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Adorno's Animal Philosophy

By

Jonathan Hollingsworth

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of Philosophy
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2020

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Adorno's Animal Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the theme of animals in Adorno's philosophy through an examination of his critique of Kant.

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First and foremost I would like to thank Dr. Deborah Cook for agreeing to supervise me into her retirement. She has been a model philosopher for me since I discovered her work as an undergraduate in Virginia, and working with her now has been one of the greatest privileges of my academic career. Without her encouragement I would not have had the confidence to carry out what often felt like the overwhelming task of writing a thesis.

I am especially thankful to Dr. Radu Neculau for his invaluable guidance and mentorship during my time at the University of Windsor. The patience and care with which he handles both the professional and personal concerns of the graduate students cannot be overstated. I would also like to thank Dr. Amy Fitzgerald for agreeing to review this thesis, and for her flexibility regarding the scheduling and logistics surrounding the virtual format of the defense.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing in the mid-twentieth century, philosopher and Frankfurt School critical theorist Theodor W. Adorno was an early critic of humanity's destructive relationship to the natural world and its inhabitants. Much has been written in the secondary literature about Adorno's attempts to theorize and problematize the domination of "nature" (broadly conceived). His critique of the domination of animals, however, has often been neglected. In this thesis I argue that Adorno's sensitivity to animal suffering informs his thought to a greater extent than commentators have previously recognized. Although at first glance it may seem that animals occupy only a marginal position in Adorno's work, upon closer inspection one discovers that references to animals occur throughout his corpus in relation to a wide variety of his concerns. As I intend to show, animals are essential for understanding Adorno's views on history, aesthetics, ethics, and more.

In addition to criticizing the exploitation of animals in society, Adorno challenges the way that animals have traditionally been conceived in Western philosophy. Accordingly, my examination of the animal theme in Adorno centers around his critique of Immanuel Kant, for it is primarily through his critique of Kant's moral attitude concerning animals that Adorno's own animal philosophy emerges.

Chapter One establishes the background necessary to appreciate Adorno's critique by offering an overview of Kantian animal ethics. Adorno was neither the first nor the last philosopher to take issue with the treatment of animals in Kant's moral philosophy. Among other things, Kant has been criticized for referring to animals as "things," "instruments," and "mere

means,” as well as for arguing that human beings have no direct moral obligations to animals.

Although Kantian moral philosophy does set limits on how we may use animals, these limits are grounded in duties we have to each other. To understand why some have taken issue with this, consider what Kant says about our duty to refrain from treating animals with cruelty. According to Kant, animal cruelty is wrong not because of the harm it causes the animal, but because of the psychological harm it may cause the abuser. Kant’s concern is that if we inure ourselves to animal suffering we may become equally numb to the suffering of other humans. In this way, Kant’s animal ethics are fundamentally anthropocentric. We have an obligation to our fellow humans to treat animals humanely, but no such obligation to the animals themselves.

Adorno’s critique of Kant treads familiar territory in some respects, but it also goes further than most in that it identifies a deeper issue with Kant’s moral philosophy that helps to explain some of his objectionable conclusions about animals. According to Adorno, Kant’s view of the human-animal relationship is informed by his disdain for the animality of the human being. Kant’s antipathy toward the human being’s animal likeness leads him to erect a boundary between the human and the animal. One consequence of this boundary is that it prevents the human from extending compassion to its fellow creatures.

Chapter Two focuses primarily on Adorno’s critique of a central concept in Kant’s moral philosophy: human dignity. By ascribing dignity exclusively to human beings, Kant effectively separates them from nature and raises them above the other animals. Adorno argues that the concept of human dignity is ideologically suspect because it reinforces a speciesist hierarchy. In addition, it conceals the fact that humans themselves are also animals, and this leads to other problems that are taken up in the third and final chapter.

Chapter Three considers Adorno's charge that Kantian idealism presents a warped view of animality. Kant's exaggerated distinction between the human and the animal gives rise to a faulty conception of the human as a free and purely rational being that has transcended its instinctual nature. In turn, animals are conceived as fundamentally irrational creatures that are doomed to slavishly obey their own instincts.

Adorno argues that Kant's contempt for the animal is directed equally at the animal within the human. Indeed, Kant vacillates between denying the human being's animal likeness and invoking that likeness to insult individuals who do not meet his threshold of personhood. Kant's tendency to revile the animality of the human being leads Adorno to regard Kantian idealism as a precursor to fascism. By insulting the human as an animal, Kant engages in the same behavior that the Nazis would later adopt to persecute European Jews.

In response to the failures of the Kantian system, Adorno offers the concept of "animal likeness" (*Tierähnlichkeit*) as a corrective. By reflecting on our likeness to animals (an act that is discouraged in Kant), possibilities for improved relations with other animals become available. Adorno seeks to foster reconciliation between humans and animals, as well as between humans and our own animal nature, by encouraging us to embrace our animal likeness.

CHAPTER ONE:
KANT'S ANIMAL ETHICS

In this chapter I discuss the place of animals in Kant's moral philosophy.¹ To begin, I consider Kant's speculative account of the origin of reason in human beings. Kant believes that before they discovered the power of reason, our ancestors lived a mere animal life as slaves to instinct. Reason enabled them to free themselves from the compulsion of their instinctual nature and allowed them to distinguish themselves from their fellow creatures (who remained in bondage to nature). According to Kant, reason not only separates human beings from other animals but also marks them out as the ultimate end of nature and grants them dominion over the animal kingdom.

Next, I focus on Kant's concept of human dignity and discuss how it informs his understanding of the relation between humans and animals. Kant argues that as rational beings, humans are able to engage in moral reasoning and act according to moral principles. On account of this ability, human beings have intrinsic value or "dignity." Since animals are nonrational

¹ My account of Kant in this chapter is primarily an account of Adorno's post-metaphysical interpretation of Kant's philosophy. There are several reasons why Adorno interprets Kant in this way. One is simply this: after the anti-metaphysical turn in philosophy, certain aspects of Kant's practical philosophy and philosophy of history become impossible to accept. Accordingly, Adorno offers an interpretation of Kant that is based on what is left of Kant's philosophy once the metaphysics are removed from it. Another reason why Adorno opts for a mostly non-metaphysical reading of Kant is because he believes it is this version of Kant's philosophy that has caused the most harm politically and is therefore the most deserving of criticism. Consequently, many of Adorno's criticisms of Kant are not criticisms of Kant's actual philosophy but rather of the misappropriation and regressive political instrumentalization of his philosophy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (I would like to thank Dr. Radu Neculau for assisting in the clarification of these points.)

beings, according to Kant, they cannot be moral agents and therefore lack dignity. Consequently, human beings are not obliged to treat animals with respect, but instead may use them as mere means to their own ends. As we shall see, Kant's separation of humanity from animality leaves him unable to reconcile the human being's dignified rational nature with its undignified animal nature.

Lastly, I examine Kant's approach to animal ethics and explain how he determines what kinds of actions toward animals are morally permissible. Although Kant maintains that we have "indirect duties" regarding animals and are not permitted to ruthlessly exploit them, critics have argued that Kant's indirect duties fail to ground adequate moral concern for animals. To conclude, I briefly consider Adorno's positive assessment of Arthur Schopenhauer's critique of Kantian animal ethics.

I

In "Conjectural Beginning of Human History," Kant uses the story of Adam and Eve's departure from the Garden of Eden as a model to speculate about humanity's emergence from its animal past. His narrative begins with human beings in a state of nature: "Instinct, that *voice of God* which all animals obey, must alone have guided [them]."² Eventually, our ancestors felt the first stirrings of reason, and over time they discovered they could use their rational faculties to defy their natural impulses and make choices that were not governed by instinct. This marked a

² Immanuel Kant, "Conjectural Beginning of Human History," in *Anthropology, History, and Education*, ed. Günter Zöllner and Robert B. Loudon, trans. Mary Gregor, Paul Guyer, Robert B. Loudon, Holly Wilson, Allen W. Wood, Günter Zöllner, and Arnulf Zweig (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 165.

turning point in human history. Once they experienced a taste of freedom, it was impossible for them to return to a life of servitude “under the dominion of instinct.”³

The birth and gradual development of reason placed an ever-widening gulf between human beings and the rest of nature. Describing the moment when human beings first distinguished themselves from other animals, Kant writes:

The [...] last step that reason took in elevating the human being entirely above the society with animals was that he comprehended (however obscurely) that he was the genuine *end of nature*, and that in this nothing that lives on earth can supply a competitor to him. The first time he said to the sheep: *Nature has given you the skin you wear not for you but for me*, then took it off the sheep and put it on himself (*Genesis 3:21*), he became aware of a prerogative that he had by his nature over all animals, which he now no longer regarded as his fellow creatures, but rather as means and instruments given over to his will for the attainment of his discretionary aims.⁴

As we shall see, Kant tempers the above remarks in his ethical writings when he places moral restrictions on how we may use animals. Nevertheless, the idea that animals exist for the benefit of humankind is one that Kant held consistently throughout his work.

In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant further develops the idea that human beings are the ultimate end of nature. Starting from the premise that everything in nature is interconnected as means and ends, Kant argues that if we examine any natural being and ask ourselves why it exists, we are led to the conclusion that it exists not for its own sake but for the sake of something else. We find, for example, that plants exist for the nourishment of herbivorous animals, and that herbivores in turn exist for the nourishment of carnivores. But in the end, the question arises: for whom or what does the whole of nature exist? Kant answers:

For the human being, for the diverse uses which his understanding teaches him to make

³ Kant, “Conjectural Beginning of Human History,” 166.

⁴ Kant, “Conjectural Beginning of Human History,” 167.

of all these creatures; and he is the ultimate end of the creation here on earth, because he is the only being on earth who forms a concept of ends for himself and who by means of his reason can make a system of ends out of an aggregate of purposively formed things.⁵

Further on, he adds:

Man is indeed the only being on earth that has understanding and hence an ability to set himself purposes of his own choice, and in this respect he holds the title of lord of nature; and if we regard nature as a teleological system, then it is man's vocation to be the ultimate purpose of nature.⁶

According to Kant, nature exists for the sake of human beings because we alone have the capacity to set ends for ourselves. The connection between these two ideas may not be entirely obvious, so let me try to explain. As we have already seen, Kant believes that reason gives us the ability to make choices independent of instinct. Consequently, we can set ends for ourselves that extend beyond the ends of mere survival. Kant seems to think that the ends of nonrational beings are much more closely tied to the satisfaction of their immediate needs, and therefore the kinds of things that can serve as means for plants and animals are relatively limited. But for the human being whose ends are potentially endless, everything in nature is potentially a means. For Kant, these are sufficient reasons to conclude that nature exists to be appropriated for whatever ends human beings may set for themselves.

II

So far we have seen that Kant distinguishes human beings from other animals primarily on ontological grounds: unlike animals, human beings have a rational nature that gives them

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 294-295.

⁶ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 318.

autonomy with respect to their instincts. But in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant draws a further distinction, this time along moral lines, in order to establish that humans are not to be counted among the beings in nature that may be treated as mere means:

Beings the existence of which rests not on our will but on nature, if they are beings without reason, still have only a relative worth, as means, and are therefore called *things*, whereas rational beings are called *persons* because their nature already marks them out as an end in itself, that is, as something that may not be used merely as a means, and hence so far limits all choice (and is an object of respect).⁷

Kant believes that human beings have an absolute and unconditional value that derives from their rational nature. As ends in themselves, rational beings are to be regarded as “persons” worthy of respect. In contrast, beings devoid of reason, such as animals, are to be regarded as mere “things” whose worth derives solely from their usefulness to humans.

Kant expresses the distinction between persons and things once more in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, where he links personhood to the concept of dignity:

The fact that the human being can have the “I” in his representations raises him infinitely above all other living beings on earth. Because of this he is a *person*, and by virtue of the unity of consciousness through all changes that happen to him, one and the same person —i.e., through rank and dignity an entirely different beings from *things*, such as irrational animals, with which one can do as one likes.⁸

The concept of dignity is key to understanding Kant’s view that human beings have intrinsic value. He writes in the *Groundwork*:

In the kingdom of ends everything has either a *price* or a *dignity*. What has a price can be replaced by something else as its *equivalent*; what on the other hand is raised above all

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor, trans. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 79.

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, in *Anthropology, History, and Education*, ed. Günter Zöllner and Robert B. Loudon, trans. Mary Gregor, Paul Guyer, Robert B. Loudon, Holly Wilson, Allen W. Wood, Günter Zöllner, and Arnulf Zweig (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 239.

price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity. What is related to general human inclinations and needs has a *market price*; [...] but that which constitutes the condition under which alone something can be an end in itself has not merely a relative worth, that is, a price, but an inner worth, that is, *dignity*.⁹

Since animals are nothing more than “instruments” and “mere means,” they are to be valued in terms of their market price, whereas the human being, by virtue of its dignity, is never to be valued merely as a commodity.

It is important to note that despite his emphasis on the dignity of the human being, Kant does not attribute dignity to the *whole* human being. In fact, he suggests in *The Metaphysics of Morals* that the animality of the human being is devoid of dignity:

In the system of nature, a human being is a being of slight importance and shares with the rest of the animals, as offspring of the earth, an ordinary value. Although a human being has, in his understanding, something more than they and can set himself ends, even this gives him only an *extrinsic* value for his usefulness; that is to say, it gives one man a higher value than another, that is, a *price* as of a commodity in exchange with these animals as things [...]. But a human being regarded as a *person*, that is, as the subject of a morally practical reason, is exalted above any price; for as a person he is not to be valued merely as a means to the ends of others or even to his own ends, but as an end in itself, that is, he possesses a *dignity* (an absolute inner worth) by which he exacts *respect* for himself from all other rational beings in the world.¹⁰

As we saw earlier, Kant believes that our capacity to set ends for ourselves authorizes us to use the natural world for our own purposes. But here he suggests that while this capacity gives us an advantage over the other animals, it is not for that reason the source of our dignity. Rather, what makes us more valuable than the other animals is our capacity to set ends for ourselves in accordance with moral principles. In other words, it is our moral capacity that gives us dignity.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant insists that reason should not be divorced from

⁹ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 84.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor, trans. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 557.

morality, claiming that the human being who “use[s] reason merely as a tool for the satisfaction of his needs” is no better than an animal.¹¹ He continues:

[R]eason does not at all raise [the human being] in worth above mere animality if [it] is to serve him only for the sake of what instinct accomplishes for animals; reason would in that case be only a particular mode nature had used to equip the human being for the same end to which it has destined animals, without destining him to a higher end.¹²

According to Kant, the “higher end” reason has destined for human beings is moral perfection. In Kantian ethics, a morally perfect individual is someone whose motives for acting dutifully are not determined by instincts, impulses, or other inclinations that belong to the human as an animal being.

In Kant’s view, only actions that are performed from a sense of duty have moral worth. Doing the right thing simply because one feels inclined to do so is not sufficient. An action must be motivated by duty in order to have moral worth, otherwise it cannot be considered a moral action (even if it is done in conformity with duty). Kant illustrates this point in the *Groundwork* with the example of a philanthropist who is beneficent to others despite being “cold and indifferent to [their] sufferings.”¹³ Kant declares that “the worth of [the philanthropist’s] character comes out, which is moral and incomparably the highest, namely that he is beneficent not from inclination but from duty.”¹⁴

Since inclinations are inferior sources of motivation for moral action, Kant thinks that we

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor, trans. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 189.

¹² Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 189-190.

¹³ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 54.

¹⁴ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 54.

should strive as much as possible to act independently of them. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, he argues that moral perfection consists in “the *purity* of one’s disposition to duty, namely, in the [moral] law being by itself alone the incentive, even without the admixture of aims derived from sensibility, and in actions being done not only in conformity with duty but also *from duty*.”¹⁵ Striving for moral perfection, then, involves cultivating a moral disposition by acting solely on the motive of duty.

For Kant, the motive of duty is a purely rational (and therefore moral) motive. Inclinations, on the other hand, are not rational but “blind,” and can cloud our moral reasoning.¹⁶ Even “feeling[s] of compassion and tender sympathy” are burdensome in this respect, and Kant says that “right-thinking persons” are better off without them.¹⁷ In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, he claims that we cannot realize our humanity unless we overcome our inclinations: “A human being has a duty to raise himself from the crude state of his nature, from his animality, more and more toward humanity, by which he alone is capable of setting himself ends.”¹⁸ Only by subordinating our impulses and instincts to the moral law can we set ends for ourselves that are rational and moral.

Given his low view of inclinations, it is unsurprising that Kant does not consider the animality of the human being to have dignity. In fact, he claims in the *Groundwork* that inclinations “are so far from having an absolute worth [...] that it must instead be the universal

¹⁵ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 566.

¹⁶ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 235.

¹⁷ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 235.

¹⁸ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 518.

wish of every rational being to be altogether free from them.”¹⁹ Ultimately, Kant believes that “morality, and humanity insofar as it is capable of morality, is that which alone has dignity.”²⁰

Due to the way that his system is structured, Kant is unable to reconcile human dignity with human animality. As a result, he is forced to divide human nature in such a way that rational nature can be regarded independently of animal nature. Kant attempts to do this in *The Metaphysics of Morals*:

[The human being] can and should value himself by a low as well as by a high standard, depending on whether he views himself as a sensible being (in terms of his animal nature) or as an intelligible being (in terms of his moral predisposition). Since he must regard himself not only as a person generally but also as a *human being*, that is, as a person who has duties his own reason lays upon him, his insignificance as a *human animal* may not infringe upon his consciousness of his dignity as a *rational human being*, and he should not disavow the moral self-esteem of such a being.²¹

The distinction between the sensible being and the intelligible being also appears in the *Groundwork*, although in that text the distinction is much more radical. Kant argues that there are two ways the human being can regard itself: either as a sensible being belonging to the world of sense, or as an intelligible being belonging to the world of understanding. Everything that happens in the world of sense is determined by natural causes. Human action, when viewed from the standpoint of the world of sense, must be regarded as determined by instincts, impulses, and inclinations. But the human is more than just a sensible being, Kant argues, for the human being “finds in himself a capacity by which he distinguishes himself from all other things, even from

¹⁹ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 79.

²⁰ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 84.

²¹ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 557.

himself insofar as he is affected by objects, and that is *reason*.”²²

Describing reason as “pure self-activity,” Kant claims that the spontaneity of reason transfers the human being into an order of things that is altogether different from the order of nature.²³ Consequently, “a rational being must regard himself [...] as belonging not to the world of sense but to the world of understanding.”²⁴ When viewed from the standpoint of the world of understanding, the human must be regarded as an intelligible being whose actions originate from reason. Such a being is considered free from the determining causes of the world of sense.

Kant’s postulate of the intelligible being can be interpreted as an extreme attempt to distance the human being from its animality. The treatment of human animality in Kant’s philosophy is something that will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Three. For now, let us turn to a discussion of Kant’s animal ethics.

III

Despite the fact that some of his own statements give the impression that we are permitted to treat animals however we wish, Kant maintains that we have certain duties regarding animals. One such duty is to avoid treating them with cruelty. Kant writes in *The Metaphysics of Morals*:

The human being is authorized to kill animals quickly (without pain) and to put them to work that does not strain them beyond their capacities (such as work he himself must submit to). But agonizing physical experiments for the sake of mere speculation, when

²² Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 99.

²³ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 99.

²⁴ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 99.

the end could also be achieved without these, are to be abhorred.²⁵

In his ethics lectures, Kant implies that vivisection is justified in cases where animal experimentation is necessary to achieve a scientifically important end. “[W]hen anatomists take living animals to experiment on,” he states, “that is certainly cruelty, though there it is employed for a good purpose; because animals are regarded as man’s instruments, it is acceptable.”²⁶ He adds, however, that killing animals for sport is never acceptable.²⁷

Kant also encourages acts of kindness and affection toward animals. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, he insists that work animals ought to be treated with gratitude, “just as if they were members of the household.”²⁸ In his ethics lectures, Kant notes with approval that after Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz was finished with a grub he had been observing, he reportedly put it “back on the tree with its leaf, lest he should be guilty of doing any harm to it.”²⁹ Put simply, Kant believes that “[a]ny action whereby we may torment animals, or let them suffer distress, or otherwise treat them without love, is demeaning to ourselves.”³⁰

One could argue that these remarks make Kant less vulnerable to the criticism that he fails to grant animals appropriate moral consideration. However, it should be noted that when Kant says that we have duties *regarding* animals, he does not mean that we have duties *to*

²⁵ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 564.

²⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, ed. Peter Heath and J.B. Schneewind, trans. Peter Heath (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 213.

²⁷ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 213.

²⁸ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 564.

²⁹ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 212-213.

³⁰ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 434.

animals. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, he denies that we can have duties to beings other than humans:

As far as reason alone can judge, a human being has duties only to human beings (himself and others), since his duty to any subject is moral constraint by that subject's will. Hence the constraining (binding) subject must, *first*, be a person; and this person must, *secondly*, be given as an object of experience, since the human being is to strive for the end of this person's will and this can happen only in a relation to each other of two beings that exist.³¹

This passage suggests that animals lack the capacity to place us under moral constraint because they are not persons with wills. Furthermore, if having a duty to someone consists in striving to achieve the end of that person's will, we cannot have duties to beings that lack the capacity to set ends for themselves. As we have already seen, Kant believes that humans are the only beings in nature whose ends are not determined by their survival instincts but are determined instead by their own autonomous reason.

If our duties *regarding* animals are not duties *to* animals, according to Kant, then to whom are these duties owed? Since we can only have duties to other human beings, it follows that our duties regarding animals are duties owed to ourselves and others. Kant explains in the *Metaphysics of Morals*:

A human being can [...] have no duty to any beings other than human beings; and if he thinks he has such duties, it is because of an *amphiboly* in his *concepts of reflection*, and his supposed duty to other beings is only a duty to himself. He is led to this misunderstanding by mistaking his duty *with regard to* other beings for a duty *to* those beings.³²

According to Kant, we can only have duties *to* another being if that being morally constrains us by its will. We may, however, have duties *regarding* another being if our treatment of that being

³¹ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 563.

³² Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 563.

happens to be involved somehow in fulfilling our duties *to* another being. In the context of Kant's animal ethics, this means that we have duties to ourselves and others that involve animals but no direct duties to the animals themselves.

In his ethics lectures, Kant claims that our treatment of animals can affect how we treat other human beings. Consequently, we should try to view animals as “analogs of humanity,” and treat them accordingly.³³ He explains:

If a dog, for example, has served his master long and faithfully, that is an analogy of human service; hence I must reward it, and once the dog can serve no longer, I must look after him to the end [...]. If a man has his dog shot, because it can no longer earn a living for him, he is by no means in breach of any duty to the dog, since the latter is incapable of judgment, but he thereby damages the kindly and humane qualities in himself, which he ought to exercise in virtue of his duties to mankind. Lest he extinguish such qualities, he must already practice a similar kindness towards animals; for a person who already displays such cruelty to animals is also no less hardened towards men.³⁴

In a subsequent lecture, Kant declares that animal cruelty “is inhuman, and contains an analogy of violation of the duty to ourselves, since we would not, after all, treat ourselves with cruelty.”³⁵

By acting cruelly toward animals, “we stifle the instinct of humaneness within us and make ourselves devoid of feeling; it is thus an indirect violation of humanity in our own person.”³⁶

This point is also stressed in *The Metaphysics of Morals*:

With regard to the animate but nonrational part of creation, violent and cruel treatment of animals is far more intimately opposed to a human being's duty to himself, and he has a duty to refrain from this; for it dulls his shared feeling of their suffering and so weakens and gradually uproots a natural predisposition that is very serviceable to morality in one's

³³ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 212, trans. mod.

³⁴ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 212, trans. mod.

³⁵ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 434.

³⁶ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 434-435.

relations with other people.³⁷

Kant believes that if we develop a habit of treating animals cruelly, we are more likely to treat human beings cruelly, thereby violating our duty to treat human beings as ends in themselves. Ultimately, violent behavior toward animals is wrong because it desensitizes us to human suffering.

Given the contempt Kant shows elsewhere for moral feeling, it is curious that in his discussion of animals he emphasizes the importance of compassion. More curious still, despite his insistence that animals are mere things, Kant recognizes that they do feel pain. He even goes so far as to say that animals are analogous to human beings and that their actions sometimes resemble those of virtuous individuals. It should be noted, however, that these last two ideas only appear in Kant's early ethics lectures and later drop out of his thought entirely. Nevertheless, this change indicates that Kant may have been conflicted at one point about how to view the relationship between humans and animals, and that he may have been hesitant to posit an absolute divide between them. These tensions in Kant's thought will be taken up again in subsequent chapters.

IV

To conclude this chapter, I would like to summarize the principles that inform Kant's animal ethics and restate the main conclusions he draws from them about how animals are to be treated. I will then briefly present Schopenhauer's critique of Kant, which Adorno regarded favorably.

³⁷ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 564.

Kant's moral philosophy is based on the idea that reason has absolute and unconditional value. Beings who possess a rational nature are called "persons." By virtue of their rational nature, persons have a dignity that is to be respected; they are to be treated as ends in themselves and not merely as means. Persons also have the capacity to determine their own ends, and this enables them to place other persons under moral constraint. Such is the basis of all duty. In Kant, duties are owed to persons alone.

Beings who do not possess a rational nature are called "things." Things merely have an extrinsic value and may be used exclusively as a means to an end. Since things lack the rational capacity to place persons under moral constraint, persons cannot have duties to things.

While Kant maintains that nothing in nature is off limits for human use, he observes that there are certain moral restrictions that set limits on *how* we may use natural things, such as animals. For example, we have a duty to refrain from treating animals with cruelty. Kant also claims that by expressing kindness, gratitude, and even affection toward animals, we show respect for humanity. "*Respect* is always directed only to persons," he reminds us, "never to things. The latter can awaken in us *inclination* and even *love* if they are animals (e.g., horses, dogs, and so forth), or also *fear*, like the sea, a volcano, a beast of prey, but never *respect*."³⁸

Even though animals are not beings to whom we owe respect, Kant thinks that for moral purposes we are permitted to view them as analogs of humanity. When we treat animals humanely, we indirectly observe our duties to each other. Likewise, when we treat animals cruelly, we indirectly violate those duties. Our duties regarding animals are therefore "indirect

³⁸ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 202.

duties to humanity.”³⁹

Critics have argued that Kant’s indirect duties fail to ground adequate moral concern for animals. Schopenhauer, for example, was particularly displeased with Kant’s anthropocentric view of compassion. As Christina Gerhardt notes, Schopenhauer criticizes Kantian moral philosophy “for how it deems animals not as equals worthy of our compassion but rather as creatures that allow us to exercise our compassion for other humans.”⁴⁰ In *On the Basis of Morality*, Schopenhauer points to the passage in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, quoted above, where Kant condemns animal cruelty on the grounds that it damages our capacity to empathize with human suffering. “[T]hus only for practice are we to have sympathy for animals,” Schopenhauer remarks, adding: “I regard such propositions as revolting and abominable.”⁴¹

In *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, Adorno commends Schopenhauer for calling attention to the shortcomings of Kant’s moral philosophy:

In his day Schopenhauer held it to be the particular merit of his own moral philosophy that it also included a view of our treatment of animals, compassion for animals, and this has often been regarded as the cranky idea of a private individual of independent means. My own view is that a tremendous amount can be learnt from such crankiness.⁴²

While Adorno considers Schopenhauer’s compassion-based moral philosophy to be an improvement over Kant’s moral philosophy, his own philosophical project aims to go beyond

³⁹ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 212.

⁴⁰ Christina Gerhardt, “Thinking With: Animals in Schopenhauer, Horkheimer, and Adorno,” in *Critical Theory and Animal Liberation*, ed. John Sanbonmatsu (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2011), 143.

⁴¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, trans. E.F.N. Payne (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1995), 96.

⁴² Theodor W. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Schröder, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 145.

compassion by “changing the circumstances that give rise to the need for it.”⁴³ In the proceeding chapters, I argue that Adorno aims to change the hierarchical structure that sets human beings over other animals by exposing and critiquing the faulty conception of animality that underlies our nature-dominating society.

⁴³ Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 173.

CHAPTER TWO: ADORNO ON DIGNITY

In this chapter I attempt to elucidate Adorno's critique of the concept of human dignity in Kant. I begin by situating Adorno's engagement with Kant's philosophy within the broader context of Adorno's critique of the enlightenment, before moving to a discussion of Adorno's assessment of Kantian ethics. Among other things, Adorno accuses Kant of attributing dignity to human beings in order to give them a practical advantage over animals. By depriving animals of dignity and reducing them to mere "things," Kant delivers the animal over to the human as an object of instrumental action. In this way, Kant's definition of the human being as a dignified "person" covertly legitimizes human supremacy and the domination of nature.

Next, I consider Adorno's critique of capitalism and his analysis of the shared suffering humans and animals experience as a result of being treated as commodities. Adorno argues that capitalism makes a mockery of human dignity by objectifying individuals and reducing them to their exchange value. Unlike Kant, who ascribes to human beings a transcendental dignity that cannot be damaged by the empirical world, Adorno seeks to recapture the critical potential of the concept of dignity by formulating it as an ideal rather than as a positive given. Doing so allows him to criticize capitalism on the grounds that it thwarts the realization of human dignity.

Lastly, I examine a somewhat cryptic passage from *Minima Moralia* in which Adorno suggests that the names of animals have a non-exchangeable quality that defies or resists the capitalist tendency to make all things fungible. This non-exchangeable quality (which Kant associates with dignity) has all but vanished from our commodified world. Yet Adorno suggests

that it is precisely in the names of the very beings to whom Kant denies dignity that the possibility of dignity is preserved.

I

Adorno's distrust of certain aspects of Kant's philosophy stems from the fact that as an enlightenment thinker, Kant belongs to an intellectual tradition whose aims Adorno finds objectionable. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and his colleague Max Horkheimer claim that the goal of the enlightenment was the domination of nature.⁴⁴ As we shall see, one of the reasons why Adorno believes that the domination of nature is wrong is because animals suffer as a consequence.

Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the enlightenment fundamentally changed the way that humans related to nature. In their pursuit to "disenchant" nature with science, the thinkers of the enlightenment adopted a reductive and instrumentalizing stance toward the natural world. Specifically, they sought to mathematize nature with the aim of deriving formulas and equations that would enable them to predict and control nature more effectively. The enlightenment's disenchantment of nature gradually removed moral and religious barriers to the unrestrained and instrumental use of nature by humans. The belief that nature is sacred or intrinsically valuable was replaced by a conception of nature as meaningless matter. From that point forward, the natural world was to be viewed as a tool for humans to employ in their own interests.

According to Adorno, the enlightenment desire to dominate nature finds its purest

⁴⁴ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), *passim*.

expression in Kant's philosophy. All the elements are there: Kant's distinction between persons and things, his view that human beings are the ultimate end of nature, his insistence that the value of natural things is reducible to their market price—these ideas work together to separate humans from nature while transforming nature into an object to be dominated and exploited.

Adorno's most scathing critique of Kant comes from an unlikely source: an unfinished and posthumously published book on Ludwig van Beethoven. Casting suspicion on Kant's concept of human dignity, Adorno observes that by attributing dignity to humans and denying it to animals, Kant raises the human above the animal and legitimizes the domination of animals by humans. The following passage was discovered in Adorno's preparatory notes for the work:

What I find so suspect in Kantian ethics is the "dignity" which they attribute to man in the name of autonomy. A capacity for moral self-determination is ascribed to human beings as an absolute advantage—as a moral profit—while being covertly used to legitimize *dominance*—dominance over nature. [...] Ethical dignity in Kant is a demarcation of differences. It is directed against animals. Implicitly it excludes man from nature, so that its humanity threatens incessantly to revert to the inhuman. It leaves no room for compassion [*Mitleid*]. Nothing is more abhorrent to the Kantian than a reminder of man's animal likeness [*Tierähnlichkeit*]. This taboo is always at work when the idealist berates the materialist. Animals play for the idealist system virtually the same role as the Jews for fascism. To revile man as an animal—that is genuine idealism. To deny the possibility of salvation for animals absolutely and at any price is the inviolable boundary of its metaphysics.⁴⁵

Here Adorno observes that human beings have a lot to gain from believing in their own dignified status. If humans are the only beings on earth who have dignity, then the respect they are obliged to show each other does not extend to other animals. Consequently, there is nothing preventing them from using and abusing other animals for their own benefit. Adorno suspects it is with this material interest in mind that Kant attributes dignity to human beings. The irony is not lost on

⁴⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 80, trans. mod.

Adorno that in Kant, the alleged dignity of the human being becomes the justification for the undignified treatment of the animal.

Perhaps the most damning aspect of Kant's ethical system, in Adorno's view, is that it prevents human beings from identifying with the suffering of other animals. To show solidarity with creatures who suffer like us is to acknowledge our affinity with them. But such an acknowledgment is discouraged in Kant, which is why Adorno says that his moral philosophy "leaves no room for compassion." This echoes Schopenhauer's criticism that in Kantian animal ethics, compassionate actions are never performed for the sake of the animals themselves. In fact, we are only encouraged to show compassion to animals in order to cultivate empathy for our fellow humans. We are not permitted to have boundless compassion for animals. Instead, we are required to hold back, always keeping in mind those for whom our duties regarding animals are actually performed: ourselves and other human beings.

Here I would like to briefly consider a possible objection to Adorno. Given that Kant condemns "[a]ny action whereby we may torment animals, or let them suffer distress, or otherwise treat them without love,"⁴⁶ Adorno's charge that Kantian moral philosophy sanctions the domination of animals may seem unfounded. However, it is important to understand that Adorno's conception of domination includes more than just cruelty and violence. On this point, Alison Stone explains:

To dominate a being, for the Frankfurt School generally, is to "prescribe" to it "goals and purposes and means of striving for and attaining them" which differ from those that the being would spontaneously adopt. Living natural beings, then, are dominated when they are forced out of the courses of development and behavior which they would spontaneously pursue. Calling this "domination," not merely "control," implies that is it

⁴⁶ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 434.

undesirable; this, for Adorno, is because living beings *suffer* (*leiden*) from having their spontaneous tendencies thwarted.⁴⁷

Stone notes that while Adorno never explains why he believes the domination of nature is wrong, he does imply

that dominating living natural beings prevents them from developing or behaving as they spontaneously would. This makes these beings suffer, because it thwarts their needs to develop spontaneously—just as, for Adorno, human beings suffer when their bodily needs go unfulfilled. Since this bodily suffering “ought not to be” when it occurs in human beings, the same suffering ought not to arise in non-human living beings, and any practice [...] which causes or exacerbates such suffering deserves criticism.⁴⁸

Kantian moral philosophy deserves to be criticized because it legitimizes human dominance over animals. When we treat animals the way Kant views them, exclusively in terms of their value for the satisfaction of our desires, we damage animals and prevent them from developing spontaneously. This causes them to suffer. Therefore, while Kant does not condone cruelty to animals, his moral philosophy permits animals to be used for food, labor, clothing, experiments, and other purposes that are opposed to their needs.⁴⁹

Due to their indirect nature, Kant’s duties regarding animals are unable to accommodate the needs of animals. In fact, they only stipulate how animals are to be treated based on how their response to our treatment of them might positively or negatively affect *us*. Kantian animal ethics is solely concerned with the question of *how* we are to use animals; the question of *whether* we

⁴⁷ Alison Stone, “Adorno and the Disenchantment of Nature,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 32, no. 2 (2006): 233.

⁴⁸ Stone, “Adorno and the Disenchantment of Nature”: 236-237.

⁴⁹ Adorno often speaks of the need to eliminate senseless or superfluous human suffering in society (see *Negative Dialectics*, 203-204). While there is no evidence to suggest that Adorno was a vegetarian or vegan, we can infer from his critique of society’s domination of animals that he believed superfluous animal suffering ought to be eliminated as well.

should be using them at all is not open for debate. This is why Adorno contends that “the possibility of salvation for animals” is denied “absolutely” in Kant.

II

Adorno argues that human beings have sought to dominate nature for thousands of years. In *Negative Dialectics*, he claims that the domination of nature “cements the discontinuous, chaotically splintered moments and phases of history.”⁵⁰ He also suggests that we can trace the domination of nature by looking at how animals have been treated in human societies. In *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, he claims that the “most obvious and tangible expression” of the domination of nature is to be found in the “exploitation and maltreatment of animals.”⁵¹ In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer reflect on the enormous animal suffering that has been part of the process of civilization:

In war and peace, arena and slaughterhouse, from the slow death of the elephant overpowered by primitive human hordes with the aid of the first planning to the perfected exploitation of the animal world today, the unreasoning creature has always suffered at the hands of reason.⁵²

Animals have suffered at the hands of reason in two senses. Not only has reason been used as a tool to exploit animals, but the belief that animals lack reason has also been used against them as an excuse to disregard their well-being.

While the domination of nature is not a new historical phenomenon, Adorno and

⁵⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton. (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), 320.

⁵¹ Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 145.

⁵² Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 204.

Horkheimer argue that such domination has reached its peak in late capitalism. The level of technological progress achieved under capitalism has taken “society’s domination of nature to unimagined heights.”⁵³ Not only are the methods of animal exploitation at our disposal more sophisticated than ever, the sheer amount of animal life we are now capable of destroying (whether directly or indirectly) is equally unprecedented.

Throughout his work, Adorno criticizes a number of practices aimed at controlling and exploiting animals. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for example, he condemns the “abominable physiological laboratories” of behavioral psychologists who were known to conduct torturous experiments on animals.⁵⁴ In *Minima Moralia*, he targets more subtle forms of animal domination, such as Carl Hagenbeck’s “open zoo” design, which uses trenches instead of bars to separate the animals from zoo visitors. Adorno argues that these exhibits “deny the animals’ freedom only the more completely by keeping the boundaries invisible, the sight of which would inflame the longing for open spaces.”⁵⁵ They also create the illusion for onlookers that the animals are not in captivity, that they are not trapped. While the “tiger endlessly pacing back and forth in his cage reflects back negatively, through his bewilderment, something of humanity,” the one “frolicking behind the pit too wide to leap” elicits no guilt.⁵⁶

Adorno observes that such attempts to better approximate the zoo animals’ natural habitats reveal just how far society’s domination of nature has progressed:

⁵³ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xvii.

⁵⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 204.

⁵⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 115.

⁵⁶ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 116.

The more purely nature is preserved and transplanted by civilization, the more implacably it is dominated. We can now afford to encompass even larger natural units, and leave them apparently intact within our grasp, whereas previously the selecting and taming of particular items bore witness to the difficulty we still had in coping with nature.⁵⁷

In his lectures on aesthetics, Adorno contends that “pure nature—that is to say, a nature that has not gone through the mediation processes of society—does not exist.”⁵⁸ He illustrates the extent to which nature has been mediated by social practices in his *History and Freedom* lectures:

If you think of the role played by nature today, in the ordinary sense of nature in a landscape as contrasted with our urban, industrial civilization, you will realize that this nature is already something planned, cultivated and organized. It is gradually turning into a nature reserve (if I may exaggerate somewhat) and—as the director of the Frankfurt Zoo has frequently pointed out—it is already becoming a problem literally to protect the natural space that wild animals need if they are to be able to move around freely.⁵⁹

Adorno makes a similar point in a different lecture series when he laments the fact that “civilization has driven the wildest and most exotic animals into the most inaccessible jungles.”⁶⁰ He claims in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that society has forgotten about wild animals, arguing that we are only reminded of their existence when the last of a species perishes.⁶¹ Passages like these demonstrate that Adorno was well-aware of the plight of animals in late capitalism.

The technological domination of nature is central to Adorno’s critique of capitalism. But he is also equally critical of the commodification of nature and the reduction of living beings to

⁵⁷ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 115-116.

⁵⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetics: 1958/59*, ed. Eberhard Ortland, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 77.

⁵⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 121.

⁶⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 176.

⁶¹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 209.

their exchange value. In what follows, I discuss Adorno's account of exchange relations and his analysis of the damage such relations have inflicted on both human and nonhuman animals.

III

Perhaps the best way to approach an explanation of exchange relations is to relate them to a phenomenon that we have already discussed. Earlier I noted that one of the primary means by which the enlightenment sought to disenchant nature was to conceptualize it mathematically. This is an instance of what Adorno calls "identity thinking." Generally speaking, identity thinking refers to the act of unreflectively reducing objects in the world to our concepts of them. To identify an object with a concept is to assume that there is nothing "outside" the concept, or that the concept so perfectly encapsulates the object that the two are identical.

Against this idea, Adorno contends that there is always a nonidentical relationship between concept and object. There are two ways in which concepts fail to match up exactly with objects. Due to their abstract universality, concepts necessarily contain less in their descriptions of objects than what is actually (or potentially) present in them. Concepts are ill-equipped to express what is unique about particular objects because particulars are always "more" than the universals they stand under. As Adorno observes in *Negative Dialectics*: "[O]bjects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder."⁶²

At the same time, concepts themselves are always "more" than the objects they subsume. Contained in every concept is something extra that is not found in the object. This surplus could be a quality that has been exaggerated, imagined, or projected onto the object. Alternatively, the

⁶² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5.

concept could contain a speculative element that expresses or anticipates something about the object's potential that has not yet been realized.

Adorno maintains that concepts do an injustice to objects by presuming to exhaust them. Identity thinking is inherently coercive because it demands that the object conform to the concept imposed on it. The object is not permitted to be anything other than what the concept tells it to be. Any qualities in the object that exceed the bounds of the concept are expunged.

The coerciveness of identity thinking is evident in attempts to conceptualize nature in purely mathematical terms. Science is guilty of identity thinking when it views natural phenomena as embodying mathematical structures or when it conflates its own models of reality with reality as such. By stripping away the qualities of natural things and reducing them to measurable quantities, science forces the diversity of nature into a single, totalizing conceptual unity.

Adorno and Horkheimer draw a parallel between the mathematization of nature and commodification under capitalism when they observe that the principle of exchange, the fundamental organizing principle of capitalist society, “makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities.”⁶³ In accordance with the exchange principle, unequal or nonidentical things are reduced to their exchange value in order to be made commensurable. The exchange principle is just as coercive as identity thinking in its demand for sameness. But whereas identity thinking uses concepts and conceptual schemas to bring objects into conformity with thought, the exchange principle forces individuals into social conformity by absorbing them into the complex relations of exchange that govern capitalist society.

⁶³ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 4.

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno suggests that exchange relations and identity thinking mutually reinforce each other:

The exchange principle [...] is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification. Exchange is the social model of the principle, and without the principle there would be no exchange; it is through exchange that non-identical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical. The spread of the principle imposes on the whole world an obligation to become identical, to become total.⁶⁴

Adorno underscores the coercive character of exchange relations when he observes that individuals are required “to respect the law of exchange if [they] do not wish to be destroyed.”⁶⁵ To survive in late capitalism, individuals must adapt to the economy; their self-preservation depends on how useful they make themselves to capital and how effectively they subserve the exchange principle. Driven by the fear of financial insecurity to integrate themselves into the social totality, individuals embrace their functions as agents and bearers of exchange value.

Here the analogy between exchange relations and identity thinking is especially apt.⁶⁶ Similar to how identity thinking effaces qualities in the object that cannot be assimilated to the concept, exchange relations assimilate individuals to the social totality by flattening out the differences between them. On this point, Deborah Cook observes:

Under the monopoly conditions that characterize late capitalism, individuals stand in much the same relation to society as particulars stand to universal concepts. Adorno suggests this throughout his work when he refers to society as the “universal.” Where identity thinking summarily subsumes objects under concepts, society reifies individuals,

⁶⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 146, trans. mod.

⁶⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, “Society,” trans. F. R. Jameson, *Salmagundi* 3, no. 10/11 (1969/1970): 149.

⁶⁶ It should be noted, however, that the relationship between exchange relations and identity thinking is more than just one of analogy. Adorno contends that identity thinking is modeled on the process of exchange and is therefore *derivative* of exchange relations.

expunging their idiosyncrasies by subsuming them under abstract exchange relations.⁶⁷

Virtually all aspects of human life have been damaged in some way by the homogenizing and leveling effects of exchange relations. This constitutes domination in the Adornian sense. The demand placed on individuals to adapt and conform to economic conditions prevents them from fulfilling their need to develop spontaneously, and this causes them to suffer.

Adorno's critique of exchange relations highlights the universality of suffering under capitalism. As contradictory as it may sound, Adorno argues that while capitalism gives human beings control over nature, human beings themselves have no control over capitalism. In fact, individuals are subjected to the same mechanisms of exploitation and domination that are directed against the natural world. Catching everything in their web, exchange relations have damaged humans and animals alike. The exchange principle does not discriminate when it reduces human and nonhuman animals to their exchange value, and it damages them both by putting a price on them and treating them as mere means.

IV

Before returning to Adorno's discussion of dignity, I would like to address a misunderstanding that may have arisen in the course of this chapter regarding the nature of Adorno's engagement with Kant's philosophy. I may have given the impression that Adorno is overly dismissive of Kant, or that he finds nothing redeemable in Kant's thought. But this is not the case. As Gerhardt notes, Adorno was deeply influenced by Kant and remained one of the

⁶⁷ Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 91.

most Kantian members of the Frankfurt School.⁶⁸ She describes his critical engagement with Kant's philosophy as follows:

Adorno was Kantian not in the sense of blindly adhering to Kant's philosophy but rather in the sense of aspiring to understand the shortcomings of that philosophy's logic and how they impeded the realization of idealism's ideals. Thus, Adorno's critiques of Kant's logic are intended to strengthen its aspirations. [...] With this in mind, it is with, rather than against, Kant that Adorno critiques Kant's philosophy.⁶⁹

As we shall see, Adorno believes that there are elements of the concept of dignity worth preserving. Despite its ideological character, the truth content in the concept of dignity lies in its conviction that some things should not be exchanged.

In *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, Adorno speculates that Kant must have recognized the emerging capitalist tendency "for everything to become merely a means," and his desire to resist that tendency motivated him to create the distinction between dignity and price.⁷⁰ Elaborating on the distinction, Adorno observes:

[In Kant,] everything [that] is functional, that exists for the sake of something else and that is exchangeable, has its price—just as of course the concept of price is based on the process of exchange. In contrast whatever exists strictly for its own sake, or happens for its own sake, [...] possesses what he calls "dignity."⁷¹

Here we can detect a hint of ambivalence in Adorno's attitude toward the concept of dignity. On the one hand, the concept of dignity serves an ideological function by reinforcing the belief that human beings are absolutely independent of nature and radically distinct from other animals. On

⁶⁸ Christina Gerhardt, "The Ethics of Animals in Adorno and Kafka," *New German Critique* 97, vol. 33, no. 1 (2016): 161.

⁶⁹ Gerhardt, "The Ethics of Animals in Adorno and Kafka": 161.

⁷⁰ Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 151.

⁷¹ Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 151.

the other hand, if appropriated from Kant's philosophy and employed in an emancipatory manner, the concept of dignity could be used to criticize capitalist society on the grounds that it fails to treat individuals with dignity.

Praising the critical bent of Kant's philosophy, Adorno observes that Kant "never simply repeats what goes on in society, but [tends] to criticize existing society and to hold up to it an alternative image of the possible."⁷² From a Kantian perspective, exchange relations deserve to be criticized because they rob human beings of dignity. But here Adorno turns Kant against himself. If exchange relations are to be criticized for robbing human beings of dignity, then Kantian philosophy is to be criticized for doing the same to animals. Kantian philosophy loses its critical edge and sides with the capitalist tendency when it views animals not as beings that exist for their own sake but rather as things that exist for the sake of exchange.

Adorno's ambivalence toward the concept of dignity is captured in a passage from *Aesthetic Theory*. In the chapter on natural beauty, Adorno argues that the exclusion of natural beauty from idealist aesthetics in favor of the concept of human dignity bears witness to the intensification of society's domination of nature:

Natural beauty vanished from aesthetics as a result of the burgeoning domination of the concept of freedom and human dignity, which was inaugurated by Kant and then rigorously transplanted into aesthetics by Schiller and Hegel; in accord with this concept nothing in the world is worthy of attention except that for which the autonomous subject has itself to thank. The truth of such freedom for the subject, however, is at the same time unfreedom: unfreedom for the other. For this reason the turn against natural beauty, in spite of the immeasurable progress it made possible in the comprehending of art as spiritual, does not lack an element of destructiveness, just as the concept of dignity does not lack it in its turn against nature. [...] If the case of natural beauty were pending, dignity would be found culpable for having raised the human animal above the animal. [...] Human beings are not equipped positively with dignity; rather, dignity would be

⁷² Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 151.

exclusively what they have yet to achieve.⁷³

Recall that in the *Groundwork*, Kant argues that the human being's capacity for reason takes it out of the world of sense (in which its actions are determined by natural causes) and transfers it into the world of understanding (in which its actions are determined by reason). As a member of the world of understanding, the human being is autonomous with respect to its own natural impulses and can act freely in accordance with moral principles. According to Kant, it is by virtue of this capacity for moral self-determination that human beings have absolute and unconditional value (i.e. dignity). In contrast, nature does not have dignity because unlike humanity, nature is not free.

Adorno observes that in Kant, freedom is a quality that is ascribed to human beings only after they have been separated from nature and nature itself has been consigned to the realm of unfreedom. Freedom in Kant is therefore an exclusionary kind of freedom, one that is based on the unfreedom of nature and attributed to human beings at nature's expense.

But there is also another sense in which human freedom spells unfreedom for nature. In Kant, animals already lack freedom because as creatures belonging to the world of sense, they do not possess the capacity for reason needed to liberate them from enslavement to their own instincts. By granting the human dominion over the animal, however, Kant ensures that the unfreedom of the animal is overdetermined. Kantian philosophy is designed to keep animals in a state of unfreedom by encouraging humans to treat animals as objects that exist exclusively for their own benefit. As a result, the very unfreedom Kant ascribes to animals in theory is imposed

⁷³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno, Rolf Tiedemann, Robert Hullot-Kentor, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 85-86.

by humans in practice.

Adorno ultimately rejects Kant's view that human beings possess dignity as a positive trait, arguing instead that dignity ought to be conceived only as that which humanity has not yet achieved. Adorno's negative formulation of the concept dignity is an instance of "nonidentity thinking." In contrast to identity thinking, which registers in objects only those characteristics already contained in the concepts imposed on them, nonidentity thinking recognizes that objects are distinct from concepts and that the relationship between them is nonidentical.

Nonidentity thinking seeks to rescue objects from the coerciveness of identity thinking. As we saw earlier, one of the ways in which identity thinking damages objects is by pressing them into the mold of rigid and static concepts. In the sciences, for example, identity thinking occurs in the service of domination when it subsumes nature under abstract mathematical models. Commenting on the link between theoretical and practical domination, Stone notes that scientists first attempt to work out how to manipulate mathematical elements conceptually because this enables them to manipulate and control nature in practice.⁷⁴ And of course, identity thinking reinforces domination outside the domain of scientific inquiry as well when it equates natural things with their exchange value in the capitalist marketplace.

Although Adorno tends to stress the damage inflicted on objects by reductionistic identity thinking, he also warns of the kind of thinking that is equally unreflective in identifying objects with concepts that exceed them. Such concepts include, but are not limited to, those that express ideals. The danger in falsely presenting an object as having fulfilled its concept is that it stifles the critical impulse needed to help the object realize its better potential. Thought betrays

⁷⁴ Stone, "Adorno and the Disenchantment of Nature": 236.

the potential in objects and cheats them of what they could be when it announces that potential as having already been achieved.

Rather than prematurely ascribe dignity to human beings, Adorno submits the concept of dignity to the scrutiny of nonidentity thinking. Since nonidentity thinking is able to recognize the gap between concepts and objects, it can use that awareness to expose and critique the social and economic conditions that create a disparity between the concept of dignity and the individuals to whom the concept refers. In doing so, nonidentity thinking points toward the possibility of improved conditions in which the ideal of dignity would be realized.

V

In the passage from *Aesthetic Theory* quoted above, Adorno argues that in idealism, the emergence of the concept of human dignity corresponded with a decline in interest in natural beauty. But natural beauty is not the only thing that idealist philosophers have overlooked. As we shall see, Adorno believes that there are utopian possibilities hidden in the world of animals, possibilities that escape our notice when we dismiss other animals as being unworthy of our attention.

Adorno often looks for possibilities in unconventional places. In *Minima Moralia*, for example, he turns to seemingly mundane activities, objects, and interactions in search of ideas can that point, however indirectly, to the possibility of what might lay beyond damaged life. Adorno believes that exchange relations have become so pervasive that it is difficult for individuals to think of alternatives. Not only is it a struggle for them to grasp possibilities in thought, they are also unable to seize on actionable possibilities that would threaten the status

quo because doing so would adversely affect their survival prospects and undermine their ability to adapt and conform to economic conditions. In light of these problems, Adorno believes that by reflecting on their own subjective experiences, individuals might be able to discover possibilities that have not yet been absorbed by exchange relations.

Adorno's attempt to salvage possibilities from the wreckage of damaged life is no better demonstrated than in the aphorism from *Minima Moralia* entitled "Toy Shop." Reflecting on childhood experience, Adorno considers the subversive nature of toys and suggests that the possibility of undamaged life is expressed through the play of children:

Hebbel, in a surprising entry in his diary, asks what takes away "life's magic in later years." "It is because in all the brightly-colored contorted marionettes, we see the revolving cylinder that sets them in motion, and because for this very reason the captivating variety of life is reduced to wooden monotony. A child seeing the tightrope-walkers singing, the pipers playing, the girls fetching water, the coachmen driving, thinks all this is happening for the joy of doing so; he can't imagine that these people also have to eat and drink, go to bed and get up again. We however, know what is at stake." Namely, earning a living, which commandeers all those activities as mere means, reduces them to interchangeable, abstract labor-time.⁷⁵

Life has an enchanted quality for children because unlike adults, they are able to imagine that everything going on around them is happening for its own sake rather than for the sake of exchange. Moreover, since they are largely unaware of the extent to which work in capitalist society is performed under compulsion, children are able to believe that people engage in work simply for the joy of doing so.

This way of viewing of the world is reflected in the actual play of children. Arguing that play is the child's defense against the universal subordination of activities to the exchange principle, Adorno observes:

⁷⁵ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 227.

In his purposeless activity the child [...] deprives the things with which he plays of their mediated usefulness [...] [and] seeks to rescue in them what is benign towards men and not what subserves the exchange relation that equally deforms men and things. The little trucks travel nowhere and the tiny barrels on them are empty; yet they remain true to their destiny by not performing, not participating in the process of abstraction that levels down that destiny, but instead abide as allegories of what they are specifically for.⁷⁶

By engaging in play that imitates work, children “unconsciously rehearse the right life.”⁷⁷ As an activity that is carried out for its own sake, play is transgressive. Not only does the playful act subtly resist the exchange principle by refusing to abide by it, it also expresses the possibility of transformed conditions in which work would be freed from compulsion.

In the same aphorism, Adorno suggests that utopian possibilities are reflected in the child’s experience of animals:

The relation of children to animals depends entirely on the fact that Utopia goes disguised in the creatures whom Marx⁷⁸ even begrudged the surplus value they contribute as workers. In existing without any purpose recognizable to men, animals hold out, as if for expression, their own names, utterly impossible to exchange. This makes them so beloved of children, their contemplation so blissful. I am a rhinoceros [*Nashorn*], signifies the shape of the rhinoceros.⁷⁹

Like everything else the child encounters in the world, animals appear to exist for their own sake. According to Adorno, what children find so delightful about the rhinoceros is that its name expresses a non-exchangeable or non-fungible quality. Unlike most things in capitalist society,

⁷⁶ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 228.

⁷⁷ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 228, trans. mod.

⁷⁸ Adorno’s criticism of Karl Marx reappears in his lectures on negative dialectics: “In Marx the principle of the *domination of nature* is actually accepted quite naïvely. [...] The fact that, according to Marx, the labor performed by animals does not lead to the production of surplus value—even though the costs of reproduction are lower in animals than the time or energy expended—the fact that, according to an explicit passage in *Capital*, their labor produces no surplus value is merely the crassest symbol of this” (*Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 58).

⁷⁹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 228.

names for the most part cannot be exchanged. The joy that children receive from contemplating the names of animals is the same joy they receive from playing with toys. Importantly, these activities involve things that do not subserve the exchange principle and can therefore be enjoyed for their own sake.

“[A]mid universal fungibility,” Adorno writes, “happiness attaches without exception to the non-fungible.”⁸⁰ The happiness that the non-fungible excites in children (a happiness that can perhaps be recaptured through the remembrance of childhood) offers a glimpse of what life outside the domination of exchange relations might hold. Perhaps, as Adorno suggests in *Towards a New Manifesto*, “[a]nimals could teach us what happiness is.”⁸¹

Commenting on the “Toy Shop” aphorism, Oshrat C. Silberbusch considers what Adorno’s cryptic remarks about the rhinoceros might mean more generally for his view of animals:

The rhino is simply there, without any other claim than being there, as rhino, a claim that turns out to be weightier than it seems. The animal’s presence does not stand for something else, it is an end in itself, as Kant would say (except that he, like most philosophers, reserved that dignity to human beings alone).⁸²

According to Silberbusch, Adorno seeks to restore to animals the very dignity denied to them by Kant. Other commentators have made this observation as well. Camilla Flodin offers a similar reading of Adorno, interpreting his critique of dignity as an attempt to broaden the concept to include animals:

⁸⁰ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 120.

⁸¹ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Towards a New Manifesto*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2019), 10.

⁸² Oshrat C. Silberbusch, *Adorno’s Philosophy of the Nonidentical: Thinking as Resistance* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 156.

A notion of human dignity based on a separation of nature and man always entails the condition of the possibility of repression of humans as well as nature. If we wish to eliminate that possibility, we need a different concept of dignity, one that would not be “a demarcation of differences” that “is directed against animals,” as Adorno [...] criticizes Kant’s concept of human dignity of being. True freedom cannot be based on unfreedom for the other, instead the concept of dignity has to include what has been regarded as the other of man: nature and the other animals.⁸³

Although Adorno is certainly critical of Kant for ascribing dignity to human beings at the expense and exclusion of other animals, Silberbusch’s and Flodin’s interpretations miss something important about Adorno’s understanding of dignity. As we have seen, Adorno questions whether *anything* can be said to possess dignity under capitalism. Therefore, it is unlikely that he would prematurely ascribe dignity to animals, just as he would be hesitant to do the same for humans. And to be sure, Adorno is not trying to ground animal dignity in the non-exchangeability of their names. Instead, he thinks the names of animals can express the possibility of a dignity that has yet to be realized. By reflecting on such possibilities, individuals are pointed in the direction of right life.

The claim that animals are disguised instantiations of utopia because they exist without any recognizable purpose should not be misunderstood as Adorno romanticizing the lives of animals. He does not wish to minimize the suffering that humans have inflicted on the animal world. But if instances of things happening and existing for their own sake are disappearing from the human world, then perhaps what is needed is to look to the world of animals for traces of the possibility of something different. Chapter Three considers other possibilities that are made available when we reflect on our relation to other animals. As we shall see, Adorno suggests that

⁸³ Camilla Flodin, “The Wor(l)d of the Animal: Adorno on Art’s Expression of Suffering,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 3, no. 1 (2011): 6.

there are things we can learn from animals about living less wrongly, but Kant's disdain for animality effectively excludes the possibility of animals serving as any kind of model for ethical behavior.

CHAPTER THREE:
ANIMAL LIKENESS

In this chapter I examine Adorno's concept of "animal likeness" (*Tierähnlichkeit*) and discuss the role it plays in his philosophy. I begin by reconstructing Adorno's account of the relation between humans and animals. Insisting that we are not radically distinct from other animals, Adorno argues that if we reflect on the natural history of our species and the evolution of human reason, we will see that we are more like the other animals than we tend to admit. Far from raising us "above" nature, reason has embroiled us even more deeply in the Darwinian struggle for existence because historically we have used reason in the service of dominating other organisms. Impelled by the instinct for self-preservation, we continue to blindly dominate nature today, and with disastrous results. In order to prevent further destruction to the natural world and its inhabitants, Adorno thinks that we need to come to the collective realization that our survival instincts are careening out of control. Achieving an increased awareness of our own instinctual nature might finally enable us to alter our behavior and change our destructive relationship to animals and the natural world.

Next, I consider Adorno's claim that humanity is deeply uncomfortable with its likeness to animals. Adorno is especially critical of Kant's philosophy for contributing to Western culture's disdain for animality. According to Adorno, it is our disdain for animality—and our denial of animality in ourselves—that lies at the root of our domination of animals. As we shall see, Adorno theorizes that certain forms of human domination are based on this denial as well.

Lastly, I discuss Adorno's views on compassion and his critique of society's coldness

toward animal suffering. Unlike Kant, whose ethical system is marked by a distinct lack of feeling, Adorno argues that compassion is indispensable to morality, and that having compassion for suffering animals is essential for creating the kind of solidarity needed to end society's exploitation of them. Adorno thinks that we can foster solidarity by reflecting on our affinity with animals. In connection with this idea, I conclude the chapter with a brief discussion of Adorno's aesthetic theory and his belief in the power of art to awaken us from the denial of our animal likeness.

I

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that Western thought has been marked since its inception by an attempt to deny the resemblance between humans and animals. Tracing the long history of Westerners defining themselves in opposition to animals, they write:

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. So insistently and unanimously has this antithesis been recited by all the earliest precursors of bourgeois thought, the ancient Jews, the Stoics, and the Early Fathers, and then through the Middle Ages to modern times, that few other ideas are so fundamental to Western anthropology. The antithesis is acknowledged even today.⁸⁴

Here Adorno and Horkheimer suggest that there is a kind of emptiness to the concept of human dignity, that it has nothing more to stand on than the supposed absence of reason in other animals. Although they never thoroughly discuss the cognitive capacities of other animals, Adorno and Horkheimer consistently challenge the notion that reason radically distinguishes

⁸⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 203-204.

humans from other animals. Emphasizing the naturalness of reason, they contend that reason first emerged as an “instrument of adaptation” to the environing world, and that it continued to develop slowly over the course of the natural history of the human species as a means to the end of self-preservation.⁸⁵ Borrowing an illustration from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Cook observes that “[r]eason can be compared to the teeth on a bear since both serve the same purpose; reason just serves the purpose of adaptation more effectively.”⁸⁶ Fooled by the power of their own reason, humans have tricked themselves into believing that they are not animals. But in fact, as Adorno and Horkheimer argue, reason has merely turned “humans into beasts with an ever-wider reach.”⁸⁷

Reason, then, may be said to distinguish humans from other animals in at least this one, albeit negative, sense: it enables humans to dominate nature much more ruthlessly and destructively than other animals. This is not to say, however, that human beings are necessarily more rational (and therefore less instinctually driven) than other animals. On the contrary, Adorno argues that humanity’s efforts to dominate nature throughout history have been driven primarily by the instinct for self-preservation.

In contrast to Kant, who maintains a clean separation between reason and instinct, Adorno stresses reason’s rootedness in nature and its entwinement with instinct. Not only was reason born in response to survival imperatives, it continues to be driven, and perilously so, by the instinct for self-preservation. The ferocity with which we continue to dominate nature today

⁸⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 184-185.

⁸⁶ Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 65.

⁸⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 185.

calls into question Kant's assessment that reason has liberated us from the bondage of instinct. While we have certainly surpassed the other animals in our ability to control the natural world, this "victory" over nature is not what it seems. For as Cook observes, "our ceaseless attempts to dominate nature reveal that we are as imprisoned in survival instincts as other animals."⁸⁸ Returning once again to the image of the rhinoceros, Adorno compares humanity's efforts to escape its instinctual nature to that of a rhinoceros trying in vain to shed the protective armor it drags along like an "ingrown prison."⁸⁹ If the experience of being imprisoned in one's own survival mechanism helps to explain the "special ferocity of rhinoceroses," Adorno suggests that it may also explain the "unacknowledged and therefore more dreadful ferocity of *homo sapiens*."⁹⁰

Paradoxically, the historical progression of instrumental reason has only led to more unreason. This is evidenced by the irrational nature of the current environmental crisis. Our efforts to preserve ourselves have become self-undermining and now threaten to destroy the natural world on which our survival depends. The blindness with which we are marching toward our own destruction makes a mockery of our self-proclaimed status as rational beings.

To be sure, when Adorno criticizes the destructive historical trajectory of human self-preservation, he is not condemning the *goal* of self-preservation. In fact, he affirms that self-preservation is a rational aim for living beings.⁹¹ For Adorno, the problem lies not with self-

⁸⁸ Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 68.

⁸⁹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 180.

⁹⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 180.

⁹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 272-273.

preservation as such but rather with the irrational pursuit of self-preservation.⁹² When the instincts driving self-preservation begin to manifest destructively, self-preservation impedes itself and becomes irrational.

According to Adorno, our predicament today is that we have let our survival instincts run wild. As he observes in *Negative Dialectics*: “Even the steps which society takes to exterminate itself are at the same time absurd acts of unleashed self-preservation.”⁹³ Although human beings will always depend on natural impulses for survival, Adorno thinks that we might be able to channel those impulses in more rational and less destructive ways by reflecting on our own instinctually-driven nature. In *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, he argues that when this kind of self-reflection is permitted to take place, “the human subject is liberated from the blind pursuit of natural ends and becomes capable of alternative actions.”⁹⁴ On this point, Stone also observes:

[B]y acknowledging the dependency of our patterns of thinking and activity on our natural impulses, we would be aware of those impulses at work in and on us. We could then decide whether we wish to pursue these impulses or not, and if so in what ways. That is, our awareness of the ongoing force of our inner nature would open up the space in which we could exercise some freedom of choice with respect to that nature.⁹⁵

If we wish to free ourselves from the compulsion of our internal nature, we cannot continue to disavow our instincts or declare ourselves to be fully autonomous with respect to them. Instead, we must strive to become more conscious of our natural impulses, for only then can we direct

⁹² Also at issue for Adorno is the “self” we are preserving. This self must be expanded to embrace the species “upon which the survival of each individual literally depends” (“Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” 273).

⁹³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 203.

⁹⁴ Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 104.

⁹⁵ Alison Stone, “Adorno, Hegel, and Dialectic,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 22, no. 6 (2014): 1128.

them toward more rational ends.

To summarize, Adorno underscores the irrational and always instinctual character of our efforts to dominate nature in order to show that we have not distinguished ourselves from other animals to the degree that we think we have. Confident that we have mastered nature, we fail to recognize the ways that nature continues to exert control over us. As Cook observes, since the domination of nature throughout history has been “impelled by nature itself in the form of the instinct for self-preservation,” it has become increasingly clear that “the dominators of nature are themselves dominated by nature.”⁹⁶

Adorno argues that by continuing to dominate nature, human history merely repeats “the unconscious history of nature, of devouring and being devoured.”⁹⁷ Human history has yet to distinguish itself from natural history because humanity remains largely unaware of the extent to which its activity continues to be driven by survival instincts. So long as we persist in blindly repaying domination with domination, nature will never relinquish its hold on us.

Although he is critical of how the line between humanity and nature has been drawn in the past, Adorno considers the possibility that we might one day establish a non-hierarchical and non-dominating basis on which to distinguish ourselves from nature. In his essay “Progress,” Adorno declares that humanity does not yet exist, that the ideal of humanity has not yet been realized, because so far in history our treatment of the natural world has been decidedly inhuman. The only “progress” humankind has consistently made is progress in developing more efficient ways to exploit nature, which is no progress at all. Consequently, Adorno argues that we

⁹⁶ Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 107.

⁹⁷ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 355.

cannot say genuine progress has occurred until “humanity becomes aware of its own inbred nature and brings to a halt the domination it exacts upon nature.”⁹⁸ What would truly distinguish us from nature is if we used our capacity for self-reflection to finally bring our domination of nature to an end.

II

Adorno speculates that the reason why human beings have yet to fully acknowledge their instinctual nature is because they are reluctant to admit their likeness to animals. In *History and Freedom*, he argues that human beings are in denial of their animality and that this denial is rooted in narcissism:

[T]he suggestion that human beings are merely creatures of nature, and hence, in the last analysis, automata, as Descartes’s *animalia* are supposed to be, is felt to be a major slight. In general, humanity as a species feels an extraordinary revulsion from everything that might remind it of its own animal nature, a revulsion which I strongly suspect to be deeply related to the persistence of its very real animality. Probably one of the most intractable problems of Kant’s conception of man and human nature lies in his attempt to differentiate it, and together with it man’s dignity and everything that involves, and to mark it off from animality. We can readily understand this [narcissistic] interest historically if we picture to ourselves the indescribable efforts and the sacrifices that it must have cost human beings in the course of their development to muster the strength to master [...] nature. For it was only thanks to these efforts and these sacrifices that it became possible to distinguish themselves from nature and that this strength could be reflected back to them as a divinely gifted quality, the quality of freedom.⁹⁹

Here Adorno alludes to the theoretical difficulties that arise from Kant’s attempts to differentiate humanity from animality. As we saw in Chapter One, Kant introduces a split between the rational and animal natures of the human being. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, he states that there are

⁹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, “Progress,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 150.

⁹⁹ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 209-210.

two standards by which the human being can value itself: either by a low standard in terms of its animal nature, or by a high standard in terms of its rational nature. While Kant maintains that these are both legitimate standards by which the human being can value itself, he goes on to suggest that the human being should value itself only by the higher standard, arguing that “his insignificance as a *human animal* may not infringe upon his consciousness of his dignity as a *rational human being*.”¹⁰⁰

In the *Groundwork*, Kant takes a similar approach to separating the human being’s rational nature from its animal nature. He argues that the human can view itself either as an intelligible (rational) being belonging to the world of understanding, or as a sensible (animal) being belonging to the world of sense. Kant insists that the human is only considered a free being when its actions are viewed from the standpoint of the world of understanding, for it is only from such a standpoint that reason can be considered the cause of its actions. When viewed from the standpoint of the world of sense, however, the human being is merely an animal whose actions are causally conditioned by nature in the form of instincts, impulses, and inclinations. Again, while these are both legitimate standpoints from which the human being can view itself, Kant argues that the human being’s rational nature takes precedence over its animal nature. Consequently, the human being must regard itself as a member of the world of understanding rather than the world of sense.

In Kant, the human being’s rational and animal natures are presented as mutually exclusive. The human can only regard itself as a rational being at the exclusion of regarding itself as an animal being, and vice versa. There is no third standpoint that unifies the two natures or

¹⁰⁰ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 557.

allows them to coexist. Reason has no place in the world of sense, and instinct has no place in the world of understanding.

To return to the passage from *History and Freedom* quoted above, Adorno casts suspicion on Kant's attempts to mark humanity off from animality. By dividing human nature in this way, Kant is able to assert the independence of the human being's rational nature over and against its animal nature. Thus, Adorno concludes that Kant's efforts are rooted in a narcissistic interest in freedom—an interest, as it turns out, which is shared by humanity in general. Humanity seeks to deny its resemblance to animals because of its own natural history. After all its efforts to get free from nature, the last thing humanity wishes to remember is its animal past.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that something of the dread humanity feels regarding its likeness to animals is expressed in children's stories:

In popular fairy tales the metamorphosis of humans into animals is a recurring punishment. To be imprisoned in an animal body is regarded as damnation. To children and peoples, the idea of such transformations is immediately comprehensible and familiar. Believers in the transmigration of souls in the earliest cultures saw the animal form as punishment and torment. The mute wildness in the animal's gaze bears witness to the horror which is feared by humans in such metamorphoses. Every animal recalls to them an immense misfortune which took place in primeval times. Fairy tales express this dim human intuition. But whereas the prince in the fairy tale retained his reason so that, when the time came, he could tell of his woe and the fairy could release him, the animal's lack of reason holds it eternally captive in its form, unless man, who is one with it through his past, can find the redeeming formula and through it soften the stony heart of infinity at the end of time.¹⁰¹

Importantly, the horror discerned in the animal gaze does not belong to the animal itself, but instead is a projection by the human being who is horrified at the reminder of its own natural origin. The animal's unfreedom is falsely attributed to its lack of reason, when in fact the cold-

¹⁰¹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 205-206.

heartedness of human society is at fault for the imprisonment of the animal. If the animal is to be released from such bondage, humanity must “soften the stony heart” that hardens it to animal suffering. This can only be accomplished through the recognition of humanity’s essential kinship with other animals.

Adorno consistently underscores the delusional nature of believing that we have left our animality behind us. Indeed, he argues that denying our animal nature reveals our animality all the more, for in thinking that we are radically distinct from other animals, we betray our own lack of self-reflection. Ironically, our narcissistic interest in having an exclusive claim to freedom is preventing us from achieving the very freedom that would come with acknowledging ourselves as animals. As Adorno’s analysis of self-preservation demonstrates, we will continue to lash out destructively at the natural world so long as we remain blind to the natural impulses driving our actions. Acknowledging our animality would serve to loosen the hold of survival instincts on us and enable us to enjoy the freedom that is currently denied to us by our own refusal to recognize ourselves as part of nature.

Adorno seeks to emphasize our likeness to animals in order to change the way that we understand ourselves as human beings and to correct our faulty conception of animals and animality in the process. Specifically, Adorno wishes to challenge the view, implied in Kantian idealism but certainly not limited to that philosophy, that animals are subservient to their own irresistible (and bestial) impulses.¹⁰² Kant scholar Allen W. Wood argues that Kant’s account of animal behavior is highly dubious in this respect. “Apparently for Kant,” he writes, “the volition

¹⁰² For example, Adorno argues that modern biology projects beastliness onto animals “in order to exonerate the people who abuse the animals.” As a result, “the ontology of beasts apes the [...] bestiality of men” (*Negative Dialectics*, 348).

of animals is reduced to the immediate response to impulses, which lead to behaviors which are either hardwired into the animal by instinct or follow conditioned patterns which result from empirical associations arising out of such instincts.”¹⁰³ This problematic conception of the animal leads Kant to conceive animality as the antithesis of freedom. But unlike Kant, Adorno does not equate animality with unfreedom, preferring instead to highlight the unfreedom that humans impose on animals externally by subjugating them.

By criticizing the domination of animals, Adorno implicitly contests the notion that animals are inherently unfree. Something which is already unfree cannot be dominated. Moreover, it is important to remember what domination consists in for Adorno. Among other things, it involves preventing a living being from developing spontaneously or from pursuing spontaneously adopted ends. Against Kant, who denies animals the capacity to set ends for themselves, Adorno would likely agree with Tom Regan, who points out that many animals have “preference autonomy.” Preference autonomy is the ability to form preferences and to initiate actions to satisfy them.¹⁰⁴ Animals share with humans a capacity for spontaneous behavior, and this is precisely what makes them vulnerable to domination. As we saw in Chapter One, Kant maintains that only rational beings are able to act spontaneously, which leads him to locate the human being in a realm beyond that of nature. Perhaps Kant would not have resorted to such extreme measures to distance the human being from its animality if not for his insistence on the unfreedom of the animal.

In the course of this chapter, I may have given the impression that by tracing the

¹⁰³ Allen W. Wood, "Kant on Duties Regarding Nonrational Nature," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 72 (1998): 210.

¹⁰⁴ Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 92.

domination of nature back to the instinct for self-preservation, Adorno is condemning our animality or disparagingly comparing our behavior to other animals. But this is not the case. Although Adorno does portray nature in a somewhat Hobbesian light at times, Flodin rightly notes that Adorno's conception of nature is far more dialectical than some of his own statements, taken by themselves, would seem to suggest.¹⁰⁵ For Adorno, animal life is not merely an endless cycle of eating and being eaten. Rather, this is the image that our nature-dominating society "produces of nature and the world of the animal: as something static."¹⁰⁶ Consequently, Adorno "does not regard the other animals as merely slaves to their own instincts."¹⁰⁷ Instead, he insists that it is *human beings* who have become in thrall to survival instincts by denying their own animality. As Flodin explains:

Human beings in denial of themselves as part of nature do not behave like other animals, according to Adorno, but rather like the faulty conception of other animals characteristic for our petrified society and identity thinking [...]. When we deny our likeness to animals and define ourselves as radically distinct from other animals, we become increasingly like the false conception of animals that stems from this denial: instinctual creatures trapped in ideological conditions.¹⁰⁸

Thus, when Adorno says that Kant's concept of human dignity implicitly "excludes man from

¹⁰⁵ Adorno is sometimes accused of painting too bleak a picture of animal life. He argues, for example, that because animals lack words and concepts, they are unable "[t]o escape the gnawing emptiness of existence"; that is, they are doomed to live a merely natural existence uninterrupted by "liberating thought" (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 205). Unfortunately, this passage has been misunderstood by commentators (see Carolin Duttlinger, "Traumatic Metamorphoses: The Concept of the Animal in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialektik der Aufklärung*": 48-53). Adorno deliberately exaggerates the plight of animals to encourage his readers to be more empathetic toward them.

¹⁰⁶ Flodin, "The Wor(l)d of the Animal": 9.

¹⁰⁷ Camilla Flodin, "Review of Deborah Cook's *Adorno on Nature*," *Florida Philosophical Review* 13, no. 1 (2013): 62.

¹⁰⁸ Flodin, "Review of Deborah Cook's *Adorno on Nature*": 62.

nature, so that its humanity threatens incessantly to revert to the inhuman,”¹⁰⁹ he is not equating “inhumanity” with “animality.” Instead, inhumanity is the result of a distinctly *human* delusion in which human beings narcissistically believe themselves to be above nature and therefore feel entitled to dominate it with the same compulsive and bestial fervor they falsely attribute to other animals.

As we saw in Chapter Two, Adorno claims that idealism is ultimately based on the denigration of the animal—including the animal in the human. According to Adorno, “[n]othing is more abhorrent to the Kantian than a reminder of man’s animal likeness.”¹¹⁰ This observation leads him to make the following statement: “Animals play for the idealist system virtually the same role as the Jews for fascism. To revile man as an animal—that is genuine idealism.”¹¹¹ Jacques Derrida offers an illuminating gloss on Adorno’s remark about the similarity between idealism and fascism in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*:

[F]ascism begins whenever one insults an animal, even the animal in man. Authentic idealism consists in insulting the animal in the human or in treating the human as animal. [...] [The idea of insult] doesn’t just imply verbal aggression, but an aggression that consists in degrading, reviling, devaluing someone, contesting his or her dignity. One doesn’t insult some thing but someone. Adorno doesn’t go so far as to say that the idealist insults the animal, but that he insults [...] man by calling him an animal, which implies that “animal” is an insult.¹¹²

In idealism, as in fascism, the concept of humanity is based on the exclusion and devaluation of the “Other.” Animals play the role of the Other for idealism, just as Jews play it for fascism. It is

¹⁰⁹ Adorno, *Beethoven*, 80.

¹¹⁰ Adorno, *Beethoven*, 80, trans. mod.

¹¹¹ Adorno, *Beethoven*, 80.

¹¹² Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 103.

also worth noting that both idealists and fascists have a tendency to weaponize the human being's animal likeness in order to humiliate and degrade those whom they deem unfit to be called human. As we shall see, even Kant cannot resist invoking the animal to shame the human who falls short of the moral law.

For Kant, to be an animal is the worst thing a human being can be. We have already seen him refer to the animality of the human being as insignificant, worthless, and crude (among other things), but in *The Metaphysics of Morals* he goes a step further. In a remark directed toward individuals who consume alcohol to “brutish” excess, he states that a “human being who is drunk is like a mere animal, not to be treated as a human being.”¹¹³ He offers a similar remark in his ethics lectures during a discussion of duties owed to “living beings that are not human”:

These [beings] are either [...] beneath humanity by their nature, or by their animality. Such beings are *bruta* (for in regard to morality no relationship can here be contemplated, since they lack understanding). Towards *bruta* we have no immediate duty; among men, indeed, no less than animals.¹¹⁴

These passages indicate that in Kant, no one is guaranteed the status of “human being.” Instead, that status can be revoked, as in the case of drunks, or refused altogether, as in the case of “*bruta*.” Once the human has been branded an animal, it is not to be treated as a human being, and no moral relationship can be had with it. In other words, the human being is to be treated like an animal as punishment for allegedly behaving like one.

III

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer highlight the dangerous

¹¹³ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 551.

¹¹⁴ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 434-435.

consequences of negatively comparing humans to animals. What begins as an insult can swiftly turn into a justification for genocide: “The distinctive human face, which humiliatingly recalls our origin in nature and our enslavement to it, irresistibly invites expert homicide. The caricature of the Jew has always relied on this.”¹¹⁵ For Adorno, the key to anti-Semitism and other forms of racism is that by likening the oppressed to animals, the oppressor is able to justify subjugating them just like animals have been subjugated. On this point, Cook observes:

[A]ll forms of oppression involve casting groups and individuals as Other than what the oppressor is. And, in human history, nature has played the role of Other *par excellence*. It is therefore not surprising that, when individuals and groups are marginalized within, or excluded from, society, they are often portrayed as bestial or animal-like, inhuman or not fully human, instinctive and irrational. In virtually all cases, the oppressor targets an individual or group as merely natural. [...] Once an individual or group is identified with nature, there is no indignity that may not be visited upon it in order to subjugate it. Rape, torture, segregation, confinement and enslavement are just some of the ways in which “nature” has been brought to heel.¹¹⁶

Likening individuals and groups to animals would not be an effective means to justify their oppression if animals themselves were not already mistreated in society. In this way, the domination of animals is intimately linked to the domination of marginalized human beings.

Adorno illustrates this point in the following passage from *Minima Moralia*:

Indignation over cruelty diminishes in proportion as the victims are less like normal readers, the more they are swarthy, “dirty,” dago-like. This throws as much light on the crimes as on the spectators. Perhaps the social schematization of perception in anti-Semites is such that they do not see Jews as human beings at all. The constantly encountered assertion that savages, blacks, Japanese are like animals, monkeys for example, is the key to the pogrom. The possibility of pogroms is decided in the moment when the gaze of the fatally-wounded animal falls on a human being. The defiance with which he repels this gaze—“after all, it’s only an animal”—reappears irresistibly in cruelties done to human beings, the perpetrators having again and again to reassure

¹¹⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 210.

¹¹⁶ Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 88-89.

themselves that it is “only an animal,” because they could never fully believe this even of animals. In repressive society the concept of man is itself a parody of divine likeness. The mechanism of “pathic projection” determines that those in power perceive as human only their own reflected image, instead of reflecting back the human as precisely what is different. Murder is thus the repeated attempt, by yet greater madness, to distort the madness of such false perception into reason: what was not seen as human and yet is human, is made a thing, so that its stirrings can no longer refute the manic gaze.¹¹⁷

Here Adorno suggests that what the perpetrators of violent hate crimes target when they commit atrocities against racial minorities is their victims’ perceived animality. By “cleansing” the human race of any trace of animality, the genocidal actors can remain secure in their own delusional conception of humanity, which is based not on animal likeness but divine likeness. For Adorno, the point is that genocide and other extreme forms of racial violence are rooted in a denial of the animality of the human being. By projecting animal qualities onto their victims, the aggressors betray their disgust of their own animality, which they desperately try to extirpate by senselessly murdering those whom they accuse of being the “real animals.”

Adorno also suggests that the genocidal actors characterize their victims as animals because they have already been conditioned to regard animal suffering with indifference. By convincing themselves that their human victims are “only animals,” the murderers are able to slay them without misgivings. The justification for destroying racial minorities is the same justification for destroying animals: in both cases, the victims are regarded as mere “things” that are so worthless and insignificant that their suffering hardly matters.

In light of the preceding observation, the passage from *Minima Moralia* quoted above could be interpreted as an indirect critique of Kant. For like the perpetrator of genocide, Kant also views animals as things. That being said, Adorno does seem to be in agreement with Kant

¹¹⁷ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 105.

on at least one point: the violent treatment of animals leads to the violent treatment of human beings. In Chapter One, we saw that Kant considers animal cruelty to be immoral because it desensitizes us to human suffering and makes us more likely to treat other human beings with cruelty. While Adorno would accept Kant's claim that withholding compassion from animals can make us cold toward humans, he would likely point out that to view an animal as a thing is already to show a lack of compassion for it. This is a source of great tension in Kantian animal ethics. If our behavior toward animals can affect our behavior toward human beings, and we have a duty to treat human beings as ends in themselves, how can we treat animals as mere things without that leading us to treat human beings in the same way?

Ultimately, Kant has enormous difficulty determining where animals fit into his ethical system and how they ought to be viewed and treated by human beings. According to Kant, animals are things, instruments, and mere means, and yet at one point he believed that they were analogous to human beings—an implicit acknowledgment of their *human likeness*. He also concedes that unlike other “things,” animals are capable of suffering, which suggests that they are not things at all. As we saw above, Adorno argues that those who commit atrocities against other human beings must constantly reassure themselves that their victims are “only animals.” This reassurance is needed, he says, because they could never fully believe even that animals are “only animals.” Perhaps Kant, who must keep reminding his readers that animals are mere things, unworthy of dignity or respect, never fully believed this either.

IV

Some commentators have argued that Adorno endorsed a compassion-based system of

animal ethics inspired by Schopenhauer. Gerhardt, for example, points to the passage from *Problems of Moral Philosophy* (discussed in Chapter One) where Adorno praises Schopenhauer's moral philosophy for its inclusion of animals and its emphasis on the importance of extending compassion to animals. Commenting on this passage, Gerhardt writes: "In Adorno's eyes what has often been dismissed as mere crankiness [i.e. Schopenhauer's advocacy of animal protection] actually provides the grounds for a radically different relationship between humans and animals that does not think of animals as mere things but rather as beings worthy of compassion."¹¹⁸

Following Gerhardt, Ryan Gunderson claims that Adorno was committed to a Schopenhauerian ethics of compassion, and that he was indebted to Schopenhauer for calling attention to the invisibility of animal suffering in society. Gunderson also notes that the concept of *Tierähnlichkeit* figures prominently in Schopenhauer's philosophy as well. "For Schopenhauer," Gunderson writes, "it was necessary for human beings to recognize their essential similarity with animals and end the 'tortures that are inflicted' on animals by human society."¹¹⁹

While the similarities between Adorno's and Schopenhauer's philosophies are striking, Gerhardt and Gunderson tend to overstate Schopenhauer's influence on Adorno and largely conflate it with Schopenhauer's much more profound impact on Horkheimer. Furthermore, these accounts fail to appreciate the complexity of Adorno's engagement with the topic of compassion.

¹¹⁸ Gerhardt, "Thinking With": 143.

¹¹⁹ Ryan Gunderson, "The First-Generation Frankfurt School on the Animal Question: Foundations for a Normative Sociological Animal Studies," *Sociological Perspectives* 57, no. 3 (2014): 293.

In *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, for example, Adorno criticizes the role that compassion plays in Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy:

[T]he concept of compassion tacitly maintains and gives its sanction to the negative condition of powerlessness in which the object of our pity finds himself. The idea of compassion contains nothing about changing the circumstances that give rise to the need for it, but instead, as in Schopenhauer, these circumstances are absorbed into the moral doctrine and interpreted as its main foundation. In short, they are hypostasized and treated as if they were immutable. We may conclude from this that the pity you express for someone always contains an element of injustice towards that person; he experiences not just our pity but also the impotence and the specious character of the compassionate act.¹²⁰

For Adorno, compassion that is divorced from the aim of changing the underlying conditions that make compassion necessary merely mitigates suffering and therefore contributes to its persistence. Such compassion does a disservice to the sufferers and unwittingly prevents their suffering from being abolished.

Adorno also questions the extent to which individuals are capable of compassion under capitalism. Indeed, he claims that compassion has been eroded by the social phenomenon of "coldness." As Simon Mussell explains, coldness refers to the "glacial atmosphere of indifference" that characterizes atomized relations in late capitalism.¹²¹ Coldness and indifference are built into the very structure of the economy because capitalism forces individuals to compete against each other and rewards those who pursue their self-interests at the expense of the interests of others. "In order to successfully survive and function amid such conditions," Mussell writes, "one must adopt or rather *internalize* this coldness and indifference:

¹²⁰ Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 173-174.

¹²¹ Simon Mussell, "'Pervaded by a Chill': The Dialectic of Coldness in Adorno's Social Theory," *Thesis Eleven* 117, no. 1 (2013): 58.

in other words, it has become socially necessary to remain as indifferent as possible.”¹²² Adorno maintains that no one is immune from coldness since “without such coldness one could not live.”¹²³

Following Adorno, Mussell points out that the effects of coldness extend beyond the immediate context of exchange relations. For at its core, coldness involves a profound “lack of empathy and corporeal connection with living things”¹²⁴ Consequently, coldness functions as a precondition for extreme acts of violence against humans and other animals. According to Adorno, the coldness that enables one to repel the gaze of a dying animal is the same coldness that makes pogroms possible. And indeed, pogroms are possible not only because the perpetrators have deadened their feeling for the suffering of the other but because the spectators are equally cold in their indifference to such atrocities.

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno suggests that coldness begins in childhood, and that children first learn coldness in relation to animals. To illustrate this point, he recounts what may well be a memory from his own childhood:

A child, fond of an innkeeper named Adam, watched him club the rats pouring out of holes in the courtyard; it was in his image that the child made its own image of the first man. That this has been forgotten, that we no longer know what we used to feel before the dogcatcher’s van, is both the triumph of culture and its failure.¹²⁵

Adorno claims that when children are confronted with animal suffering, an unconscious

¹²² Mussell, “‘Pervaded by a Chill’”: 58.

¹²³ Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” 274.

¹²⁴ Mussell, “‘Pervaded by a Chill’”: 58.

¹²⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 366.

knowledge whispers to them: “this is what matters.”¹²⁶ This knowledge, however, is eventually repressed by “civilized education.”¹²⁷ Babette Babich illustrates this point vividly:

Conscious of what it is being taught at every moment, the child learns passivity, helplessness, acceptance, complicity in the face of the subjugation of nature [...]. Thus the farmer’s child learns to drown excess kittens and puppies without a word, the city child learns to walk away from beggars on the street, learns that pigeons are dirty, that strays are to be ignored or left behind. Thus we learn to look away from suffering; we are taught that such things do not count.¹²⁸

Children who are fortunate enough to make it through such education with their sensitivity to animal suffering relatively intact are later shamed for it in adulthood. Indeed, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that in modern societies, “to show concern for animals is considered [...] a betrayal of progress.”¹²⁹ Likewise, individuals who go out of their way to treat animals with kindness and respect may be seen as having abandoned rationality. To reject coldness, then, is not only to risk undermining one’s survival prospects in an economy that promotes the single-minded pursuit of self-interest, it is also to risk being socially ostracized. As Adorno observes: “Anyone who is not cold, who does not chill himself [...], must feel condemned.”¹³⁰

In sum, while Adorno acknowledges that compassion for animals is sorely lacking in society, he also recognizes that there are serious impediments to the kind of transformative, compassionate action needed to bring about an improved state of affairs. Coldness has become inescapable under capitalism, such that the “ability of anyone, without exception, to identify with

¹²⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 366.

¹²⁷ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 366.

¹²⁸ Babette Babich, “Adorno on Nihilism and Modern Science, Animals, and Jews,” *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2011): 136.

¹²⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 211.

¹³⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 347.

another's suffering is slight."¹³¹ Adorno observes that in the face of the seeming insurmountability of coldness, "the individual is left with no more than the morality for which 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."¹³² To understand what Adorno means by this, we will need to examine the elements of coldness in Kant's ethical system.

In Chapter One, we saw that Kant disapproves of moral actions that arise out of instincts, impulses, and inclinations. In fact, he considers these motives to be utterly devoid of moral worth. The only actions that have moral worth, in Kant's eyes, are those performed from the motive of duty, because only those actions are determined by reason alone. This is why in the *Groundwork* Kant praises the cold philanthropist who fulfills his duties to others despite his indifference to their suffering. According to Kant, such a person has a character of the highest moral worth because his actions spring from duty rather than inclination.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant claims that feelings of compassion and sympathy are among the inclinations that taint the purity of one's disposition to duty. Such feelings are burdensome to rational individuals because they threaten the clarity of one's moral reasoning. Consequently, in order to achieve moral perfection, one must strive as much as possible to act independently of compassionate feelings.

As these examples demonstrate, the status of compassion in Kantian ethics is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, Kant argues that feelings of compassion are unreliable guides to

¹³¹ Adorno, "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," 274.

¹³² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 299.

morality because they can affect our ability to reason clearly about moral issues. On the other hand, he also claims that our capacity to empathize with the suffering of others can be morally useful and that we should not try to damage this capacity intentionally. Ultimately, though, by holding up the unfeeling philanthropist as the exemplar of moral perfection, Kant sides against compassion in favor of the kind of cold rationality that acts from duty alone. Not only is compassion unnecessary for moral action, it can actively hinder us from doing the right thing. What is more, actions based on compassion have no moral worth, and when we allow compassionate impulses to take precedence over rational considerations of duty, we fail to act with pure intentions and thwart the cultivation of our disposition to duty.

Some Kantians have argued that Kantian moral philosophy is not as opposed to compassion as it seems. Barbara Herman, for example, contends that Kantian moral philosophy does not require us to become cold and unfeeling toward others in order for our actions to have moral worth.¹³³ She argues that while Kant does seem to imply in the philanthropist example that a dutiful action cannot have moral worth if it is accompanied by feelings of compassion, the traditional interpretation of this example draws the wrong conclusion from it. According to Herman, Kant is not suggesting that it is morally preferable to act without inclination; rather, his point is to show that we should act from the motive of duty regardless of whether there is a supporting inclination involved. So long as duty is ultimately the motive on which the subject acts, the presence of a nonmoral motive does not detract from the moral worth of the action. For Herman, this means that the Kantian subject is not barred from having a compassionate interest

¹³³ Barbara Herman, "On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty," *The Philosophical Review* 90, no. 3 (1981), *passim*.

in performing a dutiful action so long as that interest does not take priority over the subject's interest in duty.

For the most part, Herman's interpretation is plausible. However, it still does little to mitigate the coldness inherent in Kantian moral philosophy. While on Herman's reading the Kantian subject is not required to extinguish its feelings of compassion, it is obliged to suppress the urge to act on them, and this is precisely what makes Kantian moral philosophy cold. The Kantian subject is initially unmoved in the face of misery. Instead of rushing to the aid of those in need, the Kantian subject is required to hold back and deliberate over the moral law before acting. Herman's interpretation of the philanthropist example does not change the fact that in Kant, only actions that proceed from rational considerations of duty have moral worth.

This brings us to Adorno's critique of Kant. According to Adorno, Kantian moral philosophy promotes the same bodily detachment from the suffering of others that characterizes coldness under capitalism. Since the Kantian subject is expected to refrain from acting on its compassionate impulses, it cannot truly identify with or respond appropriately to others' suffering. As we have seen, Kant implicitly associates compassion with animality when he refers to the former as an "instinct" and a "natural" capacity. This suggests that his contempt for compassion is ultimately rooted in his contempt for animality. In Adorno's view, however, animality is precisely what is needed to combat coldness. To live as a good animal is to break the icy grip of exchange relations and reestablish a physical bond with other living beings. Unlike Kant, Adorno does not invoke the animal in the context of morality to insult or shame the human. Instead, he offers the idea of living as a good animal as a corrective to Kantian ethics. Aspiring to be a good animal would be *more* human than trying to live like the Kantian "person" that denies

and suppresses its animality.

In Chapter Two, I argued that one of the aims of Adorno's philosophy (especially in works such as *Minima Moralia*) is to locate and rescue possibilities for right living that have not yet been lost to exchange relations. This is no easy task, for as Adorno argues, exchange relations have affected nearly every aspect of human life. Consequently, Adorno's search often uncovers possibilities for right living that moral philosophers have traditionally neglected or overlooked. For instance, we saw previously that Adorno offers the image of the child at play as one such model of right living.

Here I argue that Adorno is doing something similar when he speaks of the "good animal." Gerhardt takes a similar reading, arguing that for Adorno, "the very animal that Kantian ethics regards with such disdain should not be the source of derision but instead the guide to morality."¹³⁴ Like children, animals have rarely in the history of Western philosophy been regarded as the ones from whom we ought to take our moral cues. But as we shall see, Adorno establishes a link between morality and animality when he argues that instinct is a constitutive element of moral action. In contrast to Kant, who regards animality as the antithesis of morality, Adorno argues that human beings are capable of morality not in spite of their animality but precisely because of it.

At various points throughout his work, Adorno emphasizes the instinctual character of morality, arguing against Kant that physical impulses are inseparable from moral action. In his lectures on metaphysics, for example, Adorno claims that "the true basis of morality is to be

¹³⁴ Gerhardt, "The Ethics of Animals in Adorno and Kafka": 162.

found in bodily feeling, in identification with unbearable pain.”¹³⁵ In *Negative Dialectics*, he describes this bodily feeling as an impulse, one that involves a sense of solidarity with “tormentable bodies,” and argues that such impulses are “immanent in moral conduct.”¹³⁶ As a visceral, corporeal response to physical suffering, the “moral impulse” is not reducible to reason, yet it contains a normative element that is essential to morality. According to Adorno, this impulse “tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different.”¹³⁷

Fabian Freyenhagen argues that Adorno’s notion of living as a good animal involves all the elements outlined above: namely, identifying with the suffering of others and showing solidarity with tormentable bodies.¹³⁸ In addition, he argues that Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s concept of “natural compassion” captures well what Adorno means when he suggests that a turn toward animality is needed to fight coldness:

For Rousseau, compassion consists in the “innate repugnance of seeing a fellow-creature suffer.” Put differently, it is an instinctive reaction that takes the form of recognizing one’s own struggle for self-preservation in the suffering of others. Animals experience compassion as much as humans do (in fact, it seems to be in virtue of being animals that humans are capable of compassion). Showing compassion might thus be part of what makes a “good animal.”¹³⁹

Freyenhagen notes that for Rousseau (and for Adorno as well), natural compassion “involves identification with the suffering of another creature to the extent of reacting with the same

¹³⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 116.

¹³⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 286.

¹³⁷ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 203.

¹³⁸ Fabian Freyenhagen, *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 171.

¹³⁹ Freyenhagen, *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy*, 171.

immediacy and spontaneity to its suffering as to one's own suffering."¹⁴⁰ And Freyenhagen argues that, like Rousseau, Adorno also recognizes this capacity in other animals:

The solidarity with tormentable bodies arises out of the abhorrence of (physical) suffering, which has direct motivational force for human animals. Insofar as Adorno situates this practical abhorrence within natural evolution, he would accept that other animals are capable of it and that it is a natural reaction, a "physical impulse."¹⁴¹

While Freyenhagen does not supply any evidence to support the claim that animals react instinctively to the suffering of other creatures, empathy in nonhuman animals is a well-established phenomenon. Many animals become distressed when they witness members of the same species in distress and will act to terminate that distress even at the risk of endangering their own safety.¹⁴² Under the right conditions, some animals will even respond empathetically to the distress of humans as well as other animals that do not belong to their own species.¹⁴³

By invoking the image of the "good animal," Adorno demonstrates a respect for animals that Kant lacks. The animal is a symbol of immorality in Kant, which is why he compares humans who disobey the moral law to animals. When the human behaves badly, it is the animal within that gets blamed. Adorno, however, does not share Kant's view of animality. Instead, he insists that the impulse against physical suffering (an impulse that arises from our animal being) has moral worth and should not be excluded from ethics.

In his *History and Freedom* lectures, Adorno recounts an apocryphal story about

¹⁴⁰ Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, 171.

¹⁴¹ Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, 172.

¹⁴² Stephanie D. Preston and Frans B. M. de Waal, "Empathy: Its Ultimate and Proximate Bases," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 25 (2002): 1.

¹⁴³ Preston and de Waal, "Empathy": 19.

Friedrich Nietzsche, who is said to have intervened against a coachman mistreating a horse because he simply could not “stand by and watch any longer.”¹⁴⁴ Adorno observes that “where this kind of reaction is completely absent, [...] there can be no room for ideas of freedom and humanity.”¹⁴⁵ He adds: “Perhaps the gravest objection to Kantian moral theory is that it has no room for motives of this kind.”¹⁴⁶

To be sure, when Adorno says that we should try to live as good animals, he is not suggesting that we forgo reason and self-reflection in ethical matters—far from it. As we have already seen, Adorno believes that self-reflection is essential for ending humanity’s domination of nature. In fact, what enables us to live as good *human* animals is that we can reflect on ourselves and our motivations. For instance, by reflecting on the fact that we feel free to kill other animals because we believe we are superior to them, we can question the basis for our alleged superiority and then change our behavior accordingly.¹⁴⁷ On the whole, Adorno thinks there should be more of this kind of reflection in the world, not less.

That being said, Adorno also recognizes that reflection and rational deliberation can sabotage action in situations where an immediate response is necessary to prevent or end suffering. He illustrates this point in the following example from his lectures on moral philosophy:

[C]onsider the moment when a refugee comes to your door and asks for shelter. What would be the consequence if you were to set the entire machinery of reflection in motion,

¹⁴⁴ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 239.

¹⁴⁵ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 239.

¹⁴⁶ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 239.

¹⁴⁷ I would like to thank Dr. Deborah Cook for this insight.

instead of simply acting and telling yourself that here is a refugee who is about to be killed or handed over to some state police in some country or other, and that your duty therefore is to hide and protect him—and that every other consideration must be subordinated to this? If reason makes its entrance at this point then reason itself becomes irrational.¹⁴⁸

Unlike Kant, who insists unconditionally on the subordination of impulse to reason, Adorno suggests that sometimes it is more rational to *not* engage in rational deliberation before acting. Indeed, it would be immoral in Adorno's view to withdraw into a state of self-reflection in a situation that urgently calls for one to respond without hesitation to the suffering (or imminent suffering) of others.

To return to the discussion that opened this section, Adorno's position on compassion is more ambivalent than some commentators have made it seem. While he agrees with Schopenhauer that compassion is the right response to the suffering of human and nonhuman animals, he goes further than Schopenhauer by insisting that compassion is not enough, that domination must end. Additionally, Adorno recognizes that under the frigid conditions of late capitalism, individuals are not only discouraged from acting compassionately but are also required to internalize coldness in order to survive. Consequently, the capacity of individuals to empathize with others is severely diminished.

If coldness is to be resisted, we must return to the "basis of morality," that primal, bodily feeling that coldness has not yet fully extinguished. As an essential part of our animal nature, the impulse against suffering preserves the possibility of a transformed relationship between ourselves and other animals. By responding to animal suffering in the same way that many animals respond to each other's suffering, we affirm our animality while simultaneously

¹⁴⁸ Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 97

recognizing other animals as beings who also have tormentable bodies and who are therefore equally deserving of compassion. For Adorno, reflecting on such impulses and being responsive to them is essential for overcoming the delusion of the absolute difference between ourselves and other animals.

V

To conclude this chapter, I would like to summarize Adorno's main claims regarding society's troubling relationship with animals and animality before turning briefly to several passages from Adorno's writings on aesthetics and art that make use of the concept of *Tierähnlichkeit*.

According to Adorno, the systematic domination of animals in society is predicated on the belief that human beings are not creatures of nature like other animals but are somehow outside of nature or separate from it and are therefore authorized to treat nature and the other animals however they wish. While Adorno thinks that we have a vested interest in this belief because it allows us to freely exploit other animals, he also suspects that there is a narcissistic interest underlying the denial of our animality. Not wanting to believe that our efforts since prehistory to free ourselves from nature have been in vain, we have convinced ourselves that we possess a special quality of freedom that no other natural being enjoys.

However, Adorno argues that we have not successfully freed ourselves from nature because our endless pursuit to dominate nature has itself been driven by the natural instinct for self-preservation. Indeed, we have become increasingly in thrall to this instinct precisely because we refuse to acknowledge it in ourselves. By disavowing our instinctual nature, we have blinded

ourselves to the self-destructive course that our survival instincts have taken. Unless this course changes soon, we will destroy the natural world along with ourselves.

Adorno outlines an additional consequence of viewing ourselves as radically distinct from other animals. Historically, the revulsion human beings feel toward their animality has manifested in the projection of that animality onto others. Arguing that this kind of projection is essential to anti-Semitism and other forms of racism, Adorno observes that those in power often portray marginalized groups as animals in order to justify using violence and other means to oppress them. He also points out that people are far less likely to express indignation over racist violence if the victims are cast as animal-like. This is because they have already learned from an early age to be indifferent to cruelties done to animals.

Ultimately, Adorno believes that our failure to reconcile ourselves with our animality has brought immeasurable harm to ourselves and other animals and that it now threatens to jeopardize all life on earth. Our situation calls for us to bring our domination of nature to an end, a feat that would require us to come to terms with our animality. Adorno suggests that we can start this process by reflecting on our animal likeness. One of the ways that we can engage in such reflection is by acknowledging the extent to which survival instincts have shaped our thought and behavior.

In addition, Adorno suggests that we can foster a deeper appreciation of our animal likeness by reflecting on aesthetic representations of *Tierähnlichkeit*. In connection with this idea, Adorno references the works of Gustav Mahler and Franz Kafka. In *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, Adorno writes about the third movement of Mahler's Third Symphony, entitled "What the Animals in the Forest Tell Me":

Through animals humanity becomes aware of itself as impeded nature and of its activity as deluded natural history; for this reason Mahler meditates on them. For him, as in Kafka's fables, the animal realm is the human world as it would appear from the standpoint of redemption, which natural history itself precludes. The fairy-tale tone in Mahler is awakened by the resemblance of animal and man. Desolate and comforting at once, nature grown aware of itself casts off the superstition of the absolute difference between them.¹⁴⁹

In *Prisms*, Adorno compares the redemptive quality of Mahler's music to Kafka's stories, noting that both artists use the theme of animals to remind human beings of their own animality. "Instead of human dignity, the supreme bourgeois concept," Adorno writes, "there emerges in [Kafka] the salutary recollection of the similarity between man and animal, an idea upon which a whole group of his narratives thrives."¹⁵⁰ Here Adorno contrasts the concept of human dignity with *Tierähnlichkeit*; the latter is meant to serve as a corrective to the former.

Remarking again on the connection between children and animals, Adorno suggests that the possibility of recapturing a childlike and intuitive awareness of our animal likeness becomes available through art:

In its clownishness, art consolingly recollects prehistory in the primordial world of animals. Apes in the zoo together perform what resembles clown routines. The collusion of children with clowns is a collusion with art, which adults drive out of them just as they drive out their collusion with animals. Human beings have not succeeded in so thoroughly repressing their likeness to animals that they are unable in an instant to recapture it and be flooded with joy; the language of little children and animals seems to be the same. In the similarity of clowns to animals the likeness of humans to apes flashes up; the constellation animal/fool/clown is a fundamental layer of art.¹⁵¹

Here Adorno strikes a hopeful note. Although our likeness to animals has been repressed, it is

¹⁴⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 9.

¹⁵⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, "Notes on Kafka," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Sherry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 270.

¹⁵¹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 165.

never far from the surface. And when we choose to acknowledge that likeness, instead of denying it or using it to insult other human beings, the recognition of our similarity to animals can become a source of pure joy. It is with this promise in mind that Adorno encourages us to not just accept our animal likeness but to embrace it.

CONCLUSION

My aim in this thesis has been to highlight the importance of animals to Adorno's thought. As a critical theorist concerned with the project of human liberation, Adorno recognized that human oppression and animal oppression are inextricably linked, and consequently, that the liberation of humans depends on the simultaneous liberation of animals. Adorno was committed to including animals in the emancipatory project of critical theory because he believed that society's treatment of animals constituted domination. By tracing domination across species lines, Adorno sought to give voice to animal suffering and to expose oppressions shared by both human and nonhuman animals. For Adorno, the entwinement of human domination and animal domination meant that neither form of domination could be adequately theorized or critiqued in isolation.

The theme of animals in Adorno deserves more scholarly attention than it has traditionally received. Scholars interested in the Adorno-Kant connection may find this theme especially worth investigating, given that Adorno reserved his most biting commentary on Kant for the latter's view of animals and animality. Additionally, those interested specifically in Kantian animal ethics may find Adorno's analysis equally illuminating. While there has been no shortage of criticism leveled at Kant from animal ethicists in the last several decades, Adorno stands out as a distinctive voice among these critics. Adorno's critique of Kant is unique because it traces the problems that arise from Kantian animal ethics back to Kant's contempt for the animality of the human being, as well as his implicit rejection of the similarity between humans and other animals. For Adorno, a truly humane animal ethics is not possible in the absence of the

recognition that humans and animals are fundamentally alike.

Adorno believed that questions concerning our ethical relationship to animals were central to philosophy. In *Towards a New Manifesto*, he declares that “[p]hilosophy exists in order to redeem what you see in the look of an animal.”¹⁵² Adorno was sensitive to that fact that all too often it is the look of *suffering* animals that we encounter, from the gaze of the fatally-wounded animal to the zoo animal trapped on the other side of the glass. As he observes in *Aesthetic Theory*: “There is nothing so expressive as the eyes of animals—especially apes—which seem to objectively mourn that they are not human.”¹⁵³

Expressed through the eyes of the animal that finds itself at the mercy of the human is the yearning for a changed relationship between humans and animals. If philosophy exists in order to redeem what lies in the animal gaze, it is because that gaze challenges us to live up to our humanity. As Robert Savage rightly notes, Adorno was firm in his conviction that “the path to humanity leads *toward* animality, not away from it.”¹⁵⁴ For Adorno, a fully-realized humanity would consist in nothing less than the reconciliation of human beings to their animality and the establishment of their right relation to other animals.

It is my hope that the subjects treated in this thesis have provoked thought about contemporary issues. Indeed, Adorno’s insights are more relevant than ever given the current environmental crisis. Scientists warn that we are in the midst of a sixth mass extinction, estimating that up to 50% of all animal and plant species on earth could become extinct by the

¹⁵² Adorno and Horkheimer, *Towards a New Manifesto*, 47.

¹⁵³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 155.

¹⁵⁴ Robert Savage, “Adorno’s Family and Other Animals,” *Thesis Eleven* 78 (2004): 110.

end of the 21st century if we do not drastically alter our destructive course. Although concerns about climate change and mass extinction were just beginning to emerge at the time of Adorno's passing in 1969, he was remarkably prescient in his analysis of the dangerous trajectory of our exploitation of the natural world. In light of the problems facing us today, Adorno's animal philosophy offers useful resources for thinking about the underlying causes of the environmental crisis and for theorizing alternatives to our destructive and self-destructive relationship to nature and the other animals.

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