

# THE IDEA OF NATURAL HISTORY

by Theodor W. Adorno

Allow me to preface my remarks today by saying that I am not going to give a lecture in the usual sense of communicating results or presenting a systematic statement. Rather, what I have to say will remain on the level of an essay; it is no more than an attempt to take up and further develop the problems of the so-called Frankfurt discussion.<sup>1</sup> I recognize that many uncomplimentary things have been said about this discussion, but I am equally aware that it approaches the problem correctly and that it would be wrong always to begin again at the beginning.

First permit me a few words on terminology. 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. The concept of nature employed here has absolutely nothing to do with that of the mathematical sciences. I cannot develop in advance what nature and history will mean in the following context. However, I do not overstep myself if I say that the real intention here is to dialectically overcome the usual antithesis of nature and history. Therefore, wherever I operate with the concepts of nature and history, no ultimate definitions are meant, rather I am pursuing the intention of pushing these concepts to a point where they are mediated in their apparent difference. The concept of nature that is to be dissolved is one that, if I translated it into standard philosophical terminology, would come closest to the concept of myth. This concept is also vague and its exact sense can not be given in preliminary definitions but only in the course of analysis. By it is meant what has always been, what as fatefully arranged predetermined being underlies history and appears in history; it is substance in history. What is delimited by these expressions is what I mean here by "nature." The question that arises is that of the relationship of this nature to what we understand by history, where history 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, but rather one in which the new occurs; it is a movement that gains its true character through what appears in it as new.

I would like to develop what I call the idea of natural-history on the basis of an analysis, or more correctly, an overview of the question of ontology within the current debate. This requires beginning with "the natural." For the ques-

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\*Translated by Bob Hullot-Kentor.

1. There are various opinions about this reference, none authoritative. Cf. W. Martin Luedke, *Anmerkungen zu einer Logik des Zerfalls* (Frankfurt: Shurkamp, 1981), p. 74, and Hermann Moerschen, *Adorno und Heidegger* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1982), p. 34.

tion of ontology, as it is formulated at present, is none other than what I mean by "nature." I will then begin at another point and attempt to develop the concept of natural history out of the problematic of the philosophy of history. In the course of discussion this concept will already substantially gain its content and concreteness. After the formulation of these two questions has been sketched out, I will attempt to articulate the concept of natural-history itself and analyze the elements by which it appears to be characterized.

## I.

To consider, then, first of all, the problem of the present ontological situation: if you pursue the question of ontology as it has been formulated in the context of so-called phenomenology and indeed especially in the context of post-Husserlian phenomenology, that is, from Scheler on, one can conclude that its initial intention was to overcome the subjectivistic standpoint of philosophy. It meant to replace a philosophy that aims at the dissolution of all categories of being into categories of thought and that believes itself able to ground all objectivity in certain fundamental structures of subjectivity, by an approach that establishes another kind of being, a region of being that is different in principle, a transsubjective, an *ontic* region of being. And ontology is at issue so long as the logos is to be developed from this  $\text{ὄν}$  (being). It is, indeed, the fundamental paradox of all modern ontological thought that the means with which the attempt is made to establish transsubjective being is none other than the same subjective reason that had earlier erected the infrastructure of critical idealism.<sup>2</sup> Phenomenological-ontological thought presents itself as an attempt to secure transsubjective being by means of autonomous reason and its language since other means and another language are not available. Now, the ontological question of being can be articulated in two forms: In one form it is the question of *being itself*, what since Kant's first critique, as the thing in itself, has been pushed back beyond the reach of philosophical inquiry and then drawn back out again. At the same time, however, this question becomes that of the *meaning* of being, the meaningfulness of the existing (*Seiendes*) or of the meaning of being as, simply, possibility. It is precisely the double form of the question that argues powerfully for the thesis that I am propounding, that the ontological question with which we are today concerned, holds to the starting point of autonomous reason: only when reason perceives the reality that is in opposition to it as something foreign and lost to it, as a complex of things, that is, only when reality is no longer immediately accessible and reality and reason have no common meaning, only then can the question of the meaning of being be asked at all. The question of meaning is determined by the starting point of reason, but at the same time the question of the meaning of being, the axis of the early phases of phenomenology (Scheler), produces a broadly encompassing range of problems through its subjectivistic origin. For this production of meaning is none other than the insertion of subjective meanings as they have been posited by subjectivity.

2. Neo-Kantianism. Trans.

The insight that the question of meaning is nothing more than the insertion of subjective meaning into the existing leads to the crisis of phenomenology's first stage. The drastic expression of this crisis is the obvious instability of fundamental ontological categories which reason has to experience in its attempt to secure an order of being. As it has been shown that the factors accepted as fundamental and meaningful, as for example in Scheler's work, stem from a different sphere and are in no way themselves possibilities within being, but have been derived from the existing and are indeed imbued with all the dubiousness of the existing, so the whole question of being becomes insoluble within phenomenology.<sup>3</sup> So far as the question of meaning can still occur, it does not imply the establishment of a sphere of significations isolated from the empirical that would be valid and always accessible; rather the question of meaning is really none other than the question *τί ἦν δὲ*, the question of what being itself properly *is*. The expressions: meaning and signification are ambiguous in these contexts. Meaning can be a transcendent content which, lying behind being and signified by it, can be developed by analysis. On the other hand, meaning can also be the interpretation of the existing itself with regard to what characterizes it as being, but without this interpreted being thereby having been proven meaningful. It is therefore possible to pose the question of the meaning of being as the signification of the *category* of being, as that which being really is, but that, in terms of the initial question, the existing will turn out to be not meaningful, but meaningless, as is increasingly the case today.

If this reversal of the question of being has occurred, then the single initial intention of the original ontological reversal disappears, namely that of the turn towards the ahistorical. This was the case with Scheler's work, at least in his early work (which has remained the more influential), where he attempted to construct a heaven of ideas on the foundation of a purely rational intuition of non-historical and eternal contents, that radiates over and above everything empirical and has a normative character to which the empirical allows access. But, at the same time, there is a basic tension between the meaningful and essential that lies behind the historically manifested and the sphere of history itself. In the origins of phenomenology there is a dualism of nature and history. This dualism ("nature" in this context means that which is ahistorical, Platonically ontological), and the original intention of the ontological reversal that it embodies, has corrected itself. The question of being no longer has the significance of the Platonic question of the extent of the static and qualitatively different ideas that stand in contrast to the existing, the empirical, in a normative relationship or in a relationship of tension. Rather, the tension disappears; the existing itself becomes meaning and a grounding of being beyond history is replaced by a project (*Entwurf*) of being as historicity.

3. This was a general critique of Scheler current in the late 20s. One student put it: "Whatever happens in the real world . . . the assassination of a dictator, or the failure of such a plot . . . either can be explained by Scheler's sociology and metaphysics. His philosophy is adapted to account for any situation; like the barber's stool, as one of Shakespeare's fools says, it's designed for any ass." Quoted in J.R. Staude, *Max Scheler* (New York: Free Press, 1967), p. 239. Trans.

This displaces the problem and for the moment, at least, the issues dividing ontology and historicism apparently disappear. From the perspective of history, of historical criticism, ontology seems to be either a merely formal framework that has nothing to say about the content of history and can be arbitrarily set up around the concrete, or, in the Schelerian form of material ontology, it appears as the arbitrary production of absolutes out of inner-historical facts which, perhaps for ideological purposes, are raised to the level of eternal and universal values. From the ontological point of view the problem is just the reverse and it is this antithesis that has dominated our Frankfurt discussions: according to the ontologists all radically historical thought, all thought that aims at reducing content exclusively to historical conditions, must presuppose a project of being by which history is already given as a structure of being; only within the framework of such a project is the historical organization of particular phenomena and contents in any way possible.

Now the most recent turn of phenomenology, if one may still call it that, has carried out a correction at this point by eliminating the pure antithesis of history and being. By on the one hand renouncing the Platonic heaven of ideas and on the other by, in observing being, regarding it as life, false stasis and formalism have been eliminated. For the project (*Entwurf*) appears to absorb the fullness of the elements of being and even the suspicion of the transformation of the accidental into the absolute disappears. History itself, in its most extreme agitation, has become the basic ontological structure. At the same time, historical thought itself appears to have undergone a fundamental reversal. It is reduced to a philosophically based structure of historicity as a fundamental quality of human existence (*Dasein*). This structure is responsible for there being any history in the first place without, however, that which history *is* being set up in opposition to it as a finished, fixed, and foreign object. This is the point that the Frankfurt discussion has reached and where I may begin to introduce critical themes.

It appears to me that the starting point that we have arrived at here and that unifies the ontological and historical questions likewise fails to master the concrete issues or does so only by modifying its own logical and by incorporating at its content themes that do not necessarily derive from the outlined principle. I will demonstrate this with regard to just two points.

First of all, even this project is limited to general categories. The problem of historical contingency can not be mastered by the category of historicity. One can set up a general structural category of life, but if one tries to interpret a particular phenomenon, for example the French Revolution, though one can indeed find in it every possible element of this structure of life, as for instance that the past returns and is taken up and one can verify the meaning of the spontaneity that originates in man, discover causal contexts, etc., it is nevertheless impossible to relate the facticity of the French Revolution in its most extreme factual being to such categories. On the contrary, in the full breadth of the material one will find a sphere of "facticity" that cannot be explained. This is of course not my own discovery, but has long since been demonstrated

within the framework of ontological discussion. But it has not been previously enunciated so sharply, or rather, it has been worked over in an expedient fashion: all facticity that will not, on its own, fit into the ontological project is piled into one category, that of contingency, of the accidental, and this category is absorbed by the project as a determination of the historical. However logically consistent this may be, it also includes the admission that the attempt to master the empirical has misfired. At the same time this turn in the theory offers a schema for a new turn within the question of ontology. This is the turn towards tautology.

I mean nothing else than that the attempt of neo-ontological thought to come to terms with the unreachability of the empirical continually operates according to one schema: precisely where an element fails to dissolve into determinations of thought and cannot be made transparent, but rather retains its pure thereness, precisely at this point the resistance of the phenomenon is transformed into a universal concept and their resistance as such is endowed with ontological value. It is the same with Heidegger's concept of being-towards-death as well as with the concept of historicity itself. The structure of historicity, in the neo-ontological formulation of the problem, only offers an *apparent* solution to the problem of the reconciliation of nature and history. Even though history is acknowledged to be a fundamental phenomenon, its ontological determinations or ontological interpretation is in vain because it is transfigured directly into ontology. This is the case for Heidegger for whom history, understood as an all embracing structure of being, is equivalent to his own ontology. This is the basis of such feeble antitheses as that of history and historicity, which contain nothing but qualities of being that have been gleaned from human existence and transposed into the sphere of ontology by being subtracted from the existing and transformed into ontological determinations, aids for the interpretation of that which is basically only being repeated. This element of tautology is not due to the coincidences of the linguistic form, rather it is necessarily embedded in the ontological question itself, which holds to ontological endeavour, but because of its rational starting point it is unable to ontologically interpret itself as what it is: namely, a produce of, and internally related to, the starting point of the idealist *ratio*. This requires explanation. If there is a path that leads farther, then it can in fact only be adumbrated by a "revision of the question." Of course this revision is not only to be applied to the problem of history, but also to the problem of neo-ontology itself. At least some indication may be given here why it appears to me that this problem stems from the fact that the idealist starting point has not been abandoned even by neo-ontological thought. Specifically: neo-ontology is characterized by two element that it owes to idealism.

The first is the definition of the encompassing whole *vis-à-vis* the particularities included in it; it is no longer held to be a systematic whole, but rather a structural whole, a structural unity or totality. In conceiving the possibility of encompassing all reality unambiguously, even if only in a structure, a claim is implicit that he who combines everything existing under this

structure has the right and the power to know adequately the existing in itself and to absorb it into the form. The moment that this claim can no longer be made, it becomes impossible to talk about a structural whole. I know that the contents of the new ontology are quite different from what I have just asserted. The most recent turn in phenomenology, it would be said, is precisely not rationalistic, but rather an attempt to aduce the irrational element in a totally new way under the category of "life." It makes, however, an enormous difference whether irrational contents are inserted into a philosophy that is founded on the principle of autonomy, or if philosophy no longer assumes that reality is adequately accessible. I only need to point out that a philosophy like Schopenhauer's came to its irrationalism by no other way than strict adherence to the fundamental theme of rational idealism — the Fichtean transcendental subjectivity. To my mind this is evidence for the possibility of an idealism with irrational content.

The second element is the emphasis on possibility in contrast to reality. Actually it is this problem of the relationship of possibility and reality that is perceived as the greatest difficulty in the context of neo-ontological thought. I want to be careful here not to attribute positions to neo-ontology that are still being disputed within it. But it is consistently agreed that the project (*Entwurf*) of being at least takes priority over the subsumed facticity; a facticity that is to be fitted in as an afterthought and when it does not is subject to criticism. I find idealist elements in the predominance of the sphere of possibility, because in the context of the critique of pure reason the antithesis of possibility and reality is none other than that of the categorical subjective structure and empirical multiplicity. This relation of neo-ontology to the idealist position not only explains its formalism, the unavoidable generality of its categories, to which facticity can not conform, but it is also the key to the problem of tautology. Heidegger says that it is no mistake to move in a circle, the only concern is to enter it in the proper fashion. I am inclined to agree with him. But if philosophy is to remain true to its task, then entering the circle correctly can only mean that being which determines or interprets itself as being makes clear in the act of interpretation the element through which it interprets itself as such. The tautological tendency, as I see it, can only be clarified through the old idealist theme of identity. It has its origin in the subsumption of a being that is historical by the subjective category of historicity. The historical being that has been subsumed by the subjective category of historicity is supposed to be identical with history. Being is to conform to the categories with which historicity stamps it. The tautology appears to me to be less a self-grounding of the mythical depths of language than a new camouflage of the old classical thesis of the identity of subject and object. Heidegger's most recent turn towards Hegel seems to confirm this interpretation.

Given this revision of the problem, the starting point itself remains to be revised. We have established that the division of the world into nature and spirit or nature and history, a tradition set by subjectivistic idealism, must be overcome and that its place must be taken by a formulation that achieves in

itself the concrete unity of nature and history. A *concrete* unity, however, is not one modeled on an antithesis of possible and real being, but a unity developed from the elements of real being itself. The neo-ontological project of history only has a chance of winning ontological dignity, of achieving an actual interpretation of being, if it is directed not at possibilities of being, but radially at the existing itself in its concrete inner-historical definition. Every exclusion of natural stasis from the historical dynamic leads to false absolutes, every isolation of the historical dynamic from the unsurpassably natural elements in it leads to false spiritualism. The achievement of the neo-ontological formulation is that it has radically demonstrated the insuperable interwovenness of natural and historical elements. On the other hand, this formulation of the problem must be purged of the idea of an all encompassing whole and it is necessary, furthermore, to criticize the separation of the real and possible from the point of view of reality, whereas they were previously quite disparate. These are in the first place general methodological requirements. But much more is to be postulated. If the question of the relation of nature and history is to be seriously posed, then it only offers any chance of solution if it is possible *to comprehend historical being in its most extreme historical determinacy, where it is most historical, as natural being, or if it were possible to comprehend nature as an historical being where it seems to rest most deeply in itself as nature.* It is no longer simply a matter of conceptualizing the fact of history as a natural fact *toto caelo* (inclusively) under the category of historicity, but rather to retransform the structure of inner-historical events into a structure of natural events. No being underlying or residing within historical being itself is to be understood as ontological, that is, as natural being. The retransformation of concrete history into dialectical nature is the task of the ontological reorientation of the philosophy of history: the idea of natural-history.

## II.

I go back now to the question of the philosophy of history that has already led to the construction of the concept of natural-history. The concept did not fall from heaven. Rather it has its binding identity in the context of historico-philosophical work on particular material, till now above all on aesthetic material. The simplest way to give an idea of this type of historical conception of nature is to cite the sources in which the concept of natural-history originates. I am referring to the works of Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin. In the *Theory of the Novel*, Lukács applied a concept that leads in this direction, that of a second nature. The framework of the concept of second nature, as Lukács uses it, is modeled on a general historico-philosophical image of a meaningful and a meaningless world (an immediate world and an alienated world of commodities) and he attempts to present this alienated world. He calls this world of things created by man, yet lost to him, the world of convention. "Where no aims are immediately given, the structures that the spirit in the process of becoming human finds amongst men as the scene and substrate of its activity lose their evident enrootedness in supra-personal ideal necessities; they are simply existent, perhaps powerful, perhaps frail, but they neither carry the

consecration of the absolute nor are they the natural containers for the overflowing inwardness of the world. They form the world of convention, a world from whose all-embracing power only the innermost recesses of the soul are safe; a world that is present everywhere in boundless multiplicity and whose strict lawfulness, both in becoming and in being, is necessarily evident to the cognizant subject. But for all its lawfulness this world supplies neither a meaning for the subject in search of a goal nor sensuous immediacy as material for the acting subject. This world is a second nature; like the first — “first nature” for Lukács is likewise alienated nature, nature in the sense of the natural sciences — “it can only be defined as the embodiment of well-known yet meaningless necessities and therefore it is ungraspable and unknowable in its actual substance.”<sup>4</sup> This fact of a world of convention as it is historically produced, this world of estranged things that cannot be decoded but encounters us as ciphers, is the starting point of the question with which I am concerned here. From the perspective of the philosophy of history the problem of natural history presents itself in the first place as the question of how it is possible to know and interpret this alienated, reified, dead world. Lukács already perceived this problem as foreign to us and a puzzle to us. If I should succeed at giving you a notion of the idea of natural-history you would first of all have to experience something of the *θαυμάζειν* (shock) that this question portends. Natural-history is not a synthesis of natural and historical methods, but a change of perspective. The passage in which Lukács comes closest to this conception, runs as follows: “The second nature of human constructs has no lyrical substantiality, its forms are too rigid to adapt themselves to the symbol creating moment; the content of its laws is far too rigidly defined ever to free itself from those elements that in lyric poetry must give rise to essayistic impulses; these impulses, indeed, live so exclusively by the grace of laws and have in fact so little valency of sensual existence independent of them, that without them they would collapse into nothing. This nature is not mute, corporeal and foreign to the senses like first nature: it is a petrified estranged complex of meaning that is no longer able to awaken inwardness; it is a charnel-house of rotted interiorities. This second nature could only be brought back to life, if ever, by a metaphysical act of reawakening the spiritual element that created or maintained it in its earlier or ideal existence, but could never be experienced by another interiority.”<sup>5</sup>

The problem of this awakening, which Lukács grants to be a metaphysical possibility, is the problem that determines what is here understood by natural-history. Lukács envisioned the metamorphosis of the historical qua past into nature; petrified history is nature, or the petrified life of nature is a mere product of historical development. The reference to the charnel-house includes the element of the cipher: everything must mean something, just what, however, must first be extracted. Lukács can only think of this charnel-house in terms of a theological resurrection, in an eschatological context.

4. George Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT, 1978), p. 62. Translation corrected.

5. Lukács, *ibid.*, p. 54.



Benjamin marks the decisive turning-point in the formulation of the problem of natural-history in that he brought the resurrection of second nature out of infinite distance into infinite closeness and made it an object of philosophical interpretation. Philosophy has succeeded in refining the concept of natural-history by taking up this theme of the awakening of enciphered and petrified object. Two passages from Benjamin's *The Origin of the German Play of Lamentation*<sup>6</sup> are germane to those quoted above from Lukacs. "In nature the allegorical poets saw eternal transience, and here alone did the saturnine vision of these generations recognize history."<sup>7</sup> "When, as is the case in the German play of lamentation, history comes onto the scene, it does so as a cipher to be read. "History" is writ across the countenance of nature in the sign language of transience."<sup>8</sup> The deepest point where history and nature converge lies precisely in this element of transience. If Lukacs demonstrates the retransformation of the historical, as that which has been, into nature, then here is the other side of the phenomenon: nature itself is seen as transitory nature, as history.

The problem of natural history can not be correctly formulated in terms of general structures, but only as interpretations of concrete history. Benjamin shows that allegory is no composite of merely adventitious elements; the allegorical is not an accidental sign for an underlying content. Rather there is a specific relation between allegory and the allegorically meant, "allegory is expression." Allegory is usually taken to mean the presentation of a concept as an image and therefore it is labelled abstract and accidental. The relationship of allegory to its meaning is not accidental signification, but the playing out of a particularity; it is expression. What is expressed in the allegorical sphere is nothing but an historical relationship. The theme of the allegorical is, simply, history. At issue is an historical relationship between what appears — nature — and its meaning, i.e. transience. This is explained as follows: "[The worldly, historical breadth . . . of the allegorical intention is, as natural history, as the original history of signification or of intention, dialectical in character.<sup>9</sup>] The

6. Since Benjamin's book is altogether concerned with distinguishing Baroque theater and the form of its lamentation from tragedy, a worse translation of its title than the one it presently carries, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, could not have been found. Trans.

7. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: NLR Press, 1977), p. 179. Translation corrected.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 177. Translation corrected.

9. This line precedes the passage that Adorno actually quotes. It does not appear in either the published or in Adorno's manuscript. From the context, however, it is clearly required. The editor of Adorno's collected works agrees and it will be inserted in future editions (letter from Tiedemann). It is interesting to speculate why this line is missing. Tiedemann guesses that the essay was delivered from notes. The single manuscript that exists would be the work of a stenographer who could have easily missed a line. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to check whether a stenographer was at this meeting for, according to the present editor of *Kant-Studien*, all of the Society's records from the period were destroyed (letter from Manfred Kleinschneider). One thing, however, makes it doubtful that the essay is solely the work of a stenographer and that is its footnotes. Only Adorno could have plausibly put in footnote 16. He must have gone over the essay, perhaps preparing it for publication, and this makes the fact important that Adorno, not known for carelessness, passed over the passage's discontinuity. An explanation is possible: The line contains two important elements, one a reference to the "original-history of signification" and the other to natural history, in Benjamin's sense of course. The former was

relationship of symbol and allegory may be incisively and formally determined by means of the decisive category of time, whose introduction into this sphere of semiotics was the great romantic insight of these thinkers. Whereas in the symbol, with the glorification of death and destruction, the transfigured face of nature reveals itself fleetingly in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica*<sup>10</sup> of history, a petrified primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the beginning, has been ultimately, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face — or rather in a death's head. And although such a thing lacks all "symbolic" freedom of expression, all classical proportion, all that is human, nevertheless not only the nature of human existence in general but the biographical historicity of an individual is enunciated in this figure of the most extreme subjugation to nature, in the form of a riddle. This is the heart of the allegorical vision, of the Baroque, secular exposition of history as the passion of the world; it is only meaningful in the stations of its prostration. The greater the signification, the greater the subjugation to death, for death digs most deeply the jagged demarcation line between *physis* and signification."<sup>11</sup> What is the meaning here of "transience" and "original-history of signification?"<sup>12</sup> I cannot develop these concepts in a traditional fashion. What is at issue is of an essentially different logical form from that of a scheme of thought based on a project (Entwurf) whose foundation is constituted by a general conceptual structure. The alternative logical structure cannot be analyzed here. This structure is a constellation. It is not a matter of clarifying concepts out of one another, but of the constellation of ideas, namely those of transience, signification, the idea of nature and the idea of history. One does not refer back to these ideas as "invariants;" the issue is not to define them, rather they gather around a concrete historical facticity that, in the context of these elements, will reveal itself in its uniqueness. How do these elements cohere? According to Benjamin, nature, as creation, carries the mark of transience. Nature itself is transitory. Thus it includes the element of history. Whenever an historical element appears it refers back to the natural element that passes away within it. Likewise the reverse: whenever "second nature" appears, when the world of convention approaches, it can be deciphered in that its meaning is shown to be precisely its transience. As Benjamin has understood this — and here the discussion must be pushed farther — there are certain fundamental original-historical

needed for the coherence of Adorno's talk. But in that, for Benjamin, it is given as a synonym for natural history, the reference would have confused the presentation. Trans.

10. This is not one of those Latin phrases that everyone is supposed to know. The "Hippocratic face" is the physiognomy of a person suffering from "the worst." Francis Adams, in his introduction to *The Genuine Works of Hippocrates* (N.Y.: William Wood, 1886), p. 195, cites the classical description of this countenance: "a sharp nose, hollow eyes, collapsed temples, the ears cold, contracted, and their lobes turned out: the skin about the forehead being rough, distended, and parched; the color of the whole face being green, black, livid, or lead colored." For a discussion of "the face of nature" in Greek, Hebrew and early modern traditions see H.A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1962), Vol. 1, pp. 244-247. Trans.

11. Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p. 166. Translation corrected.

12. Literally, the last part of this sentence reads, "in both cases "transience" and "transitoriness" occur." In fact, only the word "transience" appears in the cited passages. Nothing of importance seems to be at stake and so the phrase has been dropped to avoid confusion. Trans.

phenomena, which were originally present, have passed away and are signified in allegory, return in the allegorical, return as script. It cannot simply be a matter of demonstrating that in history itself original-history as transience contains within itself the theme of history. The basic quality of the transience of the earthly signifies nothing but just such a relationship between nature and history: all being or everything existing is to be grasped as the interweaving of historical and natural being. As transience all original-history is absolutely present. It is present in the form of "signification." "Signification" means that the elements of nature and history are not fused with each other, rather they break apart and interweave at the same time in such a fashion that the natural appears as a sign for history and history, where it seems to be most historical, appears as a sign for nature. All being, or at least all being that has been or become what it is, transforms itself into allegory; in these terms allegory is no longer merely a category of art history. Likewise "signification" itself is transformed from a problem of the hermeneutics of the philosophy of history, from a problem of transcendental meaning, into the element whose character it is to transubstantiate history into original-history. Hence "original-history of signification." So, for example, in the language of the Baroque, the fall of a tyrant is equivalent to the setting of the sun. This allegorical relationship already encompasses the presentiment of a procedure that could succeed in interpreting concrete history as nature and to make nature dealectical under the aspect of history. The realization of this conception is once more the idea of natural-history.

### III.

Having sketched out the origin of the idea of natural-history, I would like to carry the discussion farther. The positions of Lukács, Benjamin and the idea of natural-history are related in the problem of the image of the charnel house. For Lukács it is something simply puzzling; for Benjamin is a cipher to be read. For radical natural-historical thought, however, everything existing transforms itself into ruins and fragments, into just such a charnel-house where signification is discovered, in which nature and history interweave and the philosophy of history is assigned the task of their intentional interpretation. A double turn, therefore, is made: on one hand I have reduced the ontological problematic to an historical formula and tried to show in what way ontology is to be concretely and historically radicalized. On the other hand, I have shown, under the aspect of transience, how history itself in a sense presses towards an ontological turn. What I mean here by ontological turn is something entirely different from that which is presently understood by the term.<sup>13</sup> Therefore I will not try to appropriate the expression for my own purposes, but will introduce it dialectically. What I have in mind with the idea of natural-history is not "historical ontology," not an attempt to isolate a group

13. Although Heidegger does not use the term "ontological turn" (*ontologische Wendung*), in the context of his work it would refer to a transformation of ontology such as occurred with Descartes. Trans.

of historical elements and to hypostatize them ontologically, force them, as for example Dilthey did, to encompass the totality of an epoch as its sense or fundamental structure. Dilthey's attempt at an historical ontology ran aground because he did not engage facticity with sufficient seriousness; he remained in the sphere of intellectual history and in the fashion of vague categories of styles of thought entirely failed to grasp material reality. Instead of intellectual history, instead of trying to reconstruct basic images of history epoch by epoch, the issue is to grasp historical facticity in its historicity itself as natural-historical.

To articulate the idea of natural-history I will take up a second problem from the opposite side. (This is a direct continuation of the Frankfurt discussion.) One might object that I am proposing a sort of bewitchment of history and passing off the historical, in all its contingency, as the natural and the original-historical. The historical is to be transfigured as something meaningful because it appears allegorical. That is, however, not what I mean. Certainly the starting point of the problem's formulation, the natural character of history is disconcerting. But if philosophy wanted to be nothing more than the shock that the historical presents itself at the same time as nature, then such a philosophy would be subject to Hegel's criticism of Schelling's philosophy as the night of indifferentiation in which all cats are grey. How does one avoid this night? That is something that I would like to clarify.

The starting point here is that history, as it lies before us, presents itself as thoroughly discontinuous, not only in that it contains disparate circumstances and facts, but also because it contains structural disparities. If Riezler<sup>14</sup> enumerates three opposing yet interrelated categories of historicity (i.e., *tyche*, *ananke*, spontaneity), I myself would not attempt to synthesize this division of the structure of history into a so-called unity. I believe, indeed, that the neo-ontologists have performed something very fruitful in their conception of this structure. Now this discontinuity, which, as I said, can not be legitimately transformed into a structural whole, presents itself in the first place as one between the mythical archaic, natural material of history, of what has been, and that which surfaces as dialectically and emphatically new. The problematical character of these categories is clear to me. The differential procedure required to arrive at natural-history without anticipating it as a unity consists in firstly accepting these two problematical and indeterminate structures in their contradictoriness, as they occur in the language of philosophy. This is legitimate in that it appears that the philosophy of history increasingly comes to just this sort of intertwining of the originally existing and the newly becoming in the findings presented by research. I would like to recall that psychoanalytic research presents this antithesis with full clarity in the distinction between archaic symbols, to which no associations may attach themselves, and inter-

14. Kurt Riezler, 1882-1955. Nationalist, classicist, philosopher. Once well known for his study of Parmenides and an aesthetics, more recently for his World War One diaries. Adorno is referring to his *Gestalt und Gesetz* (1924) a "critical metaphysics" that argues that life is characterized by a fundamental dualism of law and form, unified by fate. Cf. Introduction, note 11. Trans.

subjective, dynamic, inner-historical symbols, which can all be eliminated and transformed into psychological actuality and present knowledge. Now the first task of the philosophy of history is to distinguish these two elements, separate them and set them out in mutual opposition. Only where this antithesis is made explicit is there a chance of succeeding in the complete construction of natural-history. Pragmatic findings, which turn up when one observes the archaic-mythical and the historical-new, indicate the direction of this process. It is evident that the foundation, the mythic-archaic, the supposedly substantial and enduring mythic, is in no way a static foundation. Rather, there is an element of the historically dynamic, whose form is dialectical, in all great myths as well as in the mythical images that our consciousness still carries. The mythic fundamental elements are in themselves contradictory and move in a contradictory manner (recall the phenomenon of the ambivalence, the "antithetical sense" of primal words).<sup>15</sup> The myth of Kronos is just such a myth in which the most extreme godly power of creation is coupled with the fact that he is the god who annihilates his creations, his children. Likewise, the mythology that underlies tragedy is in every instance dialectical because it includes the subjugation of the guilty man to nature at the same time that it develops out of itself the reconciliation of this fate: man raises himself up out of his fate as man. The dialectical element here is that the tragic myths contain at one and the same time subjection to guilt and nature and the element of reconciliation that transcends the realm of nature. The notion not only of a static undialectical world of ideas, but of undialectical myths that break off the dialectic, points back to its origins in Plato.<sup>16</sup> In Plato the world of appearances lies fallow; it is abandoned, yet visibly ruled by the ideas. Yet the ideas take no part in the world of appearances and since they do not participate in the movement of the world, as a result of the alienation of the ideas from the world of human experience, they are necessarily transferred to the stars in order to be able to maintain themselves in the face of the world's dynamic. The ideas become static: frozen. This is, however, already the expression for a level of consciousness in which consciousness has lost its natural substance as immediacy. In Plato's moment consciousness has already succumbed to the temptation of idealism: spirit, banned from the world, alienated from history, becomes the absolute at the cost of life. The misconception of the static character of mythical elements is what we must free ourselves from if we want to arrive at a concrete representation of natural-history.

On the other hand, "the new," the dialectically produced, actually presents itself in history as the archaic. History is "most mythical where it is most historical." This poses the greatest problems. Rather than pursuing the thought in general terms, I will give an example, that of semblance (*Schein*) — and I mean semblance in the previously established sense of second nature. This

15. Apparently a reference to Freud's "The Antithetical Sense of Primal Words" (1910), in *Collected Papers*, 4th ed. by Joan Riviere (London: 1950). Trans.

16. Cf. Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, trans. Lee M. Capel (Bloomington: Indiana, 1965), p. 112 ff.

second nature is a nature of semblance in that it presents itself as meaningful and its semblance is historically produced. Second nature is illusory because we have lost reality yet we believe that we are able to meaningfully understand it in its eviscerated state, or because we insert subjective intention as signification into this foreign reality, as occurs in allegory. Now what is remarkable is that the inner-historical essence is itself semblance of a mythical kind. Just as the element of semblance is an aspect of every myth, indeed just as the dialectic of mythical fate is in every instance inaugurated by semblance in the forms of hubris and blindness, so the historically produced elements of semblance are always mythical. This is so not only in that they reach back to the archaic original-historical and that in art every illusory element has to do with myth (one thinks of Wagner), but rather because the mythical character itself returns in the historical phenomenon of semblance. Its clarification would be an authentic problem of natural-history. This would involve demonstrating, for example, that if you sense an aspect of semblance in certain houses, then along with this semblance there is the thought of that-which-has-always-been and that it is only being recognized. The phenomenon of *deja-vu*, of recognition, is to be analyzed at this point. The mythical model of anxiety returns *vis-a-vis* such inner-historical alienated semblance. An archaic anxiety descends everywhere that the illusory world of convention appears in front of us. The element of foreboding is also an aspect of this semblance; one of its mythical elements is to have the character of drawing everything into itself as into a funnel. The element of the actuality of semblance in contrast to its simple pictorialness, that we perceive semblance as expression everywhere that we come up against it, that it can not be sloughed off as merely illusory but expresses something that can not be described independently of its semblance — this is also a mythical element of semblance. To make a final point: the definitive transcendent element of myth, reconciliation, also inheres in semblance. It is worth remembering that emotion always accompanies the lesser, not the greatest art works. I am referring to that element of reconciliation that is present wherever the world appears most as semblance: the promise of reconciliation is most perfectly given where at the same time the world is most firmly immured from all “meaning.” With this I refer you to the structure of the original-historical in semblance itself, where semblance in its being-just-as-it-is (*Sosein*) proves itself to be historically produced, or, in traditional philosophical terms, where semblance is the product of the subject/object dialectic. Second nature is, in truth, first nature. The historical dialectic is not simply a renewed interest in reinterpreted historical materials, rather the historical materials transform themselves into the mythical and natural-historical.

I wanted to speak about the relationship of these matters to historical materialism, but I only have time to say the following: it is not a question of completing one theory by another, but of the immanent interpretation of a theory. I submit myself, so to speak, to the authority of the materialist dialectic. It could be demonstrated that what has been said here is only an interpretation of certain fundamental elements of the materialist dialectic.