

The Ecological Nietzsche: Considering the Environmental Implications of Friedrich Nietzsche's Philosophy and the Possibility of Grounding der Übermensch in the Indigenous Perspective

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There is a tendency among the environmentally-minded to hear Friedrich Nietzsche's calls for a life-affirming philosophy of the Earth as indicative of his support for contemporary environmentalism. As someone who is pursuing a degree in environmental science and who himself began his philosophical education in environmental philosophy, I must admit to having grappled with this tendency myself due to Nietzsche's use of naturalistic language. For example, Nietzsche, perhaps more so than any philosopher before or during his time, grounds his philosophy in a genealogy of human history that is fundamentally biological and evolutionary in character. He speaks of morality in terms of organic life and describes the emergence and meaning of human knowledge and art in terms of its usefulness to us as a species.¹ Nietzsche calls for humankind to overcome itself so as to "make way" for a new creative type of human: a being who has abandoned all activity which does not improve the conditions of the species—one who says "yes" to nature.² Nietzsche was also a proponent of "great health," of grounding philosophy in our bodies, and personally enjoyed engaging in the natural world himself. These facts make Nietzsche appealing to environmental philosophers who would like nothing more than to count him as one of the more influential Western philosophers to actively contend with the subject. However, there are several concepts within Nietzsche's philosophy that are omitted or misrepresented which render these attempts problematic. In this essay, I will be exploring the viability of an ecological Nietzsche, or how Nietzsche's philosophy may play out in practical contemporary environmental contexts, and whether his philosophy is compatible with any so-called environmental philosophy. Though there is a rich discourse around attempts to assimilate a Nietzschean perspective into environmental ethics, an attempt to restate it in its entirety would exceed practical limits. Therefore, only those themes that are most appropriate for the purposes of this essay will be included. I will then consider these implications and Nietzsche's philosophy more broadly within the context of indigenous peoples who, I would argue have a "healthier" and

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* trans. Walter Arnold Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 261, 341, 419.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One* ed. and trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 25.

more sustainable relationship to nature and their environments, and consider whether they embody a more appropriate point of departure for Nietzsche's philosophical project than someone from a Western background.

It is necessary to clarify certain terms and ideas before engaging with Nietzsche's philosophy to avoid common pitfalls of misunderstanding. First, I distinguish between the terms "nature" and "environment" in this essay given that, while they are colloquially considered to be synonymous, nature has a meaning to Nietzsche that is distinct from our contemporary concept of the environment. Nature can be defined as all that is, or which composes reality as such. The environment, on the other hand, is the physical manifestation of nature that is perceptible to the beings contained within. Nature is composed of space-time, while the environment is composed of so-called wilderness and human artifice. This distinction is important for the simple reason that while Nietzsche philosophizes at length about nature, his views on the environment are less clear and are largely open to interpretation. It is also necessary to introduce some terms that are significant within environmental philosophy, as these are crucial in understanding whether they are characteristic of Nietzsche's philosophy. These terms are "anthropocentrism" and "biocentrism," which are both related to the perception of humanity's place within nature and within the environment. An anthropocentric perspective conceives of humans as being at the center of interrelatedness in nature and having a higher hierarchical value amongst these relations than other species, whereas a biocentric perspective views humans as being one species among all others in a non-hierarchical organization. (A related term that is sometimes confused with anthropocentrism is anthropomorphism, which is the act of prescribing human characteristics to some natural object or event.) In order to properly understand the arguments put forth by philosophers who have weighed in on the environmental implications of Nietzsche's philosophy, I will briefly introduce some of the most central concepts. They are Nietzsche's ideas on nihilism, decadence, will to power, the dissolution of the subject, perspectivism, and the overman (der Übermensch).

Nietzsche's philosophical project is best understood in its historical context, as he formulated his arguments in response to what he saw as the rise of nihilism in Europe in the 19th century following the decline of religious faith. Nihilism has special significance within Nietzsche's philosophy, but, for the purposes of this essay, nihilism will be understood simply as the belief that the world is not as it "should" be and that, as such, the world as it is currently should not exist.³ Nietzsche's related concept of decadence is broader than its typical usage and he employs this term to refer to that which arises from weakness and prevents one's full expression of strength.⁴ These first two concepts are essential to understanding Nietzsche's critique of Western society and humanity's relationship to nature. Will to power, as perhaps the most central concept in his philosophy and the most misunderstood, describes the fundamental expression of life as self-

3. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 23.

4. George de Huszar, "Nietzsche's Theory of Decadence and the Transvaluation of All Values," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 6, no. 3 (1945): <https://doi.org/10.2307/2707290>.

overcoming. Nietzsche describes will to power as a force with “inner will,” an “insatiable desire to manifest power; or, the employment and exercise of power, as a creative drive,” and “life at its highest potency.”⁵ Will to power is not conceived as a domination of others per se, but as bodies striving to “become master of all space and to extend its force,” or the biological activity that allows an organism to thrive in its environment.⁶ Conceived another way, will to power is what provides interpretation in a world of disembodied forces.⁷ These various and often vague explanations of will to power are what have led to certain definitions being emphasized or the concept being confused entirely. However, the definitions I have provided are crucial in understanding attempts to interpret will to power from an evolutionary biology perspective. Another concept that has broad implications to Nietzsche’s philosophy is the notion that there is no real subject—no “I” at the center of consciousness directing the mind or body, no “deed” separate from the “doer.”⁸ For Nietzsche, the subject is a fiction that humans created to aid us in practical manners of speaking; but in actuality, all that really exists is will to power and its expressions. Furthermore, he argued that we do not have access to nature or causality as such and all that is available to us are interpretations.⁹ There is no “objective” reality and, even if there is, we cannot know it. This is why Nietzsche argues that the closest that we can come to objectivity is through perspectivism, or the compilation of the perspectives of multiple “subjects” to form a general consensus of reality. Lastly, as the terminal point of Nietzsche’s philosophy, and one of the most important aspects when considering the ecological Nietzsche, der *Übermensch* is conceived of as the next step in human evolution, where humanity and its decadent morality are overcome and we are “translated back into nature.”¹⁰ Der *Übermensch* is a being that lives entirely in accordance with the will to power.

One of the first major attempts to co-opt Nietzsche into environmental philosophy came from philosopher Max Hallman, who claims that Nietzsche’s philosophy, insofar as it requires that one see oneself as not being fundamentally separate from nature or the environment lends itself to the “biocentric egalitarianism” that is inherent to the philosophy of deep ecology.¹¹ Deep ecology is one of the original schools of environmental philosophy and was developed by philosopher Arne Næss.¹² The original platform was composed of eight principles, stating that, among other things, non-

5. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 332, 340.

6. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 339.

7. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 342.

8. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 336-337.

9. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 350.

10. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* ed. Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 123.

11. Max O. Hallman, “Nietzsche’s Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics* 13, no. 2 (1991): <https://doi.org/10.5840/enviroethics199113225>, 99-125.

12. Arne Næss, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary,” *Inquiry* 16, no. 1-4 (1973): <https://doi.org/10.1080/00201747308601682>, 95-100.

human life has intrinsic value, humans have no right to degrade the environment except to provide for “vital needs,” and that considerable action is required to change humanity’s current relationship to nature. Hallman’s claim has been argued against by philosophers who claim that this representation of Nietzsche’s philosophy is either grossly simplistic, especially regarding will to power and perspectivism¹³ or overlooks exploitation in his philosophy entirety.¹⁴ I similarly believe that Nietzsche’s philosophy is incompatible with any sort of egalitarianism and that any attempt to attribute egalitarianism to his philosophy should be met with deep skepticism. Nietzsche states that all living organisms are “egoistic through and through.”¹⁵ Exploitation is a fact of all life, and this is something that is borne out in the ecological sciences and, though it is recognized within the deep ecology platform, nowhere in Nietzsche’s philosophy is this exploitation thought to be limited to “vital needs.” I would also argue that Nietzsche would reject the deep ecology platform altogether on the basis that it essentially expands Kantian ethics into non-human nature by stating that non-human life has “rights” based on its so-called intrinsic value. Nietzsche was overt about his opposition to Kant and I believe that he would see deep ecology as yet another extension of the decadence of Western morality.

David Storey, another philosopher who has also claimed to find environmentalist elements in Nietzsche, argues that Nietzsche’s philosophy exhibits a “hierarchical biocentrism.” Storey contends that humans are of higher value because of our unique capacities. Additionally, due to the fact that humankind has affected all environments on Earth, our duty as humans should be to adopt a “new conservation” such that humans would have a hand in designing (and redesigning) these environments.¹⁶ This appears to me as entirely too naive of Nietzsche’s philosophy to be an accurate representation. Though Nietzsche calls for a transvaluation of our human values, this does not mean that hierarchies of value do not exist. Nietzsche, in fact, views all of life as will to power, or as valuing activity, and not something special to humans.¹⁷ Nietzsche rightfully identifies that humans have unique faculties and himself believed humans to be “the most interesting animal.”¹⁸ However, he critiques humanity’s false assumption that humans themselves have a higher value in nature because of these faculties. He argues: “The animal functions are, as a matter of principle, a million times more important than all our beautiful moods and heights of consciousness.”¹⁹ Nietzsche believes that we ascribe this higher value to

13. Martin Drenthen, “The Paradox of Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics* 21, no. 2 (1999): <https://doi.org/10.5840/enviroethics199921229>, 163-175.

14. Ralph R. Acampora, “Using and Abusing Nietzsche for Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics* 16, no. 2 (1994): <https://doi.org/10.5840/enviroethics199416232>, 187-194.

15. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 340.

16. David E. Storey, *Naturalizing Heidegger: His Confrontation with Nietzsche, His Contributions to Environmental Philosophy*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2016).

17. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 356.

18. Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Antichrist,” *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1982).

19. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 355.

ourselves and project it onto nature and take it to be something that is actually primary. Even if we invert or dissolve the hierarchy and ascribe a higher or intrinsic value to non-human life or the environment itself, this is still a projection and is not at all something “natural.” Attempting to assert what may be best for the environment from a biocentric perspective may itself even be seen as a form of anthropomorphism because we ultimately assert what we think is best for it from our own perspective. Therefore, while Nietzsche's philosophy seems to avoid the typical pitfalls of anthropocentrism as it is typically conceived of in environmental philosophy, I believe that his philosophy is incompatible with a biocentric perspective and ultimately exists outside of this dichotomy. On these grounds, I reject Hallman's claim that Nietzsche embodies biocentric egalitarianism and Storey's claim that Nietzsche extolls a biocentrism hierarchy. I also agree with philosopher Kaitlyn Creasy's compelling argument that the sort of new conservation that Storey calls for is ultimately nihilistic in attitude. In fact, it may be said that environmentalism, or moving towards a final state where humans and nature are in perfect harmony, is completely anti-Nietzschean and nihilistic in character.²⁰ As I defined earlier, nihilism occurs when one views the world as it is to be insufficient and that it should be changed or destroyed in its current form. Creasy argues that new conservation could only end in nihilism if we are to maintain Nietzsche's original arguments. I would further Creasy's argument and extend this claim to include environmentalism as such. Though there is certainly cause for wanting to change the world as it is, Nietzsche would condemn any such project that arises from these grounds. Therefore, I believe that an ecological Nietzsche would not be supportive of any environmental policy or action that does not first reconstitute our species' very relationship to nature, as anything that may be forwarded prior to our reconciliation will arise from a place of decadence and nihilism. What is not clear from a reading of Nietzsche, then, is what he actually imagines when he calls for a “return to the earth”; I believe that this is at least partially intentional. Not only do I think that Nietzsche, the man, enjoyed his established air of mystery, but Nietzsche recognizes that he is himself a product of Western civilization and is not entirely immune to decadence or moralization—even if he may count himself as being closer to a “higher” humanity, nor is he immune to anthropocentrism. Nietzsche had great respect for der Übermensch and seemed to suggest that we in our current state are unworthy in comparison. Just as our primate ancestors could not possibly imagine our evolution into modern Homosapien, neither can we comprehend what potential lies in der Übermensch. I do not believe that Nietzsche thinks that it is for us, as those who precede the overman, to decide what our fundamental relationship to the environment will be. The most that we as “lower” humanity can strive for, Nietzsche would claim, is to affirm our bodies and “return” to them by re-learning to trust our animal instincts—to literally trust our gut.²¹ It is at this point at which we grow strong enough to evolve.

20. Kaitlyn Creasy, “Environmental Nihilism,” *Environmental Philosophy* 14, no. 2 (2017): <https://doi.org/10.5840/envirophil201791153>, 339-359.

21. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 347.

The question then becomes: what is the meaning of Nietzsche's directive? If Nietzsche would reject a traditional environmental philosophy and would be ambivalent to environmental and climate policy, does this mean that abstract problems such as climate change would simply go unaddressed under his philosophy? I want to entertain the idea, as Acampora does when he argues that der Übermensch would be exploitative and therefore incompatible with egalitarian values, that this may in fact be the case.²² Nietzsche believes that Western civilization, dating back to Socrates in Ancient Greece, is decadent beyond measure.²³ Our projection of moral value on nature and our assumption that we must escape our suffering or otherwise find or ascribe meaning to it has made our species weak. His prescription for humanity is to overcome this weakness, to overcome ourselves, so that we may yield to a stronger version of ourselves. It is entirely possible that Nietzsche would view a planetary existential crisis such as climate change as a wonderful opportunity for overcoming not only our weakness but our basic moral conventions (e.g. that widespread preventable death is evil). He states that will to power can only be manifested against resistance and that it, therefore, seeks resistance.²⁴ With over half of all species facing extinction and billions of people facing death and illness, humanity is facing not only a physical crisis but a true crisis of values. Though this is one possibility of Nietzsche's own views on the subject, I want to counter these arguments from Nietzsche's own premises and on practical grounds. Firstly, there is a real danger of humanity not grounding itself in the earth in the face of climate change but intensifying its own decadence and love of other-worlds. When faced with the powerlessness of oneself as an individual and as a member of the species, it is entirely possible that many would simply seek refuge in religion and the afterlife as humanity has done for centuries in times of crises. It is also likely that intoxication by substances and non-reflective activity will increase to remove oneself from the reality of the situation and escape suffering. This especially takes on new meaning within the technological age of social media and virtual and augmented reality, where individuals can simply "escape" into cyberspace. Nietzsche may assert that this weakness would lead to a "culling of the herd." But insofar as climate change is a crisis of planetary scale, I believe that, if left unabated, it would actually have the effect of wiping out all of humanity, "higher man" and all. Furthermore, I think that if Nietzsche would not be critical of the role that the global elite has played in climate change, then his account would be thoroughly impoverished and would be functionally useless in providing any account on the issue. It is entirely possible that Nietzsche's philosophy simply may not be equipped to deal with something as abstract as climate change. Therefore, I agree with philosopher Adrian Del Caro who argue that, while Nietzsche's philosophy in its purity cannot be assimilated into traditional environmental philosophy, this does not mean that Nietzsche has nothing to contribute to discourses on the

22. Acampora, "Using and Abusing Nietzsche for Environmental Ethics."

23. de Huzar, "Nietzsche's Theory of Decadence and the Transvaluation of All Values."

24. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 346.

environment nor does this mean that the practical Nietzsche—Nietzsche, the man—would not condone environmental or climate action.²⁵

Thus far, I have considered Nietzsche's philosophy in the context of the environment as it is conceived of under traditional schools of Western environmentalism thought. I want to expand the discourse by analyzing the environmental elements of Nietzsche's philosophy from an indigenous perspective in order to consider whether there are similarities between the two. To my knowledge, Nietzsche never made any mention of indigenous peoples in his primary texts and there is little engagement from other philosophers on this linkage. Part of Nietzsche's omission may be a result of the fact that he belonged to an elite class, but it is also likely that he was completely unaware of the indigenous worldview to begin with. The 19th century was fraught with the erasure of indigenous perspectives. Describing indigenous worldviews is not the primary focus of this essay so my discussion will serve merely as an overview. Indigenous here means being native to a given place. As I discuss indigenous peoples, I will do my best to be mindful not to essentialize this group but explore commonalities among peoples through a lens of multicultural pluralism. To aid in my discussion, I will draw upon the work of Native American philosopher Vine Deloria Jr. and ethnographer Anatoli Ignatov.

According to Vine Deloria, Jr., a Native American philosopher who has used multicultural pluralism to provide a broader indigenous perspective, two concepts that are crucial in understanding indigenous worldviews are the concepts of place and power. Place is the environment in which one finds oneself and the phenomena enabled by it and power is spiritual energy or life force. Precisely how much Deloria's concept of power embodies Nietzsche's will to power is beyond the scope of this essay, but I entertain the notion that the two are in fact similar. These two concepts—power and place—are together what constitutes the "personality" of objects in the natural world and afford the actions available to that object. Deloria also argues that Native Americans (and perhaps indigenous peoples more broadly) are non-reductive in their metaphysical considerations and allow for lived possibilities to emerge that would not be possible if they began from an assumption that they definitively knew how nature operates, as is the case with physics in Western science.²⁶ This translates into the relationship that indigenous peoples have with their environment, and overall, means that they often do not profess to know with certainty what is "best" for the environment and non-human nature. This sort of attitude is almost entirely different than that of Western environmentalism and seems to avoid the hubris of humankind that Nietzsche was so critical of. Anatoli Ignatov, an ethnographer studying animism among the Gurensi people of Ghana, argues that much of Nietzsche's perspectivism, (particularly that described in his book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) is similar to the animism of African earth priests. He argues that both perspectives view the world as having its own agency and will

25. Adrian Del Caro, *Grounding the Nietzsche Rhetoric of Earth*, (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004).

26. Vine Deloria and Daniel R. Wildcat, *Power and Place: Indian Education in America*, (New York: Fulcrum Publishing, 2010).

to power and engaging with us in a mutualistic and fluctuating web of relations. The Gurensi bestow gifts upon trees and other natural objects in faith that these acts will be reflected back on them by the Earth. Environmental issues such as climate change are not viewed by the Gurensi in physical or even moral terms, but in the practical terms of its effect on this relationship and us: addressing these concerns are a matter of self-overcoming.²⁷ Ignatov argues not that Nietzsche's philosophy nor African animism are the keys to understanding a proper human relation to the Earth, but rather that both of them together in dialogue may cause us to reflect on this relationship and its maintenance so that we are once again "at home" on the Earth instead of exploiting it like we would an alien world.²⁸ I believe that insofar as Nietzsche viewed *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as one of his most important texts, this account is especially significant.

Viewed this way, a philosophy that affirms the necessary conditions to life, as Nietzsche imagined it, is truly a matter of perspectivism and attending to our own perspectives as well as the so-called environment's. The separation of oneself from one's environment is not possible insofar as we are not subjects but representations of forces and will to power, as Nietzsche claims. If we truly were to live in accordance with this fact, we would engage with the environment as if we are engaging with ourselves. Though we are certainly free to use our will to power in a domineering, exploitative manner against the Earth, this is not without consequence and the Earth may exert its own will to power in a similar way against us. Conversely, we may extend our will to power to bear gifts to the Earth, as if to a good friend, and it may do the same. This is borne out in Nietzsche's *The Will to Power*, where he states (of the will to power) "it continually encounters similar efforts on the part of other bodies and ends by coming to an arrangement ("union") with those of them that are sufficiently related to it: thus they then conspire together for power."²⁹ The relationship Nietzsche describes is distinctly not egalitarian, as this relationship is not equal or the same, but it is in fact reciprocal. There are no guarantees in life and, even as nature is brutal and full of suffering, it is those of "great health" that can face these horrors without resorting to nihilism or decadence. I believe, based on the brief account I have provided, that the indigenous perspective is a far more suitable starting point for what Nietzsche sees as humanity's next evolutionary leap—arising not out of and against Western culture, but outside of and prior to it. Of course, this is a matter of interpretation and still amounts to a significant co-opting of Nietzsche's work no matter how it is framed. Nevertheless, it is my opinion that this is better than having the grounding for *der Uebermensch* be in the aristocratic philosopher, as Nietzsche himself envisioned. One might argue that Nietzsche would view indigenous peoples and their cosmology as suffering from the same "otherworldliness" as the rest of humanity. My counterargument would be that indigenous cosmology does not assert other-worlds but merely

27. Anatoli Ignatov, "The Earth as a Gift-Giving Ancestor," *Political Theory* 45, no. 1 (2016): <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591716656461>, 55.

28. Ignatov, "The Earth as a Gift-Giving Ancestor," 70.

29. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 340.

provides differential interpretations of this world. If Nietzsche is to be taken seriously about perspectivism then these interpretations are entirely valid.

Of course, there are few indigenous peoples left compared to before the emergence of settler-colonialism. Not only has their population been decimated through various systems of oppression and dispossession but many cultures have been lost or destroyed to it as well. Many Native Americans, for example, do not live near their ancestral homelands or reservations, nor do they speak their culture's ancestral language or observe cultural traditions. By all accounts, indigenous people the world over are now exposed to the same Western decadence as everyone else, whether they chose it or not. Though the indigenous perspective regarding nature and the environment has helped to temper the Western worldview, it has only been through great suffering and resistance that it has been able to survive. Insofar as I have argued in this essay that indigenous people and their cultures exhibit characteristics reminiscent of Nietzsche's vision for humanity, I want to end by boldly asserting that anyone who takes Nietzsche's arguments seriously should also take these perspectives seriously, even if they are incommensurable with Western perspectives. I encourage other philosophers to further explore the discourse on environmentalism within Nietzsche I briefly introduced, consider the arguments I've provided, and provide their own accounts of whether this is a compelling interpretation of Nietzsche. I also encourage all readers to support indigenous peoples in whatever way they can. Our evolution may very well depend on it.