

## Being “a Good Animal”: Adorno, Posthumanism and International Relations

Stephen Hobden

University of East London

UK

E-mail: [s.c.hobden@uel.ac.uk](mailto:s.c.hobden@uel.ac.uk)

### Abstract:

This article examines the potential contribution of the work of Theodor Adorno to the development of a posthuman analysis of international relations. Despite a recent blossoming of “Adorno studies,” his writings on nature, particularly his concerns regarding human relations with other species, have received comparatively little attention. The article argues that many of the central concerns driving the recent development of posthuman analyses of international relations overlap with some of Adorno’s core preoccupations. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in particular, much concern is directed at the perceived disenchantment with nature and the impacts of this disenchantment both on human relations with the rest of nature, but also with inter-human relations. Adorno’s focus on the attention to suffering being the “condition for all truth” is not restricted simply to the human and coincides with the ethical concerns of posthuman approaches. Finally, whilst it has been claimed that Adorno’s work, especially his notion of the totally administered society, leads to a political impasse, it will be suggested here that recent work by Fabian Freyenhagen on the practical elements of Adorno’s philosophy suggest that our priority, rather than living rightly, should be on “living less wrongly.”

### Keywords

Adorno, posthumanism, international relations theory, inter-species relations, suffering, Critical Theory

## Being “a Good Animal”: Adorno, Posthumanism and International Relations

Stephen Hobden

“What's driving there in the car and sticking out its long trunk?

Its a mammoth, its a mammoth, and its driving home”<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The photograph of Theodor Adorno from 1943 is somewhat surprising. The “theory eating dialectical monster”<sup>2</sup> is seated at his desk, half-turned towards the camera and has a smirk on his face. The desk is decorated with figures of giraffes, gazelles and horses. Towards the top of the desk is a stuffed teddy bear, while to his side is a statue of two peacocks.<sup>3</sup> These animals share the workspace of the “last genius.”<sup>4</sup> Yet this image of the writer, described by Alan How, as an “old sourpuss,”<sup>5</sup> surrounded by animal companions is not out of keeping with the role of the animal world in his life. His closest friends and family were all given animal identities. Adorno himself was Archibald, the King of the hippopotamuses. Gretel, his wife was the “Giraffe,” while Max Horkheimer, another of the behemoths of the early Frankfurt School and Adorno's sometime writing companion was, of course, the mammoth referred to in the song cited at the start of this article.

Adorno's attribution of animal characteristics to his family and close friends was not simply a reflection of the memories that he had of visiting Frankfurt Zoo as a child with his mother (hippo mare) and Aunt Agatha (tigress), it is also an indication of the role of nature and inter-species relations played in his work. As an example of the scope of these ideas in an, admittedly jocular, letter to Horkheimer, Adorno talked about the writing of a “theoretical

groundwork of a human society that includes the animals.”<sup>6</sup>

That the exploitative character of human relations with nature is a key feature of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has been frequently commented on. This article intends to take the analysis of Adorno's views on the relations between human and non-human nature further, in order to explore what Derrida described as the “least trodden” and potentially most significant of any future appreciation of Adorno's work.<sup>7</sup> As Christina Gerhardt indicates, non-human animals play an important part in Adorno’s thinking: our relationship with the non-human world “consistently highlights the inhumanity of humans... Animals remind us that nature for Adorno is not only the condition of possibility for reading the self, humans and culture but also for radically questioning the concept of otherness and our relationship to it.”<sup>8</sup> The purpose of my investigation is to evaluate Adorno's work as a possible source of ideas and praxis for a posthuman approach to the understanding of international relations. As such this article reflects the growing interest in Adorno's work within international relations,<sup>9</sup> philosophy and political theory.<sup>10</sup> The bulk of this more recent work rejects the view, derived from Habermas, that the argument of Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* leads political thinking into an impasse.<sup>11</sup> Instead most of this literature suggests that Adorno's work has much to offer in terms of epistemology and an ethics that speaks to the current era and the particular problems that we now confront.

However any attempt to engage with Adorno's thought should not underestimate the difficulties involved in such an endeavor. The early Frankfurt school writers were very clear that theory was historically and geographically specific, and that wholesale lifting and application of theory to different circumstances as a transcendent template was not effective.

However this does not mean that we should ignore the valuable insights from writers from other eras when their comments resonate with our current circumstances; and it has been the argument of many recent discussions that Adorno's work has much to contribute to an understanding of contemporary issues. While he did not use the term specifically, I will argue that there is much in Adorno's discussion of relations between human and non-human nature that prefigures current discussions of posthumanism.

Those who wish to engage with Adorno are also confronted by his approach to writing. Adorno adopted an allusive style which, intentionally, avoided simple summary or conclusion. His later works “are written at the limits of German syntax.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, he was reluctant to provide explicit definitions of his terminology for fear that this would contribute to a reification of these ideas. For the non-German speaker, this problem is compounded by the need to study his work in translation. These issues are not easily resolved, although some of the problems can be alleviated to an extent. As well as the more “difficult” books, Adorno did also produce a number of lectures and radio discussions in which his intention was to offer a more direct insight into his perspective. These (along with the extensive secondary literature) can be used as a means of shining a light on the more complex discussions.

My argument proceeds as follows: humans as a species have become separated (disenchanted) from the rest of nature, seeing the non-human world purely as means rather than ends. However this disenchantment (or development of instrumental reason) has had implications not only for human - non-human relations, but also intra-human relations. Furthermore, by seeing ourselves as separate and superior to the rest of what exists, we

underestimate the contingency of our own existence. However the appropriate response does not lie in a re-enchantment: disenchantment is a process inherent in human development. What we need to “be a good animal” is a recognition of the embodied character of our existence, and to highlight suffering, not only within our own species, but across the species boundary.

### **Human and non-human nature**

The relationship between human and non-human nature is a theme that runs throughout Adorno’s work from his earliest writings through to the posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*.<sup>13</sup> Eduardo Mendiata notes that, together with Derrida, Adorno maintained a “philosophical commitment to recognizing that we are inextricably woven into the natural history of all animals, and all that is living in general, even as we have sought to define ourselves by distinguishing ourselves from it.”<sup>14</sup>

One of Adorno’s earliest lectures, “The Idea of Natural-History,” directly addresses this issue. This lecture, given to the Frankfurt chapter of the Kant Society, had as its purpose “to dialectically overcome the usual antithesis of nature and history,” to be replaced by a “concrete unity of nature and history.”<sup>15</sup> Here Adorno appears to imply that all that exists is part of nature when he states that “for the question of ontology... is none other than what I mean by ‘nature.’”<sup>16</sup> In other words there is nothing outside of nature. The lecture is a critique of phenomenology, in which, Adorno claims, there has been a dualism of nature and history, nature in this understanding being that which is outside of history. Instead there is an “insuperable interwovenness of natural and historical elements.”<sup>17</sup> In order to understand the relationship between nature and history it is therefore necessary “to comprehend historical

being in its most extreme historical determinacy, where it is most historical, as natural being, or if it were possible to comprehend nature as an historical being where it seems to rest most deeply in itself as nature.”<sup>18</sup> More significantly, “all being, or everything existing is to be grasped as the interweaving of historical and natural being.”<sup>19</sup> In other words there is no distinction or separation of the historical from the natural. Both are historical, and the view that nature is a world of constancy is for Adorno incorrect. Human society might be more deeply historicised, but nature (including human nature) is historically contingent.<sup>20</sup>

The relationship between the human and the rest of nature is also a significant area of enquiry in Adorno’s later works. In a famous passage in *Negative Dialectics* Adorno states that “the traditional antithesis of nature and history is both true and false; true in so far as it expresses what the moment of nature underwent; false in so far as it apologetically recapitulates, by conceptual construction, history's concealment of its own natural outgrowth.”<sup>21</sup> The human species has attempted to separate itself from nature (a point discussed below), but overlooks the inherent embeddedness of the human situation, which has been hidden by the attempt to separate the human from nature.

How then does Adorno understand nature? This is to an extent a difficult question to answer, given that Adorno is reluctant to expressly define concepts. Hence his view that all our understandings of nature will be mediated, and partial. It is a central element of his view of negative dialectics that “objects do not go into concepts without leaving a remainder.”<sup>22</sup> This is not to say that for Adorno there are no distinctive features of human society. There is an “external nature” in terms of the material world that surrounds us and an “internal nature” in the sense of our physical embodiment in the world. Yet, in Alison Stone’s words “we humans are also separate from nature inasmuch as we are distinctively cultural, historical beings; we

have produced this separation ourselves, through our efforts to transcend nature.”<sup>23</sup> It is to this separation from nature that I now turn.

### **Nature Disenchanted**

Perhaps the most complete discussion of the emergence of a dualism between human and non-human nature is discussed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno’s combined undertaking.<sup>24</sup> Although this work is impossible to summarise succinctly, at its core is an argument about the development of instrumental reason. For Horkheimer, the features of instrumental reason “can be summarized as the optimum adaptation of means to ends, thinking as an energy conserving operation. It is a pragmatic instrument oriented to expediency, cold and sober.”<sup>25</sup> Instrumental Reason emerges as a result of the human position within the natural world, a position of comparative disadvantage compared to the rest of nature. Humans could only survive and prosper through the development of a greater level of cunning. The need to control nature is underwritten by the “fear of the real overwhelming power of nature.”<sup>26</sup> As such cunning was a reaction to a natural world that was seen as threatening that in response developed into a desire to dominate that world.<sup>27</sup> At this point, according to Vogel “humans implicitly set up a radical distinction between the natural and the human realms.”<sup>28</sup>

Horkheimer and Adorno draw on the myth of Odysseus to illustrate their argument. In order to ensure his own survival, in other words his self-preservation, Odysseus relied on his cunning. In his encounter with Polyphemus, Odysseus, by playing on a double meaning of the Greek word for nobody, saves both himself and his men from being eaten by the Cyclops. Yet the price he pays in doing is to separate himself from the rest of nature.

Horkheimer and Adorno use this myth to illustrate their larger point, that through the use of cunning humans have separated themselves from the rest of nature. What it means to separate the human from the rest of nature was the “extirpation of animism.”<sup>29</sup> As Horkheimer and Adorno argue “Throughout European history the idea of the human being has been expressed in contradistinction to the animal. The latter’s lack of reason is the proof of human dignity.”<sup>30</sup> That which is “animal” and without reason, becomes the standard by which the human species claims its superiority and right to domination.

The need to promote one’s own self-preservation is a complex issue however. Self-preservation is an element of our animal being, and in pursuing our own self-preservation we reveal our animal characteristics.<sup>31</sup> This cannot be split off from our animal self. Hence Adorno argues that rationality “cannot, any more than the subjective authority serving it, the ego, be simply split off from self-preservation.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, rationality is as much a reflection of our animal being as is the drive to self-preservation. Adorno does not seek to minimise or overcome these elements in us as a species, but for human animals, a first step to freedom from such drives would be to acknowledge their natural/animal aspects. As summarised by Cook “to be mindful of nature, we must acknowledge that reason developed as an adaptive response to the threats that the environing world posed to our survival, or that the trajectory of reason has been determined by instinctually driven relations with nature.”<sup>33</sup> Adorno also acknowledges that we now have the technical capability to fulfil those needs for self-preservation for the entire species, so no longer have a need to be dominated by such instincts.<sup>34</sup> Yet this self-preservation drive has culminated, through a desire to dominate nature, in the suppression of that very animal quality that self-preservation implies. We have turned ourselves into the “other” of nature, whereas we are inseparable from the rest of



nature. Ultimately for “Horkheimer and Adorno, reason emerges as the instrument of domination over nature, inner nature and finally social relations between people.”<sup>35</sup>

This separation of the human from the rest of nature requires the denial of the nature that lies within the human. This separation has had a terrible cost both for the species, and for the rest of nature. For the human, the natural elements within (which Adorno calls internal nature), are suppressed. By suppressing these elements, Adorno argues, we allow our instinct for self-preservation to become ever more dominant and, as a result, we descend into a deeper irrationality. As Adorno notes, “reason will be self-preservation running wild and will regress to nature.”<sup>36</sup> This process has a long history: “for thousands of years, human beings have largely sought to subjugate nature in the interest of their own survival, damaging (sometimes irretrievably) both non-human nature and their own inner nature in the process.”<sup>37</sup> Non-human nature has been on the receiving end of an instrumental reason that has seen the rest of nature purely in terms of human ends without a consideration of the value or suffering in nature itself. Furthermore the application of instrumental reason to the rest of nature has been duplicated in human inter-relations. As Gerhardt notes:

A logic that suppresses some or instrumentalizes others creates, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, a condition of possibility for the Holocaust. It is the hierarchy, by which humans are deemed superior by dint of their ability to reason, and animals are deemed inferior because of their inability to reason, that also concomitantly sets up a diametrically opposed relationship between the rational and the irrational, one that must be enforced at all costs.<sup>38</sup>

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno discuss in truly apocalyptic terms the outcome of this division from nature. “The denial of nature in the human,” which they describe as the “core of all civilizing rationality,” results in a “proliferating mythical irrationality.” When “human beings cut themselves off from nature” they undermine the very purposes, self-preservation for which that distinction was intended. The outcome is that “self-preservation destroys the very thing that is to be preserved,” with even more ramifications for the species in that “the antireason of totalitarian capitalism, whose technique of satisfying needs... makes the satisfaction of needs impossible and tends towards the extermination of humanity.”<sup>39</sup>

The immediate form that these negative outcomes take is in the persistence of suffering. Suffering not only in the human community, but, it will be argued here, across the species boundary.

### **Suffering**

Whilst suffering might be a concomitant part of lived existence, for the Frankfurt School thinkers a distinction could be made between “historically superfluous” and “historically necessary” forms of suffering. Whilst in previous eras suffering, due to, as an example, food shortages, may have been an inevitable part of life, in an era when it was technically possible to provide for the needs of all on the planet, the failure to do that was an indication of superfluous suffering that required investigation. Hence “the main object of their theoretical interest was the continued existence of superfluous suffering in a world in which it could actually be abolished.”<sup>40</sup>

Writing in the shadows cast by the Holocaust, or for Adorno “Auschwitz”, and the failed social experiment that comprised Stalinism, it is no surprise that the issue of suffering was an issue that runs through Adorno’s work. It should provide a focus for attention because “to lend a voice to suffering is a condition for all truth.”<sup>41</sup> Historical progress, and in particular the possibility of fulfilling basic human needs has not contributed to a diminution of suffering; if anything human suffering has perhaps become intense with modernity, as evidenced by the death camps and the gulag. A voice needs to be given to this suffering because “perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream.”<sup>42</sup> That we know pain is wrong is clear from our own personal reactions to pain. Pain is something that we would rather avoid. In Adorno’s words we experience a “practical abhorrence of the unbearable physical agony to which individuals are exposed.”<sup>43</sup> Pain is something that we prefer to avoid. It tells us something about the way things are. The focus here is on the very much on the physical experience of pain. This bodily experience is very much an indication that “tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different.”<sup>44</sup>

Auschwitz, Adorno argues had imposed on humanity a new prime directive: to ensure that such events should not happen again.<sup>45</sup> And a focus on the suffering in the camps was important as a reminder of what was possible, and what humanity should strive to avoid. The purpose of such a focus on past events of suffering is to work, above all, against a “forgetfulness that too easily goes along with and justifies what is forgotten.”<sup>46</sup>

Such a concern with suffering does not end at the species boundary. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno write in explicit terms of the suffering of animals in animal experiments, indicating a clear disapproval of such endeavors. Results from

experiments are extracted “without restraint from defenceless animals in their abominable physiological laboratories.” Conclusions are drawn from “mutilated animal bodies.”

“Humans possess reason” which is applied without pity for “the animals from which they draw their bloody conclusions.”<sup>47</sup> In one of his lecture courses, Adorno, agreeing with Schopenhauer, argues that “the establishment of total rationality as the supreme objective principle of mankind might well spell the continuation of that blind domination of nature whose most obvious and tangible expression was to be found in the exploitation and maltreatment of animals.”<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, there may be a direct link between these forms of mistreatment of non-human species with the abuse of fellow humans. Hence “Auschwitz begins wherever someone looks at a slaughterhouse and thinks they're only animals.”<sup>49</sup> There are parallels here to the tendency to compare other social groups to animals in some form or another that has justified colonialism, and genocide. Adorno drew attention to this trend when he argued that “the constantly encountered assertion that savages, blacks, Japanese are like animals, monkeys for example, is the key to the pogrom.”<sup>50</sup>

Andrew Linklater has recently pointed to the overlap between moral considerations across species boundaries being linked to concerns within the human community. He argues that “the assault on ‘speciesism’ - the doctrine that human distress has greater intrinsic moral significance than animal suffering - is part of a larger challenge to the insider-outsider dualisms, or ‘established-outsider relations,’ that have legitimated inflicting pain and suffering in relations within and between communities.”<sup>51</sup> Adorno, Gerhardt observes, suggests that a concern with animal suffering will contribute to a greater awareness of the repressed animal characteristics of the human species.<sup>52</sup>

What then would a focus on non-human animal suffering imply? Clearly we have plenty to discuss if we want to turn our attention of our fellow species, whether that is the slaughter house, laboratory (both of which are identified by Adorno), or in the sixth extinction,<sup>53</sup> which Adorno may have intuited, but was not aware of directly. Certainly at the time of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno were aware of the threats to non-human nature when they observed that “the whole ingenious machinery of modern industrial society is no more than nature dismembering itself.”<sup>54</sup> According to Alison Stone, things suffer when “their needs to develop spontaneously” are “thwarted.”<sup>55</sup> By this definition, the very high rates of extinction (far beyond the expected background rates that would be expected) indicate that nature is suffering very significantly. Focusing on the suffering of the species with which we share the planet should not only be an antidote for human separation from nature. To think in such instrumental terms would return us to a point made by Kant, of which Adorno was highly critical, that humans should not exert undue oppression on non-human animals, but only because this unkindness might be replicated in our relations with our fellow humans. Instead, non-human “perennial” suffering also has as a right to expression in its own right, together with the suffering of human beings.

But how might such suffering be overcome? It is a commonplace that Adorno’s work offers little in the way of resolution to these issues. Yet much of the recent focus on his writing has indicated that, despite the difficulties in bringing about change, Adorno does offer some glimpses of how alternatives might be generated.

## **Reconciliation**

Humans then have used reason as a way of distancing themselves from the rest of nature, and

this separation has been a central element of western thought. In this sense we are confronted by two sets of problems, the way that we think about the rest of nature, and the way that we have repressed the natural elements within us. As a result, “preponderant external nature always lies beyond our conceptual grasp, preponderant internal nature eludes our attempts to repress it.”<sup>56</sup> This internal and external distancing has allowed humans to develop the (erroneous) belief that they are in some way separated from the rest of nature. While Adorno depicts the emergence of reason as a uniquely human attribute, an issue that is certainly open to question,<sup>57</sup> his arguments about the impact of instrumental reason on human and non-nature remain valid regardless of whether we regard rationality as a uniquely human characteristic or not. As we saw in the last section, for Adorno the development of this perception of separation has been disastrous both for humans and for the rest of nature. Yet, in what may at first seem paradoxical, is a completely *natural* development. The human drive for self-preservation which, in Adorno’s account is the explanation for the emergence of consciousness and reason is very much a part of nature. As Adorno notes, “the suppression of nature for human ends is a mere natural relationship, which is why the supremacy of nature-controlling reason and its principle is an illusion.”<sup>58</sup> Given this view, that self-preservation, the force which appears to be driving us towards disaster, is entirely nature, how can it be possible to avert the looming catastrophe?

Drawing upon Adorno for an exit plan is confronted by two difficulties. Firstly there is the commonly held view that Adorno is ultimately deeply pessimistic about the human situation under late capitalism, and that his writings offer *no* possibilities for the amelioration of our situation. Furthermore, Adorno was quite clear that he was not going to offer a political programme, fearing that to do so would contribute further to the reification of society.

Without a doubt Adorno *is* deeply pessimistic about the human condition. However, rather

than taking this as a statement that positive change is impossible, we could take it as an acknowledgement of the inherent difficulties that projects for progressive change confront. Given the history of projects which claimed to be aimed at human emancipation but ended in forms of barbarity, the problems confronting political projects should not be underestimated. And indeed, recent writers have unearthed more “practical” aspects to his work.<sup>59</sup>

The notion of reconciliation is one that is a running theme throughout Adorno’s work. In relation to the rest of nature, this involves both a reconciliation, or rather acceptance of internal nature, and a reconciliation with external nature, or the environment in which we exist. With reference to internal nature, Adorno is again perhaps paradoxical. In order to gain “autonomy” from nature, humans need to accept their place as part of nature. For Adorno, Deborah Cook notes:

Reconciliation with nature requires that individuals reflect on themselves as part of nature – both to acquire a better understanding of their dependence on nature, and to achieve a greater autonomy with respect to it. The ego will become more autonomous only when it recognizes that it is not omnipotent, not completely master of its own house, but driven by impulses that it can neither dispense with nor eradicate.<sup>60</sup>

It is only through an acceptance of the animal characteristics within, that we can ultimately capture our humanity. The attempt to repress animal characteristics is also a restriction on our humanity itself. Hence a recognition of nature, in the form of the other within will also “allow a recognition of the humanity, too.”<sup>61</sup>

Central to this process is the development of critical thought, an activity that Adorno considered should be the core of educational practices. In his later work, and in particular lectures given on German radio, Adorno stressed the importance of education in developing a critical self-awareness. Adorno discusses education in two senses, first the work of teachers, and secondly more broadly in the sense of a more radical transformation of thinking processes within society.<sup>62</sup> The latter can work towards the overcoming of the “coldness” that we require to survive in late capitalist society – a coldness that affects both our inter-human relations and our relations with other species.<sup>63</sup> It is this coldness that allows large-scale human rights abuses and our maltreatment of other species. There is a problem in that it is “critical thought” which has brought us to the impasse that we have reached, in the sense that it is critical thought in the form of instrumental reason that has led to the human belief in domination both of non-human nature and inter-human relations. According to Stone, however it is possible to “say both that critical thought has always served domination and has been fundamentally shaped by this function (so that it is not simply a neutral form of thought which they can adopt unquestioningly), and that critical thought can, with vigilance, be employed in ways that gradually change its own hitherto existing status as a tool of self-preservation.”<sup>64</sup>

It is how this might be achieved that is the central concern of *Negative Dialectics*. Adorno is critical of the way that humans consider that our concepts capture the uniqueness of objects. This feature is particularly relevant in terms of the rest of nature, and it is our belief that concepts capture objects that is at the heart of our belief that we can control nature. The purpose of negative dialectics, or non-identarian thinking is to heighten our awareness of that remainder which our concepts do not capture. It is also to point out that the object has priority. For Adorno, it is “by passing to the object’s preponderance that dialectics is



rendered materialistic.”<sup>65</sup> The purpose of such an undertaking is to allow “critical reflection on our concepts [that] can make us palpably aware that our domination of nature is ethically wrong, an awareness which distances us from our pursuit of self-preservation and so alters the motivational background that shapes future exercises of critical thinking.”<sup>66</sup>

In seeking a reconciliation with nature, both within and without, Adorno is not seeking a recovery of some form of pristine nature. Overcoming our exploitative relationship with nature will not turn back the clock to some previous stage because “there is no pristine inner nature awaiting release from repression.”<sup>67</sup> External and internal nature have both been affected by the passage of time and the changing sets of social relations associated with late capitalism. Hence “neither inner nor outer nature subsists in a latent form untouched by history, which may one day be recuperated in its original prelapsarian state.”<sup>68</sup> While humans have created a disenchantment with nature, identarian thought has produced a different form of enchantment. Hence in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno are “as critical of nature’s re-enchantment as of its disenchantment; this is because they believe that experiences of nature as enchanted are a necessary consequence of the modern intensification of disenchantment.”<sup>69</sup> We can only change our relationship with the rest of nature from the position that we are now in, rather than set the clock back to some previous condition.

In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno encourages maintaining a proximity to the “alien” whilst allowing the other to be distant and different.<sup>70</sup> In other words to have a care and attention to that which is not us, while not attempting to constrain that which is different from us by identarian thought. As Wilford observes, “Adorno's normative contribution lies in the insight that persons and things do not fit perfectly together (in fact, their perfect equality would be

the result of a violent oppression); between them is a space of nonidentity that once realized, encourages a humble critical distance and an openness to the radical Other.”<sup>71</sup> It is through critical thought and such an openness that we may be able to transform the situation which we confront.

### **To be a “good animal”: Negative Dialectics and Posthumanism in International Relations**

In a critique of Kantian morality, Adorno observes that “Kantian ethics – which accords affection, not respect to animals – can muster only disdain: to try to live so that one may believe himself to have been a good animal.”<sup>72</sup> Discussing this somewhat cryptic comment, Christopher Menke notes that “the action stemming from a feeling of solidarity is the action of a ‘good animal.’”<sup>73</sup> That Adorno chooses to use the term animal in this sense (rather than human) suggests that he wants to emphasize the embeddedness of the human within the rest of nature.

There has been a recent interest in posthumanism within the discipline of international relations. While the term posthumanism is an equivocal one, and open to multiple definitions,<sup>74</sup> the term is used here to indicate an approach to international politics that acknowledges the embedded character of human systems within multiple other animate and non-animate systems. This view highlights that human systems are co-dependent on interactions with other species. Such an approach is deeply influenced by complexity thinking and advocates a non-Newtonian approach to understanding the relationships between complex adaptive systems.<sup>75</sup> While to subsume Adornian concerns and thinking within a posthuman approach would probably be an act of identarian thinking, bringing some

of Adorno's insights to bear on recent thinking within a posthuman framework could result in a positive outcome.

From the discussion so far, it is clear that Adorno's analysis is deeply embedded within a discussion of human/rest of nature relations. He considers the distancing of human relations from the rest of nature as both a mistake and potentially disastrous. Such a perspective takes a similar position to much of the recent literature on posthumanism. Whilst there has been less of a tendency to overlook internal nature, and in particular the disastrous impacts of attempting to repress this, there is an acknowledgement of the human as species of animal. A remarkable animal, but not in any sense unique. Donna Haraway has done much to draw attention to the challenges that have confronted human notions of exceptionalism, whether in Copernican astronomy, Darwin's theory of evolution, Freudian psychology or the rise of cybernetics.<sup>76</sup> All of these revelations have contributed to the challenge to the Western and enlightenment view that the human species stands apart from the rest of nature. While, as already noted, Adorno claimed that there was an element of exceptionalism in the human, with regard to the emergence of consciousness, this is an area that much in the way of posthumanist analysis would dispute. While various tests have been made to assess the rationality of non-human species, many of these tests reflect a human perception and priority on the world.

By giving priority to the object, Adorno's work can also be seen as a pre-cursor to the newly emerging field of "new materialism."<sup>77</sup> New materialism can be seen as reaction to the linguistic turn in the social sciences, bringing attention back, in part at least, to the material basis of existence. Likewise Adorno counselled the need to "break through the deception of

constitutive subjectivity,” and the purpose of his negative dialectics was to do just that, in the same ways that new materialism also intends to bring back a concern with issues of matter.<sup>78</sup>

Adorno, also is very concerned about the impacts of human activity on the rest of nature, seeing, rather presciently given his death in 1969, the possibility of environmental disaster having considerable threat for life on the planet in general. Adorno notes that “the complete reification of the world... is indistinguishable from an additional catastrophic event caused by human beings, in which nature has been wiped out and after which nothing more grows anymore.”<sup>79</sup> While the claim that a future in which “nature has been wiped out” might be an overemphasis of human power, the point that Adorno is making reflects a concern, shared with much posthumanist writing about the negative impacts of human activity on the rest of nature.<sup>80</sup>

Furthermore Adorno, both in his own writing, particularly in his work with Horkheimer provides us with an account of how this disastrous situation has come about. In fact their argument about relations between human and non-human nature is crucial to their arguments regarding the current situation of society. It was the attempts to master nature, driven by a need for self-preservation that has led to the development of a human drive to dominate other human beings, and the process of a separation from nature that has resulted in the disastrous suppression of both internal and external nature. This drive for self-preservation Adorno acknowledges is an entirely natural feature. However humanity has now reached the point where self-preservation is within our reach: humanity has the technological capacity to fulfil the needs of the entirety of the human population. However the drive to self-preservation is driving us on a path to ever greater acquisitiveness, thus pushing us into ever greater exploitation of the human and non-human systems within which we live.

Confronted by the totally reified, totally administered society might give one cause to give up hope of the emergence of a more rational society, however it is apparent that however pessimistic Adorno is about the human potential for avoiding disaster we should not ultimately despair.<sup>81</sup> A reconciliation both with internal and external nature is possible. As with much of the posthumanist literature, Adorno stresses an acknowledgement of the human position within nature both internally as well as externally as the keystone to overcoming the current situation. Cook summarises this position as, “the dominators of nature are themselves dominated by nature because domination is impelled by nature itself in the form of the instinct for self-preservation. To advance beyond our current predicament... we must first acknowledge that what now counts as progress has become self-vitiating... the preservation of humanity requires the transformation of society.”<sup>82</sup>

How then might one consider oneself to have been a “good animal”? In a recent discussion of what he calls *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy* Fabian Freyenhagen attempts to draw some elements of practice from Adorno’s thinking. His starting point is Adorno’s statement that “there is no right life within the wrong,” or as Freyenhagen states it, the “no right living thesis.”<sup>83</sup> Freyenhagen’s interprets this in the customary way to mean that under capitalism it is not possible to live a full and moral life; we are all complicit with a system that is deeply unfair and exploitative. This does not mean that within this context that it is not possible to live more or less wrongly, and, given this, Freyenhagen explores the notion that we could aim to live less wrongly.

What might living less wrongly comprise of? Freyenhagen points to various elements. First he points to Adorno’s discussion of living a “suspended life,” which he expands to take in the

idea of “*not* to be at home in this world and life.”<sup>84</sup> By this he means that we should maintain a distance from the world. This is not to absent ourselves from the world or undergo a total withdrawal. Such a withdrawal is also living wrongly, because it fails to challenge existing circumstances. Rather we should aim to consider our involvement in the world, and the extent to which our actions are complicit with a society that we perceive to be unjust, unequal and destructive of the rest of nature. While this may not result in a direct change to that system, and individually it is probably impossible to work such a transformation, “nonetheless, such a suspension is the only thing left to work for and a necessary condition for there being any change.”<sup>85</sup>

A second element in terms of living less wrongly would be to consider the relevance of what Adorno described, in *Negative Dialectics*, as a new prime directive. This involved the responsibility on humanity to ensure that nothing akin to the holocaust be allowed to occur again. In terms of international relations, this suggest a clear focus on where the concerns of the discipline should lie, but given the concerns with the rest of nature I have discussed here it also be possible to expand this concern beyond the species level. As Calvin Thomas observes, “Adorno... calls for a reactivation of a fundamental human capacity – a capacity without which the word ‘human’ in the sense not of ‘humanist’ but of ‘humane’ could hardly apply: the capacity to suffer and to recognize the suffering of others.”<sup>86</sup>

For Adorno, to expose suffering was a condition for speaking truthfully. Furthermore, he recognized that suffering was not only a concern within the human species. The writing discussed previously from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and his concern that when we think of animals led to the slaughterhouse as “only animals,” then it is clear that Adorno had concerns which extended across the species boundary.

## **Conclusion**

This article makes the claim that Adorno provides an important resource for underpinning a posthuman account of international relations. His work is suffused with a concern and an analysis of human relations with the rest of nature, and signals the dangers of a continued disenchantment with nature. In his work with Horkheimer there is a significant analysis of the form in which the human divide from the rest of nature occurs, a feature of existence that Adorno laments in much of his later work. Adorno also signals the difficulties in reversing the form of society that has emerged, and his concerns about the limits on our actions in a totally administered society are ones that emancipatory projects need to be aware of.

However, despite his reputation, Adorno does offer some glimpses that things could be otherwise: that a reconciliation can occur both within the species and across the boundaries between the species of human nature. While wrong life cannot be lived rightly, there is the possibility for living less wrongly.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> From the song “The return home of the mammoth with a trunk,” composed by Adorno in February 1941 to mark Horkheimer's return to New York. See Christina Gerhardt, “Thinking With: Animals in Schopenhauer, Horkheimer and Adorno,” in *Critical Theory and Animal Liberation*, ed. John Sanbonmatsu (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 139.

<sup>2</sup> Lutkehaus, cited in Robert Savage, “Adorno’s Family and Other Animals,” *Thesis Eleven* 78, no. 1, (2004): 102.

<sup>3</sup> Eduardo Mendiata, “Animal is to Kantianism as Jew is to Fascism: Adorno’s Bestiary,” in *Critical Theory and Animal Liberation*, ed. John Sanbonmatsu (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 150.

<sup>4</sup> Detlev Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno: One Last Genius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Alan How, *Critical Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), 172.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Claussen, *Adorno*, 240.

<sup>7</sup> See Mendiata, “Animal is to Kantianism as Jew is to Fascism,” 149.

<sup>8</sup> Gerhardt, “Thinking With,” 138.



---

<sup>9</sup> See, for example Daniel J. Levine, *Recovering International Relations: The Promise of Sustainable Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Matthew Fluck, "Truth, Values and the Value of Truth in Critical International Relations Theory," *Millennium* 39, no. 2, (2010). Linklater's more recent work has also engaged with Adornoian themes. See Andrew Linklater, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics: Theoretical Investigations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> The literature here is enormous, but in particular see J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2001); Deborah Cook, *Adorno, Habermas and the Search for a Rational Society* (Routledge, 2004); Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (Durham, NC: Acumen, 2011); E. Hammer, "Minding the World," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 26, no. 1, (2000).

<sup>11</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 119.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 234.

<sup>13</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Mendiata, "Animal is to Kantianism as Jew is to Fascism," 159.

---

<sup>15</sup> Theodor Adorno, “The Idea of Natural-History,” in Robert Hullot-Kentnor, ed., *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 252, 259.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 253.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 260.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 260, emphasis in original.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 264.

<sup>20</sup> Bernstein, *Adorno*, 189.

<sup>21</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1990), 358.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>23</sup> Alison Stone, “Adorno and the Disenchantment of Nature,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 32, no. 2, (2006): 233.

<sup>24</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in How, *Critical Theory*, 29.

---

<sup>26</sup> Stefan Muller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography* (Oxford: Polity, 2005), 283.

<sup>24</sup> Also see Stone, "Adorno and the Disenchantment of Nature," 233-234.

<sup>28</sup> Steven Vogel, *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 52.

<sup>29</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 203.

<sup>31</sup> Deborah Cook, "Nature Becoming Conscious of Itself: Adorno on Self-Reflection," *Philosophy Today* 50, no. 3, (2006), 297.

<sup>32</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 272.

<sup>33</sup> Cook, "Nature Becoming Conscious of Itself", 301.

<sup>34</sup> Adorno, *Critical Models*, 144; Ernesto Verdeja, "Adorno's Mimesis and Its Limitations for Critical Social Thought," *European Journal of Political Theory* 8, no. 4, (2009), 502.

<sup>35</sup> Verdeja "Adorno's Mimesis", 498.

---

<sup>36</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 289.

<sup>37</sup> Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 27.

<sup>38</sup> Christine Gerhardt, "The Ethics of Animals in Adorno and Kafka," *New German Critique* 97, (2006), 176-7.

<sup>39</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 42-3.

<sup>40</sup> Raymond Geuss, "Suffering and Knowledge in Adorno," *Constellations* 12, no. 1, (2005), 4.

<sup>41</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 17-18.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 362.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 365.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 203.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 365.

<sup>46</sup> Theodor Adorno, "What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?" in Geoffrey H. Hartman, ed., *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 125.

---

<sup>47</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 204.

<sup>48</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2000), 145.

<sup>49</sup> Adorno, cited in John Sanbonmatsu, "Introduction," in *Critical Theory and Animal Liberation*, ed. John Sanbonmatsu (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 10.

<sup>50</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on Damaged Life* (London: Verso Books, 2005), 105.

<sup>51</sup> Linklater, *The Problem of Harm*, 92.

<sup>52</sup> Gerhardt, "The Ethics of Animals in Adorno and Kafka," 169.

<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).

<sup>54</sup> Horkheimer, & Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 210.

<sup>55</sup> Stone, "Adorno and the Disenchantment of Nature", 236.

<sup>56</sup> Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 3.

<sup>57</sup> Susan Hurley and Matthew Nudds, *Rational Animals?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

---

<sup>58</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 179.

<sup>59</sup> Fabian Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>60</sup> Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 55.

<sup>61</sup> Gerhardt, "The Ethics of Animals in Adorno and Kafka," 178.

<sup>62</sup> Daniel K Cho, "Adorno on Education or, Can Critical Self-Reflection Prevent the Next Auschwitz?" *Historical Materialism* 17, no. 1, (2009), 85.

<sup>63</sup> For a detailed discussion of the notion of coldness in Adorno's work see Simon Mussell, "Pervaded By a Chill': The Dialectic of Coldness in Adorno's Social Theory," *Thesis Eleven* 117, no. 1, (2013).

<sup>64</sup> Stone, "Adorno and the Disenchantment of Nature," 240.

<sup>65</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 192. For a comprehensive discussions of negative dialectics see Brian O'Connor, *Adorno's Negative Dialectic : Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2004).

<sup>66</sup> Stone, "Adorno and the Disenchantment of Nature," 240.

---

<sup>67</sup> Bernstein, *Adorno*, 200.

<sup>68</sup> Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 22.

<sup>69</sup> Stone, "Adorno and the Disenchantment of Nature," 239.

<sup>70</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 191.

<sup>71</sup> Justin Wilford, "Toward a Morality of Materiality," *Space and Culture* 11, no. 4, (2008), 419.

<sup>72</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 299.

<sup>73</sup> Christoph Menke, "Genealogy and Critique: Two Forms of Ethical Questioning of Morality," in Tom Huhn, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 320.

<sup>74</sup> For discussions of the term posthumanism see Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, "Liberation for Straw Dogs? Old Materialism, New Materialism, and the Challenge of an Emancipatory Posthumanism," *Globalizations* 12, no. 1 (2015), 134-148; Stephen Hobden, "Posthumanism," in *Critical Environmental Politics*, ed. Carl Death (London: Routledge, 2014), 175-183.

<sup>75</sup> Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, *Posthuman International Relations: Complexity, Ecologism and Global Politics* (London: Zed, 2011).

---

<sup>76</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 12-13.

<sup>77</sup> For a good overview and introduction to the field see Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>78</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, xx.

<sup>79</sup> Adorno, quoted in Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 102.

<sup>80</sup> Alan Weisman, for example, points out that nature will start 'house cleaning' as soon as humanity disappears. See Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (Virgin Books, 2008).

<sup>81</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 167

<sup>82</sup> Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 107-8.

<sup>83</sup> Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, 53.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 163.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 164.



---

<sup>86</sup> Cited in Renée Heberle, “Living with Negative Dialectics: Feminism and the Politics of Suffering,” in Renée Heberle, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Theodor Adorno* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 225.