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# Adorno and Reconciliation

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**Adorno and Reconciliation**

A Thesis Presented by  
Jonathan Hollingsworth  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
Honors in Philosophy

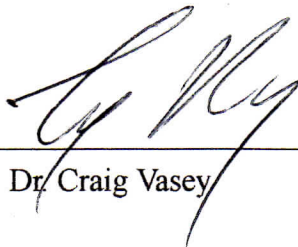
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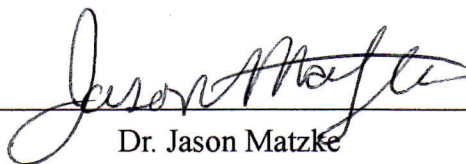
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## Introduction

The relationship between human beings and nature occupies a central place in Theodor Adorno's philosophy. Adorno was particularly critical of modern society's destructive and self-destructive relation to nature, which he saw as the culmination of a historical process set in motion by our species distinguishing itself from the natural world. Adorno speculates that human beings emancipated themselves from an oppressive state of undifferentiated unity with nature by acquiring the capacity to manipulate words and concepts. This victory was short-lived, however, for as the material environment began to appear increasingly differentiated, we started to perceive difference and otherness as a threat to our survival. The claim I advance in this paper is that, for Adorno, modernity can be read as a sort of unwitting retreat back into a state of undifferentiated nature. Chapters 1 and 2 find textual support for this claim through an analysis of Adorno's critique of modern institutions and practices that impose unity on nature's diversity. By subsuming all of nature under universal laws, abstract mathematical formulae, and totalizing conceptual schemas, human beings have reduced nature to a static, unchanging thing that exists exclusively for our own benefit.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore Adorno's understanding of the relation between the domination of human beings by other human beings and human beings' domination of nature. Adorno argues that our efforts to dominate nature are so all-encompassing that we ourselves have become the objects of our own insatiable reductions. Under the conditions that characterize late capitalist society, individuals are reduced to commensurable units of value. Society reifies individuals, expunging their idiosyncrasies and suppressing their spontaneous tendencies by subsuming them under abstract exchange relations. Since individuals have been pressed into rigid, identical molds

that prevent them from differentiating themselves in any meaningful way, society now resembles undifferentiated nature.

Chapter 3 also introduces the concept of reconciliation between human beings and nature. For Adorno, reconciliation would neither be the undifferentiated unity of human beings and nature nor their hostile antithesis. Rather, it would be a state in which highly individuated persons and things would be free to communicate their differences without the threat of domination. Chapter 4 evaluates a prominent criticism raised against Adorno by Jürgen Habermas, who argues that the idea of reconciliation between human beings and nature is untenable. Specifically, Habermas charges Adorno with making the impossible demand that our species enter into a communicative relationship with nature. In addition, Habermas takes issue with Adorno's claim that human liberation depends on the simultaneous liberation of nature from human beings. In response to these criticisms, I argue that while Adorno certainly does allude to the possibility of communication between humans and nature, his notion of communication encompasses more than just speech-relations. Finally, I argue that by linking the domination of human beings with the domination of nature, Adorno is able to account for a fundamental source of social domination that Habermas's theory cannot adequately address.

## Chapter 1

In this chapter I examine Adorno's views on the historical trajectory of our species' conceptual and practical relations with nature. After presenting Adorno's speculative account of the emergence of human reason, I explore the differences between what Adorno calls the "mythic" stage of human history and its successor, the "enlightenment" stage. Finally, I conclude by suggesting that the level of conceptual and practical control exerted over nature in modernity has been achieved at the expense of a more nuanced understanding of the natural world.

Adorno speculates that before our species acquired the capacity to discriminate between objects using words and concepts, human beings were utterly in thrall to "the overpowering wholeness and undifferentiatedness of nature."<sup>1</sup> The state of nature, as Adorno describes it, was a fearsome condition in which human beings had not yet distinguished themselves from their environment. Rejecting the romantic notion that our ancestors enjoyed an original state of blissful unity with the natural world, Adorno contends that before "the subject constituted itself, undifferentiatedness was the terror of the blind nexus of nature."<sup>2</sup> While it is doubtful that Adorno actually thought nature was an undifferentiated whole at the time human beings gained consciousness, he nonetheless took seriously the idea that nature preponderated over consciousness until our rational faculties evolved sufficiently to attenuate that preponderance. In a section from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* entitled "Man and Beast," Adorno and his co-author, Max Horkheimer, likely had our ancestors in mind when they described the nightmarish plight of

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno, Rolf Tiedemann, Robert Hullot-Kentor, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 70.

<sup>2</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "On Subject and Object," in idem, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 246.

animals:

The world of animals is without concepts. There is no word to hold fast the identical in the flux of phenomena, the same genus in the succession of specimens, the same thing in changing situations. [...] There is nothing in the flux that could be defined as lasting, and yet everything remains one and the same, because there is no fixed knowledge of the past and no clear prospect into the future. [...] The animal's experience of duration, uninterrupted by liberating thought, is dreary and depressive. To escape the gnawing emptiness of existence some resistance is needed, and its backbone is language. [...] The best days flit past in a bustling medley like a dream, which the animal can hardly distinguish from waking in any case. It is without the clear division between play and seriousness, the happy awakening from nightmare to reality.<sup>3</sup>

Adorno conjectures that our rational faculties “came into being in the first place as an instrument of self-preservation, that of reality-testing.”<sup>4</sup> Concepts aided in our struggle for survival, enabling us to seize “the identical in the flux of phenomena.”<sup>5</sup> Adorno compares the concept to a material tool, which “is held fast [...] in different situations and thereby separates the world, as something chaotic, multiple, and disparate, from that which is known, single, and identical.”<sup>6</sup> On this view, the concept of the self, as something distinct from nature, is a product of our historical efforts to emancipate ourselves from the chaotic entanglement of natural existence.

According to Adorno, human beings only began to regard themselves as fundamentally separate from nature once science and technology replaced magic and ritual as the dominant

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<sup>3</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 205.

<sup>4</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” in idem, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 272.

<sup>5</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 205.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

modes of apprehending the world. In the mythic stage of human history, the world was divided between animate and inanimate things. Animate natural things were thought to have souls or spirits. Mysterious, unpredictable, and heterogenous, the spirits found in nature were approached with reverence by magicians who tried to placate them by making appeasing gestures. The relation of the magician to the object of his ritual was one of kinship; by imitating the behavior of animals or the movement of the wind and the rain, the magician expressed his affinity with nature even as he feared the spirits he sought to influence. In *Against Nature*, Steven Vogel notes that this form of ritual worship also had “a secret and technological goal: humans of the mythic era engaged in mimetic acts so that the crops could be encouraged to grow, the hunt could be successful, the illness could be cured.”<sup>7</sup>

Adorno contends that these practices did not die out simply because human beings found more effective ways of bending nature to their will. Instead, myth fell victim to the emergence of a new kind of relation to nature in which nature was sought to be controlled “without the illusion of immanent powers or hidden properties.”<sup>8</sup> Adorno refers to this shift as a transition from “myth” to “enlightenment.” In his introduction to Adorno’s work, Simon Jarvis notes that the term “enlightenment” is used by Adorno to designate “a series of related intellectual and practical operations which are presented as demythologizing, secularizing, or disenchanting some mythical, religious or magical representation of the world.”<sup>9</sup> Enlightenment, whose

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<sup>7</sup> Steven Vogel, *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 52.

<sup>8</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 24.

program aims “at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters,”<sup>10</sup> detected fear in the old myths and banished them accordingly. Any beliefs that regarded nature as mysterious, unpredictable, and heterogeneous were relegated to the realm of superstition.

As the enlightenment worldview gained dominance, “[m]imetic, mythical, and metaphysical forms of behavior were successively regarded as stages of world history which had been left behind, and the idea of reverting to them held the terror that the self would be changed back into the mere nature from which it had extricated itself with unspeakable exertions.”<sup>11</sup> To ensure that human beings never lapse back into nature, enlightenment hypostasizes an unbridgeable split between subject and object. In opposition to myth, which sought knowledge of nature by participating with nature, enlightenment pursues its knowledge of nature in reverse. Enlightenment objectifies nature, holding it at a distance and reducing it to something wholly intelligible, predictable, and homogenous. “Nature, stripped of qualities, becomes the [...] stuff of mere classification.”<sup>12</sup>

To summarize, Adorno’s account of history can be divided into three stages. In the first stage, nature appeared to human beings as an undifferentiated and terrifying power. Not only were we unable to make out anything identifiable in the flux of phenomena, we were equally incapable of distinguishing ourselves in any meaningful way from each other and from the environing natural world. In the second stage, nature no longer appeared to human beings as a

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<sup>10</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.



monolithic power, but rather as a multitude of spirits indwelling all animate things. As Adorno notes, neither the unity of nature “nor the unity of the subject was presupposed by magical incantation.”<sup>13</sup> The rituals of the magicians “were directed at the wind, the rain, the snake outside or the demon inside the sick person.”<sup>14</sup> The magician who “practiced magic was not single or identical”; instead, he “changed with the cult masks which represented the multiplicity of spirits.”<sup>15</sup> In the third and current stage of history, all of nature, animate and inanimate alike, “is submerged in one and the same matter,”<sup>16</sup> while “the old diffuse notions of the magical heritage” are replaced “by conceptual unity.”<sup>17</sup> The barely conscious purpose of magic to control nature in the interest of human desires is fulfilled by enlightenment on a telluric scale: “The single distinction between man’s own existence and reality swallows up all others. Without regard for differences, the world is made subject to man.”<sup>18</sup>

Thus, according to Adorno, the enlightenment program aims above all at the domination of nature, which it pursues via abstract unification. In the following chapter I consider Adorno’s claim that enlightenment’s tendency toward unity has had disastrous consequences not only for the earth but also for the human beings who inhabit it.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 5.

## Chapter 2

In this chapter I explore Adorno's view that conceptual and practical forms of domination are inextricably linked. I also consider the ways in which enlightenment's unifying tendency not only adversely affects our understanding of ourselves and of nature, but also limits our capacity to experience nature and other human beings qualitatively. Finally, I conclude by arguing that enlightenment, in its attempts to escape from undifferentiated nature, has merely recreated a state of undifferentiatedness.

As I noted in the previous chapter, enlightenment opposes itself to myth by establishing a rigid distinction between subject and object. According to enlightenment, myth came dangerously close to lapsing back into undifferentiated nature. By engaging in mimetic practices, the magician risked losing his identity of self through "identification with the other."<sup>19</sup> Adorno, however, disagrees with this assessment. Although the magician's task was impersonation, "he did not claim to be made in the image of the invisible power[s]"<sup>20</sup> with whom he engaged. "The world of magic still retained differences"<sup>21</sup> even as it recognized the affinity between human beings and nature. In contrast to myth, enlightenment supplants the "manifold affinities between existing things"<sup>22</sup> with the single relationship between the subject and its absolute opposite, the object.

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<sup>19</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 6.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

If enlightenment's ultimate goal is to bring everything under a conceptual unity, then it would appear that the subject-object distinction only frustrates that goal, for the distinction itself implies that the object will always remain that irreducible "other" which lies outside the subject's grasp. Adorno suggests, however, that the subject-object distinction actually serves the purposes of unification: in thought, the subject distances itself from the object so that it may absorb the object more completely. "Once radically separated from the object," he writes, the "subject reduces the object to itself; subject swallows object."<sup>23</sup> For Adorno, the subject can be said to have swallowed the object when it subsumes the object under a concept without leaving a remainder. The object then becomes identical to its concept, and, by extension, to thought itself. Adorno declares that this maneuver "has its primal history in the pre-mental, the animal life of the species."<sup>24</sup> The urge to dominate nature conceptually is nothing more than "the belly turned mind."<sup>25</sup> Humanity's once "modest hunting ground" expands in modernity "to the unified cosmos, in which nothing exists but prey."<sup>26</sup>

It is important to note, as does Alison Stone in her essay "Adorno and the Disenchantment of Nature," that for Adorno, conceptual and practical domination are inextricably linked. The natural sciences, for example, often treat natural things as mere

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<sup>23</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "On Subject and Object," in idem, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 246.

<sup>24</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton. (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), 22.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>26</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 6.

“instantiations of universal types” in order “to work out how to control and manipulate the types and, in turn, the things.”<sup>27</sup> According to Adorno, our knowledge of nature is now “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.”<sup>28</sup> As Deborah Cook notes in *Adorno on Nature*, Adorno even goes so far as to suggest that the concept of causality, which “acts as a principle of unity, a single law for all nature,” is only found in nature when we attempt to control it.<sup>29</sup> Adorno questions the extent to which science can really understand nature if what science seeks to learn from nature is how to dominate it.

Adorno also notes that when we discover aspects of nature that defy our control and elude our understanding, we immediately subordinate them under an abstract mathematical schema. He explains: “When in mathematics the unknown becomes the unknown quantity in an equation, it is made into something long familiar before any value has been assigned. Nature, before and after quantum theory, is what can be registered mathematically; even what cannot be assimilated, the insoluble and irrational, is fenced in by mathematical theorems.”<sup>30</sup>

Quantification is enlightenment’s primary mode of demythologization. For enlightenment,

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<sup>27</sup> Alison Stone, “Adorno and the Disenchantment of Nature,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 32, no. 2 (2006): 241.

<sup>28</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 176.

<sup>29</sup> Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 72.

<sup>30</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 18.

“anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion.”<sup>31</sup> Pulling everything into the circle it draws around itself, enlightenment establishes the “identity of everything with everything [...] by relating every existing thing to every other.”<sup>32</sup> This totalizing logic, which “makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities,”<sup>33</sup> encompasses not only nature but also human beings. As a result, we become the objects of our own insatiable reductions.

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno observes that the principle of identification, according to which society organizes external nature, is similar to the principle upon which society organizes itself internally:

The exchange principle, the reduction of human labor to the abstract universal concept of average working hours, is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification. Exchange is the social model of the principle, and without the principle there would be no exchange; it is through exchange that non-identical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical. The spread of the principle imposes on the whole world an obligation to become identical, to become total.<sup>34</sup>

According to Adorno, the exchange principle “equally deforms men and things”<sup>35</sup> by reducing them to commensurable units of value. When virtually all of nature and most aspects of human

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>34</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), 146, trans. mod.

<sup>35</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 228.

life have been commodified, life begins to take on that “dreary and depressive”<sup>36</sup> quality which Adorno attributes to animal consciousness. He illustrates this point in *Minima Moralia*:

Hebbel, in a surprising entry in his diary, asks what takes away “life’s magic in later years.” “It is because in all the brightly-colored contorted marionettes, we see the revolving cylinder that sets them in motion, and because for this very reason the captivating variety of life is reduced to wooden monotony. A child seeing the tightrope-walkers singing, the pipers playing, the girls fetching water, the coachmen driving, thinks all this is happening for the joy of doing so; he can’t imagine that these people also have to eat and drink, go to bed and get up again. We however, know what is at stake.” Namely, earning a living, which commandeers all those activities as mere means, reduces them to interchangeable, abstract labor-time. The quality of things ceases to be their essence and becomes the accidental appearance of their value.<sup>37</sup>

The exchange principle not only “disenchants” the world by eliminating qualities and transforming them into quantities, it also damages “the human capacity for experience, which tends to revert to that of amphibians.”<sup>38</sup> Wearing by the false variety of a world in which even our activities have been commodified, the human sensorium “steep[s] all in gray, disappointed by the deceptive claim of qualities still to be there at all.”<sup>39</sup>

Adorno declares that the exchange principle “mars all perceptions”<sup>40</sup> by relating “all phenomena, everything we encounter, to a unified reference point and [...] subsum[ing] it under

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<sup>36</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 205.

<sup>37</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 227.

<sup>38</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 28.

<sup>39</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 227.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

a self-identical, rigid unity.”<sup>41</sup> Although we inhabit, as Cook notes, “a world that literally teems with particular things,” the uniformity “of nature is also something ‘real’ because natural things have now been pressed into the mold of universal laws, totalizing conceptual schema and homogenizing exchange relations.”<sup>42</sup> Human beings have fared no better than nature in this respect. Not only has our capacity to perceive quality and to make qualitative distinctions started to atrophy, the potential for our own self-individuation has been seriously undermined by economic forces that demand total integration. To survive under these conditions, individuals must mold themselves entirely to the economic apparatus; according to Adorno, they are “forced into real conformity.”<sup>43</sup> Shrinking “to the nodal points of conventional reactions and the modes of operation objectively expected of them,”<sup>44</sup> individuals internalize their own reification. They “define themselves [...] only as things, statistical elements, successes or failures. Their criterion is self-preservation, successful or unsuccessful adaptation to the objectivity of their function and the schemata assigned to it.”<sup>45</sup> Through the coercive logic of identity and exchange, “which encompasses all relationships and impulses” in totalized society, “human beings are being turned back into precisely what the developmental law of society, the principle of the self, had opposed: mere examples of the species, identical to one another [...] within the compulsively controlled

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<sup>41</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 114.

<sup>42</sup> Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 157.

<sup>43</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 9.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22.

collectivity.”<sup>46</sup>

Passages like these seem to suggest that human beings have already lapsed back into undifferentiated nature. Indeed, Adorno asserts that our “brutal, total, standardizing society arrests all differentiation.”<sup>47</sup> In its compulsion to make non-identical things identical by imposing “on the whole world an obligation [...] to become total,”<sup>48</sup> enlightenment has become the actualization of its own worst fears. As I noted in the previous chapter, Adorno speculates that the capacity to use words and concepts enabled human beings to seize the identical and escape the chaotic entanglement of natural existence. Enlightenment is the identifying function of thought taken to its extreme; the “identity of everything with everything”<sup>49</sup> is a regression toward undifferentiated unity.

There is also another, even more radical sense in which enlightenment threatens to bring about an undifferentiated world. “There is a universal feeling,” Adorno writes, “a universal fear, that our progress in controlling nature may increasingly help to weave the very calamity it is supposed to protect us from.”<sup>50</sup> In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno predicts that our instrumental relation to nature will reach such destructive heights that it will result in the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>47</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Sociology and Psychology,” trans. Irving Wohlfarth, *New Left Review* 47 (1968): 95.

<sup>48</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), 146.

<sup>49</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 8.

<sup>50</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), 67.



catastrophic annihilation of nature as a whole:

The human capacity for destruction promises to become so great that—once this species has exhausted itself—a *tabula rasa* will have been created. Either the human species will tear itself to pieces or it will take all the earth’s fauna and flora down with it, and if the earth is still young enough, the whole procedure—to vary a famous dictum—will have to start again on a much lower level.<sup>51</sup>

Today, we face an additional environmental crisis that Adorno, lecturing in 1959, was only just beginning to witness when he observed that “civilization has driven the wildest and most exotic animals into the most inaccessible jungles.”<sup>52</sup> Enlightenment not only imposes conceptual unity on the diversity of external nature, in many cases it is actively eliminating that diversity. As Cook notes, our unending exploitation of the earth has led to “the extinction of entire species of plant and animal life, [...] the destruction of natural habitats, and the death of more than one hundred areas in the oceans.”<sup>53</sup> Through direct and indirect intervention, human beings are increasingly and irreversibly eradicating nature’s diversity.

The human species, which freed itself from the oppressive unity of nature through its capacity to recognize difference, soon became hostile toward difference, and now tries to establish an oppressive unity on its own terms. Indeed, Adorno contends that by repaying domination with domination, “mind’s identity-consciousness” has merely prolonged “the

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<sup>51</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 186.

<sup>52</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 176.

<sup>53</sup> Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 105.

captivating spell of the old undifferentiatedness.”<sup>54</sup> Today, we dominate nature in thought only to dominate it more thoroughly in practice. In the domain of science, natural things are treated as mere instances of more general kinds. In the domain of economics, natural things are equated with their exchange value in the capitalist marketplace. In both cases, nature is turned into something to be controlled and manipulated exclusively for our own benefit. These distorted ideas impoverish our experience of nature, ourselves, and other human beings by diminishing our capacity to perceive quality and to make qualitative distinctions. Society, which rules nature via the principles of identity and exchange, is itself ruled over by those same principles. The obligation to become total keeps “subjects from being subjects and degrades subjectivity itself to a mere object.”<sup>55</sup> According to Adorno, “the complete reification of the world” has brought us one step closer to “an additional catastrophic event caused by human beings, in which nature has been wiped out and after which nothing grows anymore.”<sup>56</sup>

It is important to note that Adorno does not adopt a “back to nature” position in response to the crisis of enlightenment, nor does he advocate a return to myth. Although he seems to suggest that the possibility of a right relation to nature was expressed in mimetic practices, he also acknowledges that the seeds of domination were already contained in myth. The following chapter considers Adorno’s non-regressive alternative to enlightenment.

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<sup>54</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “On Subject and Object,” in idem, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 247.

<sup>55</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), 178.

<sup>56</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Trying to Understand *Endgame*,” in idem, *Notes to Literature II*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 245.

### Chapter 3

In this chapter I explore Adorno's claim that the domination of human beings by other human beings is inextricably linked with human beings' domination of nature. I also offer an interpretation of why Adorno thinks the domination of nature is wrong. Finally, I examine Adorno's speculative account of what a state of reconciliation between humans and nature might look like and what would be required for such reconciliation to take place.

Adorno's understanding of the relation between the domination of nature and the domination of human beings emerges most clearly through his critique of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. According to Adorno, Marx and Engels failed to extend their critique of domination *within* society to society's *external* domination of nature. Indeed, Marx viewed the level of mastery over nature achieved by capitalism as a largely positive development that would continue into communism. Praising capitalism for tearing down the idolatry of nature, Marx asserts that with the emergence of capitalism, nature "becomes for the first time simply an object for mankind, purely a matter of utility; it ceases to be recognized as a power in its own right; and the theoretical knowledge of its independent laws appears only as a stratagem designed to subdue it to human requirements, whether as the object of consumption or as the means of production."<sup>57</sup>

In his lectures on *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno questions whether a liberated society, such as the one Marx had in mind, could continue its ruthless domination of nature without relations of domination reentering society:

In Marx the principle of the *domination of nature* is actually accepted quite naïvely. According to the Marxian way of seeing, there is something of a change in the relations

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<sup>57</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, in idem, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 398.

of domination between people—they are supposed to come to an end, that is, such domination should disappear—but the unconditional domination of nature by human beings is not affected by this, so that we might say that the image of a classless society in Marx has something of the quality of a gigantic joint-stock company for the exploitation of nature, as Horkheimer once formulated it. [...] If there is only *one* truth, it is not possible to criticize radically the principle of domination on the one hand, while unreservedly acquiescing in it in an undialectical manner on the other. If it is the case—as Marx and Engels taught, although I am by no means sure that it is the case—that domination over external nature called for societies in which domination prevailed through the millennia because things wouldn't have worked otherwise—and that this situation is supposed now to be radically transformed all of a sudden, then you need a very strong faith (to put it mildly) to imagine that the forms of domination of nature should persist [...] *without* forms of domination making their appearance [in society]. [...] [F]or a seriously liberated vision of society that includes the relationship between man and nature, the relation to the domination of nature has to be changed if it is not constantly to reproduce itself in the internal forms of society.<sup>58</sup>

For Adorno, society cannot truly free itself from domination unless it addresses its own domination of nature. This is because Adorno views history and nature as unendingly entwined. History occurs as we engage with the natural world in productive and reproductive activities to ensure our own survival. Thus nature, from the very start, is pulled into the orbit of history. Adorno is skeptical that a mode of production whose goal is the absolute domination of nature could accomplish its aim without the exploitation of human beings. The domination of nature is, by definition, a totalizing, never-ending project; it implies a situation in which individuals are permanently shackled to the economic apparatus. A mode of production that, on the other hand, sets as its goal the satisfaction of human needs, would not aim to exert greater and greater control over nature. In other words, it would aim to control nature only partially, as needed, but not totally.

At times, Marx speaks as though he wants the best of both worlds. Although he

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<sup>58</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a Lecture Course 1965/1966*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 58-59.

envisioned a society in which individuals would be free to satisfy their material needs with the smallest possible expenditure of time and labor, he also viewed the domination of nature as a legitimate undertaking to be carried out in an unfettered capacity under communism. For Adorno, however, human freedom and the domination of nature are irreconcilable because the latter implies universal compulsion. In fact, Adorno speculates that if human beings were truly liberated from fear, hunger, and other ills, we might even choose to abandon the project of dominating nature. Our relation to nature would then undergo a qualitative change, as Adorno suggests in *Minima Moralia*:

Perhaps the true society will grow tired of development and, out of freedom, leave possibilities unused, instead of storming under a confused compulsion to the conquest of strange stars. A mankind which no longer knows want will begin to have an inkling of the delusory, futile nature of all the arrangements hitherto made in order to escape want, which used wealth to reproduce want on a larger scale. Enjoyment itself would be affected, just as its present framework is inseparable from operating, planning, having one's way, subjugating. *Rien faire comme une bête* [Doing nothing like an animal], lying on water and looking peacefully at the sky, "being, nothing else, without any further definition and fulfillment," might take the place of process, act, satisfaction, and so truly keep the promise of dialectical logic that it would culminate in its origin. None of the abstract concepts comes closer to fulfilled utopia than that of eternal peace.<sup>59</sup>

For Adorno, reconciliation "would lie in a peace achieved between human beings as well as between them and their Other."<sup>60</sup> I will return to this idea at the end of the chapter. For now, it is important to note that a central component of Adorno's understanding of reconciliation is the idea that the possibility of soothing our ferocity toward nature begins with the fulfillment of human needs.

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<sup>59</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 156-157.

<sup>60</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "On Subject and Object," in idem, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 247.

In the course of this discussion of the relation between the domination of nature and the domination of human beings, I may have given the impression that Adorno thinks the domination of nature is wrong only insofar as it adversely affects the potential for human emancipation. Although he certainly holds that “institutions and practices of domination [...] have always rebounded against society from the subjugation of nature,”<sup>61</sup> there is also reason to think that Adorno believes the act of dominating nature is inherently wrong. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno asserts that nature has “a purposefulness that is other than that posited by humanity,” a purposefulness “that was undermined by the rise of natural science.”<sup>62</sup> Similar to the way society reifies individuals, expunging their idiosyncrasies and suppressing their spontaneous tendencies by subsuming them under abstract exchange relations, science prevents nature from developing according to its own inner dynamic by reducing it to a mere object that exists exclusively for human benefit. Since nature “has been repressed and drawn into the dynamic of history,”<sup>63</sup> Adorno claims that nature “does not yet exist.”<sup>64</sup>

In “Adorno and the Disenchantment of Nature,” Alison Stone sheds further light on why Adorno objects to the domination of nature:

To dominate a being, for the Frankfurt School generally, is to “prescribe” to it “goals and purposes and means of striving for and attaining them” which differ from those that the being would spontaneously adopt. Living natural beings, then, are dominated when they

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<sup>61</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 32.

<sup>62</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno, Rolf Tiedemann, Robert Hullot-Kentor, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 384.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

are forced out of the courses of development and behavior which they would spontaneously pursue. Calling this “domination,” not merely “control,” implies that it is undesirable; this, for Adorno, is because living beings *suffer* (*leiden*) from having their spontaneous tendencies thwarted.<sup>65</sup>

Stone rightly notes that Adorno is also concerned with the domination of non-living natural things. But on this point, she raises an important question:

[A]ssuming that non-living things cannot suffer, how can they be dominated? Presumably, Adorno believes that transforming non-living things out of their original forms (e.g. when stone is made into a pillar) approximates to the activity of controlling living beings, and, correspondingly, then when we transform non-living things we inflict upon them a condition which approximates to that of suffering in living beings, and which may therefore also be called “suffering,” in an extended sense.<sup>66</sup>

I believe Stone is mistaken in this regard. First of all (as Stone herself acknowledges in a footnote), Adorno maintains that even “wild” nature “is indelibly marked by human efforts to manage, regulate, and demarcate it.”<sup>67</sup> In other words, even those areas of nature that have been “left alone” are themselves the result of a historical process. Thus, it is unlikely that Adorno objects to nature being taken out of its “original form,” or, for that matter, that he thinks nature’s “original form” exists anywhere. In *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, J.M. Bernstein offers a similar reading of Adorno, noting that Adorno is intensely aware that “there is very little, if any, ‘nature’ in evidence at all; all the nature we come across has already been, inevitably, socially mediated.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Alison Stone, “Adorno and the Disenchantment of Nature,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 32, no. 2 (2006): 233.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 233-234.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>68</sup> J.M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 189.

Secondly, Stone fails to consider passages in Adorno where he complains that nature has not been modified *enough*. One such passage appears in *Minima Moralia*:

The shortcoming of the American landscape is not so much, as romantic illusion would have it, the absence of historical memories, as that it bears no traces of the human hand. This applies not only to the lack of arable land, the uncultivated woods often no higher than scrub, but above all to the roads. These are always inserted directly in the landscape, and the more impressively smooth and broad they are, the more unrelated and violent their gleaming track appears against its wild, overgrown surroundings. They are expressionless. Just as they know no marks of foot or wheel, no soft paths along their edges as a transition to the vegetation, no trails leading off into the valley, so they are without the mild, soothing, un-angular quality of things that have felt the touch of hands or their immediate implements. It is as if no one had ever passed their hand over the landscape's hair. It is uncomfortable and comfortless. And it is perceived in a corresponding way. For what the hurrying eye has seen merely from the car it cannot retain, and the vanishing landscape leaves no more traces behind than it bears upon itself.<sup>69</sup>

The act of mindlessly blasting streets into the landscape constitutes a form of domination because it receives no input from the landscape itself. According to Adorno, then, human beings dominate non-living nature when we seek to suppress its particularity, and, alternatively, when we fail to *bring forth* its particularity.

Interestingly, Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory* compares regions of untouched and undifferentiated nature to industrial landscapes in which nature has all but been drowned out by total mediation:

[N]ature 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 outer space will someday be clear. [...] [T]echnique is said to have ravished nature, yet under transformed relations of production it would just as easily be

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<sup>69</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 48.



able to assist nature and on this sad earth help it to attain what perhaps it wants.<sup>70</sup>

For Adorno, unmediated nature is just as ugly (and perhaps just as terrifying) as nature that has been thoroughly mediated. Human beings, in fear of undifferentiated nature, have in many cases merely recreated that nature in our attempts to escape it. Between the two extremes of total mediation and total unmediation lies the possibility of reconciliation, a state in which human beings and nature would be free to mutually mediate each other.

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno speaks approvingly of conscious attempts to work with nature rather than against it:

In technique, violence toward nature is [...] immediately apparent. It could be transformed only by a reorientation of technical forces of production that would direct these forces not only according to desired aims but equally according to the nature that is to be technically formed. After the abolition of scarcity, the liberation of the forces of production could extend into other dimensions than exclusively that of the quantitative growth of production. There are intimations of this when functional buildings are adapted to the forms and contours of the landscape, as well as when building materials have originated from and been integrated into the surrounding landscape, as for instance with châteaux and castles. What is called a “cultural landscape” [Kulturlandschaft] is a beautiful model of this possibility.<sup>71</sup>

Here again, Adorno suggests that reconciliation between humans and nature has as its precondition the fulfillment of human needs. Only then would we cease to “shout over” nature in our destructive attempts to ensure our own self-preservation. “The aims posited [by a purely instrumental relation to nature] are unreconciled with what nature, however mediated it may be, wants to say on its own.”<sup>72</sup> Adorno claims that when nature is treated not merely as “an object of

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<sup>70</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno, Rolf Tiedemann, Robert Hullot-Kentor, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 93.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

action,” but rather as a participant, “nature itself imparts expression, whether that of melancholy, peace, or something else.”<sup>73</sup>

Reconciliation also implies a radical change at the level of our conceptual apprehension of individual objects. Here, Adorno contrasts the “hurrying eye” with the “lingering eye.” The hurrying eye casts a violent look upon the object by unreflectively absorbing the object in thought. The impulse that motivates the hurrying eye is, for Adorno, akin to a sexual craving, in that it “makes everything an object of action and therewith equal.”<sup>74</sup> The hurrying eye is unable to make distinctions; it “reduce[s] everything in its path as unceremoniously to its basic essence as do soldiers the women of a captured town.”<sup>75</sup> The lingering eye, on the other hand, casts a “long, contemplative look that fully discloses people and things.”<sup>76</sup> In contemplation, the urge to possess the object is deflected: “[H]e who contemplates does not absorb the object into himself.”<sup>77</sup> Instead, the contemplator furnishes “a distanced nearness”<sup>78</sup> to the object that allows for communication between them to take place. Unlike the hurrying eye, which obliterates the object’s particularity by subordinating it under a category, the lingering eye yields to the object and seeks to “do justice to the object’s qualitative moments.”<sup>79</sup> If “thought really yielded to the

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>74</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 89.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>79</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), 43.

object,” Adorno writes, “if its attention were on the object, not on its category, the very objects would start talking under the lingering eye.”<sup>80</sup>

In his essay “On Subject and Object,” Adorno offers a tentative formulation of what reconciliation between subject and object might look like:

Were speculation concerning the state of reconciliation allowed, then it would be impossible to conceive that state as either the undifferentiated unity of subject and object or their hostile antithesis: rather it would be the communication of what is differentiated. Only then would the concept of communication, as an objective concept, come into its own. The present concept is so shameful because it betrays what is best—the potential for agreement between human beings and things—to the idea of imparting information between subjects according to the exigencies of subjective reason. In its proper place, even epistemologically, the relationship of subject and object would lie in a peace achieved between human beings as well as between them and their Other. Peace is a state of differentiation without domination, with the differentiated participating in each other.<sup>81</sup>

Adorno speaks cautiously about reconciliation because he is convinced that the logic of identity and exchange is so ingrained in our thinking that it mars even our attempts to think beyond it.

For Adorno, communication between subject and object *is* obstructed by the prevailing mode of thought. Under these conditions, it is not possible to conceive of reconciliation in concrete terms.

Any attempt to do so would be premature and one-sided; it would exclude the object from the very start and therefore be self-defeating.

Reconciliation “between human beings as well as between them and their Other”<sup>82</sup> lies in a peace that can only be achieved once the domination of nature is brought to an end. Under a transformed mode of production, individuals would be liberated from the compulsion of self-

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

<sup>81</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “On Subject and Object,” in idem, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 247.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 247.

preservation and be free to abandon the project of dominating nature. The totalizing logic of identity and exchange would then begin to lose its grip on both our cognition and our social organization. Reconciliation would release the unique particularity of individual things and enable them to develop spontaneously. Dispensing with invariant concepts of humanity and nature, we would learn to conceive of ourselves and the environing natural world only through the most “extreme form of differentiation, individuation.”<sup>83</sup> Once a freer intercourse has been established between highly individuated persons and things, our primal fear of otherness might finally be assuaged. “The reconciled condition,” Adorno writes, “would not be the philosophical imperialism of annexing the alien. Instead, its happiness would lie in the fact that the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different, beyond the heterogenous and beyond that which is one’s own.”<sup>84</sup>

In this paper I have attempted to explicate Adorno’s understanding of our current situation and highlight the salient features of his conception of reconciliation. In the final chapter I evaluate a prominent criticism raised against Adorno by Jürgen Habermas, who argues that the idea of reconciliation between human beings and nature is untenable.

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<sup>83</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Progress,” in idem, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 151.

<sup>84</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), 191.

## Chapter 4

Shortly after Adorno's death in 1969, Jürgen Habermas published an essay criticizing Adorno's conception of reconciliation. In the first section of this chapter I present Habermas's charges against Adorno and explicate his alternative understanding of reconciliation. In the second section I offer a response to Habermas's criticisms using the ideas developed in the previous chapters. Ultimately, I argue that Habermas's theory cannot address certain issues concerning the relation between the domination of nature and the domination of human beings.

In "Theodor Adorno: The Primal History of Subjectivity—Self-Affirmation Gone Wild," Habermas rightly notes that Adorno "entertained doubts that the emancipation of humanity is possible without the resurrection of nature."<sup>85</sup> As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Adorno thinks human liberation depends on the simultaneous liberation of nature from human beings. So, when Adorno speaks of "a peace achieved between human beings as well as between them and their Other,"<sup>86</sup> he is calling for what Habermas terms "universal reconciliation."<sup>87</sup> For Habermas, universal reconciliation is simply not possible because it assumes "a categorically different science and technology."<sup>88</sup> This categorically different science and technology, while freeing nature from human control, would undermine our capacity to provide for ourselves. If

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<sup>85</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Theodor Adorno: The Primal History of Subjectivity—Self-Affirmation Gone Wild (1969)," in idem, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 107.

<sup>86</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "On Subject and Object," in idem, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 247.

<sup>87</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Theodor Adorno: The Primal History of Subjectivity—Self-Affirmation Gone Wild (1969)," in idem, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 108.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

“avoidable social repression” is to be eliminated, Habermas contends, then “we cannot refuse the exploitation of nature that is necessary for survival.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, Habermas sees no acceptable alternative to our instrumental relation to nature.

In addition to rejecting the possibility of a new science and technology, Habermas objects to the idea that nature is something that can be dominated at all. As Steven Vogel notes in *Against Nature*, Habermas holds that nature can neither be dominated nor liberated because such concepts are applicable only to relations between subjects capable of expressing their interests through speech.<sup>90</sup> Attempting to apply the concept of reconciliation to the natural world, then, involves a category mistake. “Perhaps,” Habermas writes, “one can say that in a certain measure we ‘repress’ nature in the methodical attitude of science and technology, because we only let it ‘have a say’ in relation to our own imperatives instead of apprehending it and dealing with it from its own point of view.”<sup>91</sup> However, Habermas contends there are no means available to us to determine what nature wants. Without a rational criterion by which to critique the domination of nature, Adorno’s conception of universal reconciliation leads to a dead end. For, according to Habermas, it entails the impossible “demand that nature open up its eyes, that in the condition of reconciliation we talk with animals, plants, and rocks.”<sup>92</sup> Instead of focusing on the domination of nature, Habermas thinks critical theorists should direct their attention exclusively to matters

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>90</sup> Steven Vogel, *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 111.

<sup>91</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Theodor Adorno: The Primal History of Subjectivity—Self-Affirmation Gone Wild (1969),” in idem, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 108.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 107.

concerning the liberation of human beings. This means giving up the idea of universal reconciliation in favor of a more narrow view of reconciliation which, for Habermas, would be a state of “communication free from domination.”<sup>93</sup>

What would communication free from domination look like? In *Between Naturalism and Religion*, Habermas identifies four presuppositions of communication that must be fulfilled for an ideal speech situation to occur: (1) “no one who could make a relevant contribution [...] must be excluded,” (2) “everyone must have the same opportunity to speak to the matter at hand,” (3) individuals must be free to speak their opinion without deception or self-deception, and (4) communication must be free from coercive processes and procedures of discourse “that prevent the better argument from being raised and determining the outcome of the discussion.”<sup>94</sup>

Coercion in this case would include systematically interrupting others, preventing them (by threat of force or some other means) from taking a “no” stance, and other forms of manipulation. According to Habermas, the unavoidable presuppositions of communication provide a normative basis for the critique of domination. Since interlocutors always anticipate an ideal speech situation whenever they argue seriously, and since an ideal speech situation is a condition free from domination, a mindful observer would be alerted to conditions of domination (in the workplace, in political spaces, etc.) as soon as one of the four presuppositions of communication were violated. The observer would then be able to critique the institutions and practices that gave rise to those conditions on the grounds that they fail to live up to the norms presupposed in everyday discourse.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>94</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 50.

To summarize, Habermas takes several issues with Adorno's conception of reconciliation. First, it is not possible to end the exploitation of nature without jeopardizing our own survival. Second, human beings can only ever have an instrumental relation to nature because the alternative, a communicative relation, requires subjects capable of speech. Third, since nature is mute, we are left with no rational criterion for the liberation of nature. Finally, the counterfactual norms of an ideal speech situation provide the necessary grounds for a critique of social domination that does not depend on fruitless attempts to divine what nature wants. For Habermas, we *can* know what human beings want, not only because we can communicate our needs, but also because certain norms are imbedded in the act of communication itself:

[The ideal speech situation,] although never real, is still most intimate and familiar to us. It has the structure of a life together in communication that is free from coercion. We necessarily anticipate such a reality, at least formally, each time we want to speak what is true. The idea of truth, already implicit in the first sentence spoken, can be shaped only on the model of the idealized agreement aimed for in communication free from domination. To this extent, the truth of propositions is bound up with the intention of leading a genuine life. Critique lays claim to no more than what is implied in everyday discourse, but also to no less.<sup>95</sup>

According to Habermas, Adorno's critique of domination does lay claim to more than what is implied in everyday discourse. By including the liberation of nature as a necessary condition for the liberation of human beings, Adorno's theory sets an impossible standard for human emancipation and thereby forfeits the hope of reconciliation. For Habermas, the only way to preserve this hope is to leave nature out of the critique of domination entirely.

### **A Response to Habermas**

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<sup>95</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Theodor Adorno: The Primal History of Subjectivity—Self-Affirmation Gone Wild (1969)," in idem, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 107.



In this section I offer a response to Habermas using the ideas developed in the previous chapters. I begin by evaluating Habermas's claim that there are no alternatives to our current instrumental relation to nature. I then argue that Adorno's understanding of communication encompasses more than just speech-relations. Finally, I argue that Adorno does, in fact, provide a rational criterion for the liberation of nature, and, moreover, that it is possible to locate this criterion in certain presuppositions of communication that Habermas ignores.

In response to Habermas's claim that human beings cannot cease exploiting nature without jeopardizing our own survival, Adorno would partly agree. The satisfaction of human needs does require a certain level of control over the natural world. However, Adorno would object to the idea that all our current endeavors to control nature are absolutely necessary to our survival. Although "technology has virtually made self-preservation easy,"<sup>96</sup> we continue to dominate nature past the requirements of self-preservation because the capitalist mode of production demands unending growth. Paradoxically, our attempts to wholly dominate nature now threaten to destroy what they are meant to preserve. For Adorno, then, it is no longer in our survival interests to ruthlessly exploit the natural world.

Adorno would also object to Habermas's claim that there is no alternative to our current instrumental orientation toward nature. As I noted in the previous chapter, Adorno thinks that if human beings gave up the unconditional domination of nature, our relation to nature would undergo a qualitative change. New ways of interacting with and experiencing nature would then become available to us. In our free time, we could cultivate an aesthetic appreciation of nature

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<sup>96</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), 349.

unsullied by the corrupting logic of identity and exchange. Or, we could simply pass the time by doing nothing, like an animal, “lying on water and looking peacefully at the sky.”<sup>97</sup> Even our productive encounters with nature would be transformed. If the forces of production were free to “extend into other dimensions than exclusively that of the quantitative growth of production,”<sup>98</sup> we could satisfy our material needs while simultaneously helping nature “to attain what perhaps it wants.”<sup>99</sup>

In response to Habermas’s claim that there are no means available to us to determine what nature wants, Adorno would partly agree, but for entirely different reasons. At present, we cannot adequately discern what nature wants because nature “has been repressed and drawn into the dynamic of history.”<sup>100</sup> If nature were free to develop according to its own inner dynamic, its purposefulness might become more apparent to us. Only then would we be able to assist nature in repairing the damage done to it by our historical efforts to dominate it. In a sense, Adorno thinks the question of what nature wants is unanswerable because nature has not yet been given the chance to answer on its own behalf. Rather than dismiss the question entirely, Adorno leaves it open-ended for the same reason he offers only a tentative formulation of reconciliation. To prescribe to nature a goal would be just as premature as to deny that it has any goals at all. In both cases, determinations are made about nature that exclude any input from nature itself.

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<sup>97</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 157.

<sup>98</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno, Rolf Tiedemann, Robert Hullot-Kentor, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 64.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

To be sure, when Adorno conceives of reconciliation as “the communication of what is differentiated,”<sup>101</sup> he is not demanding, as Habermas suggests, “that nature open up its eyes, that in the condition of reconciliation we talk with animals, plants, and rocks.”<sup>102</sup> He does, however, take seriously the idea that nature expresses itself when we yield to its qualitative moments. In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno contrasts the false variety of commodities with the real variety found in nature, especially among animals. “In existing without any purpose recognizable to men,” Adorno writes, “animals hold out, as if for expression, their own names, utterly impossible to exchange. This makes them so beloved of children, their contemplation so blissful. I am a rhinoceros [*Nashorn*], signifies the shape of the rhinoceros.”<sup>103</sup> Here, the name of the rhinoceros is not simply conjured up and affixed to the animal the way a product is stamped with a brand name. Instead, the name is borrowed from the shape of the rhinoceros itself, expressing in linguistic form the animal’s unique particularity. For Adorno, the mutually expressive relation between the rhinoceros and its name hints at “the potential for agreement between human beings and things.”<sup>104</sup> Although this relation is not a communicative one in the Habermasian sense, it does point to the expressive possibilities contained in the concept of communication that cannot be reduced “to the idea of imparting information between subjects according to the exigencies of

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<sup>101</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “On Subject and Object,” in idem, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 247.

<sup>102</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Theodor Adorno: The Primal History of Subjectivity—Self-Affirmation Gone Wild (1969),” in idem, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 107.

<sup>103</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 228.

<sup>104</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “On Subject and Object,” in idem, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 247.

subjective reason.”<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, the linguistically mediated recognition that nature’s variety exists for its own sake, and not for “any purpose recognizable to men,”<sup>106</sup> gives notice that nature has “a purposefulness that is other than that posited by humanity.”<sup>107</sup>

Before responding to Habermas’s claim that Adorno lacks a rational criterion for the liberation of nature, I would like to offer a few preliminary remarks. It is important to note that Adorno and Habermas fundamentally disagree about the relation between the domination of nature and the domination of human beings. While Adorno maintains that it is neither advisable nor fully possible to separate these forms of domination from each other, Habermas attempts to do just that by locating a rational criterion for the liberation of human beings in the counter-factual norms of an ideal speech situation. These norms, which presuppose that no one capable of making a relevant contribution has been excluded, that everyone has the same opportunity to speak, that participants are free to express their opinion without deception or self-deception, and that there are no sources of coercion built into the processes and procedures of discourse, only call into question domination that does not depend on the liberation of nature. Whereas Adorno views our continued exploitative relation to nature as an impediment to social emancipation, Habermas takes the opposite view. For Habermas, social exploitation must be addressed independently of any concern for the exploitation of nature if human emancipation is to occur at all. By cleaving the liberation of human beings from the liberation of nature, Habermas believes

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>106</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 228.

<sup>107</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno, Rolf Tiedemann, Robert Hullot-Kentor, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 384.

he has found a way to circumvent the difficulties inherent in Adorno's conception of reconciliation.

I propose, however, that Habermas's refusal to acknowledge the relation between the domination of nature and the domination of human beings is a significant weakness of his theory. This refusal leads him to neglect the ways in which the domination of nature gives rise to conditions that prohibit an ideal speech situation from occurring. Communication presupposes the capacity to make qualitative distinctions, a capacity that has been seriously undermined by the principles of identity and exchange. When "all phenomena, everything we encounter," has been related "to a unified reference point and [...] subsum[ed] [...] under a self-identical, rigidity,"<sup>108</sup> our capacity to perceive difference, dissimilarity, and unlikeness begins to atrophy. As a result, our senses "steep all in gray, disappointed by the deceptive claim of qualities still to be there at all."<sup>109</sup>

Identity and exchange force human beings and natural things into real conformity by imposing "on the whole world an obligation to become identical, to become total."<sup>110</sup> As Deborah Cooks notes in *Adorno on Nature*, "natural things have [...] been pressed into the mold of universal laws, totalizing conceptual schema and homogenizing exchange relations."<sup>111</sup> Human beings have also been pressed into rigid, identical molds by economic forces that demand total

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<sup>108</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 114.

<sup>109</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 227.

<sup>110</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), 146.

<sup>111</sup> Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 157.

integration. With their idiosyncrasies expunged and their spontaneous impulses repressed, individuals “are being turned back into precisely what the developmental law of society, the principle of the self, had opposed: mere examples of the species, identical to one another [...] within the compulsively controlled collectivity.”<sup>112</sup>

Communication also presupposes that there are differentiated things to talk about; without differentiation there is no communication. According to Adorno, the principles of identity and exchange arrest all differentiation. Identity prevents differentiation by coercively aggregating dissimilar things and subordinating them under a closed conceptual schema. Exchange prevents differentiation by reducing qualitatively diverse people and things to quantifiable equivalents. Once something has been identified with a concept and stamped with an exchange value, there is supposedly nothing more of importance to be said. Thus, the principles of identity and exchange, with their homogenizing and leveling tendencies, thwart not only differentiation, but also communication, and, by extension, the possibility of reconciliation.

In response to the points above, one might argue that a liberated society could learn to compartmentalize its usage of these principles and apply them only to matters concerning the organization of external nature. This view, however, assumes that society could operate peacefully in accordance with two opposing logics: one that accommodates and encourages difference, and the other that reacts hostilely and violently toward difference. Such a view, which is not far from Habermas’s own, vastly underestimates the all-consuming character of identity and exchange. As I argued in the previous chapter, the driving force behind identity and

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<sup>112</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 29.

exchange is the domination of nature, a project that, by definition, is totalizing and never-ending. A logic bent on making all that is different and unknown the same will necessarily absorb society along with everything else. No other logic is permitted to exist.

Adorno's understanding of the relation between the domination of nature and the domination of human beings offers an important corrective to Habermas's theory. Since nature drops out of his theory almost entirely, Habermas cannot account for a fundamental source of social domination. Although he tries to isolate a sphere of human life in which a critique of social domination may be raised without entailing a critique of the domination of nature, this attempt is ultimately unsuccessful. The domination of nature *does* give rise to conditions that prohibit an ideal speech situation from occurring. If we include the presuppositions of communication identified in this section, namely, that interlocutors have the capacity to make qualitative distinctions, and, moreover, that there are differentiated things to talk about, then it is possible to critique the domination of nature on the grounds that it gives rise to conditions that fail to live up to the norms presupposed in everyday discourse. Thus, contrary to Habermas's assessment, Adorno does, in fact, provide a rational criterion for the liberation of nature.

## Conclusion

In closing, I would like to offer a few final remarks about Adorno's conception of reconciliation and how it relates to his speculative account of human history. Before our species acquired the capacity to discriminate between objects using words and concepts, human beings were trapped in an undifferentiated state of nature. Thought emerged as an act of resistance against the chaotic entanglement of the natural world, enabling us to seize "the identical in the flux of phenomena."<sup>113</sup> Given Adorno's views on identity, it may appear inconsistent for him to claim that the same identifying function of thought that is now leading humanity back into a state of undifferentiatedness was in the first place the very means by which humanity wrested itself from undifferentiated nature. However, Adorno contends that identification "is not merely [...] an ascent from the scattered phenomena to the concept of their species. It calls just as much for an ability to discriminate."<sup>114</sup> Without this ability, it would not be possible to identify anything. "[T]o aggregate what is alike means necessarily to segregate it from what is different. But what is different is the qualitative; a thinking in which we do not think qualitatively is already emasculated and at odds with itself."<sup>115</sup> It is only when identity mistakes itself as the *telos* of thought that a situation arises in which the "identity of everything with everything"<sup>116</sup> becomes

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<sup>113</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 205.

<sup>114</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), 43, trans. mod.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>116</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 8.



the absolute goal.

Differentiation has always been thought's implicit aim. And when thought resists undifferentiatedness, it resists domination. According to Adorno, the demand placed on thought at this juncture in history is to resist the domination it inflicts on both human beings and nature via identity. A thinking that resists its own unifying impulse reaches for the "utopia of the qualitative;"<sup>117</sup> it reaches for reconciliation. But reconciliation is not something the thinking subject can achieve alone. In his essay "On Subject and Object," Adorno asserts that reconciliation would be a "state of differentiation without domination, with the differentiated participating in each other."<sup>118</sup> The participatory element here is crucial. Differentiation can only occur in a dynamic relationship with other diverse things. Although nature is always entwined with history, Adorno aims to foster a more dialectical relationship between human beings and the environing natural world through reconciliation. For Adorno, reconciliation would neither be the undifferentiated unity of human beings and nature nor their hostile antithesis. Rather, "it would be a togetherness of diversity,"<sup>119</sup> a state in which highly individuated persons and things would be free to mutually mediate each other while remaining differentiated.

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<sup>117</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 120.

<sup>118</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "On Subject and Object," in idem, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 247.

<sup>119</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), 150.

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