

Nietzsche and Ecology: A Critical Inquiry

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More than two decades ago, I published an insufficiently critical essay that interpreted Martin Heidegger as a forerunner of deep ecology. (Zimmerman, 1983) A decade later, in the light of disturbing revelations about the entwinement of Heidegger's thought with National Socialism, I had to retract important elements of my earlier claims. (Zimmerman, 1993, 1994) When I was invited to discuss how yet another conservative German philosopher's work might be pertinent to ecology, I resolved not to repeat the problems found in my early interpretation of Heidegger. Because other writers, in particular Graham Parkes, have argued effectively that Nietzsche's thought is in some ways compatible with contemporary environmentalism, I do not feel obligated to repeat their insightful analyses. (Hallman, 1991; Parkes, 1994, 1998; Stack, 1992) Anyone familiar with Nietzsche's work knows that he deeply appreciated the natural world and that he defined humankind (der Mensch) at least partly in terms of naturalistic categories. In what follows, however, I will argue that there are also considerable difficulties in the way of any uncritical reading of Nietzsche as a proto-ecologist. (See Campora, 1994)

Perhaps the greatest difficulty is that Nietzsche's major concern as a thinker differed from that of contemporary environmentalists, many of whom believe that human behavior is profoundly harming the biosphere. Despite the remarkable achievements of nineteenth century European industry, few people at that time--including Nietzsche--believed that humans could destroy the conditions necessary for human life. In the 1880s, atomic weapons were not on the conceptual horizon, much less on the tips of ICBMs; human population was a fraction of what it is today; industrialism had not spread too far beyond Europe and parts of North America; rapid species extinction was only

beginning; and vast areas land were not only uncharted, but also regarded—however naively—as virtually “untouched” by human hands. In view of his critique of animal abuse, his interpretation of humankind as a natural organism, his frequent use of metaphors drawn from natural phenomena in order to describe humankind and its possibilities, and his passion for swimming and hiking, it is easy to see how one can regard Nietzsche as anticipating today’s environmental attitudes. While condemning Christianity (and similarly otherworldly religious and metaphysical traditions) for despising the body and nature, he seems to have envisioned a this-worldly transfiguration of the human body that would correspond to his affirmation of nature. “Remain faithful to the earth,” proclaimed Zarathustra, Nietzsche’s prophet of a future and higher humankind.¹

Despite all this, and more, Nietzsche would have had serious reservations about certain aspects of contemporary environmentalism. He would have been deeply suspicious of romantics yearning to restore a supposedly Edenic human past. He would have criticized the seriousness, the spirit of gravity, and ascetic attitude discernible in many contemporary environmentalists. He would have loathed the utilitarianism and social justice ideals that inspire much of today’s Green movement. Perhaps most importantly, he would have criticized the kind of anti-anthropocentrism that guides much of today’s environmentalism. Because “ecology” has contemporary political, cultural, and scientific meanings that did not obtain in the 1880s, the politics of nature today differ considerably--although by no means completely--from German politics of nature more than a century ago. The “nature” about whose fate Nietzsche and many other leading

intellectuals, scientists, and ideologues were most concerned was not biospheric nature, but rather human nature.

These days, environmentalists are informed by the science of ecology, which studies the relationship between organisms (including human beings) and their organic and physical environment. Informed by scientific ecology, mainstream environmentalists maintain: 1) that human well-being and survival depend on maintaining vital ecological relationships among the interconnected constituents of the biosphere; 2) that the enormous expansion of both industrialization and human population is undermining vital ecological relations, harming human (and non-human) health, and extinguishing species at a rapid rate by destroying relatively “wild” habitat; 3) that humans must make changes in their behavior, attitudes, and institutions in order to limit threats to human well-being and the well-being of other life forms; and 4) that the attitude most in need of change is anthropocentrism. This attitude, deeply rooted in major Western religious and philosophical traditions, provides ideological justification for the concept of progress that legitimates the use of industrial technology to dominate nature. Given the importance of anti-anthropocentrism in Anglo-American environmentalism, in what follows I will focus on how Nietzsche might have evaluated such anti-anthropocentrism. As we will see, Nietzsche’s major concern was how to avoid degeneration and nihilism, not how to avoid environmental destruction and ecocide.

I begin by discussing Nietzsche’s complex approach to the notion, inspired by Darwin’s revolution, that man should conceive of himself merely as a clever animal, rather than as a soul-endowed being specially formed by the biblical Creator. Nietzsche makes clear, however, that man is not just one among other animals, but instead the “over-animal.” (HH, 40) His effort to “re-animalize” man, however, is closely bound up with problematic concepts of race, breeding,

and degeneration that were widely shared at the time. Next, I examine his claim that anthropocentrism has been destroyed by astronomers who have demonstrated the insignificance of the human animal. In fact, however, Nietzsche contends that science does man little service if it fails to provide him with a justification for his existence. Man needs to believe in his own special status. The death of God is an earth-shattering event precisely because it threatens man with cosmic meaninglessness, which Nietzsche feared would throw European man—already degenerate, because out of touch with his animal instincts—into suicidal despair. After explaining in more detail why, for Nietzsche, man, as is the exceptional animal that invents a world suitable for enhancing human power, I show the extent to which he embraced a certain conception of “progress” that validates human domination of the planet. Such domination is undertaken not merely to preserve the human species, but primarily to enhance the human Typus, by generating a few exceptional individuals who can “justify” human existence. Finally, I argue that Ernst Jünger and Martin Heidegger offer a plausible, though controversial, reading of Nietzsche’s Overman as heralding the culmination of 2500 years of metaphysics, which takes the form of technological domination of the planet. Nietzsche’s naturalistic anthropocentrism can be interpreted in a way that is decidedly at odds with current environmental thinking. What follows is one way, not the way, to understand Nietzsche’s pertinence for ecology. I hope that my approach help to inspire constructive debate.

Nietzsche’s Qualified Re-Animalization of Man

In naturalizing humanity, Nietzsche focused on human nature, which he defined not only in terms of organic heritage and constitution, but also in terms of character, race, psychology, moral capacity, and evolutionary possibility. For Nietzsche, “reanimalization” of man and “return to nature” involved not the recovery of simpler times, but instead an ascent to something higher, freer, more terrible. (TI, “Skirmishes,” 48) Such ascent requires re-contacting long suppressed instinctual energies, but without regressing to the social formations, cultural levels,

and psychological traits consistent with unmediated expression of such energies. Channeling instinctual energy into the modern consciousness, enormously deepened by centuries of the ascetic ideal, might make possible the step beyond herd man toward the higher man, even the Overman. Although Nietzsche often criticized arrogant anthropocentrism, then, his major concern was about the health and destiny of humankind. Here, he revealed his continuing attachment to the Western notion that humans bring forth historical, conceptual, artistic, and moral domains that cannot be understood solely in terms of naturalistic categories. Indeed, in “Schopenhauer as Educator,” he remarks: “And if all of nature presses toward the human being, then in doing so it makes evident that he is necessary for its salvation from animal existence and that in him, finally, existence holds before itself a mirror in which life no longer appears senseless but appears, rather, in its metaphysical meaningfulness.” (SE, 209) So as to underscore our entwinement with animal being, however, Nietzsche closes with a question: “Where does the animal cease, where does the human being begin?”

As noted earlier, many environmentalists criticize anthropocentrism, a belief-system originally fostered by Biblical religions, but later put on life-support by agnostic and atheistic Enlightenment moderns. Anthropocentrists believed that humankind stands atop the terrestrial (and perhaps even cosmic) pecking order. Hence, humans are morally justified in treating non-human nature however they choose, including as an instrument for human ends. Religious believers once used the term “soul” to name the special trait that elevates humans over other animals, but moderns speak of “mind” or “rationality” or “linguistic capacity.” Nietzsche states in The Antichrist:

We no longer derive man from “the spirit” or “the deity”; we have placed him back among the animals.... Man is by no means the crown [nor the purpose] of creation: every living being stands beside him on the same level of perfection. And even this is saying too much: relatively speaking, man is the most bungled

of all the animals, the sickliest, and not one has strayed more dangerously from its instincts. (AC,14)

This passage would be music to the ears of some environmentalists. A false note, however, is sounded in the sentence that immediately follows: “But for all that, he is, of course, the most interesting [animal].” In his “modest” attempt to naturalize humankind, and in his critique of shame about the human body and its instinctual demands, Nietzsche did not make the mistake of overlooking how dramatically different man is from other animals! Man is the “over-animal” because he has developed an exceptional moral and evaluative capacity. Real “progress,” we are told, would occur if man left behind the instinct for violence and lust for punishment—“gifts” bestowed on humans by other animals--and developed instead a greater capacity for justice. (WS, 183; HH, 43,44, 452)

Yet, did not proclaim that progressive (socialist, democratic, modern) man is degenerate and effeminate precisely because he weakens the vital instincts—including hostility--required for healthy existence, and promotes instead the ignoble goal of pain-free happiness? (TI, “Skirmishes, “ 37) Yes, he did, much to the delight of far right-wing ideologues who promoted racist social Darwinist attitudes.² Concerns about degeneration, however, were by no means limited to right-wing thinkers. Likewise, racist explanations for such degeneration (miscegenation) were widespread among European intellectuals, including some who would have regarded themselves as progressive. At the time, major questions were: Is there a common human nature, or instead are there different races that on the one hand have some something in common, but on the other hand can and should be rank ordered in terms of their capacities and weaknesses? If there is no God in whose eyes all humans are equal, should we turn to the social hierarchy at work in the animal world for clues about organizing human society? Is the

European (white, Aryan) race of human animals degenerating and thus becoming uncompetitive with other races?

Interrelating with one another in complex ways, social Darwinism, naturalism, racial concepts, and concerns about degeneration shaped the politics of nature in late-nineteenth century Europe. Consider this: the man who in 1866 coined the term “ecology,” Ernst Haeckel, was an influential German scientist and nature-mystic, as well as a racist and social-Darwinist. (See Gasman, 1971; Staudenmeier, 1995). Soon the idea would emerge that land was healthy if tended by pureblooded people who have been affiliated with it for centuries. The Nazi version of this idea is summarized in the slogan, Blut und Boden. Efforts to combat racial degeneration, concern about which reached near-hysterical levels in some groups, were not confined to Europeans. Americans played a crucial role in developing the science of eugenics to combat degeneration. Nazi ideologues made extensive use of this research in setting up their own infamous programs. (Kevles, 1985; Kuhl, Stefan, 1994) Many notables, including Nietzsche, Theodore Roosevelt, and Lord Baden-Powell (founder of the Boy Scouts) expressed grave concern about the disappearance of “manly men.” To be sure, some social critics blamed urbanization, industrialization, and material deprivation—not miscegenation—for sapping the virility of Western men. Miscegenation, however, was uppermost in the minds of many of those seeking an explanation for the decline of European vitality and virility. By comparison, so it was widely believed, growing populations of pureblooded non-whites retained their vigor and thus would eventually out-compete European humankind, even if non-whites were originally “inferior” to Europeans. Racist theorists claimed that European blood was particularly debilitated when mixed with that of the allegedly semi-human Africans, the Asiatic hordes (including the Slavs, who were allegedly always threatening to overwhelm the continent), and of course the Jews.

Arguably, Nietzsche's most important concern was how to halt degeneration of European (and German) man. To his credit, he often publicly castigated anti-Semites who warned against allowing German blood to be contaminated by that of Jews. Indeed, he often maintained that hybrid races—products of miscegenation--were more vigorous. Hence, an appropriate admixture of (the right kind of) Jewish blood could help not only to restore the degenerating German Volk, but also to promote the “good European” who synthesizes the strengths of various European peoples. Nietzsche's frequent expressions of admiration for Jews, however, was sometimes linked to the observation that their remarkable cultural longevity could be traced in part to their racial purity (BGE, 251), in contrast with mongrelized (and thus sometimes degenerate) peoples. (BGE, 200) Although having arisen from several different races, as did the ancient Greeks, the Jews kept their bloodlines relatively unmixed for many centuries. That there was a physiological dimension to Nietzsche's conception of race cannot be wished away by those who prefer to emphasize its cultural component. (See for example Scott, 2003) Nazi ideologues often not only distorted his views, of course, but also omitted his admirable tirades against anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, his free use of race-based categories, his references to physiological degeneration, and his frequent talk of breeding a nobler race, strike discordant notes among most contemporary readers who know that National Socialists used similar categories to justify exterminating “degenerate” elements of the population—elements that were described as subhuman, as vermin. When blended with racism and social Darwinism, naturalism can become an extremely potent and dangerous political ideology.

Until recently, liberal white Americans environmentalists might have asked: What does any of this have to do with our concern to preserve wild habitat loss in order to slow the extinction spasm now taking place? Indeed, they would have summarily dismissed suggestions that racialism or even racism were influencing their attitudes and practices. About fifteen years ago, however, African-Americans, Hispanics, and other minorities began to assert that their communities—many of which were poor and located in urban areas—were negatively affected by

what is now called “environmental racism.” Environmental justice advocates charged that mainstream environmental organizations: a) were composed almost entirely of white people, b) tended to ignore urban pollution, land use issues, and installation of toxic waste dumps in areas that disproportionately affected poor and non-white groups, c) focused primarily on preserving “wilderness,” and d) sometimes adopted anti-immigrationist views consistent with racist or ethnocentric organizations on the grounds that non-white immigrants could not be trusted to “preserve” the land.

Until recently, anti-anthropocentrism led many environmentalists to assume that humans were a pestilence upon nature; hence, only “virgin” or “untouched” land was pure and worthy of being called wilderness. Pre-contact America was regarded as such a wilderness, to which “original” condition the land ought to be restored, if possible. Some anthropologists, however, have not hesitated to charge that racism underlies such attitudes, which depict Native Americans—who in fact substantially altered North America for millennia—in what can be regarded as at best a demeaning manner. Forty years ago, O.C. Stewart wrote:

The fact that even the more historically minded American ecologists have started their evaluation of the influence of man upon nature with the landing of the Pilgrims follows from the view that American Indians were part of nature like other animals. Aborigines could be ignored more easily than buffalo as forces of nature [!].... Not only scientists but all whites of European ancestry have always found it difficult to take the Indians seriously enough to learn from them. The relationship between Indians and whites started with the assumption that the Indians were only part of the natural environment. This logically led to the point of view that the American natives had nothing to teach sophisticated Europeans. (Stewart, 1963, 119,121; cited in Kay, 2002, 245-246)

Nietzsche would not have had a problem with rank-ordering races, but he would have dismissed the yearning for “pristine” or “original” nature. Living in a European landscape tilled

and managed by humans for thousands of years, he had little interest in “wilderness,” partly because he assumed that there was no land untouched by human hands.

Racist and anti-immigrationist comments made years ago by some American members of Earth First!, as well as the resurgence in Europe of far-right wing groups concerned about the relationship between blood purity and environmental well-being, confirm the conviction of many moderns that concern about the well-being of “nature” is sometimes bound up with reactionary social attitudes, including “ecofascism.” (Biehl, 1995; Geden, 1995; Olsen, 1999; Staudenmeier, 1995; Zimmerman, 1995) Recently, Mark Sagoff has demonstrated that in speaking of invasive species, many scientific and environmentalists use the same vitriolic, fear-mongering, Other-hating language used by early twentieth century Americans critics who warned that the degenerate, semi-human masses (mostly Eastern European Jews and Southern European Catholics) were threatening to displace an America composed of white American Protestants.³ (Sagoff, 1999)

If Nietzsche were magically transported to the year 2004 and asked to explain the psychological and/or socio-cultural roots of environmental problems such as global warming, acid rain, and species extinction, he would be unable to do so without a crash course in contemporary natural and social science, as well as in twentieth-century history. As his knowledge increased, Nietzsche would discover that the genetic revolution in Darwinism, as well as comparative and empirical anthropological research, undermined central aspects of the doctrines of race and breeding that were common in his era. Moreover, given the astonishingly evil purposes to which National Socialism put such racial doctrines, he might even renounce some dimensions of his aristocratic anti-modernism. If Nietzsche could confront with real comprehension today’s ecological problems in light of the events of the past century, I suggest, he would not write what he wrote more than a century ago.

A little earlier, we spoke of Nietzsche’s attack on the ascetic ideal, its attendant slave morality, and the degenerate scientific modernity that shares such morality, even after having

slain the Biblical God. Despite all this, however, Nietzsche made clear that ascetic man was far more interesting, morally profound, and ultimately more promising than the blond beasts, to whom we are nevertheless indebted for having used their violence to establish societies that were gradually taken over by violence-condemning and anti-aristocratic ascetic priests and philosophers. Agreeing in some respects with those who complain that man is enslaved and debilitated by modern society, Nietzsche excoriated Rousseau for ascribing moral goodness to primitive humans (BT 2, 19; SE, 201; HH, 216, 463; D, preface, 3; TI, 552), whereas in fact early human life was characterized by horrendous violence, unmediated resurrection of which Nietzsche did not recommend.

Instead of reverting to the murderous assaults justified by the blonde beast's master morality, which was far too close to the "morality" governing other animals "red in tooth and claw," Nietzsche sought to transcend man as he is: herd man, maggot man, ascetic man, insipid socialist man, peace loving man, and even—dare I say it? —environmentalist man. Insofar as Nietzsche's historical scheme exemplifies a three-phase movement—pre-modern, modern, and post-modern—his scheme shares the same Gnostic eschatology animating the work of Hegel, Feuerbach, and Marx. (Voeglin, 2000) According to Nietzsche, the "danger of dangers" is that man will allow the ascetic morality at work in socialism and democracy to prevent attainment of "the highest power and splendor actually possible to the type 'man.'" (GM, preface, 6) Anticipating and helping to make possible the attainment this kind of human being are central themes in Nietzsche's thought. By bringing master and slave morality into constructive confrontation with one another (GM, I, 16), by channeling instinctual energy—rather than either immediately giving in to it, or else suppressing it—into the process of human self-overcoming, people willing to experiment may help to give rise to higher man, "the Roman Caesar with the soul of Christ." (WP, 983)

Lest we get carried away here, however, let us recall that Nietzsche affirmed that higher men would be both willing to make use of others, and even do violence against them, all of which

would be justified insofar as it furthers the goal of saving humankind from the despair and nihilism that he saw stemming from the death of God. While a new goal is needed to replace that provided by the otherworldly God and the ascetic ideal, Nietzsche often indicated that this goal—which would require total mobilization of human activity—would be to generate a few extraordinary human beings, whose noble traits and astonishing capacities would be so aesthetically pleasing that they would justify the suffering, struggle, and effort required for ordinary mortals to exist. In a moment, we will return to what is required of humankind—and the Earth—to fulfill this new goal. First, however, let us consider how Nietzsche’s concern about the need to justify human life tempers his critique of anthropocentrism.

How Modern Science (Unwisely) Deflates Anthropocentrism

Nietzsche observes that astronomers have punctured our arrogance, by showing that we are merely animals living on the side of a dirt ball in the middle of nowhere. Just as an ant may think it is the goal of the forest, so we think we’re the goal of the universe! (WS, 14) Indeed, it is an arrogant, monstrous, and insipid pose to regard man as the measure of all things. (GS, 346) Elsewhere, however, Nietzsche asserts that humans can no more avoid evaluating, measuring, judging, than they can exploiting, dominating, and oppressing. Man may not be the measure of all things, but what man does is to measure, to give value to himself, others, and the world. For humans, there are no immediate perceptions or absolute truths, but only perspectives, that is, vantage points that let us evaluate things in ways that enhance our power as individuals or as members of cultures. According to Nietzsche’s naturalistic epistemology, such cognitive and evaluative activity serves above all the goal of survival of the species. In the opening lines of The Gay Science, we read:

Whenever I contemplate men with benevolence or with an evil eye, I always find them concerned with a single task, all of them and every one of them in particular: to do what is good for the preservation of the human race. Not from

any feeling of love for the race, but merely because nothing in them is older, stronger, more inexorable and unconquerable than this instinct — because this instinct constitutes the essence of our species....” (GS,1)

Yet, highlighting the importance of instinctual self-preservation seems to contradict Nietzsche’s view that life seeks not mere preservation or survival, but instead ever greater power. This may explain why, at the end of the above-cited passage, Nietzsche adds “our herd” immediately after “our species.” Man as he is up to now, herd man, makes survival his priority, but the anticipated higher man will seek the highest concentration of spiritual power, which will require that he see most deeply and resolutely into the abyss of nihilism and despair opened up by the death of God. (BGE, 56). Confronting such truth, however, is clearly not for everyone; the vast majority of people, including intellectuals, can endure only so much of it. (BGE, 39, 43) People need art, poetry, myth, religion, deceptive strategies, illusions, and noble lies of all sorts, to avoid the black despair that follows from realizing that ultimately their lives are meaningless. (HH, 33; GS, 357). Our organism is not prepared for the unvarnished truth: that we are accidental byproducts of an accidental universe, but instead depends on the lies of common sense metaphysics. (GS, 110) Science itself cannot provide values, goals, or purposes after having taken them all away. (GS 7, 373)

In the Genealogy, Nietzsche famously argues that in its quest for truth at any cost, science shows itself as the secret ally of the ascetic ideal that Enlightenment science supposedly renounced. Nietzsche asks: “Does anyone really believe that the defeat of theological astronomy represented a defeat for that [ascetic] ideal?” (GM, III, 25) On the contrary, we read, science promotes man’s self-belittlement by destroying faith in his own “dignity and uniqueness,” “his irreplaceability in the great chain of being....” Natural science has turned man into “an animal, literally and without reservation or qualification...” (GM, III, 25) Nietzsche continues: “Since Copernicus, man seems to have got himself on an inclined plane—now he is slipping faster and faster away from the center into —what? into nothingness?... Very well! Hasn’t this been the

straightest route to—the old [ascetic] ideal?” (GM, 25) Nietzsche presses his critique: “All science ... has at present the object of dissuading man from his former respect for himself, as if this had been nothing but a piece of bizarre conceit.” [My emphasis, MEZ] (GM, 25) Nietzsche, however, believed that human dignity and self-respect are not mere conceits, but instead conditions necessary for the vast majority of human animals to exist without falling into suicidal despair. Very few, the lonely ones, are capable of saying “yes” to life when they sail out upon the horizon-less sea, the infinite universe disenchanting by the death of God.

Here, I am reminded of Stanley Rosen’s claim that there is an exoteric and an esoteric side to Nietzsche. (Rosen, 1989) The exoteric Nietzsche writes not to the masses, but to free thinkers grappling with the fall of God and the rise of scientific naturalism. Free thinkers may find life-affirming satisfaction in the proposal that humankind is capable of producing great living artworks, in the form of extraordinary exemplars of our species. The esoteric Nietzsche, however, writes perhaps only for himself. Consider the subtitle of Thus Spoke Zarathustra: “A book for all and none.” Nietzsche recognizes that even his own goal of generating great human beings is but another noble lie, one that may also sustain our species in centuries ahead. One who sees deeply and resolutely enough, however, realizes that all phenomena are ultimately expressions of the completely impersonal will. Humans, even the greatest, are merely epiphenomena of monstrous strivings that care and know nothing about us meager mortals. This reading downplays Nietzsche’s contentions that the Will to Power is multiple, and that humans can transform (via culture^o the mineral, vegetal, animal drives at work in us. (See Parkes’ excellent book, Composing the Soul, 1994) As if attempting to establish meaning for human existence in almost completely impersonal world, bereft of a Creator, were not a sufficiently daunting task, Nietzsche raises the stakes by positing the horrifying claim that everything recurs eternally. Even the bravest, hardest, and most resolute individuals have difficulty in affirming life in the face of this claim. So far as we know, only one person managed to do so: Zarathustra, Nietzsche’s fictional hero. In contrast to Nietzsche, even free thinkers and intellectuals must

posit intermediate goals—great human accomplishments in the sciences and arts, personal career achievements, family well being, leisure time activities—that provide the necessary balm that draws the veil of lethe over human meaninglessness. Attempting to restore human self-respect, shredded by the Enlightenment’s dialectical chainsaw (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002 [1944]), the exoteric Nietzsche describes man as the most interesting, courageous, and promising animal.

Many environmentalists would point out that this position resembles all too closely the anthropocentric idea of human exceptionalism. If Nietzsche is right, humans are not merely animals after all! In contrast, some radical ecologists describe humans as the lowest possible animals, such as vermin, or even as cancer that should be eliminated. Nietzsche himself spoke contemptuously of “maggot” man, so such vocabulary would not bother him. What would bother him, however, is the claim—advanced even by such a well-known environmental ethicist as Paul Taylor-- that the earth would be unaffected by human annihilation, except insofar as it this would enable earth to heal itself after millennia of human abuse. (Taylor, 2001) Nietzsche would regard such an assertion as passive nihilism, the new Buddhism yearning for nothingness, oblivion, and self-extinction. Daniel Conway remarks that for Nietzsche “The will to nothingness represents the final will of a declining people or epoch, as decadent human beings embrace self-annihilation as the sole remaining goal capable of stimulating their enfeebled wills.”⁴ Is not the yearning for self-annihilation also visible in those Earth First!ers who called for eliminating layers of civilization and for a return to hunter-gatherer times, when men were more innocent, neither desirous nor capable of threatening the biosphere? How might Nietzsche have evaluated a book popular among some environmentalists, Ishmael, named after a talking ape, who depicts the past ten thousand years of human history as a regrettable mistake, insofar as agriculture moved us away from living according to nature’s cycles? (Quinn, 1992)

Drawing on Nietzsche, we could say that environmentalists who do not adequately qualify the claim that the human being is an animal are not only blind to its extraordinary capacities, but also help to justify human domination of nature. After all, if humans are merely

animals, and if animal life is defined by the struggle for survival, then humans can be expected to expand their populations at the expense of other species. Slipping a moral claim into this naturalistic position, one could say that humans have every right to dominate non-human beings. Environmentalists reply that conceiving of humans as animals knocks us off our lofty pedestal and forces us to take into account the interests of our kin, whether plant or animal. It is not self-evident, however, that naturalism leads people to feel compassion for or take into account the interests of their animal (and plant) kin. True enough; the mid-nineteenth century humane movement began in England, perhaps inspired partly by Darwin's revolutionary claims. Yet, those same claims were also put to use not only by social Darwinists to justify racist positions, but also by industrialists who use the social Darwinist idea of "struggle for survival" to dismiss "sentimental" concerns about destruction of the land by railroads, airports, highways, factories, farms, suburbs, and cities.

Naturalism is closely tied to natural science, which analyzes phenomena under the assumption that they are strictly mechanical objects lacking interiority, that is, feeling, striving, or consciousness. Nietzsche agreed with naturalism that otherworldly religious categories are not explanatory, but he also showed contempt for mechanistic naturalism (BGE, 21, 36; GS, 373), because it ignores purposiveness and will, central instances of the interiority that Nietzsche ascribed to everything in a way that seems consistent with a variety of pan-psychism. Retaining a place for consciousness, soul, and spirit in his naturalism, Nietzsche ascribed to plants and animals an interiority that is overlooked in principle by the sciences that focus solely on mechanical behavior. In effect, he assumed that the basic "stuff" of reality was not matter, but energy, which is always associated with a perspective, the "new infinity." (GS, 374) For something to be means for it to be energy whose drive for power is guided by a perspective. As our previous discussions have indicated, however, the fact that Nietzsche acknowledges that all phenomena have interiority does not mean that he would agree with biocentric egalitarianism. A truly "high spirituality" knows that its mission is "to maintain the order of rank in the world,

among things themselves--and not only among men.” (BGE, 219) Just as he had no compunction about enslaving, exploiting, and harming human beings, so long as such behavior can be justified, so he assures us, Nietzsche also recognized that humans could justify dominating life on earth in pursuit of a crucial human end.

Man as the Evaluating Animal par excellence

Nietzsche personally was not pleased by the prospect of human domination of the planet. For him, dominating oneself (and at times even other humans) for the sake of self-overcoming was one thing; brutal dominion over animals, for example, was another. (On mistreatment of animals, see for example HH, 36, 53). Nevertheless, if my argument is correct, he saw no way around some form of human dominion over life on Earth, especially in the coming centuries. Hence, he criticized as disingenuous sentimental attitudes toward nature, because they ignore that people have always exploited the natural world. (D, 286; BGE, 259) Nietzsche knew that humans could not have become intelligent, moral animals without relying on the work, food, and products provided by our animal cousins. Injury, appropriation, overpowering of what is alien and weaker, all these are all essential to life, not its corruptions or imperfections. People should be honest about this, he tells us. (BGE, 259) Some poets claim to sense something “greater” lurking behind natural phenomena, but Nietzsche asserts that such sense is a merely a residue of early human fear that something really was lurking behind trees and rocks: saber tooth tigers, wolves, and other predators! (D, 142) For Nietzsche, nature is relentless, pitiless, and indifferent to the concerns of any species; indeed, nature is another word for the infinite and constantly shifting perspectives of the Will to Power. Nature is no model for art, Nietzsche insists, because it has too many gaps, distortions, and infelicities. To see what “is” is inartistic! The artist and the poet, rather, improve

and expand upon what is given. (TI, “What Germans Lack, “ 7) Even sober scientists remain “artists in love,” “burdened with those estimates of things that have their origin in the passion and loves of former centuries.” Consider that mountain or that cloud: “What is ‘real’ in that? Subtract from it the phantasm and very human contribution, my sober friends! If you can!” (GS, 57)

We project upon nature not only beauty and rationality, but also moral value. But, Nietzsche warns against projecting moral significance onto the back of amoral nature! (D, 3) Surely he would criticize many of today’s Greens, who not only promote utilitarian ideals (which he scorned), but who also adhere to Malthusian and ascetic notions about nature’s scarcity, insufficiency, and limits. In contrast to such ascetic ideals, Nietzsche held that nature is given to lavishness, squandering, overabundance, violence, and exploitation, all in the service not merely of survival, but of generating lucky hits—new types, new species--that keep the evolutionary game moving forward. He would also conclude, I believe, that environmentalists are in many cases ascetics who fail to posit an adequate goal for future humanity. He would ask: So what if we manage to preserve the biosphere so life can go on. Why should it “go on”? Of course, only the human animal can ask such a question, but Nietzsche is persuaded that the current answers to which we cling are crumbling.

For Nietzsche, man is a poet who has invented the “whole eternally growing world of valuations, colors, accents, perspectives, scales, affirmations, and negations.” (GS, 301) Hence, “Whatever has value in our world now does not have value in itself, according to its nature— nature is always value-less, but has been given value at some time, as a present—and it is we who gave and bestowed it.” (GS, 301). Later on, however, he scoffs at inventing values that supposedly exceed the value of the actual world, and at putting existence on the scales and “find[ing] it wanting.” (GS, 346). Moreover, sounding like Emerson, he suggests at times that as humankind’s spiritual insight grows, so does the space around him, such that “his world becomes

more profound” (BGE, 57), revealing glory hidden from the masses. The experience of such a tiny minority of people, however, can scarcely be expected to shape the behavior of the vast numbers of humankind who strive to control their environment.

The tension present in Nietzsche’s assessment of the human treatment of nature is visible in the following passage from the Genealogy: “Hubris is our whole position regarding nature, our assaulting nature with the help of machines and heedless technological and engineering inventiveness.... “ (GM, III, 9) Although apparently agreeing with environmentalism’s critique of the domination of nature, this passage occurs in a specific context, namely, discussion of the fact that what once was evil is now regarded as good. Introducing the above-quoted passage, Nietzsche writes: “[M]easured even by the standards of the ancient Greeks, our entire modern being [Sein], insofar as it is not weakness but power and consciousness of power [my emphasis: MEZ], has the appearance of sheer hubris and godlessness....” A little later, he remarks that from the ancient Greek perspective our attitude toward God and even to ourselves is hubris,

for we experiment with ourselves in ways that we would never permit ourselves to experiment with animals and ... we cheerfully vivisect our souls. [...] We assault ourselves nowadays, no doubt of it, we nutcrackers of the soul, ever questioning and questionable, as if life were nothing but cracking nuts; and thus we are bound to grow day-by-day more questionable, worthier of questioning; perhaps also worthier—of living? (GM, III, 9)

Despite the implicit critique of animal experimentation voiced here, Nietzsche makes clear that moderns regard the industrial mobilization of nature not as violation, but instead as the most efficient way to enhance not just human survival, but human power and consciousness of power. What once seemed hubristic and thus evil now seems to be appropriate and good. To be sure, Nietzsche invidiously contrasted what he regarded as the rather crude and domineering modern mode of power seeking with the spiritualized power acquired by great individuals in the process of overcoming themselves. Nevertheless, the modern will to power has legitimacy not only

because it is an enactment of will, but also because it may contribute to what Nietzsche regards as higher, more spiritual forms of power in the higher men arising from the turmoil of modernity.

Nietzsche's Embrace of Progress, Rightly Defined

Having formerly attempted to revitalize in Germany the spirit of tragedy, Nietzsche later concluded that European humankind has no historical alternative to going forward with the project of industrial modernity. "We are faltering, but we must not let it make us afraid and perhaps surrender the new things we have gained. Moreover, we cannot return to the old, we have burned our boats; all that remains is for us to be brave, let happen what may.—Let us only go forward, let us only make a move! Perhaps what we do will present the aspect of progress...." Here, 'progress' is defined as a positive development in human evolution. (HH, 248) In Twilight of the Idols, Nietzsche contrasts such authentic progress with the usual modern conception of "progress"—utilitarianism, rationalism, social justice, democracy, capitalism, socialism--as a degeneration of the instincts, as a weakening that should be hastened to allow for the emergence of a new, more life-affirming phase of human existence. (TI, "Skirmishes," 43) In the Genealogy he returns to what he regards as genuine progressus, the convoluted evolutionary process

which always appears in the shape of a will and a way to greater power and is always carried through at the expense of numerous smaller powers. The magnitude of an 'advance' can even be measured by the mass of things that had to be sacrificed to it; humankind in the mass sacrificed to the prosperity of a single stronger species of humanity—that would be an advance. (GM, II, 12)

A little earlier we read that all organic events involves a "subduing, a becoming master, and that all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which and previous 'meaning' and 'purpose' are necessarily obscured or even obliterated." (GM, II, 12) I interpret this passage as saying that the higher men must find a way to interpret industrial modernity not as ordinary progressives do, namely, as technological domination of

nature for the sake of material prosperity and democratic rights for the laboring class, but instead as the condition necessary for the emergence of a new goal life-affirming goal for humankind: production of a few great human beings who are ends in themselves, but who also provide the masses beings in whom they can take pride and venerate. Paradoxically, then, even though democracy is in one respect a sign of human decay and diminution (BGE, 203), in another respect it promotes emergence of a higher type. “The very same conditions that will on the average lead to the levelling and mediocratizing of man—to a useful, industrious, handy, multi-purpose herd animal—are likely in the highest degree to give birth to exceptional human beings of the most dangerous and attractive quality.” [My emphasis, MEZ] ⁵ (BGE, 242) European democratization “is an involuntary arrangement for the cultivation of tyrants—taking that word in every sense, including the most spiritual.” (BGE, 242, 258; see also WS, 275)

In fall, 1887, Nietzsche writes that according to an “economic justification” of virtue, “The task is [to] make humankind as useful as possible” by outfitting it with “machine-virtues” that make humans like unfailing machines. (KSA 12:10 [11] “If we just have that unavoidably imminent total economic management of the earth, then humankind can find its best meaning as machinery in [economic] service: as a gigantic clockwork [Räderwerk], composed of ever-growing superfluity of all dominating and commanding elements; as a whole of tremendous force, whose individual factors represent minimal forces, minimal values.” (KSA 12: 10 [17], WP, 866) Nietzsche regards this mechanistic dwarfing of humankind, however inevitable it may be, as a regressive (and dreadful?) phenomenon, one that requires considerable justification. Hence, he posits—but can by no means demonstrate—that there will arise a “countermovement” in the form of “the precipitation (Ausscheidung) of a luxury surplus of humankind: it aims to bring to light a stronger species, a higher type that arises and preserves itself under different conditions from those of the average human. My concept, my metaphor for this type is, as one knows, the word ‘Overman’.” (Ibid)

A few years earlier, Nietzsche had described modern democratic humanity not as cog in the monstrous economic machine, but instead as a skillful actor. Nietzsche bemoaned the fact that “[T]he individual becomes convinced that he can do just about everything and can manage almost any role, and everybody experiments with himself, improvises, makes new experiments, enjoys his experiments, and all nature ceases and becomes art.” (GS, 356) Curiously, however, modern humanity’s traits are very much like those that Nietzsche himself praises, especially the will to experiment on oneself. The apparent problem with such men, Nietzsche says, is that they crowd out the great “architects,” those endowed with the strength to build, the courage to make plans, and the genius for organization. “For what is dying out is the fundamental faith that would enable us to calculate, to promise, to anticipate the future in plans of such scope, and to sacrifice the future to them—namely, the faith that the human being has value and meaning only insofar as it is a stone in a great edifice; and to that end the human being must be solid first of all, a “stone”—and above all not an actor!” (GS, 356) Is it possible, however, that democratic humanity’s experimentalism and flexibility will allow him to engage in a mode of conformity unimaginable in previous societies? Will the invisible hand of democratic industrialism generate higher types “behind the backs” of the flexible actors? Will they unwittingly, or possibly even willingly, become solid stones? Will the industrial armies of the proletariat, the armies of the nation states, and multinational entrepreneurs make possible a scale of planetary domination hitherto undreamt of? Is this what is heralded by Nietzsche’s Overman?

Heidegger’s Reading of Nietzsche as the Thinker Herald of Technological Modernity

Readers will recognize that the last question animates Heidegger’s controversial interpretation of Nietzsche. I believe, however, that my interpretation of Nietzsche can be justified by reference to Nietzsche’s texts alone, independently of the debatable interpretative framework offered by Heidegger’s critique of Western metaphysics. Around 1930, Heidegger was electrified by reading Ernst Jünger’s book, Der Arbeiter, which argued in effect that the total mobilization occurring in industrial modernity was generating a new human Typus, hard,

dangerous, elemental, instinctual, far-seeing, cunning, organic construction, half-steel, half-flesh. (Heidegger, 1998 [1955], 1972 [1954]) This concentrated, flexible, courageous, and intelligent raw material rejoiced in aligning its energies with those of others of its type, the worker-soldiers bent on transforming the planet into a titanic factory that would make possible something truly extraordinary. This was how the Will to Power manifested itself in technological modernity, so at least Jünger and Heidegger concluded. ⁶ Heidegger read Nietzsche's conception of being as Will to Power as the apotheosis of twenty five hundred years of Western metaphysics. Critics have correctly pointed out that Heidegger glosses over texts that contradict his effort to force Nietzsche to lie in the Procrustean bed of the history of being. Nevertheless, given what I have been arguing, Heidegger's reading is not wholly implausible. Praising Napoleon for having made it possible in Europe for "the man (der Mann)" to become "master over the businessman (Kaufmann) and philistine," Nietzsche goes on to speculate that the incomparable French warrior may have brought back the decisive slab of antique granite necessary to unite Europe in an affirmative sense, thereby making her "mistress of the Earth." (GS, 362) "The time for petty politics is over: the very next century will bring the fight for the dominion of the earth—the compulsion to large-scale politics." (BGE, 208) This passage occurs at the end of a discussion of failure of European will, weakened by hybridization. Europe must unite so as "to acquire one will by means of a new caste that would rule Europe, a long, terrible will of its own that would be able to cast its goals millennia hence...." Who would constitute this new caste? Nietzsche's higher men? The Overman? Jünger's worker-soldier?

A slightly more benign characterization of total human planetary domination is described years earlier in The Wanderer and His Shadow. There, Nietzsche argues that different people thrive (or are stunted) in different climates. Humanity must first discover empirically which regions of the earth have curative capacities and which give rise to degeneration, and then transplant nations, families, and individuals "for as long and continuously as is needed for our

inherited physical infirmities to be conquered. In the end, the whole earth will be a collection of health resorts [my emphasis, MEZ]..” (WS, 188) In the very next section, Nietzsche writes:

That which in senile short-sightedness you call the overpopulation of the earth [!] is precisely what proffers the more hopeful their greatest task: humankind shall one day become a tree that overshadows the whole earth bearing many millions of blossoms that shall all become fruit for one another, and the earth itself shall be prepared for the nourishment of this tree. [...] The task is unspeakably great and bold: let us see to it that the tree does not untimely rot away! [...] What we must do... is to look in the face our great task of preparing the earth for the production of the greatest and most joyful fruitfulness—a task for reason on behalf of reason! (WS, 189)

I detect no irony in these remarks, which are consistent with Nietzsche’s overriding concern: promoting the self-overcoming of herd humanity for the sake of a higher type, in this case, a type characterized by mutual service, which is about as idealistic as Nietzsche ever becomes. In Unfashionable Observations, Nietzsche remarked that humankind should make its own goal that at which plants and animals aim: production of powerful and superior specimens. Humankind “must search out and produce those favorable conditions in which those great, redeeming human beings can come into being.” (SE, 215) Only in genuine, unselfish love does the soul “desire to look beyond itself and to search with all its might for a higher self that lies hidden somewhere.” (SE, 216) To achieve the goal of generating great human specimens requires planetary alteration, which is consistent with the overriding importance that Nietzsche accords to the human animal:

[T]he existence on earth of an animal soul turned against itself [ascetic man], taking sides against itself, was something so new, profound, unheard of, enigmatic, contradictory, and pregnant with a future that the aspect of the earth was essentially altered. [...] From now on, man is included among the most

unexpected and exciting lucky thrown in the dice game of Heraclitus' 'great child,' be he called Zeus or chance: he gives rise to a interest, a tension, a hope, almost a certainty, as if with him something were announcing and preparing itself, as if man were not a goal but only a way, an episode, a bridge, a great promise. (GM, II, 16)

It would, I think, be difficult for environmentalists to interpret these passages as anything but anthropocentric, except insofar as Nietzsche envisions that contemporary anthropos will overcome himself and generate something higher—perhaps even a planetary master capable of encouraging non-human beings to prosper. Long before such a noble prospect could emerge, however, humans would have to organize, manage, and cultivate the planet in order to nourish the growth and development of the human tree. The organic metaphor should not prevent us from seeing that planetary organization would require the enormous arrangements made possible by industrial technology. Nietzsche sees risk here, of course, but not the risk that such technology would destroy the biosphere, for this prospect never crossed his mind. The risk would be that, despite committing itself to something as great as overcoming itself, the moral animal might botch the job so badly that humans might regress to ape-like status. Even this, however, could be regarded by him as an instance of nature's tendency to squander itself, sometimes absurdly. (TI, 14)

How would Nietzsche have assessed today's environmentalists, who seem so timid and fearful in the face of possible climate change or species loss? Would he have regarded them as siding with Malthus and Darwin, rather than with the bold and violent ones envisioning a new and even more extraordinary phase of human existence, which is a dimension and even an expression of terrestrial life? Would Nietzsche have preferred that we roll the dice with industrial modernity to see what it might, even unintentionally, bring forth? Would he have admired the globalizing entrepreneur more than the small-is-beautiful Green? If apprized of the potential power of genetic engineering, which has been made possible by science at work in liberal

democracy, would he look to it as a way to generate exalted exemplars of our species, without the painful and often horrendous ascetic practices hitherto necessary to generate such exemplars? Would he insist that utilitarian-democratic social forces be prevented from guiding decisions about how and how widely to use genetic engineering? What poetic categories would he like to see put into play during the coming centuries, when humankind redesigns the planet? What are the stakes in this version of a Nietzschean “politics of nature”?⁷

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¹ On another occasion, I would like to argue that in The Birth of Tragedy Nietzsche referred to Raphael's painting, The Transfiguration, not merely because it exemplified the classical Greek yearning for the Apollinian dream world, but also because Nietzsche himself yearned for a spiritual transfiguration in which the glorified body (represented by Christ in Raphael's painting) would occur in the very world occupied by the suffering masses below. The only figure in Raphael's painting who looks up at the transfigured Christ is an epileptic, with whom Nietzsche may have well identified himself: the wounded healer whose pre-seizure aura reveals to him human possibilities hidden to the frightened masses incapable of affirming this life.

² For an insightful account of how right-wing ideologues used—and abused—Nietzsche's thought, see Roger Woods, The Conservative Revolution in the Weimer Republic (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996).

³ Donna Haraway has made a strong case for why environmentalists (and, so I would add, perhaps especially those looking to Nietzsche for inspiration) must keep in mind the potential, but not inevitable, connection between the politics of nature and the politics of race. See for example, "Universal Donors in a Vampire Culture: It's All in the

Family: Biological Kinship Categories in the Twentieth-Century United States,” in Uncommon Ground, ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1995).

⁴ Conway also argues that Nietzsche finally saw no alternative to moving forward with modernity’s potentially re-invigorating project.

⁵ Lawrence Lampert comments that Nietzsche imagined that “global process of homogenization” would provide conditions needed to generate a few exceptional people. See “ ‘Peoples and Fatherlands’: Nietzsche’s Philosophical Politics,” in Nietzsche and Politics, Spindel Conference 1998, ed. Jacqueline Scott, The Southern Journal of Philosophy, XXXVII, Supplement, 43-63.

⁶ On Heidegger’s relation to Jünger, see Michael E. Zimmerman, Heidegger’s Confrontation with Modernity, Division One (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

⁷ I am very grateful to Ben Crowe, Graham Parkes, Frank Schalow, and Teresa Toulouse for offering helpful criticism of earlier versions of this essay. Graham Parkes generously engaged with me in correspondence about this topic. Remaining shortcomings are my responsibility.