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Western ‘Naturalism’ Disrespects Nonhuman Animals and the Entire Natural World

The self-destructive delusion that we are the only species that has a right to life on Earth has led to the ecological crisis.

One species has transformed into a material backdrop for its tribulations the 10 million other species that constitute its extended family, its giving environment, and its daily cohabitants. More specifically, it is one small population of this species that has done so, the bearer of a merely historical and local culture. Making all other living beings invisible is a provincial and late phenomenon—not the product of mankind as a whole. Imagine a people approaching a land populated by a myriad of other related peoples, and declaring that they don’t really exist, and that they are the stage and not the actors (ah yes, it’s not a fiction that requires a lot of imagination, as it also comprises vast swaths of our history). How did we accomplish this miracle of blindness toward the other creatures of the living world? We could hazard here—to exacerbate the strangeness of our heritage—a rapid history of the relations between our civilization and other species, a history which leads to the modern condition: Once nonhuman living beings were debased ontologically (that is to say, considered as endowed with a second-order existence, of lesser value and lesser consistency, and thus transformed into ‘things’), human beings came to believe that they alone truly existed in the universe.

It simply took Judeo-Christianity to expel God from ‘Nature’ (this is the hypothesis of the Egyptologist Jan Assmann), to make Nature profane, then the scientific and industrial

revolutions to transform the nature that remained (the scholastic *phusis*) into a matter devoid of intelligence or of invisible influences, available to extractivism, for human beings to find themselves as solitary travelers in the cosmos, surrounded by dumb, evil matter. The last act involved killing off the last affiliation: Alone in the face of matter, human beings nevertheless remained in vertical contact with God, who sanctified it as his Creation (natural theology). The death of God entails a terrible and perfect loneliness, which we might call the anthropo-narcissistic prison.

This false lucidity about our cosmic solitude put the final seal on the serene exclusion of all nonhuman beings from the field of the ontologically relevant. It explains the ‘prison house’ of the philosophy and literature cultivated in the great European and Anglo-American capitals. My choice of this expression is not arbitrary: Not only are these fields now a prison house or ‘closed room’ in the sense of Jean-Paul Sartre’s play “No Exit”—but also the prison house is the world itself, the universe, which is populated only by us and the pathological relationships with our fellow humans entailed by the disappearance of our plural, affective, and active affiliations with other living beings, nonhuman animals and environments.

This ubiquitous theme in 20th-century literature and philosophy, which foregrounds the cosmic solitude of human beings, a solitude elevated to grandeur by existentialism, is intriguingly violent. Under cover of the heroism of the absurd (as Albert Camus [defined](#) it), under cover of having the courage to face the truth, this violence is a form of blindness that refuses to learn how to see the forms of existence of others, negating their status as cohabitants, postulating that, in fact, they have no communication skills, no ‘native senses,’ no creative point of view, no aptitudes for finding a *modus vivendi*, no political promptings. And this is the great cunning, and therefore the hidden violence of Western naturalism, which in fact aims to justify exploiting all of nature as a raw material lying to hand for our project of civilization—it means treating others as matter ruled by biological laws, refusing to see their geopolitical promptings, their vital alliances, and all the ways in which we share with living beings a great diplomatic community in which we can learn anew how to live.

The human subject alone in an absurd universe, surrounded by pure matter lying to hand as a stock of resources, or a sanctuary for humans to recharge their batteries spiritually, is

a phantasmal invention of modernity. From this point of view, those great thinkers of emancipation, Sartre and Camus, who have probably infused their ideas deeply into the French tradition, are the objective allies of extractivism and the ecological crisis. It is intriguing to reinterpret these discourses of emancipation as vectors of great violence. Yet it was they who transformed into a basic belief of late humanism the myth that we alone are free subjects in a world of inert and absurd objects, doomed to giving meaning through our consciousness to a living world devoid of it.

This myth took away from that world something it had always possessed. The shamanists and animists described by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Philippe Descola know very well what this lost state had involved, namely complex social relations of reciprocity, exchange, and predation which are not peace-loving or pacific, and do not follow Isaiah's prophecy, but are political in a still enigmatic sense, and call for forms of pacification and conciliation, of mutualist and considerate cohabitation. After all, there are meanings everywhere in the living world: They do not need to be projected, but to be found, with the means at our disposal—translation and interpretation. It's all about diplomacy. We need interpreters, intermediaries, and in-betweens to do the job of starting to speak again with living beings, to overcome what we might call Claude Lévi-Strauss's curse: the impossibility of communicating with the other species we share the Earth with. "For despite the ink spilled by the Judeo-Christian tradition to conceal it, no situation seems more tragic, more offensive to heart and mind, than that of a humanity coexisting and sharing the joys of a planet with other living species yet being unable to communicate with them," Lévi-Strauss said in conversation with Didier Eribon.

But this impossibility is a fiction of the moderns—it helps to justify reducing living beings to commodities in order to sustain world economic exchanges. Communication is possible, it has always taken place; it is surrounded by mystery, by inexhaustible enigmas, by untranslatable aspects too, but ultimately by creative misunderstandings. It doesn't have the fluidity of a café conversation, but it is nonetheless rich in meaning.

As an enigma among other enigmas, the human way of being alive only makes sense if it is woven into the countless other ways of being alive that the animals, plants, bacteria, and ecosystems all around us demand.

The ever-intact enigma of being a human is richer and more poignant when we share it with other life forms in our great family, when we pay attention to them, and when we do justice to their otherness. This interplay of kinship and otherness with other living beings, the common causes they foster in the politics of life, is part of what makes the ‘mystery of living,’ of being a human being, so inexhaustible.

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