



The New Humanities In Search of Boundaries

Abstract: This article attempts to discuss the philosophical contexts and meaning of the new humanities in the context of the philosophy of subjectivity. At the foundation of the new humanities, as it is argued, is not enlightenment, but Heidegger's thought, with his excoriating critique of modern subjectivity and its *Machenschaft*. The article points to the foundational hubris that the new humanities oppose, and to the attempt to reinstall the subject within fixed boundaries. The new humanities, and posthumanism in particular, might backlash with violence against civilisation, comparable to that they endeavour to renounce. In order to manoeuvre through these convoluted figures of subjectivity, the article supports its theses with insightful readings of Hölderlin and Adorno.

Keywords: New Humanities, Posthumanism, The Frankfurt School, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Karl Marx, Martin Heidegger

*A little humanity distances us from nature,
a great deal of humanity brings us back.*
– Emmanuel Lévinas, *Difficult Freedom*

The New Humanities is an internally diverse field, which has developed out of quite different philosophical discourses, but there is perhaps a single theme that dominates this field and binds it together: the search for boundaries.

At the same time it is not just a question of escaping these boundaries; the principle, applied from Kant through Foucault, of enlightenment as continuous transgression no longer holds sway with the New Humanities.¹ Rather, we have now precisely the opposite question: the question of ascertaining boundaries as real limits, which might put a halt to the modern idea of the subject as something potentially unlimited, something that frees itself from all givens and evades everything that

1. Michel Foucault, paraphrasing the Kantian definition of enlightenment as permanent Emergence, explicates it as a continuing leap over boundaries and a transgressive alertness; modernity, according to Foucault, is thought which feels ill at ease in conditions of a *a priori* limitation. Cf. Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," in: *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 32–50.

is imposed or encountered. At the foundation of the New Humanities, therefore, lies not enlightenment, but Heidegger, with his excoriating critique of modern subjectivity and its *Machenschaft*, or calculating approach to a world from which it feels itself detached. Detachment here means lack of bonds; the unshackled subject with its calculating rationality proves to be the source of limitless violence towards being, which remains external to it. The New Humanities sets up in opposition to this the hubris of the notion of subjective freedom, striving to find its limits: to reattach the subject to being and thereby to bind and fetter it. And then, in the reverse of that gesture of promethean *hybris* described by Hölderlin, to change the fetters into bonds of love.² As much as the modern subject, therefore, breaks the bonds of affection and dependence in order to savour the farthest degree of freedom – which sometimes borders on madness³ – the postmodern subject doggedly seeks in itself instances of connection, through which it might suppress the fit of freedom and return to a state of self-limitation and participation. It aspires, in other words, to attain once more the “blessedness of boundaries”: to execute not a progressive or transgressive movement of escape, but a regressive one of return, like that of the prodigal son, a movement that the Greek tragedians called *nostos*, “the return home.”⁴

For the New Humanities, the legacy of Heidegger is decisive, and it is this legacy that determines for this field the form of its other two major precursors, Rousseau and Marx. This form is unambiguously anti-modern: both Rousseau, as the theorist of romantic nostalgia, dreaming of all manner of returns (to nature, to community, to the womb), and Marx, as the critic of the liberal-capitalist formation, serve as great brakemen who – to adapt Walter Benjamin’s aphorism – tug the emergency brakes of the runaway train of modernity.⁵ Rousseau, refracted through the lens of Heideggerism, supplies arguments for renouncing the artificial experiment of denaturalization: in neo-Rousseauvian thought, man is to rekindle his place in the wholeness of nature, out of which a destructive illusion has torn him, and to rediscover the delight of direct participation in it. Participation – a keyword

2. Cf. Friedrich Hölderlin, “The Rhine,” in the translation of Richard Sieburth: “Who was it who first / Wrecked the bonds of love / And transformed them into chains?” According to Hölderlin, who was then entranced by Rousseau, it was Prometheus who first defied the power of nature, the gods, and fate, and this defiance became the founding act of human civilization.

3. On the connections between Cartesian thought and madness, see, in particular, Jacques Derrida, “Cogito and the History of Madness,” in: *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1967).

4. On the need for a “return home” which is at the same time a return to the Greece of the tragedies, Heidegger writes incessantly, but most eloquently in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

5. Cf. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” trans. Harry Zohn, in: *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), 253–264.

in posthumanist strategy – is intended to ensure for the individual its original fixedness and affiliation, predating critical reflexion, and therewith impose on it an *a priori* limit. The positivity of original participation – in scope both natural and social – is therefore to set a limit to the negativity in which, in *modernitas*, there developed a kind of limitless critical thought. The “Heideggerized” Marx, in turn, serves above all as a modifier of the language of emancipation. As a critic of the liberal formula of negative freedom, he supplies arguments for emancipation not *from*, but *to*: positive freedom, the incarnation of which is full identification of the subject with its existential determinants, namely race, class and sex. The goal of emancipation is not the triumph of consciousness over being (still found in the final formulations of the enlightenment idea of emancipation as transgression, for example in Foucault and Judith Butler), but the recognizing and working out of boundaries, with the help of which being – the prior factuality of racial, class and gender identifiers – defines the individual consciousness. In aid of such a modified theory of emancipation comes psychoanalysis, which in late modernity underwent an analogous change of discourse. For while Freud still sees the goal of therapy as the possibility of freeing the psyche from the trauma that afflicted its early psychogenesis, for Lacan therapeutic success lies precisely in reconciling the psyche with its trauma as a necessary condition, as, indeed, the cornerstone of the subjective construct.

Regardless, therefore, which particular thinker should come within the scope of interest of the New Humanities – be it Rousseau, Marx, Spinoza, Nietzsche or Freud – the principle of his or her reception remains Heideggerian in spirit: modernist negativity, which gave the subject a limitless critical perspective, becomes bound and shackled by New Positivity, in the foreground of which stretches the immediacy of conditions and participation, or, to put it another way, the primacy of factuality. The New Humanities is thus decidedly anti-Hegelian: Marx’s standing of Hegel back on his feet is here equivalent to the binding of thought with the *factum brutum* of matter. The New Materialism operates here on the principle of Goethe’s warning, *am Ende bist du, was du bist* (“in the end you are only that which you are”). The limitless degrees of freedom through which moves Hegelian thought turn out to be a phantasm, which, having no reality, remains merely an epiphenomenon – “foam” – produced by thinking, a flower plucked from its roots and trying to rebel against them.

The materialistic plan of the New Humanities might be called, after Derrida, a general exorcism of phantoms that bear no weight.⁶ As weightless illusions, they are only an impediment on the road to a positive identification of spirit and matter, or rather,

6. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).

to a final reduction of spirit to its material conditions. The materialism of the New Humanities is thus a materialism of elimination, and only in this aspect can it be considered to be an heir of enlightenment, understood primarily as disenchantment. The exorcising of phantoms, the goal of which is to eliminate the spectral dimension of thought, which reaches beyond that which is, towards that which is not yet (what Ernst Bloch calls the *noch-nicht*), can be included in the movement for *Entzauberung*, which seeks to deprive thought of its fundamental prerogative – the ability to promise. For the ethical promise – that most phantasmagoric aspect of the spirit, which cranes out towards the least existent, the most *noch-nicht*, the purely ideational – must develop under the pressure of the “tyranny of facts.” Enlightenment as promise – the promise of general emancipation and justice – disappears, to be replaced by enlightenment as simply the movement of disenchantment itself. In this sense as well the New Humanities is the fulfilment of the dialectic of enlightenment described by Horkheimer and Adorno: fulfilled, obviously, in the pejorative sense, namely inert and finished.⁷

Posthumanism as Conformity

There is no doubt that in this effort to limit the madness of absolutely free subjectivity there *is* method. The hubris of modernity, with its limitless faith in the phantom of endless development, harms both the planet and human communities, and in the end, too, harms the individual. The theme of renewed limits thus imposes itself spontaneously on thought. It is worth wondering, however, whether the search for new boundaries need take just the course proposed by the New Humanities, which mobilizes to this end all the most powerful antimodernist discourses: Heideggerianism, nostalgic-ecologic Rousseauvianism, and a more or less reductive Marxism (and precisely non-Marxist insofar as it remains in the bosom of the romantic *antimoderne*). The result is a mixture that may be as much a poison as a cure: the limiting of subjective freedom may turn out to be in effect the abandonment of the idea of the individual subject as such. Imprisoned in its material factuality – species, race, class, sex – subjectivity fades into the set of its conditioning factors.

The New Humanities thus constitutes an extreme reaction to an equally extreme conception of subjectivity: its eliminative materialism is based upon a complete rejection of the pneumatic tradition, which since the time of St. Paul has determined, first, the spiritual contours of Christianity, and second, the phi-

7. Cf. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). Hereinafter cited in text as DE.

philosophical idea of the subject as being detached from the physical dimension. However, as simply the negation of this philosophical order, the New Humanities risks becoming eternally enmeshed in a dualism which – at least professedly – it seeks to overcome. As the pneumaticism of St. Paul – a belief in the immortal soul, which is but momentarily thrown into the material world – lent to the concept of the spirit a radical and hypersublimated form, so does the materialism of the New Humanities completely abandon the idea of spirit, in so doing casting doubt on its humanistic status, or precisely its connection with the “sciences of the spirit” (*Geisteswissenschaften*). By reaching for an oversimplified negation, the New Humanities can cease to be humanistic; by opening the way for a post-humanist perspective, it may even endorse a strategy of dehumanization.

Posthumanism thus asserts that in this way it is deconstructing the hypocrisy of humanism, which in its reductive, neo-Rousseauvian version simply leads to justifying the dominance of dead white males over the rest of the world or, in other words, to so-called “speciesism,” in which one species usurps the right to domination over others, and exploits to this end a certain kind of religious ideology (as expressed in the Biblical injunction, “Have dominion over the earth”). In the posthumanist perspective, by contrast, we have always been a part of nature and always subject to her laws, even if humanism bruited the idea of Enlightenment as escape from the house of bondage wherein we were bound by all kinds of irreflective, supposedly “natural” laws (*vide* Kant). “We have never been human,” goes one of the leading slogans of posthumanism, formulated by Bruno Latour: we never succeeded in any exodus from nature; we have always been and shall forever be merely cogs in the organic machine of life and death, and we may do nothing but reconcile ourselves to this fact.⁸ This principle of conformity to nature stands in striking contrast to the postulates of critical thinking, which became possible only as a result of *denaturalization*, or escape beyond the boundaries of the realm that is governed by the natural criterion of simple survival.

If, therefore, posthumanism were to be quite consistent, and not merely parasitic in relation to critical thinking, which it simultaneously exploits and subverts, it would be compelled to renounce the critical stance as decidedly *unnatural* (as does, in fact, Peter Sloterdijk, who is an unhypercritical posthumanist, but also not a very radical one). In general, however, posthumanism collaborates with one of the darkest and most cynical tendencies of our era: with its disenchanting, late-modern realism, which for a cognitive achievement boasts of that which two centuries ago was recognised as an ontological error, namely the claim to derive *ought* from *is*. Today few heed the argument of Kant, that *Sollen* (the sphere

8. Cf. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

of the ought) not only does not accompany *Sein* (the sphere of being), but is diametrically opposed to it; that is, as Steven Schwarzschild, a contemporary Jewish Kantian, writes, “To have an ethics means to have an alternative to reality.”⁹ Here precisely the radical understanding of the ethical norm – underived from the facts and offering in contrast to them an alternative vision of life – today is succumbing to posthumanist deconstruction, which drags it back into the timeless relation of submission to fact, from which it had sought to escape. The principle of natural fact governs univocally, demanding that our ethical norms submit to what Adorno, still with the spirit of resistance, called “ignominious adaptation.”¹⁰ That which once was understood as the norm of the norm – its function as an alternative in the face of brute reality – now is taken to be a utopian pathology, one that expresses unjustified claims against social being, which “is what it is.” In spite, therefore, of its clamorous cries of radical discontent with the existing political state of affairs, posthumanism in fact collaborates with the bio-political experts and their efforts to naturalize the vision of turbo-capitalism: both camps, after all, agree that there has never been any “escape from nature.” Criticism in such a case, is, to use Sloterdijk’s term, mere foam (*Schaum*), and to practice criticism is simply to whip up a lather.¹¹

Therefore, it may be worth asking whether it be possible to imagine new boundaries, in a truly new language, which would not mean a blanket condemnation of *modernitas*, but rather a dialectical sublation of its most violent moments. In this essay, I would like to adumbrate such a perspective: a way to get beyond “instrumental reason” which nonetheless honours the premises of enlightenment, and which, therefore, does not take refuge in the wholly antimodernist triad of Heideggerism, neo-Rousseauvianism, and (poorly construed) Marxism.

Less or More Human?

Posthumanism as a regress to the natural community – understood even so broadly and seemingly without definition as is done by Latour – is thus, firstly, not possible as a curative procedure for humanity, and secondly, not desirable because it binds too tightly the critical faculties of the human subject. The Heideggerian idea of ontological limit, derived from his analysis of finitude, is not fitted to serve as the foundation for a vision of the future; it is rather a symptom than

9. Steven Schwarzschild, “The Lure of Immanence,” in: *The Pursuit of the Ideal. Jewish Writings of Steven Schwarzschild*, ed. Menachim Kellner (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 73.

10. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1993), 98.

11. Cf. Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären. Band III: Schäume* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2004).

a solution. Though there is general agreement that mankind must learn anew to live with a sense of boundaries, disagreement persists over what those boundaries are to be: a natural limit in the form of death, which comes for every finite being in the cosmic natural order, or a new, truly human, ethical-critical boundary, which is designated by the Other? I am strongly inclined towards the second possibility, which not only remains on the ground of the humanities, but actually strengthens them, because it stands on the principle of ethical self-constraint, of which the human subject, and it alone, is capable.¹²

The most lucid exponent of this position is Emmanuel Lévinas, who, not by chance, framed it in the course of his polemics with the legacy of Heidegger. Referring to the dubious attractions of anti-humanism, towards which we are drawn by the Heideggerian mythological regress, Lévinas writes, in *Difficult Freedom*:

The doctrine is subtle and new. Everything that, for centuries, seemed to us to be added to nature by man, was already shining forth in the splendours of the world. A work of art, a blazing forth of Being and not a human invention, makes his anti-human splendour glow. Myth announces itself within nature. Nature is implanted in that first language which hails us only to found human language. Man must be able to listen and hear and reply. But to hear this language and reply to it consists not in giving oneself over to logical thoughts raised into a system of knowledge, but in living in the place, in being-there. Enrootedness. [...]. [B]ut the plant is not enough of a plant to define an intimacy with the world. A little humanity distances us from nature, a great deal of humanity brings us back.¹³

This last sentence, which serves as the epigraph of the present essay, expresses the core of my proposal: in the face of anti- and posthumanist arguments, which arose in the mythologizing shadow of Heidegger, I hold that it is not by the non-human god of the *Contributions*, called up at the end of history by Being itself,

12. I would like to stress here that this strongly-accented motif of anthropological distinction by no means need translate into status distinctions in the sense of a metaphysical hierarchy. The difference that is the basis for a long series of subtle distinctions between humankind and the animal kingdom – distinctions often more quantitative than qualitative – does not, obviously, form grounds for value judgment: man is *not* the crown of creation, something higher and better than other beings. And yet, because of the particular reflective nature of his cognitive processes, which he expresses in language, only man – at least for now – proves capable of formulating the idea of common laws, and then submitting to them in an act of self-constraint. That does not mean that this process occurs without various distortions; these have been exhaustively deconstructed by Jacques Derrida in his essay *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, who at the same time does not countenance the very species distinction homo sapiens. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

13. Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 232.

that we shall be saved, but rather by the appeal for “more humanity,” made in the spirit of ethical awakening.

To this end we turn now to the late Adorno, and in particular to his conception of “reconciliation with nature.” In recent ecology-oriented debates, the name of Adorno hardly arises, but this is an error that results from a faulty – excessively Heideggerian – understanding of the discourse, in which Adorno, when he appears, does so in an exclusively negative context. For posthumanist advocates of deep ecology, with their new naturalism, Adorno embodies the hostile paradigm of anthropocentric modernism, which demonizes nature and sets it in opposition to human culture. In their turn, post-naturalists of the type of Bruno Latour see in Adorno and other modernist thinkers examples of that great error which consists in the hypostasis of the concept of nature.¹⁴ Therefore, while posthumanism contests Adorno’s antinaturalist position and proposes instead the reattachment of humankind to the natural ecosystem, the postnaturalists sever themselves from all philosophies of nature, regardless whether they are “for” nature or “against” it, or – as happens in the Adornian dialectic – both at once.

The complexity of Adorno’s stance is to be seen in the very term “reconciliation with nature.” The Hegelian term *Versöhnung* suggests something besides a simple return. So as much as posthumanist ecology is marked by a certain phantasmatic naïveté, which conceives natural life as a perfectly functioning biological machine and contrasts this with the wastefulness of the human economy, Adorno refrains from any kind of naturalistic nostalgia and the condemnation of technology that it conveys. A “return” to nature is impossible – not only because there is no nature as such to return to (as proponents of the term “Anthropocene epoch” correctly observe, there no longer exists any ecosystem still untouched by the hand of man), but because such a return would be a mistake. The word reconciliation itself posits that between the human and the natural forms of life exists a difference that cannot be erased, but which can be a field of negotiation. Adorno is, thus, a firm advocate of the so-called “anthropological difference,” but with an also strongly marked dialectical variant, by which the full acknowledgement of the difference between man and nature becomes a necessary condition for working out a new relation between them. So it is, too, in the diagnosis of Lévinas: “less humanity” maintains the state of enmity between man and nature, while “more humanity” leads man by degrees to include natural beings in the sphere of his ethical concern.

14. Cf. Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

Adorno's negative dialectics is often characterised as being "Kantified Hegelianism," and the same has been said of his "reconciliation with nature." Namely, Hegel can essentially come only after Kant: the human being must first of all separate itself out from the totality of nature, and only then, when it is free of naturalistic criteria, may it once again establish a relation with the natural world, but now one which is based only on its own set of values – among these being in particular the category of justice. The Kantian critique of nature as the Realm of Necessity, that is, an oppressive form of life which is geared toward simple survival, and the grounding of morality in anti-naturalistic foundations, must therefore precede the Hegelian moment of reconciliation, which in turn can only because of this precedence become an act of justice, namely, an ethical gesture that cannot be reduced to natural principles. Otherwise, that is, without the Kantian antithesis, reconciliation will lead only to capitulation to the superior force of nature: to a conformist submission to her biopolitical rules of action, and thus to "the shame of adaptation." For according to Adorno, who here faithfully follows Kant,¹⁵ *nature as such has no knowledge of justice*; nature knows only a certain elementary kind of *fairness*, which condemns everything, equally and inevitably, to the same fate of "arising and passing away." The ethical idea of justice, however, does not derive from this understanding of naturalistic egalitarianism, in which operates "the all-levelling arm of fate" (Nietzsche): it derives, rather, from the maxim of consideration for the Other, which – as an individual and a distinct being – must always be treated as an end in itself, never as a means. So while from the point of view of nature, her egalitarian *fairness* depends on each one being treated without exception only as a means – that is, a means to the maintenance of nature as a system – from the point of view of the Kantian man, ethical justice depends upon the severing of individual beings from the natural machine of means, and acknowledging them as ends in themselves. The exodus from nature, rendered possible by the "anthropological difference," is here therefore the same as the passage from the Realm of Means to the Realm of Ends. Only when man forsakes nature – that Schopenhaueresque gristmill of life and death that grinds down every individual existence in order to feed upon it – can there arise in him the idea of justice. And so only then can

15. However, this is not an entirely uncritical Kantianism. In a move that anticipates the objections of Lacan and Derrida's deconstruction, Adorno rigorously opposes that aspect of Kant's ethics that sanctions the violent negation of nature, rejecting it as a "pathology." In the section of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* devoted to the modern subject Adorno compares Kant with the Marquis de Sade (a move repeated by Lacan in his "Kant avec Sade"), pointing out the sadistic element in the Kantian antithesis. At the same time, he dialectically asserts that this sadistic stage of violent differentiation is unavoidable: the key is that it not be treated as a final solution, but that there be found a way back to eventual "reconciliation."

man turn again to nature in a spirit that is radically foreign to her, and envelop her with a ban on instrumentality. But as long as he remains within nature, so long does he retain the natural sanction to treat everyone and everything simply as a means to his own survivalist ends.¹⁶

Paradoxically therefore – but only apparently, and at the outset – man must escape from nature, in order to cease violating her. For in the mythical world, there is no justice, but only the hard and cruel law:

The world controlled by *mana*, and even the worlds of Indian and Greek myth, are issueless and eternally the same. All birth is paid for with death, all fortune with misfortune. While men and gods may attempt in their short span to assess their fates by a measure other than blind destiny, existence triumphs over them in the end. Even their justice, wrested from calamity, bears its features. . . . *Justice gives way to law*¹⁷.

16. In this context it is worth pointing out the procedure of Giorgio Agamben, who subscribes to the posthumanist strategy for renaturalizing man, which includes “weakening” the tension between the sphere of existence and the sphere of the ought: *rehabilitation of the idea of the mean*. This idea, first expressed in an essay on Benjamin, *Means without End*, and further developed in *The Use of Bodies*, strikes at the radical conception of ethical activity that relies on the forbidding of instrumentalization and likewise on respecting the inviolability of the other considered as an end in itself. Both the ban on utilization and the care for the other’s inviolability seem to Agamben unnecessarily elevated ethical stakes, which should be able to operate without being invested in a definition of humanity. For Agamben, the heart of the matter lies not in use as such, but in use that, through an excess of acquisitiveness, becomes overuse: the Roman *ius utendi et abutendi* suffices to mark out the clear borders of the former. In fact it is man, who according to Rousseau thought up the right to property, who is the one to overuse the right of use in the natural world – in contrast to animals, who use the world and each other innocently, taking nothing for their possession. It is therefore not a matter of concern for oneself and others – the humanistic paradigm of concern ought to be superseded – but of innocent use: to make use of bodies, others’ and one’s own, freely, up to the point of their “irreparable” harm, which then must be treated as the natural course of things, as with animals, who are always “at ease” with the fate that the natural order dictates. There is thus nothing wrong with instrumentalization in itself, which nature too employs; it is only man, overusing the principle of the means – as a means to an end, which is appropriation – who distorts the Realm of Means and, according to Neorousseauvianism, is thus deserving of liquidation. The lesson of Agamben well illustrates that posthumanist neorousseauvianism is a thoroughly implacable stance, whose basic principle is, if something goes wrong, man is to blame. Thus if nature presents itself as a domain of Darwinian survival of the fittest and Hobbesian *bella omnium contra omnes*, this is only because man projects onto it his own subjective pathology: in fact, if we were to distance ourselves from this projection, nature would present a countenance of innocence. If we examine neorousseauvianism from a theological perspective, it can look like an even more radical and barely secularized form of Augustinian theodicy, in which man, the bearer of original sin, is responsible for all evil. Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Means without Ends: Notes on Politics*, trans. Cesare Casarino and Vincenzo Binetti (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2000), and *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

17. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 11–12. Italics mine.

Thus for Adorno it is precisely nature that is the first mythical prison of the individual life; all cultural forms that assume the form of “mythical” – that is to say, “renouncing hope” – are simply imitating the cyclical equilibrium of the natural world.¹⁸ For submission to nature means an elementary kind of enslavement: obedience to the law of an implacable cycle, governed by the principle of a fatalistic alteration of *hybris* and *nemesis*, pride and retribution, according to which everything that exists must be punished for its illusion of individuality, and forced back into its role as a means. So long as man remains in the power of this most fundamental of natural laws, enlightenment will remain only a continuation of nature – literally – by other *means*; it will be only yet another form of the vindictive domination of the general over the particular. Upon this very point depends Adorno’s dialectic of enlightenment; so long as man does not truly abandon nature, he will continue simply to repeat her pattern of “vengeful necessity” in the guise of apparent emancipation, which means only the reversal of power relations:

But the more the magic illusion [of freedom – A. B.R.] vanishes, the more implacably repetition, in the guise of regularity, imprisons human beings in the cycle now objectified in the laws of nature, to which they believe they owe their security as free subjects. The principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, which enlightenment upholds against mythical imagination, is that of myth itself. The arid wisdom which acknowledges nothing new under the sun, because all the pieces in the meaningless game have been played out, all the great thoughts have been thought, all possible discoveries can be construed in advance, and human beings are defined by self-preservation through adaptation – this barren wisdom merely reproduces the fantastic doctrine it rejects: the sanction of fate which, through retribution, incessantly reinstates what always was. Whatever might be different is made the same. This is the verdict which critically sets the boundaries to possible experience. The identity of everything with everything is bought at the cost that nothing can at the same time be identical to itself¹⁹.

Neither in Kant, nor Lévinas, nor Adorno does the idea of the Escape from Nature appear by accident. With all three of these thinkers, who are guided by the ideal of the ethical promise, the biblical story of *jeiciat micraim*, the exodus from the house of bondage, makes a solid background for their dialectical narrative of enlightenment. Its first phase is the escape from natural servitude; the second is the stage of the cruel struggle against nature for survival, which is still waged on terms

18. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer define myth as an eternal cycle and return (*Kreislauf*), which becomes also the overriding figure of enlightenment at the moment that it begins to succumb to “natural law”: “Enlightenment thereby regresses to the mythology it has never been able to escape. For mythology had reflected in its forms the essence of the existing order – cyclical motion, fate, domination of the world as truth – and had renounced hope (20).

19. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment...*, 8.

dictated by her; while the third is the realization of the promise concealed in the symbol of Exodus, that is, the *real* escape from nature, in which man finally frees himself from the natural criteria of survival. This true liberation means that the human subject no longer simply carries out a reciprocal instrumentalization of the natural world, in which he simply reverses the pole of power relations (according to the principle of vengeful retribution: “once nature governed us, today we govern her”), but rather assumes towards natural beings the non-natural, ethical attitude: he breaks free of the game of domination and violence, in order to dwell in a truly universal Realm of Ends.

Reconciliation and Its Dialectic

Adorno’s thought thus sets up a kind of Hegelian triad, perhaps best seen in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which takes as its canvas the story of Odysseus, that “myth of escape from the mythical,” over which is layered the Hebrew motif of Exodus. The first stage is the natural life, symbolized by the dreamy land of the lotus-eaters, in which the simple pleasure of unmediated existence is bought at the cost of bondage in service to Mother Nature. The second stage is the escape from this world of natural bondage, the dangers of which are related in the parable of the sirens: sailing through heteric waters, Odysseus emerges untouched by the sirens’ song, but at the same time he “loses his life.” While gaining control over the elements, with an ascetic gesture he establishes subjectivity as something cut off from sensual pleasure. He becomes an enlightened subject, the master of his own conscious existence, but the cost of this self-mastery turns out to be the loss of vitality; having left the bay of the sirens behind, Odysseus sails out into the wide waters of freedom from nature, where, for all this newly won liberty, he is in danger of drifting aimlessly. He is indeed conscious, focussed on his own self-preservation – on the control of natural impulses both within him and outside him – but his body is inert: objectified and denaturalized.

The first escape from nature, therefore, starting in the dimension of rationality and reflectivity, turns out to be equivalent to *the killing of nature in oneself* – to treating oneself as a sacrificial animal:

Any attempt to break the compulsion of nature by breaking nature only succumbs more deeply to that compulsion. That has been the trajectory of European civilization. Abstraction, the instrument of enlightenment, stands in the same relationship to its objects as fate, whose concept it eradicates: as liquidation.²⁰

20. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment...*, 9.

In order to escape from the impasse of a bad escape from nature, Adorno suggests that we look at the process of the formation of subjectivity somewhat differently, in terms of another, more substantial and less instrumental, kind of enlightenment – which is to inaugurate the third, most desirable stage of subjective development. For the birth of reason is not only the disenchantment of the ancient mystery, and the passage to cynical means of control that have been stripped of sacred fear; it is also, and perhaps above all, *the birth of justice*. It is the birth of a claim that is foreign to nature and to all myths, that in their pseudo-wisdom imitate the cyclical course of *physis* and “in this way renounce hope.”

The dialectic of enlightenment, then, depends on the contrast of two models of exiting from nature. One, contained in the figure of Odysseus, depends on purely instrumental skill for reversing the relations of power, but changes nothing in the broader ethical picture, remaining therefore within the field of influence of myth. The other, contained in the figure of the Exodus, embodies the escape from nature with the birth of a moral stance, yet in connection with this it falls at once into a formidable paradox. For, on the one hand, we have a real enlightenment practice, depending on the ever more profound disenchantment of nature, over which the subject manages to retain mastery for as long as possible, but, on the other, there is the ideal ethical formula of enlightenment as the demand for justice, which for that reason cannot excuse the violence that it must exercise against nature, in order to free itself from her. On the one side, we have the pure technique of enlightenment, which desires only to rule over nature, and on the other, the pure promise, which in practice remains paralyzed by its ethical paradox.

To unravel this paradox means “to defend enlightenment against itself”: to wrest it from the aporia of effective instrumentalism and passive promise. This means to undertake a process of reconciliation:

Enlightenment [...] that does not preserve in self-reflection the natural context from which it separates itself through freedom, turns into guilt toward nature and becomes a piece of mythic entanglement in nature... *Reconciliation is not the simple antithesis of myth; rather, it includes justice toward myth.*²¹

Reconciliation is thus a complex gesture. It is not simply the antithesis of myth, that is, it does not mean the complete condemnation of it; it acknowledges that the first exit from nature could only occur as a mythical imitation of nature. At the same time, however, it extends the imperative of justice into the natural world, which up until then had been excluded from it. Adorno thus proposes a new

21. Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature, Volume 2* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 168–169. Italics mine.

Kantian realm of ends, where individual life – including life in nature – has the right to flourish without the threat of all kinds of reification: life freed from relations of power and violence, freed for otherness, or as Adorno puts it, for “non-identity.” Adorno doesn’t deny that his inspiration for this vision of a *nominalist realm* is Messianic theology, which opposes the understanding of the world in general and repetitive categories:

The world is unique. The mere repetition in speech of moments which occur again and again in the same form bears more resemblance to a futile, compulsive litany than to the *redeeming word*.²²

It is in this fulfilled uniqueness that becomes realized the “the disappearance of the natural order in a different order”²³, that is, in the “universality, in the good sense, of the living”²⁴, which no longer closes itself off in a natural system of domination that erases all individuality. Indeed, nature cannot be redeemed, but it is possible to make to her the messianic gesture that consists in an ethical renunciation of violence and domination: as Hegel put it, let her live, “set her free” (*freilassen*). Meanwhile, the “reconciliation with nature” means to return justice to that which itself does not know justice, that which in itself “is neither good [...], nor noble”²⁵, but which as such in no way *justifies* the infliction of violence upon it. A victim need by no means be beautiful, in order to arouse justified moral sympathy.

This does not mean, therefore, that at the stage of reconciliation man will demand of nature that it stop being nature and accept ethical criteria of co-existence, so that, as in the apocalyptic vision of the new heaven, the hind should run with the wolf, partaking in the messianic “eternal peace.” For Adorno’s concept of reconciliation with nature is also free of this kind of violence, the violence of ethical conversion – St. Augustine’s *compelle intrare!* – that forces natural entities into the Realm of Ends. It is rather the concept of a consciously asymmetric relation, this time in accord with Lévinas’s notion of intuition, that it is only a radical asymmetry that verifies a true ethics, and not the pragmatic principle of exchange *do ut des*. Within the framework of this asymmetry man acknowledges nature in her unassailable otherness: he does not demand that natural creatures should be capable of ethical reciprocity. But at the same time he avoids the allure of re-naturalization, of a return to the bosom of na-

22. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment...*, 182. Italics mine.

23. Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature, Vol. 1...*, 119.

24. Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature, Vol. 2...*, 124.

25. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment...*, 212.

ture, of becoming one with her.²⁶ In Adorno's programme, late-modern man should be appalled at the violence that he has inflicted upon the natural world, and yet at the same time he should not mistake repentance for disavowal. For, like the baby in the psychoanalytic theory of Melanie Klein, which wants to become a separate subject, he too must recognise the violent phase of separation as being necessary in the process of emancipation, where here the role of the mother's body is played by Mother Nature. The separation phase, though full of vengeful violence, is crucial, so that the emancipated human being might develop a distinct ethical code, whose final rule turns out to be: the imperative for reconciliation.²⁷

So it is not to be argued that humanity should be punished and suppressed, as proposed by the posthumanism that is inspired by the tragic work of the later Heidegger. This, according to Greek tragedy, was always the way of the system of nature, which dispatched the Erinyes to pursue every bold mortal who displayed *hybris*. In the same way, too, has human civilization behaved in the past, simply recapitulating natural violence in its own domineering relations to nature: civilization today is negated by posthumanist thought with the same vindictive violence with which in the past it has itself negated the autonomous natural world. In this way, the New Humanities has found itself at an impasse without an Exit: in the mythical cycle (*Kreislauf*) of violence and retribution that "renounces hope" – this only real hope which no longer promises revenge, but transcends

26. At any rate it is only by this additional premise of the ethical principle of asymmetry that the idea of a "unity with nature" ceases to be a squaring of the circle. Without the introduction of this emnthememe, the reflections of Adorno would seem to remain caught up in that hopeless "ambivalence of the concept of nature" which has driven many of his critics to despair. One of these, Steven Vogel, who devoted a book to the problem of nature in the Frankfurt School, defines its "turbid" status as follows: "Nature seemed to be both promesse de bonheur but also that which was most to be feared, that which is dominated by enlightenment but also that which returns to take its terrible revenge when domination (as it always must) ultimately fails"; Steven Vogel, *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 84. And tellingly, no doubt from despair he imputes to Adorno "unclear and unconvincing animistic longings" (Vogel, *Against Nature...*, 3). Meanwhile this ambiguity can be resolved if we adopt – as far as possible from all forms of pagan animism – the Hebrew concept of enlightenment as, above all, the promise of justice.

27. The association here with Melanie Klein is not accidental. In essence we might interpret Adorno's third dialectical stage of unity as a process of reparation, which is initiated in the psyche by a sense of guilt arising from too violent a severing of the tethers of dependency. Thus it is not that man – and the humanism that represents him – should feel no guilt, but only that the guilt should properly define and situate, without hyperbolic overgeneralization, what it is a part of: first the theodicy of Augustine, and then its secularized version in neo-Rousseauvian form.

the evil symmetry of eternal violence. Meanwhile Adorno, faithful to the promise of *Escape*, sketches a vision in which reconciliation with nature is an ethical gesture of self-limitation, which will be possible only when man becomes not less, but more human, than he has been so far.

Translated by David Schauffler

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4079-1903>

Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor W. *Minima Moralia. Reflections from Damaged Life*. Translated by E.F.N. Jephcott. London: Verso, 1993.
- Adorno, Theodor W. *Notes to Literature, Volume 2*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Means without Ends: Notes on Politics*. Translated by Cesare Casarino and Vincenzo Binetti. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2000.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Use of Bodies*. Translated by Adam Kotsko. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Translated by Harry Zohn. In: *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, 253–264. New York: Schocken Books, 1988.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Cogito and the History of Madness." In: *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1967.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. New York and London: Routledge, 1994.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Translated by David Wills. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.
- Foucault, Michel. "What is Enlightenment?" In: *The Foucault Reader*. Edited by Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.
- Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- Latour, Bruno. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. Translated by Seán Hand. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.
- Schwarzschild, Steven. "The Lure of Immanence." In: *The Pursuit of the Ideal. Jewish Writings of Steven Schwarzschild*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1990.
- Sloterdijk, Peter. *Sphären. Band III: Schäume*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2004.
- Vogel, Steven. *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1996.

