

Two sorts of natural history: On a central concept in critical theory and ethical naturalism

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Abstract

The concept of natural history has received a great deal of attention in contemporary practical philosophy, especially as a result of Michael Thompson's concept of natural-historical judgments which aims to explain the normativity of the human life-form. With this concept, the norms effective in a life-form are understood as something natural and constitutive for that life-form. Although Thompson does not present a historical-philosophical model, he claims to be able to determine the normativity of the historically developing human life-form. By contrast, Theodor W. Adorno developed his own concept of natural history on the one hand as an interpretative conceptual model of historical reality, on the other hand, to indicate the normativity of the natural-historical course of human history itself. The normativity of natural history that Adorno focuses on is historically and socially determined, in contrast to the categorically conceived natural normativity that is at the heart of Thompson's approach. This article analyses the similarities and differences between the two approaches in such a way that it becomes clear to what extent ethical naturalism also provides possibilities for critique that can be made fruitful for a critical theory inspired by Adorno.

In recent times, there have been a number of attempts to bring the ideas of Critical Theory into conversation with those of neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism.¹ The reason for this was a shared motive in normativity theory, as both

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the leading exponents of ethical naturalism—such as Rosalind Hursthouse, Philippa Foot, John McDowell, and Michael Thompson—and older and younger exponents of Critical Theory—such as Adorno and Honneth—sought to critique the dualism of nature and normativity.² What is striking about these debates is that even where Adorno was the focus on the Critical Theory side, there was barely any systematic engagement with his concept of natural history, in most cases because this concept was considered problematic and was only rarely interpreted in a systematic way.³ It seems to me that a renewed examination of this concept of Adorno's is worthwhile for the following reasons. The concept of natural history has received a great deal of attention in contemporary practical philosophy, specifically through Michael Thompson's concept of natural-historical judgments, which attempts to explain the normativity of the human life-form. With this concept, the norms effective in a life-form are to be conceived as something natural and constitutive of every life-form. Although, strictly speaking, Thompson does not present a model of the philosophy of history, he (along with Philippa Foot⁴) claims to be able to determine the normativity of a historically developing life-form—the human—by means of natural-historical judgments. Adorno developed his own concept of natural history, firstly as an interpretative model of the historical reality of the human life-form and, secondly, to indicate the normativity of the natural-historical course taken by human history. The normativity of natural history that Adorno focuses on is historically and socially determined, in contrast to the categorically conceived natural normativity that is at the center of Thompson's approach. It would be too simple, however, to leave it at the observation of this difference. My essay aims to explore the commonalities between the two approaches, despite this undeniable difference, and to do so in such a way that it becomes visible to what extent ethical naturalism opens up possibilities for critique that could be made fruitful for a Critical Theory inspired by Adorno.

The starting point of my reflections is an aspect of Adorno's concept of natural history that has received too little attention in the research, namely the distinction between the natural (*Natürlichem*) and the nature-like (*Naturhaftem*).⁵ This distinction is constitutive for an adequate explanation of the two ways of using the term “natural”: a reflexive and a referential one. Both usages are interrelated, which is why I will define them more precisely in a first step (1.1), before explaining the normativity of natural history in more detail (1.2). Both steps are oriented towards the distinction between the natural and the nature-like, which makes it possible to put Adorno's understanding of the normativity of natural history into a productive relationship with that which Thompson discusses under the headings of natural history and natural normativity. The normativity of natural history that Adorno criticizes is—in contrast to ethical naturalism—a *nature-like* normativity; a *natural* normativity comes into view for him only negatively, through the suffering of human beings *from nature-like normativity itself*.⁶ For this reason, it is vital that the relationship between the two forms of normativity be clarified.

Once this has been done, a discussion of the concept of natural history in Thompson's ethical naturalism follows, which I conduct with reference to Adorno. In Thompson, natural normativity is delineated as that form of normativity that also determines the human life-form. For this reason, it must first be clarified what Thompson means by a life-form whose normativity is expressed through natural-historical judgments (2.1). In contrast to other life-forms, the human life-form, according to Thompson, is one that manifests itself in the performance of actions determined by self-consciousness. It is therefore historically changeable, yet its normativity is a priori determined in a weak sense. The critique that can thus be applied to the concrete stage of development that the human life-form has reached in capitalism is, in contrast to Adorno's critique of society—I will argue—primarily an immanent critique that does not strive to transcend that form of life but is nevertheless capable of diagnosing undesirable developments (2.2).

1 | ADORNO'S CONCEPT OF NATURAL HISTORY

1.1 | Reflexive and referential usages

Adorno's early lecture “The Idea of Natural History” (INH) begins with a reflexive definition of the concepts “nature,” “history,” and “natural history.” What Adorno does not yet attempt here is a definition of the natural

history of the human species. This already brings us to the distinction between a reflexive and referential usage of concepts. Because Adorno's use of the aforementioned concepts in INH is reflexive in the sense that it does not initially attempt to define the *objects* nature, history, and natural history—precisely that would be a referential mode of use—but instead attempts to explain *what it means to conceive of something as* natural, historical, or natural-historical. “The expressions ‘nature’ and ‘history’ do not function (primarily) referentially, referring to a particular domain of objects, but *reflexively*, representing a thing under a particular aspect.”⁷ The referential usage, which Adorno then adopts to a greater extent in *Negative Dialectics*, has this reflexive clarification of the concepts as its prerequisite. If the referential usage attempts to carry out an interpretation of the real history of humanity under capitalist conditions as natural history, such an interpretation is only possible once it has been clarified *in what sense* human-made history is natural history. As Adorno emphasizes, a reflexive definition of the concepts nature and history is necessary so that the interpretation of real history as natural history does not become an arbitrary undertaking.⁸ Whyman has pointed out that this trait of Adorno's distinguishes his philosophy of history as a critical theory. Negotiating a path between ontological essentialism and historicist relativism, this approach seeks to understand reality as having become what it is and thus capable of being changed.⁹ With this understanding, the natural-historical perspective itself is placed in a critical relation to its own historical-social reality. Only when the meaning of the fundamental concepts and the possibilities of their mediation are clarified—this is the reflexive usage—can a critical interpretation of reality as natural history be made with them—this is the referential usage. But the reflexive clarification of concepts is not to be understood as a final definition, which would then merely be followed by their referential application. Instead, Adorno emphasizes, “the problem of natural history cannot be correctly formulated in terms of general structures, but only as interpretations of concrete history.”¹⁰ The reflexive clarification of the usage of the concepts nature, history, and natural history would involve mere abstract conceptual definitions if it were not confronted with specific historical material. Both uses depend on each other in two ways:

1. the reflexive usage cannot be fulfilled without confronting the concepts with concrete history, that is, not without referential usage, and
2. without reflexive clarification the mediation between nature and history could not be determined with respect to the object. Without reflexive usage, the referential usage would reproduce the separation of the domains of nature and history, which is common in the sciences.

I will explain these dependencies in the following on the basis of Adorno's actual text.

1.1.1 | Reflexive usage

At the beginning of INH Adorno imposes a significant qualification to his concept of natural history.

Although the topic is natural history, it is not concerned with natural history in the traditional pre-scientific sense of the history of nature, nor with the history of nature where nature is the object of natural science.¹¹

In Adorno's concept of natural history, nature is not to be understood as an object to be conceived in natural scientific terms, nor is it a pre-scientific understanding of the history of plant and animal species, nor is the history of human nature to play a role. Instead, the aim of Adorno's preoccupation is “to overcome (*aufzuheben*) the usual antithesis of nature and history.”¹²

The concept of nature that needs to be dissolved, Adorno tells us, can best be translated with “the concept of myth.” By this, he means “what has always been, what as fatefully arranged predetermined being underlies history and appears in history; it is substance in history.”¹³ That which underlies human history and is substantial in it must

be something invariable, so that nature for Adorno means here the unchanging moments within historical changes.¹⁴ Thus, a reflection on nature as a web of organic life is unnecessary; the negative starting point of Adorno's thinking is the unchangeable within the changeable. That is why he speaks of "starting from the 'nature-like' (*Naturhaften*)"¹⁵—and precisely not from self-reproducing living nature. History, on the other hand, means "that mode of conduct established by tradition that is characterized primarily by the occurrence of the qualitatively new; it is a movement that does not play itself out in mere identity, mere reproduction of what has always been."¹⁶

In place of the antithesis of nature as the unchangeable and persistent in history and history as movement, change and the appearance of the new, a mediation of the two is to take place. Drawing on Heidegger's concept of historicity, which for Adorno has the merit of clarifying ontologically the problem of the mediation of nature and history, he says: "the question of ontology, as it is formulated at present, is none other than what I mean by nature."¹⁷ In this way, Adorno makes clear that he is not concerned with unchanging definitions of human or extra-human nature; his concept of natural history is not aimed at a form of anthropology but at a conceptual-categorical question of how the relationship between nature and history, the unchanging and the changing, can be opened up in such a way that concrete historical experiences are understood as more than mere explications of a conceptual structure. "The distinction between 'nature' and 'history'," Adorno argues, "functions conceptually as a reflexive, aspectual distinction *within* and *alongside* our practice. For this reason, one must understand practice in 'natural-historical' terms: as the indissoluble relationship of these two perspectives."¹⁸ Only when nature and history are understood as mediated can history be referred to in such a way that what appears unchanging is not severed from what appears as new.

Adorno finds realizations of this mediation in the works of Lukács and Benjamin, although each of these two thinkers takes only one side of the mediation into consideration. While Lukács succeeds in understanding the historical world as nature-like with his concept of "second nature," nature itself appears as historical in Benjamin's work due to its "transience." Adorno wants to bring together both attempts at mediation. If the historical world is for Lukács produced practically by human beings, it is nevertheless characterized by an emptying of meaning. Such a "world of convention" is then no longer the world of those who produced it. "It is a second nature, and, like first nature, is definable only as the epitome of recognized but senseless necessities, and therefore is, in its real substance, incomprehensible and unknowable."¹⁹ In the form of the "world of convention" the product of human activity, that is, historical practice, has become independent of humans. This world is *second* nature, because it is nevertheless something produced and, to this extent, has not developed naturally. But it is *second nature* because it appears as something necessary and unchangeable.²⁰ If Adorno rejects as metaphysics Lukács' envisioned revival of the lost sense of the "world of convention," it is in order to use the concept of second nature to critique that world.²¹

The critical use of the concept of second nature is now clearly a referential use: society is criticized as second nature for presenting itself differently than it actually is. Society as a product of historical practice becomes nature again, or nature-like (*naturhaft*), in that it has become independent from its producers. As an independent entity, society appears unchangeable and thus assumes the characteristics that Adorno associates with the concept of nature at the beginning of his lecture: it appears as that which "has always been," "fatefully arranged predetermined being."²²

The mediation of the concepts of nature and history becomes possible here by referring to a specific historical formation of social life, namely the "world of convention." The opposition between nature and history is here transformed into a mediation in the sense that history now appears as nature. However, this reflexive move of Adorno's already implies the reference to something non-conceptual, which must find its way into the reflection of the concepts of nature and history. Without reference, the reflection would not reach its target.²³

As second nature, history is *like* nature, that is, it appears as nature. This appearance in turn requires interpretation, a motif Adorno appropriates from Benjamin's attempt to mediate between nature and history. Benjamin had showed that, in the allegorical world of the baroque tragedy (*Trauerspiel*), nature means history insofar as it is understood as transient. However, this is no arbitrary aesthetic designation but one that, according to Benjamin, is objectively mediated, for in the baroque *Trauerspiel* one finds nothing other than an "exposition of history as the history of the world's suffering." Their nature is transient and so can be read as history; history is a history of suffering,

which in turn establishes a relation to historical reality. What is expressed in the *Trauerspiel's* allegorical language “is nothing but an historical relationship.”²⁴ Since nature itself “carries the mark of transience,” according to Adorno, it includes “the moment of history within it.”²⁵ This circumstance is made visible in a specific material, namely the baroque *Trauerspiel*, so that the reflexive dissolution of the concept of nature as that which underlies history and its mediation with the concept of history are also impossible without a reference to the object. Here, too, reflection reaches its target only with the help of a specific reference.

Adorno's reflexive usage gives rise to the demand for the application of natural-historical thinking to specific historical material. “Now, first of all, the task of the philosophy of history is to work out these two moments (the archaic-mythical and the historical-new, PH), to separate them and juxtapose them, and only where this antithesis is explicated is there a chance of a successful exegesis of natural history.”²⁶ For the philosophy of history, the object of “natural history” remains history, but compared to conventional models of the philosophy of history, natural history promises a change of perspective: history is now understood to be *like nature*, in that what appears in it as new turns out to be a return of the old, the archaic, a second nature. In turn, that which presents itself in history as nature, as unchanging, is deciphered by natural-historical thinking as transient and thus as *historical*. For Adorno, however, we are not to conclude that the difference between nature and history disappears in natural history—this would be nothing other than “the night of indifference in which all cats are grey.”²⁷ A difference remains despite the mediation, even if this difference is merely asserted here by Adorno on the reflexive level. The ground or justification of this difference can only be demonstrated by the “reconstruction” of natural history that he demands, but this must take place on the basis of a specific material, and it is precisely for this that the term must be used referentially.

1.1.2 | Referential usage

The referential usage²⁸ is captured paradigmatically in the following sentence by Adorno: “The objectivity of historical life is that of natural history.”²⁹ This raises the question of what defines historical life such that it deserves to be identified as natural history. Unlike in the early INH, Adorno's late work explicitly sets out its understanding of natural history in the language of Marx and Hegel. That human history is natural history is now explicitly a critical judgment, since the naturalness of history consists in the fact that historical life is governed by the “natural law” of “capitalist accumulation.” This natural law has been produced as a social natural law by human beings and is also changeable by them. Talk of a social natural law, however, is contradictory, as Marx, to whom Adorno refers here, points out:

The law of capitalistic accumulation, mystified by the economists into a supposed law of nature, in fact expresses the situation that the very nature of accumulation excludes every diminution in the degree of exploitation of labor, and every rise in the price of labor, which could seriously imperil the continual reproduction, on an ever larger scale, of the capital-relation.³⁰

The law of nature is a mystification because what appears natural is actually made by humans, reproduced by them and could be abolished by them too. It is natural *law* only insofar as it is necessarily valid in capitalist society. It is subject to those determinations that Adorno, in discussion with Lukács, associated with the concept of second nature: the result of historical practice—the aforementioned natural law—reveals itself as nature because it appears unavoidable and necessary. Due to its illusory character, Adorno calls this law “nature-like (*naturhaft*).”³¹ But the fact that it is not only appearance but at the same time socially effectual, justifies once more the talk of a natural *law*.³²

To the concept of the *Naturhaft* (nature-like) Adorno now adds the concept of *Naturwüchsigkeit* (literally: the characteristic of having grown naturally). “The *Naturwüchsigkeit* of capitalist society is real and at the same time its appearance.”³³ Like the concept of the *Naturhaft*, this term is intended to specify the illusory character of capitalist society, but it also emphasizes another aspect that has not yet been made explicit, namely that human-made history,

“the progressing mastery of nature, continues the unconsciousness of nature.”³⁴ Human history has “grown naturally” to the degree that it has not been rationally controlled. Adorno defines the history of nature as “devouring and being devoured” and calls it “unconscious.” Under the conditions of capitalistically organized domination of nature, human history takes on the characteristics of the history of nature. That this history is “unconscious” means nothing else than that it is not shaped in a planned way and according to rational insight but is determined by forces that are beyond human control. At the same time, “devouring and being devoured” is perpetuated in human history, because social life in capitalism benefits those with the greater economic and political means to enforce their interests. Natural history is thus not yet human history, because it is defined by the unconsciously enacted social domination of nature, the progress of which causes suffering.

Thus, in the referential usage of the concept of natural history, two moments become apparent:

1. Natural history is nature-like, that is, seemingly natural history, because the life of humanity is dominated by the natural law of capitalist accumulation.
2. Human history is natural history because it perpetuates the unconsciousness and violence of the history of external nature through the natural law of capitalist accumulation.

Thus when Adorno uses the term natural history referentially he has a clear critical intent, namely to denounce a historical process in which humans do not consciously determine their lives. But this raises the question of whether a truly human history would cease to be conceivable as natural history. Because even a humankind freed from the natural law of capital would have to carry out a “metabolism with nature” to sustain itself, and its history would remain—in this respect at least—natural history, albeit one that would not be eligible for critique.³⁵ If, on the other hand, natural history is understood as the not yet truly human history of humankind under the natural law of capitalist accumulation, then natural history is only nature-like history. From Adorno's perspective, only the *form* in which the metabolism with nature is carried out can be critiqued, and it is precisely this that the critique of natural history as nature-like history aims at. On this basis, we can now establish the normativity of natural history from Adorno's perspective.

1.2 | Two types of normativity of natural history

Insofar as the natural history of humankind is natural history, it is open to critique. The normativity of this nature-like life is characterized by a tension, namely between a nature-like and a natural normativity. From Adorno's perspective, these two forms of normativity do not exist in the same way. Nature-like normativity describes the criteria according to which the human species organizes and carries out its life under capitalism. These criteria can be brought to light through critical engagement with this life. Natural normativity, on the other hand, describes those criteria that must be fulfilled in order for human beings to be able to preserve themselves as species beings and not suffer from the form of their self-preservation. In the relationship between these two forms of normativity the following problem arises: the two are not congruent; they do not demand the same thing from human beings. Since the life of the human species under capitalism follows a nature-like normativity and not a natural normativity appropriate to human nature, people suffer from the way a capitalist society forces them to live. If in the natural-historical life of humankind natural normativity actually has precedence over nature-like normativity, then the life of the species would have to be arranged according to natural normativity, and the nature-like normativity of capitalism be abolished.

Here, a crucial aspect of Adorno's problem of normativity becomes apparent: natural normativity can only be inferred negatively. Since the nature-like normativity of natural history causes suffering it is not befitting of human nature, but what criteria the organization of human species life should follow instead—that is, what natural normativity consists in—cannot be stated positively, because every notion of a better life and every notion of the good remain bound to the existing society by humans' total social determination. Even when these notions point beyond

existing society as transcendent moments, they do not add up to a concept of the good that could then be used as a standard of critique.³⁶ On the one hand, natural normativity must be adhered to even within the socially effectual nature-like normativity, at least to the extent that surplus value production is maintained, even if this endangers the self-preservation of the human species. On the other hand, natural normativity, compared to nature-like normativity, represents something yet to be realized, which would have to be put in place of nature-like normativity and socially actualized. Adorno thematizes the tense relationship between these two forms of normativity thus:

All activities of the species point to its continued physical existence, although there may be misconceptions of it, independent organizations whose business is done only by the way. Even the steps that society takes to exterminate itself are at the same time absurd acts of unleashed self-preservation. They are forms of unconscious social action against suffering even though an obtuse view of society's own interest turns their total particularity against that interest. Confronted with such steps, their purpose—and this alone makes society a society—calls for it to be so organized as the productive forces would directly permit it here and now, and as the conditions of production on either side relentlessly prevent it. The *telos* of such an organization of society would be to negate the physical suffering of even the least of its members, and to negate the internal reflexive forms of that suffering.³⁷

The purpose of social life is clearly stated here by Adorno: the “negation of physical suffering” of every person. This means that social institutions exist because they are meant to prevent the preventable and unreasonable physical suffering of humans. Here, Adorno even goes so far as to view this not only as a state to be striven for, but also to see unconscious attempts to realize this purpose even in practices that work against this purpose. All human practice is ultimately motivated—whether consciously or unconsciously—by the abolition of physical suffering. As will be discussed in detail below, Thompson conceives of human practice as a manifestation of the human life-form that aims at the realization of a good for that life-form, without the members of the life-form necessarily being aware of this at any given time. Thompson, however, understands this as an *a priori* categorical definition; his object is not—as it is for Adorno—a specific social-historical stage of development of the human life-form. What Adorno and Thompson have in common—this much can already be said here—is that human practice follows *one* key purpose: for Adorno it is the abolition of physical suffering, for Thompson the realization of a good. For Adorno, the fact that the attempt to negate physical suffering so often fails or turns into its opposite is due to the organization of the relations of production, that is, to the form in which human practice is socially arranged. If practice fails in the realization of its good, then, from Thompson's perspective, this is not due to the social form of organization in which it is carried out, but rather—and this will be defined more precisely below—due to “local impediments.”³⁸

Since physical suffering—be it in the form of unbearable pain, disease, lack of food, violence, and so on—endangers human life, its elimination, according to Adorno, constitutes the primary motivating purpose of human action. Therein lies a fundamental feature of what can be identified in Adorno as natural normativity. While, according to Adorno, no knowledge can be gained under late capitalist conditions about what the good is for human beings, it can at least be stated with some certainty what harms human beings and makes them suffer, thus making it impossible for them to live like human beings. “We may not know what absolute good is, or the absolute norm, we may not even know what man is or the human or humanity—but what the inhuman is we know very well indeed.”³⁹

Suffering from the nature-like normativity of capitalist society points to the fact that this normativity is not befitting of human beings. This argument does not reveal a positive definition of a natural normativity, but instead, from Adorno's perspective, contains only a knowledge of what should not be expected of humans on account of their suffering from nature-like normativity. Accordingly, these negative definitions of human nature—that is, what makes humans suffer—can then be used to criticize the respective social conditions. What would be necessary from Adorno's perspective would be a normative upending of society: instead of following the purposes of capital accumulation, the abolition of suffering would have to be assigned the supreme purpose of social life.

While this society is also the outcome of our striving for self-preservation and emancipation, this striving has produced in capitalism a system that has its own dynamic, the pursuit of surplus value, and this dynamic has usurped the place of human teleology.⁴⁰

In its negative form, natural normativity, which Freyenhagen here calls “human teleology;” can be used to criticize nature-like normativity. This is true even if the former becomes accessible only negatively via the suffering caused by the latter.

However, this does not clarify the relationship between natural and nature-like normativity from Adorno's perspective. Since Adorno considers the power of social relations over the individual to be so great that the structure of people's very needs comes to match what is socially demanded of them, it seems that beyond the socially prevailing nature-like normativity no other normativity distinct from it can be identified. “Second nature,” Adorno writes, “is, in truth, first nature.”⁴¹ But since humans suffer from their life in conditions that have become second nature, the arrangement of their living conditions does not correspond to the kind of living beings they are. Their suffering under nature-like normativity makes the critique of that normativity possible because it can lead to the insight that it is bad for humans as natural beings to live this way and that the conditions of their existence must therefore be changed in such a way that humans no longer suffer because of them.

In capitalism, the natural history of the human species is thus characterized by a conflict between two forms of normativity. If, outside of the nature-like normativity which is imposed by the form of socialization, there is no experience from which a knowledge of the good could be derived that could serve as a basis for a critique of nature-like normativity, then only the suffering of humankind under nature-like normativity remains, which negatively points to a natural normativity that is its opposite. The reflexive definitions of the concept of natural history elaborated above must now be brought into play once again, because in this way it is possible to avoid misunderstanding the conflict between nature-like and natural normativity as a conflict between the historical and the natural, as if nature-like normativity was historically determined, and natural normativity was ahistorical.

If that which falls under the concept of nature is to be regarded as transient and therefore as historical, and that which falls under the concept of history is to be regarded as second nature, the question arises how the concepts of nature-like and natural normativity are to be understood from this reflexive point of view. To understand something as nature-like is to understand it as seemingly natural but actually historically produced. In this respect, the concept of nature-like normativity developed here stands up to the reflexive definitions of the concept of natural history. To think the normativity of capitalist society in natural-historical terms is precisely to unmask it as nature-like.

But what does it mean to think natural normativity in terms of natural history? First of all, this would mean that natural normativity is itself transient, that is, dependent on historical and social change. Thus, the naturalness of natural normativity cannot be grounded in its independence from history. It is natural only because it is the normativity of living human species beings. The fact that, according to Adorno, these beings are socially determined through and through, that their nature itself is changeable, means that the normativity corresponding to them and, in this sense, natural to them, must be able to adapt to these changes. But here we have to be careful, because to subsume natural normativity under the reflexive definitions of the concept of natural history would mean failing to take into account the material context in which that normativity is thematic. Adorno's talk of natural normativity suggests itself for a very specific reason: because he regards the purpose of society as the negation of physical suffering. People can suffer physically only because they are living and in this sense natural beings. Since suffering is always the suffering of someone from something under specific social conditions, the suffering to be eliminated or prevented is always a specific suffering that requires specific measures. Understood in this way, natural normativity can entail nothing other than the demand for the individually appropriate and historically and socially determined alleviation and elimination of specific suffering—if the reflexive definition of the concept of natural history is to be taken seriously. Suffering, understood in this way, is a result of the social mediation of human nature. It has a historical-social character and is the only aspect of human nature to which, under conditions of late capitalist socialization, normative and (as we have seen) merely negative reference can be made.⁴²

Thus, conceiving the normativity of natural history as the objective life process of humankind in natural-historical terms means:

1. understanding the natural law of capitalist socialization as nature-like, as seemingly natural, but in reality as historically determined and capable of being eliminated; and
2. understanding natural normativity as a historically specific demand for the elimination of human suffering, which is itself a historically determined result of the social mediation of human nature.

These two stipulations must now be put into a productive relationship with Michael Thompson's reflections.

2 | THE CONCEPT OF NATURAL HISTORY IN ETHICAL NATURALISM⁴³

2.1 | Life-form and natural history

At the heart of Michael Thompson's influential book *Life and Action* is the thesis, echoing Hegel, that “thought, as thought, takes a quite special turn when it is thought of the living.”⁴⁴ Thompson understands this constitutive object-dependency of thinking in such a way that the term “life” acquires the status of a category: where thinking refers to living things, this reference is a priori determined by the term “life” and—in the case of human life—by a number of concepts related to it, such as life-form, action, intention, volition, and practice.⁴⁵ This determination is primarily a determination of form; it indicates how thought combines different living things into a unity as living things.⁴⁶ Because every conceptual reference to living things depends on the use of the category of life, every conceptual reference to particular living things necessarily invokes a further context, which Thompson calls “life-form.” This concept is species-relative, its content is determined according to the specific life-form to which it refers, therefore its a priori character is only weak. The said reference is established by natural-historical judgments that take the following form: “The S is (or has or does) F.”⁴⁷ “It is necessary that a common noun (S) and some other predicative expression (F) be present or in the offing.”⁴⁸ That is to say: the judgment “humans are bipeds” is a natural-historical judgment, because it says something about the human genus or form of life that is typical for this life-form. “The category occupied by the ‘thing thought of’ in such thoughts [...] may be expressed by the word ‘life-form’.”⁴⁹ Natural-historical judgments thus assign something to a life-form, the concept of which indicates the form in which something is what it is.

Here S does not stand for individuals or sets of individuals, but for the substance form itself, while the F connected to S by the “temporally universal” copula is/has/does stands for the state or forms of movement that exemplars of S as such and in general manifest.⁵⁰

In this way, natural-historical judgments provide something like standards that the individual members of a life-form follow. This distinguishes them from purely descriptive or statistical statements about the properties of a certain number of individual members of a life-form.

Natural-historical judgments become normative by virtue of the fact that they are related to the teleological determinations of a life-form. Thus, they say not only what happens, but what purpose something follows and must follow in order for it to be good for an individual. According to Philippa Foot, the purposes of living beings lie in “development, self-maintenance, and reproduction.”⁵¹ Natural-historical judgments, with reference to these purposes, enable the expression of what is good for a life-form. The norms that determine the functioning of a life-form are accordingly “natural norms.”⁵² By means of these norms, living individuals can be evaluated in terms of their behavior and characteristics by making value judgments that apply these norms to individuals.

The question now arises why these judgments are actually called natural-historical judgments, that is, in what sense natural history is being used here and what is referred to thereby. Again, natural history—as in Adorno—does

not mean the natural process of development of a genus. For Foot, such judgments relate not to the diachronic “moving picture of the evolution of a species” but to the synchronic “stills” that can be made from this moving picture.⁵³ The natural-historical interpretation that Adorno carries out likewise does not retell a history of the species, but attempts to make visible the normative social structures determining these situations in a specific historical situation and to arrive at a critical assessment. Thompson’s natural history approach is, in at least a related way, aimed at uncovering the normative structures that characterize the life of a life-form in a particular situation and at determining in what way individual members currently deviate from the norms that determine their life-form.

To pinpoint the differences and similarities between the two approaches as precisely as possible, the peculiar form of temporality of natural historical judgments must be examined.

Natural-historical judgments tend to be formulated in some type of present tense. [...] It is of Elsa, *hic et nunc*, that we say: she bore three cubs last spring. Of her kind we say: the mature female bears two to four cubs in the spring—employing a form of the present tense even if we pass the information on in winter. The peculiarity of the case shows itself already in this, that the past-tense proposition about Elsa may be given as providing an *example* of what is recorded in the intuitively *purely* present-tense general proposition.⁵⁴

If a natural-historical judgment is in the simple present tense and states what counts as a typical determination of the life-form in question, an exemplifying judgment is one that says about a particular individual whether and at what time (or in what way) it has realized what is typical for its life-form. Natural-historical judgments refer to life-forms, which exist as such temporally, since living also means existing temporally. It is true that there is no explicit reference to the past in the above-mentioned natural-historical judgment, but since a natural-historical judgment is by definition related to life-forms, it is always already related to something that has a past, a present, and a future. The natural-historical judgment then makes possible an explicit reference to the past in the exemplification, which, however, does not carry out itself.

Natural-history sentences, which Thompson also calls “Aristotelian categoricals,” speak of the life cycle of individuals of a given species. [...] The history of a species is not, however, the subject with which Aristotelian categoricals deal. Their truth is truth about a species at a given historical time; and it is only the relative stability of at least the most general features of the different species of living things that makes these propositions possible at all.⁵⁵

Under the assumption of the relative stability and invariability of the most general characteristics of a life-form, “stills” (as Foot calls them)⁵⁶ can be made in the form of natural-historical judgments, which reveal nothing of the natural development of a species but express at this moment in time something of its relatively invariable determinations.

The present tense of natural-historical judgments corresponds to the relative immutability of the natural norms expressed in such judgments. This is not to say that natural norms must be immutable, but merely that natural-historical judgments address the individuals of a life-form insofar as they fall under relatively stable general determinations. The objects of natural-historical judgments are thus life-forms insofar as their normativity is stable in time. They do not deny that there is change or deviation. By emphasizing what is initially a stable determination of a life-form as a natural norm, they also make it possible to address what behaves differently in a life-form precisely as a deviation or deficiency.

Thompson’s natural-historical approach is primarily interested in making visible the normative structures of a life-form at a particular point in time, with the assumption that these structures would be the same at another point in time. Where these structures change, it would be appropriate, according to Thompson, to speak then of a different life-form.⁵⁷ As we saw above, Adorno assumes in his natural-historical approach that the form of normativity that determines the human life-form is a nature-like normativity that has become historical and is likewise changeable. This nature-like normativity, it is true, is as determinant for the life of the human species as the natural norms which

apply, say, to the species of domestic cats, but unlike the latter, human norms are historically changeable without the human life-form ceasing to be the human life-form. Adorno's reflections aim at making visible the unchangeable in the changeable—he shares this with Thompson—but at the same time his aim is to critically dissolve the appearance of the unchangeable—of history as nature—and to reveal human practice as the driving force behind this appearance.

Thompson's naturalism is not concerned with human history, but with how normative access can be found to the human life-form as a natural life-form. He certainly does not deny that there is such a thing as history within this form of life, and that a crucial difference between human and nonhuman life-forms is the presence of something like a culture defined by language and reason. But the conceptual-categorical structures he uses for the normative evaluation of the human life-form—since the concepts he uses are non-empirical—have not been obtained from an examination of a specific historical-social stage of human development. Admittedly, this idea is at odds with Adorno's understanding of the conceptual, according to which even in the most abstract philosophical concepts their mediation by a non-conceptual social reality can be brought to light. But this difference should not obscure the view of a highly revealing commonality between Adorno and Thompson, which not coincidentally becomes apparent at a point where Thompson deals with deviation, deficiency, and lack.

The non-empirical concepts used in natural-historical judgments can explain the normal functioning of a life-form. "We may note that it is precisely in the cases where there is no defect, deformity, lack, need, disaster, and so on, that we are able to appeal to the system of general propositions in question to explain particular facts."⁵⁸ One does not have to resort to empirical circumstances to explain the constitution of the individual. In a way, the individual merges into its life-form or its description merges into the description of the life-form. But "where there is defect, deformity, lack, need and disaster, I must explain the sorry phenomena here and now by reference to causes there and then."⁵⁹ To explain negativity—defect and suffering—the categorical definitions of the life-form are insufficient. Natural-historical judgments only set the standards that must be met for an individual's life to flourish. Any *de facto* failure to flourish cannot be explained by natural-historical judgments; for this, we must consider the empirical circumstances present in each case. But this does not make the relevant natural-historical judgment wrong. Such judgments only set the standards; they say nothing about why specific empirical factors prevent their fulfillment here and now.

To explain, on the basis of natural-historical concepts, processes in empirical reality that fail to befit the standards of a life-form, the real processes must themselves be examined. If Adorno demanded for his natural-historical approach that it takes its starting point from people's suffering from the nature-like normativity of their life-form, this cannot be claimed in the same way for Thompson. But where the suffering of the members of a life-form becomes thematic, it is also not enough for Thompson to remain on the level of categoricals. Adorno's statement that "[n]atural-historical questions [...] are not possible as general structures" but "only as interpretations of concrete history"⁶⁰ parallels Thompson's approach when he speaks of suffering. The difference between the two philosophers is that, in Thompson's case, a categorically determined standard is already available for determining what suffering or deficiency or deviation is. This knowledge, independent of experience, of what is good for a life-form is the prerequisite for determining what is bad. Knowledge of the bad, however, exists only as a negation of knowledge of the good. Adorno, by contrast, begins with suffering or with the bad, without having a standard of the good already conceptually defined.

Now, it follows from Thompson's reasoning that, in the case of the human life-form, an analysis of the empirical or social reasons for suffering must also be carried out, since the standards expressed by means of natural-historical judgments enable the normative assessment of the current condition of this life-form. To quote Whyman: "If there exists an actual human good (or bad), wholly outside of the 'ideology' of presently existing society and culture, then that human good (or bad) can be invoked critically against society as it presently exists."⁶¹ Thus, if there is something like a natural normativity of the human life-form which can be determined independently of particular historical realizations of this life-form, it can be used to criticize the nature-like normativity which Adorno sees as historically and socially predominant. This conclusion can be reached even before analyzing Thompson's understanding of the specifically human form of life, which will be undertaken in a moment. It already follows from the conceptual layout of this form of ethical naturalism. However, Thompson does not take the step to social criticism. His work enables a natural-historical thinking, but he does not conduct social critique.

If we turn from Adorno's distinction between the reflexive and the referential use of the concept of natural history to Thompson's approach, we can say, on the one hand, that the definition of the concept of life-form and its related non-empirical concepts (which nevertheless refer directly to the empirical) undermines the distinction elaborated in Adorno. On the other hand, Thompson's plea for empirical explanations whenever reasons need to be given for individual deviation from the standards of a life-form is a sign that the empirical existence of a life-form is not exhausted by its categorical definitions. For Thompson, this does not pose a problem, since he is concerned not with an empirical but with a conceptual understanding of a life-form. For Adorno, the insight into the difference between concept and reality, which is manifest in suffering, leads to a change in the status of the conceptual vis-à-vis reality. From Adorno's perspective, the conceptual definitions of a life-form are dependent on how the individual members of that life-form actually conduct their existence. To be sure, Thompson does not deny that the content of the concept of the life-form, precisely with reference to the human life-form, also depends on how this life-form is *concretely* constituted. However, he would understand the dependence of concept and thing emphasized by Adorno as insignificant for the functioning of his core concepts. Indeed, this problem is addressed by Thompson in a more complex way when it comes to the definitions of the human life-form around which Adorno's thoughts revolve.⁶²

2.2 | The human life-form and its natural normativity

The definitions of the human life-form which distinguish it from all other life-forms must also be located on a categorical level. The central concept here is that of the human, which precisely must not be understood as an empirical concept. The concept of the human includes those beings that have a concept of themselves as humans. For Thompson, it belongs to the first nature of humans that they have a knowledge of themselves as humans that is independent of experience. Unlike John McDowell, who wants to liberate the concept of human nature from its restriction to a first nature and open it up to definitions of second nature, Thompson is concerned with liberating the concept of first nature from its scientific restrictions.⁶³

The education of rational faculties defines human nature *sans phrase*. [...] One can say that reasoning is the "first nature of human beings," but then one is speaking of "nature" not as a specifically *other* nature, but as a nature *other than nature*.⁶⁴

Human nature remains nature, the human life-form remains a life-form among others even if the conceptual self-representation of this life-form belongs to its nature. Accordingly, humans are beings who have a consciousness of themselves as humans in all their thoughts and actions.

In the self-conscious representation of myself as thinking, as in all my self-conscious self-representation, I implicitly represent myself as alive, as falling under life-manifesting types. And in bringing myself under such types I bring myself under a life form.⁶⁵

Again, it is appropriate to examine Thompson's reflections on suffering discussed above, this time in relation to human beings.

That you are in pain or are hungry or that you are thinking something are, after all, as much vital phenomena as that your heart is beating. They presuppose among other things the presence in you of a life form with pain- and hunger-potential and a power of thought [...]; yet you are able to bring yourself under these particular vital descriptions – I'm hungry, I'm in pain, I think there's something wrong with my liver—without adverting to any inner or outer observation of yourself much less of your life form or kind.⁶⁶

What the human life-form shares with many other life-forms is that it can feel pain. What distinguishes it from other life-forms is that the human knows itself as a being that can feel pain and whose pain is therefore different in form from the pain that other life-forms feel. These pains are always pains felt by a being conscious of itself as a human being. This formal difference is for Thompson a difference concerning the whole:

So the characterization of an individual organism here and now as thinking or speaking, like the characterization of it as eating or breathing or leaving out, is a life-form-dependent description: take away the life-form and we have a pile of electrochemical connections; put it back in and we have hunger and pain and breathing and walking, indeed, but, in suitable cases, self-conscious thought and discourse as well. The life-form *underwrites* the applicability of these diverse state- and process-types in individual cases.⁶⁷

Two things follow from these reflections:

1. As much as the ability to feel pain is something that the human life-form shares with other life-forms, the form of human life determined by self-consciousness extends down to the level of the most basic physical perceptions. The human physique is the physique of a self-conscious being, and this distinguishes it from the physique of any other being.
2. As something known by a human being as *its* pain, this becomes something consciously and practically processable. Unlike many other animal life-forms, humans have not only the possibility to flee as a reaction to pain, but also the possibility to process pain in a practical way, which is at the same time a function of the life-form itself.⁶⁸

Because humans can consciously process what they experience, their life-form is determined by practice. A practice is something by which individuals orient themselves when performing an action and which plays the role of a standard according to which it can be judged whether the action was performed well or badly. The source of a practice lies in nothing other than the life-form itself, because only in this way, according to Thompson, is it possible for individuals distinguished from one another to consciously pursue and exemplify *one and the same* practice in their actions. Where such a “unity” exists, the practice “must be or involve something that can act as a *standard* or *measure* of genuine good and bad in the individual operations of the agents who bear it.”⁶⁹ It is inherent to the human life-form that its members practically shape and change what they encounter in the world. Insofar as humans are practically active—and it is part of their nature to be practically active—they express through this their belonging to their life-form. In this respect, every practice is by its nature a social one in the sense of a shared practice. History, in this perspective, is nothing other than the process of shaping the reality of the human life-form that is brought about by human practice. “In other words, it's a manifestation of our life-form, that is, of our first nature, that we have a social practice which develops into historical practices, that is, into second natures.”⁷⁰

This allows us to return to Adorno's concept of natural history. Concerning the point last mentioned, there is agreement between Adorno and Thompson in that Adorno, following Marx, sees social domination of nature as a constitutive feature of the human life-form.⁷¹ As Testa points out, for Thompson the historicity of human praxis is not to be understood in opposition to but as an expression of human nature.

[I]n line with thinkers such as Marx in his Paris Manuscripts, Thompson deploys a version of social naturalism which is compatible with historicism, insofar as it understands human social practice as such that it structurally develops into historical practices.⁷²

In contrast to Thompson, however, for Adorno everything depends on the specific form of this domination of nature, that is, on the specific form of social practice that follows a nature-like and not a natural normativity.

Thompson says nothing about the role played by the fact that human practice in capitalist society is determined by a nature-like normativity, that is, by structures that have become independent of that practice. The second nature Thompson has in mind is not that of independent social relations, but that which Aristotle had attributed to the virtues and which can be defined by the concept of ethical (*sittlichen*) habit. What becomes second nature to people through habit, that is, through practice, is itself an expression or manifestation, as Testa puts it, of their life-form, that is, of their first nature. But since practices, as Ursula Wolf notes, vary historically and culturally and sometimes cause harm to people—Wolf mentions blood vengeance as an example—the question is at what point a practice loses its characteristic of manifesting the human life-form, if this is indeed possible.⁷³ If it should turn out that certain social institutions make it difficult or even impossible for humans to act in accordance with the standards or yardsticks of their life-form, then exactly these institutions and the practices connected with them would also have to be critiqued. The critique of these practices would then be that they fail to contribute to the flourishing of the human life-form and should therefore no longer be undertaken.

This conclusion is obvious, but it is not one that Thompson draws. It suggests itself because Thompson has already emphasized in the case of deviation from the standards of a life-form that the reasons for these deviations must be sought in the empirical. With reference to the human life-form this would mean that the reasons have to be sought in social practice and its conditions. Natural normativity would thus make possible a critique not only of individual actions that do not meet the standard of their practice; it would also make it possible to criticize practices as such, because even when executed well they would be bad for humans. They would be practices whose exemplifications in actions, though good by their own standards, would actually be bad. Thompson comments that “we won't have any use for the notion of practice if we...construe it this way.”⁷⁴ If there were such practices, then they would have to be discarded. But then the question arises as to how it is possible that the human life-form manifests itself in practices that are bad for them. A conclusion from this, one which is impossible for Thompson to draw, would be that the human life-form itself is bad.

Thompson does not take this step of critiquing practice, on the contrary. He criticizes neither specific forms of practice nor their social conditions; instead, the addressee of his critique of bad actions is the individual who in each case, and for individual reasons, has acted badly. This is made clear in Thompson's example of promise-making and promise-breaking.

Thus the various forms of infidelity, considered as dispositions or vices, really *are* private attainments and private sources of action. They are local impediments to the apt instancing of a practice that the agent nevertheless bears and that is instanced minimally in his possession of the concept of a promise and in the individual promises he forms. It is just that there are other things going on with him.⁷⁵

For Thompson, these “other things” that are “going on” and which lead a person to break his promise seem to be simply due to the contingency of individual desires. The person is then criticized for giving priority to the fulfillment of desires over the accomplishment of the shared practice, with the practice forming the standard of evaluation of the deficient accomplishment.

In this respect, there is a clear difference between Adorno's critique of the nature-like normativity of the false life in capitalist society and Thompson's approach. The terms with which Adorno tries to grasp the reality of the human life-form are taken from the natural history—as Adorno understands it—of this life-form, so that their content is accordingly historically determined and not (in the weak sense) *apriori* as with Thompson. From Thompson's perspective, Adorno is not critiquing the human life-form but is engaging in critique of “a ‘form of life’ or a ‘second nature’.”⁷⁶ For Adorno, we cannot conceptually grasp the human life-form as such, only historically changing stages of development, whose own historically determined normativity can nevertheless be stated. Since human suffering under this normativity (which capitalism endows with a nature-like character) points to the fact that the present institution of the human life-form harms its members, Adorno critiques those practices that contribute to the maintenance of this form of life, rather than critiquing the mere exemplifications of practices in human actions.

Thompson never develops his theory in the direction of a critique of nature-like normativity. The only type of critique that can be practiced using Thompson's thinking is one that measures individual actions against the yardstick of a practice of which they are exemplifications. It focuses on the success or insufficiency of contemporary realizations of practices. Yet this is not—even from Adorno's perspective—nothing. Because this form of critique can highlight the need to replace a radically deficient realization of social practices with their good realization. Whereas Thompson points out that practices are relative to life-forms, that is, they must always be understood in a quasi-holistic sense as part of the human life-form whose good they are meant to realize, Adorno points out that every practice is determined by the *present social constitution* of the human life-form and realizes the purposes of that constitution. Since the realization of the purposes of this—in Thompson's words—"form of life" reduces human action *grosso modo* to self-preservation while simultaneously endangering the survival of the human species through suffering, this present social constitution of the human life-form is unfitting for human beings. It perpetuates—as Adorno says—the history of non-human nature by tending to reduce human life to the struggle for survival. Although "development, self-preservation, and reproduction"⁷⁷ are designated by Foot (following Thompson) as the purposes of life-forms in general, both emphasize that, due to the rationality of human nature, these purposes are not exhaustive of the *human* life-form. If the human life-form can no longer realize rational practical purposes because its present social constitution threatens to reduce it to something less than human, it would be possible to critique this situation with the normative standards of human practice provided by Thompson. However, the problem discussed above would then return in a modified form: if the human life-form as a whole is defective or indeed no longer human, the standards immanent to it are also affected; if it is no longer a human life-form, then the standards for its evaluation can in turn no longer be taken from the human life-form. In this case, one would be dealing with a different or new life-form, whose natural normativity must then be elucidated once more by a modified system of natural-historical judgments.

Concerning what Adorno calls "wrong life" in capitalism, there are therefore only two possibilities for ethical naturalism in the variant developed by Thompson:

1. If this life really is a wrong life, if the practices that determine it simply do not result in a good that is good for human beings, then this life is not a human life and cannot be evaluated by the standards of the human life-form.
2. If, however, within this wrong life traces of something better can be found, if not every practice is invalidated by the wrongness of life as such but it is possible to begin with existing practices and to pay attention to their good execution, then the categorical standards of ethical naturalism—natural normativity—can be used for the critique of wrong life. The human life-form would remain human even if much of its current form of realization is wrong.⁷⁸

Since Thompson must reject a notion of wrong life in the sense of the first possibility, his ethical naturalism can only be used for social critique in the sense of the second possibility.

In closing, I would like to make some comparative remarks concerning the form of critique that Adorno practices within the framework of his natural-historical approach and that can be practiced using Thompson's philosophy as well. Though it is true that Adorno emphasizes at the beginning of *Negative Dialectics* that—from his historical vantagepoint in late capitalism—social practice seems indefinitely to be postponed,⁷⁹ this insight does not entail an abstract rejection of every form of existing social practice. Instead, Adorno practices critique in the form of determinate negation. For Adorno, this critique is necessary even in the case of everyday practices that at first glance seem wholly unproblematic, because the existing relations of production already subordinate every particular practical purpose to the accumulation of capital. What appears to people subjectively as their good and which they pursue in their everyday practices may serve their self-preservation, but under the natural-historical conditions of capitalism it contributes simultaneously to the preservation of independent and profoundly unjust social relations. Adorno's critique is directed precisely against this social determination of the form of human practice, not against practical purposive rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) as such.

Thompson, on the other hand, understands praxis in general as the determination of the form of human life, quite independently of the respective form of socialization. Now, this disinterest on Thompson's part would, from Adorno's perspective, clearly be an uncritical feature of his theory. But at the same time, the idea that every practice strives to realize something good for the human life-form contains a critical trait, namely that something which harms human beings as living beings cannot be understood as a practice that realizes something good for this life-form. This may eventually lead to the demand for the sort of transformation of practice that actually realizes a good for the human life-form per se. Admittedly, Thompson himself complicates the implementation of such a thought by taking as his focus a distinction between good and bad exemplifications of practices rather than between good and bad practices as such. But—as already argued—his theoretical approach provides potential for an immanent critique of human practice, which, however—and here Adorno can offer something in his turn—would have to be enriched with a developed concept of capitalist society.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ This text is the result of numerous conversations about the aforementioned relationship. I am particularly indebted to Jan Müller for an ongoing conversation about the various philosophical ways of explaining the concept of second nature, from which I have benefited greatly. I am grateful to Gordon Finlayson for comments and criticisms of a recent version of this text, which have given it greater clarity and precision.
- ² Without claiming to be exhaustive, a list of valuable works that discuss critical theory and Aristotelian ethical naturalism together would include: Bernstein (2009, 2011), Fink (2006), Freyenhagen (2013, pp. 232–254), Müller (2017), Testa (2007, 2015), Whyman (2017).
- ³ Among the contributions already mentioned, those by Müller and Whyman are exceptions in this respect. In another article (Whyman, 2016), Whyman has presented a remarkable systematic discussion of Adorno's concept of natural history, to which I will refer repeatedly in what follows. At the beginning of his contribution, he points to Max Pensky's (Pensky, 2004), Susan Buck-Morss's (Buck-Morss, 1977), and Robert Hullot-Kentor's (Hullot-Kentor, 2006) engagements with the concept of natural history, which each judge it as central to Adorno's work but which view it as problematic because of its vagueness. Another systematic discussion, which is so far only available as an unpublished online manuscript, is by Italo Testa (Testa, n.d.). A further reason for the lack of engagement with Adorno's concept of natural history may be the marginalization of questions of the philosophy of history in contemporary Critical Theory, although this is slowly beginning to change, as seen, for example, in recent work by Amy Allen and Rahel Jaeggi.
- ⁴ I use Philippa Foot's reflections here primarily in order to explain Thompson's model. Thompson sees his own work as a continuation of what Foot began in her later work.
- ⁵ Buck-Morss (1977), Pensky (2004), and Hullot-Kentor (2006) each neglect this distinction, as does the English translator of *Negative Dialectics*, E. B. Ashton (1973), and though Whyman criticizes these authors he too pays insufficient attention to it. In contrast, the distinction is taken seriously by Breitenstein (2013), Macdonald (2019), and Müller (2017), as well as by Testa (n.d.). One reason why this distinction has received too little attention may be that the current English translation (by Hullot-Kentor) translates both *natürlich* and *naturhaft* as “natural” (cf. Hullot-Kentor, 2006, p. 253).
- ⁶ Freyenhagen's understanding of Adorno's practical philosophy as a negative Aristotelianism also points towards this. See Freyenhagen (2013, pp. 232–254).
- ⁷ Müller (2017, p. 307). With reference to the central terms in “The Idea of Natural History,” Breitenstein (2013, p. 112) thus speaks of “concepts of reflection.”
- ⁸ Adorno says, “this interweaving of nature and history must in general be the model for every interpretative procedure in philosophy. We might almost say that it provides the canon that enables philosophy to adopt an interpretative stance without lapsing into pure randomness” (Adorno, 2006a, p. 187; Adorno, 2006b, p. 133).
- ⁹ Cf. Whyman (2016, p. 4).

- ¹⁰ Adorno (1997a, p. 358) and Adorno (1984, p. 119).
- ¹¹ Adorno (1997a, p. 345) and Adorno (1984, p. 111).
- ¹² Adorno (1997a, p. 345) and Adorno (1984, p. 111).
- ¹³ Adorno (1997a, pp. 345/346) and Adorno (1984, p. 111).
- ¹⁴ On this assessment, see Testa (n.d., p. 3).
- ¹⁵ Adorno (1997a, p. 346) and Adorno (1984, p. 111) (translation amended).
- ¹⁶ Adorno (1997a, p. 346) and Adorno (1984, p. 111).
- ¹⁷ Adorno (1997a, p. 346) and Adorno (1984, pp. 111–112) (translation amended). Cf. Testa (n.d., pp. 6/7). On the relationship between Adorno and Heidegger with regard to questions in the philosophy of history and on Adorno's sometimes problematic reading of Heidegger, see Macdonald (2011, 2019).
- ¹⁸ Müller (2017, p. 308).
- ¹⁹ Lukács (1994, p. 54) and Lukacs (1971, p. 62) (translation amended).
- ²⁰ The meanwhile quite diversified discussion on the concept of second nature among neo-Hegelians and neo-Aristotelians is not something I can refer to here. On the relation of these discussions to the concept of second nature in critical theory, see Testa (2007) and Whyman (2017).
- ²¹ Cf. Adorno (1997b, p. 48) and Adorno (1973, p. 38).
- ²² Adorno (1997a, p. 346) and Adorno (1984, p. 111).
- ²³ Müller's apt remark, already quoted above, that the concepts of nature and history “do not function (primarily) referentially” but reflexively (cf. Müller, 2017, p. 307), thus requires a caveat: “not (primarily) referentially” does not mean “not referentially at all” but rather “referentially only through reflection.”
- ²⁴ Adorno (1997a, p. 358) and Adorno (1984, p. 119).
- ²⁵ Adorno (1997a, p. 359) and Adorno (1984, p. 120) (translation amended).
- ²⁶ Adorno (1997a, p. 362) and Adorno (1984, p. 123) (translation amended).
- ²⁷ Adorno (1997a, p. 361) and Adorno (1984, p. 122).
- ²⁸ Adorno's referential usage of the concept of natural history refers to all those objects that are interpreted in terms of the philosophy of history, above all, society and art. I limit myself here to the object *society*. On the question of art, see Hofstätter (2019). Adorno devotes the first eight lectures of his posthumously published lecture *Aesthetics* (1958/1959) (Adorno, 2017, pp. 9–138; Adorno, 2018, pp. 1–85) to the relationship between nature and art, where he discusses extensively his natural-historical understanding of art.
- ²⁹ Adorno (1997b, p. 347) and Adorno (1973, p. 354).
- ³⁰ Marx (1961, p. 652) and Marx (1990, pp. 771–772).
- ³¹ Adorno (1997b, p. 348) and Adorno (1973, p. 354) (translation amended).
- ³² Cf. Adorno (1997b, p. 349) and Adorno (1973, p. 354).
- ³³ Adorno (1997b, p. 348) and Adorno (1973, p. 355) (translation amended).
- ³⁴ Adorno (1997b, pp. 348/349) and Adorno (1973, p. 355).
- ³⁵ This is also the kernel of truth in Marx's thesis that labor as a process of metabolism with nature can never be abolished. The form in which labor is carried out in capitalism—namely as wage labor—can be transformed, but labor as such cannot be abolished for reasons of self-preservation of the human species. Cf. Marx (1961, p. 57).
- ³⁶ Freyenhagen has elucidated Adorno's idea of the indiscernibility of the good under conditions of late capitalism with the term “epistemic negativism” (cf. Freyenhagen, 2013). Not that he denies the positive inflections to be found in certain places in Adorno's writing, it is just that these cannot be combined into a concept of the good but instead remain bound to the existing negativity. For a different theoretical treatment of “epistemic negativism” in Adorno, see Finlayson (2020).
- ³⁷ Adorno (1997b, pp. 203/204) and Adorno (1973, pp. 203/204).
- ³⁸ Thompson (2008, p. 210).
- ³⁹ Adorno (1996, p. 261) and Adorno (2001, p. 175). This is exactly what Freyenhagen means by “epistemic negativism.”
- ⁴⁰ Freyenhagen (2013, p. 239).
- ⁴¹ Adorno (1997a, p. 365) and Adorno (1984, p. 124).

- ⁴² This point is also emphasized by Müller when he insists that the suffering-bound natural normativity of the human life-form under conditions of capitalist society should not assume a foundational character. See Müller (2017, p. 311).
- ⁴³ In order to be able to work out differences and potential complementarities between Adorno's and Thompson's understanding of natural history, some basic remarks about Thompson's philosophical project have to be set aside here—these are in any case well-known and have already been discussed. Only afterwards do I deal with more specific questions relevant to the subject matter of this essay. However, since Thompson and Adorno—as far as I know—have hitherto rarely been discussed comparatively (if one disregards the brief but very dense reflections in Müller [2017]) it seems to me appropriate to proceed in this way.
- ⁴⁴ Thompson (2008, p. 27).
- ⁴⁵ See Thompson (2008, p. 22).
- ⁴⁶ For Thompson, the point of the categorial status of the concept of life is that it is not a category in the Kantian sense, whose reference to the object is carried out by other (primarily empirical) concepts, but a category in the Aristotelian sense, that is, a non-empirical concept that refers directly—without further mediation by empirical concepts—to the empirical. On this see Thompson (2008, pp. 19/20).
- ⁴⁷ Thompson (2008, p. 65).
- ⁴⁸ Thompson (2008, p. 65).
- ⁴⁹ Thompson (2008, p. 20).
- ⁵⁰ Hoffmann (2015, p. 54).
- ⁵¹ Foot (2001, p. 35).
- ⁵² Foot (2001, p. 44).
- ⁵³ Foot (2001, p. 29).
- ⁵⁴ Thompson (2008, p. 65).
- ⁵⁵ Foot (2001, p. 29).
- ⁵⁶ Foot (2001, p. 29).
- ⁵⁷ See Thompson (2013, p. 725).
- ⁵⁸ Thompson (2013, p. 722).
- ⁵⁹ Thompson (2013, p. 722).
- ⁶⁰ Adorno (1997a, p. 358) and Adorno (1984, p. 119).
- ⁶¹ Whyman (2017, pp. 1, 208).
- ⁶² Testa points to the same problem when he writes that Thompson's categorial determinations are as much mediated by the individual acts in which they become effectual as vice versa, especially when social practice is involved. Cf. Testa (2015, p. 79).
- ⁶³ See Thompson (2013, p. 711).
- ⁶⁴ Müller (2017, pp. 308/309).
- ⁶⁵ Thompson (2004, p. 68).
- ⁶⁶ Thompson (2004, p. 70).
- ⁶⁷ Thompson (2004, p. 67).
- ⁶⁸ Hence Thompson's interest in Marx's early writings. See, for example, Thompson (2013, pp. 728–730).
- ⁶⁹ Thompson (2008, p. 199).
- ⁷⁰ Testa (2015, p. 73).
- ⁷¹ Hans Fink (2006, pp. 216/217) is surely right when he understands Adorno's approach as compatible with ethical naturalism because of this anti-dualistic move. However, he overlooks the fact that Adorno's understanding of natural history is not only interested in the conceptual mediation of nature and history as such, but above all in criticizing the specific social form in which nature and history have coagulated into a social second nature or a nature-like unity.
- ⁷² Testa (2015, pp. 74/75).
- ⁷³ See Wolf (2010, p. 306).
- ⁷⁴ Thompson (2008, p. 187).
- ⁷⁵ Thompson (2008, p. 210).

- ⁷⁶ Thompson (2008, p. 208).
⁷⁷ Foot (2001, p. 33).
⁷⁸ The reflections in Finlayson (2020) point in this direction.
⁷⁹ See Adorno (1997b, p. 15) and Adorno (1973, p. 3).

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