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# THE WORLD UNDONE: ENVIRONMENTAL DENIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL AND ANIMAL RIGHTS EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The majority of ideas in environmental ethics, especially those focusing on much-needed practical changes in human behaviour, represent a well-known strategy of widening the circle of our moral responsibility so as to encompass all living beings and even inanimate natural objects, such as ecosystems. This is precisely what Aldo Leopold had in mind when he advocated the necessity of the idea of the “third step in ethical sequence” in his *A Sand County Almanac*: “The extension of ethics to this third element in human environment is, if I read the evidence correctly, an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity. It is the third step in a sequence”.<sup>2</sup> In more general terms, this strategy is detected as one of two main conclusions concerning environmental ethics in Andrew Light’s and Holmes Rolston III’s introduction to *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*. They describe it as a “central question” in ethics, formulating it thus: “How broadly ‘inclusive’ we ought to be in our circle of moral consideration?” adding that “The history of ethics often appears to be the history of ever-expanding notions of moral respect.”<sup>3</sup>

In line with the overwhelming consensus concerning the business of environmental ethics – unfolding our moral umbrella so as to cover as

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<sup>1</sup> The ideas of the present paper were first presented at the “Poesis of Peace” conference in Gozd Martuljek, Slovenija (May 2014), and later at the “International Days of Frane Petrić” conference of the Croatian Philosophical Society (September 2014) in Cres, Croatia.

<sup>2</sup> A. Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001, p. 168.

<sup>3</sup> A. Light & Holmes Rolston III, “Introduction: Ethics and Environmental Ethics”, in: A. Light & Holmes Rolston III (eds.): *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*. Blackwell, Oxford 2003, pp. 1–11.

many natural beings and ecosystems as possible – a vast number of educational methods in environmental ethics and sustainable development focus on developing sentiments, or looking for rational reasons on which to base a widened moral obligation, in active moral subjects (i.e. humans) needed for such a “third step”. My own past efforts, presented in my monograph *Odtenki zelene*<sup>4</sup>, took this exact avenue in pursuing an environmental ethical goal, focusing on the Rortian-Humean proposal of the “progress of (moral) sentiments”. In this paper, however, I want to radically alter that perspective, presenting an alternative view on environmental and animal ethics<sup>5</sup>, according to which our affection towards nature and living beings – and even our sense of moral obligation towards them – is not something that has to be brought about in the future (by, for instance, pointing to our similarities with animals, or our enjoyment of the natural world in order to convince us that “they are worth our respect since they are almost like us”) but instead something that has to be reclaimed from our denied present; this affection is thus not something we have to construe from nothing (would that be at all possible?) but is rather something which is “always already there”, something that is repressed in the course of our upbringing, something that each individual (to a greater or lesser degree) learns (perhaps subconsciously) to deny as a member of a society that is based on high consumption of environmental resources.

By pointing out that our affinity towards the natural world is always already present and that our detrimental attitude towards the environment and cruelty towards animals has to deny this primordial moral affection, I do not mean to say, perhaps in a pseudo-Rousseauian fashion, that deep within ourselves we are all environmentalists, and that all what we have to do is to recover our true self, the one that is uncontaminated by subsequent pressure from social institutions. That is, I do not want to hypostatise any “moral substance” in humans that is

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<sup>4</sup> T. Grušovnik, *Odtenki zelene [Shades of Green]*. Annales, Koper 2011.

<sup>5</sup> I'm aware of the troubled relationship between the two; however, for the purposes of present paper they will be more or less coterminous. The reason for this is that both environmental and animal ethics traditionally presuppose an “enlargement” of our moral universe; therefore, the difference between both is here (for brevity's sake) viewed only in terms of *how far* this universe should be stretched.

present in moral subjects *before* they enter our high-consumption society; on the contrary, this environmental moral sentiment as something that is “always already there” has to be understood more in terms of a logical precondition with which one can explain the occurrence of trauma in people exposed to disproportionate violence towards nature and natural beings. To put this in different words: our “primordial moral affection towards the natural world” could well be something that surfaces only *post festum*, only after subjects are introduced into a culture that they view as alienating; something that is coinstantaneous with the degradation of nature and natural beings and not something that exists in any substantial fashion since, or even before, the inception of a moral subject. The main point I want to make here is simply to point out that I do not need to naturalistically hypostatise any moral substance in human subjects in order to pursue the present argumentative strategy.

I hope these remarks will further clarify themselves in the course of the paper. I will try to touch upon them once again explicitly. However, what should be mentioned right at the outset is a certain resemblance of the present strategy to the one I employed in my papers concerning “environmental denial”. There<sup>6</sup> I tried to show how disbelief in scientific data about climate change and human impacts on the natural world is a consequence of our inability to cope with perceived reality: according to the *cognitive dissonance* theory, we have to deny facts in order to preserve our *mode de vie* and our image of ourselves as moral persons. There is, however, an important difference to be noted between both examples of denial: if in the first case the facts (about climate change, or about environmental degradation) are presented to deniers and by virtue of that consciously acknowledged and then denied, in the second example – one dealt with here – this is not the case, for here “facts” (our “spontaneous” affection towards the natural world) are *not present* to subjects and thus remain unobvious (this is precisely why traditional forms of environmental ethics strive to “enlarge” our moral domain); in this sense, the first case of denial could be termed “active” or “con-

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<sup>6</sup> Most accessible: T. Grušovnik, “Environmental Denial: Why We Fail to Change Our Environmentally Damaging Practices”, *Synthesis Philosophica*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2012, pp. 91–106. Accessible online: [http://hrcak.srce.hr/index.php?show=clanak&cid\\_clanak\\_jezik=139410](http://hrcak.srce.hr/index.php?show=clanak&cid_clanak_jezik=139410)

scious” (in the sense of consciously confronting the facts), whereas the second is much more sublime and “passive”, or “unconscious” (because the “facts” are always already repressed).

The consequences of this latter denial are also much more frustrating and immediate, at least for individual subjects, than the consequences of the first denial, since, if the climate change deniers face only inaction (failure to act according to sustainable development standards) as a consequence of their disbelief, then workers in a slaughterhouse, for instance, face much more immediate and shocking traumas as a consequence of this latter denial, most notably *traumatic stress*, resulting in widespread alcoholism and violence.<sup>7</sup> In the case of environmental degradation, the consequences of denial may not be as intense as in the case of violations of animal integrity and well-being; nonetheless, they are severe: whole communities are exposed to terrible living conditions; in recognition of this, everyone – except for the poorest of the poor – tries to avoid such environments or jobs connected with severe environmental degradation.

In this sense, the most potent argument in favour of the present strategy is a simple fact: since practically every sane person tries to avoid killing or hurting animals and damaging the environment, and since slaughterhouses and areas of industrial pollution are almost without exception hidden from civic eyes, a very strong environmental and animal moral sentiment – or stance<sup>8</sup> – has to be always already present in

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. J. Dillard, “A Slaughterhouse Nightmare: Psychological Harm Suffered by Slaughterhouse Employees and the Possibility of Redress through Legal Reform”, *Georgetown Journal on Poverty Law & Policy*, 15, no. 2, summer 2008, pp. 391–408.

<sup>8</sup> One could, of course, argue, that this fact is *not enough* to argue for *moral* problematic: since garbage, for instance, is also put away from civic noses and *this* is not a moral, but rather an “*aesthetic*” problem. In other words: slaughterhouses and polluting industrial areas are put away from our sight because they are unpleasant, not because they are *immoral*. But if this were so, how come that slaughterhouse workers nonetheless exhibit symptoms akin to symptoms of those who are exposed to brutal inter-human violence, and how come people observing images of vast environmentally degraded areas have a feeling of there being something *wrong* with that (and not that it is only unpleasant in the sense of a pile of rotting garbage)? If we are to relativise the present problematic in such a fashion, we should, of course, go all the way and also try arguing that Nazi concentration camps were put out of sight only because they were unpleasant (and not because people didn’t want to know what was going on there because that was highly morally disturbing).

human moral subjects.<sup>9</sup> As Larry Carbone, a laboratory research veterinarian, nicely pointed out in his monograph *What Animals Want*: “If voluntary consent were our standard for animal research, the whole business would end – not because we cannot understand what the animals are telling us, but because we can.”<sup>10</sup> The point, then, is that what (in this case animal rights) ethics looks for is already there, the only problem is that we are *taught to repress it*: “... veterinarians in the U.S. before 1989 were simply taught to ignore animal pain”.<sup>11</sup>

### Acknowledging animals and nature

Perhaps the most obvious way to argue for something like a primordial, spontaneous human affinity with the natural world would be to endorse the so-called “biophilia hypothesis”. Coined by Erich Fromm and elaborated by Edward Osborne Wilson, the hypothesis accounts for “the connections that human beings subconsciously seek with the rest of life.”<sup>12</sup> The reasoning here would be quite simple: in line with Leopold’s idea that (environmental) ethics is actually a product of evolution and can be seen as a form of “symbiosis”,<sup>13</sup> it is obvious to conclude that human beings must cherish spontaneous feelings of affection towards the natural world. In other words, since as a species we co-evolved with other organisms, it is only natural that we prefer green environments to concrete walls and living animals to robots. Consequently, all that is required for a “third step” is in us already – we just need to return to our deeply ingrained affections in order to overcome the environmental problems and alleviate the animal pain that is inflicted by our industrial food production.

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<sup>9</sup> Next, perhaps equally powerful point in favour of the basic premise of this paper, is the fact that “moral enlargement” would not be possible if there were no “ground”, viz. already existing environmental and animal moral sentiment in humans, on which to build it, as already glossed above.

<sup>10</sup> L. Carbone, *What Animals Want*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, p. 179.

<sup>11</sup> B. Rollin, *The Unheeded Cry: Animal Consciousness, Animal Pain, and Science*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 1989, pp. xii, 117–118, cited in: L. Carbone, *What Animals Want*, p. 150.

<sup>12</sup> E. O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life*. Harvard University Press, Harvard 1992.

<sup>13</sup> A. Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, p. 202.

But this line of reasoning begs the question. For if we have been so intimately interconnected with nature from the beginning, why do we then face such enormous environmental problems? How is it possible that we so overwhelmingly act in discordance with the biophilia hypothesis? What is the source of the perceived alienation?

Because of this problem and due to the fact that the biophilia hypothesis seems to demand a certain hypostatization of primordial affection in human moral subjects (which, for ontological reasons, I hope to avoid), I'm choosing a different route in arguing for our denial of an always already present environmental and animal ethical outlook, based on my previous work on Stanley Cavell in connection with environmental debate,<sup>14</sup> focusing around the problematic of the concept of "acknowledgment", the cornerstone of Cavellian philosophy.

In tackling scepticism, Cavell resorts to a painstakingly detailed analysis of primarily Wittgensteinian philosophy and Shakespearean drama in order to derive an idea that scepticism can be – as in the case of *Othello* – something that one "lives" and is thus connected with our quotidian strategies of coping with the world. Drawing from Nietzsche Cavell concludes that in this sense scepticism can be seen as "the attempt to convert the human condition, the condition of humanity, into an intellectual difficulty, a riddle", interpreting "a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack."<sup>15</sup> Thus in scepticism regarding "other minds" the existence of others can be – as the title of Cavell's essay on *King Lear* suggests<sup>16</sup> – *avoided*. In this sense, the existence of others (but also the world as such) is not something that one has to *know*; rather, it is something that has to be *acknowledged*, accepted.<sup>17</sup> And – most

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. T. Grušovnik: "Un Poète Maudit: Stanley Cavell and the Environmental Debate", *Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2013, pp. 85–100. Accessible online: <https://uottawa.scholarsportal.info/ojs/index.php/conversations/article/view/954>

<sup>15</sup> S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1987, p. 138.

<sup>16</sup> "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear", in: S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1987, pp. 39–123.

<sup>17</sup> Originally, the argument is bound up with Wittgenstein's philosophy, where scepticism is not wrong but nonsensical because sceptical arguments undermine themselves; Wittgenstein, for instance, shows how making mind states "private" eliminates them from language games entirely (cf. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. Blackwell, Oxford, § 293), or how utterances "I am only dreaming, and this is not real" in the "dream argument" similarly

importantly – failure to do so results in doubt (as in Descartes) or in hatred and violence (as in Shakespearean tragic heroes, or in Coleridge’s *The Ancient Mariner*), and this is precisely why Cavell says that “what philosophy knows as doubt, Othello’s violence allegorises (or recognises) as some form of jealousy.”<sup>18</sup>

Of course it is now possible to ask *why* Cavell thinks one would try to *avoid* accepting, or “acknowledging”, the existence of other minds or even the external world. The answer to this question can, in fact, be deduced from what has already been said: because one is incapable of facing the whole truth of “human condition”, its contingency, vulnerability, and uncertainty; because one is dissatisfied with circumstances and relations in this world; and because one strives for something bigger, or greater than what is “humanly possible”.<sup>19</sup> If one wants to escape from the contingency of Wittgensteinian *Lebensformen*, or if one wants to “give up the responsibility of their maintenance”,<sup>20</sup> the “real” existence of the other (be it the world, or the human Other) has to be presented as inaccessible, as beyond our powers of reason.

An analysis of Cartesian treatment of other human beings (“other minds”) then reveals precisely this logic of reinterpretation of an existential problematic into an epistemological one, in which the existence of other “souls” is transposed and understood as a problem of (unattainable) knowledge because of the inability to cope with human separateness.<sup>21</sup> Descartes’ treatment of animals as “brutes, substantially

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undermine themselves by implying that their truth-value is independent from the fact of me perhaps dreaming (in other words: if the statement “I’m only dreaming” is true, then I’m also only dreaming this statement and its meaning, which in turn means, that it cannot be true; for a good presentation of Wittgenstein’s analysis of the dream argument cf. A. Stroll, “Wittgenstein and the Dream Hypothesis”, *Philosophia*, no. 37, 2009, pp. 681–690). Thus if a sceptical position is *per se* incoherent, then its sense must be somewhere else; for Cavell, this sense is to be found in an individual’s reinterpretation of an existential problematic in an epistemological one.

<sup>18</sup> S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> In this sense Cavell can be seen as saying something Hegel says in “Introduction” to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in § 74, viz. that what calls itself as fear of error, makes itself known rather as fear of the truth.

<sup>20</sup> S. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 1979 p. 109.

<sup>21</sup> Similar to this line of argument one could – like Rachel Jones, explicating Luce Irigaray’s thought on Descartes – say that the process of universal doubt: “is less driven by the quest for certainty than the meditator’s desire to free himself of dependency on anything that originates

different from human beings” reveals, however, a somewhat different but nonetheless analogous logic: it turns out that the present existence of animal souls has to be denied in order to save the possibility of the eternal existence of human souls (animal consciousness, then, has to be denied in the same way that the practical knowledge of human minds was earlier denied). This can be clearly seen from the remarks about animals in *The Passions of the Soul* and *Discourse on Method*, where Descartes points to a complete similarity of animal and human bodies on the one hand, and yet denies an ontological equivalence between humans and animals. In other words, the distinction between animals and humans turns precisely on *nothing*; it is a non-existent difference:

“For although they [animals] lack reason, and perhaps even thought, all the movements of the spirits and of the gland which produce passions in us are nevertheless present in them too, though in them they serve to maintain and strengthen only the movements of the nerves and the muscles which usually accompany the passions and not, as in us, the passions themselves.”<sup>22</sup>

In *Discourse on Method* it becomes clear that this distinction between animals and humans is needed in order to reassure the Cartesian subject that he, in his innermost essence, cannot be affected by death. In other words, the distinction between animals and humans is asserted for the same reason as the distinction between the body and the mind:<sup>23</sup> it’s needed in order to remove humans from nature, and thus rescue them from finitude:

“For after the error of those who deny God, which I believe I have already adequately refuted, there is none that leads weak minds further from the straight path of virtue than that of imagining that the souls of the beasts are of

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outside himself.” R. Jones, Irigaray: *Towards a Sexuate Philosophy*. Polity, Cambridge 2011, p. 105.

<sup>22</sup> R. Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul* (Part One, § 50), in: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1 (tr. Robert Stoothoff). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985, pp. 325–404, p. 348.

<sup>23</sup> This is also the reason why the present argumentation of course holds *even if* animals do not in reality have any souls, or consciousness; the point is, on the contrary, that Descartes wants to make a distinction where there is, according to his own reasoning, none. Perhaps it is *precisely because* he ties “passions” – and states of mind in general – so strongly with the body that *then* he needs such an unreal distinction between the two entities in order to argue for immortality.



the same nature as ours, and hence that after this present life we have nothing to fear or to hope for, any more than flies and ants. But when we know how much the beasts differ from us, we understand much better the arguments which prove that our soul is of a nature entirely independent of the body, and consequently that it is not bound to die with it.”<sup>24</sup>

Along similar lines one could argue that in the romantic period “Man” was, again, further alienated from “Nature” as a consequence of a similar motivation: trying to preserve a place for the human subject that would help to raise her/him above natural determinism, contingency, etc. The idea can, as Isaiah Berlin points out, be traced to Kant’s thoughts on the Will freed from nature, and even more specifically to Friedrich Schiller.<sup>25</sup> It is the latter that famously says in his essay *On the Sublime*: “All other objects obey necessity; man is the being who wills.”<sup>26</sup> Romanticism then, even more than during the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the Enlightenment period, exhibits precisely the paradox I want to draw our attention to: while presumably cherishing nature and, perhaps for the first time in Western history, exposing it as an “Other” (which can be most clearly observed in Caspar David Friedrich’s paintings), it simultaneously represents it as a *different* from humans, and humans as “above” – even “outside” – it. To put it in different words: instead of inaugurating it (which is perhaps commonly thought), Romanticism by and large *eliminates* it from the human sphere and alienates humans from nature almost *completely*.

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<sup>24</sup> R. Descartes, *Discourse on the Method* (Part Five), in: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, vol. 1* (tr. Robert Stoothoff). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985, pp. 111–151, p. 141. Even Descartes’ contemporaries and close followers were surprised by his treatment of animals, which was unusual for the time. Mandeville, for instance, explicitly scouredged Descartes for his views on animals: “When a creature has given such convincing and undeniable Proofs of Terrors upon him, and the Pains and Agonies he feels, is there a Follower of *Descartes* so inur’d to Blood, as not to refute, by his Commiseration, the Philosophy of that vain Reasoner?” (B. Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees or Private Vices, Publick Benefits*. Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 1988, pp. 196–197). For a good overview of philosophical attitudes towards animals in Descartes’ time cf.: P. Harrison, “The Virtues of Animals in Seventeen-Century Thought”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 59, no. 3, 1998, pp. 463–484.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. I. Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*. Princeton University Press, Princeton 2001 (fourth lecture, or chapter, titled “The Restrained Romantics”, where Berlin talks about freed Will).

<sup>26</sup> F. Schiller, “On the Sublime”, in: *Aesthetical and Philosophical Essays*. Echo Library, Teddington 2006, pp. 102–111, p. 102.

This gesture would not in itself be problematic were it not a consequence of what has been shown above: of an inability to accept the immersion of humans into nature and thus their susceptibility to death, contingent violence etc.<sup>27</sup> The irony of this denial is, of course, that it does precisely what it should avoid: committing violence towards nature and oneself (as in *The Ancient Mariner*). The only way out of this circle is to *accept* “human finitude”, to *acknowledge* nature. How this should be done is a matter of specific circumstances, of a specific singular act on the part of a specific individual: everyone has to do it for her-/himself (the Mariner did it by accepting ugly and disgusting water-snakes as “O happy living things! No tongue / Their beauty might declare: A spring of love gushes from my heart, / and I bless’d them unaware! /.../ And from my neck so free / The Albatross fell off, and sank / Like lead into the sea”<sup>28</sup>). The other important emphasis of this point is that the denial of nature (i.e. the denial of the feelings and emotions of individual living beings as well as the denial of nature as something humans are immersed in) causes harm to the denier her-/himself, and not solely to nature and natural beings. This, in turn, is the case because something that has been avoided and repressed – namely the always already existing affection towards nature and natural beings – does not simply vanish but remains “there” in a displaced fashion, as a suppressed truth which inevitably resurfaces and revenges itself as a feeling of isolation and despair with which the denier from now on has to live.

One will undoubtedly argue that the picture of the denial(s) presented here is a bit stretched, and that the philosopher, or a poet like Schiller, denies nature in a very different way than, for example, the Mariner

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<sup>27</sup> Schiller's motivation in the above mentioned essay is precisely to protect Romantic subject from violence, and thus save his “dignity”. After uttering the famous sentence, Schiller continues: “It is exactly for this reason that there is nothing more inconsistent with the dignity of man than to suffer violence, for violence effaces him. He who does violence to us disputes nothing less than our humanity; he who submits in a cowardly spirit to the violence abdicates his quality of man... Surrounded by numberless forces, which are all superior to him and hold sway over him, he aspires by his nature not to have to suffer any injury at their hands.

<sup>28</sup> If we were true to the Mariner's story all the way, we should perhaps say that this act of acknowledging has to happen unconsciously: the verse “And I bless'd them unaware” repeats twice in this stanza, and the Mariner attributes his change to the “pity of his saint”. S. T. Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, in: Wordsworth, W., and Coleridge, S. T., *Lyrical Ballads* (Owen, W. J. B., ed.). Oxford University Press, Oxford 1985, pp. 7–32 p. 17.

or – to take the most vivid example – a slaughterhouse worker. This, however, would not be a minor objection at all: for, if true – if the philosopher, the poet, the Mariner, and the slaughterhouse worker do not share the same fate – then the argument of this paper is to a significant degree pointless, since its aim is precisely to show how an analogous structure is at work in all these cases. The challenge, then, is to show how both Descartes and the slaughterhouse worker kill animals in roughly the same way. In order to do that, one has to point out that in the latter case, in the case of a butcher, the animal has to be *already dead* if it is to be slaughtered. To put it in other words: the animals in slaughterhouses have to die *twice*, first *as animals*, i.e. *as living beings* (which, in industrial farming, happens even before they are born), and then also physically, *as objects*. The only difference between the philosopher and the butcher is then the physical act of terminating an object.<sup>29</sup> This is, of course, no small difference and the full force of it is felt as different consequences of the denial and their severity. However, what I wanted to stress it is that the first act is needed in order to carry out the second.

The fact that there is, by and large, a certain uneasiness in killing animals for food, and that indeed the animals have first to be killed symbolically before they can be slaughtered, can also be clearly detected in language. To be sure: one never says that the animals killed for food have been “killed”; they are either “butchered” or “slaughtered”. Similarly, meat brought to the table always has to be renamed: one does not feel comfortable eating a “cow”, a “deer”, a “pig” or a “sheep”. We instead prefer to eat “beef”, “venison”, “pork” and “mutton” (needless to say, this difference occurs in practically every language); more generally, we do not eat “flesh”, we consume “meat”. The connection between the object (meat) and the animal (a cow, a deer, etc.) has to be symbolically severed before it is ready for consumption; the physical act of turning

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<sup>29</sup> But even that is questionable, for it is known that Descartes performed vivisections himself, at least from what can be deduced from his vivid examples: “If you slice off the pointed end of the heart in a live dog, and insert a finger into one of the cavities, you will feel unmistakably that every time the heart gets shorter it presses the finger, and every time it gets longer it stops pressing it.” R. Descartes, *Description of the Human Body* (Part Two), in: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, vol. 1* (tr. John Cottingham). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985, pp. 313–324, p. 317.

an animal into an object has to be hidden from public eyes, so much so that some young people don't even know where the meat comes from. But, as indicated above, the animals for meat production are turned into objects even before they are killed: they aren't simply "animals" as "pets" are, but are "livestock", "cattle" etc. All this points to a hypothesis proposed by Edmund Leach, viz. "we can only arrive at semantically distinct verbal concepts if we repress the boundary percepts that lie between them."<sup>30</sup> In our case the "boundary percept" that is being repressed is nothing other than an animal as a living being, a being that has a life that is similar, at least in certain aspects, to our own.<sup>31</sup> Again it is precisely because there is a need for symbolic distinction that one may presuppose that no distinction was originally felt.

This "originally", however, demands some further reflection, as already indicated in the introduction. By "always already present affection" and "no original distinction", I, as mentioned, do not wish to hypostatise any "organic" or "naturalistic" bond between humans and nature (apart from an obvious fact that we all are material beings with bodies and thus subject to same physical laws). I'm convinced such a strategy would lead to theoretical problems – such a proposition demands empirical evidence which I don't attempt to provide here, since it is questionable what this evidence should look like: how, that is, one could empirically prove something like an "affection" or even "morality"? It is enough, I believe, to point out that the discussed symptoms (from posttraumatic stress to symbolic operations in language) presuppose the denial and the repressed truth, even if this truth is non-existent before the onset of the symptoms. This would mean that the differences introduced between animals, nature and humans formally presuppose contiguity between these concepts; were this not so, then there would

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<sup>30</sup> E. Leach, "Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse. *New Directions in the Study of Language*, August 15, 1966, pp. 23–63, p. 23.

<sup>31</sup> A roughly analogous symbolic operation occurs when humans are being killed in conflicts: the enemy is often portrayed not as a "fellow human being" but as a "demon" (religious wars) or as an animal, a "pest" (as, for instance, a "Colorado beetle" in the latest Ukraine conflict: cf. "Colours of Conflict", *The Economist*, May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014. Accessible at: <http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2014/05/guide-ukrainian-and-russian-flags> (retrieved September 4, 2014)).

be no need for imposing the difference on the one hand, and also *no place* where to ground it.<sup>32</sup>

Before turning to the conclusion, let's shed some light on the distinction between denying animals as animals and nature as nature; that is, between repressing our affection towards animals and towards nature, which was here presented as a singular denial of "nature". Even though there seems to be a major qualitative difference between the acts of killing an animal and cutting down a tree – reflected also in different symptoms experienced by the one who commits the deeds – there is nevertheless a commonality to both: in either case the agent has to distance her-/himself from the "object" he/she destroys. And even though there is a huge difference between slaughterhouses and clear-cuttings, or polluted industrial areas, there is a convincing similarity there as well: both have to be hidden before the eyes of the public, and no one feels comfortable looking at them. As already pointed out, those phenomena should not only be viewed aesthetically but predominantly morally: they are hidden (maybe not only, but certainly *also*) because one feels there is something *wrong* with that. In order to exist, they presuppose a distancing of humans from them, portraying humans as *substantially different* from animals (as in Descartes) and above, or even

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<sup>32</sup> Perhaps one could even argue that the "gap" one perceives between oneself and the Other (be it another human being, or an animal, or even an object) is a result of the very existence of "knowledge" and "subject" as such; i.e., that it is formally necessary for a "subject" to think of itself as "alienated" from an "object", since the very structure of "knowledge" is such that it immediately falls apart into a "subject" and an "object". The gap, then, would be formal and as such necessary precondition for every possible "knowledge" and thus also "subject". The "error" – in our case the error of traditional environmental ethics – would then be to hypostatise this formal gap into a supposedly "real gap" that exists between a "moral subject" and "nature" as distinct objects. If this were correct, then the task of environmental ethics – of bridging the gap that it itself poses – would as such be impossible; i.e. it would not be possible to bridge the gap *within* environmental ethics itself. The point here is also this: it does not make sense to speak about either "continuity" or "gap" *before* or *outside* of knowledge (and thus also subject); they are interdependent. One further point: by commenting that the gap is "only formal", one doesn't mean that it isn't *perceived* as real; it is, of course, and necessarily so. However, it is nothing *empirical*, nothing partial (like an object that can be pointed out). It is, instead, an effect of the structure of knowledge as such (and if this structure changes, then the sense of the gap changes as a consequence).

outside our ecosystems (as in Schiller and romantics).<sup>33</sup> This gesture, however, produces a blowback, a shadow of what has been repressed, which carries its own revenge. The only way to avoid this revenge is to acknowledge what has been repressed and denied by simultaneously acknowledging that we, as well as “them”, or “it”, are all a part of this “nature”, marked by contingency, finitude, susceptibility to violence, pain and the cessation of life.

### Conclusion: environmental and animal rights education reconsidered

If what I tried to show above holds true, then much of environmental and animal ethical education may turn out to be misplaced, or even part of a symptom (ethical studies trying to rationally ground our responsibility may be seen as our attempt at escaping our moral obligation, the same way that Descartes’ solipsism was, in Cavell’s analysis, a sign of his unwillingness to accept and acknowledge the existence of other human beings). In formal terms, its goal should then not be seen as an *enlargement* of our moral responsibility; rather, it should be viewed as a deconstruction of our acquired insensitivity and denial, as its *reduction* and *shrinking*. This, however, is not just a formal turn of the problem; it significantly changes the perspective from which to view human insensitivity to nature and animals – and, consequently, how to deal with it.

Firstly, such education must place an emphasis not so much on learning something new but on unlearning something acquired through, perhaps, socialisation (even learning of language). It must focus on something that was repressed and forgotten, and not on something that is yet to be brought about. “Teaching, like analysis”, says Soshana Felman:

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<sup>33</sup> Here perhaps one should also point out that similar feelings of wrong occur when not only the natural areas are devastated but artificial ones as well: as, for instance, the destruction of buildings and whole residential areas in war. The point of this comparison would be the fact that it is not problematic to destroy only “natural” areas or “living things”, but “objects” as such; perhaps this is the reason why humans must think of themselves as “subjects”, i.e. categorically different from “mere objects”. For brevity’s sake I’ll leave these thoughts aside for now, recognising their potential importance and perhaps delineating a future area of my research.

“has to deal not so much with lack of knowledge as with resistance to knowledge ... Ignorance, in other words is nothing other than a desire to ignore: its nature is less cognitive than performative; as in the case of Sophocles' nuanced representation of the ignorance of Oedipus, it is not a simple lack of information but the incapacity-or the refusal-to acknowledge *one's own implication* in the information.”<sup>34</sup>

This “refusal to acknowledge” brings us back, full-circle, to Stanley Cavell and our point of departure. But let us only stress that in trying to overcome our “resistance to knowledge” new, or at least reformed, environmental and animal rights education might first start to look for social and cultural mechanisms, including learning a special body of knowledge and know-how, that teach us to disregard nature and living beings as moral subjects. In short: environmental and animal rights education must focus on how the world was undone since this is the only way to rebuild it.

Secondly, these remarks remind us that environmental and animal rights education as it stands has little chance of succeeding – for whatever it teaches is automatically undone by a different, perhaps more silent “teaching” that is opposed to it and that teaches us precisely how to disregard its main points: animal sensibility and the “intrinsic” worth of nature and ecosystems. We have, as we speak, two different “educations” that are opposed to each other and that mercilessly bite at each other without going back to their common root: it’s doubtful whether reinforcing one will help to eliminate the other; it may, on the contrary, only provoke more hatred and cause even a bigger repression and denial from the other side, as is often the case. Instead of teaching us how to “sympathise with animals” or trying to “walk our feet” with trees (a strategy that is highly problematic for all kinds of reasons), education should focus on social mechanisms that promote and institutionalise our denial. In order to prove this, it is enough to point out that the strategy of “sympathising with animals” has, so far, only made killing lots more of them more “humane” by industrialising meat production and pushing it out of public gaze: “The public animal slaughtering facilities

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<sup>34</sup> S. Felman, “Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and Interminable”. *Yale French Studies*, no. 63, 1982, pp. 21–44, p. 30.

constructed outside of city centres in both the US and Western Europe were designed and sited to reduce contemplation and questioning of them by workers and consumers”;<sup>35</sup> this was done *precisely in those countries* that otherwise express great concern for animal well-being, there “where people are physically and psychologically removed from the animals that produce the products they use, yet most somewhat paradoxically enjoy very close relationships with their pet animals.”<sup>36</sup>

A similar paradox can be noted in our current “eco-oriented” societies, in which nature and ecosystems ostensibly started to play an important role in our economic and other considerations. The relevant policies and strategies have, however, come up with many new and subtle methods for controlling and dominating nature rather than with an attitude that is capable of bringing about a reconciliation. New equipment designed to monitor all sorts of “environmental parameters” and qualities can be seen as another biopolitical tool, not necessarily as means of coming to terms with our natural habitat. Indeed, all sorts of eco mobile apps and portable “meters” – while ecological footprint grows form year to year – can be seen as nothing else but a symptom of human desire to bypass and repress our dependency on the environment, even the desire to rise above finitude, contingency and individual mortality.

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<sup>35</sup> A. J. Fitzgerald, “A Social History of the Slaughterhouse: From Inception to Contemporary Implications”, *Research in Human Ecology*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2010, pp. 58–69, p. 60.

<sup>36</sup> Op. cit., p. 59.



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