

# Levinas and Adorno

## Can There Be an Ethics of Nature?

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### NATURE OR HISTORY?

A common flaw in many contemporary discussions of the environment, including environmental activism and philosophical approaches in environmental ethics and environmental phenomenology, is its ahistorical character. Animals, ecosystems, environments, landscapes, that is, all that we associate with the ambiguous and problematic word “nature,” are addressed as if they were either external to or permanently fixed throughout human history. Nature, whether interpreted as antagonistic or idyllic, is constructed and reified as the opposite of human culture, history, and sociopolitical life.

Recent studies in environmental history and environmental literary criticism have explored the socially, historically, and culturally mediated character of both conceptions and experiences of what counts as nature and naturalness.<sup>1</sup> As Levinas and Adorno already pointed out, “nature” is bound up with human desires and practices, including those involving domination and exploitation. Yet contemporary environmental philosophy, both analytic and phenomenological, has not sufficiently attended to the consequences of the mutual interdependence of history and nature even if this thesis is generally acknowledged. One reason for this is the fear that the universality of ethical claims—such as all animals are equal and have the same

rights—or the truth of phenomenological claims—such as encountering a stone, a tree, a river, or a woodchuck discloses a basic structure of existence—would be undermined by considering their human context and conditions. Second, the suspicion of culture, history, and society in relation to the environment is a genuine response to the environmental damages they have caused, traditional anthropocentrism, and positions that entail that (1) entities are primarily social products or linguistic constructs and thus (2) in a sense insignificant if not immaterial and unreal. Constructivist theories, insofar as they are committed to both claims one and two, do not appear to leave much room for the recognition of anything self-sufficient in animals, ecosystems, and environments that was not conferred on them by a human or humanlike agent, subject, or system of signification. According to prevalent ecological arguments, it is difficult to have an ethics of nature *as* nature if nature only exists as a derivative product of God, humanity, or late capitalist society.

There thus seems to be two interpretive choices. On the one hand, environmentalism appears to require some sort of appeal to nature external to agency and representation or naturalism, whether scientifically, phenomenologically, or romantically conceived. Nature is essence and identity. On the other hand, Judeo-Christian monotheism, philosophical idealism, and social-linguistic constructivism appear to exclude this recourse to nature as pagan, intellectually naïve, or an ideological artifice. Against this either-or between the natural and native, on the one side, and the fabricated and foreign, on the other, I consider two alternative approaches to the relation between the natural and the human.

It might well be the case that there can be an ethics that is responsive to and responsible for animals, ecosystems, and environments without presupposing or requiring any concept or experience of nature—as it is formed in human discourse—at all. Instead of furthering environmental reflection, appeals to nature might impede and harm it, such that environmental ethics is better off “without nature.” This possibility is suggested by the works of Emmanuel Levinas, who relentlessly criticizes discourses of nature, naturalness, and naturalism in the name of the ethical. Levinas’s interpretation of nature as derivative of ethics concerned, first, positivistic and reductive naturalism and materialism that he analyzed as undermining the transcendence

occurring through the ethical relation to the other. Ethics requires the interruptive and reorienting force of transcendence, infinity, and the otherwise than being in relation to being and biology.

Second, his approach to nature addressed the adventure of nature in its romantic, irrationalist, social Darwinist, and fascistic forms.<sup>2</sup> Akin to Theodor Adorno, Levinas was justifiably suspicious of both the nostalgia for the archaic and the “primitive” and of the “return to nature.” This nostalgia construes nature, according to Adorno, through “the cultural desire that everything should remain unchanged,” reflecting the failure and alienation of—instead of a genuine escape from—culture.<sup>3</sup> What appears as unchanging nature is doubly false in Adorno’s analysis since nature is historically changing as well as human experiences and interpretations of it. Adopting an argument from *The German Ideology*, Adorno stresses that such “naturalness” consists of the remnants and fragments of previous human activities (*HF* 96).<sup>4</sup> Nature is a social category of what appears to be nonsocial and hence unalterable, as ideologies of nature and naturalness—reflecting the social and material nexus of human life—produce and reinforce the cultural category of the natural. Rather than being the spontaneous and unmediated expressions of natural life that they are frequently claimed to be, “natural activities” can be infantile and regressive when they hide their own social character; that is, that they are sophisticated products of a highly complex and mediated cultural and economic nexus.<sup>5</sup> Analogously, according to Levinas, the category of nature is a prism of human existence. The inescapability of nature, life, and being in their brute and brutal facticity echoes a self-celebratory egoism that excludes the other through careless neglect or careful destruction (*OE* 49, 51; *TI* 25–26, 59).

Levinas at times does mention the otherness and radical exteriority of nature and culture as its reduction to presence and the same (*EN* 179). An ethical culture, oriented by the ethical uniqueness of the human other, might have a different relation to nature by not absorbing it in identity. Yet Levinas concludes this discussion, which indicates the prospect of an ethical culture that is also more attentive to nature, by associating the radical exteriority of nature with the barbarism of being (187). Consequently, there does not seem to be a place for an ethical nature or concept of nature in Levinas, as it here appears to be offered only to be taken away. The ethical occurs through an

alterity and transcendence that necessarily and unconditionally disrupts the sacrificial orders of nature and history, calling the self to act for the other rather than out of self-interest and self-assertion in the “struggle for survival.”

Levinas’s approach to nature is deeply rooted in his early thought, which associates nature with being and its indifference and violence. For Levinas, “matter is the very fact of the there is (*il y a*)” (*EE* 51). Nature and matter designate the anonymous and impersonal forces against which human dignity struggles (*CPP* 130–31). This leads Levinas to criticize the ethical poverty of all naturalisms, while still addressing bodily and earthly needs and joys, sensual life and fecundity, and to unfold their movement—provoked through the claim of transcendence and alterity—toward the good and—through the third—toward justice. This movement is neither biological nor immanent but primarily ethical, as the biological is the sameness of genus and race as opposed to “human community instituted by language” for Levinas (*TI* 213). Although—as Derrida has contended, accusing Levinas of Cartesianism concerning the animal—Levinas only spoke of ethics in relation to human others and perhaps God, I suggest that there are traces of a broader ethics in Levinas that can be rethought and expanded.<sup>6</sup> There might not only be a “humanism of the other human” but—as John Llewelyn proposes—a “humanism of the other animal” and an alterity and transcendence to life and living beings insofar as they are ethically rather than biologically understood.<sup>7</sup>

Whereas we find a potential nonnaturalistic animal and environmental ethics through the moment of transcendence in Levinas, the writings of Adorno suggest a different alternative to the problematic opposition between naturalism and constructivism by advocating what might be called a nonreductive and ethically oriented “critical materialism.”<sup>8</sup> Levinas takes the route of transcendence, as the interruption of totality and the same, which—as John Drabinski has argued—leaves its traces in materiality and sensibility.<sup>9</sup> In Adorno, transcendence occurs within worldly immanence, as immanence inevitably disrupts itself and its totalization. Whereas alterity or absolute otherness is an unconditional or anarchic exteriority and transcendence in Levinas, and is not found in the immanence of things and environments, nonidentity is immanent or internal to things them-

selves, their mutual yet heterogeneous relatedness, and their antagonistic mediations for Adorno (*AT* 3–5). Adorno does not thereby exclude transcendence, even if it has no identity or positivity, as transcendence is a paradox beyond which thought cannot reach and for which we cannot designate a name or engrave an image—even that of God—as it reflects a life containing the “promise of something transcending life.”<sup>10</sup>

Adorno engages the aporia of history and nature as constitutive and inescapable, such that critical reflection needs to proceed from “natural history.” Like his non-anthropocentric humanism that joins animals to humans through their common sensuous existence and suffering, Adorno’s use of the category of “natural history” has its roots in Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and Walter Benjamin.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the ordinary scientific and vulgar materialist conceptions, and particularly the reduction of history to nature, the critical notion of “natural history” entails naturalizing the historical by reconnecting it with its material conditions while historicizing the natural by revealing its socially mediated character. This productive aporia is seen in the tension between the ideological construction, on the one hand, and the implicit promise of organic and animal life, on the other. The sensuous, material, and bodily links between human and animal life, happiness, and suffering point toward the possibility of an unforced and noncoercive sensual-mimetic and conceptual-rational responsiveness toward animals and the natural world.

#### INTERRUPTING NATURE: LEVINAS AND THE ETHICS OF OTHER ANIMALS

Whether environmental ethics is understood biocentrically and ecocentrically or anthropocentrically, whether nature is construed as having its own intrinsic worth or as valuable only in relation to human self-interest, it is frequently assumed that environmental ethics requires a notion of nature that gives it an independent or relative value. Given this thesis, and Levinas’s hostility to discourses of nature, it seems questionable to consider environmental ethics in the context of Levinas.

The apparent impossibility of a Levinasian environmental ethics can be countered, if nature is unnecessary for, or even an impediment, to environmental reflection and action. Some recent works in

environmental thought have argued against naturalism and romanticism and for environmental aesthetics without nature, for denaturalizing ecological politics, or against nature as an ideological construct.<sup>12</sup> These writings proceed from the other side of the previously discussed opposition, that is, the sociohistorical context of understanding and experiencing nature. This strategy cannot be used in approaching Levinas to the extent that history is as problematic a category as nature in that it does not introduce the ethical or justice. For Levinas, nature and history are bound together in an apologetic logic of domination that sacrifices the other (*DF* 22–23).

Can there then be an ethical responsiveness to and responsibility for animals and environments “without nature” or without the magic, idolatry, and fetishism of humans enchanted by natural forces and things? Even if there can be, an affirmative response to this question faces the difficulty that Levinas does not explicitly leave much space for ethically encountering the inhuman or nonhuman. Levinas’s writings are devoted to the suffering, persecution, and hunger of the human other, and animals or environments are not primarily discussed in ethical terms as has been frequently noted.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, some examples indicate the unethical anonymous, indifferent, and violent character of nature, in which humans are exiled and fall prey to events (*EN* 17, 46–48).

Whereas Adorno overtly criticized Heidegger for privileging the human, Levinas objected to Heidegger’s privileging of anonymous and neutral being, nature, and encompassing landscapes.<sup>14</sup> Levinas remarked, “In the *Feldwege*, there is a tree; you don’t find humans there” (*EN* 116, trans. modified). In the short critique of Heidegger entitled “Heidegger, Gagarin and Us,” Levinas praises the monotheistic and modern technological destruction of pagan groves, sacred sites, and mystery-laden landscapes. Levinas praises this destruction because it undermines the distinction between native and stranger—and accordingly between nature and artifice—and the violence that this distinction repeatedly justifies. Nonetheless, nature is conceived here as antihuman and mythical violence. Love of locality, place, and native landscape is seen as dividing humans into native and foreign and—despite Levinas’s earlier interpretation of phenomenology as “de-reifying the human being” and humanizing things (*DEH* 132)—responsiveness to things is identified with cruelty to one’s fellow humans (*DF* 231–32).

It is not nature and mystery that make humanity human, it is serving one's fellow humans by cultivating and reshaping the land in order to feed them (*DF* 233). It is, Levinas contends, distance from nature that allows humans to engage in their earthly task of not approaching "the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the beggar" with "empty hands" (26). The Holy Land is accordingly not a wilderness or forest paths, and hunger is more sacred than being. The tamarisk planted by Abraham is a Hebrew acronym for "food, drink and shelter, three things necessary to man which man offers to man. The earth is for that" (233). Although Levinas advocates the separation of human freedom in relation to nature, a hint of a different response to nature remains as Levinas insists that "man inhabits the earth more radically than the plant" (247). This radical inhabiting is distinguished by Levinas from Heidegger's care and dwelling by being devoted to welcoming and serving the other rather than itself.

Can this earthly inhabiting and use of the earth for the sake of the other, welcome and serve animal others or ethically respond to ecosystems and environments? Can we respond to nature *as* nature?<sup>15</sup> This is not a possibility in the varieties of deontological ethics that dominate contemporary social thought, insofar as philosophers such as Habermas demand certain kinds of symmetry and equality for there to be ethical responsibility.<sup>16</sup> Levinas, however, argues that responsibility is asymmetrical, as it involves a response without recuperation (*OB* 11). Whereas equality presupposes exchange, I am universally responsible to and for each regardless of their equality, reciprocity, or symmetry with myself (*DF* 21–22). I am responsible even to the other who bothers me and the enemy who persecutes me, in one of Levinas's more provocative formulations.<sup>17</sup>

For Levinas, ethical inequality is "absolutely opposed to oppression" as it suggests a solidarity of difference rather than the sameness of biological kinship or the genus (*OB* 87, 159, 177). The biological notion of the human—and thus every biologically justified anthropocentrism—is ethically interrupted. In this context, inequality between humans and nonhumans in Levinas need not necessarily lead to the denial of the latter's moral status and might indicate reasons for human responsibility to and for them. Just as I am infinitely responsible without any expectation of reciprocity to humans who need my help—the stranger, the widow, and the orphan—so there might be an analogous responsibility to nonhuman hunger, need, and persecution

that is likewise seen in the faces, cries, and bodies of animals. Levinas maintained both that the animal has no face, in the context of his account of the ethics of the face, and that the animal's face is a difficult issue. Still, the animal face, its gaze or need, can call me to respond and answer as much as any human face can in overlapping if not in identical ways. To the extent that human action is ethically defined by transcendence and responsiveness to alterity rather than nature or anthropology, as Levinas argued of biological categories applied to human existence, it is questionable to restrict the ethical to humans based on biological and anthropological reasons such as the biological differentiation of species.

Another text reveals the difficulty of extending ethics to animals in the Levinasian context, as the ethical respect for the human other does not easily translate into respect for animal others in their difference or alterity from humans. In the short piece called "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights," Levinas described Bobby the dog as "the last Kantian in Nazi Germany" (*DF* 153). Whereas the Germans offer not the slightest recognition to Levinas and his fellow prisoners of war—"stripped of our human skin . . . we were subhuman, a gang of apes" he remarked—there is a dog called Bobby who recognizes them as more than an object of neglect, disgust, and negation; "with neither ethics nor logos, the dog will attest to the dignity of the person" (152). The dog Bobby reveals a humanism, a Kantian respect for humanity lacking in the behavior of his fellow humans. A number of readings, such as John Llewelyn and Christina Gerhardt's, find an ethical alterity or animal otherness in these passages, whereas critics such as Jacques Derrida and David Wood find an absence of animal otherness.<sup>18</sup> John Llewelyn even suggests that Levinas sets up an analogy between the Holocaust and treatment of animals.<sup>19</sup> Bobby acts more humanely than humans and is not an object of inhumaneness in Levinas's account. The dog is symbolically construed in this essay through humanity's lack of humanity, and insofar as the dog is ethical "without ethics or logos," it lacks a moral agency of its own. But does Bobby's lack of ethical agency imply that it does not have an ethical status for Levinas and his fellow prisoners of war, who greeted and played with the dog? If ethics is exclusively defined by equality and symmetry, then the lack of such agency and reflection is the absence of the ethical. If ethics is asymmetrical, that is, an obligation prior to



my reflection or the natural qualities of the other, then such asymmetries do not exclude the animal's ethical status. In this case, the dog's inequality allows it to respond to humans in a way that other humans do not, whether out of fear, hatred, or indifference.

This prospect of an animal ethics does not necessarily entail a broader environmental ethics, since ecosystems and environments cannot be as easily perceived or conceptualized as faces or others, and Levinas is critical of the pagan and nationalistic identification with landscape, locality, and place. Beginning with the rise of National Socialism, Levinas contrasts Judaic diachronic dualism between nature and spirit with the anonymous monistic nature of pagan naturalism.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Levinas renounces "nature" as he, sometimes perhaps overly polemically and almost gnostically, critiques nature, life, and being as a condition of ontology and war, as egoistic self-assertion and indifference to the other.<sup>21</sup>

Beginning in the 1930s, in his earliest published responses to the rise of National Socialism such as "The Philosophy of Hitlerism," Levinas associated the biological with fatality, spontaneous nature with cruel brutality, and the natural body with the enslavement of the human being to the mechanical and vitalistic forces of life and nature (*DF* 27; *OE* 54; *UH* 18). Socially marked through biological and naturalistic categories, humans are chained to their natural bodies that are racialized through heredity and blood and subjected to the extreme sacrificial logic of the "struggle for existence" (*UH* 20). Levinas persistently associated this struggle for life with Spinoza and Heidegger as much as Darwin and Nietzsche.<sup>22</sup> Subjected to nature, instead of individuating themselves in relation to it, humans are unable to escape the brutality of the facticity and thereness of being, which Levinas later analyzes as the indifferent "there is" of the *il y a*. He concludes *On Escape* from 1935 with the words: "Every civilization that accepts being—with the tragic despair it contains and the crimes it justifies—merits the name 'barbarian'" (*OE* 73).

In *Totality and Infinity*, he associated nature with the striving of the conatus, the identification and conflation of the divine and the natural, the struggle for bare or brute existence, the Nietzschean self-assertion of the will, the National Socialist fetishizing of nature as native blood and soil, and the rusticity of Heideggerian being. The philosophy of nature, as assertion and struggle, is central to Western

metaphysics from Heraclitus to Heidegger in Levinas's analysis. It is in this context that Levinas assesses philosophies of immanence. They remain within the logic of pagan and primitive absorbed participation in the sacredness of the world.<sup>23</sup> He identified the philosophy of immanence with Heidegger in particular yet also Western ontology in general, as the absence of ethical alterity in absorption and participation in being. For Levinas, an interest in being essentially reflects the "survival instinct"; self-interest and being are at the root of violence (*EN* xii).<sup>24</sup>

Levinas distinguished life from nature when he described life as "living from" or "living on" (*livre de*). Life—and here human life is meant—nourishes itself from the earth and the sun, bread and water (*TI* 110–11). This living from can be taken as a return to the elemental, as the naked will to exist and survive. The modern conception of the struggle for existence, and the war of all, coincides with the awe and fear of the archaic and primordial, which Adorno takes to be the remnant of older, harder forms of repression (*HF* 100). Adorno and Levinas placed into question the privileging of self-assertion and the struggle for survival that both associated with fascism and racism. Levinas challenges such interpretations of life as power and will by showing how living from is not pure conatus or will, self-assertion in the struggle for existence: "Life is love of life, a relation with contents that are not my own being but more dear than my being: thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun" (*TI* 112). Already within the apparent unity of the biological, the I (*moi*) relates itself to a plurality of elements through nourishment and enjoyment prior and irreducible to even pragmatic relations to things: "prior to being a system of tools, the world is an ensemble of nourishments" (*TO* 63).

David Wood has criticized this thesis from the perspective of Heidegger's analysis of the pragmatic availability and usage of things, as a referential context of practical signification that already shapes nourishment and enjoyment.<sup>25</sup> One response might be that Levinas's position opens up a different relationship to nature, since instrumentality and possession presuppose rather than possess and control the elemental, which as "earth, sea, light, city" is non-possessable. This is suggestive of an ecology of the elemental, of environments

that are more and other than human pragmatic relations with things (*TI* 131). Second, Levinas's thesis can be defended as a version of the priority of sensuous practice, its potential fulfillment in happiness and the suffering in "the pain of need and work" (*TO* 69), which is also found in Adorno.<sup>26</sup> By distinguishing bodily nourishment and joy from instrumentality, bodily experiences that contest the body's fatality and instrumentalization become visible (*UH* 16–17). Levinas indicates how the referential context of instrumental significance is historically variable rather than a fixed and inevitable structure of human existence. It is derivative even if inescapable in existing society to the extent that instrumental relations can potentially be reoriented toward the welfare of humans. Whereas Heidegger speaks of a formal for the sake of which governing pragmatic relations, they relate to potential happiness and suffering in Levinas.<sup>27</sup> Levinas extends the argument that hunger and savoring are irreducible to pragmatic handiness, appropriation, and possession through their very materiality and singularization to enjoyment and suffering in *Otherwise than Being*. Only because life enjoys life can it leave the complacency of this enjoyment for the other (*OB* 73–74).

Gnostic and otherworldly readings of Levinas set being and its beyond—or otherwise—into absolute opposition, reifying transcendence as "the Heavenly City" and "worlds behind the scenes" (*OB* 4, 178). Despite such interpretations, Levinas advocates a twofold exteriority consisting of both a worldly elemental as well as an ethical pluralism.<sup>28</sup> His thought proceeds "toward a pluralism that does not merge into a unity," which emerges through the relationship with the other (*TO* 43, 54, 75). Such a radical multiplicity of singulars differs from a numerical multiplicity orderable by totality (*TI* 221). Contrary to the ascetic self-denial attributed to him by his critics, here Levinas celebrates the enjoyment and happiness of the I that reveals that a life is more than nature or being, since through happiness it becomes personal. There is no life without affectivity and sentiment and no person without the demand for satisfaction and happiness for Levinas (115). The I, individuated by its happiness in the particular contents of its life, is in this sense "beyond being" and the impersonal categories of the philosophies of life or race. In such impersonal life, life consumes itself, as all life is food for life, and all life is the same

(*EN* 13–14). As an individuated affective life, the individual lives both in egoism and egoism being interrupted by the happiness and suffering of the bodily other.

It is in this context that Levinas speaks of the other interrupting the sameness of the living being and of tearing the bread away from one's own mouth and giving it to the other. Here too we might ask of the animal's hunger and satisfaction in its affective life of sensibility and nourishment, of eating, sleeping, and enjoying the warmth of the sun or the coolness of the water, if not reading books. Levinas even speaks of the "morality of 'earthly nourishments' [as] the first morality, the first abnegation. It is not the last, but one must pass through it" (*TO* 43, 54). This first earthly morality is one that relates to justice and economy (*EN* 23, 29). Given Levinas's critique of discourses of nature, naturalness, and naturalism, which are called into question by the face of the other and by the other's hunger and poverty, it has become clear that a Levinasian ethics of animals and environments cannot be justified by an appeal to "nature" (*AT* 26–27). Appeals to "nature" have no primacy in Levinas's thought, as the ethical is seen as prior to, older, and more immediate than the natural, and it cannot be derived from it (*OB* 84–85). Human materiality, sensibility, and vulnerability "are earlier than nature," as in maternity that is irreducible to the biological as perseverance in being (68, 75). More radically, because of the human face-to-face, of "meeting and friendship," "the human is in contrast with all other reality" (*AT* 56).

Whereas the human is exemplified by the interpersonal, the non-human and natural is associated with the standpoint of third-person objectivity (*OB* 81, 86). Nonetheless, the Hebraically biblical yet concomitantly ethical materialist moment in Levinas that addresses bodily and earthly needs and joys, sensual life and fecundity, interrupts the reduction of the nonhuman to objective relations by relating the human and nonhuman through the body and human incarnation. If such a moment suggests an ethical obligation prior to and thus not isolated to intentionality and rationality, one can speak of a Levinasian if not Levinas's animal ethics. That is, a humanism of the other animal to the degree that the animal's "living from" addresses me calling me to respond, which I can do or fail to do. To the extent that such an ethics involves identification with animals and their suffering, the het-

erogeneity of the human and nonhuman places any such continuity and solidarity of identification into question.

Even if one finds in Levinas a premonition of an animal ethics, it is still questionable whether there can be an environmental ethics. Is the environment at best an issue of pragmatic concern insofar as pollution and global warming negatively affect human and animal life or can environments and ecosystems place further obligations on human action and nonaction? Is it inevitably paganism to speak of an ethics of place and nature in the context of Levinas's thought or can these be thought ethically—without nature or naturalism—through individuating encounter and confrontation rather than absorption and participation? Would not the claim that there is ethical transcendence in a melting glacier or in polluted wetlands be a perversion of Levinas's critique of personalizing the inhuman and depersonalizing the human, as glaciers and wetlands do not experience much less suffer need, want, and hunger?

Levinas's approach to nature is insufficient to the extent that he regards the Earth and its forests and mountains as places of exile over which the human individual and sociality have unconditional priority (*DF* 17, 22–23). Despite the suggestiveness of Levinas's "first" or "earthly morality," his non-instrumental approach to the elemental, and his interlocking of sensibility and materiality, questions remain. First, as there is only a limited role for the expression of natural integral wholes in Levinas, as exemplified by his rejection of the later Heidegger's environmental reflections, such a broader or more extended sense of environmental sensibilities or responsibilities appears dubious from a Levinasian perspective.<sup>29</sup> Second, since there is no notion of the exploitation, domination, or reification of nature but only of human and perhaps by extension animal life, it is difficult to make ecological claims ethical per se without fracturing Levinas's portrayal of the ethical itself; that is, by breaking not only with Levinas's literal word in extending his thought to other creatures but with its very orientation and direction in extending it to natural phenomena.

Nonetheless, multiple beginnings for environmental reflection and engagement are suggested by Levinas's thought. Levinas is critical of the materialism of the Enlightenment and Marxism while recognizing

its ethical orientation and promise (*UH* 15–17). His humanism incorporates elements such as sensual fulfillment and happiness from humanistic materialism and socialism, which he frequently praises insofar as they orient us toward others.<sup>30</sup> This meditation on ethical materiality, which insists that “matter is the very locus of the for-the-other” and that we will return to below, is associated with the self being a sensuous creature (*OB* 77, 113–14). Even though it is the human being rather than the animal that says, “here I am,” the nonresponse of the other is never an excuse to evade my responsibility for that other. This reflection should be extended to other animals to the extent that “our material nature is the very fulfillment of solidarity within being” (*DF* 126). That is, it is extended to animal others insofar as asymmetry does not exclude but is the condition of responsibility, and animals are encountered as material sensuous beings who enjoy and suffer, that is, who live from the elements and are invested with some form of sensibility and sense and therefore cannot be excluded from human responsibility.

Levinas’s humanism is structurally incompatible with ecological biocentrism and biological or other varieties of naturalism that affirm the priority of the natural or “nature as nature.” But commenting on a second century exegete, Levinas concludes “for if the earth had not been given to man but simply taken by him, he would have possessed it only as an outlaw” (*CPP* 58). The Earth is an issue of human and perhaps divine justice, not one immanent to nature. Accordingly, when asked about ecology in a late interview, he considered it to be an issue of human economy and justice.<sup>31</sup> This response might seem insufficient for some interpretations of antihumanist and deep green positions such as deep ecology, yet—like Adorno’s works—it presages the environmental justice movement that more adequately addresses the nexus of human and natural life.<sup>32</sup>

#### NATURAL HISTORIES: ADORNO, ANIMALS, AND ENVIRONMENTS

There is a potential if unrealized nonnaturalistic animal ethics via the moments of alterity and transcendence in Levinas and a suggestive yet insufficient environmental ethics of urban and rural air, land, and water in their elemental import for humans. In the works of Theodor Adorno, another alternative is articulated to the opposition between

nature and history, and naturalism and constructivism, insofar as human beings are both natural beings and nonidentical with their immediate and natural existence.<sup>33</sup> Adorno advocates what might be called a reflective and nonreductive naturalness when he suggests, for example, that by becoming “conscious of their own naturalness,” humans can “call a halt to their own domination of nature, a domination by means of which nature’s own domination is perpetuated” (*HF* 152).

Adorno’s thought shares some overlapping features with Levinas’s, while pursuing a different philosophical strategy with divergent premises and stakes. Despite their distance, to name one example, they share overlapping critiques of “totality,” the comprehensible graspability of things in a system.<sup>34</sup> The critique of totality unfolded in Adorno’s mature thought occurs via nonidentity, which has pre-conceptual and disruptive tendencies analogous to Levinasian alterity and humanity (*HF* 146–47). In addition, they opposed scientific and romantic naturalisms as reductive and reactionary, associating the latter with fascism. Although Adorno is clearly closer to materialism, they both stressed the material moment of sensuous human activity and fulfillment.

Levinas addressed living from as nourishment, enjoyment, labor, and fatigue. “Pain cannot be redeemed,” according to Levinas, and “retribution in the future does not wipe away the pains of the present”; without any just retribution, Levinas continues, “to hope then is to hope for the reparation of the irreparable; it is to hope for the present” (*EE* 93). The utopian and messianic hope for the “redemption of the flesh,” that is, of earthly existence and material needs and desires in the present, remains the justification of materialism for Adorno.<sup>35</sup> The implicit promise of society, however much betrayed, he writes: “would be to negate the physical suffering of even the least of its members, and to negate the internal reflexive forms of that suffering. By now, this negation in the interest of all can be realized only in a solidarity that is transparent to itself and all the living.”<sup>36</sup> Life is not a factual biological claim for either thinker; it calls for addressing suffering and injustice. It is ethical or sociopolitical.

The Stendhalian “promise of happiness” remains unfilled, and perhaps it cannot be fulfilled and remains utopian, and the materialism that would realize human rights and well-being was debased

and betrayed through its historical realization. Between utopianism and betrayal, the materialist dialectic of suffering and happiness, and of the damaged and the good life, remains crucial (if in negative form) for Adorno: “Art records negatively just that possibility of happiness that the only partially positive anticipation of happiness ruinously confronts today . . . the promise of happiness, once the definition of art, can no longer be found except where the mask has been torn from the countenance of false happiness.”<sup>37</sup> This insight applies not only to the aesthetic. Without the reference of reflection and rationality to concrete needs, interests, and their satisfaction, universal reason becomes irrational domination through the loss of the individual and its material nonidentical contexts (*HF* 41, 61). This is the one-sidedness of Hegel’s philosophy of history and of religious and secularized theodicies, which ask the victims to acquiesce to their own mutilation in being consoled by the universal, as “the consciousness of non-identity that characterizes the particular is stripped of its own substantiality and survives only as suffering, as a consciousness of pain” (42).

Absorbed and spellbound in the appearance of immediacy, spontaneity is reduced to consumption and happiness to pleasure.<sup>38</sup> Yet material and sensual practice—and the promise of their potential fulfillment in happiness and the good life that cannot be conflated with existing reality<sup>39</sup>—continues to orient Adorno’s critical models and negative dialectical procedure, which seems—if only at first glance or on a preliminary reading—to turn all positive claims to naught. According to Robert Manning, Adorno’s philosophy “cannot excavate the meaning of its own ethical sense,” which is articulated in Levinas, since it “is an entirely negative strategy of reflection, an entirely critical theory.”<sup>40</sup>

In “Marginalia to Theory and Practice,” Adorno does not reject the prereflective and pretheoretical spontaneity and positivity of praxis as such but the fixation on and reification of practice that devalues theory, reflection, and the labor of the concept to the detriment of practice itself.<sup>41</sup> Spontaneity needs reflectivity and the confrontation with material and social realities if it is not to be fully co-opted.<sup>42</sup> Sensuous enjoyment remains both a reference point in a moving constellation for critical thought, and it is suspect as it is compelled to obey the logic of the fetish character of the commodity. That is, as it



is commoditized and manipulated to the neglect of the individuation of the self and the injustice and suffering of others.<sup>43</sup> In his ostensibly pessimistic late essay “Resignation,” in which he challenges the student movement, Adorno articulates thinking as a practice of resistance that, however damaged and compromised, is still bound to its own and humanity’s happiness.<sup>44</sup> Adorno is not merely negative, reflective, and theoretical. Such happiness involves both ethical and utopian moments that allow a powerful critique of suffering, which Adorno extends to animals and nature itself.

Adorno, analogously to Levinas, criticized scientific and romantic naturalisms. Instead of their destroying transcendence, their portrayals of nature as objective factuality, struggle for existence and self-assertion, or idyllic paradise reflect ideology and consequently social domination for Adorno. Ideology is relentless to the degree that it is most powerful in the construction of identities, where second nature takes on the appearance of an unchanging first nature, “at the very moment when people believe they are most themselves and belong to themselves” (*HF* 78). Social domination, tied to human domination of nature, is revealed through immanent critique rather than interrupted through a transcendence outside of natural history. The self-critique of immanence brings a different focus to the critique of nature. Adorno does not eliminate nature by reducing it to an ideological function. Criticizing its reductive ideologically determined conceptualizations, without eliminating the category, social-ethical possibilities of nature remain significant for human life. For Adorno, we are compelled to recognize the material and objective side of history, “once we realize that we are its potential victims” (23). This same facticity is the possibility of critique and transformation.

As a result of Adorno’s nonreductive materialism, and materialism means for Adorno “the preponderance of the object” and the rejection of the reduction of objects to the knowing and organizing subject, nature is never absorbed without residue and excess into subjectivity or an intersubjective totality.<sup>45</sup> Discourses of the subject are themselves inadequate to the nonidentity of material bodily subjects.<sup>46</sup> As such, nature haunts the individual and society. Instead of taking Levinas’s route of transcendence as the interruption of totality and the same, it is worldly immanence itself that disrupts itself and its social totalization and fixation through the logic of equivalence through

identity and exchange. Whereas alterity or absolute otherness is an anarchic exteriority and transcendence for Levinas, and negativity and nonidentity remain insufficient in regard to the transcendent, otherness and nonidentity are immanent or internal to things themselves and their relatedness for Adorno (on negativity and nonidentity in Levinas, see *OB* 9, 13). This is possible in Adorno's thought because he does not identify immanence with essence or identity (on Levinas's identification of immanence with essence, see *OB* 17). Accordingly, not only other humans—or their subjectivity—but things or objects themselves can be interruptive insofar as they resist assimilation or throw a systematic order into question. The social totality exercises power over each thing, such that we are absorbed in and enthralled to things.<sup>47</sup> Resistance is inevitably mediated by the very categories and structures it defies: the “truth beyond coercive identity would not be its absolute other, but would always pass through that coercive identity and be mediated by it” (*HF* 23 and 266). In the face of such a situation of unavoidable complicity with domination, even in resisting it, critical thought cannot avoid its own weakness (47, 55).

As mediation is antagonistic and aporetic, rather than completely integrating insofar as the movement of identity is also one of nonidentity, resistance still occurs.<sup>48</sup> It can come not only on the side of the object, in its irreducibility and transcendence, in which case Adorno is more hopeful than Levinas, but it also occurs in the moment of reflection and in the distance that thought can take in relation to its context (*HF* 11). In both cases, Adorno associates interruption with interworldly instead of otherworldly otherness. Adorno addresses the ontic, material, and empirical character of worldly immanence as disturbing and reorienting thought and practice rather than using the religious language of God and a transcendence and infinity that is beyond and otherwise than being—whether understood rhetorically or theologically.<sup>49</sup> Such indirect reference to the empirical and to the object, the irreducible “additional factor” (*das Hinzutretende*), must remain risky and tentative given the ideological manipulation and loss of empirical reality.<sup>50</sup> Adorno and Levinas are Heidegger's most relentless critics. Whereas Levinas criticizes Heidegger's being in the name of the other that transcends it, Adorno criticizes being for the

sake of beings that dislocate it from within in their multiplicity, heterogeneity, and nonidentity. Adorno hence associates the nonidentity of nature with its multiplicity and diffuseness (*HF* 255, 266).

While challenging conventional understandings of nature and naturalism, often for similar reasons to Levinas, the relation of history and nature is a central issue from Adorno's early to later works. In the early 1930s, Adorno engaged the aporia—or intractable paradox—of history and nature as constitutive and inescapable and called for thinking both from the notion of “natural history” that removes the typical antithesis of nature and history by naturalizing the historical while historicizing the natural.<sup>51</sup> Nature is history in the sense of what has already become. What we call human nature is a product of what humans have been so far.<sup>52</sup> History is nature in the sense of activating and forming nature and all the possibilities of the new that such transformation implies. History and nature are both issues of second nature, of what becomes and is taken as fixed. Marx described the realization of human freedom as the end of natural history and the beginning of genuine history as rationally shaped through human agency. For the young Marx “nature as nature” is a fiction, and the elimination of nature is the emergence of free individuality.<sup>53</sup> Adorno repeatedly employed “natural history” in this sense. He also distinguished the vulgar naturalistic from the critical reflective use of the category of “natural history,” addressing it as a productive paradox (*HF* 116–17). This aporia is seen in the tension between the ideological construction and implicit promise of organic and animal life, the material and bodily links between human and animal life, happiness, and suffering, and the possibility of an unforced and noncoercive sensual responsiveness and ethical appropriateness to animals and natural phenomena.

Tracing this material moment into art, there is an aesthetics of nature in Adorno that is lacking in Levinas for whom the aesthetic and the cultural is always derivative of the ethical (*CPP* 100). Here too for Adorno there is a moment of nonidentity and nonequivalence, of sensuous freedom and the responsiveness of the mimetic, such that art is not unavoidably the fetishism, idolatry, and myth condemned by moralists from Plato to Levinas. Adorno articulates the potential nonidentity of freedom and dependence in mimesis and identifies a

moment of enlightenment in myth, rejecting the reactionary archaism that never finds what it seeks—an origin uncontaminated by reflection.

Although Adorno speaks of a materialism and an art without images, and critically employs the language of the Judaic prohibition of images and idols, he does not pursue this to the degree that Levinas does. The self mimetically models itself on its external world, whether its playfulness and ease or its hardness and coldness.<sup>54</sup> As Levinas noted of the reification of the body and its spontaneity, as it is “exposed to violence, spontaneity undergoes, turns into its contrary” (*TI* 229). Enchanted or absorbed identification allows no distance just as identity thinking suppresses all difference. They are both derivatives of mimesis that do not exhaust its role, import, and possibilities. As Asher Horowitz argues, mimesis includes both the desire for the object and its irresolvable exteriority.<sup>55</sup> This is an ambivalent logic of desire for alterity also addressed by Levinas. Although Levinas described this mimetic moment as regressive, evaluating poetry as magic and art as idolatry, he too—as Jill Robbins argues—cannot avoid presupposing and employing the mimetic to critique the mimetic, a possibility inherent in mimesis itself (*UH* 85, 88–90).<sup>56</sup> Mimesis, identification, and art can accordingly be either enslavement or emancipation, as it is for Adorno, who did not restrict the aesthetic to the human—as Aristotle did—insofar as it is associated with sensuality in its spontaneity and receptivity. Such recognition and identification, that is, of a responsiveness irreducible to mechanical stimulus and reaction, is crucial to Adorno’s formulation of the question of the animal.<sup>57</sup>

This revisionary nonreductive materialist strategy allows Adorno to address animal as well as human suffering as part of the human domination of nature. Although Adorno frequently does not appear to think much of animals’ natural capacities, he does bring attention to their suffering. According to Adorno, obliviousness to suffering, whether animal or human, is based in the same coldness and insensibility that allows maltreatment of horses and something like Auschwitz to be possible (*HF* 154–55). In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno relates racist dehumanization to the distancing abjection of animals. As totally other, dehumanized humans and devalued animals do not ethically interrupt the sameness of the gaze. The subhuman and non-

human is categorically separated from the normatively human, and the “possibility of pogroms is decided in the moment when the gaze of a fatally wounded animal falls on a human being,” as “those in power perceive as human only their own reflected image, instead of reflecting back the human as precisely what is different.” The stirrings and sufferings of the other “can no longer refute the manic gaze.”<sup>58</sup> Despite the vulnerability and defenselessness characteristic of all organic life, and not solely the human face, the animal is not simply the passive object of destruction, a pure construct and product of human calculation, discourse, and power.

Human revulsion and fear of animality, used to justify human degradation of animals, is of humanity’s own animality. The absolute difference between animality and humanity, which Levinas himself maintained, is a thesis that Adorno condemned in Kant (*EN* 33).<sup>59</sup> Animality links the mastery of both “inner” human and “outer” animal and environmental nature (*HF* 209). In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer analyzed the Baconian domination of nature, based historically in human lack and need and on the growing equation of knowledge and power, as part of the same historical process by which humans dominate each other. This analysis allows Adorno in his later works to diagnose environmentally destructive phenomena, without mystifying or sacralizing them. Romanticism concerning nature is part of its domination, as Adorno argues in his analyses of the natural in Wagner or Heidegger. Different aspects of nature are tamed or marginalized and celebrated or demonized (260–61). The domination of nature is the sociohistorical subjugation of natural phenomena as alien, different, and other (13). Such domination informs the exploitation and suppression of all phenomena seen as natural from the environment to the ideological naturalization of the human body in racism (45, 106–07).

The thoroughly “planned, cultivated, and organized” nature of second nature and nature reserves appears as first nature (*HF* 120–22). Although the conventional and social is taken to be nature, “primary nature”—consisting of the objective and material context of human thought and practice—is irreducible to its social construction to the extent that the priority of the social in how humans interact with natural phenomena, including those that they are, does not entail the reduction of nature to social ontology (122). Idealism, and

its linguistic and social constructivist derivatives, correctly historicize nature but misconstrue history as nature, reducing the nonidentical to the identity of mind, history, language, or society (123–24). Such positions cannot take animals and environments to be ethical, that is—in the Levinasian sense of exteriority—more than their construction and projection that is in effect their domination. Although all thought is interpretive, the reduction of reflection to interpretation undermines possibilities for critique and altered practice (128). As an alternative, Adorno argues that “natural history” itself indicates a model for interpretation, in which nature is read from history and history from nature (133–34). Both are revealed in their antagonistic dynamism and ephemeral transience, in their nonidentity, as immanent critique liberates immanence from itself and its own fetishization, allowing what is other than itself to be encountered (135).

#### A CULTURE OF NATURE?

Adorno’s social theory and Levinas’s ethics indicate a response to the heterogeneity of human and animal life without reducing that diverse and myriad life to either a hypostatized anthropocentric humanistic ideal, oblivious to the nonhuman in its presumed dominion over its world, or a predestined fatality of reified nature instrumentalized in the “struggle for existence” and biosocial mastery. The link between biologicistic self-assertion and biosocial control is the domination of nature, an issue inadequately articulated in Levinas, who does not sufficiently question modern Western civilization from the perspective of dominated nature.<sup>60</sup> Freedom consists in the breaking of and resistance to such spells, resisting totalization and identity, since it presupposes the category of the individual and the individual’s reflection, just as a singular being resists its totalization through its separation in Levinas (*HF* 174, 179; *TI* 54). Resistance is furthermore possible at each moment, since freedom is a sociohistorical category that is related to the natural bases of human life in impulse, spontaneity, and sensuous activity.<sup>61</sup> Although Levinas criticized the egoism, mastery, and virility of natural spontaneity, arguing that freedom is constituted through responsibility and command, he does not reject spontaneity or its ethical import entirely (*TI* 43; *OB* 91, 101, 107, 122).<sup>62</sup>

The affective, bodily, and sensuous enactment of the ethical via responsiveness brings Levinas into an ambivalent proximity to materialism.<sup>63</sup> Levinas associates materiality with the captivity and solitude of identity and matter, to be shattered by the time of the other, which becomes totalitarian through anonymity and the enchainment of the self to the body (*TO* 57–58). Yet the body, as the experience of materiality—indeed of “a materiality more material than all matter”—is not a possession or instrument (*OB* 108). It is an event wherein humans engage their existence and “exposedness to wounds and outrage” (*EE* 69–70; *OB* 108). The self as body is affected and persecuted in spite of itself (*OB* 101–02). Materiality is ethical through the affectivity of the body and bodily responsiveness to others in recognizing their distress, lack, and need. The ethics of the body is seen not only in response to bodily pain and need but also in moments of proximity and love, such as the receptive spontaneity of the caress in contrast to grasping touch (*TO* 89; *OB* 90).

Addressing the ecological and environmental crisis need not revert to metaphysical essentialism about inherent and eternal laws of nature, romantically blinding us with fetishized images of nature that obscure the realities of human domination and suffering, or to anthropocentric calculation about how useful it might be to recognize the natural and the animal. Even as Adorno and Levinas are to varying degrees complicit with what they criticize, their strategies can be employed beyond the historical facticity and limits of their works to promote a critical environmental reflection that is necessary for environmental ethics and practical engagement.<sup>64</sup>

Adorno’s approach to natural history in coordination with Levinas’s articulation of a culture oriented toward the ethical offers a suggestive critical model for environmental reflection. Instead of appealing to nature in itself or as such, this model suggests an ethically and environmentally informed society and culture that has the capacity to recognize, appreciate, and respond to the natural, the environmental, and the animal as more than a human construct or instrumental calculation of self-interest. Such a culture would let beings and environments be encountered in their singular uniqueness as well as their nonhomogeneous organic continuity with our own life and well-being. Thomas Heyd has described such a prospect

as “environmental culture,” a society in which a practical and effective environmental conscience is possible.<sup>65</sup>

To echo Levinas, the intensifying crises of the environment and the very existence of animal species in its “non-postponable urgency” call for a response, that is, justice and solidarity in an ethical asymmetry and difference no longer restricted to the human (*TI* 212–14). An environmental society or culture presupposes individual as well as social transformation from an allergic to a nonallergic relation to animals and environments. Adorno and Levinas both situate such hope in the context of the critique of totality and identity. Even if such concepts are to some extent exaggerated when applied to contemporary societies, they retain a critical import relevant to our current situation. Rather than demanding more overcoming and control, or a new union or fusion of nature and society, both authors advocate less. Such maximalism furthers more identity and consequently injustice to the nonidentical, and liberation from identity calls for “self-limitation” (*HF* 150, 158). Minimalism, or self-limitation instead of self-assertion, in relation to others in society and natural beings in the world is not only a question of nature but of society, particularly the logic of exchange, commodity fetishism, and consumerism diagnosed in varying degrees by both Levinas and Adorno. Their analysis of this logic has significant environmental implications in the face of the economic reductionism and commodification of nature that promotes environmental devastation and social injustice.<sup>66</sup>

A responsive—rather than merely ascetic or disciplinary—minimalism is also appreciably rational in that it allows the critique of reified forms of rationality without rejecting the critical transformative nonidentical moment in reason. Responding to the object, such as animals and environments, calls for the nonabsorbed yet nonindifferent distance and reflection as well as the engagement of immediacy and affectivity. Reason need not be a totalizing identity thinking to be rational. As Levinas contends, radical pluralism, and the responsibility it entails, is the very condition of reason (*TI* 208). It is not rationality, the sciences, and technology but their overextension and instrumentalization that is irrational. As reified, they are no longer responsive to things or their human agents.

Although there can be no return to a nature that never existed, experiences and conceptions of nature as more than a construct play a



critical sociocultural role for human reflection and praxis. The unsaying of the already said complicit with the domination of nature would be part of the formation of a society and culture that responds to and takes responsibility for nature. This is critical for a transformation that would address and respond to contemporary environmental damages and injustices rather than ignore and excuse them through religious or secularized theodicies that are the reduction and reification of transcendence whether understood in Levinas's or Adorno's sense.