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Wildness as a Critical Border Concept: Nietzsche and the Debate on Wilderness Restoration

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ABSTRACT

How can environmental philosophy benefit from Friedrich Nietzsche's radical critique of morality? In this paper, it is argued that Nietzsche's account of nature provides us with a challenging diagnosis of the modern crisis in our relationship with nature. Moreover, his interpretation of wildness can elucidate our concern with the value of wilderness as a place of value beyond the sphere of human intervention. For Nietzsche, wild nature is a realm where moral valuations are out of order. In his work, however, we can discern a paradoxical moral concern with this wildness. Wildness is a critical moral concept that reminds us of the fact that our moral world of human meanings and goals ultimately rests on a much grander, all-encompassing natural world. Nietzsche's concept of wildness acknowledges the value of that which cannot be morally appropriated. Wild nature confronts us with the limits of human valuing. Wildness as a concept thus introduces the 'beyond' of culture into the cultural arena of values.

KEYWORDS

Nietzsche, wildness, environmental restoration, concepts of nature, environmental ethics, pluralism.

INTRODUCTION

Why do so many ethical pleas in favour of a more respectful attitude towards nature fail to be convincing in the public realm? Why do they fail to have a significant impact on general lifestyle and policy development? To a large extent, this is due to the fact that we seem to lack commonly accepted moral criteria that can be of guidance in ethical debates. Notably, we are ill at ease

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when it comes to allowing the concept of nature a place in normative discourse. Indeed, according to the standards of contemporary ethical discourse, it seems illicit or at least highly problematic to use nature as an argument in (applied) ethics. Yet, although the concept of nature does not seem to play an important normative role in contemporary ethics (unlike for instance in ethical discourse during the classical era), it remains one of the key moral concepts – under the surface and hidden from view. Most arguments in moral debate ultimately refer to a particular account of reality, to a particular way in which the world is interpreted. At certain points nature still seems to provide us with indications of how to interact with the world around us. The argument, for instance, that we should respect the integrity of ecosystems only makes sense once we adopt a worldview in which the concept of ecosystem is an important principle of order in nature, and in which an intervention disturbing this order can be considered – more or less explicitly – to be an ‘unnatural’ violation of nature. The problem, however, is that more than one version of such an account exists. We are faced with a plethora of moral views of nature, all of which are deeply contingent. Our concepts and images of nature are the result of processes of interpretation, in which all sorts of cultural and historical influences play a part. As a result, concepts of nature are subject to change. They are bound to change over time and to be context-dependent. For this reason, it is no longer acceptable among ethicists to refer to something like the ‘natural order of things’ to ground our moral valuations. As participants in a moral debate may look upon nature from completely different perspectives, particular views of nature, as well as the moral arguments that arise from them, cannot be accepted as generally convincing.

Nevertheless, our moral interpretations of nature cannot simply be ignored either. They enable us to see nature as a meaningful place for us to dwell in, as a world that makes sense. Moral interpretations transform mere nature into *our* environment, *our* home. Moreover, in everyday life, we easily forget about the contingent character of our particular outlook on nature. We tend to take our views for granted. We cannot involve ourselves in reflection continuously. Sooner or later, we are bound to commit ourselves to one particular view of nature, in order to be able to engage ourselves in various forms of interaction with nature (Casey 1993, Smith 2001).

It is only when our basic beliefs about nature are *challenged* by ‘moral strangers’ that we become aware of the particularity or perhaps even idiosyncrasy of our views. Whenever we are confronted with others who challenge our views, we can respond in two different ways. Either we emphasise the strictly personal, subjective character of our moral beliefs, thus avoiding the ethical debate about nature as something we all relate to, or we distance ourselves from the debate by adapting (or backing out into) a form of eco-fundamentalism. Both attitudes – moral indifference and moral fundamentalism – can actually be encountered in the debate concerning our relationship with nature. And because the ethical debate on nature goes back and forth between these extremes, a real moral debate

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is being hindered more often than not, and moral questions about our relation to nature are hardly ever put forward in the context of moral deliberations. They are de-listed from the agenda.

It is against the backdrop of this stalemate that the work of the 19th-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) becomes important for environmental philosophy. Nietzsche not only provides us with a fundamental diagnosis of the moral crisis of our culture but, more interestingly still, in his philosophy a new, albeit paradoxical, form of respect for nature can be discerned. According to Nietzsche, there is a fundamental link between the crisis in contemporary morality and our problematic relationship with nature. Besides helping us understand the nature of the moral crisis, his work can also shed some light on what is at stake in environmental philosophy. It furthers the objective of deepening our understanding of our problematic relation with nature.

One or two brief remarks to start with. Nietzsche's writing and thinking is highly complex. It was never elaborated in a systematic form. Quite often, he seems to play and experiment with certain lines of thought, without making it perfectly clear to what extent he really endorses the views that are articulated. This poses serious difficulties when it comes to putting forward adequate interpretations of his work. As a writer, Nietzsche makes ample use of literary figures and styles so that it is not obvious how one should interpret particular remarks. To ignore these hermeneutical problems is to put oneself in danger of misusing Nietzsche as a spokesperson of one's own views. Regardless of what interpretation one chooses to follow, one will virtually always be able to come across a fitting fragment in Nietzsche's writings that confirms it. A serious interpretation, therefore, should pay attention to Nietzsche's literary styles, to his use of masks and figures of speech, to tensions and ambivalences.

Moreover, I believe that we can only do justice to Nietzsche's philosophy if we remain aware of the possible distance between Nietzsche's thinking and our own moral presuppositions. In fact, Nietzsche's philosophy becomes all the more interesting once we really allow ourselves be confronted with the strange and unruly aspects of his thought, if we are really willing to read his work 'against the grain' (Zimmerman 2005) instead of looking for confirmation of our own presuppositions. For this reason, I do not endorse the more or less common interpretation of Nietzsche as a proto-environmentalist thinker, although I acknowledge that certain passages in his work can easily be interpreted in an environmentalist way.¹ In this essay, rather, I want to show what is at stake in Nietzsche's philosophy of nature. After a brief discussion of Nietzsche's thinking on nature and morality more generally, I want to propose a Nietzschean interpretation of contemporary debates on wilderness preservation. I do not pretend that my questions are the same as Nietzsche's, but I do believe that Nietzsche's analysis can further our understanding of some fundamentally problematic aspects of our current relationship with nature.

NIETZSCHE'S DIAGNOSIS OF OUR MORAL CRISIS

Our contemporary relationship with nature is deeply ambiguous. We recognise the moral value of nature itself, whereas at the same time we are – or at least *could* be – profoundly aware that all of our images and concepts of nature rely on interpretations that are deeply contingent (Oelschlaeger, 1995, introduction). According to Nietzsche, this ambiguity in our relation to nature is a symptom of a more fundamental crisis of our culture: we no longer seem to have commonly accepted criteria that can give us moral orientation, but, at the same time, we do not know how to live our lives without such criteria. This crisis is expressed in the famous words of Nietzsche's madman on the 'Death of God':

'Where is God?' he cried. 'I will tell you. We have killed him— you and I! All of us are his murderers! But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving now? Where are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? And backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning?' (GS, 125)

We moderns suffer from a total loss of moral orientation, although, most of the time, we do our best to push away this awareness. Nietzsche tries to come to terms with this irretrievable loss of ground, to find a way to cope with it. In Nietzsche's view, philosophers should be like physicians of a culture: they should analyse cultural phenomena as symptoms of underlying natural physiological processes (in terms of weaknesses and strengths, health and disease), and from this diagnosis come up with a treatment for that culture's illnesses. Accordingly, although his ultimate aim is to affirm life itself, Nietzsche's main focus is diagnostic.

According to Nietzsche, the reason for our moral crisis is that the traditional foundations of morality no longer function. In modern times, morality is usually grounded in something other than nature: nature is seen as the *object* of morality – the raw material that morality acts upon – but morality *itself* is conceived of as of belonging to a different order. Morality is understood as the ability to freely relate to one's natural inclinations, to take responsibility for one's actions, instead of merely acting instinctively. A typical example of this is Kant's moral philosophy. Kant's ethics relies heavily on the distinction between the world of nature, governed by natural laws, and the world of freedom and reason, from which morality arises. Such an opposition between nature and morality is typical of most types of modern ethics.² According to Nietzsche, modern science has shown this underlying 'two-worlds metaphysics' to be obsolete: humans

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are part of nature in *every* respect. We are not just natural beings in the physical sense; our so-called morality is just as natural as the rest of us.

Nietzsche criticises the dominant ethics that conceives morality as something that singles out humans from nature.³ He criticises this interpretation of the nature of morality not just because it is false but also because, in Nietzsche's view, the unnatural morality has become a force that inhibits the flourishing of human nature. Nietzsche considers it to be a *moral* obligation for philosophers to conceive of ourselves as part of all-embracing nature. He does not aim at a destruction of morality *per se*, but at a deepening of morality. Morality has to be interpreted as nothing other than nature, because we must learn to bring our self-image into agreement with our understanding of (our place in) nature. For Nietzsche, this translation of man into nature itself is morally motivated.

To see to it that man henceforth stands before man as even today, hardened in the discipline of science, he stands before the *rest of nature*, ... deaf to the siren songs of old metaphysical bird catchers who have been piping at him all too long, 'you are more, you are higher, you are of a different origin!' – that may be a strange and insane task, but it is a *task* – who would deny that? (BGE, 230)

Nonetheless, the main effort of Nietzsche seems to be a radical critique of morality, in an attempt to get rid of the anti-naturalness of morality. Following up on French moralists like Laroche-foucauld, Nietzsche unmasks the hypocrisy of most morals, for instance by showing that underneath most so-called altruistic behaviour there is in fact a profound selfishness at work. But unlike the French moralists, Nietzsche interprets the underlying process of morality in naturalistic terms, almost in line with a modern scientific world view.

From his earliest work onward, Nietzsche is motivated by a deep distrust of the anthropocentric idea that humans have a special position in the universe because of their morality. Nietzsche denies that humans are something special: our self-pride rests on a perspectival distortion. In *On Truth and Lies in a Non-moral Sense* (1873), we read:

Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of 'world history,' but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die. – One might invent such a fable, and yet he still would not have adequately illustrated how miserable, how shadowy and transient, how aimless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature. There were eternities during which it did not exist. And when it is all over with the human intellect, nothing will have happened. For this intellect has no additional mission which would lead it beyond human life. Rather, it is human, and only its possessor and begetter takes it so solemnly, as though the world's axis turned within it. But if we could communicate with the gnat, we would learn that he likewise flies through the air with the same solemnity,

that he feels the flying centre of the universe within himself. There is nothing so reprehensible and unimportant in nature that it would not immediately swell up like a balloon at the slightest puff of this power of knowing; and just as every porter wants to have an admirer, so even the proudest of men, the philosopher, supposes that he sees on all sides the eyes of the universe telescopically focused upon his action and thought. (TL, 1)

There is a distinctly nihilistic tone in this early fragment, which can also be recognised in another early fragment from *The Birth of Tragedy*, in which Nietzsche cites the legend of King Midas and Silenus, the companion of the god Dionysus:

When Silenus finally fell into the king's hands, the king asked what was the best and the finest thing of all for men. The daemon remained silent, motionless and inflexible, until, compelled by the king, he finally broke out into shrill laughter and said, 'Suffering creature, born for a day, child of accident and toil, why are you forcing me to say what is the most unpleasant thing for you to hear? The very best thing for you is totally unreachable: not to have been born, not to exist, to be nothing. The second best thing for you, however, is this: to die soon. (BT, 3)

It is this nihilism that Nietzsche tries to overcome in his later work. It may be true that the best thing for man is unreachable, because humans are nothing but a glimpse in the eternal all-embracing struggle of nature. But if Nietzsche's critique of morality is to make sense, a criterion is needed with which one can transcend the all-too-human. If the narrow-mindedness of anthropocentric morality really were inevitable, then Nietzsche's own account of things and his critique of morality would be just another futile human voice. If Nietzsche's critique is to be valid, then it has to be because of something in light of which particular forms of morality can be criticised as distortions. Nietzsche criticises our inability to come to terms with the insight that we are no different from the rest of nature: now that we no longer believe in a supernatural miraculous source of morality, our old moral self-understanding is rendered obsolete, and we must dare to go on naturalising ourselves more radically, in an effort to find a new type of ethics that is more in line with (our understanding of our place in) nature.

Much of Nietzsche's philosophy can be seen as an attempt to come up with an account of nature that explains how all aspects of human nature are just elements of an all-embracing nature. For that purpose, Nietzsche brings forward the concept of will to power.

NIETZSCHE'S TEACHING OF THE WILL TO POWER

Nietzsche tries to give an account of nature that can explain not just the fact that humans are part of nature in the plain biological sense, but in other respects as well. To that end, he interprets nature in such a way that it is possible to explain

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all of human reality as an aspect of nature in a broader sense. Nietzsche argues that our passions and instincts have to be understood as entirely natural and can be seen both as physical forces and as interpretative entities. For that purpose, he introduces the concept of 'will to power'.

According to the theory of will to power, all of nature consists of a dynamic struggle between a plurality of competing forces that try to overpower each other. Nature is a complex of commanding and obeying forces. In this struggle, contingent temporary organisations emerge, that are then again being overpowered by other forces, thus constantly shifting the power-balance. These natural forces are not blind, physical forces, but have an 'inner side'. All of nature (not just living nature) has a striving towards 'internalisation': all that is, exist not just as a force (i.e. something that works externally on other entities), but also as a *will* (i.e. with an interior quality), and as interpretation. Having an interior, mental, quality is not something exclusively human, but is an aspect of everything that exists in nature. In this respect, one could call Nietzsche's natural philosophy 'pan-psychist'. With this pan-psychism, Nietzsche tries to escape from the metaphysical separation between humanity and the rest of nature. Nature is conceived as a never-ending struggle of different, competing, interpretations, which all try to overpower the others; human beings are mere parts of that ongoing process in nature.

The mutual ratio of forces or wills-to-powers continuously generates hierarchical organisations in nature, but all these organisations are themselves deeply contingent: they are but the temporary result of an ongoing struggle. Therefore, there will always be some ordered structure in nature, but no one single structure is eternal. The hierarchical structures can be found on all levels: from the realm of the physics and physiology, to the realm of culture. Nietzsche's views on morality, culture, body and mind are mere elaborations of his cosmological theory of will to power.

In concordance with this view, morality is considered to be merely a symptom of natural processes within human nature. Whereas morality is traditionally conceived as the *relation to* our own nature (e.g. Kant, who takes morality as the ability to consciously and freely control our natural impulses – thus implying that morality comes from something other than nature), in Nietzsche's view, morality itself *is* part of nature, that is, it is a particular, naturally occurring organisation within human nature, a particular – temporarily fixed – proportion of different competing drives and instincts within human nature. Morality is the naturally occurring contingent organisation of different passions and impulses within ourselves, both the result of the struggle between these different competing instincts, and an organising force in that struggle.⁴ Nietzsche emphasises two aspects of the nature of morality. On the one hand, morality is an 'unnatural' disciplining interpretation of nature, an interpretation that restricts the amount of possibilities in our nature and organises the plurality of competing wills within each person, forcing them into one particular, unified form.⁵ On the other

hand, morality occurs naturally; the commanding force of morality is itself part of our nature. As an instance of will to power, morality is the order-bringing force in human nature.⁶ The different wills-to-power in us subdue themselves to one strong organising force; they feed into an organisational form that is commanded by one governing will to power. Together, these two aspects paint a picture of human nature as mirroring the bigger struggle between competing forces in nature. Nature is a struggle of wills-to-power, competing interpretations, a play of interpreting and being interpreted, and humans are merely part of that struggle.

When people interpret the world, again, this is yet another event within nature. Knowing and valuing are both instances of will to power, that is, attempts to appropriate the world – to unify different experiences and perceptions of the world – in a powerful organising interpretation. While morality is a unifying interpretation – and disciplining – of human nature, as such, it also limits the ways in which the world can appear to us. That is why Nietzsche criticises morality not only as a tyrannical disciplining of human nature, but also as a violent reduction of the endless possibilities of interpreting the world. In morality, we maintain a well-ordered image of ourselves at the cost of those aspects of ourselves that do not fit into this order. These passions or urges will be suppressed or reinterpreted as something else. As soon as our morality is no longer convincing enough to succeed in organising the plurality of wills in ourselves, then we need to acquire a new, more powerful morality, or we will lose our internal organisation and grow insane.

In the same way as our morality interprets our own nature, it also interprets the world around us. We appropriate reality as a whole, by overpowering the strange and reducing the unruly to something familiar. In this way, we make the world into a meaningful place, fit to live in, but, just as with human nature, this comes at a price. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche criticises Stoic philosophy which advocates a life in accordance with nature:

Imagine a being like nature, wasteful beyond measure, indifferent beyond measure, without purposes and consideration, without mercy and justice, fertile and desolate and uncertain at the same time; imagine indifference itself as a power – how could you live according to this indifference? ... In truth, the matter is altogether different: while you pretend rapturously to read the canon of your law in nature, you want something opposite, you strange actors and self-deceivers! Your pride wants to impose your morality, your ideal, on nature – even on nature – and incorporate them in her; you demand that she be nature ‘according to the Stoa,’ and you would like all existence to exist only after your own image – as an immense eternal glorification and generalisation of Stoicism. (BGE, 9)⁷

Morality implies both a ‘tyrannical’ disciplining of human nature and an appropriation of the strange, a reduction of the fundamentally multi-interpretable nature around us.

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Nietzsche, so it seems, gives a ‘metaphysical’ account of nature as something ‘bodily’ underlying our moral interpretations. In this (quasi-)ontology, reality is presented as a struggle between different interpreting wills-to-power.⁸ But Nietzsche is aware of the self-referential aspects of his philosophy. He acknowledges that even his own quasi-naturalistic account of reality is just one possible interpretation amongst others.⁹ This admission puts his interpretation of nature in perspective, but because of the peculiar nature of his interpretation it does not lead to a self-contradictory position (Müller-Lauter 1993). On close examination, it turns out that Nietzsche presents his theory of will to power *not* as a final truth about reality, but as an interpretation itself, albeit a special one, which enables us to see the world *as* consisting of different interpretations.¹⁰

Suppose ... we succeeded in explaining our entire instinctive life as the development and ramification of one basic form of the will – namely, of the will to power, as *my* proposition has it – suppose all organic functions could be traced back to this will to power and one could also find in it the solution of the problem of procreation and nourishment ... then one would have gained the right to determine *all* efficient force univocally as: *will to power*. The world viewed from inside, the world defined and determined according to its ‘intelligible character’ – it would be ‘will to power’ and nothing else. (BGE, 36)

Nietzsche’s line of thought can be rephrased as ‘suppose we succeed in describing everything there is in terms of will to power, then the world would be will to power’. But if we fulfil this condition and succeed in appropriating all there is within one single interpretative scheme, then the will to power is already at work! Nietzsche’s reasoning has a circular structure; it is an example of a so-called hermeneutic circle: it presupposes the existence of what it wants to reveal. This means that the statement that everything is will to power cannot be meant as a hypothesis about the world that could be tested and proven true or false (as is assumed by Moles 2000). Instead, it is an interpretation that opens a new perspective on things. The teaching of will to power enables us to see reality as a struggle of interpretations, and, at the same time, is part of that struggle. The admission of the perspectivity of his own account on nature confirms the original statement that there exist only interpretations,¹¹ thus enabling us to see the world as a struggle of interpretations and so gain freedom from the dominant perspective.

Nietzsche’s teaching of the will to power thus opens a form of thinking that questions the distinction between true and false. True and false are themselves power claims made by interpreting wills-to-power. There is no objective criterion of truth that could serve to distinguish between different claims about the nature of things, because each truth claim can itself be interpreted as an instance of will to power. Therefore, to Nietzsche the central question is not whether a particular statement about the world is true or false, but of what form of life

such a statement is a testimony or symptom, and what will be the impact of a particular statement.

All this renders Nietzsche's philosophy strange and highly paradoxical, but not nonsensical. It enables him to criticise dogmatic forms of naturalism that refer to 'real nature' (thus concealing the interpretative act that precedes such concepts of nature) and to criticise each particular identification of nature as a contingent, tyrannical, seizure of power. At the same time, the concept of nature plays a key normative role in his critique of morality as well, and his critique serves the broader purpose of 'naturalising' mankind.

Nietzsche's philosophy revolves around the tension between two ideas. One is that of a 'true' (interpretation of) nature that can function as a critical counterbalance against anti-natural and tyrannical metaphysical (and moral) interpretations of nature. It is from this angle that Nietzsche criticises the anti-naturalness of morality, and wants to free nature from the restrictions of our contingent (self-)interpretations. The other is the insight that even this concept of 'pure' nature itself inevitably implies yet another interpretative appropriation. The tension between these antagonistic aspects of nature, 'seizure of power' and (what I would like to call) 'wildness', gives a strange dynamic to Nietzsche's philosophy of nature. I believe that this paradoxical thinking on nature can help us understand our contemporary dealings with nature.

NATURE AS CHAOS

Underneath Nietzsche's critique of morality lies an experience of *nature as chaos*: his point of departure is the experience of total lack of order in nature. Nature, to Nietzsche, is an all-encompassing struggle of forces that are constantly trying to interpret and, consequently, overpower each other. Each apparent order in nature is but a moment within that struggle. Nature is in an absolute sense without measure, a-moral and indifferent.

The general character of the world ... is to all eternity chaos; not by the absence of necessity, but in the sense of the absence of order, structure, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever else our aesthetic humanities are called. Judged by our reason, the unlucky casts are far oftener the rule, the exceptions are not the secret purpose; and the whole musical box repeats eternally its air, which can never be called a melody – and finally the very expression, 'unlucky cast' is already an anthropomorphising which involves blame. But how could we presume to blame or praise the universe? Let us be on our guard against ascribing to it heartlessness and unreason, or their opposites; it is neither perfect, nor beautiful, nor noble; nor does it seek to be anything of the kind, it does not at all attempt to imitate man! It is altogether unaffected by our aesthetic and moral judgements! (GS, 109)

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If it is not possible for humans to positively identify nature, then 'nature is chaos' should not be understood as a positive *ontological* statement regarding the structure of nature as it is *in itself*, but rather as a negative *epistemological* statement. This becomes clear when we look at the following passage from *Day-break*, where Nietzsche seems to claim almost the opposite: 'It is required that we do not see the world as more disharmonious than it is' (D, 4). The statement that nature is chaos would also be an all-too-human account of the world if taken as an ontological claim about reality. Both contradictory statements correct each other's one-sidedness. 'Nature as chaos' is thus an indication of the finite nature of the human capacity to know nature as it is in itself, and in the problematic nature of the human-nature relationship. In this respect, Nietzsche's philosophy constitutes a radicalisation of Kant's critique of pure reason. In stressing the chaos in nature, Nietzsche emphasises the fact that the order that we experience in reality exists only because of our own ordering and structuring activity.

The experience of nature as chaos is a typical contemporary phenomenon. It is a symptom of a culture that has become utterly reflective and self-aware. It mirrors our contemporary awareness that all our interpretations are, to a large extent, contingent. 'We are from the start illogical and therefore unfair beings, and this we can know: it is one of the greatest and most insoluble disharmonies of existence' (HH- I, 32). Now that man 'stands before man as he stands before the rest of nature' and has naturalised his self-image, he has become aware that his interpretations of nature rest on violent acts of appropriation, and thus are deeply contingent. 'Nature as chaos' refers to the dynamic, unruly system that precedes our ordering acts of appropriation; it refers to the moment of resistance that is overpowered. As soon as an interpretation 'succeeds', the strange and the unruly in nature have vanished. By affirming nature as chaos, Nietzsche tries to re-affirm the value of that which cannot be properly appropriated – he appreciates, so to speak, the failure of each seizure of power. At the same time, he recognises that we cannot do otherwise – morality is as much part of nature as it is violent. Indeed, it is the ability to order (their) nature that makes (some) people stand out. Order lies at the base of everything truly worthwhile in our culture. *The seizure of power is as necessary as its failure is inevitable.*

Nevertheless, 'nature as chaos' expresses an understanding of the value of 'wild' nature beyond our moral frameworks. It refers to nature as something that cannot be appropriated, that is unutterable and unknowable, but nonetheless asks to be recognised as something meaningful. The experience of nature as chaos requests an understanding of nature in which we can let nature be, motivated by the awareness that the indifferent dynamics of all-encompassing nature have a beauty and dignity that lies beyond human measure (although, in the end, even this statement is all-too-human).

Graham Parkes shows that Nietzsche's commitment to the inhuman has a very concrete, less 'metaphysical' meaning as well. According to Parkes, Nietzsche is looking for ways to transcend our own limited, all-too-human understanding of

things and to ‘understand the whole – without going beyond the world in a move of metaphysical transcendence’ (Parkes 1998, 182). How we should imagine such a broadening of perspective in our relation with nature can be seen in this ‘gem of an aphorism’: ‘*How one is to turn to stone. – Slowly, slowly to become hard like a precious stone – and finally lie there still and to the joy of eternity*’ (D, 541). Humans should re-interpret themselves as part of an all-encompassing nature. We should acknowledge that life, although an exceptional state in nature, is to be understood in terms of what is more general: the dead.

Let us be on our guard against saying that death is contrary to life. The living being is only a species of dead being, and a very rare species. Let us be on our guard against thinking that the world eternally creates the new. There are no eternally enduring substances; matter is just another such error as the God of the Eleatics. But when shall we be at an end with our foresight and precaution? When will all these shadows of God cease to obscure us? When shall we have nature entirely undeified? When shall we be permitted to naturalise ourselves by means of the pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature? (GS, 109)

We should free our image of nature from the different shadows of god, by which we cloud our understanding of nature, and then naturalise ourselves.

Nietzsche’s emphasis on the chaos of nature serves to criticise the violent contingency of our moral appropriations of the world, and to remind us of the limitations of our moral worldview. Nature as chaos faces us with the task of acknowledging the fact that we inevitably appropriate nature as soon as we try to express its moral meaning to ourselves. As such, Nietzsche’s concept of nature as chaos is reminiscent of the idea of wildness of some contemporary environmental ethicists. Before I turn to the significance of Nietzsche’s analysis for contemporary debates on nature, let me first comment on some fragments in which Nietzsche seems to contemplate our contemporary dealings with wild nature.

NIETZSCHE’S DIAGNOSIS OF CONTEMPORARY WILDERNESS EXPERIENCES

Throughout his work, Nietzsche appears to comment on our contemporary relation to nature. As is to be expected, he takes on the role of physician of our culture, and gives a diagnosis of the underlying state of our culture of which our relation with nature is symptomatic. One significant fragment is about our love for free nature: ‘Out in nature. – We like to be out in nature so much because it has no opinion about us’ (HH-I, 508).¹² One could read this fragment in two distinct ways. The first, most obvious, reading interprets Nietzsche’s characterisation as a critique of modern man’s inability to make commitments, and his fear of being morally judged, his inability to acquire a strong taste of his

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own. In this reading, the love for free nature is not something to be proud of. I believe, however, that this fragment can be interpreted in a different way: as a reflection on an exemplary possibility. The fact that ‘we’ love nature because it has no opinion of us, could mean that we have come to value it as a place of indifference, a place where we can ‘rest from morality’, so to speak.

The appreciation of nature as a place where moral valuations are ‘out of order’, out of place, reflects the awareness that all of our moral frameworks are deeply contingent, and that the true meaning of nature lies beyond the attempt to appropriate nature within our frameworks. It values the unruly ‘remainder’ that is being suppressed by each ‘successful’ moral interpretation of nature. This modern experience of nature emphasises openness toward the otherness of nature. The wildness and inescapable otherness of nature is a border phenomenon and reflects an awareness of the limitations of our own ability to adequately reflect the ‘true’ value of nature.

But this modern wild nature is not only something to repose in. The moral ‘neutrality’ of nature also causes a feeling of unrest and unease:

Neutrality of great nature. – The neutrality of great nature (in the mountain, the sea, the wood and the desert) pleases, but only for a short while: after that we get impatient. ‘Do these things really want to tell us nothing? Do we not exist for them?’ There raises a feeling of *crimen laesae majestatis humanae* [a crime against human dignity]. (HH–WS, 205)

At first sight, we love nature in all its indifference toward all of our conventions. It gives us a chance to put things in perspective and gives us a feeling of freedom. On second thought, however, this neutral nature causes a feeling of unease, because it leaves us empty-handed. In the confrontation with the great, overwhelming, but morally ‘neutral’ phenomena of nature, we painfully realise that those things that are dear to us do not matter in the bigger picture. We feel offended by this indifference of nature.

At this point, a comparison may be helpful between Nietzsche’s account of the experience of wildness and Kant’s notion of the sublime. According to Kant, we experience wild nature with a mixture of pleasure and pain: at first, wilderness causes fear and aversion, because of the transgression of aesthetic and moral standards. On second thought, we realise that we can only experience this fear because we possess the idea of infinity within ourselves. This causes the feeling of pleasure – we feel ourselves to be something higher than mere nature. We experience the sublime in confronting wild nature, but the sublime itself rests in ourselves. In this respect, sublime nature is just a means to our end. In contrast, for Nietzsche, the experience of ‘wild’ nature does not lend itself to such a triumphant reversal. To him, the experience of wild nature leads to a questioning of human dignity. This – again – confirms that we cannot but face wild nature in an act of appropriation. In order to feel at home in nature,

we have to interpret. Again, we see an ambivalent account of the experience of wild nature.

The Nietzschean love of nature differs radically from romanticism. The romantics sought harmony in nature – a purity that could be a cure for a modern culture that had lost its standards. Although Nietzsche's wildness functions critically with respect to cultural appropriations of nature, it differs from the romantic conception of wilderness in one crucial respect. Nietzsche is aware that, although 'wild' nature serves as a critical moment with regard to morality, *we cannot but morally appropriate this wildness*. Nature is not a place to stay: we still need a cultural world to be at home.

Ultimately, Nietzsche's account of our relation to nature is deeply paradoxical. Nietzsche commits himself to a notion of wild nature that lies beyond each interpretation. But he is aware that the only way to remind us of this wildness is by using yet another appropriative interpretation – and thus by repeating that which he wants to put in question. Thus, the 'wildness' of nature, although the key positive element in Nietzsche's critique of morality, remains a critical border concept, which points to a limit to our valuing. As a limit, it is always outside and inside simultaneously. Morality has to be guided by a concept of 'wild nature' as a critical point that is constantly withdrawing, but that nonetheless can serve as a criterion 'from afar'. With the notion of wildness, one can distinguish between appropriations in which nature is being *reduced* to a particular interpretation, and those in which one acknowledges the problematic nature of such reductions. In this respect, the notion of wildness enables us to distinguish between more or less violent appropriations of nature. At the same time, wildness is not just the object of interpretation, but also the primal 'substratum' of reality that is always present *in* the act of interpretation. Wild nature makes up the context in which we live. Wildness is thus an ambivalent criterion with which to evaluate different moralities. It does not provide univocal ethical norms, but it does indicate that moralities should be judged by the degree to which they succeed in interpreting a world that lies beyond interpretation, *through* a particular interpretation.

Wilderness – 'nature that has no opinion of us' – may also be a place where *we* do not have to have an opinion. We can appreciate nature, but we do not have to judge nature. Nature is a realm beyond good and evil. As a place where moral judgements are out of place, it can also be a place in which morality itself, that cornerstone of anthropocentrism, can be put in perspective. Wildness, then, poses a limit to our judgements: in the wild, our judgements are out of place; here we have to restrict our inclination to morally appropriate the world. But again we end up in a paradox, because whatever limit is being put on our morality, it will always be a *moral* limit.

Thus, from a Nietzschean perspective, *environmental ethics itself* appears to be a paradoxical undertaking (Drenthen 1999): on the one hand, interested in nature in so far as it transcends human seizures of power (wildness as a critical concept); on the other hand, restricted in its ability to model this interest

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on anything else than yet another interpretative appropriation. We can only articulate the moral significance of nature 'itself' by interpretation, but this inevitably implies a moment of appropriation. Nietzsche's idea of wild nature, although itself an interpretation of nature, functions as a critical concept that radically limits our inclination to interpret and domesticate nature (via ethics and otherwise) by reminding us that there is something other, whose meaning must be, but at the same time can never fully be, interpreted.

WILDERNESS AND ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION

Nietzsche's paradoxical concept of wildness can help us to understand our contemporary fascination with wild nature. Some argue that we are interested in protecting wild natural areas because they have an ecological function, or because they contain genetic diversity – a resource for future developments. True as this may be, these utilitarian arguments are incapable of articulating the full scope of the moral reasons why modern people are interested in 'wild nature', 'real nature' and so on.

To shed light on this fascination with real nature, it makes sense to look at debates on ecological restoration (Elliot 1997, Oelschlaeger 1991, Turner 1996, Willers 1999), where one regularly hears references to 'wild' or 'real nature' (as opposed to 'fake' nature). In the Netherlands, these debates have been especially interesting because the Dutch landscape has been intensively altered by humans in the course of history. As a result, it consists mostly of cultural and semi-natural landscapes, and hardly any untouched wild nature is left anymore (with the Wadden Sea as a possible exception). In the last three decades, there have been several successful attempts to re-create more or less 'natural' areas on former agricultural land, by allowing natural processes such as river flooding to take place again.¹³ This has led to several new, ecologically and aesthetically interesting places.¹⁴ Although there is no primal nature, in the debate about the pros and cons of ecological restoration projects, many people still refer to these places with concepts like 'wilderness' and 'real nature'. It is obvious that these people do not refer to pristine, untouched nature. What, then, does wilderness mean in these moral debates? I believe that these references primarily serve a *moral* function and that Nietzsche's notion of wildness can help us clarify its meaning.

One could argue that our current fascination with wild nature is just another moment in a historical succession of different archetypal images of nature. In the past, people hated wilderness and liked 'tamed' landscapes, because they had trouble surviving in a wild natural environment they did not control. Now that wild, untamed natural landscapes have become more and more difficult to find, and most people live in highly regulated urban spaces, people tend to appreciate wildernesses more than ever, mainly for recreation purposes. From this

historical perspective, the current appeal of the 'wilderness icon' is merely the contingent outcome of a cultural and socio-historic development. Indeed, social scientists have shown how personal appreciation of different types of landscape is related to cultural and socio-economic background. It is just a matter of time before the wilderness image gives way to other images of nature such as the arcadian landscape, or the functional semi-cultural landscape.

Although I acknowledge that this type of historical inquiry can help put our current understanding of nature in context, I believe that we should understand our current wilderness desire as something that is unprecedented at least in some respects. We live in a post-modern age. We all know that our thoughts and images about the world and ourselves are deeply influenced by our historical cultural background. We are aware (at least occasionally) of the relativity of our own cultural and moral conventions. This awareness has changed our outlook on nature once and for all. From this unique historical situation, we realise that there exist many different accounts of nature, and that in every day life we – consciously or not – fall back on one of many myths about nature. The special situation that we live in confronts us (or at least it should) with the question 'what is nature?' more forcefully than ever before. What does it mean that many different conceptions and images of nature exist, all connected to particular practices? There does not seem to be any account of nature that is *not* mediated by contingent cultural schemata.

This awareness of the relativity of the different conceptions and images of nature makes it difficult to commit oneself to one particular interpretation of nature. We cannot, contrary to what some environmental ethicists pretend, simply 'choose' one particular moral image of nature, commit ourselves to the practices that stem from it (as if one could 'choose' to conceive of nature in an ecocentric way and henceforth be an ecocentrist) and decide to confront those who hold a different view (for instance, those who tend to look at nature as merely a resource for economic purposes). This view rests on a wrong conception of what it means to adopt a concept of nature. The problem is that, in the end, we all cling to different concepts of nature on different occasions. We conceive of nature differently when we drive a car or when we go on a hike. Apparently we have a whole repertory of images of nature at our disposal, all of which are thoroughly contingent, that is to say: all of which have something accidental that renders them unfit as images of 'nature' 'as it is'.

This post-modern awareness of the contingency of all of our images of nature, I believe, can explain our current fascination with wildness. Wilderness in this post-modern sense does not refer to an objective wilderness as pristine or primal nature, but it is primarily a *relative moral* concept, referring to nature which cannot be reduced to a cultural image or interpretation. I believe that the use of 'wildness' in contemporary moral debates refers to that which precedes our interpretations, images and myths.

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We post-moderns are deeply aware of the contingency of all these appropriations of nature, and therefore long for something that lies beyond our interpretations. We value wildness, precisely because it *does not* suit our moral order; we desire wilderness as something radically other, which is beyond our grasp, which fascinates us, which both has to and cannot be properly appropriated. Because we know that we can only encounter nature from within a cultural framework, we desire – on the rebound, so to speak – something that is not dependent on our interpretations. We like to relate to something ‘real’, something that is already there, that is bigger than us and precedes and exceeds our interpreting appropriations. Our contemporary fascination with wildness expresses an interest in the otherness of nature. That is to say, nature appeals to us, not because its moral meaning fits in a particular moral framework, but because of the otherness that breaches this moral framework.

If my reading is correct, then our moral situation is strange and paradoxical. What interests us is the otherness in nature, that which cannot be appropriated and interpreted. This appealing nature demands that we articulate what it means to us, make it part of our world – appropriate its meaning. That which appeals to us, has to be interpreted, in order to make it one’s own, but through this appropriation we lose the otherness that appealed to us. We long for wild nature, but in modelling this desire, we risk losing the object of our desire, because it exists precisely in resisting appropriation.

This paradox can also be recognised in different practices of ecological restoration. In these practices, some people claim to recreate nature that resembles primal nature as it once existed in that place, although they are fully aware that the result of all our efforts can never be anything but a fake copy, a reconstruction of a doubtful original. Apparently, the rationale behind our efforts is not the recreation of a historically authentic ecosystem. I suggest reinterpreting these places as cultural monuments: post-modern reminders of the fact that nature precedes and exceeds our imagery of nature. These are places where we can still meet the amoral and unruly, where people can get in touch with something that is not of their making. Wouter Helmer, ecologist and director of the Ark Foundation, involved in many Dutch ecological restoration projects, once used the appropriate phrase ‘insane oasis’ to designate these places of ‘new nature’ as places of freedom, where one can put in perspective the ‘sanity’ of our everyday moral conventions (Helmer 1996). Wilderness is a border-concept that reminds us of the fact that there is something beyond our moral frameworks. The paradox remains, however, that these places are themselves the result of another moral framework, albeit a strange, paradoxical and somewhat ironical one. These places can never be anything but reminders of a limit, and a symptom of our inability to commit ourselves to one moral image of nature.

Another Dutch conservationist, Thomas van Slobbe (De Geus and Van Slobbe 2003) has experimented with this paradox more explicitly. In the Netherlands, a country where every patch of land is allocated in governmental zoning plans,

he tried to create ‘an empty space’ outside the human order (Van Slobbe and De Geus 2003; Van Slobbe 2005). He committed ‘the perfect crime’: in an unknown nature reserve, undetectable to passing hikers, he placed a circular hedge around a piece of land, thus ‘expropriating’ a piece of nature from the human sphere. After he thus created the ‘empty place’, van Slobbe walked away, never looked back, never returned. Thus he created a place that cannot be experienced, that cannot be valued, that cannot be made subject to human plans and endeavours. It is just what it is, ‘an empty place’ outside the human sphere. The only way to represent such a place would be to make ‘a hole in the map’, if only that would not again reveal the location and make the empty place again part of the human world. The paradox is, of course, that by creating this ‘empty place’ – a place outside culture – wildness is introduced into culture again. The empty place is a real place in a real location (at least, that is what we are supposed to believe), but at the same time it functions as a symbol of wildness, as a moral reminder of human finitude in a land dominated by culture.

We are interested in nature that is beyond our control, and are fascinated by the limitations of our power. Deeply aware of the contingency of all interpretations of nature, we (morally) value wildness as that which *does not fit* in our moral order, and wild places as places where moral valuing is out of place. This paradoxical fascination and valuation can be seen both as a symptom of the moral crisis, and as an emergence of a new sensitivity for the radical otherness in nature that lies beyond our own moral standards. Nietzsche provides us with a way to interpret wildness not as the opposite of culture, but as a moral meaning within culture. This notion of wildness introduces the ‘beyond’ of culture into the cultural arena of moral values.

NOTES

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¹ How to interpret Nietzsche in light of current environmental philosophy is discussed in Hallman 1991, Acampora 1994, Drenthen 1999, Drenthen 2003, Acampora 2004 and Del Caro 2005.

² Although in utilitarianism the moral good is identified with a particular natural state (happiness as a ‘non-moral good’), moral calculus itself – the core of utilitarian reasoning – is not taken as a part of human nature. In contrast, in classical (virtue) ethics there is less opposition between (human) nature and morality: the morally good is interpreted as the reasonable essence of (human) nature. For this view, however, the problem is how to distinguish moral from amoral aspects of nature.

³ Nietzsche’s critique of anthropocentrism and his plea for a ‘reanimation of man’ is not, as Michael Zimmerman (2005) rightly points out, motivated by biospheric arguments.

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His concern is rather about the health and destiny of humankind. Even so, one can point to countless parallels between Nietzsche's anti-anthropocentrism and that of current environmentalism (Hallmann 1991, Parkes 1998, 2005).

⁴ In this respect, there is a clear parallel between Nietzsche's thought and ancient Greek moral philosophy. Greek virtue ethics also considers morality as a particular organisation of one's own natural impulses. The main difference from Nietzsche, however, is that the Greeks believed in providence, the idea that the 'true' moral good mirrors the essence of human nature, whereas Nietzsche denies the existence of such a moral essence in nature.

⁵ BGE, 188: 'Every morality is ... a piece of tyranny against "nature" The essential and invaluable element in every morality is that it is a protracted constraint.'

⁶ Nietzsche takes morality to be 'a decided and decisive testimony' of 'in what order the deepest impulses of [one's] nature stand to each other' (BGE, 6). In fact, he equates morality with this organisation of impulses. The unifying power of morality does not come from a higher order of being. The moral order is nothing but the net result of the constituent wills being organised. The resulting unity 'is only unity as organisation and combination' (KSA 12, 2[87]).

⁷ Evidently, Nietzsche does not do justice to the 'real' Stoics. In fact, there are very strong parallels between Nietzsche's moral philosophy and stoic ethics. According to Paul van Tongeren, Nietzsche tries to adjust the stoic ideal to a modern, a-moral, conception of nature: 'Nietzsche seems ... to search for a meaning of the stoic ideal of homologia [living in accordance with nature] in the framework of an ontology of struggle' (Van Tongeren 2002, 17).

⁸ Indeed, many influential scholars – Martin Heidegger amongst others – interpret the teaching of the will to power in this way. It is certainly possible to interpret Nietzsche's theory of will to power as an ontology (Mittasch 1952, Moles 1990) – a last guise of traditional metaphysical thinking about the true nature of reality. Such a reading would find confirmation in Nietzsche's statement that the concept of will to power provides the physical concept of force with an 'inner side' (KSA 11, 35[68]) or that the will to power is the world 'viewed from the inside' (BGE 36). However, such a metaphysical interpretation of the will to power is very doubtful, because it neglects the self-referential aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy: if reality is indeed a constant flow of competing forces, how could such a fixed, final truth about the world exist *in* such a world? That is why Nietzsche explicitly presents his theory as an interpretation (amongst other, competing interpretations).

⁹ BGE, 22: 'Supposing that this also is only interpretation – and you will be eager enough to make this objection – well so much the better.' Statements like these lead some scholars (e.g. Schönherr 1989) to conclude that the main focus of Nietzsche's teachings of will to power is to criticise totalitarian ideologies. However, anti-metaphysical interpretations like these remain one-sided, because they pass over how Nietzsche too presents his own theory as a truth claim, for instance by flirting with scientific interpretations of nature. A purely negative interpretation of the will to power thus fails to do justice to the presumption with which Nietzsche presents his account of nature: 'as *my* proposition has it' (BGE 36).

¹⁰ As Wolfgang Müller-Lauter (1993) convincingly showed, both the ontological and the perspectival aspect of Nietzsche's theory demand each other, the result being a kind of self-referential philosophy that is in constant flux.

¹¹ Cf. BGE 22 (footnote 9).

¹² In the original German text, Nietzsche speaks of *grosse Natur*, that is, big or grand nature.

¹³ One of the most commonly used methods is to make breaches in the riverbanks, so that rivers can recreate floodplains, with their highly dynamic ecological features. It goes without saying that all this takes place within carefully defined confinements.

¹⁴ There has been much debate about the proper treatment of animals in these parks, which are in a process of de-domestication (Klaver et al. 2002).

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D = Daybreak

BT = The Birth of Tragedy

BGE = Beyond Good and Evil

GS = Gay Science

HH = Human All Too Human

HH-WS = Human All Too Human – The Wanderer and his Shadow

KSA = Kritische Studienausgabe

UM-HL = Untimely Meditations; On the Use and Abuse of History for Life

TL = On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense

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