There’s no gentle way to begin, nor should there be. No pleasant way to begin to talk of genocide. This is the first problem we encounter in trying to approach some of Theodor Adorno’s various remarks on what has come to be called the holocaust. The rubric under which I’d like to approach this particular problem is the theme of human coldness. The question I pose is whether we might rightly fault nature, and especially our fear in relation to it, as the source of our unrelenting chill toward others as well as toward ourselves. The holocaust is taken to be the absolute expression of human coldness.

A key difficulty of the subject reveals itself in the very hazard of approach: we feel the prohibition that we ought not warm ourselves to the subject. That is, the subject requires, mimetically, that we harden and steel ourselves in the face of it. It’s as if our understanding, our thinking approach to the idea, demands that we likewise become changed by it. For this is what the movement, the dynamic of thinking, yields: transformation. Thinking, à la Hegel for example, is best described as beginning in the very transformation of what is given into something else. For such thinkers as Adorno and Benjamin, to come near an object or an idea is mimetically to fashion and to transform oneself into a likeness of that same thing or idea, regardless of course of the existence of any objective standard of likeness. Let us leave aside all weak formulations of thinking as some mere surveying of things, as the calculation and administration of objects or effects. That kind of thinking is what we might call thinking in its mere housekeeping function, the keeping track of things. In relation to the holocaust this exclusively administrative thinking would include all the aspects that Hannah Arendt famously called the banality of evil: the tabulating and record keeping of bureaucratic organization. Rather, the thinking I’m interested in trying to draw near in order to understand is the thinking whose very nature it is to alter and to transform.
Here then we come into contact with fear. It’s around this term that we will gain the most insight into Adorno’s characterization of how thinking mis-orients itself. Fear, on his account, displaces the activity in which thinking transforms itself—recall that thinking begins in the transformation of things—by fear transforming, instead, the very activity of transformation into a rigid, non-transformative reflex. Adorno’s schema is remarkably simple, akin we might even say to those rather straightforward sketches of primitive life drawn by both Freud and Rousseau. It begins with the slightest of assumptions, which is that nature includes, first and foremost, the inevitability of suffering. And indeed in this Adorno might well be echoing Freud’s account of how our lives are measured in relation to suffering. Recall that for Freud there are three sources of suffering. The first is the inevitability of the decline and decay of the body: we will be betrayed by our bodies, and this is an unavoidable source of suffering. The second is that nature will also bring suffering from disasters like floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, etc. And while the first two sources are natural, the third and most powerful source of suffering for human beings lies not in nature but rather originates in our relations with other human beings. And Freud is not imagining here that human beings cause suffering to one another primarily through malicious intent—though there is certainly plenty of that to go around—but rather, the specification he gives is that we will suffer primarily from the disappointments that other people cause in us. Now we know exactly what we most have to fear: one another. Still, please note that the logic of this supposed continuity in the sources of suffering, from nature to one another, has happened too readily. We have neglected to consider why fear has entered the picture so dramatically. We have displaced our fear of nature onto our fear of one another. And, curiously enough, in this rather opaque displacement we have greatly—if unwittingly—expanded the scope of our fear. We have, obviously, more to fear, and to hope for, from one another than from any other source. In this nexus of suffering and fear we also encounter the dynamic which now pervades each of us most thoroughly: self-preservation. Suffering, fear, self-preservation—it is the peculiar configuration of these things that continues to make us cold.

But here’s what appears lopsided: if we need fear, in effect, only for the disappointments that others will occasion in us, then why have we developed such a profoundly assertive form of self-preservation? What is it that might have prompted the overdevelopment—if indeed it is an overdevelopment—of this aspect of our being in the world? Our vulnerability toward others appears greatly exaggerated, but is it in fact so? Is our self-preservation a form of overcompensation for the relative safety we have achieved in our relation to nature? Our fearful comportment toward suffering becomes a strategy that likewise makes suffering enlarged and all-pervasive. Fear, in other words, calls forth terror. Why are we overdetermined toward fear? Why does fear invade us