient transformation and enlightenment, when through ill-applied effort they have become obscure, confused, and useless" (KrV, A x).

> *not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition*, which would agree better with the requested possibility of an *a priori* cognition of them, which is to establish something about objects before they are given to us. This would be just like the first thoughts of Copernicus, who, when he did not make good progress in the explanation of the celestial motions if he assumed that the entire celestial host revolves around the observer, tried to see if he might not have greater success if he made the observer revolve and left the stars at rest. (KrV, B xvi, my emphasis)

Like Copernicus and the scientific masters that have compelled nature to share its secrets by approaching their objects with particular designs and principles in hand, Kant suggests confronting the confusions of metaphysics *by taking stock of the knowing subject* before approaching the object in question. This is one way in which Kant frames the advent of the transcendental register; rather than assuming that our cognition is adequate to objects as they are, he suggests that reason explore the ways in which objects are *made* adequate to our cognition, prior to actual experience. In metaphysics, rather than the dogmatic attempts for certainty in the eternal objects by proofs hinging upon their concepts, he pivots by pursuing the "unchanging" within the cognition of the subject, that is the necessary conditions of experience.

There is a crucial ambivalence in Kant, though. On the one hand, Kant could not be more explicit when he declares the natural sciences to be the example that metaphysics must follow in order to become a science: "Now the concern of this critique of pure speculative reason consists in that attempt to transform the accepted procedure of metaphysics, undertaking an entire revolution according to the example of the geometers and natural scientists" (KrV, B xxii). On the other hand, that it is critical reason itself taking stock of its own enthusiasms and errors signals a departure from the procedures of the natural sciences. For Kant, reason deployed in this speculative capacity has this

"peculiarity," that is, "that it *can* and *should* measure its own capacity according to the different ways for choosing the objects of its thinking, and also completely enumerate the manifold ways of putting problems before itself" (KrV, B xxiii, emphasis added). This is to say that it is up to reason alone, through a critique of itself, to ground the validity and dignity of truth and knowledge. Kant famously identifies synthetic *a priori* judgments, wherein we seem to be able to know truths about objects prior to our empirical experience of them, as in physics or geometry. For those kinds of cognition, "nothing can be ascribed to the objects except what the thinking subject takes out of itself," and nothing but reason itself can explore and identity these elements of the thinking subject (KrV, B xxiii).

I have for the most part in this section focused on Kant's aim of proving the necessity of certain principles as structuring experience. Grounding these principles serves to validate their use in the natural sciences; causality is no longer a matter of "habit" if it is a necessary condition for experience, that is, if it is proven that it is impossible to experience without it. This move thus imports *necessity* and *objectivity* into the human elaboration of natural laws. This becomes, however, a necessity and objectivity only for *us*, human subjects. Not discussed here is Kant's other aim in the first *Critique* involving the transformation of metaphysical claims that issue from purely speculative reason, namely those concerning the soul, God, and the nature of the world. Using critical reason to plumb its own nature and regulate its own boundaries, Kant means to set metaphysics in order, while further dignifying the knowledge won in the natural sciences against the skeptical attacks of the empiricists. Adorno describes the project thusly: "The [*Critique of Pure Reason*] is an act of salvaging in the sense that through this act of immersion in inwardness, that is, in the subject, something can be discovered

of that light that shines like a beacon through this metaphysical night."[11] In Kant, Adorno identifies attempts to salvage objectivity and truth *through* the subject.

Adorno takes great care to praise in Kant's critical philosophy this "hesitation, [this] inconsistency, if you like, a disinclination simply to follow the smooth path of progress," namely the progress of enlightenment's subjection of all ends to its disenchanting doubt and positivism. "I feel this to be the sign of an extraordinary seriousness," Adorno avows, "a particular deliberateness and conscientiousness."[12] Committed as Kant clearly is to the natural sciences, Adorno emphasizes that, "Kant's philosophy makes use of doubt, of critical examination, so as to ensure that what it perceives as incontrovertible truth should shine forth in all its glory because it has withstood even that skeptical inspection."[13] This speculative, critical function of reason intervenes at the level of metaphysics; it surpasses the natural sciences in that it marks out a domain for the natural sciences, and it does so by delimiting the boundaries of metaphysics. The natural sciences themselves have neither the authority nor (often) the interest to order the whole of reason's activities, whereas for Kant, "pure speculative reason is, in respect of principles of cognition, a unity entirely separate and subsisting for itself" (Bxxiii). Again praising Kant, Adorno disapprovingly notes that the idealist philosophers who came after Kant turned reason into "an absolute," into a "metaphysical entity, whereas for Kant reason acted as a critical authority; it had a cognitive, scrutinizing function."[14]

---

[11] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 112.
[12] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 120.
[13] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 30-1.
[14] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 42.

This critical function of reason gives rise to one more of Kant's quite telling metaphors that Quill Kukla also highlights, emphasizing the radicality of Kant's intervention into the history of philosophy when he "insisted on relinquishing the dream of total epistemic mastery in order to gain genuine mastery over a carefully limited and circumscribed domain."[15] Kukla emphasizes Kant's own vision of his project as reaching the "land of pure understanding," which he further describes as:

> an island, and enclosed in unalterable boundaries by nature itself. It is the land of truth (a charming name), surrounded by a broad and stormy ocean, the true seat of illusion, where many a fog bank and rapidly melting iceberg pretend to be new lands and, ceaselessly deceiving with empty hopes the voyager looking around for new discoveries, entwine him in adventures from which he can never escape and yet also never bring to an end. (KrV, B 294–5)

Kukla notes that the figure of the island, a circumscribed domain of epistemic mastery, functions as an ideal in the eighteenth century. Instead of Odysseus's epic efforts to return home to his ancestral lands, Kant's metaphor hews closer to a new colonial imaginary—closer to Robinson Crusoe's deserted island—where the explorer discovers a rich and durable outpost to occupy. The shimmering fog and melting ice tempt the voyager to tread on them, but the elements are not solid, not what they seem. Mastery and self-possession are thus contingent on staying put and mapping out one's small plot. I now turn to the subjective conditions for the possibility of experience Kant finds there.

[15] Kukla, "Introduction," *Aesthetics and Cognition in Kant's Critical Philosophy,* 4-5.

Section 2: Nature, Blind and Mutilated

In this section, I emphasize the manner in which Kant constructs the object as fully dependent upon the subject's iterable conditions of experience, save for the points of givenness that remain invisible or inexplicable for us. Nature is thus only knowable via terms drawn from the human subject, but as Angelica Nuzzo carefully and rightly points out, Kant's problem in the first *Critique* is to account for "nature *in general*," that is, to provide the adequate description of nature via the universal laws of nature "brought to light by the understanding's *a priori* legislation."[16] From this perspective, objects are construed as *homogenous*, and Kant's aim is to account for what is alike and shared by all objects of nature as we know them. It then follows that of necessity the way particular objects can appear is only via subjection to the most general terms, and the subject knowing them is likewise cast in only the most general terms—namely as that which applies the categories to the relatively (and yet not fully) indeterminate bits of preconceptual material. Again, for the sake of the validity and objectivity of science, Kant wants to justify the legitimacy of the calculability of objects. That being said, the figuration of nature that such a project provides—and the ensuing account of cognition that falls out of it—is one where nature is "blind," "mutilated," and dead.

Kant starts with the definition of knowledge as a matter of proper judgment. Judgment is the justified correlation of a subject and predicate, of two representations; it is a matter of appropriate synthesis. Kant seeks to defend objectivity, the knowledge we have gleaned from empirical reality and from the mathematical sciences, by claiming that our unique sensibility and conceptual framework are

[16] Angelica Nuzzo, "Reflective Judgment, Determinative Judgment, and the Problem of Particularity," *Washington University Jurisprudence Review* 6, no. 7 (2013): 8.

in fact the *only* way that we can make consistently reliable judgments about our experience of the natural world. To this end, Kant avows: "All that seems necessary for an introduction or preliminary is that there are two stems of human cognition, which may perhaps arise from a common but to us unknown root, namely sensibility and understanding, through the first of which objects are given to us, but through the second of which they are thought" (KrV, A 15/B 29). Kant leaves the *origin* of consciousness mysterious and invisible, as he is not concerned with any speculative account of how such things came to be. Rather than *how* they came to be differentiated, what is significant is *that* sensibility and discursive conceptuality are separable elements of our cognition, and that even in sensibility, objects are given to us *by an element of our own cognition*. All the way down, it is the subject's own activity that renders objects as given. For Adorno, from the very outset, implicit in the basic terms of Kant's transcendental method is the exclusive distribution of activity to the subject and passivity to the object.

In the Transcendental Aesthetic, Kant argues that time and space are not simply concepts or sensations we have or properties of the objects we experience, but rather the necessary features of our human sensibility that structure the most basic manifold by which an object can be possibly "given" to us. Kant calls them the "conditions of receptivity," and they are the primary mode in which an object is represented by us, although not the sufficient mode (KrV, A 77/B 102). Kant's Aesthetic argues that human sensibility is such that it is impossible to even conceive of experience that is *not* fundamentally structured by space and time. But while these "forms of appearance" are responsible for the first vague shaping of representations of objects in the world, this manifold blurry bit does not yet

become thinkable—a proper object of experience—until the intuition is further formed by certain concepts.[17]

Sensibility is the foundation upon which Kant is to build his painstakingly ornate account of *human* knowledge, but the further levels of intellectual synthesis are both more complicated and more loadbearing. Experience must be comprised of both our intuitional forms as well as our intellectual forms, namely the pure concepts of understanding. These universal and necessary concepts are also known as the categories, which Kant has inherited from logic—with some significant modification—as the functions of the understanding in judgments. Because judgment is "the mediate cognition of an object, hence the representation of a representation of it," and furthermore, "all judgments are accordingly functions of unity among our representations," Kant feels justified in accepting the canonical table of logical functions (KrV, A 68/B 93–A 69/B 94). This is all to say that: 1) logic provides the valid forms by which we can combine our representations, and, 2) objects, as themselves already representations and the products of synthesis, are subject to the laws which govern proper judgments. From the table of logical functions, Kant then transcendentally synthesizes each form of judgment with pure intuitions, i.e., the *forms* of space and time that are not empirically given but structure our intuitions. He arrives at the twelve transcendental concepts of the understanding:

[17] Quill Kukla rightly points out, however, that Kant's Transcendental Aesthetic does not feature a deduction per se, that is, an argument that seeks to justify the use of the concept. Intuition is that which "in whatever way and through whatever means a cognition may relate to objects, that through which it relates *immediately* to them" (KrV, A 19/B 33). It is that which captures the existence of the world. Time and space, as the pure aesthetic forms of intuition, *necessarily* relate to objects because of their fundamental receptivity. Intuitions are given, and even empirical concepts do not require a deduction—their validity relies on the proof of experience, and a deduction as to their lawfulness outside of their correspondence to the world is unnecessary.

namely, those of quantity (unity, plurality, totality), quality (reality, negation, limitation), relation (inherence and subsistence, causality and dependence, community), and modality (possibility-impossibility, existence-non-existence, necessity-contingency).

The expositions of sensibility on the one hand and the pure concepts of the understanding on the other give Kant the requisite elements to explain cognition, but the question remains of *how* these *a priori* concepts are to be applied to given objects. This is the problem at the heart of Kant's "discovery" of *a priori* synthetic judgments. *A priori* synthetic judgments are synthetic and not analytic in that they are not merely definitional: a classic example of an analytic judgment is "all bachelors are unmarried men," and Kant's own illustration is that, "all bodies are extended" (KrV, A 7/B 11). To be a bachelor is to be unmarried; to be a body is to be extended. Synthetic judgments, in contrast, add something to the concept of the subject: "all bodies are heavy" introduces a conceptual element not found exhaustively in the concept of body. *A priori* synthetic judgments are *a priori* and not *a posteriori* in that they do not rely upon experience for the amplification of the concept of the given subject.[18] In contrast to the common judgment of experience, Kant "discovers" synthetic *a priori* judgments that add to the concept but apart from or prior to experience—his now very loaded example is, following Hume: "Everything that happens has its cause." Kant is true to Hume's critique in that he acknowledges that causality is *not* implicit in the concept of something that happens, but he never

[18] To continue with Kant's example of "all bodies are heavy," the analytic judgment includes its extension, even marks of impenetrability and shape, but "looking back to the experience from which I extracted this concept of body," one discovers weight is always connected with the marks of extension, impenetrability, and shape of a body. For Kant, this is an *a posteriori* synthetic judgment because it adds something to a concept beyond the original definitional content of the subject's concept, and what it adds is discovered in experience.

doubts the truth of this judgment nor considers it merely a matter of habit. Instead, a "certain mystery thus lies hidden here [in synthetic *a priori* cognition], the elucidation of which alone can make progress in the boundless field of pure cognition of the understanding secure and reliable" (KrV, A 10/B 13).

To return to the broader aim of Kant's project, the validity of synthetic *a priori* judgments will vouch for the validity of natural science's laws, not only as applied to possible pure objects but to empirical objects as well. Implicit in Kant's elaboration of *synthetic* judgments is that experience does not occur if one of its elements, intuitions or concepts, are missing, that is, if *synthesis* does not take place. Famously, Kant proclaims: "thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" (KrV, A 51/B 75). I will go into more detail about the problems of empty forms of thought in the next section on "the block," but what is crucial to register is that in the blindness of intuition, we witness nature only "*as something blind and mutilated*," to hearken back to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.[19] Intuitions, mysteriously produced by the subject, at the same time present *nature*, the object, as inactive and passive prior to conceptualization.

For Adorno, the fundamental concept of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is "the concept of synthesis, that is, the gathering together of dispersed ideas into a unity, the bundling together of scattered ideas to form a unity," and he identifies in this central concept of synthesis "nothing but the theory of nominalism brought to the highest pitch of abstraction because *it declares not merely concepts, but everything that can be meaningfully discussed, to be the consequence of mental activity.*"[20] This is a step beyond the formalism Odysseus discovered, where names and words become separated from their

[19] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 31.
[20] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 125, my emphasis.

content.[21] Here, nature is thus robbed of any meaning or claims on us that we ourselves have not put there via the forms of intuition and the categories. The necessity of contact with the object gives rise to a blind and blurry moment of intuition in which an object is given but voided of determinacy not imposed on it by the understanding. Synthesis itself is described as "the mere effect of the imagination, of a blind though indispensable function of the soul, without which we would have no cognition at all," and blindness here seems to imply unavailability to consciousness and critical reason (KrV, A 78/B 103). It also bears mentioning, as editors Guyer and Wood indicate in the footnote, that Kant replaced the "function of the soul" in his own copy of the first edition with "function of the understanding," to emphasize where the authority in rule-governed experience lies.

These nodal points of blindness—the insufficiently intelligible but necessarily posited manifold, as well as the manner in which synthesis is effected—are coupled with the disappearance of recognizable nature independent of us and available to us; Kant will conclude, "without understanding there would not be any nature at all" (KrV, A 126). What Kant means by nature is nature as a construction, a rule bound unity, as described by necessary laws, not of course whether empirical nature or reality exists. For nature to be known in its laws, it must be presented as a unity and, so as not to be overly powerful (guiding human reason by the "leading-strings" like in unenlightened times), it must be commanded to speak in terms of the human subject.

[21] In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer mark that from formalism, which Odysseus discovered in "mythical names and statutes, which, indifferent like nature, seek to rule over human beings and history, emerges *nominalism*, the prototype of bourgeois thinking. Self-preserving guile lives on the argument between word and thing" (47, my emphasis).

The "blinding" of nature is further accomplished in the emergence and then suppression of the faculty of the imagination in the transition from the A Deduction of 1781 to the B Deduction of 1787.[22] This episode is a moment when Kant errs on the side of unity and identity, and I will return to this discussion—and Kant's equivocations—in the next chapter and the discussion of the role of aesthetic experience.[23] The conveying of all potential meaning to the side of the subject and the "blind" inexplicable placeholder for nature's own determinacy is perhaps most visible in the relationship between the imagination and the understanding. Having separated "blind" nature from the active subject, Kant requires an account of their synthesis. For Adorno, "synthesis in Kant means merely that a manifold, an assemblage of diverse things, is brought together in a unity. It is actually a decisive factor by means of which Kant may be said to have signed up to the tradition of a *philosophy concerned to dominate nature*."[24] Again, Kant's efforts in the first *Critique* are to ground nature as a subjective unity. Whereas the A Deduction features ascending levels of synthesis that culminate in the "discovery"

---

[22] The "threefold synthesis" in the A edition of the Second Section of the Deduction of the Pure Concepts of Understanding includes the apprehension of representations, the imaginative reproduction (or continuity) of these first representations, and finally the recognition of them in the concept (KrV, A 97). At the first level, which essentially stipulates that *any appearance or representation must appear in time*, Kant is trying to extract a necessary unity from the most basic level of the manifold of the intuition. There *must* be an *a priori* synthesis of apprehension to account for the unification of the forms of time and space into respective moments. Kant must assert this "blind" but necessary moment, a moment of hybridity. Though no sphinx or siren, this manifold that is also a unity still shimmers indistinctly as it allows Kant to pass to the next phenomenon of succession.

[23] It is worth mentioning that this account was ascendant in Anglo-American philosophy until a resurgence in studies of third *Critique* in the past 40 years. Analytic philosophy tending towards positivism has disregarded the "faculty-talk" and "psychologism" of the A Deduction as messy and invalid, while Heidegger takes Kant to be shying away from acknowledging the imagination and time as central, thoroughly dethroning the attempt at finally crowning the reign of the understanding. Against these two paths of skepticism and enthusiasm, recent Kant scholarship affords some less reactive interpretations of the transition. Longuenesse and Zammito both argue that there is a continuous progression—and no radical break—from the A Deduction to the B Deduction.

[24] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 196.

of the transcendental unity of apprehension, in the second version of the Deduction, to highlight the centrality of the (potentially conscious) subject in the transcendental project, Kant *begins* with the transcendental unity of apperception and the affirmation that all syntheses are only due to the activity of the understanding. Thus the B Deduction features an even stronger polarization of the active and passive components of cognition, with the strong emphasis on the transcendental apperception in a new explicit form, the "I think."

In both editions, Kant argues that what is often noticeable as a reflection upon an empirical representation—that the "I" is the one doing the thinking—is not merely some kind of auxiliary phenomenon, but rather that the "unifying unity" of the "I" thinking is a necessary feature for objectivity itself. The transcendental unity of apperception is that unity which allows for the connection between intuitions and concepts. Against Hume, Kant is reconstituting a notion of the self or identity by stating that cognition is impossible without a unity that extends a potential sense of *mineness* among the manifold of representations. Kant further writes in a footnote, "the ground of proof rests on the represented unity of intuition through which an object is given, which always includes a synthesis of the manifold that is given for an intuition, and *already contains the relation of the latter to unity of apperception*" (KrV, B 144, emphasis added). With the avowal of the "blind" given, so to speak, in section 21 Kant admits more pointedly that he still cannot "abstract from one point, namely, from the fact that the manifold for intuition must already be given prior to the synthesis of understanding and independently of it; *how, however, is here left undetermined*" (KrV, B 145, emphasis added). In the B Deduction, Kant casts the synthesis that takes place at the level of intuition as an

effect of the unity of self-consciousness, and the object mirrors the subject in that it is the most hollowed out, abstracted unity.

Nature conceived as a unity guarantees that any particular objects appear as lifeless examples of general laws, and because of the Copernican direction from which he accounts *for* experience *independently of* experience, Kant requires in his account of cognition some passive, "blind" (not yet fully determinate) material on which the general, lawful, self-generated concept might act. The model of *a priori* synthetic judgments will not only serve as the law by which metaphysics must now regulate itself, but it also functions as the subsumptive model for what Kant will call *a posteriori* "determinative" judgments in the third *Critique*. To Adorno, the lifelessness of the object shakes out of increased subjectivization: "There is a reifying quality in the very attempt to relate all phenomena, everything we encounter, to a unified reference point and to subsume it under a self-identical, rigid unity, thus removing it from its dynamic context."[25] This reification occurs in Kant in the transcendental register, a philosophical expression of the dialectic of enlightenment that Adorno also identifies in the structure and proliferation of the commodity form. The following rings true for both levels: "Human beings purchase the increase in their power with estrangement from that over which it is exerted…In their transformation the essence of things is revealed as always the same, a substrate of domination. This identity constitutes the unity of nature."[26] Unity may be the nisus for Kant's account of reason (as the categories and cognition stem from this unity of consciousness), but, as Adorno points out, "the concept of unity is never discussed or deduced from anything else. Instead, it represents the canon by

[25] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 115.
[26] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 6.

which everything else can be judged."[27] For Adorno, this inheritance of enlightenment thinking's hostility towards diversity is precisely that which must be identified in the programs of each philosophical system. From Kant's philosophy as a whole to the more granular accounts of synthesis in the Deductions, the "foe of this thinking" is:

> the diverse, the many, that which is opposed to the autonomy of a self-controlling rationality. This includes the diffuse that always captivates us precisely because it is not uniform, because it is ambiguous. We are familiar with the diffuse from the countless myths in which elemental beings of a hybrid nature hover between man and beast, nature and man, shimmering and enticing us to follow them. … It could be said that in Kant everything of metaphysical substance that is opposed to diversity has been gathered together in this idea of unity, of whatever is identical with itself.[28]

While Kant's third *Critique* will be a softening of this hostility toward diversity and non-identity, I will next show how *internal* to Kant's first *Critique*, Adorno finds expression of the non-identical, that is, testaments to that which is not exhaustible by concepts.

Before turning to a check on the drive towards self-identity, I would like to briefly add a related point. Adorno discerns another layer in Kant's efforts to establish the transcendental conditions for experience: first, in the "equation of binding truth with the timeless or eternal knowledge," he reads the bourgeois concern with fixed possessions. Distinguishing a merely "derogatory, aestheticizing sense" of the term "bourgeois" from its phenomenological appropriateness, "in order to define the specific character of this kind of philosophy in the history of mankind," Adorno notes that "this strange idea of the truth as something lasting and enduring somehow always appears where urban exchange

[27] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 196.
[28] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 196.

societies have developed."[29] This (proto-)bourgeois idea, he acknowledges (and as we might glean from the previous chapter), may have the archaic fear of difference at its basis, where the new, the indeterminacy of nature, is a threat. These elements are expressed in "a kind of taboo on the new and on change that declares itself in the way in which the right to truth, the emphatic claim to be true, is given only to what is permanent, while whatever changes and is new is degraded in the first instance to the illusory, the transient, and condemned to inferior status."[30] At stake in the designation of "bourgeois" thinking is tracking the extension of the archaic need for security into the ideas of property alongside the residual fear of nature animating all enlightenment thinking. Thus, even lodged in Kant's transcendental philosophy, Adorno traces residual archaic baggage inhering in the ostensibly distinctive bourgeois concerns.

Following this thought through, Adorno writes that in Kant's philosophy:

> we find lurking the idea that the act of cognition is a kind of exchange in which equivalents, namely efforts and products, are exchanged so that debts are settled and the sums work out. There is a relationship of equivalence such that in principle nothing can emerge without entering into it, that is, nothing that does not have to be paid for by whatever has first been *posited*. And in the process only this exchange relation of knowledge, that is, the effort, the exchange between the labor of thinking and the object which thought then appropriates, and the products of this process, namely the fact that the ideas *work out*—only this becomes the thing that endures, the lasting product.[31]

Implicit in Kant's account is that knowledge of the object must be *earned* by the subject's activity. This work ethic that Adorno traces in the core of Kantian epistemology bears the stamp of the mythic

[29] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 26-27.
[30] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 26.
[31] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 27.

principle of sacrifice, where nothing comes for free. It is this process of exchange—of effort or labor of thinking for the object now *mine*, as vouched for by the transcendental unity of apperception—that renders objective cognition. There is clearly a critical edge in Adorno's tone when identifying these distinctly bourgeois values out of Kant's epistemology, but that makes all the more striking Adorno's attempts to salvage the spirit of Kant's doctrine of the block, as I will now show.

Section 3: Nature and the Block

In the last section, I addressed Adorno's emphasis on Kant's privileging of unity and synthesis at the expense of diversity and the object, laying out the ways in which Kantian critical philosophy subscribes to and promotes a philosophy of identity. Metaphysics has cut the "leading-strings" of nature, in that the source of objectivity for valid knowledge is now the necessity of *a priori* synthetic principles within the subject, outside of which nature is unable to act or appear. Against the professed defense of the natural sciences, their natural laws, and the positivism Kant thereby enabled more broadly, the Copernican turn also includes an act of metaphysical humility, the reframing of the reach of human knowledge. This will prove crucial for Adorno's reorientation of philosophy and aesthetic theory. By elaborating the ways in which objects necessarily appear to us, Kant limits knowledge to *only* that domain of objects of possible experience, placing the knowledge of those eternal, highest objects of metaphysical inquiry resolutely out of reach. This means that while Kant has determined the safe and certain laws by which humans might understand things as they appear to us, no longer can human understanding claim to approach things as they are, or things-in-themselves.

Adorno calls this the *doctrine of the block*, because critical reason restrains—or blocks—reason's urge to know things that are not objects of possible experience. Kant's Transcendental Aesthetic features his arguments for designating space and time as forms of intuition as opposed to being themselves sensations or concepts merely laid over sensation. These forms of intuition structure a "manifold"—the first manner in which an object is given to us—which is then further formed by the pure concepts of the understanding. Again, experience requires both, as always: "thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" (KrV, A 51/B 75). Cognition can only occur with some possible object given by the intuition, and then further shaped by the categories; experience requires the real *or possible* object afforded by intuition. And so, in the Transcendental Analytic, Kant understands himself to have proven that: "the understanding can never accomplish *a priori* anything more than to anticipate the form of a possible experience in general, and, since that which is not appearance cannot be an object of experience, it can never overstep the limits of sensibility, within which alone objects are given to us" (KrV, A 246/B 303). Justified only in the "exposition of appearances," Kant humbly declares that that "the proud name of an ontology, which presumes to offer synthetic *a priori* cognitions of things in general in a systematic doctrine (e.g., the principle of causality), must give way to the modest one of a mere analytic of the pure understanding" (KrV A 246-7/B 303). The mapping out of being is replaced by an account of the conditions of human understanding.

Kant marks this shift with the distinction between noumena and phenomena. In several places, Kant will speak of the transcendental object, which stands as a placeholder for an object of experience (and as a possible object it is subject to the conditions of sensibility), but Kant creates the designation

of *noumenon* as a kind of sedimented proscription for thought, as that which we must remember we cannot think. Of course, though, (and as Hegel is keen to push,) its very designation means we can think it to a degree. Kant carefully specifies in the B edition: "If by a noumenon we understand a thing **insofar as it is not an object of our sensible intuition**, because we abstract from the manner of our intuition of it, then this is a noumenon in the **negative** sense"—which is to say, we can posit the noumenon negatively, as something we *cannot* know—"but if we understand by that an **object of a non-sensible intuition**, then we assume a special kind of intuition, namely intellectual intuition, which, however, is not our own, and the possibility of which we cannot understand, and this would be the noumenon in a **positive** sense" (KrV, B 307). That is to say, we are *not* justified in claiming with anything even approaching certainty that the noumenon actually *exists* for an intuition that is distinct from ours. The noumenon only designates negatively.

The issue of form and matter on the side of the subject is thus central for the blighted, pitiful state of metaphysics described in the first section of this chapter. For human cognition, if we subtract all concepts, we are left with some buzzing manifold—we are, again, "blind." Conversely, if we subtract all intuition, we are still left with the form of thinking, the categories, "i.e., the way of determining an object for the manifold of *a possible intuition*" (KrV, A 254/B 309, emphasis added). Kant explains metaphysics' disorder and disrepute as stemming from this very definite separability between the form and matter of our thinking: not only is it possible for the form of our thought to be empty, but we are drawn to applying our categories *beyond* the sensibility that we necessarily employ and are thereby limited to. Our categories then "extend further than sensible intuition, since they think objects in general without seeing to the particular manner (of sensibility) in which they might be given. But they

do not thereby determine a greater sphere of objects, since one cannot assume that such objects can be given without presupposing that another kind of intuition than the sensible kind is possible, which, however, we are by no means justified in doing" (KrV, A 254/B 309). The "greater sphere of objects," of objects-in-themselves, glow with the old metaphysical aura of the unchanging, but they are unavailable to us as, again, in the Transcendental Aesthetic, Kant posits that time and space are the *necessary* structuring representations for human cognition. Additionally, Kant of necessity leaves the question unanswered about other forms of intuition, as asserting the existence of any other form of intuition would be ungrounded speculation pending direct, empirical contact.[32]

Kant thus finds himself in a peculiar bind following this total proscription of the noumenon, one which surely occupies the idealists to come. While we cannot know things-in-themselves, and if appearances are not to be merely the products of our own minds, then they must be caused, so to speak, by the things-in-themselves. Kant holds out against Cartesian skepticism and full-on idealism—just as he does not doubt the advances of the natural sciences, he also does not doubt the existence of the external world, which he famously treats in his Refutation of Idealism. Not only in the Refutation but also in both Introductions, Kant explicitly begins his critical project with a disavowal of radical doubt: "There is no doubt whatever that all our cognition begins with experience; for how else should the cognitive faculty be awakened into exercise if not through objects that stimulate our senses" and

[32] For more on Kant's speculations about aliens and angels, see Peter Szendy, *Kant in the Land of Extraterrestrials: Cosmopolitical Philosofictions*, trans. Will Bishop (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013). Additionally, Kant discusses the possibility of an intuitive intellect with no need for intuition separate from it in the proofs for the existence of god and in §§76-77 in the third *Critique*.

"themselves produce representations" (KrV, B 1)?[33] Kant maintains that things-in-themselves elicit our representations, although we can know nothing more about them than that. Transcendental idealism and empirical realism are supposed to facilitate one another, although our knowledge is limited to the human conditions of experience. At the same time, he refuses to have all *being* absolutely generated by the subject, and this refusal has special significance for Adorno: "only in that way can his theory of knowledge introduce the notion of the non-identical—that is, the element that is more than just mind or reason. For it is only in this way that this element of non-identity makes its appearance in his thought."[34]

In what follows, I argue that for Adorno, Kant's doctrine of the block has two functions: 1) it expresses social and metaphysical alienation, and 2) it serves as a testament to nature's alterity. I first treat the philosophical expression of alienation: Kant may sound cheerful while disciplining reason and putting metaphysics in line, but the idea of noumena that are forever out of reach both breeds and expresses a metaphysical longing. In the designation of the noumenon, Kant makes explicit—reifies, in a sense—a recast cosmological position, a new "metaphysical condition." As articulated in some of the pushback against heliocentrism, the Copernican shift marks the end of the human beings'

---

[33] Kant continues, "if not through objects that stimulate our senses and in part themselves produce representations, in part bring the activity of understanding into motion to compare these, to connect or separate them, and thus to work up the raw material of sensible impressions into a cognition of objects that is called experience? As far as time is concerned, then, no cognition in us precedes experience, and with experience every cognition begins" (KrV, B 1). This is admittedly an expansion on the first edition: "Experience is without doubt the first product that our understanding brings forth as it works on the raw material of sensible sensations. It is for this reason the first teaching, and in its progress it is so inexhaustible in new instruction that the chain of life in all future generations will never have any lack of new information that can be gathered on this terrain" (KrV, A 1).

[34] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 67.

central position in the universe, as ordained by providence or a divine, natural order. In its most mournful articulation, earth could be said to be just another planet circling the sun, which challenges the prior cosmic order upon and alongside which claims about human significance and meaning were made. (Catholic and Protestant reactions to Copernicus were not all negative, and objections to the Copernican intervention were not solely based on religious grounds.) This decentering of the human perspective in the broader order of things is simultaneously a doubling down on the human perspective, however, as the human observer herself becomes a site of activity or motion. This reinscription of the Copernican revolution via a critique of our cognition even prior to experience of objects effects this distinctly modern cosmological perspective within metaphysics itself. This great experiment's "correctness" is manifested in the results, namely the explanatory success that grounds further calculations in turn. The cosmic decentering of Copernicus' revolution now occurs in the register of epistemology. This melancholic impression is present in metaphysics' humbling fall from noblest pursuit to something like a hereditary malady—in the A edition preface, Kant diagnoses the "peculiar fate" of human reason that is "burdened with questions which it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself, but which it also cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason" (KrV, A vii). Hegel makes much of this unhappy consciousness in the *Phenomenology*, but recall the backdrop of the success of the natural sciences; the individual sciences have become very good at explaining and manipulating the objects of their study, from numbers and spaces to existing objects. Although knowledge is proliferating spectacularly, the ostensible ultimate aim of inquiry and metaphysics' bequest—knowledge of things as they are—is precisely what must be foresworn as impossible.

For Adorno, this reflects a historical and metaphysical experience that is continuous with the dialectic of enlightenment, as well as the version of the natural sciences I sketched in the second chapter. The sciences produce knowledge at a rate never before seen on earth, and yet reason and its expansive metaphysical drives cannot be satisfied by the purely mechanistic world in which everything is explainable by laws found within the understanding. Adorno writes, "the more we appropriate, the more we find ourselves alienated from what we are really looking for, and what we do actually appropriate is only a kind of lifeless residue."[35] Metaphysics' old objects—God, the immortal soul, and freedom—linger on, at odds with positivistic or strictly mechanistic science, and to spare itself the sin of error or anthropomorphic projection, reason reigns itself in.

Second, then, regarding nature's alterity: it is crucial to emphasize that this strong and self-imposed limit relates not only to the highest objects of metaphysics, but Adorno extends it specifically to nature as well: "*the object of nature that we define with our categories is not actually nature itself*. For our knowledge of nature is really so preformed by the demand that we dominate nature (something exemplified by the chief method of finding out about nature, namely the scientific experiment) that we end up understanding only those aspects of nature that we can control."[36] We went looking for nature, and all we got was this lousy—or actually, very good—construction. This resonates especially with Kant's prefaces to the *Critique* examined in the first section: science *compels* nature to speak, without illusions that true nature is visible anywhere outside of the experiment.[37] Adorno points here

---

[35] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 176.

[36] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 175-6, my emphasis.

[37] For this reason, Adorno considers metaphysics in Kant to be no more than a residue: "it is what is left over once every conceivable scientific discipline has made itself independent of the κόσμος νοητικός of the old metaphysics, which was itself the product of an earlier process of emancipation from the magical

to the presence of the idea, though not yet fully articulated, that science does not provide the absolutely exhaustive representation of nature. Adorno notes that Kant was "enough of a scientist and was sufficiently self-confident to refrain from calling for a kind of knowledge that would reveal the 'true' essence of nature," like some great Romantic philosophers.[38]

Kant thus presents a unique hinge point in the first *Critique*: he casts the knowledge of nature explicitly in terms of the subject, and yet he affirms that real, essential nature must exist *outside* of us and our terms, though we are forbidden to speculate upon how. I will not here go into detail about Kant's antinomic treatment of the former objects of metaphysics—the soul, God, and the world—except to mention that nature is not so easily dealt with: it will spark the project of the third *Critique*. With the taboo of the noumenon, Kant has placed knowledge of nature as it is in itself—like knowledge of God or the self or freedom—out of reach of human answers, as natural as asking after them may be. Adorno describes this "underlying feeling" as: "while we are putting out our nets and catching more and more things in them, there is a sense in which nature itself seems to keep receding from us; and the more we take possession of nature, the more its real essence becomes alien to us."[39] While the alienation from nature provisionally echoes the desperation related to God, freedom, and

---

and mythological idea of the oneness of nature" (*Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 40). Metaphysics is put in line because, as Adorno writes, "What Kant actually does in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is to examine this residue of knowledge, assertions, theses and propositions that cannot be dissolved into scientific knowledge. He then judges this residue according to criteria that have been derived from the sciences whose validity is uncontested" (ibid.). Only synthetic *a priori* principles and the natural empirical laws they subtend may claim authority for human cognition.

[38] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 175. Adorno continues, "I am thinking here of Ritter and Schelling, and even, in a sense, of Schopenhauer. Kant, however, did not do this; he would certainly have rejected all such aspirations as obscurantist" (ibid.).

[39] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 176. Cf. Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics, and the Non-Human*, 45.

immortality of the soul, it remains a central issue that is not adequately accounted for by the sciences and their newfound transcendental justification.

In the first section of this chapter, I explained how Adorno understands Kant to instantiate two poles of the enlightenment: skeptical hostility towards indeterminacy on the one hand and the preservation of the value of truth, a kind of emancipation, on the other. With the doctrine of the block, Kant becomes an even more fraught but significant figure of the enlightenment. While he has transcendentally fixed the feeling of existential alienation in his critical philosophy, Adorno alights upon this moment of non-identity as a powerful moment of Kant's resistance to positivism full stop. Kant shares positivism's "insistence on the finite nature of knowledge and the rejection of metaphysics as a 'wild extravagance,'" but the feeling that permeates his philosophy is distinctly *not* positivistic.[40] Adorno sums up Kant's unique balance in this way:

> we have a situation in which knowledge is illusory because the closer it comes to its object, the more it shapes it in its own image and thus drives it further and further away, much as civilization has driven the wildest and most exotic animals into the most inaccessible jungles. This is what is reflected in the doctrine of the block; it is a kind of metaphysical mourning, a kind of memory of what is best, of something that we must not forget, but that we are nevertheless compelled to forget. This memory is quite alien to positivism, just as positivism has no room for any theory that propounds the idea of a block on knowledge. Instead, positivism would say that this is all nonsense, these are all obsolete fantasies; stick to the 'positive' facts, to the given realities—nothing further lies behind them.[41]

Adorno identifies the power of Kant's "historical consciousness (or whatever you want to call it)" that is not shared by the positivists: "The memory of the questions philosophy formerly asked is still so

[40] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 176.
[41] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 176.

powerful in him that even against the grain of his own positivistic rationality, he retains at least a notion of what lies beyond reason."[42] And what lies beyond reason, as Adorno evocatively suggests, is a memory of an experience of undomesticated nature. While it might not be right or safe to engage with these "wild" and "exotic" remnants, neither is it fair to forget them. There is a kind of memorial justice at play in Adorno's description of Kant's metaphysical mourning.

The positivism that Adorno refers to is the kind of no holds barred enlightenment thinking described in Chapter 2 as instrumental rationality. Adorno goes so far as to say that taken to its extreme, this form of thinking responds to the limitation of knowledge with a such thoroughgoing defeatism that it is no longer fair to call such knowledge *truth* in an expansive sense. The skeptical extreme, which exists in both cultural historicist circles as well as scientistic ones, holds that "to make an absolute of everything human is not significantly different from endorsing the customs of shamans who regard their own rites as objectively valid, even though in reality they are no more than subjective abracadabra."[43] In Kant, critical reason both is motived by and tries to mitigate the desire "to rid itself of mythology, of the illusion that man can make certain ideas absolute and hold them to be the whole truth simply because he happens to have them within himself."[44] Kant checks human reason's illusory grasp on the nature in itself, but his acknowledgement of this limit is itself asserted as a kind of truth that exceeds the purview of the natural sciences.

There are thus two elements of enlightenment thinking that come into a unique and deeply significant articulation in Kant: there is reason's need to eliminate specters of dogmatism that upon

---

[42] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 176.
[43] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 66.
[44] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 66.

inspection reveal themselves to be anthropomorphic projection, and there is self-limitation, the emphasis on the human and partial nature of what humans are responsible for. This latter tendency, which Adorno deems the "criticism that enlightenment directs at identity, that is, at the assertion that everything which exists is absorbed into reason," is also that element that can lead to the "intellectual somersault that turns against the Enlightenment and against reason."[45] Kant's block on "the arrogance of a reason that asserts itself absolute" can reflect back to weaken that first enlightenment element that critically roots out superstition. (Adorno writes, "It is no accident that the adherents of a consistent positivism—and positivism is basically the rationalism of an absolute self-limitation—that positivists are never immune to superstition. When they find themselves faced by occult phenomena of one sort or another, they exhibit a casualness that would be unthinkable in a speculative philosopher of the caliber of Hegel, who would never let such things pass without comment."[46]) However, in this moment Adorno sees a singularly important restraint:

> because of the Kantian block and even more because of this theological idea that reason *cannot* be asserted absolutely, we see that there is an ultimate barrier which prevents reason, spirit, the very thing that in the final analysis has separated itself off from manual labor, from being asserted in an absolute way. This barrier prevents something which is deeply embedded in nature from behaving as if it were a transcendent category, utterly superior to nature. *We may well say that the spirit that forgets that it is rooted in nature, and that consequently truly asserts its own absolute status, is committing an act of hubris that condemns it all the more to fall victim to its own roots in nature. We may say, in other words, that it will be doomed to perpetuate blind natural conditions.*[47]

[45] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 67.
[46] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 75.
[47] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 75-6, my emphasis.

Thus for Adorno, Kant's block on knowing nature absolutely, the memory that nature in itself still exceeds our grasp, serves as a reminder that human knowers are *themselves* a part of nature. The necessary limits on reason reaffirms the embeddedness of reason in the world of nature and contingency. Although self-limitation could uncritically snowball into a possibly defeatist version of reason (which is compatible with positivism), it is an essential component in Adorno's positive project of the remembrance of nature within the subject. Even in the first *Critique*—which seems a full stop defense of the subsumptive, iterable model of thinking—Kant provides an example of conscious humility. In the figure of the noumenon, Kant erects a crucial testament to nature as not identical to our modes of calculation. Remembering that something of nature eludes our total grasp and mourning via this "memory of what is best, of something that we must not forget, but that we are nevertheless compelled to forget" is in league with recalling that reason is not absolute—and supernatural—but of this world.

Adorno's pursuit of this tension in Kant only deepens in his engagement with Kant's last work, the *Critique of Judgment*. Adorno has cast Kant's mission as a salvaging effort, and so too can we understand Adorno's impulses regarding Kant himself and the doctrine of the block. Adorno's philosophy, as he avows in the preface to *Negative Dialectics*, is to reorient philosophy again from the subject to the object: "The last chapter, groping its way around metaphysical questions, tries by critical self-reflection to give the Copernican revolution an axial turn."[48] In the next chapters, we will see how beauty and aesthetics play into this undertaking.

[48] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1973), xx.

Chapter 4

Enlightenment and Aesthetic Experience

In his 1958 lectures on *Aesthetics*, Adorno avows: "my entire deliberations stand in flagrant opposition to the most venerable aesthetic theory—in German tradition, at least—namely that of Kant."[1] Adorno distances his theory from Kant's where Kant seems to define aesthetics primarily in terms of the beholder's reaction, which Adorno takes to be "in agreement with the widespread vulgar subjective categories."[2] (Though they do agree that whether an artwork is good or bad should not depend only on whether someone liked it or not.) Kant tries to wrest more dignity for aesthetics by grounding it in transcendental subjectivity, distinguishing the pleasure arising in the free play of the faculties from contingent sensual gratification, but Adorno contends that Kant's theory and any subjectivist

[1] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetics*, ed. Eberhard Ortland, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 200.
[2] Adorno, *Aesthetics*, 200.

aesthetics miss the point that both the aesthetic object and the aesthetic subject are "highly organized," "concrete," and "saturated with historical experiences"—and the latter therefore "cannot be compared to that general transcendental subject."[3] The proof for this, Adorno writes, is "quite simply in the fact that people do not relate works of art, in the form in which they normally encounter them, to those most general of categories."[4]

Despite these protests, and as many have noted, Adorno returns to Kant for his aesthetic theory, writing in the "Draft Introduction" to *Aesthetic Theory* that "Kant's theory is more apposite to the contemporary situation, for his aesthetics attempts to bind together consciousness of what is necessary with consciousness that what is necessary is itself blocked from consciousness."[5] Indeed, what Adorno describes as the "dilemma of aesthetics," namely "that it can be constituted neither from above nor from below, neither from concepts nor from aconceptual experience," seems a direct rearticulation of Kant's paradoxical framing of aesthetic judgment.[6] In *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno*, Jay Bernstein understands Kant's transcendental elaborations of aesthetic judgment to inform Adorno's philosophical diagnosis of modernist art.[7] On his view, Adorno converts Kant's transcendental distinctions among the theoretical, moral, and aesthetic domains to the *real* indices of social alienation in our contemporary world, and the separation of the aesthetic realm from the domains of the true and the good becomes art's own animating question: What is art, if it is not

---

[3] Adorno, *Aesthetics*, 201.
[4] Adorno, *Aesthetics*, 201.
[5] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York, New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 2002), 343.
[6] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 343.
[7] J. M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

true in a standard sense? What is art, if it is freed from the task of religious or moral instruction? Adorno asserts Kant's significance for contemporary art quite straightforwardly: "Kant brought into thought the deepest impulses of an art that only developed in the one hundred fifty years after his death: an art that probed after its objectivity openly, without protection of any kind."[8]

Robert Kaufman, in his "Red Kant; or The Persistence of the Third 'Critique' in Adorno and Jameson," argues instead that Adorno simply translates Kant into the vocabulary of late modernism, and that Adorno's own aesthetic theory is therefore "formally and phenomenologically indistinguishable from Kant's own accounts of aesthetics and epistemology."[9] Adorno is thus Kaufman's ally in his larger project of rescuing Kantian aesthetic insights from trumped up charges of formalism, especially within Marxian contexts. Because in Kant the aesthetic is "free" in ways concept-based determinative judgments are not, the aesthetic is "both a boot-up disk for conceptual thought as such" and "the engine for new, experimental—because previously nonexistent (and therefore, free of status quo determined)—concepts."[10] For Kaufman, Kant's distinction of the aesthetic from standard concept-based thinking is taken up directly by Adorno as the idea that "thought determined by society (which is to say, thought determined by society's reigning concepts of itself) can never give a satisfactory, even provisionally true picture of that society."[11] Against these established and determinate concepts that undergird existing society, aesthetic experiment, with its "quasi-social" and "quasi-conceptual" character, provides "a prerequisite of critical thought when (if only by negation or

[8] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 343.
[9] Robert Kaufman, "Red Kant, or the Persistence of the Third 'Critique' in Adorno and Jameson," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (2000): 685.
[10] Kaufman, "Red Kant," 711.
[11] Kaufman, "Red Kant," 711.

in art's negative space) it offers formal means for allowing new (and not necessarily utopian) aspects of contemporary society to come into view."[12] In other words, for Kaufman, the Kantian account of the aesthetic allows for the creation of new concepts and makes space for new critical perspectives onto the contemporary social world, and Adorno inherits these Kantian elements with no equivocation.

Both these readings are textually grounded and compelling, and Ross Wilson suggests they are both true but represent the two poles of objective and subjective aesthetics. On Bernstein's interpretation, Adorno translates Kant's aesthetics into an account of the objective world and art's historical development, while on Kaufman's reading, Adorno makes central the quasi-conceptual ability of Kant's aesthetic to reorient the aesthetic subject toward the social world. Not only did Adorno himself seek to put these two moments into movement in his own "dialectical aesthetics," Wilson argues, but these two perspectives are in line with Kant's own aporetic aesthetic program of subjective universality, which Wilson supports by drawing on Adorno's interpretation of Kant as trying to "salvage objectivity by way of the subject."[13]

I take all of these readings to be correct and instructive, but each one focuses explicitly on art and overlooks the significance of the aesthetic experience of nature in both Kant and Adorno. In order to recalibrate their accounts to make space for an aesthetics of nature in Adorno, I will analyze four fundamental Kantian concepts that inform Adorno's aesthetic theory with an eye to the figuration of nature they construct: morality, freedom, history, and aesthetic rationality. First, in an attempt to salvage morality, Kant translates practical reason into a formalistic system which, according to Adorno,

---

[12] Kaufman, "Red Kant," 711.

[13] Ross Wilson, "Dialectical Aesthetics and the Kantian *Rettung*: On Adorno's Aesthetic Theory," *New German Critique* 35, no. 2 (2008): 57.

further sediments the domination of nature. Second, while Kant understands his project to be for the sake of furthering freedom, Adorno contends that his interpretation of enlightenment redirects freedom to the realm of thought and away from that of action and the objective social world. This view is made possible by Kant's formulation of history as nature, whereby he naturalizes progress in a bid to demand civil obedience. Aesthetic rationality for Kant—and for Adorno also, I argue—takes shape *against* these forms: aesthetic rationality is thus not merely formal; aesthetic rationality does not promote obedience in the practical realm; and aesthetic rationality is not content to speculatively regard history as nature, i.e., it does not passively inherit history as fate. Instead, for both Kant and Adorno, aesthetic rationality involves sensuous, mimetic involvement in the object and a *block* on all claims of a total grip of the object. In this way, the aesthetic becomes a *repository* for nature's significance beyond its objectification by theoretical reason and beyond its instrumental status in relation to human ends.

Section 1: Morality and Mutilated Nature

In line with the "salvaging" gesture of much of his philosophy, Kant safeguards morality by casting it as a function of reason; the ends and dignity of morality are saved from skeptical and corrosive devaluation by being placed in the supersensible realm governed by reason. In "Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno read Kant's separation of the natural and scientific order from that of moral actions to be an unsuccessful attempt to salvage the value of human beings from calculating reason. This calculating reason, skeptical of or

impervious to substantive ends, is the very same that Kant deduced via the understanding in the first *Critique*, and that which Adorno and Horkheimer track in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. This reason transforms nature into quantifiable material or means; demystifies and unmasks both erroneous magic and dogmatism; and can only perceive particular objects as instances of a universal type. Skeptical of substantive ends or values, calculating reason cannot account for the kinds of ethical relations that most thinkers of the Enlightenment period would like to have. As explored in the second chapter, this drive of enlightenment goes far beyond the disenchantment of the more exoteric aspects of religion: ethical bonds themselves cannot hold up against the enlightenment's skeptical drive towards truth and the concomitant logic of self-preservation.

Kant's method for combatting moral skepticism is arguably unsuccessful as, for Adorno and Horkheimer, "it is the usual endeavor of bourgeois thought to ground the respect without which civilization cannot exist on something other than material interest."[14] Just as Kant seeks to retain the dignity of truth for the knowledge produced by the natural sciences, he also wants to secure the dignity and authority of moral and ethical values. "Is it not thought to be of the utmost necessity to work out for once a pure moral philosophy, completely cleansed of everything that may be only empirical and that belongs to anthropology?" Kant asks in the Preface to the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (GMS, AA 4: 389).[15] Following his distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal worlds, the realm of the material and sensible cannot account for the *necessity* that such laws, *as laws*, ought to

[14] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 67.

[15] *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, in *Gesammelte Schriften,* vol. 4 (Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin: De Gruyter: 1900ff). *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary Gregor (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

have, and yet for Kant there must be a ground for such necessity and obligation, as made clear by "the common idea of duty and moral laws" (GMS, AA 4: 389).[16] In order to salvage these ethical bonds, the *Critique of Practical Reason* amounts to a defense of moral laws via their *formal* rationality, that is, via their universal applicability and allergy to contradiction.

In the *Groundwork*, the categorical imperative decrees: "act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (GMS, AA 4: 421). Kant's attempt to save ethical bonds thus results in their abstraction and *mortification*, as natural instincts and ethical inclinations are subjected to translation into the universal terms of reason. Kant defines inclination in the *Groundwork* as "the dependence of the faculty of desire on sensations" (GMS, AA 4: 413n). While human actions are generally motivated by such inclinations, be they for personal gain or personal affection, for Kant such actions do not claim the dignity of the truly moral. At his most extreme, in the *Groundwork*, Kant distinguishes "good" actions, when done out of "good" but material interests, such as others' happiness and well-being, from properly moral actions. At his "coldest," he writes:

> To be beneficent where one can is a duty, and besides there are many souls so sympathetically attuned that, without any other motive of vanity or self-interest they find an inner satisfaction in spreading joy around them and can take delight in the satisfaction of others so far as

[16] Charles W. Mills and Dilek Huseyinzadegan, among others, argue that there is a second "impure" part of Kant's ethics and political thought in his anthropology, and that his claims—that the "man of nature" and women are not able to overcome nature and become moral—render Kant's "pure" ethics unavoidably imbricated in colonial-racist ideology. For more on the relation between Kant's "ideal theory" and its "nonideal" anthropological underpinnings, see Mills, "Black Radical Kantianism," *Res Philosophica* 95, no. 1 (2017): 1–33; Mills, "Kant's *Untermenschen*," in *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Walls (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2005), 169–93; Mills; *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1997); Huseyinzadegan, *Kant's Nonideal Theory of Politics* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2019).

> it is their own work. But I assert that in such a case an action of this kind, however it may conform to duty and however amiable it may be, *has nevertheless no true moral worth* but is on the same footing with other inclinations. (GMS, AA 4: 398, emphasis added)

It is only via the universalizing operation in line with the categorical imperative that human agents become autonomous moral agents. Religious and divine authority used to ground these moral and ethical bonds but by grounding morality through reason itself and reason alone—which for Adorno again demonstrates "the hopelessness of attempting to replace enfeebled religion by an intellectual motive for enduring within society when material interest no longer suffices"—Kant means to wrest morality out of the hands of moral dogmatists, relativists, and skeptics. At the same time, however, Kant's attempt to safeguard the value of the human person via a rationalist account thereby sacrifices nature as valuable in itself.[17]

Adorno most explicitly critiques the mortification of nature in Kant's ethical work in the preparatory notes for his work on Beethoven. There he writes on the abjection of the animal:

> What I find so suspect in Kantian ethics is the 'dignity' with which they attribute to man in the name of autonomy [….] Ethical dignity in Kant is a demarcation of differences. It is directed against animals. Implicitly it excludes man from nature, so that its humanity threatens incessantly to revert to the inhuman. It leaves no room for pity [*Mitleid*]. Nothing is more abhorrent to the Kantian than a reminder of man's resemblance to animals [*Tieränlichkeit*]. This taboo is always at work when the idealist berates the materialist. Animals play for the idealist system virtually the same role as the Jews for fascism.[18]

[17] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 67.
[18] Theodor W. Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 80.

When the human being is set apart so definitely from nature, *Mitleid*, meaning also compassion and sympathy, is routed and reminders of the human being's *Tieränlichkeit,* or animal-likeness, become offensive. Kant's definition of morality against animality bears on the issue of material interest, because material interest is not merely *self-interest*. Material interest includes the whole gamut of what Kant calls inclinations, and what we might call "natural" ethical bonds. Inclinations thus include the motivations and desire that stem from our embodied, natural, sensuous selves and relations. In *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, Jay Bernstein argues that Adorno diagnoses precisely this motivational crisis, which Kant's moral philosophy expresses in ahistorical, transcendental terms.[19] Kant's moral philosophy is thus a *response* to the withering of the authority of ethical life, but a rigid, cold, and insufficient one. Bernstein then tries to recuperate these material interests through what he will call the "material inference," which he argues appears in Adorno's work as a *natural* response to, for instance, a body in pain. Nature, appearing negatively as a response *of* suffering and *to* suffering, calls for mimetic understanding and recognition, which is precisely what Kant dismissed from his rationalistic account of ethics. Against Kant's misguided attempts to protect moral bonds by leaning into the denial of nature as morally valuable, Bernstein recovers the authority of ethical relations via a "remembrance of nature within the subject."

Alongside the debased animal, Kant's account of formal moral reason gives rise to further figurations of nature, which Adorno and Horkheimer explore in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by pairing Kant's moral philosophy with another thinker of the enlightenment, the Marquis de Sade. The opening lines to the second excursus in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* come from Kant's essay "What is

[19] Jay M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Enlightenment?": "Enlightenment, in Kant's words, is 'the human being's emergence from self-incurred minority. Minority is the inability to make use of one's own understanding without direction from another.'"[20] De Sade, they come to argue, exhibits precisely "the bourgeois subject freed from all tutelage."[21] Like Kant's moral philosophy, de Sade's characters table their own inclinations for the sake of a *more thoroughgoing enlightenment*. For Adorno and Horkheimer, de Sade and his characters see through the flimsy rational justification of the moral order so that morality itself appears as an ungrounded prejudice, a magical remnant. Therefore, in *Juliette*, the characters undertake a truly *systematic* abomination of mores, the justifications of which have long been eroded. Kant gives a rationalistic justification for moral bonds via practical reason's autonomy, its superiority to mere inclination, and its universal self-evidence. In line with the aims of enlightenment, Juliette and friends absorb the authority for action into themselves (self-determination), regulate their feelings and conscience for the sake of such actions (self-discipline), and at their best, refrain from overvaluing and mythologizing their own morality (scientific integrity). Horkheimer and Adorno thus understand de Sade to offer an apotheosis of the skeptical compulsion of the enlightenment project, which was precisely what Kant attempted to stave off by formalizing morality and securing it by reason alone.

De Sade's *Juliette* reveals that once the weakness of moral bonds is transparent, corroded by enlightenment reason and the demands of social life itself, all that is left is power. For Adorno and Horkheimer, de Sade goes even further than Nietzsche in giving no philosophical justification for power's supremacy: the exalted status of might rests on the self-evidence of its greater force. For

[20] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 63.
[21] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 68.

thinkers of the Enlightenment period who are committed enough to the principles of self-determination and the destruction of false idols *and* false truths, "once the objective order of nature has been dismissed as prejudice and myth, nature is no more than a mass of material [….] To the extent that the understanding, which was formed against the standard of self-preservation, recognizes any law of life, it is that of the stronger."[22] In dismissing *Mitleid* and denigrating the human and non-human animal, a form of nature is again *released*: the skepticism toward substantial ends brings about a "natural" justification of the powerful. It is in this context that Adorno and Horkheimer discuss how Jews and women, as victims of differing forms of violence, appear *as* nature in their victimhood and suffering, and the sexual and racialized division of value is seen as natural.[23] In a sketch for *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, "Interest in the Body," Adorno and Horkheimer extend this analysis to agents of racial terror in the United States:

> the lynchers and clan members, the bruiser who steps in when someone answers back… all the werewolves lurking in the darkness of history and sustaining the fear without which there is no domination… in blind rage they repeat against the living thing what they cannot make undone: the splitting of life into mind and its object. The human being irresistibly attracts them, they want to reduce him or her to the body, nothing shall be allowed to live.[24]

[22] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 78.
[23] In *Juliette*, Adorno and Horkheimer home in on this historical issue of gender: "Man as ruler refuses to do woman the honor of individualizing her. Socially, the individual woman is an example of the species. A representative of her sex, and this, wholly encompassed by male logic, she stands for nature…To eradicate utterly the hated but overwhelming temptation to lapse back into nature—that is the cruelty which stems from failed civilization; it is barbarism, the other side of culture" (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 88).
[24] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 195.

The *Tierähnlichkeit* of human suffering becomes a further motive for violence and dehumanization. This "love-hate for body and earth" is mobilized by others, it "has always been an indispensable instrument in the art of government."[25]

The logic of Kant's moral reasoning is subsumptive; it is not based on fellow feeling but on rational principles. While some Kant scholars, like Rae Langton, try to promote the "sane" versus the "extreme" Kant, Adorno and Horkheimer find another instantiation of nature "blind and mutilated."[26] Having been rendered meaningless by the dominant social logic and the objective facts of social life, nature's worthlessness is doubly confirmed by the attempt to translate moral value into an abstract and universal operation.

Section 2: Freedom and Naturalized History

In the 1959 lecture series on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason,* Adorno briefly addresses Kant's essay, "What is Enlightenment?", which served as the opening lines to the excursus analyzed in the previous section. The open letter has since become widely read, as befits its original aim of engaging with the public. By analyzing this short public address, I continue to parse the relationship between the enlightenment subject and the objective world in which historical subjects live. In the piece, Kant condemns obedience in thought but unreservedly demands obedience in action. This is a consequence,

[25] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 194-95.
[26] See Rae Langton, "Duty and Desolation," *Philosophy* 67, no. 262 (1992): 481–505.

I argue, of Kant's conceiving of history *as nature* in such a way that undermines the substantial notion of freedom that is the goal of enlightenment in the first place.

The essay is Kant's response to the question put to the public readership in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, namely: What is Enlightenment? Written on September 30, 1784 and published in the magazine in December of the same year, the essay bears special significance given that it was written two years before the death of the ill and aging Frederick the Great. The monarch had afforded greater freedom to the public (and the philosophical faculty in particular) on matters that were heavily censored in other political realms, and hope for the continuity of such intellectual freedoms is a driving force in Kant's public defense and definition of enlightenment.

Adorno takes up this particularly "instructive" document both because of Kant's influential definition of the enlightenment and because it provides a particularly rich opportunity to trace "the interplay of conflicting forces within [a philosophy's apparent] coherence."[27] Under the ideal of autonomy, Kant now famously proclaims that "*Enlightenment is the human being's emergence from his self-incurred minority [Unmündigkeit]*," and that both fear and laziness are responsible for the widespread failure to think for oneself (WA, AA 8: 35).[28] *Unmündigkeit* denotes both immaturity and the status of being under legal age, and Kant intimates that this "self-incurred" minority could flip into "self-initiated" self-direction. Referring to a walking cart [*Gängelwagen*] instead of the leading-strings of the second introduction to the first *Critique*, Kant rails against another device that provides

---

[27] Theodor W. Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason,* ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 60.

[28] "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?" in *Gesammelte Schriften,* vol. 8 (Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin: De Gruyter: 1900ff). "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

support for children learning to walk. While "kindly" guardians "have made their domesticated animals dumb and carefully prevented these placid creatures from daring to take a single step without the walking cart in which they have confined them, they then show them the danger that threatens them if they try to walk alone" (WA, AA 8: 35). Against this infantile, brutish dependency and so-called impairment encouraged by theoretical, spiritual, and even medical authorities (the walking cart transforms into "the ball and chain of everlasting minority"), Kant advocates for critical thinking and the development of one's own law of belief or action rather than the acceptance of heteronomous doctrine (WA, AA 8: 36).[29]

Having adequately abused those of insufficient courage to think for themselves, however, Kant also deduces the corresponding and admittedly paradoxical directive of enlightened Prussia and the Enlightenment period more broadly: "*Argue as much as you will and about what you will: only obey!*" (WA, AA 8: 41). While Kant encourages the elaboration of the *law* of one's action, he actively opposes engaged action itself—for the very sake of enlightenment.

How does Kant come to such a fraught definition of enlightenment? In the public letter, as in the *Critique of Pure Reason,* Kant calls for the establishment of reason as the absolute authority. While reason is the only authority and a *unity*, as he emphasizes throughout his works, in *practice* human reason is already plural. Kant characterizes reason in the following way: "The disputes in which reason

[29] The significant obstacles for enlightenment are the guardians who infantilize the public and the public who acquiesces to such guidance. Kant dismissively ventriloquizes: "If I have a book to have understanding in place of me, a spiritual adviser to have a conscience for me, a doctor to judge my diet for me, and so on, I need not make any efforts at all. I need not think, so long as I can pay; others will soon enough take the tiresome job over for me" (WA, AA 8: 35).

becomes involved, including those disputes with itself, are to be seen as reason's own life-blood."[30] Reason's very substance comes from confrontations *with* itself. Kant locates the possibility for enlightenment in these disputes, in these public arguments, and by so doing, Kant shifts the responsibility for enlightenment from an individual to a world-historical, cultural scale. Therefore, the public, not yet "enlightened" but living in the "age of enlightenment" (WA, AA 8: 40), must be left its freedom for its "possible" and indeed "almost inevitable" enlightenment (WA, AA 8: 36). A few already enlightened minds "will disseminate the spirit of a rational valuing of one's own worth" and the "calling of each individual to think for himself," but freedom from censorship and self-regulation according to reason are crucial (WA, AA 8: 36).

In this spirit, Kant proudly declares that the motto of enlightenment is *sapere aude!—dare to know!*—but as Adorno emphasizes, this call to freedom and self-determination has a strong subjective tilt: the daring is to extend exclusively *to thought*. Kant avows: "The *public* use of one's reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among human beings; the *private use* of one's reason may, however, often be very narrowly restricted without this particularly hindering the progress of enlightenment" (WA, AA 8: 37, Kant's emphasis). The term "private" here refers somewhat counterintuitively to one's role in civil life—as a doctor, minister, even citizen—whereas one's public use of reason involves the claims one makes "as a scholar before the entire public world of readers" (WA, AA 8: 37). The use of reason in one's civic role—notably, again, in one's capacity as citizen—is proscribed for the sake of the stability of the social order. Social continuity is a high priority for Kant, writing between the American and French revolutions, but this is not merely a concession to the

[30] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 62.

monarchic powers of his time; it is a rational conclusion. He is skeptical of the power of political revolution to bring about "a true reform in one's way of thinking; instead new prejudices well serve just as well as old ones to harness the great unthinking masses" (WA, AA 8: 36). Additionally, the state would not be able to function if "some members of the commonwealth" did not "behave merely passively, so as to be directed by the government, through an artful unanimity, to public ends (or at least prevented from destroying such ends)" (WA, AA 8: 37). It is imperative that all perform their military, civic, and clerical roles without question.

An individual's enactment of enlightened thinking swerves away from the register of historical action, bringing about a different set of two worlds than typically appear in Kant. In one's daily life, when enmeshed in one's normal responsibilities and roles, one has the duty to passively obey, in line with the explicit or implicit conditions of the role in question. The world we generally think of as that of action is thus kept safe from the use of one's own critical reason, although Kant believes that it is the most rational (and therefore necessary) to obey orders in civic life. Only in thought, in reflection as divorced from this realm of practical daily duties and action, is one encouraged *to dare to know*. According to Adorno, for Kant, enlightenment "is restricted to the way the individual behaves within the world of his own thoughts," but it does not entail being critical of "the structures of objective spirit, that is, to be critical of whatever is not thought [….] The question of the objectification of spirit and therewith the institutions and arrangements of the world is not really included in this definition of enlightenment."[31] Drawing on Hegelian terminology, objective spirit refers to the existing forms of community, culture, custom, and law, which as spirit are the result of purposive activity and social

[31] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 62.

processes. Public debate is surely valuable, but when action upon one's principles is itself barred, this public sphere—defined only as scholarly debate—is a limited and ideal register. For Adorno, the force of the first part of dual imperative is curtailed by the latter: "*Argue as much as you will and about what you will: only obey!*" (WA, AA 8: 41).

Kant, however, is aware that the principal imperative for the enlightenment is paradoxical.[32] Adorno argues that what the two prongs of Kant's essay express is that "the irrationality of the whole, that is to say, the blindness of the forces at work, and with that the inability of the individual to determine his own life in accordance with reason, remains intact."[33] Kant's division between public and private reasoning enables and validates the picture wherein life can continue to be organized by irrational and "blind" forces, which precludes allowing reason to have a grip on life. Moreover, for Adorno, "this peculiar oscillation between rationality and irrationality characteristic of bourgeois society at its very core is reflected in the ambivalent attitude of philosophy, especially the greatest philosophy, towards reason."[34] Reason's powers are great and total in the realm of thought—one should develop one's own *law* of belief or action and can even publish about it—but because Kant *limits* action on those beliefs if they conflict with one's civic role, reason is clearly and openly limited when it comes to the objective, social world in which one lives and acts.

---

[32] After spelling out his motto, "Argue as much as you will and about what you will; only obey!" Kant continues: "Here a strange, unexpected course is revealed in human affairs, as happens elsewhere too if it is considered in the large, where almost everything is paradoxical. A greater degree of civil freedom seems advantageous to a people's freedom of *spirit* and nevertheless puts up insurmountable barriers to it; a lesser degree of the former, on the other hand, provides a space for the latter to expand to its full capacity" (WA, AA 8: 41).

[33] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 64.

[34] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 64.

For Kant, however, these restricted freedoms of thought and public discourse, kept apart from action, are only justified by a gamble, namely an epistemologically-qualified venture about nature's ends. Kant makes this gamble on nature's aims quite cheerfully, writing:

> when nature has unwrapped, from under this hard shell, the seed for which she cares most tenderly, namely the propensity and calling to *think* freely, the latter gradually works back upon the mentality of the people (which thereby gradually becomes capable of *freedom* in acting) and eventually even upon the principles of *government*, which finds it profitable to itself to treat the human being, *who is now more than a machine*, in keeping with his dignity. (WA, AA 8: 41-2)

Reason's direct forfeiture of the objective world and compelled obedience in social reality thus bank on an understanding of the human being's natural potential and essence. When, in accordance with nature, human beings think freely, only then might they be capable of acting freely. Only at this point can the government be organized so as to allow them to act in keeping with that dignity.

Kant's arguments in "What is Enlightenment?" thus run as follows: 1) Reason is the only valid authority in the realm of thought, and it is not yet absolutely valid in the objective world, so one must obey the authorities in place for the foreseeable future; 2) Human beings have the capacity to be enlightened and autonomous within them like a seed, although reason seems to flourish most when exercised publicly, discursively, and indeed combatively; 3) Because human beings have such a potential for autonomy *by nature*, it *must* be nature's end that the seed ripen, but only bit by bit and still in the realm of thought—if this development is not to be interrupted by too great or bloody a growth spurt.

Kant's motto in its entirety should read: dare to know, by all means obey, and have *faith* that freedom in thought will lead to actualized freedom. Have *faith* that freeing reason in the scholarly

domain—and allowing reason to regulate itself—will lead to actualized reason in the objective world of social institutions. The hope and promise that the sacrifice of civil obedience will result in enlightened political institutions relies on the claim that enlightenment is a *nature-given* possibility.

This last point, however, relies on a kind of speculation that is shy of worldly certainty. Although reason might require faith in the enlightenment based on human nature, this faith must be epistemologically qualified: it is not a claim about phenomenal nature, and so it cannot claim the status of knowledge. Thus, in addition to Kant's restriction of the knowledge of nature to terms taken from the subject and the acknowledgement that nature's essence exceeds us—there is a *block* on knowing nature as it is in itself—speculation on the ends of nature serves to undergird some of the most crucial political and practical tenets of his philosophy.

This move reveals a new figuration of nature in Kant's work. This is the necessity of *speculation about nature* for the sake of an account of history. As he suggests in "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim," also written in 1784, one should try to "discover an aim of nature in this nonsensical course of things human" (IaG, AA 8: 18).[35] This question of a general purposiveness in human history is one that Kant will address in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, where, befitting a critique, he asks after the transcendental grounds for such speculation. For Kant, for practical and historical reasons, it is "possible, indeed necessary, to conceive in nature, over and above its mechanical

[35] "Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht," in *Gesammelte Schriften,* vol. 8 (Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin: De Gruyter: 1900ff). "Idea for a universal history with a Cosmopolitan Aim," in *Anthropology, History, and Education*, eds. Günter Zöller and Robert B. Louden, trans. Allen W. Wood (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

necessity, a purposiveness" (EEKU, AA 20: 219).[36] What grounds this necessity is the reflective power of judgment.

I again emphasize that the justification of Kant's definition of enlightenment—the freedom in thought and obedience in action—relies on a speculative claim about nature, or more properly, on seeing history *as nature* and thus *naturalizing history*. Drawing again on Adorno's lens of natural-history helps to reveal the stakes and consequences of such an appeal. In "Idea for a Universal History," for instance, Kant also naturalizes what are socially dependent phenomena. There, Kant defines human nature in terms of our "antisocial sociability," exclaiming: "Thanks be to nature, therefore, for the incompatibility, for the spiteful competitive vanity, for the insatiable desire to possess or even to dominate! For without them all the excellent natural predispositions in humanity would eternally slumber undeveloped. The human being wills concord; but nature knows better what is good for his species; it wills discord" (IaG, AA 8: 21). The will to dominate—and colonial expansion—is thus naturalized and universalized, alongside the conscious desires for harmony, for it is only with this double nature that the aim of the human species is "to develop completely the germs of nature" (IaG, AA 8: 22-3). Kant will ultimately claim that such an account of the development of nature may help further the development of enlightenment and cosmopolitanism, driven by human nature's natural antagonistic tendencies. Kant himself gestures towards the significance of speculating on such ends of nature: "such a justification of nature—or better, of providence—is not an unimportant motive for

[36] *Erste Einleitung in die Kritik der Urteilskraft*, in *Gesammelte Schriften,* vol. 20 (Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin: De Gruyter: 1900ff). *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

choosing a particular viewpoint for considering the world" (IaG, AA 8: 30). The way one figures human nature serves to orient one within the world.

Whereas Kant's account of political freedom here amounts to compelling obedience explicitly for the sake of perpetuating the status quo, the aesthetic sphere will come to generate insights and sensibilities that exceed and directly challenge the status quo.

Section 3: Aesthetic Rationality in Kant and Adorno

Although he explicitly opposes the abstracting rationality of Kant's moral philosophy and the subjective tilt of Kant's framing of the enlightenment, Adorno values Kant's aesthetic theory as a corrective to the foregoing logics and their hostility towards nature. In this section, I will demonstrate that Adorno inherits and transforms the following three elements of Kant's aesthetics: purposiveness without purpose, quasi-conceptual non-discursivity, and the latent ethical valence inhering in aesthetic comportment. First, Kant lays the groundwork for an altogether different kind of cognition by distinguishing reflective judgments from determining judgments. Kant then establishes the autonomy of the aesthetic by gating off the perceived purposiveness of the aesthetic object from any real, worldly purpose. The aesthetic thus becomes a repository for nature's significance over and above its instrumental value. Adorno develops this distinct mode of purposiveness against a thick account of instrumental rationality, as, following Kant, he defines aesthetic objects as standing "apart" from empirical reality and its means-ends logic. Art therefore levels a critique of the logics governing social life. Second, for both Kant and Adorno, the aesthetic involves non-discursive, yet quasi-conceptual

judgment. In Kant, this is expressed in discussions of reflective judgment and natural beauty, which Adorno recasts in terms of the enigmatic communication of particularity and mimetic behavior, where mimesis characterizes both the artwork's activity *and* the response called for by the observer. Third, for all the importance of the "purposelessness" of the aesthetic, the aesthetic domain does *do* something. For Kant, the fine arts promote the "cultivation of mental powers for social communication" (KU, AA 5: 306), while natural beauty prepares one to "love" (KU, AA 5: 299).[37] For Adorno, art and the aesthetic promotes a vision of a different world and offers new modes of perception, while aesthetic comportment explicitly contrasts with the top-down, potentially dominating model of discursive cognition.

While my ultimate aim is to make space for Adorno's aesthetics of nature, much of what follows will focus on the recovery of nature within art because Adorno redirects many of Kant's insights into his philosophical analysis of modernism. I want to begin, therefore, with Adorno's curious suggestion that the aesthetic realm itself relies on an empirical experience of natural beauty. In *Aesthetic Theory*, he writes, "Genetically, aesthetic comportment may require familiarity with natural beauty in childhood and the later abandonment of its ideological aspect in order to transform it into a relation to artifacts."[38] The *aesthetic experience of nature* marks and in turn generates the ability to parse and interpret art. Not just a one-off idea, this thought also appears earlier in the 1958 lectures on *Aesthetics*; "I do not wish to dwell on pointing out to you" (and yet he goes on) "that someone who is unable to

---

[37] *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, in *Gesammelte Schriften,* vol. 5 (Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin: De Gruyter: 1900ff). *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
[38] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 69.

perceive natural beauty—that is, who is not capable, already in the experience of nature, of that peculiar separation of objects of action from practical objects that constitutes the aesthetic—that such a person is probably not genuinely capable of artistic experience either." He continues:

> I would rather tell you that natural beauty has a very specific model character for artistic beauty, and that it is therefore unacceptable to exclude all thoughts of natural beauty from an examination of beauty, as the whole of recent philosophy has done, because the conception of the artistic beauty itself, in its most intrinsic meaning, is entwined with natural beauty and—as I hope to show you—with nature itself.[39]

It is unclear how such a claim might be substantiated, but again Adorno gives voice to this remarkable idea is that some aesthetic experiences of nature drives aesthetic interest and aesthetic comportment writ large. At the very minimum, this thought underscores the importance of natural beauty for Adorno, and secondly, the empirical truth of this claim is not necessary for the philosophical point to stand, namely that natural beauty and the foundational act of separating "objects of action from practical objects" is an integral element of aesthetics full stop. In other words, these are Kantian terms, and Adorno's aesthetics rely on salvaging key Kantian insights in order to understand art, aesthetic comportment, and an axis of our relationship to nature itself.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant defends a narrow conception of cognition, where judgments consist in the application of the lawful rules of the understanding. At its narrowest, such cognition consists of *a priori* synthetic judgments, which are the application of the pure categories to sensibility. This is the foundation for conceptualizing nature as a spatio-temporal object of experience only—it significantly does *not* account for the attribution of ends to objects. In the first *Critique*, Kant

[39] Adorno, *Aesthetics*, 24.

describes the power of judgment as responsible for the proper application of concepts (the universal) to the intuition of an object gleaned from the world (the particular), which thus accounts for human discursive judgment. In the first introduction to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, however, Kant expands the definition of the power of judgment. Now, more broadly, it is "the faculty for thinking of the particular as contained under the universal," a slight but significant modification (KU, AA 5: 179). Although there is evidence that this was simmering prior, only the third *Critique* does Kant introduce the distinction between determining and *reflective* judgments.[40] A *determining* judgment occurs when cognition starts with the universal: the rule, principle, or law is first given, and the power of judgment subsumes the particular under that rule. This is the model of objectively valid judgment and experience established in the first *Critique*.

In contrast, however, *reflective* judgment departs from the rule-binding, subsumptive model of cognition. Rather than *determining* the particular, the power of judgment is *reflecting* when the particular is given and it reaches for a universal to further determine the particular. Because there is a relationship to the universal—the subjective principle of *purposiveness without purpose*—this activity qualifies as a judgment and not as mere association of sensations. This mode of cognition is distinctive in that the power of judgment takes its cues from the sensible form, before rising towards concepts. The force of determination is not so absolutely on the conceptual side; the object is not so absolutely disciplined by the understanding. Ostensibly, then, reflective judgment would allow for the object—

[40] For a discussion of Kant's thinking through three distinct kinds of judgment throughout the 1780s, namely judgments of perception, judgments of taste, and (logical) reflective judgments, see John Zammito, John. *Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgment*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 77-83.

be it *actual existing nature, material ends, significant forms*—to appear to the subject, mediately, of course, but also without being so strictly determined by the laws of the understanding.

For Adorno, who understands "aesthetic phenomena as what is constitutively particular," Kant's elaboration of aesthetic judgment in the third *Critique* marks an irreducible element of aesthetic experience.[41] Reflective judgments and the concept of finality or purposiveness is "the idea of *conceptualization from within,*" and this alternative form of cognition "was to correct in both parts of the *Critique of Judgment* the classificatory method of 'theoretical,' natural-scientific reason that emphatically rejects knowledge of the object from within."[42] Aesthetic purposiveness is defined against the disenchanted instrumentality Kant has validated elsewhere in his system, and beauty—especially natural beauty—therefore functions as a sanctuary for particular modes of significance and experience.

Kant's definition of the beautiful is that "**beauty** is the form of the **purposiveness** of an object, insofar as it is perceived in it **without representation** of an end" (KU, AA 5: 236). This means that while there must *seem* to be some kind of intent or purpose behind the form of the object, the beauty of that object cannot be tied to its purpose. The purposiveness accessible in an aesthetic judgment is distinct from an actual, worldly purpose or end. In the footnote that follows, Kant strictly asserts the aesthetic's autonomy from utility by addressing a counterexample, "the stone utensils often excavated from ancient burial mounds, which are equipped with a hole, as if for a handle" (KU, AA 5: 236). Although such artifacts are regarded as works of art, they are "nevertheless not declared to be beautiful," Kant writes; there is "no immediate satisfaction at all in their intuition" (KU, AA 5: 236).

[41] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 166.
[42] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 165.

For Kant, the reason that these ancient artifacts *cannot* count as beautiful, although their shape might be pleasing, is that one "relates their shape to some sort of intention and to a determinate purpose" (KU, AA 5: 236). As when one walks through museums of ancient crafts, one can admire the artifacts, but one cannot in good faith deny the purpose they serve: a reliquary, while ornate, protects the bones of a saint; Etruscan wine vases hold wine. For Kant, a *pure* experience of beauty cannot involve even the perception of instrumental ends. Thus, against the ancient cutlery, Kant contrasts the natural object of a flower, a tulip, which "is held to be beautiful because a certain purposiveness is encountered in our perception of it which, as we judge it, is not related to any end at all" (KU, AA 5: 236).

Adorno also maintains that aesthetic objects "are separated from empirical reality," and this constitutes the aesthetic's autonomy.[43] Against those who dismiss Kant as being overly formalistic, Adorno counters that Kant "does not simply idealize art: The separation of the aesthetic sphere from the empirical *constitutes* art."[44] In line with his critical method, that is, in terms related to the necessary conditions of the subject, Kant sediments the exclusion of actual ends from the experience of the beautiful via the concept of disinterestedness. Disinterestedness is the modality that separates aesthetic experience from "the satisfaction that we combine with the representation of the *existence* of an object" (KU, AA 5: 205, my emphasis). Disinterestedness is best elucidated by contrasting it with the interestedness of sensual pleasure (the agreeable) and the pleasure in the good. The agreeable, for Kant, "excites a desire for objects of the same sort," and moves beyond a mere judgment about the object to an interest in the existence of the object—and an interest in more of the same kind (KU, AA 5: 207).

[43] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 151.
[44] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 10, my emphasis.

(Adorno acknowledges that "Kant was the first to achieve the insight, never since forgotten, that aesthetic comportment is free from immediate desire; he snatched art away from that avaricious philistinism that always wants to touch it and taste it."[45]) The good, on the other hand, always involves the concept of an end and the will, which has an interest in willing that end into existence. "In order to find something good," Kant writes, "I must always know what sort of this the object is supposed to be […] I do not need that in order to find beauty in something" (KU, AA 5: 207). Disinterestedness is thus a subjective requisite for aesthetic experience, marking that for a true aesthetic experience, the observing subject must not regard the aesthetic object as an opportunity for any other purposes. Thus Kant anticipates the modernist caution about aesthetic experience being swallowed by external functions such as moral development, financial investment, or even the opportunity to "recharge," as in the entertainment industry Adorno later describes. Kant strictly separates the experience of the aesthetic object as beautiful from experiencing the object as anything related to purposes and external ends.[46]

Adorno values the distinction of aesthetic objects from the purposes of the empirical world to such an extent that he holds Kant's insights to transcend the subjective framing of his philosophy:

---

[45] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 10.

[46] Adorno does challenge the continued usefulness of disinterestedness for understanding contemporary art. It is because of passages such as these that the scholarship exaggerates Adorno's dismissal of Kant as too formalistic and ultimately outdated. Speaking to the real fear, revulsion, and disgust occasioned by Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and *The Penal Colony*, Adorno acknowledges that "the route to aesthetic autonomy proceeds by way of disinterestedness; the emancipation of art from cuisine or pornography is irrevocable," but, he continues, "art does not come to rest in disinterestedness. For disinterestedness immediately reproduces—and transforms—interest. In the false world all ἡδονή is false. For the sake of happiness, happiness is renounced. It is thus that desire survives in art." Art has moved beyond disinterestedness because in its modern, autonomous form, it comes to thematize the phenomena of desire, satisfaction, and the worldly conditions that preclude such fulfillment. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 12-13. ἡδονή, in Greek script in Adorno's text, is the Greek personification and goddess of pleasure, enjoyment, and delight.

"Kant's paradoxical formulation that the beautiful is what is purposive without a purpose, expresses—in the language of subjective transcendental philosophy—the heart of the matter with a fidelity that never ceases to distance the Kantian theorems from the methodological nexus in which they appear."[47] Adorno takes care to flag that "artworks were purposeless because they had stepped out of the means-ends relation of empirical reality," and exiting the world of instrumentality allows for aesthetic objects to be "purposive as dynamic totalities in which all particular elements exist for the sake of their purpose—the whole—just as the whole exists for the sake of its purpose, the fulfillment or redemption through the negation of its elements."[48] Purposiveness denotes the relation among the particular elements of the aesthetic object to the whole, for the sake of the emergent and dynamic unity, without sacrificing the importance and value of any particular element. By distinguishing the experience of the beautiful from mere satisfaction or rationalistic interest, Kant describes and justifies the irreducibility of the particular elements in the aesthetic object, which are thereby elevated and no longer merely secondary or incidental qualities. Adorno preserves this notion of purposiveness without purpose, but he also connects it to the social historical world.

As discussed in the dissertation so far, the dominant logic emerging out of the dialectic of enlightenment is predicated on the instrumental value of nature and other human beings, with the consequence of the increasing fungibility of particulars. For Adorno, again crediting Kant, the aesthetic object emerges in relation to this logic as its exception and, retaining Kant's strict division of the aesthetic object's purposiveness from any *actual* purpose or end, Adorno fleshes out what the artwork's

[47] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 139.
[48] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 139.

exceptional status means given his historically situated reading of enlightenment rationality's complicity in domination. "That artworks, in accord with Kant's magnificently paradoxical formula, are 'purposeless,' that they are separated from empirical reality," means that they "serve no aim that is useful for self-preservation and life."[49] By resisting the dominating logic of self-preservation and instrumentality, Adorno suggests that art levels an "implicit critique of the nature-dominating *ratio*."[50] Artworks themselves stand apart from the everyday world; they are framed, positioned, or marked, and they eschew the seamless or transparent functionality demanded of commodities.

Building on this Kantian insight that aesthetic rationality contrasts with the interested, instrumentalizing rationalities organizing the world, artworks for Adorno level this critique of the nature-dominating reason non-discursively and yet quasi-conceptually. Adorno thus claims that "art is knowledge" because it involves a different sort of *ratio* or reason within the very construction of the artwork.[51] In other words, and against rationalist aesthetics, artworks' very *form* is the critique of nature-dominating reason:

> It is not through the abstract negation of the *ratio*, nor through a mysterious, eidetic vision of essences, that art seeks justice for the repressed, but rather by revoking the violent act of rationality by emancipating rationality from what it holds to be its inalienable material in the empirical world. Art is not synthesis, as convention holds; rather, it shreds synthesis by the same force that affects synthesis. What is transcendent in art has the same tendency as the second reflection of nature-dominating spirit.[52]

[49] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 151.
[50] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 139.
[51] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 138.
[52] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 139.

In this dense passage, Adorno suggests, first, that art separates the dominant and violent form of rationality from the material it is generally entitled to in the empirical world, where the abstract categories of ends—what it is good for, as Kant put it—determines the relative value of all things. This separation of the logic of means and ends from its "material" cannot be an abstract negation of enlightenment thinking, because part of enlightenment logic's corrosive effect lies precisely in the abstractness of its universal categories and its imperviousness to concrete, meaningful particulars. Neither can the dominant logic of enlightenment be countered by a revelation of some ideal other world, because, again, the separation of the idea from its material, its matter, perpetuates the second-class status of concrete particulars and the domination of nature. To put the critique in positive terms, "art seeks justice for the repressed" via different modes of relating *within* the artwork and by modifying the rigid determinations of the nature-dominating *ratio*, by setting them "in movement."[53] In this vein, the sensuousness of the medium, by resisting full-stop abstraction, is a persistent remainder and reminder of nature that the artwork continuously negotiates and frames.

While art and artworks level a critique non-discursively and quasi-conceptually, aesthetic comportment must also differ from the instrumentalizing and dominating logics of the world. Earlier, Adorno writes that aesthetic purposiveness signals *conceptualization from within* and *knowledge from within*. In other words, aesthetic experience involves *mimesis*: "If in Kant discursive knowledge is to renounce the interior of things, then artworks are objects whose truth cannot be thought except as that of their interior. Imitation is the path that leads to this interior."[54] In Chapter 2, I briefly discussed

[53] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 139.
[54] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 126.

mimesis in relation to magical rites, where the knowing subject *imitates* the natural phenomenon it seeks to influence. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, magic contested specific iterations of nature's power through the mimetic wielding of power, and myth—already enlightenment—sought to separate the force of nature and its "individual link," moving to instead account for nature and reality through more abstract principles.[55] Mimesis, however, was never fully extirpated: "Mimetic comportment—an attitude toward reality distinct from the fixated antithesis of subject and object—is seized in art—the organ of mimesis since the mimetic taboo."[56] Adorno describes the only adequate experience of artworks as a "living experience" in which the observer follows the object closely, in time, until it becomes alive:

> Aesthetic experience becomes living experience only by way of its object, in that instant in which artworks themselves become animate under its gaze…Through contemplative immersion the immanent processual quality of the work is set free. … Analysis is therefore adequate to the work only if it grasps the relation of its elements to each other processually rather than reducing them analytically to purported fundamental elements."[57]

At play in aesthetic experience and aesthetic rationality is the sensuous, mimetic involvement with the aesthetic object. Aesthetic experience involves an engagement that is irreducible to discursive knowledge. The subject's aesthetic experience is both receptive to and constructive of the object; this constitutes a mode of knowing that produces new meanings while tapping into the repressed mimetic capacity, wherein the division between subject and object is less rigid. Importantly, mimetic rationality is also an essential element in the recognition of suffering, the *Mitleid* that Kant's moral philosophy

---

[55] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 10.
[56] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 110.
[57] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 175-76.

renders suspect. Instead of formalized moral systems where ethical bonds are verified through abstracting reason, Adorno often points to the primacy of and ethical imperative inhering in witnessing pain, the perception of which occurs first in the mimetic register rather than the formally rational one. Thus, art can be said to seek "justice for the repressed" because it fosters this mode of mimetic relationship while denying the fungibility of the object.

Given the essential moment of aesthetic, mimetic engagement in aesthetic experience, Adorno directly defines art, "the configuration of mimesis and rationality," as an enigmatic form that "emerged out of a historical process. Art is what remains after the loss of what was supposed to exercise a magical, and later a cultic, function."[58] In other words, with the rise of universal, iterable principles and the dominance of abstract rationality, the mimetic form of understanding—which takes place in the sensuous world—survives in art but devoid of its power to exert actual and direct changes on that empirical world: "Art thus became an enigma; if it no longer exists for the purpose that it infused with meaning, then, what is it? Its enigmaticalness goads it to articulate itself immanently in such a fashion that it achieves meaning by forming the emphatic absence of meaning."[59] Art's enigmatic status is another way Adorno distinguishes the aesthetic from the nature-dominating *ratio* and identity-thinking, identity-thinking being the contention that concepts are adequate to nature, that thinking can exhaustively know nature in its own terms.

For both Kant and Adorno, the aesthetic's purposiveness without purpose and the mimetic, reflective character of aesthetic experience offer new modes of perception relating to both nature and

[58] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 127.
[59] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 127.

the historical reality in which nature is figured. Kant suggests in §44 that beautiful art "is a kind of representation that is purposive in itself and, though without an end, nevertheless promotes the cultivation [*Cultur*] of the mental powers for sociable communication" (KU, AA 5: 306). For Adorno, art is a privileged sphere of experimentation, construction, and meaning that, although enigmatic, can serve as a corrective to the domination and stultification of coercive mass society. Art can sharpen one's understanding of the historical present and its reality.

Natural beauty, admittedly, is not a construction; it is not the active production of meaning in the way that art is. And yet, in the lectures on *Aesthetics*, Adorno frames the recovery of natural beauty in the following terms:

> if—as I consider inevitable in the light of current experience—one no longer feels capable of going along with the absolute supremacy of humans, this philosophical anthropocentrism, then surely one must at least consider the problem of natural beauty in its connection to artistic beauty and, even if one does not believe an explicit theory of natural beauty is possible, not stop at Hegel's verdict on natural beauty as subordinate, but assess the relationship between nature and beauty which is far more dialectical than Hegel would have it, and which simultaneously provide the first categories for a definition of what art actually is.[60]

The consequences of the sacrifice and mutilation of nature and of the residual hostility toward the human being's *Tierähnlichkeit* demand—at the very least—a reconsideration of nature and natural beauty in the aesthetic realm, for the sake of both human and non-human nature.

Adorno's somewhat startling speculation that the aesthetic experience of art requires familiarity with the experience of natural beauty—in which a natural object is *rescued* from instrumental

[60] Adorno, *Aesthetics*, 22.

purposiveness and fungibility—points to an ethical charge within aesthetic comportment, because the ramifications of such an ability are not limited to the narrowly aesthetic world but have consequences for "nature itself." Although defining the aesthetic in purely moral terms would compromise aesthetic autonomy, this ethical element at work in that "peculiar separation [of] objects of action from practical objects" could explain Kant's assertion in §29, that "to take an **immediate interest** in the beauty of **nature** (not merely to have taste in order to judge it) is always a mark of a good soul, and that if this interest is habitual, it at least indicates a disposition of the mind that is favorable to the moral feeling, if it is gladly combined with the **viewing of nature**" (KU, AA 5: 298-99). While Adorno is much more alert to the ideological and reactionary functions of natural beauty, Kant's association of a good person and the habitual interest in natural beauty can be explained by the practice of tabling instrumental purposes; this echoes or strengthens moral feeling. Furthermore, in §59, natural beauty is the symbol of the morally good. The experience of beauty allows us to assume a purposiveness of nature, which fosters the idea that nature and the phenomenal world might cooperate with our moral aims.

For Kant, natural beauty remains the paradigm for artistic beauty and for the aesthetic generally, not because of its pleasing or originary forms, but because of the freedom and purposiveness without purpose that we access while engaging with nature in this way.[61] Against the determinate knowledge of nature that he grounds in the first *Critique*—fully subject to our categories of the understanding, forms of intuition, and natural laws gleaned from experience—Kant's hard-won freedom from conceptual determination in natural beauty is what gives aesthetics its autonomy and

[61] Natural beauty, like the tulip first mentioned, is free beauty, whereas most art for Kant is "adherent beauty," meaning it is beautiful as one of its kind. For Kant, natural beauty emerges as the archetype of the epistemic restraint involved aesthetic reflection that facilitates the "free play" of beauty.

its power to reorient us in relation to the normal modes of knowing and using objects. This is what drives Adorno to claim: "Art does not imitate nature, not even individual instances of natural beauty, but natural beauty as such."[62] Sensuously determinate and yet not reducible to concepts, "natural beauty is close to the truth but veils itself at the moment of greatest proximity. This, too, art learned from natural beauty," Adorno writes pointedly against "that philosopher of identity," Hegel.[63]

This chapter began with Adorno's vocal assertion that his aesthetics stand in flagrant opposition to Kant. I have shown how Kant's aesthetics are a key element not only in Adorno's aesthetic theory but in his philosophy of nature, which entails the recovery of nature. To conclude, I will linger a moment on another criticism Adorno levels at Hegel:

> By rejecting the fleetingness of natural beauty, as well as virtually everything nonconceptual, Hegel obtusely makes himself indifferent to the central motif of art, which probes after the truth in the evanescent and fragile. Hegel's philosophy fails vis-à-vis beauty […] thus for him the nonidentical only figures as a restraint on subjectivity rather than that he determines the experience of the nonidentical as the telos and emancipation of the aesthetic subject.[64]

Hegel misses something crucial about art because he fails to understand natural beauty. In this chapter I have emphasized the value of non-discursive significance in reflective judgment, natural beauty, and

---

[62] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 72. Adorno transforms the interwovenness of natural beauty and artistic beauty. For Kant, humans experience natural beauty in such a way that it seems *as if* the natural thing were created for the human senses—natural beauty already borrows from the idea of artistic production. This is the crux of the notion "purposiveness without purpose." Kant also argues in §45 that, "*Beautiful art is an art to the extent that it seems at the same time to be nature*" (KU, 5: 306, emphasis added). For art to be beautiful, "the purposiveness in its form must still *seem* to be as free from all constraint by arbitrary rules *as if* it were a mere product of nature" (KU, 5: 306, emphasis added). Art cannot be mistaken for nature—its status as a product of human activity must be immediately recognizable—but it must seem *as if* it were nature.

[63] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 73.

[64] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 76-77.

purposiveness without purpose. For Adorno, this residual or mimetic significance is the nonidentical, the remainder and reminder that exceeds abstracting conceptual determination, which in turn is the goal, end, and liberation of the aesthetic subject who lives in a social world structured by the domination of nature. The aesthetic therefore serves the ethical project of "remembrance of nature within the subject" in that it makes space for the truth of what Adorno here calls fleetingness, evanescence, and fragility. It is to these themes I will now turn.

Chapter 5

Natural Beauty on "This Sad Earth"

While Adorno's nuanced discussion of natural beauty has received more attention as of late, many such treatments reinstate the hierarchy that Adorno contests, namely the subordination of the aesthetic value of nature to art. Building on the evidence of Adorno's inheritance of Kantian aesthetics in the previous chapter, I will further demonstrate that not only does Adorno contest the inferiority of the aesthetic experience of nature, but his unconventional theoretical articulation of natural beauty is especially pertinent for our time. In addition to salvaging the Kantian block on an exhaustive grip on nature and the Kantian irreducibility of natural beauty, I argue that Adorno also takes a cue from Walter Benjamin and defines nature in relation to history. Adorno thereby also articulates an aesthetic experience of nature that involves the recognition of human effects on nature, the hint of freedom from the domination of nature, and ethical claims on us to act in this world.

In this chapter, I first survey Adorno scholarship on the question of the aesthetic experience of nature before teasing out what Adorno takes "nature" to be in a discussion of natural-history. I next unpack Benjamin's conception of transience, first as it appears in his *Origin of German Tragic Drama* and then in his later writings on profane messianism. In the following section, I explore how Adorno incorporates elements of Benjamin's articulation of natural-history and transience into natural beauty, and finally I analyze Adorno's description of the cultural landscape. Adorno thus goes beyond the strict delimitation of natural beauty from the social-historical world in which it is experienced, finding instead an alternative vision wherein nature and human activity are not at odds. This, in addition to the critique of an exclusively objective or subjective aesthetics I lay out in Chapter 1, constitutes his contribution to environmental aesthetics: "In schema borrowed from bourgeois sexual morality, technique is said to have ravished nature, yet under transformed relations of production it would just as easily be able to assist nature and on this sad earth help it to attain what perhaps it wants."[1]

Section 1: Subordinated Natural Beauty

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor Adorno notes that since Schelling and Hegel, the topic of natural beauty has largely faded from philosophical aesthetics. Not only has aesthetics primarily concerned itself with questions about art, but, after Kant, the concept of natural beauty has been "repressed. The concept

[1] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 2002), 68.

of natural beauty rubs on a wound."[2] Although elsewhere Adorno aligns himself with Hegel's objective aesthetics, which privileges the aesthetic object over the beholder's reception of it, natural beauty is a point at which Adorno flags a great divergence. Hegel's assertion that "the beauty of art is *higher* than nature [because] the beauty of art is beauty *born of the spirit and born again*" did much to redirect philosophical energies to questions of the arts, and in this hierarchy Adorno reads the idealist and bourgeois claim to superiority over the animal.[3] Contra Kant, Hegel locates natural beauty's deficiency in its indeterminacy, and its lack of being-for-us is superseded by the artwork. Contra Hegel, Adorno prizes natural beauty's irreducibility to discursive thought; "Natural beauty is perceived both as authoritatively binding and as something incomprehensible that questioningly awaits its solution."[4] As discussed in the previous chapter, Adorno associates this enigmatic quality with aesthetic experience as a whole.

Adorno is critical not only of the hierarchy wherein Hegel's emphasis on freedom and reflexivity tip the scales in art's favor, but also of how natural beauty's indeterminacy is made to serve a function in Hegel's dialectic: "Natural beauty gains legitimacy only by its decline, in such a way that its deficiency becomes the raison d'être of art beauty."[5] Adorno's sustained attention to natural beauty seeks to break out of this "bourgeois topos," where natural beauty's value lies in its usefulness in setting

---

[2] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 61-62.
[3] G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol. 1, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 2. Adorno ultimately blames Kant's conception of human dignity for "raising the human animal above the animal," but in aesthetics it is Hegel and those after Kant who are responsible for "the desiccation of everything not totally ruled by the subject," which he also calls "the dark shadow of idealism" (*Aesthetic Theory*, 62).
[4] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 70-1.
[5] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 76.

artistic beauty on its proper track.[6] Beyond mere instrumental value, at stake is the legitimacy of the aesthetic experience of nature itself.

Given the explicitness of Adorno's critique of Hegel's aesthetic hierarchy, it is remarkable that much recent Adorno scholarship repeats this subordinating move, with the consequence that a rich account of the aesthetic experience of nature goes overlooked. Because she focuses exclusively on the constitution of autonomous art in the last two centuries, Surti Singh, for example, concludes that, "as important as natural beauty is for the origin of art, it is *art* that gives access to the promise of natural beauty in a way that natural beauty itself cannot."[7] The problem is that when viewed exclusively from the perspective of art's developing autonomy, natural beauty is cast as an immediate vision of freedom from material and conceptual domination—and art is tasked with expressing this promise, this hope, more truthfully in negative form. While Adorno does emphasize art's relationship to nature—"Art does not imitate nature, not even individual instances of natural beauty, but natural beauty as such"—this intervention should not obscure or overdetermine the distinct issue of the aesthetic experience of nature *qua nature*, which, I will show, has itself transformed in the intervening centuries.[8]

Even scholars who do explicitly investigate the aesthetic experience of nature in Adorno ultimately endorse Hegel's priority of art. Rodolphe Gasché states that "Adorno does not wish to overturn the hierarchy that [Hegel] established between the two kinds of beauty," though he also maintains that Adorno inscribes within art an imperative to refer to natural beauty's lack of

---

[6] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 76.
[7] Surti Singh, "The Spiritualization of Art in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory," *Adorno Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017): 39, my emphasis.
[8] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 72.

conceptuality.[9] Heinz Paetzold affirms, alongside Adorno, that a transformation of the human social condition relies on an aesthetic awareness of nature. This awareness, though, "is achieved through the experiences we have with the work of art."[10] So, natural beauty is important for art and ethically significant but again deficient compared to the revelatory capacity of contemporary art.

Donald Burke offers a shift in perspective, however, holding that Adorno's aim is rather to destabilize the hierarchy of artistic and natural beauty; thereby Adorno "moves beyond the one-sidedness of Kant's and Hegel's positions."[11] Espen Hammer likewise notes that "nature is relevant for art but also aesthetically relevant on its own terms," and so while he does not repudiate Hegel's hierarchy, he does not reinstate it.[12] Thus alongside the question of how art relates to the aesthetic experience of nature and the indeterminacy, unintentionality, and non-discursiveness—in other words, with the nonidentical—that the tradition associates with natural beauty, Burke and Hammer open up the conceptual space to pursue the more radical and *repressed* question of what is at play in the aesthetic experience of nature itself.

This chapter will recuperate some of Adorno's insights into the aesthetic experience of nature on its own terms, not merely as a foil for art's self-definition. This is not to say that art and artworks

---

[9] Rodolphe Gasché, "The Theory of Natural Beauty and Its Evil Star: Kant, Hegel, Adorno," *Research in Phenomenology* 32, no. 1 (2002): 116.

[10] Heinz Paetzold, "Adorno's Notion of Natural Beauty: A Reconsideration," in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 227.

[11] Donald Burke, "Adorno's Aesthetic Rationality: On the Dialectic of Natural and Artistic Beauty," in *Critical Ecologies: The Frankfurt School and Contemporary Environmental Crises*, ed. Andrew Biro, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 176.

[12] Espen Hammer, *Adorno's Modernism: Art, Experience, and Catastrophe*, (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 46.

have no bearing on these issues—the shifting demarcation between the natural and the artistic constitutes a large part of the history of the aesthetic.[13] While presenting aspects of Adorno's sophisticated account of the aesthetic experience of nature, I do not argue that Adorno tries to invert the hierarchy and assert natural beauty's superiority over art (a position held by no one in the literature, it bears mentioning). As I will show shortly, Adorno is clear about the ideological function of such an emphasis on pure and untouched nature.

Instead, I suggest—along with Adorno—that to privilege the aesthetic experience of art risks overlooking what is philosophically and experientially significant about the aesthetic experience of nature. In the previous chapter, I argued that despite criticizing Kant's formalistic morality, his privileging of freedom in thought, and the subjective prejudice of this aesthetics, Adorno repeatedly aligns himself with Kant's account of aesthetic rationality. A certain priority of the experience of natural beauty, the distance of the aesthetic object from instrumental purposiveness, non-discursive yet quasi-conceptual mimetic "knowledge from within," and an ethical valence in these objective and subjective aspects mark Adorno's inheritance of Kantian insights. These elements are further supported by what Adorno designates admiringly as Kant's *block* on the absolute determination of the object—and of nature especially—by the subject. Against the proliferation of instrumentalizing, quantifying, disenchanting knowledge of nature, Adorno prizes Kant's self-reflective testaments to nature's alterity and the memory that nature is not absolutely reducible to human concepts.

---

[13] For more on art's relationship to natural beauty and nature in Adorno, see any contemporary work cited thus far. For a discussion of poetic language as a privileged site for thinking nature with consequences for ethical life (and allusions to Adorno), see Dennis J. Schmidt's chapter on Hölderlin, "Speaking of Nature: On Language and the Unbidden World" in *Lyrical and Ethical Subjects: Essays on the Periphery of the Word, Freedom, and History*, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2005).

However, I now argue this privileging of nature's indeterminacy and the non-identical is only *one* element of Adorno's aesthetics of nature. In addition to what might be called the Kantian strand of Adorno's aesthetics of nature, there is also a Benjaminian one. Both are crucial for understanding Adorno's dynamic account of natural beauty, why the aesthetic experience of nature is not subordinate to that of art, and why an aesthetics of nature actually enables insight into our historical present.

In order to lay out what is at stake in the experience of natural beauty, I must return to one of the central questions of this dissertation: What *is* nature for Adorno? Again, Adorno does not simply fit into what Vogel designates as the Romantic camp, for whom nature is an unmediated, self-evident, existent thing, albeit inexplicable by discursive terms. Instead, what the concept "nature" refers to is determined in, by, and against history, as Adorno describes via the critical concept of *Naturgeschichte*, natural-history. It bears repeating that rather than referring to empirical systematic inquiry into earth's organisms and their environments, "natural-history" is a critical concept meant to undermine the strict conceptual dualism between nature as "what has always been" and history as the advent of the "qualitatively new."[14] When nature is conceptualized as eternal substance, it bears the mythical principles of necessity, repetition, and thus fate—it appears ineluctable, impervious to human intervention. Alternately, conceiving of history as constitutively progressive slides into a triumphalist endorsement of the present and the justification of the violence in the past. Complicating these views, Adorno has assigned philosophy this twofold task: "*to comprehend historical being in its most extreme*

[14] Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," 253.

historical determinacy, where it is most historical, as natural being," and, "*to comprehend nature as a historical being where it seems to rest most deeply in itself as nature.*"[15]

To comprehend historical being "as nature" involves the awareness that historical conditions appear to us as given and fated. As discussed in the second chapter, Adorno draws on Georg Lukács's formulation of "second nature," which denotes the way in which the organization of life under capitalism appears to be everlasting and unalterable, from its institutions and values to its very articulation of an eternal or essential human nature. Alternately, to understand nature "as history" entails recognizing that our relation to the material world has historical consequences. Alongside our evolving conceptions of nature, nature itself changes; species really become extinct, new ones are created, the skies and seas become polluted, and human qualities themselves are changed through cultural and environmental influences.

Adorno draws this latter perspective out of Benjamin's *Origin of the German Trauerspiel,* where Benjamin teases out how in medieval mourning plays poets overlaid political plots and players with natural images; "for example, in the language of the Baroque, the fall of a tyrant is equivalent to the setting of the sun."[16] Adorno quotes Benjamin extensively in the "Natural-History" essay, adopting his identification of transience, *Vergänglichkeit*, as a site of the coincidence of nature and history.

By defining nature in terms of what it shares with history—namely, that both are subject to passing away, perishing, impermanence—Adorno does not vacate the term "nature" of meaning; rather he highlights the specific and substantial quality of ephemerality. Heinz Paetzold first relates

[15] Adorno, "Natural-History," 260.
[16] Adorno, "Natural-History," 264.

(rightly, albeit briefly) the dialectical concept of *Naturgeschichte* to the aesthetic experience of nature, but Harriet Johnson goes much further: she suggests that natural-history functions as a corrective to natural beauty's "tendency to re-enchant nature."[17] Johnson highlights the novelty of Adorno's emphasis on transience, arguing that natural-history's power to interrupt natural beauty's mythical element lies in the fact that it "is anchored in a process of decay rather than (post-)Enlightenment categories of freedom and teleology. Its face, Adorno says, is not illuminated by the light of redemption but resembles the Hippocratic countenance wasting in cachexia."[18] While at moments Johnson sounds as if she falls into the first position in the scholarship outlined above—avowing "natural beauty can only be grasped by discursive thought when it is framed within art"[19]—her sophisticated treatment of Adorno on natural beauty avoids such an easy characterization because of her emphasis on Adorno's method of constellation thinking, suggesting that Adorno lays natural-history and natural beauty "side-by-side to create a conceptual force field that reveals the prospect of nature being-for-itself to be a truly historical struggle."[20]

While I agree with Johnson that Adorno goes to great lengths to curtail natural beauty's tendency towards mythical pacification, I believe that her reading overlooks the constellation of ethical and aesthetic elements already inhering in Benjamin's notion of transience that Adorno explicitly draws on. For this reason, I next turn to this inheritance. Outlining the themes of nature, mourning, and worldly restitution in Benjamin illuminates Adorno's own rich account of an aesthetic experience

---

[17] Harriet Johnson, "Undignified Thoughts After Nature: Adorno's Aesthetic Theory," *Critical Horizons* 12, no. 3 (2011): 388.
[18] Johnson, "Undignified Thoughts After Nature," 386.
[19] Johnson, "Undignified Thoughts After Nature," 379.
[20] Johnson, "Undignified Thoughts After Nature," 388.

of nature. As I will ultimately show, the critical concept of "natural-history" as transience is not merely a supplement to Adorno's account of natural beauty but an animating element within it.

Section 2: Transience and *Trauerspiel*

In both *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and the "Theological-Political Fragment," Benjamin develops accounts of the perishing mortal nature of human existence that, instead of promising a release from the transient world to an eternity outside of history, is oriented towards redemption *within* the order of transience. He also calls this happiness. In the following two sections, I show how Benjamin draws on Jewish, Christian, literary, and dramatic traditions to present an understanding of humanity that is both natural but not merely natural. Benjamin appeals to all of these sources to bend the redemptive arc of messianic time to *within* the world of the profane. This ultimately calls for attention to the historical conditions that bear on our transient existences and the imperative to act in this world. Transience thus levels an ethical claim on perishable humanity, and just as this concept is important for understanding Adorno's account of natural-history, it is necessary for giving a just account of Adorno's rehabilitation of natural beauty.

I begin in this section with Benjamin's investigation of the overlooked dramatic genre of *Trauerspiel*. Emerging within a Christian context, the mourning play features insights into eternal transience; Adorno transcribes Benjamin's documentation of this vision in his "Idea of Natural-History" lecture: "In nature the allegorical poets saw eternal transience, and here alone did the saturnine vision of these generations recognize history." Importantly, the *Trauerspiel* also gives clues

as to how this eternal passing might be glimpsed within both history and nature as "a cipher to be read. 'History' is writ across the countenance of nature in the sign language of transience."[21] Again, the convergence on nature and history in transience explicitly informs Adorno's "Idea of Natural-History" essay, and his 1932 lecture features long quotes from Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book. In this chapter, however, I argue that Benjamin's substantive treatment of transience is also crucial for understanding Adorno's account of natural beauty. I will now explore these themes in greater detail.

Written and rejected as Benjamin's *Habilitation* paper in 1925, then published in 1928, the *Trauerspiel* book asserts the import of the Baroque allegorical poets who expressed the violent world of transience in their crude, tragic plays. Benjamin for the most focuses on part minor German figures, such as Martin Opitz and Andreas Gryphius, against some of the better-regarded artists like Shakespeare or Calderón. One of the first major aims of the book is to distinguish the *Trauerspiel,* the mourning play on the late 16th and early 17th century, from tragedy, so that the significance of the *Trauerspiel* as dramatic form can be understood on its own terms and not dismissed according to Aristotelian or Romantic criteria as clunky, unsuccessful tragic specimens. Briefly, Benjamin connects the emergence of tragedy to the historical conflict between ancient, mythical orders and the emergent life of national community. Both make claims on the tragic hero, who is doubly sacrificed. She is both a "final" sacrifice to the gods, and a "first" sacrifice, through her action, whereby "new aspects of the

[21] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 177. Also quoted by Adorno in "Idea of Natural-History."

life of the nation become manifest."[22] In this way, tragedy's object is myth, that ancient order in which fates are spun.

Distinct from tragedy, Benjamin argues that the Baroque drama "grew up" with a fertile tension: Christianity's promise for the redemption of mankind was not lessened by the conflict between the Reformation and Counter-Reformation movements, but "it was just that this century denied them a religious fulfillment, demanding of them, or imposing upon them, a secular solution instead."[23] He illustrates this shift by alluding to the Passion-Plays and Mystery-Plays of the middle ages which "present the futility of world events and the transience of the creature as stations on the road to salvation."[24] The structure of these dramatic works, along with their focus on visceral suffering, was passed down to the baroque German dramatists, the best of whom, Benjamin notes, were Lutherans. And so, while the poets inherited the eschatological structures of these plays, their theological "situation" was different. Benjamin connects this vision to the newly an "empty world," which he suggests is a result of the Lutheran dismissal of good works (and Calvinist predestination of the elect, to a degree). With human actions thus drained of their value, it was possible to regard "the

---

[22] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 107. I do not have space to extensively treat tragedy besides as contrast to the mourning play. Briefly, in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* Benjamin points to the fact that "tragic stature" of its characters derives "from the pre-historic epoch of their existence—the past age of heroes" (62). The tragic hero is caught between negotiating the fate they have been born into and the new, "as yet unborn, natural community" (107). Benjamin understands this to be the expression of a real emergent historical problem. The tragic hero must die because of conflicting obligations that the hero takes on herself, one relating to gods, whose authority grounds an ancient sense of right, and another claim on her which belongs to the emergent nation. "The tragic death has a dual significance: it invalidates the ancient rights of the Olympians, and it offers up the hero to the unknown god as the first fruits of a new harvest of humanity" (107). The object of tragedy, then, is myth, and the negotiation of ancient claims on the community with the emergent nation.

[23] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 79.

[24] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 81.

scene of their existence as a rubbish heap of partial, inauthentic actions."[25] The poets still foregrounded the misery of creaturely life, but they withheld salvation.

Benjamin calls this a "rash flight into a *nature deprived of grace*."[26] What concerned the authors of the German *Trauerspiel* was "the hopelessness of the earthly condition," but, remarkably, redemption "resides in the depths of this destiny itself rather than in the fulfilment of a divine plan of salvation."[27] It is in this environment of metaphysical abandonment and religious wars that *history* becomes the focus of the play, rather than mythical or transcendent resolution. The sovereign, the main character of the play, is not a mythical prototype but "the representative of history. He holds the course of history in his hand like a scepter."[28] Again, unlike Greek tragedy, the baroque *Trauerspiel* does not stage the negotiation of the individual with fate or a god, understood as "the representation of a primordial past," or with nature as mythical recurrence or force—which Adorno would label mythical nature.[29] In baroque drama, the "true object" is historical, creaturely life—the social conditions of natural demise, albeit under the conditions of now-secular cataclysm—and therefore it is rather "the confirmation of princely virtues, the depiction of princely vices, the insight into diplomacy and the manipulation of all the political schemes, which makes the monarch the main character in the *Trauerspiel*."[30] Politics, not fate, is the plot. For the problems of the perishing and

---

[25] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 139.
[26] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 81, my emphasis.
[27] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 81. Benjamin claims the crude mechanical nature of the *deus ex machina*, the moment of redemption at the end of the *Trauerspiel*, only *emphasizes* the hopelessness of the deeply historical material of the drama. The messianic redemption tacked on at the end of the play served to emphasize the true absence of divine salvation in the historical world.
[28] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 65.
[29] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 62.
[30] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 62.

suffering of the natural creature, however, earthly salvation is both urgently needed but emphatically undecided.

While the question of salvation now appears in its proper profane order, the political situations depicted are of course catastrophic. Representatives of creaturely humanity, sovereigns are subject to death, violence, pain, and the end of their bloodline.[31] This focus on the possibility of deliverance within the political domain should not in any sense diminish the extreme violence, pain, and courtly intrigues that are plotted in the *Trauerspiel*. And though access to the transcendent heavens is restricted, evil now *lives*. Benjamin notes this "anti-antique" element in *Trauerspiel*: "the gods project into the alien world, they become evil, and they become creatures. The attire of Olympians is left behind, and in the course of time the emblems collect around it. And this attire is as creaturely as a devil's body."[32] The signs that "collect" around the creaturely protagonists and antagonists of political intrigue connects to the baroque "way of seeing," to *allegory*, the narrative form wherein every image also means something other than what it is.[33]

As Bainard Cowan identifies, for Benjamin, allegory is not only a way of seeing but a kind of experience. He paraphrases, "allegory arises from an apprehension of the world as no longer permanent, as passing out of being: a sense of its transitoriness, an intimation of mortality, or a

[31] For a discussion of the politically repressive effects of the fragmentary inheritance of Christian eschatology as *opposed* to the weakly messianic philosophy of history, see Yannik Thiem, "Theological-Political Ruins: Walter Benjamin, Sovereignty, and the Politics of Skeletal Eschatology" *Law and Critique* 24, no. 3 (2013): 295–315.
[32] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 225.
[33] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166.

conviction, as in Dickinson, that 'this world is not a conclusion.'"[34] This experience of the transience of the world and its objects is mirrored in allegory's significative function; "transforming things into signs is both what allegory does—its technique—and what it is about—its content."[35] Benjamin is attempting to reclaim allegory from the Romantics, who elevated the symbol against the medieval figuration of temporary, incomplete experiences of Jesus Christ's sufferings or the trials of Man. In the symbol, complete meaning, all-in-one and all at once, was communicated: "The measure of time for the experience of the symbol is the mystical instant in which the symbol assumes the meaning into its hidden and, if one might say so, wooded interior."[36] Yet for Benjamin, it was only via the allegorical form that the observer was forced to confront the "petrified, primordial landscape" of history, devoid of divine or ideal intervention.[37] The symbol, "in bad faith,"[38] disavows this element of messianic abandonment in existence along with the very fragmentariness of signification, and instead, "destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption."[39] In allegory, this destruction is not idealized, it is *expressed*; because the light of redemption does not yet shine upon this profane world, "everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful is expressed in a face—or rather in a death's

---

[34] Bainard Cowan, "Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory," *New German Critique* 22, Special Issue on Modernism (Winter, 1981): 110.

[35] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166. The preeminence of allegory run through Benjamin's method (and material) from *Trauerspiel*, to his Baudelaire works, and finally the unfinished *Arcades Project*. See Bainard Cowan (1981) and Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989) for discussions of allegory in these later works.

[36] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166.

[37] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166.

[38] Bainard Cowan, "Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory," 111.

[39] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166.

head."[40] Benjamin picks out this exemplary allegorical object, the skull, as the "form in which man's subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise not only to the enigmatic question of the nature of human existence as such, but also of the biographical historicity of the individual."[41] The skull betokens death in general while also pointing to the singular life of the person to whom this specific skull belonged.

The *Trauerspiel*'s allegorical mode exhibits creatures subjected to suffering and death, whose very significance is up for grabs. Benjamin, however, emphasizes the subjection of history itself to transience in the *Trauerspiel* as well. He therefore focuses on the ruin:

> The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history, which is put on stage in the *Trauerspiel*, is present in reality in the form of the ruin. In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay.[42]

Here Benjamin moves the focus beyond the theater stage to the wider environment—to a *landscape*—where history's natural aspect appears in the ruin and nature's decline takes on historical form. He thus shifts from the allegorically put "petrified landscape" of history to actual landscape and ruin as sites where decay and meaning await interpretation. The ruin poses the very question of significance, of signification, as its meaning is not assured. Ruins are remainders of historical worlds that no longer live on; any meaning they might convey is of necessity fragmentary. In the *Trauerspiel*, mourning both responds to and asserts the *question* of the meaning of nature and the meaning of history, and both nature and history (in their transience) are inscribed with the potential for significance or its absence.

---

[40] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166.
[41] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166.
[42] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 177-8.

And as Adorno quotes in the "Natural-History" essay: "The greater the significance, the greater the subjection to death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance."[43] Benjamin's text continues, "But if nature has always been subject to the power of death, it is also true that it has always been allegorical."[44]

Section 3: Messianic Nature, History, and Happiness

In the *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin has depicted the allegorical poets' vision of nature that stands in need of redemption but "this century denied them a religious fulfillment, demanding of them, or imposing upon them, a secular solution instead."[45] A secular solution never came. Following my exposition of their construction a profane order of time, in which humanity's natural precarious life is revealed and mourned, in this section I explore an alternate vision of nature and history that also inform Adorno's articulation of natural beauty: Benjamin's profane messianism. First I demonstrate that Benjamin offers two conceptions of the messianic, one which is proper to the Messiah, and one which is proper to the profane, to history. By developing a messianism proper to the profane and earthly nature, redemption takes on a historical charge. I then return to the theme of profane happiness—in its passing nature—that is also indexed to history. Via this alternate vision of history,

[43] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166. In Adorno's lecture, he quotes nearly an entire page of Benjamin's *Origin of German Tragic Drama* stopping just short of Benjamin's affirmation of the allegorical element of nature; cf. Adorno, "Idea of Natural History," 263.
[44] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166.
[45] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 79.

mourning and remembrance becomes ethical practices, which Adorno will channel into his account of natural beauty.

To begin, Benjamin's conception of profane redemption is notoriously obscure and a point of conflict among his friends. The crystalline "Theological-Political Fragment," only three paragraphs long, was originally published posthumously by Theodor Adorno in 1955 and dated to 1937. Both Theodor and Gretel Adorno recount Benjamin sharing the fragment with them in 1937, referring to it as the "Newest of the New," while Gershom Scholem, however, recollects that the piece was written around the time of Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" in 1921. Benjamin's German-language editor, Rolf Tiedemann, convinced by Scholem, dated the fragment according to the early 1920s, but the editors of the recent English edition of Benjamin's *Selected Writing* were compelled by Adorno's account and included it in *Volume 4: 1938-1940*.[46] This minor "controversy" among his friends' speaks to larger attempts to claim Benjamin and his modification of redemption for materialist and theological camps respectively.

The admittedly dense "Theological-Political Fragment" begins:

> Only the Messiah himself consummates all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic. For this reason nothing historical can relate itself on its own account to anything Messianic. Therefore the Kingdom of God is not the *telos* of the historical dynamic; it cannot be set as a goal. From the standpoint of history it is not the goal, but the end. Therefore the order of the profane cannot be built up on the idea of the Divine Kingdom, and therefore theocracy has no political, but only a religious meaning. To

[46] Eric Jacobson, "Understanding Walter Benjamin's *Theological-Political Fragment*," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (2001): 209. Jacobson's own piece follows through on Scholem's suggestions and seeks to rework the fragment back into the themes of Benjamin's early period, especially his interest in Ernst Bloch, Franz Rosenzweig, Jewish philosophy, and "metaphysical anarchism."

> have repudiated the political theocracy with all intensity is the greatest service of Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia*.[47]

In this opening passage, Benjamin differentiates between the two temporal orders that seem incommensurable: the messianic and the profane. These orders are disparate firstly because history is absolutely cut off from the messianic, barring the arrival of the Messiah. Jacob Taubes points out that, in this first sentence, "one thing is clear: There is a Messiah. No *shmontses* like 'the messianic,' 'the political,' no neutralization, but the Messiah. We gave to be clear about this [….] No cloudy Enlightenment or Romantic neutralization."[48] In these first two sentences, it is clear that the Messiah proper appears, which Judith Butler notes is the "anthropomorphized" Messiah.[49] There is no equivocation: without the Messiah, history cannot consummate itself. History has no means to step into the properly messianic on its own. These temporal orders are to remain discrete, secondly, because while the Messiah can step into history, he does so only to consummate it, to transform it and effectively to end it.

This leads to Benjamin's distinction between the teleological arcs of the respective temporal orders. Because the Messiah, by absolutely transforming and redeeming profane history, effectively *concludes* history, and *only* the Messiah can consummate history in this way, the goal of profane history must be distinct from this end. And so against the "theocratic" political project of instating an earthly

---

[47] Benjamin, "Theological-Philosophical Fragment," in *Selected Writings Volume 4: 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 312.

[48] Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul,* trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 70.

[49] Judith Butler, "One Time Traverses Another: Benjamin's 'Theological-Political Fragment," in Walter Benjamin and Theology, eds. Colby Dickinson and Stéphane Symons (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 276.

Kingdom of God, Benjamin instead nudges the goal of history to back within its own temporal and profane order. Instead of aiming itself towards a redemption which *only the Messiah can effect*, Benjamin opens the following paragraph with the claim: "The order of the profane should be erected on the idea of happiness [*Glück*]."[50] As Benjamin writes elsewhere, because *fulfilled* historical time cannot take place within the temporal order of history, "this feature naturally changes the meaning of fulfillment completely."[51]

---

[50] Benjamin, "Theological-Philosophical Fragment," 312.

[51] Walter Benjamin, "*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy," *in Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913-1921*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 56. In this fragment, written in 1916 but unpublished in his lifetime, Benjamin works through the externality of the messianic proper and these distinct dramatic forms, which leads him to lay out four ideas of time. First is the notion of *historical time*, which is "infinite in every direction and unfulfilled at every moment. This means we cannot conceive of a single empirical event that bears a necessary relation to the time of its occurrence" (55). In contrast to this infinitely stretching and constitutively unfulfilled historical time Benjamin juxtaposes the idea of *messianic time*, fulfilled time. This second conception of time comes from the Bible and, contrasted with historical time, messianic time is precisely when an empirical event bears a necessary relation to its time of occurrence. Benjamin cautions, however, that in this idea of messianic time, "the idea of a fulfilled historical time is *never identical with the idea of an individual time*" (56, my emphasis). Thus, similar to the move by which he distinguishes between the messianic proper to the Messiah and the messianic of the profane, messianic time proper to the Bible cannot map onto historical time proper. Fulfilled historical time cannot take place within the temporal order of history, and thus "this feature naturally changes the meaning of fulfillment completely" (56). Emphasized differently, although "the idea of a fulfilled historical time is *never identical with the idea of an individual time*," we do still retain an idea of fulfillment. This statement can be a gloss of Benjamin's translation of messianism proper into profane messianism in the "Theologico-Political Fragment." In the fragment on *Trauerspiel*, however, this shift between temporal registers is what marks the distinction between tragic time and messianic time. This is the third notion of time, *tragic time*. Tragic time relates to messianic time "in the same way that an individually fulfilled time relates to a divinely fulfilled one" (56). Tragedy features the eruption of fulfilled time as the tragic hero's action seals her fate; she must die because "no one can live in fulfilled time" (56). In contrast to the individually fulfilled time that the tragic hero cannot survive, "the time of the mourning play is not fulfilled, but nevertheless it is finite. It is nonindividual, but without historical universality" (56).

While the nature of happiness remains to be unpacked, Benjamin first allows the extreme incommensurability of the two timelines to become a bit more complicated:

> If one arrow points to the goal toward which the profane dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of Messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the Messianic direction; but just as a force can, through acting, increase another that is acting in the opposite direction, so the order of the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the Messianic Kingdom. The profane, therefore, although not itself a category of this Kingdom, is a decisive category of its quietest approach.

Here Benjamin speculates about the relationship of human agency in bringing about the arrival of the Kingdom of God. Eric Jacobson points to the debates that emerged out of Lurianic Kabbalah in the sixteenth century concerning the effects of human activity in bringing about the arrival of the Messiah. Jacobson credits Ernst Bloch—whom Benjamin praises in the first paragraph—as continuing this tradition's revolutionary and political interpretation of messianism. Bloch writes, "It is therefore as the Baal Shem says, that the Messiah is capable of coming only after all the guests are seated at the table. This table is, first, labor, and only then the table of the Lord…"[52] Opposed to these views, Benjamin is adamant that the increasingly just organization of the social-political historical world—the striving of "free humanity" for happiness—is *not* directed towards the making real of the Messianic Kingdom, because nothing historical can bring itself to relate to the order of the Messiah proper. Again, the profane, and the pursuit of happiness that should orient the profane, cannot be the same as intending to bring about the Kingdom of God. In this passage, in fact, Benjamin states that the profane and its

[52] Cited in Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 24.

goal of happiness *opposes* to the Messianic direction, suggesting cryptically that efforts towards worldly happiness abet the arrival of the end of history, which, again, runs counter to its goal.

In this second paragraph, however, *pace* Taubes, Benjamin departs from the messianic *proper to the Messiah* and, in speaking of the happiness orienting the profane, introduces a transformed notion of the messianic, *one proper to the profane and to nature*. As just emphasized, only the Messiah can redeem the profane in relation to the properly messianic, and yet, Benjamin suggests that history still stands in need of redemption, and that redemption is connected to both happiness and passing away. Thus Benjamin concludes the second paragraph of the fragment:

> For in happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall [*Untergang*], and only in good fortune is its downfall destined to find it. Whereas, admittedly, the immediate Messianic intensity of the heart, of the inner man in isolation, passes through misfortune, as suffering. To the spiritual *restutio in integrum*, which introduces immortality, corresponds a worldly restitution that leads to the eternity of downfall, and the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence, transient in its totality, in its spatial but also in its temporal totality, the rhythm of Messianic nature, is happiness. For nature is Messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away [*Vergängnis*].[53]

In this short passage, as Yannik Thiem argues, Benjamin transforms *transience itself* into a messianic concept.[54] Happiness, that towards which the profane should be oriented, is neither otherworldly nor

---

[53] Benjamin, "Theological-Philosophical Fragment," 312-3. The German is as follows: "*Denn im Glück aber erstrebt alles Irdische seinen Untergang, nur im Glück ist ihm der Untergang zu finden bestimmt.—Während freilich die unmittelbare messianische Intensität des Herzens, des inner einzelnen Menschen durch Unglück, im Sinne des Leidens hindurchgeht. Der geistlichen restitutio in integrum, welche in die Unsterblichkeit einführt, entspricht eine weltliche, die in die Ewigkeit eines Untergangs führt and der Rhythmus dieses ewig vergehenden, in seiner Totalität vergehenden, in seiner räumlichen, aber auch zeitlichen Totalität vergehenden Weltlichen, der Rhythmus der messianischen Natur, ist Glück. Denn messianisch ist die Natur aus ihrer ewigen und totalen Vergängnis."* (II.203).

[54] Yannik Thiem, "Benjamin's Messianic Metaphysics of Transience," in *Walter Benjamin and Theology*, ed. Colby Dickinson, Stéphanie Symons (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 32. Thiem traces

eternal—if those terms are understood as being *outside* of history. Rather, nature and all that is earthly of necessity—eternally—perishes; all that lives in the historical profane ages and decays. All that is earthly is finite. Happiness itself is to be found in this perishing, transient nature, not outside of it and not outside of history. Benjamin affirms the goal of happiness within the eternally passing and perishing order of the profane *and* imbues it with the redemptive power of a messianism proper to the profane. This messianism, as Thiem argues, "provides a critical perspective on history and on the future because it raises the question of the conditions of this natural demise and the livability of demise within these events." [55] How can finite lives be lived well, even in their ending? Nature and natural beings, in their ineluctable passing away, still stand in need of salvation, but *within* that register still circumscribed by the rhythm of life's passing away. The locus of redemption shifts from the arrival of the Messiah in messianism proper to the question of redemption within history.

Against the promise of the spiritual restitution via immortality of the soul, Benjamin asserts a *worldly* restitution within the eternity of the perishable and the perishing. *Restitutio in integrum*, a law from the Justinian Code, was established to restore the property or legal position to a person who was unfairly taken advantage of, and was most often applied to children cheated of property rights.[56] As Judith Butler notes in "One Time Traverses Another," immortality [*Unsterblichkeit*], wherein soul that exists separately from and survives the body, is one mode wherein the human being "seeks to overcome

---

the recovery of transience, our "perishable and perishing" existence, throughout Benjamin's early work, and this enigmatic definition of happiness is no exception.

[55] Thiem, "Benjamin's Messianic Metaphysics of Transience," 38-9.

[56] William Smith, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, (London: John Murray, 1875), 987-8.

his or her finite condition."[57] Benjamin redirects the problem of finitude away from a transcendent solution and back within the realm of the transient. From this perspective, it is passing away itself that is infinite. The problem of the finite—within the world of eternal transience—becomes a question of happiness *in* that perishing finitude. And so Thiem concludes, "passing away in happiness is a matter of the conditions and circumstances under which life in this world is allowed, rather than forced, to perish."[58]

The last paragraph of the "Theological-Political Fragment" is one sentence long: "To strive after such passing, even for those stages of man that are nature, is the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism."[59] The terse and opaque assertion of a relationship between the profane yet messianic happiness-in-perishing, on the one hand, and politics as nihilism on the other, I argue, might be best understood in light of Benjamin's *The Origin of German Trauerspiel*, where God and the Messiah are unequivocally absent. History and politics are to be the scene of properly earthly happiness. However, in Benjamin's own messianic inflection of transience—which is a departure from the world of the *Trauerspiel*—the significance of transient natural lives and historical worlds (an element of happiness in demise) becomes an *ethical* and *worldly* question. *Mourning, remembrance, is the assertion of the meaning of perishable nature and perishing history*. For Benjamin, in this world where the messianic impetus is inscribed solely within the world of politics, *significance itself is at stake*, the significance of transient natural lives and historical worlds. As Thiem argues, the messianic expands

---

[57] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 2003), 277.
[58] Thiem, "Benjamin's Messianic Metaphysics of Transience," 39.
[59] Benjamin, "Theological-Philosophical Fragment," 313.

into an ethic of demise that bears on both the living and the dead; Sigrid Weigel emphasizes that the messianic for Benjamin is "a phenomenon of cultural history that originates in the attitude of the community towards the dead."[60] Significance is asserted through historical recollection, the meaning of those lives affirmed through remembrance as ethical practice. This significance is won through sad recollection; the meaning of those lives as affirmed through remembrance. For this reason, against the idealizing impulse to artificially or prematurely claim redemption (when it is clear that salvation of human beings in the profane world is not to come), Benjamin offers a vision of humanity that, in its transience, poses the question of meaning in general and in terms of the specific "biographical historicity of the individual."[61] That is, human beings and human history are both natural in that they are destined for downfall, but they are more than natural in that their significance is at stake.

I conclude by returning to the theme of happiness, which seemed out of reach in the violent and mournful *Trauerspiel*. In the second thesis on history in his later famous work, "On the Concept of History," Benjamin observes that "the image of happiness we cherish is thoroughly colored by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us."[62] Building on the thought that the present rarely feels envy for the future, Benjamin locates happiness in possibilities in the past that were left untaken: "only in the air we could have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us."[63] Happiness, for Benjamin, is tied to the idea of making

---

[60] Sigrid Weigel, *Walter Benjamin: Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*, trans. Chadwick Truscott Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 83.
[61] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166.
[62] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *Selected Writings Volume 4: 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 389.
[63] Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 389.

good—the idea of redemption is indexed to historical missed opportunities. Benjamin expands from this subjective scope to a much larger one, to a generational understanding of the past and present; the past itself stands in relation to the present as similarly clambering for happiness as redemption.

> Doesn't a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear, isn't there an echo of now silent ones? Don't the women we court have sisters they no longer recognize? If so, then there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Then our coming was expected on earth. Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim. Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply.[64]

While happiness in transience certainly includes the attention to the profane circumstances in which life lives and perishes, happiness also includes the past's claim on those living in the present—which, must be said, is eternally and at every moment changing. Like in an individual's personal life, the broader historical past likewise contained the possibilities for happiness that were missed. Those possibilities are what we bear, the possibilities for happiness that were missed lay on the presently living.

Benjamin continues in the third thesis of "On the Concept of History":

> The chronicler who narrates events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accord with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history. Of course only a redeemed mankind is granted the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation a l'ordre du jour*. And that day is Judgment Day.

[64] Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 390.

Without profane political salvation in sight—and the Messiah proper especially beyond view—Benjamin extends the redemptive aspect of profane messianism to the project of the historian, who can collect fragments and signs that point the past and its lost opportunities for happiness. The messianic call for redemption, when attached to the earthly and passing creatures in history, moves salvation from a transcendent sphere to that of history and politics instead. That fulfillment is of necessity partial, as long as happiness in perishing is not yet the order of the day. And again, although the meaning of fulfillment is changed "completely," the prospect of fulfillment is retained.

Burgeoning within the *Trauerspiel* book, the messianic recasting of transience—which runs from the early works above through Benjamin's famous late piece, "On the Concept of History"—is of singular importance for Adorno's thinking. I will show how understanding nature in terms of redemption, alongside the allegorical posing of the question of meaning and natural-history, informs Adorno's account of natural beauty. In the *Trauerspiel* work, against the impulse to idealize such loss and artificially or prematurely claim redemption when happiness in demise is not yet come, Benjamin cautions: "Allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty."[65] The truth of this statement rests on what beauty designates, on what occurs in the aesthetic experience of beauty. Adorno will ultimately pursue this line of inquiry to give an account of natural beauty that *begins* from Benjamin's refiguration of nature and reinscribes the ethical imperative of remembrance within it. As Adorno writes in the "Natural-History" essay, quoting Benjamin: "The deepest point where history and nature converge

[65] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 178.

lies precisely in this element of transience."[66] Moreover, "The word 'history' stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience."[67] It can be *read*.

Section 4: Natural Beauty and the Cultural Landscape

Having explained transient nature in terms of historical meaning, remembrance, and the promise of happiness in demise, I now show how Adorno infuses the elements of natural-history within his account of natural beauty, effectively recasting the concept under the mark of transience so that it serves to unmask the ideology of subjective-aesthetic retreat rather than support it. In this section, I first bring the idea of natural-history to bear on Adorno's retrieval of natural beauty by way of the following questions: 1) how can we comprehend natural beauty, *where it seems to rest most deeply in itself as nature*, as historical? And, 2) how can we comprehend natural beauty, *in its most extreme historical determinacy*, as natural being? I then conclude the chapter by examining Adorno's remarkable analysis of the cultural landscape, which harnesses beauty, transience, remembrance, and mourning in one aesthetic experience.

First, then, to refract natural beauty by way of natural-history. *To comprehend nature as historical being* entails the recognition that our relation to the material world, to nature, has historical consequences. Just as our effects on physical nature must be conceived historically, the cultivation of a sensibility that experiences natural beauty must also be recognized as a historical phenomenon.

[66] Adorno, "Idea of Natural-History," 262.
[67] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 177.

"Wherever nature was not actually mastered, the image of its untamed condition terrified. This explains the strange predilection of earlier centuries for symmetrical arrangements of nature."[68] (Think of the social and technological preconditions for the family white water rafting trip!) Not only is the experience of natural beauty historical but *all* experiences of nature are historically determined, insofar as the subject experiencing nature is a member of a historically-situated community, and any given human community interacts both materially and cognitively with nature. As explored in Chapter 2, Adorno and Horkheimer demonstrate the social determination of nature's appearance in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where they connect the increasingly disenchanted figurations of nature with progressive material and conceptual control over nature in Western rationality, where nature extends to external nature, internal nature, and other human beings.[69] The basic historicist point has a synchronic corollary; different cultures—with distinct histories and material practices—will also have culturally specific experiences of nature. Adorno's discussion of natural beauty thus opposes universalist claims about the aesthetic experience of nature. Rather, "in every particular aesthetic experience of nature the social whole is lodged."[70] The aesthetic experience of nature at a particular moment and place in time is informed by and against the culturally and historically specific conceptualizations and valuations of nature.

Following this general point, natural beauty must be understood as emerging out of a concrete social moment. Adorno indexes the historical advent of natural beauty—the interrelated aesthetic

---

[68] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 65.
[69] For discussions extended discussions of the domination of nature in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, see Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2014), and Steven Vogel, *Against Nature*.
[70] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 68.

experience of natural beauty and its theoretical articulation—to the bourgeois revolutionary spirit of the 18th century, particularly as expressed by Rousseau and Kant. He proposes that the concept of natural beauty was affiliated with "the alleged natural rights of human beings" that served as the foundation for bourgeois emancipation; natural beauty was precisely "coined in opposition to absolutism's wigs and formal gardens."[71]

Adorno suggests that from the perspective of bourgeois revolutionaries, human institutions and conventions had not fully petrified into the absolute, alien force of second nature. Revolution is the political attempt to destroy the alien fatedness of a given world and build a more human world in its place. For the political actor, "the humanly made was never thought to fully become second nature," and one tool for transforming the absolutist political structures was the appeal to "first nature."[72] But a true social and political transformation of the world *failed*, and the aesthetic experience of nature came to serve a different function: that of providing solace in the alienated world of second nature. When revolution reinstates an economic-political order based on the exploitation of external nature, inner nature, and fellow human beings, "the subject's powerlessness in a society petrified into a second nature becomes the motor of the flight into a purportedly first nature."[73] Thus the cult of natural beauty becomes a *symptom* of the reified world of domination.

Adorno here describes how, conceived *in its most extreme historical determinacy,* natural beauty reverts to *natural* being when it functions as a mythical pacifier in thought, when the call to go "back to nature" idealizes an uncorrupted immediacy outside of history or society. Rousseau's *retournons* thus

[71] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 68.
[72] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 64.
[73] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 65.

parallels the curated experience of wilderness on offer in today's tourist industry. In both, the historical and social mediation of the experience of nature is disavowed, and nature becomes "neutral and apologetic," "an alibi" for larger systems of destruction and expropriation.[74] The false escapism into bucolic nature perpetuates political complacency if it presents the contemporary social condition as impervious to human intervention. Adorno's criticism of the mollifying iteration of natural beauty here aligns with his criticism of the Idealists more broadly: emancipation in thought is not yet true emancipation. What it papers over, crucially, is the weakly messianic claim of nature—inclusive of human beings—to worldly restitution in the mortal, political realm.

Both the emancipatory element and the resigned, mythical element—natural rights and the forfeiture of political solutions for a compensatory aesthetic experience of nature, respectively—stem from the same source, the fact "that the experience of natural beauty, at least according to its subjective consciousness, is entirely distinct from the domination of nature, as if the experience were at one with the primordial origin."[75] For Adorno, this perception of harmony, peace, and the rejection of the domination of nature is both a strength and weakness: it is a strength "because it recollects a world without domination, one that probably never existed," and it is a weakness "because through this recollection it dissolves back into that amorphousness out of which genius once arose and for the first time became conscious of the idea of freedom that could be realized in a world free of domination."[76] That is, when the experience of natural beauty elicits the feeling that harmony lies in a world that is not our own real, historical, sad earth, then natural beauty is mythical and reactionary. The recollection

[74] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 65.
[75] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 66.
[76] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 66.

of freedom in natural beauty is a false, ideal source of comfort from the reality of historical unfreedom: "The anamnesis of freedom in natural beauty deceives because it seeks freedom in the old unfreedom. Natural beauty is myth transposed into the imagination and thus, perhaps, requited."[77]

In holding onto the utopian moment inherent in the experience of natural beauty, Harriet Johnson suggests that, "Adorno drops his usual guard against the false comforts offered by foundations."[78] And it is this illusory reconciliation that art sublates, as the literature on the development of art's autonomy points out. Johnson argues that Adorno retains this "suspect hope" but balances it (as mentioned above) with the concept of natural-history, which "debunks any notion of nature as the invariant eternal."[79] While Johnson is correct to emphasize the moments where Adorno denies that we can access pure nature immediately, I argue that Adorno incorporates this "nature-skeptical" element within the aesthetic experience of natural beauty itself.[80] On the one hand, Adorno reinstates Kant's block on the definitive knowledge of nature in the *aesthetic* sphere, writing, "The boundary established against fetishism of nature—the pantheistic subterfuge that would amount to nothing but an affirmative mask appended to an endlessly repetitive fate—is drawn by the fact that nature, as it stirs mortally and tenderly in its beauty, does not yet exist."[81] On the other hand, Adorno will draw from Benjamin's constellation of nature with transience, history, allegory, and redemption.

---

[77] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 66.
[78] Johnson, "Undignified Thoughts," 374.
[79] Johnson, "Undignified Thoughts," 374.
[80] Johnson draws on Kate Soper's distinction on *What is Nature?*, where the "nature-skeptics" understand the concept of "nature" to be a historical construction, as opposed to "nature-endorsing" schools of thought that posit the existence of nature. While Soper primarily worries that nature-skeptical post-modernism might corrode the claims of nature-endorsing climate science with concerns about historicity and language, Johnson is disturbed more by the ideological functions of nature-endorsing positivism.
[81] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 74.

While Benjamin argues that allegory is beyond beauty, in the appreciation of the cultural landscape, Adorno imbues beauty with the allegorical question of meaning. Via the *Kulturlandschaft*, itself a historical modification of natural beauty, Adorno describes an aesthetic experience that it is increasingly historically available and relevant to us in the contemporary climate crisis.

Adorno takes the emergence of the concept of *Kulturlandschaft* or cultural landscape in the nineteenth century to be an important moment where natural beauty expanded beyond "inviolable" (Rousseauean) nature. Adorno is critical of landscape paintings as inevitably kitsch, but he focuses on the cultural landscape as a clearly "artifactitious domain that must at first seem totally opposed to natural beauty," but, like "hillside towns that are related to their setting by the use of its stone," the artefactual elements become beautiful by virtue of being related to their natural setting.[82] Echoing Benjamin, for whom "the allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history, which is put on stage in the *Trauerspiel*, is present in reality in the form of the ruin," [83] for Adorno, the cultural landscape "resembles a ruin even when the houses still stand."[84] The World Heritage Committee designates three main types of cultural landscapes, all of which reflect the "combined works of nature and of man," expressing "a long and intimate relationship between peoples and their natural environment." First is the landscape clearly designed and created intentionally by humans; second, the organically evolved landscape, which results from "an initial social, economic, administrative, and/or religious imperative and has developed its present form by association with and in response to its natural environment";

[82] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 64.
[83] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 177-8.
[84] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 65.

and lastly, the associative cultural landscape, the value of which stems from the powerful religious, artistic or cultural associations with the place.[85] In the cultural landscape, such as UNESCO's example of "cultivated terraces on lofty mountains," one can see *history and nature* in transience—one beholds both the shaping of the land by human hands, and the natural decay of the artefactual. Additionally, as Paetzold emphasizes, the experience of the cultural landscape is a modern aesthetic experience; it not only presumes a division of labor and the distinction between labor and leisure time, but (following Joachim Ritter) it is a secularized site where human beings are reconciled with nature without pastoral or doctrinal direction.

Crucially, Adorno refuses the idea that nature itself offers an escape from domination; pure nature is pure subjection to force. He writes against the idealization of purely natural landscapes: "precisely nature that has not been pacified by human cultivation, nature over which no human hand has passed—alpine moraines and taluses—resembles those industrial mountains of debris from which the socially lauded aesthetic need for nature flees. Just how industrial it looks in inorganic space will someday be clear."[86] Fetishized "pure" nature is clearly not responsive to the transient nature of human beings.

Instead of the alienating inhospitality of such scenes, *Kulturlandschaften* elicit a kind of pleasure in the contemporary beholder. Adorno connects this feeling of pleasure to a larger social-historical consciousness: "So long as progress, deformed by utilitarianism, does violence to the surface of the earth, it will be impossible—in spite of all proof to the contrary—completely to counter the perception

---

[85] "Cultural Landscapes," United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Association (UNESCO) World Heritage Convention, accessed May 29, 2020, http://whc.unesco.org/en/culturallandscape/#1
[86] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 68.

that what antedates the trend is in its backwardness better and more humane. Rationalization is not yet rational."[87] Adorno insists that even if this feeling is attached to a misplaced nostalgia for a past that never was, it is an expression of an attitude towards contemporary historical conditions. What Adorno means is that instrumental rationality has not yet made human beings, in their perishable and perishing natures, happy: "the universality of mediation has yet to be transformed into living life."[88] Human happiness depends on our relation to nature, and our fantasies about witnessing testaments to something like cultivation rather than absolute consumption or destruction speaks to the contemporary failure of reason to provide that happiness for humanity, especially when it has the technical means to do so.

The feeling of pleasure in beholding the *Kulturlandschaft* sustains the sense that human happiness, despite always ending in death, is to be found in this profane, political world, rather than in an ahistorical Edenic ideal or afterlife. However, Adorno is also sensitive to the decay of the allegorical, illuminative potency of the *Kulturlandschaft* when it reifies into a commodity. Even truer today than at the time Adorno was writing, when a landscape is reduced to a movie backdrop or pitched as a dreamy setting for a family holiday, it becomes an image for consumption and a mere complement to urban and suburban experience. Even though the cultural landscape can and does become "suspicious" when deployed as a commodity—because it disguises its mediatedness, its relation to the social whole and historical reality—Adorno maintains that in our rationalized world,

[87] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 64.
[88] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 64.

"the traces of immediacy, however dubious and antiquated," are still endowed "with an element of corrective justice."[89]

The strongest allegorical element in Adorno's presentation of the cultural landscape is its testament to the question of meaning. Adorno writes:

> But perhaps the most profound force of resistance stored in the cultural landscape is the expression of history that is compelling, aesthetically, because it is etched by the real suffering of the past [….] The cultural landscape, which resembles a ruin even when the houses still stand, embodies a wailful lament that has since fallen mute. If today the aesthetic relation to the past is poisoned by a reactionary tendency with which this relation is in league, an ahistorical aesthetic consciousness that sweeps aside the dimension of the past as rubbish is no better. Without historical remembrance there would be no beauty. The past, and with it the cultural landscape, would be accorded guiltlessly to a liberated humanity, free especially of nationalism.[90]

Having shown how Adorno's account of natural beauty builds upon Benjamin's idea of natural-history, we can understand Adorno to be incorporating Benjamin's deployment of the ruin as an allegorical question of the meaning of perishing life, both in general and in its specific historicity—against, for example, Steven Vogel's assertion that Adorno's reference to ruins betrays an anti-modern yearning for a feudal past.[91]

Adorno means to salvage natural beauty from exactly that kind of reactionary idealization of both nature and the past.[92] Nostalgic idolization of the past or nature can be used to perpetuate the

---

[89] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 64.
[90] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 64-65.
[91] See Vogel, *Against Nature*, 87-88.
[92] Adorno can therefore be said to inflect beauty with elements of the sublime. Adorno explicitly blurs the lines between the beautiful and the sublime, going to far as: "Kant lodged the sublime—and probably along with it all beauty that rises above the mere play of form—in nature" (*Aesthetic Theory*, 64). I want to stress, however, that Adorno does not *sublate* beauty in favor of the sublime, as Tom Huhn suggests.

mythical idea that the world was better before, or that the modern world is necessarily doomed, and that human beings cannot bend the arc of "natural" forces (e.g., of the market, or human nature). Against the aesthetic fetishization of history and Benjamin's own worry about the idealizing power of beauty, Adorno retrieves Benjamin's interpretation of ruins. Benjamin invested ruins with the power to present the very question of meaning; in a profane world where God and eschatology are absent, and human beings, ineluctably *natural* beings, pass away, there is no guarantee for the significance of either nature and history. Mourning, remembrance, is the assertion of meaning against the "jagged line" death digs between significance and its absence in "pure" physical nature. In the earthly cultural landscape, Adorno transforms the experience of natural beauty by infusing it with the memorial charge Benjamin found in the allegorical plays. Integral to the experience of these landscapes, from the perspective of contemporary experience of progressive destruction of habitats, is both a pleasure—to be distinguished from the mere satisfaction of consumption, à la Kant—and the charge to remember, to retrieve the suffering of the past back into the human world of meaning. "Without historical remembrance there would be no beauty." Adorno inflects beauty, as a critical concept, with this assertion of meaning of the suffering of the past. We might go one step further in connecting this remembrance with today's knowledge of climate crisis, another element that strictly formalist aesthetics are unequipped to handle. Only a liberated humanity could relate to the past without guilt.

Where the Kantian sublime features the pleasurable affirmation of human reason in the face of natural's frightful force, natural beauty points to the possibility of stepping out of a dominating relationship towards nature. See Tom Huhn, "Kant, Adorno, and the Social Opacity of the Aesthetic," in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997), 237–57.

By demonstrating how the experience of natural beauty expanded historically, Adorno gives us tools to contemplate what is at stake in our contemporary aesthetic experience of nature. The rigid dualisms of nature and history, of the natural and artefactual, are themselves historical artifacts, and they certainly no longer stand at this moment of global climate crisis. While artworks can certainly disclose this, it is now glaringly manifest in our aesthetic experience of nature itself and should be reflected in the philosophical account thereof. Perhaps most pressing today, alongside the recognition of suffering both human and non-human, is acknowledgement of the imbrication of human activity with nature. Against fetishizing untouched nature, again, Adorno points to an alternative: "In schema borrowed from bourgeois sexual morality, technique is said to have ravished nature, yet under transformed relations of production it would just as easily be able to assist nature and on this sad earth help it to attain what perhaps it wants."[93]

To conclude, I want to emphasize what I take Adorno to have done. He points to the danger of natural beauty to become "merely aesthetic," where the aesthetic performs a compensatory function. He criticizes a notion of nature as being outside history or human activity. Lastly, he describes natural beauty in a way that tasks us. I think this is the most appropriate formulation of natural beauty given the world we live in.

[93] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 68.

Conclusion

In the concluding words of "Man and Beast," the sketch appended to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer reaffirm the caution required by their historicist commitments alongside the ethical necessity of philosophically treating the concept of nature:

> Nature in itself is neither good, as was believed by the old Romanticism, nor noble, as is asserted by the new. As a model and goal it signifies anti-intellectualism, lies, bestiality; only when apprehended as knowledge does it become the urge of the living toward peace, the consciousness which, from the beginning, has inspired the unerring resistance to *Führer* and collective. What threatens the prevailing practice and its inescapable alternatives is not nature, with which that praxis coincides, but the remembrance of nature.[1]

The bald assertion of nature in positive terms is used all too often to justify claims to power, to mask what in fact are social and historical developments, or to justify a retreat from the actual, complex political and historical world. A dynamic or dialectical relationship between nature and history requires both the recognition that nature is never definitively exhausted by human concepts and the

[1] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007), 211-12.

acknowledgement that the appearances and very reality of nature are also mutable and changing, human beings included.

Instead of merely posited nature, the remembrance of nature involves very material histories—in addition to speculative ones. For instance, in *Caliban and the Witch*, Silvia Federici tracks the pointed political efforts to produce the woman as a "natural" being in the rise of capitalism in Europe. Woman as nature was "produced" in that it took centuries of targeted legal mandates, economic incentives, and outright terror to establish the role of women as identical with reproduction—the reproduction, more specifically, of labor-power. That women's *social* role became identical with the so-called "*natural*" role of social reproduction entails not only that women's value lies in their birthing new laborers, but that their work—feeding, caring, cleaning, and whatever labor required for maintaining and sustaining themselves and those around them—became cast as non-waged work, a matter of virtue and nature.[2] (Adorno and Horkheimer acknowledge in "Man and Beast" that, "the division of labor imposed on her by the man was unfavorable. She became an embodiment of biological function, in image of nature, in the suppression of which this civilization's claim to glory lay."[3])

Federici also addresses the production of racialized "natures" in the persecution of witches and the enslavement of Indigenous peoples in the Americas, which also relied on targeted social, legal, economic, and outright violent coercion. In "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," Anibal Quijano explores the idea of race as itself "a naturalization of colonial relations between

[2] Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Brooklyn, New York: Autonomedia, 2004).
[3] Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 206.

Europeans and non-Europeans," whereby "the conquered and dominated peoples were situated in a natural position of inferiority and, as a result, their phenotypic traits as well as their cultural features were considered inferior."[4] In the context of the United States, W. E. B. du Bois chronicles in minute detail the contested relationship between race, citizenship, and subjugation from colonial America to the "failure, but a splendid failure" of Reconstruction.[5] At the center of all these analyses is efforts to control resources, most important of which being human labor. Du Bois is particularly astute in tracking the misplaced and often homicidal hostility of the white worker toward the Black worker, staging the tragic missed opportunity of labor organizations and the abolition movement.

The remembrance of nature also involves attending to the mutilated desires, wants, and needs of the human animal. Critical of the debasement of the animal, Adorno does not fetishize or advocate a return to primal desires—as if we could get unmediated access to them—but he does draw attention to the ways in which contemporary social life replaces survival as the goal of life. With nature thus denied, nature then erupts. "The wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity."[6]

This dissertation began with reflections on the current pandemic in which we find ourselves, and I suggested that critical attention to figurations of nature is necessary to ward off the naturalization of this contemporary global health crisis as well as the larger ecological catastrophe. In order to avoid the stultifying sense of resignation or guilt that accompanies thoughts of "nature's revenge" or tainted

---

[4] Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," Nepantla: Views from South 1, no. 3 (2000): 534-35.
[5] W. E. B. du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880* (New York, New York: The Free Press, 1998), 708.
[6] Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1.

human nature, nature must always be made particular and indexed to history, and indeed vice versa. Moreover, attention to the aesthetic shapes of nature is also necessary.

I end, then, by returning to the question: With the conceptual unravelling of the dualism between human activity and nature—and the realities of global warming more pressing every season—how might the aesthetics of nature change? What are significant aesthetic images of nature today? As I argued, vigilance against unreflected natural beauty and escapist Edenic fantasies seems warranted. The false beauty of dolphins reclaiming Venice seems relatively benign, however, compared to its logical conclusion: the defeated sublimity of an empty urban apocalypse. An iteration of the increasingly popular genre in the wake of Alan Weisman's 2007 book, *The World Without Us*, *Aftermath: Population Zero*, a Canadian documentary series, asks the question of what would happen to the world if all human beings disappear in an instant. First, with no pilots and no passengers, empty planes crash into empty buildings. (A haunting relic of another nightmare entirely.) Next, dogs survive in our absence by forming packs and eating smaller dogs, just like in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the narrator grimly states. (Dogs eventually come to scavenge the plentiful corpses of dairy cows.) *Life After People*, a successful television show on the History Channel with two specials and two seasons, goes into even more depth. Some choice episode titles include: "The Bodies Left Behind"; "Sin City Meltdown"; "Roads to Nowhere"; "Waters of Death"; "Toxic Revenge"; and my favorite, "Holiday Hell."

As reviewers on YouTube and Amazon note, the episodes begin as fascinating and disturbing, but they become repetitive. Boring. The ecological sublime is too large. Again, it homogenizes humanity and real suffering both. Instead of imagining an end of history so generic as to become

entertainment, what would it mean to further rethink the ruin in light of natural-history? New cultural landscapes: a bleached coral reef, a kudzu vine barren, the growing Gobi Desert.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. New York, New York: Continuum, 2002.

———. *Aesthetics*. Edited by Eberhard Ortland and Wieland Hoban. Cambridge: Polity, 2018.

———. *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998.

———. *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. Malden, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2006.

———. "The Idea of Natural-History." In *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, 252–69. New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

———. *Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason."* Edited by Rolf Tiedemann. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002.

———. *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E.B. Ashton. New York, New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1973.

Adorno, Theodor, and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007.

Allen, Amy. *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

Barth, Brian. "How Kudzu, 'The Vine That Ate the South,' Put Southern Agriculture on the Skids." *Modern Farmer*, October 13, 2016. https://modernfarmer.com/2016/10/kudzu/.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2002.

———. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne. New York: Verso, 2003.

———. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2004.

———. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2: Part 1: 1927-1930*. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2005.

———. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 4: 1938-1940*. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003.

Berleant, Arnold. *Aesthetics and Environment: Theme and Variations on Art and Culture*. Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 2005.

———. *Aesthetics Beyond the Arts: New and Recent Essays*. Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 2012.

———. "The Aesthetics of Art and Nature." In *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, edited by Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1992.

———. *The Aesthetics of Environment*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 1992.

Bernstein, J. M. *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*. New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

———. *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno*. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992.

Brady, Emily. "Don't Eat the Daisies: Disinterestedness and the Situated Aesthetic." *Environmental Values* 7, no. 1 (1998): 97–114.

———. "Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature." In *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, edited by Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant, 156–69. Orchard Park, New York: Broadview Press, 2004.

Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991.

———. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*. New York: Free Press, 1979.

Budd, Malcom. *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature: Essays on the Aesthetics of Nature*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Burke, Donald A. "Adorno's Aesthetic Rationality: On the Dialectic of Natural and Artistic Beauty." In *Critical Ecologies: The Frankfurt School and Contemporary Environmental Crises*, edited by Andrew Biro, 165–86. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011.

Butler, Judith. "One Time Traverses Another: Benjamin's 'Theological-Political Fragment.'" In *Walter Benjamin and Theology*, edited by Colby Dickinson and Stéphane Symons, 272–85. New York: Fordham University Press, 2016.

Carlson, Allen. *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art, and Architecture*. London: Routledge, 2000.

———. "Nature, Aesthetic Judgment, Objectivity." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 40, no. 1 (1981): 15–27.

———. "Requirements for an Adequate Aesthetics of Nature." *Environmental Philosophy*, Special Issue: Environmental Aesthetics and Ecological Restoration, 4, no. 1 & 2 (2007): 1–14.

———. "Review of The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature: Essays on the Aesthetics of Nature by Malcolm Budd and Aesthetics of the Natural Environment by Emily Brady." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 55, no. 218 (2005): 106–13.

Carroll, Noël. "On Being Moved by Nature: Between Religion and Natural History." In *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, edited by Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant, 89–107. Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2004.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 197–222.

Cheney, Jim. "Postmodern Environmental Ethics: Ethics of Bioregional Narrative." *Environmental Ethics* 11, no. 2 (1989): 117–34.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. "Dejection: An Ode." Dejection: An Ode, n.d. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43973/dejection-an-ode.

Cook, Deborah. *Adorno on Nature*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Cowan, Bainard. "Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory." *New German Critique* 22, no. Special Issue on Modernism (Winter 1981): 109–22.

Cronon, William. *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1983.

———, ed. *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996.

du Bois, W. E. B. *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880.* New York, New York: The Free Press, 1998.

Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch.* Brooklyn, New York: Autonomedia, 2004.

Feyerabend, Paul. *Against Method*. New York: Verso, 2010.

Finch, Bill. "The True Story of Kudzu, the Vine That Never Truly Ate the South." *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 2015. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/true-story-kudzu-vine-ate-south-180956325/.

Friedler, Delilah. "'Nature Is Healing, We Are the Virus' Memes." Mother Jones. Plague Comforts, May 19, 2020. https://www.motherjones.com/coronavirus-updates/2020/05/plague-comforts-nature-is-healing-we-are-the-virus-memes/.

Gasché, Rudolphe. "The Theory of Natural Beauty and Its Evil Star: Kant, Hegel, Adorno." *Research in Phenomenology* 32, no. 1 (2002): 103–22.

Habermas, Jürgen. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures (Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought)*. Translated by Frederick G Lawrence. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990.

Hammer, Espen. *Adorno's Modernism: Art, Experience, and Catastrophe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Hegel, G. W. F. *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. Translated by T. M. Knox. Vol. I. II vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Hepburn, Ronald. "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty." In *British Analytical Philosophy*, edited by Bernard Williams and Alan Montefiore, 285–310. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966.

———. "Landscape and the Metaphysical Imagination." In *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, edited by Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant, 127–40. Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2004.

Hill, Samantha Rose. "Walter Benjamin's Last Work." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, December 9, 2019. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/walter-benjamins-last-work/.

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin Classics, 1996.

———. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Robert Fitzgerald. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.

Horkheimer, Max. *Kritische Theorie 2*. Frankfurt am Main, 1968.

Huhn, Tom. "Kant, Adorno, and the Social Opacity of the Aesthetic." In *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, edited by Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart, 237–57. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997.

Hullot-Kentor, Robert. *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

Huseyinzadegan, Dilek. "Between Necessity and Contingency: A Critical Philosophy of History in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*." *Epoché* 22, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 467–86.

———. *Kant's Nonideal Theory of Politics*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2019.

Ivereigh, Austen. "Pope Francis Says Pandemic Can Be a 'Place of Conversion.'" The Tablet: The International Catholic News Weekly, April 8, 2020. https://www.thetablet.co.uk/features/2/17845/pope-francis-says-pandemic-can-be-a-place-of-conversion-.

Jacobson, Eric. *Metaphysics of the Profane*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

———. "Understanding Walter Benjamin's Theological-Political Fragment." *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (2001): 205–47.

Jarvis, Simon. *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 1998.

Johnson, Harriet. "Undignified Thoughts After Nature: Adorno's Aesthetic Theory." *Critical Horizons* 12, no. 3 (2011): 372–95.

Kant, Immanuel. "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" *Practical Philosophy*. Translated by Mary Gregor. New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

———. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

———. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

———. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1900ff.

———. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. In *Practical Philosophy*. Translated by Mary Gregor. New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

———. "Idea for a universal history with a Cosmopolitan Aim." In *Anthropology, History, and Education*. Edited by Günter Zöller and Robert B. Louden. New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

———. *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics With Selections from the Critique of Pure Reason*. Edited by Gary Hatfield. New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Karera, Axelle. "Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics." *Critical Philosophy of Race* 7, no. 1 (2019): 32–56.

Kaufman, Robert. "Red Kant, or the Persistence of the Third 'Critique' in Adorno and Jameson." *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (2000): 682–724.

Kukla, Quill. "Introduction." In *Aesthetics and Cognition in Kant's Critical Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Langton, Rae. "Duty and Desolation." *Philosophy* 67, no. 262 (1992): 481–505.

Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel*. Translated by Anna Bostock. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1971.

Maskit, Jonathan. "On Universalism and Cultural Historicism in Environmental Aesthetics." In *Environmental Aesthetics: Crossing Divides and Breaking Ground*, edited by Martin Drenthen and Jozef Keulartz, 41–60. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014.

Matthews, Patricia. "Scientific Knowledge and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (2002): 37–48.

Mills, Charles. "Black Radical Kantianism." *Res Philosophica* 95, no. 1 (2017): 1–33.

———. "Kant's *Untermenschen*." In *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*, edited by Andrew Walls, 169–93. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005.

———. *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997.

Inside/Out: A MoMA/MoMA PS1 Blog. "Rirkrit Tiravanija: Cooking Up an Art Experience," February 3, 2012. https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/02/03/rirkrit-tiravanija-cooking-up-an-art-experience/#:~:text=Rirkrit%20Tiravanija.,303%20Gallery%20in%20New%20York.

Moore, Jason W., ed. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Oakland, California: Kairos PM Press, 2016.

Moore, Ronald. *Natural Beauty: A Theory of Aesthetics Beyond the Arts*. Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2008.

Nuzzo, Angelica. "Reflective Judgment, Determinative Judgment, and the Problem of Particularity." *Washington University Jurisprudence Review* 6:7, no. 1 (2013): 7–25.

Paetzold, Heinz. "Adorno's Notion of Natural Beauty: A Reconsideration." In *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, edited by Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart, 213–36. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999.

Pastoureau, Michel. *The Bear: History of a Fallen King*. Translated by George Holoch. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2011.

Patel, Raj, and Jason W. Moore. *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2017.

Quijano, Anibal "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America." *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000), 533-580.

Richter, Gerhard. *Afterness: Figures of Following in Modern Thought and Aesthetics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Émile, or On Education*. Translated by Barbara Foxley. Auckland, New Zealand: Floating Press, 2019.

Schmidt, Dennis J. *Lyrical and Ethical Subjects: Essays on the Periphery of the Word, Freedom, and History*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005.

Singh, Surti. "The Spiritualization of Art in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory." *Adorno Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017): 32–42.

Smith, William. *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*. London: John Murray, 1875.

Stolnitz, Jerome. "On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness.'" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20, no. 2 (1961): 131–43.

Soper, Kate. *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics, and the Non-Human*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1995.

Szendy, Peter. *Kant in the Land of Extraterrestrials: Cosmophilosophical Fictions*. Translated by Will Bishop. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013.

Tafalla, Marta. "Rehabilitating the Aesthetics of Nature: Hepburn and Adorno." *Environmental Ethics* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 45–56.

Taubes, Jacob. *The Political Theology of Paul*. Translated by Dana Hollander. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004.

Thiem, Yannik. "Benjamin's Messianic Metaphysics of Transience." In *Walter Benjamin and Theology*, edited by Colby Dickinson and Stéphane Symons, 21–55. New York: Fordham University, 2016.

———. "Theological-Political Ruins: Walter Benjamin, Sovereignty, and the Politics of Skeletal Eschatology." *Law and Critique* 24, no. 3 (2013): 295–315.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: World Heritage Convention. "Cultural Landscapes." Accessed May 29, 2020. http://whc.unesco.org/en/culturallandscape/#1.

Vince, Gaia. *Adventures in the Anthropocene: A Journey to the Heart of the Planet We Made*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2014.

Vogel, Steven. *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory*. Albany, New York: State University of New York, 1996.

———. *Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2016.

Walton, Kendall L. "Categories of Art." *The Philosophical Review* 79, no. 3 (1970): 334–67.

Watts, Vanessa. "Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency Amongst Humans and Non-Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European World Tour!)." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 1 (2013): 20–34.

Weigel, Sigrid. *Walter Benjamin: Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*. Translated by Chadwick Truscott Smith. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013.

Whyman, Tom. "Understanding Adorno on 'Natural-History.'" *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 24, no. 4 (2016): 452–72.

Whyte, Kyle. "Climate Change: An Unprecedentedly Old Catastrophe." Biopolitical Philosophy, January 16, 2019. https://biopoliticalphilosophy.com/2019/01/16/climate-change-an-unprecedentedly-old-catastrophe/.

———. "Is It Colonial Deja Vu? Indigenous Peoples and Climate Injustice." In *Humanities for the Environment: Integrating Knowledges, Forging New Constellations of Practice*, edited by Joni Adamson and Michael Davis, 88–104. New York: Earthscan Publications (Routledge), 2017.

———. "Our Ancestors' Dystopia Now: Indigenous Conservation and the Anthropocene." In *Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, edited by Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen, and Michelle Niemann, 206–15. New York: Routledge, 2017.

———. "The Roles for Indigenous People in Anthropocene Dialogues: Some Critical Notes and a Question." Inhabiting the Anthropocene, January 25, 2017. https://inhabitingtheanthropocene.com/2017/01/25/the-roles-for-indigenous-peoples-in-anthropocene-dialogues-some-critical-notes-and-a-question/.

Wilson, Ross. "Dialectical Aesthetics and the Kantian *Rettung*: On Adorno's Aesthetic Theory." *New German Critique* 35, no. 2 (104) (2008): 55–69.

Zammito, John. *Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgment*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.