

**Adorno's notion of *Begriffslosigkeit*;
and its use in understanding
man's perplexed relation to nature**

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Adorno's Negative dialectics can be summarized by the following four theses:

(i) Nothing as such satisfies the logical norm of self-identity; pseudoformally: there is no x , such that $x=x$.

(ii) Concepts (*Begriffe*) never strictly match things and the intended subject matter. (iia) The meaning of any concept necessarily includes more than the speaker intends to say.

(iib) Every concept represents less than what is intended, i.e. its meaning never captures all that the speaker intends to say.

(iii) In our thinking and experience, as well as in the subject matter, there remains a dimension which is non-conceptual (*begriffslos; nichtbegrifflich*)

(iv) Dialetheism: There are true contradictions which are necessary for proper thinking

Adorno's *utopia of natural history*:

The exploitation of nature echoes the inter-human relations of domination (*Herrschaft*) within the bourgeois society. Therefore, in order to change the latter relations of domination, the former relation, namely man's relation to nature, has to be changed too, and *vice versa*.

- In other words, in order to find a reconciled relation to nature, social domination structures have to be dismantled.
- The utopia: that both ends can and should be realized.

Adorno's *dilemma of natural history*:

Because social progress necessarily demands increased control over nature it isn't plausible that we will ever reach such a reconciliation with nature that is needed for the realization of Adorno's utopia.

Adorno's view of tribal cultures:

(D1) Wild nature, nature without concrete human intervention, is brutal because the strongest is able to exercise power over the weaker ones.

(D2) Native or tribal societies organize themselves in a manner which imitates the natural order around them and thus its hierarchical structure.

(D3) Mythical and animistic thinking reflects the hierarchical social structure.

(D4) The domination structure of native societies and the repressive mythos and animistic totem system which supports the social order forces the society to adopt a domination relation to nature.

Adorno's dilemma of natural history (reformulated):
D1–D4 presents nature as an enemy that must be regimented and controlled in the name of emancipation. Where, in this vista of Adorno's, is the nature and natural history with which we are supposed to be reconciled? There is none. We are not supposed to reconcile our life with the brutality of nature. This is the problem at the heart of Adorno's dilemma of natural history.

Adorno's notion of nonconceptuality (*das Nichtbegriffliche*, or *die Begriffslosigkeit*):

In order to move toward the realization of the utopia of natural history, Adorno extends Freud's theory of neurosis and the unconscious, and especially the idea of repressed content, from the individual to the social level.

Man's relation to nature can be seen as a repression relation in a sense which is analogous with Freud's original use of the notion of *Verdrängung*.

According to Adorno's dialectical application of the Freudian theory, repression is a condition for a cluster of symptoms arising from the lack of successful (i.e. conscious) conceptualization (in the sense of the thesis iii above); as to Adorno's fugitive utopia in particular, the lack can be interpreted to appear as the inability (inflicted by repressed desires and guilt) to properly conceptualize the man-nature relationship.

Adorno's *dilemma of natural history* (third formulation):

(A) If native societies were (or are) brutally exploitative in their relation to nature (say in the sense of conditions D1–D4) overall (social, instinctual, technical) emancipation may contribute to the realization of Adorno's utopia only in case and to the extent that the exploitation is a consequence of a neurosis (conditions D1–D4 represent a neurotic stage of an early society).

- Otherwise such emancipation necessarily contributes to a more effective exploitation of nature.

(B) If, on the other hand, tribal societies were not thoroughly exploitative in their relation to nature but entertained attitudes which are at least minimally 'hermeneutical' then unreserved emancipation (for example as further development of subjectivity such which Adorno would have welcomed) *from* them isn't necessarily desirable. In this case we have found the nature with which we may want to reconcile.

New kind of social *antagonism* (in a sense which satisfies the theses iv):

The (modern Western) bourgeois society is divided to those (people, groups, interest organizations, units of production) who would decisively decrease the overall production and consumption, and who would be willing to live modestly and self-sufficiently along local traditions; and to those who wouldn't comply with this.

The analysis of the *dilemma of natural history* according to Negative dialectics:

The (Western bourgeois) exploitation of nature has an Oedipal guilt structure which explains the obsessive productivity and effectiveness.

A new dilemma:

The psychoanalytic theory of exploitation of nature can help to alter the prevailing situation only to the extent that the situation is neurotic, that is, clearly abnormally repressive. But the Oedipal structure comprises, not only the seriously neurotic zones of our culture, but the whole culture as such, including its normal and basic areas.

Critical summary of Adorno's position:

- Universalism
- The principle of the priority of objects is conceptually isolated from the theses i–iv
- Freudian conceptualism and expansionism
- The nonconceptual as something repressed
- Bourgeois stance in the new antagonism
- Speciesism: progress and emancipation defined in terms of humanity

How to go beyond the inadequacies of Negative dialectics:

- Serious aconceptuality should be called for
- The untranslatability of languages and cultures must be acknowledged
- There are properties of tribal cultures from which we should not emancipate
- The unconsciousness cannot be conceptually exhausted
- The theory of the Oedipus complex is not universally valid

- Unlike what Adorno teaches, *dialectics* itself is a local culture-specific notion: every culture has to produce its own (untranslatable) version of dialectics, its own *aconceptual dialectics*.