

Envisioning a Nietzschean land ethic

In this article, the author employs a Nietzschean lens to deconstruct the nihilistic logic of the Anthropocene, which tends to artificially separate human life from its other-than-human context, thus blocking humanity from recognizing networks of significance that exceed us. This occurs even as Anthropocene logic runs human and other-than-human life together, by making the other-than-human world intelligible only with appeal to human interests and needs. When it assumes that human beings are the primary (if not sole) sources of meaning and value, Anthropocene discourse obscures our embeddedness in a world of value and meaning that exceeds us and our machinations. Insofar as this discourse blocks us from recognizing the ends and values of the other-than-human, it blocks us from discovering new possibilities for being and acting that might make our lives much richer and more meaningful. Furthermore, insofar as Nietzsche's thought allows us to recognize that other-than-human life forms have ends and values of their own – that they are therefore intrinsically valuable – it allows us to recognize that the other-than-human has moral status.

For those working on environmental topics today, the problem of the Anthropocene looms large. Scholars ask how human beings ought to live in the age of the Anthropocene – whether the scope of their domination ought to expand or contract – and come to very different conclusions (Rolston, 2017; Preston, 2018). Some claim the extent of anthropogenic change is such that the planet's climate and other-than-human life forms are already fully dominated by humanity; thus, everything on Earth is “human artifice” (e.g. Ellis, 2011; Vogel, 2015). Others, however, point to the potentially pernicious effects of uncritically employing (and resigning ourselves to) ‘the Anthropocene’ as a concept and category for understanding our world and ourselves (e.g. Crist, 2013). Yet other analysts problematize the notion that humanity *in general* can be held responsible for the ecocrisis; instead arguing (and convincingly so) that only certain sectors of humanity are responsible – in particular, that the systems of power that emerge under capitalism are largely to blame (e.g. Moore, 2017). Generally speaking, Anthropocene discourse is

pervasive; sometimes critically examined, other times less so.

Here, I do not defend my conception of the natural world against that of an entirely artificial planet; nor do I stake a claim about whether all of humanity is responsible for the age of the Anthropocene. Instead, I employ a Nietzschean lens to deconstruct the nihilistic logic of the Anthropocene, which tends to artificially separate human life from its more-than-human context, thus blocking humanity from recognizing networks of significance that exceed us. This occurs even as Anthropocene logic runs human and other-than-human life together, by making the other-than-human world intelligible only by way of an appeal to human interests and needs. When it assumes that human beings are the primary (if not sole) sources of meaning and value, Anthropocene discourse obscures our embeddedness in a world of value and meaning that exceeds us and our machinations. Insofar as this discourse blocks us from recognizing the ends and values of the other-than-human, it blocks us from discovering new possibilities for being and acting that might make our lives much richer and more meaningful.

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Furthermore, since Nietzsche's thought allows us to recognize that other-than-human life forms have ends and values of their own – that they are, therefore, intrinsically valuable – it also allows us to recognize that the other-than-human has moral status. On such an account, any conservation policy that fails to sufficiently consider the ends and interests of the other-than-human is ethically suspect, and any conservation policy or program must take the moral status of the other-than-human seriously. Though the vision I outline here utilizes aspects of Nietzsche's thought, it also moves beyond Nietzsche to construct a more robust and clearly ecocentric account. On this account, when we recognize our essential openness to other-than-human life forms, we are able to see ourselves as "plain member and citizen" in an ecological context, and to recognize the critical significance of cultivating a practice of receptivity to other-than-human meanings and the ways they inform human lives and actions.

Deconstructing Anthropocene discourse

The strand of Anthropocene discourse to which I will pay special attention in this piece is the 'new conservation' discourse. New conservationist thinkers regard the Anthropocene as the "beginning of a new geological epoch ripe with human-directed opportunity" (Ellis, 2011). The alleged arrival of this new age, characterized by the pervasiveness of anthropogenic change, is not understood to mandate dialling back human influence and control; rather, it is seen as a license to extend control over the Earth as a "global, half-wild rambunctious garden, tended by us" (Marris, 2011: 2). Unsurprisingly, given this logic, conservation interventions allegedly justified by the arrival of the Anthropocene are those that centre on human well-being, especially economic development and prosperity (Kareiva *et al.*, 2012). According to this platform, nature conservation ought to be motivated by the interests and aims of humanity. Other-than-human life forms or landscapes are understood primarily

in terms of their instrumental value for the economic flourishing of humanity, as "capital stock from which people derive vital ecosystem services" (Ehrlich *et al.*, 2012: 69). Such a program, according to which conservation of the natural world is coextensive with the advancement of human interests, is anthropocentric through and through, and reinforces human exceptionalism – that is, the view that human beings have a privileged status over non-human beings in virtue of certain unique features that we possess (for example, special cognitive capacities such as rationality).

Throughout his body of work, Nietzsche consistently and straightforwardly rebukes human exceptionalism, insisting that man has "placed himself in a false rank order in relation to animals and nature" (Nietzsche, 2001: 114) and that "[m]an represents no progress over the animal" (Nietzsche, 1967: 55). Indeed, beyond simply rejecting the notion that human life is more valuable than non-human forms of life, Nietzsche (1997: 62) goes so far as to insist upon the way in which human valuation can distort the world, by obscuring potential ways of seeing and existing:

We do not regard the animals as moral beings. But do you suppose the animals regard us as moral beings? – An animal which could speak said: "Humanity is a prejudice of which we animals at least are free."

Nietzsche insists that anthropocentric values and priorities prejudice us in certain ways. But we also see him begin to disrupt the notion that human beings are the only beings that have value. As beings continuous with the natural world, Nietzsche avers, humanity has much to learn from adopting a stance of humility and receptivity rather than one of arrogant projection and control. Indeed, we must restrain our hubristic impulse to project meaning onto the Earth and more-than-human life before we have made ourselves listeners, receptive to the lessons the natural world and non-human life have to teach (Nietzsche, 2006b).

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Alongside his rejection of human exceptionalism, Nietzsche critiques the human assumption that certain of our cognitive capacities – especially our reason – enable us to know and understand the perspectives of other forms of life and decide what is best for them (2001: 238–9; 2006b: 23–4; 2006a: 87; 2005: 167–70). This Nietzschean point is one echoed by Leopold (1949: 204):

In human history, we have learned (I hope) that the conqueror role is eventually self-defeating. Why? Because it is implicit in such a role that the conqueror knows, *ex cathedra*, just what makes the community clock tick, and just what and who is valuable, and what and who is worthless, in community life. It always turns out that he knows neither, and this is why his conquests eventually defeat themselves.

On this broad point – that the workings of ecosystems and the interests of other-than-human life forms are often obscure and difficult even for experts to understand – there is now fairly widespread agreement. I suggest, then, that we ought to be sceptical of the new conservationists' confidence in humanity's ability to occupy the perspectives of other-than-human life and execute courses of action that ostensibly benefit other-than-human life while contributing to human prosperity.

Finally, Nietzsche dismisses narrow economic priorities as spiritually empty and deadening, remarking that “life in a hunt for profit constantly forces people to expend their spirit to the point of exhaustion in continual pretence or outsmarting or forestalling others” (2001: 184). When we view a phenomenon purely in economic terms – when we focus, for example, on how “prosperity springs from nature” (as the new conservationist Natural Capital Project does) – we restrict the ways in which that phenomenon can lead to our personal, spiritual enrichment. Otherwise put, what we *expect* to ‘get out of’ the natural world will shape what we *in fact* get out of it. Viewing natural landscapes and other-than-human life-forms through the lens

of ‘natural capital’ from the start precludes us from viewing these phenomena differently: as phenomena with their own values that might contribute to our far broader flourishing. From a Nietzschean perspective, then, the new conservationist view of nature flattens out the richness of our world, narrowly circumscribing the way in which other-than-human life might contribute to human life and experience.

A positive vision

Beyond Nietzsche's critical project, however, it is possible to construct a positive vision – a proto-ecocentric Nietzschean vision that de-centres the human as the sole or highest source of value. After all, Nietzsche exhorts humanity not only to recognize its animal (and even vegetal) nature, but to recognize its embeddedness in an invaluable world, a world worthy of affirmation as an inexhaustible wellspring of meaning and in which we can discover new possibilities for being and acting. In what follows, I employ certain Nietzschean themes – in particular, the other-than-human value that results from the end-directedness of living beings – in order to construct an account of such a proto-ecocentrism. The positive vision I sketch here extends Nietzsche's thought by emphasizing the importance of developing an *ethical* attunement to the other-than-human world.

According to Nietzsche, every living being has certain ends or goals towards which it directs itself (2006b: 89; cf. Richardson, 1996: 36). In this account, humans are not the only beings with interests and ends all their own: animals and plants also have their own ways of being end-directed, of being oriented with respect to certain characteristic goals and purposes. Indeed, for Nietzsche, even ‘non-living’ processes – such as chemical interactions – are end-directed insofar as they tend towards the achievement of particular goals.¹ Furthermore, any end-directed being or process for Nietzsche can be said to have its own interests, and thus its own values (or evaluative perspectives). In many ways, as David Storey argues (2015),

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this Nietzschean account can be thought of as a proto-biocentrism, of the type we find in Paul Taylor's work (1981). Insofar as Nietzsche extends end-directedness to the inorganic world as well, however, one might identify Nietzsche as an ecocentrist – or, if not, at least construct a robust ecocentrism directly inspired by his thought.

In the case of human beings, examples of relations between goals and values are fairly straightforward. I can, for example, be said to value economic flourishing only insofar as economic success is a goal towards which I strive. This point is a bit trickier to demonstrate with respect to plants, animals and natural processes, however. But let us imagine a showy goldenrod plant (*Solidago speciosa*). On the Nietzschean view, since photosynthesis is an end-directed process that showy goldenrod must undergo in order to grow and thrive, one of a showy goldenrod plant's ends is to photosynthesize. Because of this end, the showy goldenrod is situated in the world in a particular way: it has the potential to be transformed in certain ways (by the presence or absence of light) and to transform its world in certain ways (in this case, either using sunlight to 'split' water – separating hydrogen from carbon dioxide, and turning carbon dioxide into sugars for energy – or failing to split water in the absence of sunlight). For this reason, the showy goldenrod might be said to have a positive evaluative orientation towards sunlight – it might be said, from a Nietzschean perspective, to *value* sunlight. From this perspective, then, understanding plants, animals and even ecological processes as end-directed allows us to make sense of the claim that plants, animals, and processes have inherent value.²

Indeed, the more we recognize the purposes, ends and interests of other-than-human life forms – that is, the more we acknowledge the intrinsic value of the more-than-human – the more we must face the fact that we are, to some extent, ethically obligated to them. If a honeybee (or a community of honeybees) has end-directed processes and purposes all its own,

things that hinder or advance its ends, then it has interests – and thus moral status. Furthermore, it is intelligible to say that an ecosystem or a biotic community can be harmed or hindered in its development *because* we recognize that there are certain end-directed processes characteristic of that community: that there are actions that can be taken pursuant to the ends and interests of the community, and actions that work against these interests.

The above is why Nietzsche can faithfully be characterized as a proto-ecocentrist, in that his views allow us to recognize the other-than-human world (both the biotic community and the inorganic elements and topography) as a source of value. On this Nietzschean view, recognizing the ecosphere as valuable means recognizing our fundamental relationality to this other-than-human world as a source of value. When we adopt anthropocentric, or even hyper-rational, stances, we deny our status as participants in the natural world. When we project our own values onto the world without also engaging in listening and receptivity, we preclude ourselves from seeing other values, ways in which this world exceeds us. And indeed, if we were to subject the natural world and non-human life forms to our control and utilize them for our ends alone (especially ends as superficial as economic ones that purport to ensure 'comfort for all'), we would flatten out the richness of experience, undermining our own depth of being which depends on coexisting with diverse forms of life.

Affirming the other-than-human: Shifting individual attitudes and conservation priorities

From out of the abstract account sketched above, it might seem difficult to isolate a practical vision or concrete recommendations for action. It seems to me, however, that by engaging in small, everyday practices through which one acquaints oneself with the natural world, one might shift one's attitude towards that world and become better able to recognize other-than-human values. Such practices,

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as they become more and more widespread, will become transformative – changing hearts and minds and tilting humanity away from typically anthropocentric concerns, even in a world with pervasive anthropogenic change.

Let me give an illustration of such small, everyday practices. In the summer of 2017, my partner and I purchased a home, a small single-storey house on the north side of Indianapolis, a sprawling city in the Midwest of the US. Indianapolis was recently named the frontrunner in toxic chemical releases for the 50 most populous US cities. This was due in part to nitrate releases from industrial agriculture and in part to releases of arsenic, lead and mercury from manufacturing and power plants. The air quality is, overall, poor; soil is, on the whole, degraded. Several days this year, I could taste an odd quality in the air. The website for Indiana's Department of Environmental Management (2010) supported my suspicion – that I was likely inhaling industrial chemicals in a not-particularly-industrial area – though it also reassured the concerned citizen that the chemicals “can be smelled well below levels of concern.”

On the little piece of land we inhabit, my partner and I have decided not to use pesticides or fertilizers; next to the non-native species already established in our yard, we have decided to plant native species that offer sustenance to pollinators and preserve the integrity of the soil. Of course, it's just a small bit of land; caring for it does not dramatically lessen the environmental devastation in Indianapolis. The basic ecological processes and functions affecting this piece of land have been transformed – and continue to be transformed – by extensive air, soil and water pollution. So, some might ask, what's the point?

Quite simply, even in the middle of quasi-suburban Midwestern city sprawl, we want to remain mindful of the land, cultivating an ecological conscience that remains aware of our obligations to all life forms. Only by resisting attitudes of domination and control – attitudes frequently legitimized by Anthropocene

discourse – can we open ourselves to interactions that make apparent the end-directed processes and values of the land and more-than-human life forms. Working harmoniously with the little plot of land we inhabit offers us one way of doing this. Adopting an ecocentric perspective means, first and foremost, “[extending]...the social conscience from people to land” (Leopold, 1949: 209); such an extension of conscience fundamentally requires us to recognize values in non-human life forms. Working in close concert with the other-than-human, wherever one finds it, is one way in which individuals might discover – and take seriously – the interests and values of a honeybee or a showy goldenrod plant, even in a time of ever-increasing technology and widespread domination over nature.

But our Leopoldian conviction, our sense that we are simply “plain member[s] and citizen[s]” of our biotic community, is not all that motivates caring for our little plot of land. Indeed, we want to remain attuned to the way in which ecological processes continue to shape this land and our lives, shifting and adapting to extensive anthropogenic change in ways that exceed our understanding and projects. In a time when humans – as Rolston (1991: 370) points out – often opt out of ecosystems, we choose to opt *in*: valuing the ecosphere not only in itself but as a way to experience a matrix of meanings, values and purposes that allow us to recognize that we live in an inherently meaningful world that exceeds us. Working with the small plot of land on which we live is a meaning-cultivating practice, a practice that enables us to recognize that we live in a world of potentially inexhaustible richness, an ecosphere full of purposes and end-directed processes that surpass human machination, and reveal a world of meaning beyond ourselves. Working with the land, noticing resistances and affordances in what contributes to the health of nonhuman denizens and soil, enhances our lives and lets us affirm the world in all its richness. To do this is to resist the nihilism towards which post-modern societies tend when they avow the human as sole source of value in the world,

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projecting that frame onto a world made to bend relentlessly to our wills and whims. To do this is our way of reminding ourselves that because the broader biotic community to which we belong has its own purposes, processes and values, nihilism – the view that the world in itself is without inherent meaning – is simply false. No matter the extent of anthropogenic change, a more-than-human world both ‘out there’ and *right here* remains, with a meaning all its own – and values that we might embrace and make our own, too.

On my view, moving forward in a way that affirms the Earth and all of its inhabitants will necessarily include a shift in the attitudes and comportments that individuals have towards the natural, other-than-human world. But changes at the level of individual attitudes must also translate to conservation priorities that centre the other-than-human, while simultaneously avoiding the continual marginalization of communities historically impacted by well-intentioned but sometimes misguided preservation movements (Wuerthner *et al.*, 2015). As conservation is one of the few areas concerned with recognizing and advancing other-than-human interests, it is the real and serious work of conservation to act *in the interests of other-than-human life forms*. This means resisting conservation policies that emphasize and prioritize human interests to the detriment of other-than-human life forms and landscapes – which means resisting the ‘new conservationist’ platform. ■

Notes

- 1 See, for example, the unpublished fragment 14[81] entitled “Critique of the concept of cause” from 1888 (Nietzsche, 1967–77, vol 13: 260–1), and the remark about chemistry at fragment 35[58] (Nietzsche, 1967–77, vol 11: 537).
- 2 Although it might seem odd to equate valuing with *having* value, according to Nietzsche, “[t]hrough esteeming alone is there value: and without esteeming, the nut of existence would be hollow” (Nietzsche, 2006b: 43).

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