



ECOOCENE

POLITCS

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Mihnea Tănăsescu, *Ecocene Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0274>

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Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0274#resources>

ISBN Paperback: 9781800643147

ISBN Hardback: 9781800643154

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781800643161

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 9781800643178

ISBN Digital ebook (azw3): 9781800643185

ISBN XML: 9781800643192

SBN Digital (HTML): 9781800646803

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0274

Cover image: Anna Gatti

6. Ecopolitical Ethics, Part II

Responsibility

The concept of responsibility is usually seen as commensurate with capacity; in other words, only those capable of engaging in particular kinds of harm can be held responsible. But one also needs to have the capacity to *be* responsible, that is to say that the object of responsibility needs to be commensurate with the subject's powers.

These broad outlines have changed tremendously at the dawn of the Ecocene: both capacity for destruction and capacity for responsibility have transformed fundamentally. Here, I want to take stock of this transformation and propose that the most constructive meaning for responsibility going forward is within the mutualist framework that I have been building. As part of this argument, I will claim that responsibility is best understood in inter-human relations, and that it is through those that the responsibility for the environing world comes to have much needed purchase. Whereas in the chapter on reciprocity I argued that reciprocal relations are best understood in interspecific terms (humans and places and other creatures), here I want to present responsibility as fundamentally intra-specific. Together, these two notions can draw the contours of an ecopolitical ethics fit for the Ecocene, the appropriate scaffolding of a mutualist politics.

The idea that the human world may be responsible for the non-human one did not start with discussion of the Anthropocene, but rather with the nuclear age. The technological development initiated by German scientists and followed through by the United States and the Soviet Union led to the advent of the nuclear bomb, an event that immediately resonated within philosophical and social thought as a fundamental expansion of responsibility. In other words, before humans were able to destroy the natural world wholesale, they were not responsible for it.

This argument was amply developed by Hans Jonas, whose thought on the ethical implications of technological power has come to frame much of our understanding of responsibility. In his 1985 book *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, as well as the 1984 article 'Ontological Grounding of a Political Ethics', he developed a future-oriented ethics that could deal with what he perceived to be the disproportionate technological power of humans over the world.

His main point of departure was that technology radically increased the future horizon that present decisions need to reckon with. He argued that previous ethics was concerned with the future inasmuch as it was foreseeable, perhaps going as far as one's own children (Jonas 1985, 12–17). This was not a shortcoming of those ethical outlooks, but rather a response to the capacities of those times, when it was obvious that human nature would essentially stay the same, and that non-human nature would always essentially be an inexhaustible and fundamentally independent realm.¹

These axes that ethics depended on were radically changed by technology. Indeed, we live in a time when all living creatures are potentially affected by human decisions. What constitutes a human or an animal can no longer be taken for granted, as it increasingly becomes the subject of technological tinkering. Similarly, nature can no longer plausibly be conceived as an infinite other, and therefore comes under the focus of present decisions in an unprecedented way.² Thinking of nature as wholly other is unfit for dealing with modern, technological capacities, and is itself a view of nature filtered through these capacities. Modern technology both posits nature as an object of alterity, and is incapable of regulating its relation to this foreign object. Under these

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- 1 From the perspectives developed in this book, it is quite obvious that the notions of human and non-human nature are deeply problematic. However, Jonas used them, and so I reproduce them here as such for the purposes of recreating his argument.
 - 2 The idea that pre-modern conceptions of nature regarded nature as inexhaustible is contradicted by anthropological studies (for example Berkes 2012, Anderson 1996, Turner 1981). What this body of work suggests is that in a-modern societies a sense of the limits of nature is crucial and, partly because of its importance, internalized and transmitted through ritual. Jonas is partly guilty of underestimating the ways in which pre-modern societies had conceptualized nature as limited, and I think this was for two reasons. First, his reference for pre-modern is the philosophy of European antiquity. Second, and related to the first, what he means by a conception of limitless nature only applies to a conception of the world as such.

conditions, ethics desperately needs to take into account the possibility of an indefinite future for human and non-human nature.

This starting-point led Jonas to look for an ethical perspective that could cope with the pressure that technology has placed on our horizons of action. He did not wish the development of technology away, realizing that it would be futile, but rather attempted to meet it head on. This is not to say that he did not see room for wiser technological progress. The point, rather, is that technology is to be reckoned with whatever its manifestations. Though technology, when understood as a tool use, is a primary interface between us and non-human nature, techno-logos as it has developed in modernity lacks the guiding principles of mere tool use; it instrumentalizes and objectifies for its own sake—"the juggernaut moves on relentlessly" (Jonas 1979, 35)—which is also why it has written within itself the possibility of utter destruction. Another way to express this is that scientific progress in the guise of technological development makes it imperative that there be norms, though it itself erodes all norms (Jonas 1985, 52).

Jonas is not nearly as careful as he should be in identifying which humans are responsible and which are not. He also tends to generalize from a Western, modern history of technological development to 'humanity' as such, in the same way that the concept of the Anthropocene does. However, what I want to extract from his work is the double point of the normlessness of technological development, as well as the way in which this normlessness extends responsibility towards the existence of future humans. But if that is the case, then it also extends responsibility towards the existence of the environing world as such. It would seem that, inasmuch as the natural world also risks annihilation, there is nothing to stop us from applying the concept of responsibility as commensurate with capacity to the natural world as well.

In fact, I have argued throughout that a-modern modes of human-environment relationality are not ethically steeped in responsibility, but rather in reciprocity. In the case of Māori philosophy, for example, the idea of guardianship was traditionally applied to supernatural spirits, not to humans, precisely because humans were not seen as having the capacity to *be* responsible for something that in fact sustained human life. Instead, humans had a duty to reciprocate such that their own role in the local ecology was upheld. As Stengers (2015, 45) writes in relation

to the concept of Gaia, “if she was honored in the past it was as the fearsome one, as she who was addressed by peasants, who knew that humans depend on something much greater than them, something that tolerates them, but with a tolerance that is not to be abused”.

The idea that long-term responsibility is attached to a particular form of technological power needs a lot more qualification than Jonas himself was prepared to provide. Crucially, we need to understand the differential distribution of that power, as well as the difference between the aggregate effect of many humans’ actions and the individualization of responsibility. In the case of nature conservation, for example, Büscher and Fletcher show how many of the restrictions that come with preservationist policies are directed at immediate users of an environment (that is, local populations), as they are thought to be the ones that are directly responsible. However, the ultimate drivers of accelerated change and biodiversity loss are more likely to be the elite donors to environmental organizations, and urban citizens that consume orders of magnitude more than many locals around conservation areas.

Similarly, many of the actions that non-privileged people take to better their own lives do have an aggregate effect on the enviroing world. Take illumination as an example;³ it is fairly universally sought out because of its undeniable benefits to human lives. However, it is also deadly to nocturnal insects, and incredibly disruptive to their own kinds of life. But it would be absurd to pin insect populations’ decline on rural communities now installing electricity. The overwhelming majority of the historical impact on insect populations is still due to the relentless development of the West. This process has had to do with much more than illumination, but also with pollution and the overall cementification of the environment required by ever-increasing modes of consumption. This is to say that identifying a general concept of responsibility that is commensurate with technological capacity does not warrant the individualization of blame. In fact, it requires that we be careful in apportioning responsibility in light of both historical and actual capacity.

On the opposite end, this argument does not imply that there are actors that are *fully* responsible. We are only ever talking about degrees, though admittedly there is a very wide scale to cover. But the truly

3 The same would hold for home refrigeration, or basic sanitation.

frightening thing about the normlessness of technological power is precisely that nobody controls it. There is no single actor that could wield that formidable power according to his will, though not for lack of trying. Technological annihilation of the kind that Jonas envisioned is much more likely to be a mistake than the result of an action pursued by a particular individual.

The idea that technology, applied outside of guiding norms, can be totally destructive, is most immediately exemplified by the nuclear threat. However, beyond the spectacular nature of that threat, all sorts of creatures, humans included, are much more likely to drown in trash than be blown up. In other words, technological deployment today is coupled with the idea of modern development in such a way as to have become a veritable aggregate juggernaut, endlessly churning out things. It is this churning that is most destructive of environing worlds, as it transforms what is found in nature into cheap and valueless stuff, a diffuse apparatus that makes variegated resources privately profitable while draining their significance and value. Here, there is no human responsibility as such. Production and consumption of goods has become entangled in extremely complex networks that support countless human lives. The point is rather that the normless application of technology in the twenty-first century can hardly carry the idea that 'humans' are capable of being responsible for 'nature'.

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Under the standard account best exemplified by Jonas, it would seem that technological capacity gives a blanket responsibility to 'humanity' for the perpetuation of the natural (and human) world. But this is a remnant of modernist ways of thinking that tend towards unstable universalisms. As I have argued, there is no 'humanity' as such that wields technological power, though that does not mean that there aren't many different kinds of humans who do have an outsized influence on the fate of worlds, both near and remote. However, it would be a mistake to think—as the Anthropocene discourse does—that because of the theoretical power of technology we are warranted to say that humans are now in charge. The devastating conundrum of the Ecocene comes precisely from the tension between an unevenly distributed power of destruction and the structural incapacity of humans to *direct*

natural worlds. Humans are not in charge; they are merely using inherited powers predicated upon the bifurcation of nature in wholly irresponsible ways.

This has many impoverishing effects, for human as well as non-human worlds. For example, Andre Gorz has characterized the impoverishment of human worlds in direct relation to the increasing production of “goods” within capitalism. “A richer life”, he writes, “is not only compatible with the production of fewer goods, it demands it” (1980, 28). In fact, rich and poor are relative terms—relative to each other—such that the elimination of one logically entails the elimination of the other. To be destitute, he explains, is the condition of not having enough. To be poor is to be denied that which already exists as surplus production. The infinite production of mostly useless commodities that characterizes contemporary capitalism is not only destructive of countless environments (through both production and consumption), but also generative of human suffering on an increasing scale.

In the so-called affluent world, there is such a tremendous abundance of unnecessary objects that the persistence of poverty can only be explained through the logic of capitalism itself. “Poverty is created and maintained, that is to say *produced and reproduced*, at the very pace at which the level of aggregate consumption rises” (28–29, italics in original). At the same time, the relationship between this highly unequal world and actual destitution is perverse in two ways. On the one hand, part of the destitution of large populations is directly related to the affluence of others. And the recipe for solving destitution inevitably leads to levels of consumption that inherently cause ecological and social misery. Achieving poverty through surplus consumption seems the only available option.

There is yet another way in which the powers of infinite destruction have morphed into consumerism and modern development, draining human practices of the meaning that had sustained them for generations. The creation of endless products happens at a time when aggregate wealth far exceeds the needs of *all* people. This means that working for a wage has become a wholly artificial way of apportioning goods. Logically, more and more people have to pretend to be working by becoming professionals of all sorts, a process that David Graeber (2018) has called the creation of “bullshit jobs”. And one of their most perverse effects is the generalized de-skilling of countless people.

Ivan Illich has been instrumental in identifying and characterizing this ill. At its most succinct, it is the phenomenon whereby “the professional power of experts [...] eviscerates personal competence” (1978, 86). The disappearance of crafts and their replacement with mass production, as well as the delegitimation of a whole series of daily interventions for the maintenance of health, both personal and communal (understood ecologically), are part and parcel of what modern development requires. Tellingly, every society that is up for development goes through the same process of de-skilling, which is equivalent to the (temporary) loss of the capacity to interact with the environment in a relatively generative and meaningful way.

The power of technology, coupled with modern development, creates different kinds of responsibility for different people, but it cannot create a responsibility as such, especially in relation to the environment, because its capacity to eat everything up is not correlated with the ability to control the complexity and direction of wider ecological processes. The power of destruction that developed societies wield may seem total, colonizing everything and every mind. This is indeed the feat it continuously tries to accomplish, but the great effort that goes into maintaining and expanding modern development is indicative of the perpetual resistance it encounters. Even within a consumerist, de-skilled, seemingly barren landscape, people and creatures continue to misbehave.

To get a better handle on how the concept of responsibility can navigate the conundrums thrown up by the Ecocene, I need to return to how the enviroing world actually features in human lives, beyond the blindness that modern technology may occasion (alas, require) in human users. “Environmental hermeneutics focuses on the fact that environments matter to people [...], because environments embody [...] [normative] contexts” (Drenthen 2013, 17). From the hermeneutical point of view, nature is a text to be read (Clingerman 2009); indeed, it is the ultimate text, because it is at the same time the grounds of our being, the region (Heidegger 1966) within which reading and meaning can happen. The normative context that Drenthen refers to simply means that the natural environment is the necessary background for the existence of human meaning and values.

This is even apparent in the notion of nature that purports to be furthest removed from human meaning: wilderness. As many have

shown (Oelschlaeger 1991; Cronon 1995; Schama 1995; Vicenzotti and Trepl 2009; Kirchoff et al. 2013), “what is constitutive of wilderness are not the specific biophysical properties of an area but rather the specific meanings ascribed to it according to cultural patterns of interpretation” (Kirchoff and Vicenzotti 2014, 444). It is possible to catalog the meanings of wilderness through the ages, because “this interpretation of wilderness as not being a complex of ecosystems, but a meaningful arrangement of symbolic objects, renders visible the multitude of diachronic and synchronic meanings of wild nature: the way wilderness is viewed, characterized and valued is subject to change over time” (Kirchoff and Vicenzotti 2014, 445). Said differently, even the ostensibly most removed concepts of nature play a hermeneutical role in human lives (see the discussion of Descartes in Chapter 2). The same holds true for near and very specific environments, such as a park that one may visit regularly and its birds.

The general meaningfulness of the environing world has been amply recognized throughout the history of the human species; its oblivion may only be a part of the modern project of bifurcation. However that may be, it remains the case that human well-being and flourishing is inseparable from the state of the natural world. So even though technological power is unevenly distributed and not really controlled by anyone in particular (though, again, there are degrees of control that have to be taken into account), the impoverishing effect that it has on the natural world is not only relegated to nature; it always also affects human communities.

Many in the field of political ecology have looked at issues of environmental justice and have amply demonstrated the link between environmental destruction and socio-economic deprivation, often along racialized lines. This is well established, and goes together with the widespread illusion (among elites, but not exclusively) that there is a way to safeguard against ecological impoverishment. The privileged, the argument goes, are always able to escape the worst effects of environmental ills. This may be true, but only to some degree: the most privileged suffer *less* than the disadvantaged and even then, only in the most visible ways. It is undeniable that living next to a steel plant affects the health of the neighboring people much more drastically than that of the ultimate consumers of the steel produced there.

But it is also the case that the privileged classes have created for themselves a world so removed from ecological processes that it is impoverished nonetheless.⁴ One of the clearest expressions of the destabilizing effects that this kind of luxury impoverishment has is the increasing prevalence of mental illness in the developed world. Being ripped out of the reciprocal relations that our very bodily perception requires leaves marks that need constant healing. It is no surprise that some of the most soothing therapies for a range of afflictions involve nature retreats and/or the companionship of (domestic) animals. In a very real sense, the world of privilege is increasingly unlivable.

The illusion that one can be insulated from wider environmental ills is perhaps most clearly approaching its end when we consider the now generalized level of toxicity. Whereas pollution in minority neighborhoods makes the headlines on and off, the fact that microplastics are now to be found in streams at the base of glaciers alarms many more people. Walling oneself off has reached its logical limit. Perhaps the supposed winners of development will get some consolation from living in relatively less toxic environments; or perhaps they will realize that living outside of reciprocal bonds is necessarily harmful. But the choice should not be between a devastated, polluted hellscape and a manicured, walled-off environment of privileged depression.

Once the link between human and environmental well-being is front and center, we can start appreciating how there is no need to pin the fate of 'nature' to the responsibility of 'humanity'. Instead, it suffices to establish that humans are responsible for the well-being of fellow humans (and here there is a much better fit between capacity and responsibility) in order to articulate an ethic that *necessarily* passes through environmental flourishing. Some people are responsible for the poverty of others, in all of its senses; this is a responsibility that can be met. But it cannot be met outside of an approach that first recognizes the importance of ecological processes as a very condition of possibility

4 The effects of climate change are starting to seem quite democratic; the original expectations about supposed positive effects of climate change in rich countries (growing wine in Belgium, water availability in Russia, drilling in the Arctic) are proving to be wishful thinking. Droughts, hurricanes, floods, heatwaves are appearing in an unpredictable fashion and seem increasingly indiscriminate in their geographical preferences, though obviously affecting different populations differently. Considered from the point of view of chance, change, and locality, this should not be surprising at all.

for a rich life. At this point in time, and for the foreseeable future, responsibility passes through the concept of ecological restoration.

I have already argued that the concept of restoration is best understood as targeting mutually beneficial ecological relationships, rather than a particular previous state (a baseline). In any circumstance, what can be restored will be up for debate; the point here is that the responsibility that people have towards the well-being of their fellow humans obliges them to consider the concept of restoration. The Ecocene requires that particularly those in positions of power and privilege (and therefore in positions of causing greater harm) work towards enhancing the natural world and human relations to it. In the most general sense, this means not only ensuring that there is a world for future generations (Jonas' position), but also, perhaps especially, that there is a world of multiplicity for a multiplicity of future humans. And the best way to work towards that is through the ecological idea of redundancy.

The practice of conservation in a world of modern development has increasingly focused on the specialness of protected areas: an area being the most biodiverse, the most unique, and so on, is a frequent rationale for conservation.⁵ Without denying the unique features of each and every environment, the insistence on uniqueness also encourages the homogenization that is a hallmark of modern development. We are heading towards a world where most of the available space is a sacrificial zone for the accumulation of capital, while the rest is a carefully curated bestiary of "the miracles of the natural world". Instead, this book has argued that we need to start thinking about embeddedness more thoroughly, such that it becomes possible to see the homogenization of spaces as the greatest danger to the multiplicity of worlds (human and otherwise), and their survival.

Instead of focusing on the uniqueness of what is left over, it is more radical to focus on restoring environments *everywhere*, such that *every* human being is part and parcel of a greater natural community in which

5 As intimated in Chapter 4, the history of walling places off as conservation reserves is also tied to the creation of poverty and destitution. This is partly because classical conservation is not based on the kind of idea of restoration that I am advocating, but on a radical separation of humans and wild nature. Humans are then interpreted as 'the species', though in practice it is always better-off humans that benefit from leisurely activities in conservation areas, and more marginalized humans that are excluded from using them in reciprocal ways.

they ritualistically participate. And just as in the history of species one of the greatest insurers against disaster is the redundancy of habitat, so too in human history will the redundancy of habitat be key to human flourishing. It is drastically insufficient to save one marsh here and there; instead, the future capacity of humans to lead meaningful lives depends on the responsibility of present generations to restore countless marshes, such that they become, yet again, redundant.

This also applies in urban settings, where most people increasingly live. There is no reason to suppose that the urban environment needs to be uniformly paved over and therefore deprived of countless interactions. In fact, the intuition that diverse environments are needed for human flourishing is already on display in the universally distributed difference between rich and poor neighborhoods in terms of the 'green space' that they have. In virtually every urban setting one could think of there is a stark difference in terms of the permeability of the ground, the availability of natural spaces for leisure, the amount of pollution, the density of population and car traffic, and so on, distributed according to class and socio-economic status. Evidently, people rich and poor know that their well-being depends on their direct environment.

But the manicured environment of wealthy suburbia, though relatively healthier for people, is also stifling in its poverty. It is the opposite of a rich space; it is uniform, dogmatic in what lives where, phobic with respect to any kind of creature that does not have a pre-approval to exist. Its obsession with control leads to environmental pollution through the wide use of pesticides and the creation of lawn monocultures lacking in life. It would be a mistake to take those impoverished green spaces as the standards to be sought in restoring urban environments in general; it would risk instrumentalizing restoration in an 'ecological service' way and missing its point altogether. The point of urban restoration, just like restoration elsewhere, is to embed people within their immediate environment in reciprocal ways. Suburban lawns are generally speaking not an environment of reciprocation, but one that often relies on precarious labor to maintain the illusion of 'nature'.

Ecological restoration has become increasingly mainstream in the last decade. It is now routinely proposed as a simple way of mitigating climate change through the carbon sequestration that restored environments can provide. The implication here is precisely that,

without these measures, there will be a radically impoverished world left for future generations. But this insight is endangered by the very grand scale and managerial view of restoration as a technical solution. It is not enough to restore flagship environments and enclose them away from people. Instead, I am advocating a diffuse politics of restoration at all scales, such that mutually beneficial ecological relationships can in themselves become a way of life, as opposed to a technical solution for a problem that keeps being generated. It is not about restoring some patch of mangrove, but rather about restructuring human lives such that they contribute more than they take away from whatever environment they happen to live in.

Ecological restoration needs to be deployed in the service of rebuilding networks of *ordinary* environments, not in the service of saving the special through technical interventions. The task is to recreate environmental conditions that allow for generalized flourishing, and the truly daunting thing is the number of practices and beliefs that need to change in order for that to be the case. Some possible practices are in fact simple but stifled by techno-managerial thinking. For example, many restoration initiatives, whether we are talking about recreating prairies or restoring the meanders of an urban river, depend on relatively straightforward techniques. These are often broken down into a hierarchical chain of command that is led by professionals and executed by (poorly) paid labor of a mechanized and repetitive kind. The kind of network involved in hands-on interventions recalls Illich's idea of deskilling, where the capacity of interacting with the surrounding world in skillful and careful ways is simplified, professionalized, and largely inaccessible.

In Chapter 3 I talked about the Queen of Compost, through the work of de la Bellacasa. Restoring relationships with soil is there presented as a low-tech, ordinary affair that people can *easily* engage in. The skills that they learn are applicable to a variety of situations that cannot be authoritatively counted. For example, practices such as composting with worms in the city hold great potential. Having worms as companions, and reciprocating their stubborn efforts at creating soil by feeding them what would otherwise be refuse, transforms relationships with the idea of garbage as well: it is no longer waste, but worm food. Learning to become soil is about everyday, even banal, practices that invest creatures in one another, and that consequently enrich countless lives.

Ecologists have started taking the social dimension of restoration much more seriously, though the ways in which it is pursued is still hobbled by a view of restoration as an expert-driven affair that is really concerned with biodiversity above all. It is telling that what should be routine involvement in ritualized restoration is always conceived of as a “social” addition that is often a nuisance, something that increasingly needs to be formally done. For example, the restoration of Medlock River (near Manchester, UK) was achieved without the local people knowing it was being done at all. They all appreciated the resulting ability to walk through an interesting area, but their appreciation was limited by the very process of restoration, which was only really driven by the species assemblies of the river itself (De Bell et al. 2020). Humans became mere users, in a similar way to being a user of one’s lawn. It is evidently preferable to restore a river than plant a lawn, but at the level of embedding people within their immediate environments, the result is similar.

Options are available. Many are already engaged in renovating their own ecological relations in ways that provide inspiration. Chapter 4 presented the case of the longest-standing restoration project, started by Aldo Leopold at the University of Madison, Wisconsin, and aimed at the resuscitation of prairies and their natural fire regime. This case gets close to the idea of infrastructures of reciprocity, where certain grooves of practice are carved out such that reciprocation becomes commonplace through its ritualization. This is possible in all sorts of environments because its only requirements are interactive, and do not have to do with a final form at all.

A last example: in the city of Brussels, there are many nests made by the common swift (D’Hoop 2022). Finding wildlife in cities is in fact common around the world, but most city dwellers are either not aware of it or see it as a nuisance. The increasing renovation of buildings in Brussels is threatening the nesting grounds of swifts, and a local organization is proposing tours for residents, as well as engaging with mayors and urban planners in order to include the swifts within daily experiences. This is not an expert-driven affair; the organizers and the participants are people that are re-learning kinds of skills, and manners of paying attention. Renovating one’s house becomes a way of noticing what had been previously invisible, of gifting something to the swifts

who bring the sounds of spring year after year. Making these kinds of practices the norm is not a logistical or technical problem. All that is needed is a manner of thinking that allows for them.

* * *

The idea that human responsibility towards fellow humans passes through the enhancement of the natural world may easily be seen to go hand in hand with concepts of guardianship or stewardship over nature. Here I want to challenge that assumption and show further how responsibility cannot logically extend to the natural world as such, but rather needs to pass through inter-specific relations. Simply and hyperbolically put, humans cannot be responsible for nature as such.

There are models of interaction that do not need to rely on the figure of humanity saving nature. The idea that the Anthropocene requires that humans become guardians of the planet is but the latest continuation of modernist thought. From the point of view of deep multiplicity and embeddedness that this book has presented, the idea of guardianship is suspect also on account of its sidestepping structural human ignorance. This kind of fundamental ignorance is fully present in the best scientific practices, as well as in many locally based traditions. The illusion of control only comes from the refraction of this ignorance through the bifurcation of nature that is foundational of modernist thinking. It is also exacerbated through the normless application of technology, which makes it seem as if humans are capable of manipulating worlds at will.

Māori philosophies are relational, where the identity of individuals is simply a knot in a series of relationships extending in space and time, forward and backward. This is reflected in Māori art as much as cosmological stories and philosophies. Relationships with ancestors are powerfully important and, like in so many other philosophies worldwide, animals and plants, the land and the sea, can themselves be ancestors. This means that one can enter into relations with these natural entities, and human life is simply the traveling node in which all sorts of life-forms interact. The sign of a good relation is reciprocity, the mutual exchange of gifts.

This kind of relational thinking is not alien to 'Western' philosophies either. Anne Salmond, in *Tears of Rangi* (2017), shows how the very first Europeans to arrive in New Zealand were, in part, themselves

steeped in relational Enlightenment science, though by far the dominant philosophy of the time (late-eighteenth century) was the Great Chain of Being: the idea that the universe was ordered on a string of increasing (or decreasing, depending which way you looked at it) importance, with God at the top and the rest of creation strung on hierarchically. The meeting of these worlds, the Great Chain and the relational one of the Māori, is still productively shooting sparks today. Though we can easily sneer at hierarchical thinking, it is so insidiously embedded that it is far from extinct.

The interaction of different ontological worlds has never stopped producing interesting hybrids. Lately, the domain of law—so dominated by Western philosophy in settler states—has started to be productively intertwined with Māori *tikanga* (ways, laws, customs). For example, the ancestral home of Tūhoe, Te Urewera, as well as the Whanganui River, received the status of legal entity (in 2014 and 2017, respectively). The legal status that was granted to the Whanganui River and Te Urewera is but a node in a process of hybridization that began with Captain Cook, in 1769.

Since then, the various Māori descent lines have lost the use of much of their ancestral land at the hands of European settlers. The Whanganui *iwi*, the tribes inhabiting the Whanganui lands, and Tūhoe, the inhabitants of Te Urewera, sought to obtain ownership of their respective lands by challenging the Crown in court for having breached the founding treaty of New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi (signed by many but not all chiefs in 1840). The *iwi* (tribes) claimed that they had never given the Crown exclusive rights to their lands. Predictably, the NZ government resisted granting *iwi* ownership and, instead, it was granted to the land itself: hence, the Whanganui River and Te Urewera are now legal persons with ownership of themselves.

A useful way of conceptualizing alternative views of the kind of responsibility imparted by the Ecocene is precisely by attending to these kinds of locally based thinking. However, attention to the details of each case is easily traded for generalities. For example, it is a commonplace of environmental thought to suppose that indigenous practices are steeped in guardianship.⁶ This assumption runs so deeply that even when indigenous cultures themselves do not use the concept

6 See my critique of harmony with nature narratives in Tănăsescu (2015, 2020, 2022).

'guardian', coverage of what they do still insists on using it! When in 2017 the Whanganui River was inaugurated as a legal person in New Zealand law, almost universally the Whanganui *iwi* were described as the guardians of the river. A closer look at what the law actually says, in the context of a deeply relational Māori philosophy, suggests much more tantalizing and promising alternatives.

The Whanganui River, as a legal person, needs to be represented in the legal and political processes in which it can now participate. This representation is the task of a board created especially for this purpose, as the law mandates. The composition of the board is half members of Whanganui *iwi*, and half members of the state government. So already at the level of board composition, this is completely different from the Whanganui *iwi* being sole guardians of the river. Instead, the board is a political construction that mandates dialogue between parties with traditionally different ontological and epistemological claims. The commitment to dialogue across deep and often painful divides is itself worth pointing out.

Does this mean that *the board* is guardian of the river? The 2017 law nowhere describes it as such. Instead, the board is referred to as the river's "human face", and this is following Māori philosophical commitments. If the NZ government had had the upper hand in defining the role of the board, they may as well have defined it as one of guardianship. Instead, given the deep Māori involvement in the negotiations leading up to the law, the board became quite simply a human face of a non-human entity. This is not because Māori do not have a concept akin to guardianship. In fact, the term *kaitiakitanga* is often translated as guardianship, but in the Māori universe the *kaitiaki* (the guardians) are almost never humans, but rather *tanizoha*, or supernatural spirits, such as sharks or stingrays, that guide the integrity of a place (see Salmond 2017). In other words, the figure of the human is too fragile for the weight of responsibility that being *kaitiaki* would place.

What people *can* do is speak in legal and political terms after consultation with non-human beings. In this sense the river, which is anything but mute in Māori philosophy, can only speak with a *human voice* through actually embodied humans. Who those humans may be remains at the level of local political practice, but in more general terms the ability of humans is mostly that of interpreting what a fundamentally

independent being is saying, and not that of directing the river's life. It would be a mistake to think that this is because the Whanganui River is pristine, untouched, unpolluted, and so on. Quite the contrary. As Geoff Park (1995) and other NZ scholars have shown, and as *iwi* members themselves know, the Whanganui is deeply anthropic. But no amount of pollution and transformation can take away from the fundamental independence and autonomy of the processes that are called a river.

The idea of guardianship is very seductive, being somewhat flattering, and painting a picture of responsible humans taking care of the world. It is also, in this account, deeply steeped in Great Chain of Being thinking. How could humans take care of nature without having the knowledge and the power to do so? The point of Māori philosophies, as well as other relational ones, is precisely that humans are not above the natural order, so in that sense guardianship or stewardship become logical impossibilities. In fact, humans are always in debt to natural beings, trying to assuage their power through behavioral tricks (prohibitions, offerings, and so on). More people everywhere are likely to rediscover the awesome powers that overwhelm human agency, now that we have entered the Ecocene: the era of increasingly erratic natural agency barging into the polis.

Parallels between Indigenous philosophies and the idea of guardianship may be well-meaning, but ultimately wrong-headed. Māori philosophies challenge that easy identification, showing it to be a continuation of hierarchical thinking. The relational mode that is present in alternative ways of being and thinking is exemplified through *whakapapa*, or genealogy, encountered in Chapter 5. The natural entity that one may claim as an ancestor is not under the guardianship of the person, but exactly the other way around: the natural entity is what nestles the person and gives them meaning and identity. This relationship, much closer to ecological science, is what must be expressed and lived. Guardians of the Anthropocene not only does not come close to it, but it points us in the wrong direction.

Denying the possibility of meaningful guardianship does not deny the possibility of acting in ways that enhance the environing world, quite the contrary. Not placing oneself in the position of guardian also comes with the freedom to *be* responsible in a commensurate way, that is to say to act in ways that do bear on the capacity to be responsible.

In genealogical terms, the greatest responsibility of present humans is towards the future possibility of descendants, what Hans Jonas expressed as the responsibility for the very existence of future generations.

In this sense, genealogical links to the land make one responsible for the future existence of multiple generations, which in turn commits present generations to perpetual enhancement of the environment. Human impact on a river's health is more often than not guided by stupidity and short-termism, not by some master plan that would control what the river does. This is so even in societies that have managed to control their waters to a staggering effect, such as the Netherlands. But in the Ecocene, water is re-establishing its agential power, and the Netherlands, a top-down water management regime if ever there was one, is being forced to change its water policy from control to "living with the river". Of course, this does not imply that it is done in the restorative way argued for here; one can try to "live with the river" in fundamentally managerial ways, as a smarter measure of control that outwits the Ecocene. This kind of doubling down side-steps the important opportunities our new era gives for recreating relationships, as opposed to regimes of power and control.

In any given circumstance, humans can participate within larger natural processes by lending their voice to them in increasingly diverse fora.⁷ But to think that humans can be guardians of nature, directing it according to their will and anticipating all possible deviations from this will, is a dangerous illusion. The challenge of the Ecocene is to re-dimension humans appropriately, that is to say in such a way as to accord responsibility for what can actually be achieved. We need to re-establish the bonds of responsibility that bind humans together, and through these reawaken ourselves to the active worlds around us and speak for them when needed. Instead of some blanket managerial solution, we need a multiplicity of practices reflective of the multiplicity of worlds. There is no endgame that these practices need to correspond to, no utopian state to be achieved, but rather only internal requirements of mutual enhancement.

Modernity has never managed to entirely stomp out the human intuition that the natural world is greater, more independent, and more mysterious than we may think. The Ecocene is rapidly reinstating the

7 See last chapter for more examples of this.

central role of this intuition. In many different settings—the Māori philosophical and practical context as much as the ancestral memory of environmental co-creation in many European contexts⁸—the connection with the past is as important as the responsibility for future generations. The Māori discussion is again telling: the idea of genealogy is a way of relating to ancestors as much as to the land. In fact, ancestors are seen through the land, as their own practices are inherited by present generations, and therefore to a great extent set the stage for what is possible. “Māori walk back into the future”, as a Māori aphorism says (in Kawharu 2010, 222). Or, as Sir James Henare puts it, “when I look at these landscapes, I see my ancestors walking back to me” (in Kawharu 2010, 228).

This kind of walking backwards can be expressed as a specific kind of genealogical awareness that is nonetheless widely distributed. We are inheritors of our own ecological ignorance as much as of relational strategies that can be recuperated. The placenames (toponyms) we interact with on a daily basis bear traces of ancestral knowledge that can be reinvigorated, literally given the vigor to live again (see Tănăsescu and Constantinescu 2018, 2020, Tănăsescu 2019). The ghosts in the cemetery of practices are our ancestors; we already speak to them when visiting actual cemeteries or when we commemorate the past. It may be time that we ask them different questions.

* * *

There is nothing easy in being responsible for the wellbeing of another, or in responding to the enviroing world in partial and always imperfect ways. Yet basic aspects of moral life are unthinkable without this kind of difficulty, as I have shown through the work of Cora Diamond. Moral action always fails, can never approximate enough, frustrates continuously, demands the impossible. The sympathetic imagination therefore moves in a universe of impossibility, which makes the moral stance one of endurance, of refusing to exit what is always uncomfortable.

Thinking of morality this way forbids one from supposing that the work of living with tragedy in the Ecocene is easy, or even bearable. It will rip the flesh, but the alternatives will always be worse. And yet,

8 See, for example, Squartiti (2013) for a history of human co-determination with chestnut trees in medieval Italy.

for a time, and perhaps for a long time still, many have been fooled into thinking that the difficulty of reality, in Diamond's expression, can be evicted from its structuring place in human life. The attraction of modern development trades on this kind of liberating promise.

Critiques of modernity assume that it is enough to point out the many ways in which it severs crucial ties with the environing world in order to fatally weaken its very lure. Sadly, this is not so: no amount of "consciousness raising" will re-enchant the environing world and its material processes. The real challenge is to build a politics that gives back more than it takes, which under circumstances of free capitalist consumption is logically impossible. The irruption of Gaia will likely strengthen both the resolve of building gated, air-conditioned communities, and that of renovating reciprocal relations with the world. That will be the great political battle of the future. But it would be a mistake to think that the project of modernity, because it is so morally bankrupt and so clearly suicidal, is also already dead. As Büscher and Fletcher suggest, modernity is moribund, but some of the greatest strength is wielded precisely at the moment when the gravest wounds are being felt.

Andreas Malm argues that "one is led to the prediction that the higher the temperatures, the more conclusive the science, the more radical the required measures of mitigation, *the more confident and belligerent the denialism of the winners will be*" (2018, 134, emphasis in original). He is specifically concerned with climate change and its denial, but this observation could well apply to all kinds of ecological crises looming on the horizon. The point is that it is naïve to think that the ones considering themselves the winners of modern development will give up their lifestyles without a fight. It would be equally naïve to think that their allies will only come from the same social class (something that Marxists often tend to think). The lure of modernity is stronger than that, fooling all sorts of people into thinking that they, too, can float above the ground.

It has seldom been appreciated just how much enchantment there can be in *alienation* from the surrounding world. Driving a big vehicle, wearing protective gear, living in air-conditioned spaces, trades on the illusion of overcoming vulnerability, a powerful feeling. Modernity, in this light, and particularly through the project of development from

which it has become inseparable, appears as a kind of immortality cult. The ethics of this cult is the 'deadness of fiber' that Lawrence (quoted in Diamond) talks about, the idea that you can shoot a baby gorilla in its mother's arms and suffer no consequences, because you are beyond the level of a mere creature, therefore need not participate in the fellowship that having a life imparts. The promotion of this kind of deadness of fiber is key to understanding modernity's appeal, its ease if you will, and the appeal of consumerism as the latest face of modern development. It is also crucial in order to understand that *many* will defend modern development to its last breath, precisely so as to save the immortality illusion. Hardly anything has ever been so powerful as secular immortality.

Modernity (particularly of the capitalist kind) is also highly invidious, and therefore keeps those in positions of deprivation hoping to one day be on top, freeing themselves from the difficulty of being responsible for the wellbeing of their neighbors. A lot of political discontent comes from the perceived betrayal of that promise of power, not from the inherent destructiveness of churning out indefinite trash. The idea of material development allows the winners of the process to partake in the immense power and magic of transforming nature's stuff into humans' stuff and exempts them from caring about those that remain in the negatively vulnerable position of 'closer to nature'. Those in disadvantaged positions often object to their not being able to also take flight from the world, as the neoliberal state and openly authoritarian ones both promise.

Invidiousness goes together with shame, the feeling that failure to partake in the project of becoming modern is a kind of sin, a sign of backwardness. Modern progress is routinely connected with the desire to be perceived as modern, to "be in the twenty-first century". This partly results from the seeming inevitability of progression towards development. Consumption becomes not only normalized, but expected, a crucial part of what legitimizes the status quo. Often, delivering consumption is the only thing that legitimizes it.

The attraction of the modern consumptive apparatus is directly related to the bifurcation of nature that is the stamp of modernity. Every time a mountaintop is removed, an ocean depth drilled, the special significance of a place to its creaturely ensemble is assaulted and often

driven into extinction, as if to confirm the notion of the world as devoid of any inherent hermeneutical resistance. Consumer goods are a conjuring trick, a propaganda for bifurcation, which shows its power through the seemingly infinite capacity to transform matter into anything at all, precisely because it is treated as devoid of any inherent qualities. But the sciences behind this infinite production know all too well that matter is not dumb, as it is only by working with inherent qualities that it can achieve the production of goods that are then inscribed into the consumer ethos of a disenchanting world.

What many critics of modern, capitalist development fail to consider is the affective alliances that this form of development has already built across social divisions. The idea that anyone can be freed from matter-of-fact bonds of responsibility is powerful because the impulse to cheat your fellow humans, to dominate if in the appropriate position, has always been part of human affairs; it is not a product of capitalism itself. What is a product of capitalist development is the universalization of this freedom from responsibility. Inasmuch as one is permitted, alas encouraged, to ignore the earthly constraints of vulnerability that connect all the living, many will be fooled into doing just that. Instead of infrastructures of reciprocity sustaining responsibility, we have infrastructures of consumption generating callousness.

Alternatives are needed, ones that define the good life not in terms of increased consumption and the achievement of some kind of illusory immortality, but rather as the reciprocal networks of relations in which one is embedded and that generate joy as much as always-precarious protection from life's vicissitudes. Thankfully, side by side with the Great Acceleration, there are an increasing number of alternative worlds being built. Part of my claim is that these are implicitly predicated on versions of mutualism, understood not only as holding between people but rather as a structuring concept for relationships with and within the enviroing world, combining reciprocation and commensurate responsibility. I shall now attend further to the characteristics of mutualism understood among the living, as well as some of the many ways in which it is already being acted out.