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**On Damaged and
Regenerating Life:
Spinoza and the
Mentalities of Climate
Catastrophe**

Dan Taylor

Abstract: This essay strategically intervenes in the ongoing climate catastrophe debate by considering how underlying mentalities that either emphasise Promethean technological fixes and individual behavioural change, or which misanthropically claim human extinction is inevitable, rely on capitalist norms of domination established in the early modern period. Amid a period of urgent hazard warnings, it begins with Adorno to explore the 'sickness' that naturalises and not historicises capitalist domination and calmly assents to business (or catastrophe) as usual. It then turns to Spinoza in three substantial ways: 1) in his apparent ontological critique of anthropocentrism, which has roiled the scholarly literature – the essay uses Spinoza's critique of misanthropy and anthropocentrism in ethics and politics to argue for a new democratic, collegial anthropocentrism; 2) in his critical theory of *ingenium* (mentality), which underpins anthropocentric prejudice as well as shared forms of political domination; and 3) in his underexplored argument for democratic, collegial deliberation for overcoming the force of prejudice, fear and servitude. It places Spinoza in opposition to a theoretical Prometheanist line from Bacon to Boyle, Petty and early modern colonialism which emphasised subduing the Earth, indigenous peoples and labour discipline. It concludes with a speculative outline for a desubjectified, post-Anthropocene democratic praxis.

Keywords: Spinoza, Adorno, Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Prometheanism, Democracy, Collegiality

Strange times these, when virtually every head of state has recently publicly committed themselves to deal with the problem of climate change, an issue of the most immense existential and geopolitical importance this century. Even Oprah Winfrey, the Pope and Ronald McDonald have issued climate action directives. Major hedge funds like BlackRock have begun in 2021 to divest from fossil fuels, coinciding with the growing market interest and profitability of renewables. Once-sceptical publications like the *Financial Times* and *The Economist* have noisily announced briefings and campaigns around the issue, particularly around opportunities presented by carbon trading and offsetting. Historically a concern of ecological and anti-capitalist leftists, today politicians on the right like Marine le Pen and Viktor Orban are calling for a green nationalism, pitched to conservative voters in terms of protected jobs and borders.

The Covid-19 pandemic, with its temporary grounding of domestic flight traffic in the West, has provided an illusion of system change: IEA estimates found that even in the midst of a viral resurgence in December 2020, global CO₂ emissions were 2% higher than the same month a year earlier, while the world's sixty biggest banks have provided around \$3.4

trillion in financing for fossil fuel companies since the Paris climate deal of 2015.¹ On the day I write, the Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii detected 417.19 ppm of CO₂ in the atmosphere – an increase by 0.7% in one year, by 32% since 1958 (when first measured) and by 49% against estimated pre-industrial levels (c.1750).² These figures will soon date, yet the gap between rhetoric and action is persistent.

The Paris Agreement declared ‘the need for an effective and progressive response to the urgent threat of climate change’, in agreeably-vague language common to previous summits.³ Although intrinsically flawed by its reliance on voluntary reductions and soon dispensed with by President Trump, its real shortcoming was the lack of an agent who would act on its urgent calls to “recognise” the problem. The sarcastic entreaty to ‘please recycle’ at the footer of the first page of the draft proposal, which was far plainer about the ‘irreversible threat’ of climate change than the final agreement, is perhaps the most authentic if pessimistic statement in the document.⁴ Plutocrats like Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Richard Branson and even Prince William have in recent years deflected scrutiny of their wealth by offering lavish prizes for new technologies that might tackle climate change: William’s “Earthshot Prize” ‘aims to turn the current pessimism surrounding environmental issues into optimism’.⁵ Most recently, Bill Gates has written a book announcing that we can avoid a climate disaster through technological solutions, adding that ‘the conversation about climate change has been sidetracked by politics’. What we need instead is ‘the world’s passion and its scientific IQ’ – unwavering obedience to democratically unaccountable corporations. ‘We already have some of the tools we need’, he writes, ‘and as for those we don’t yet have, everything I’ve learned about climate and technology makes me optimistic that we can invent them’.⁶ In a post-political era, collective or democratic solutions, or ones that might take hold of the master’s tools (or cease construction entirely) are out of the question. Digital modernity becomes techno-feudalism.

Beneath the rhetoric of urgency or a breezy optimism about technological solutions is a consensus that responses to climate change must not compromise the global economic capitalist system in any

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This essay is dedicated to my friend Terry Woods. My thanks to Agon Hamza and Frank Ruda for their invitation to contribute and support throughout.

1 IEA 2021, np; Rainforest Action Network 2021, p. 4.

2 24 March 2021, using this calculator: <https://www.co2.earth/daily-co2>.

3 *Paris Agreement* (2016), p. 88

4 Conference of the Parties 2015, p. 1.

5 Earth Shot Prize 2021, np.

6 Gates 2021, pp. 4, 18.

meaningful way; that instead, they should present new opportunities for capital return (be it new sources of “green” electricity to sustain continued growth of asset profitability and consumption, or incorporating new swathes of consumers of services and products in the developing world), while absolving investors of political or moral scrutiny. This necessitates that their citizens around the globe view the fossil-based economy as largely as something that can be fixed by new technology (geo-engineering, carbon trading, carbon capture, renewable electricity), or a matter of individual behaviour (diet, air travel, recycling habits), or as something largely impossible to curtail because of the consumption needs of other nations.⁷ A recent G7 statement announced it will ‘put our global ambitions on climate change and the reversal of biodiversity loss at the centre of our plans’ while simultaneously ‘champion[ing] open economies and societies’, ‘freer’ multilateral trading and ‘balanced growth’.⁸ The same year that the UK hosts COP26, a major UN climate summit tasked with ‘uniting the world to tackle climate change’, it also granted new licences to open a coal mine and allow North Sea oil and gas exploration.

To the radical who today posts on Twitter or publishes an article on the urgency of acting in response to climate change, most of the global capitalist class now (nominally) agrees. On a certain level of opposition to a centuries-long process of unimpeded extraction and consumption of natural resources, climate change has made us all anti-capitalists now.

In this way a remarkable state of cognitive dissonance is achieved, in which contradictory ideas not just about climate change but our underlying relationship to the natural world result in a deeply confused mentality (or what Spinoza would call an *ingenium*), at one paralysed in vacillation between empty hope and fear.⁹ On the one, an attitude that focuses on changing individual behaviour, “business as usual” in politics and economics, proffering technological solutions – an attitude of *Prometheus*, the thief of fire. On the other, an attitude focused on the collective behaviour of others but which abandons faith in political (particularly international) solutions, in which climate change reflects an aggressive, greedy but universal human nature whose over-consumption liberalism cannot or should not restrict – a *misanthropic* attitude that refuses to challenge the power of the gods. What is missing is a critical concept of *democratic humanity*. A humanity that collectively acts to not just mitigate or adapt to climate change but also democratically dismantle the capitalist economic structures that have led to such rapid and unprecedented damage to life on Earth in the last seventy-five years. A

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7 Technological, e.g. Gates 2021, ch.11; individual, e.g. Williamson et al. 2018, p. 5.

8 G7 2021, np.

9 The Latin term *ingenium* can refer to a natural quality, disposition, temperament, character, but also capacity, talent or genius. In this essay I will generally use the more open ‘mentality’ which incorporates existing dispositions and also the possibility of expansion and rational transformation.

humanity that regenerates and re-establishes social and economic activity in a sustainable, democratic and cooperative fashion, through which the part is valued as much as the whole.

While in recent years important work of a broadly eco-socialist hue has addressed these themes – whose range vastly outspan an essay like this – where I intend to contribute is in two ways. Firstly, by approaching the problem of climate in/under-action through a conceptual problem of mentality; second, by using the philosopher Spinoza to examine how shared narratives or ontological premises about ‘Nature’ or ‘human nature’ result in the perpetuation of dangerous political outcomes.¹⁰ Throughout, I will make the case that Spinoza has been overlooked as an ally for approaching environmental problems. Indeed, the apparent difficulties, like his anthropocentrism in politics (certainly not in his metaphysics) are wholly instructive for considering how to establish mass democratic movements for civilisational regeneration over the coming decades.

Damaged Life

In *Minima Moralia: Reflections From Damaged Life* (1951), Theodor Adorno addresses the ‘sickness’ of those who have not so much accommodated themselves but become incapacitated by their subordination to authority. Qualities like ‘cheerfulness, openness, sociability, successful adaptation to the inevitable’ and an ‘unruffled calm’ have become prerequisites for adaptation and success.¹¹ This sickness, and its resultant call in the Finale to practise philosophy ‘in [the] face of despair’, alludes to Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness Unto Death*, for whom despair is a condition of not being oneself.¹² The sickness and despair that characterises life in modern administered societies lies in its docile acceptance, if not ability to thrive in a life thoroughly ‘wrong’, alienated, ‘as normal as the damaged society it resembles’, wherein what is damaged or lost has become normalised.

Readers of Adorno will know that this response *from* (rather than *on*) damaged life is in response to a sense of life irreparably harmed by the Shoah, as one barbaric culmination of a centuries-long development of instrumental rationality that had also created the modern capitalist consumer society like that of the United States, to which Adorno and Max Horkheimer, to whom *Minima Moralia* was dedicated, had been forced to seek refuge during the war. During these initial years, the pair had developed this analysis in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), which observes a process of reason being used instrumentally from the early modern period to dominate nature, snuff out universal solidarity and

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¹⁰ Throughout, I will use a realist definition of *Nature* as the material processes and structures that exist independent of human activity and culture.

¹¹ Adorno 2005, p. 59.

¹² *Ibid.*; 247; Kierkegaard 1989, p. 60.

control humanity within a totally 'administered world'. The pair illustrate the argument with the myth of Odysseus's encounter with the Sirens. In resisting their seduction, he succeeded not just in domesticating himself and his subservient crew, but Nature itself, using deception, cunning, self-discipline and obedience. Odysseus recognised that the 'way of civilization has been that of obedience and work, over which fulfilment shines everlastingly as mere illusion, as beauty deprived of power'.¹³ Yet it is remarkable that the figure of Prometheus does not appear at all in this book, one who, in an insightful study by Pierre Hadot, was often invoked in this same period as the founder of experimental science through his subversive, gods-defying wish to 'discover the secrets of nature, or the secrets of God, by means of tricks and violence'.¹⁴ In each case, the discovery of such secrets had left human beings bereft, 'worldless', as Hannah Arendt would write a decade later in *The Human Condition* (1958), subsumed by vastly powerful machines and left infinitesimally small by the new, industrial law of nature: exchange-value.¹⁵

Adorno's task in setting out his melancholy science is to explore to what extent remained 'the teaching of the good life' – what in classical philosophy was called an *ethics*.¹⁶ Adorno, famously (if deceptively), is pessimistic. 'Our perspective of life has passed into an ideology which conceals the fact that there is life no longer' he demurs. Yet the work's life/not-life or wrong-life distinction relies on a gap between the public performance of assent to the naturalised 'political façade' and a private myopia to the underlying reality of capitalist expropriation and its imprint on popular culture.¹⁷ This gap, and our inability to perceive it (metaphors of the eye abound), defines the despair that Adorno diagnoses as the modern malaise, wherein life's lack of autonomy reflects the 'absolute predominance of the economy'.¹⁸ Sickness becomes normality. Rebellion in bourgeois society is neutered and replaced with an individualised mentality that perceives late capitalism as a natural and not historical culmination, in which the few opportunities for individual agency are in the performance of one's labour (what's now so often mistakenly called one's "career", as if it involved such security, vocation or such clear distinction from one's leisure time), or one's habits of consumption.¹⁹

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¹³ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, pp. xi, 26.

¹⁴ Hadot 2006, p. 95.

¹⁵ Arendt 1998, pp. 257, 307.

¹⁶ Adorno 2005, p. 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁹ The late, brilliant cultural theorist Mark Fisher called this a process of 'mandatory individualism' (2018, p. 757).

What is required is a new diagnostic, one which evaluates the patient's symptoms (docility, inactivity, irrational calm) by way of a concept of life understood critically. Thus 'only objective way of diagnosing the sickness of the healthy is by the incongruity between their rational existence and the possible course their lives might be given by reason.'²⁰The task for critical theory as set out by the melancholy science is to contemplate things as they are and not as we would like them to be, to adapt a tenet of Spinoza. To perceive the world as 'systematised horror' yet with the aim of displacing that world, estranging it, for the sake of the possible.

This imagery of the theorist-as-physician is by no means new – Machiavelli had popularised the image of balancing the humours of the body politic, though we can look back further to Plato, or in the Indian tradition, the 3rd-century BCE *Arthashastra*. Some, understandably led by Adorno's own language of alienation and redemption, have concluded that everything in existence in late capitalism is a manifestation of the false or wrong.²¹ In reading Adorno amid the Anthropocene, Joanna hZylinska presents a minimal ethics amid the 'impending death of the human population, i.e., about the extinction of the human species', if that were not already clear enough.²² The task of a minimal ethics is to outline, in both a 'non-systemic' and 'non-normative' fashion, an open-ended outlook that leaves behind human welfare and 'concerns itself with dynamic relations between entities across various scales such as stem cells, flowers, dogs, humans, rivers, electricity pylons, computer networks, and planets'.²³ While her position is admittedly minimal, surrendering politics and ontology entirely in favour of modest experimentation in thought, it relies on a common if instructive misreading not just of Adorno but of the impact of climate change more broadly. On one level, such a perspective involves a peculiarly-eschatological view of humankind's inherently fallen and doomed state, which takes extinction as a given and political resistance all but impossible.²⁴ The solution (if it can be called that) is to sit back, cease vexatious and futile attempts at resistance, and undertake 'deep adaptation' and grief for the world we are about to lose.²⁵ In the process, collective agency is surrendered to the forces of fossil fuel capitalism.

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20 Ibid., p. 59.

21 E.g. Rüdiger Bittner, "Kritik, und wie es besser wäre", in Whyman (2016), pp. 1-2.

22 Zylinska 2014, p. 9.

23 Ibid., p. 20.

24 Other proponents of this position include Jairus Victor Grove, Jonathan Franzen and Paul King-snorth.

25 Glossing Bendell 2020.

While such fatalism is obviously self-defeating and self-fulfilling, its problem in relation to Adorno is that the sickness of the individual diagnosed is one symptomatic of being embedded in *the relations of* late capitalism. Drawing on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the sickness of the prototypical bourgeois individual and its conflict-neutered ego is its wholly practical, obedient, 'sacrifice of the present moment to the future'.²⁶ In regard to climate change caused by CO2 emissions and biodiversity loss, for which scientific forecasts demanding urgent action go back at least to the 1960s,²⁷ what is remarkable is that this socio-relational sacrifice (labour, consumption) is continually made even as the possibility of the future recedes from view. Ethics must instead widen its scope to include political institutions and socioeconomic relations, or as Rahel Jaeggi puts it, 'the forms of life in which the action of the individual is embedded'.²⁸ Ethics thereby necessitates historically critiquing the socio-cultural mentalities which rationalise and naturalise the current political and economic order.

Ethics also necessitates reapproaching that initial ontological relationship with Nature that had, by 1951, become so damaged for Adorno and others. Whereas Odysseus had used 'deception, cunning, rationality', and Prometheus employed trickery and violence in stealing fire from Zeus – in each case, involving a dialectic between reason or man (active, cunning) and nature (passive, hostile) – I propose we follow another road of the early modern period, one entirely if understandably missing from Adorno and Horkheimer's survey of bourgeois society. That of Spinoza, whose two major works, the *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670, hereafter TTP) and the *Ethics* (1677), engage in a running battle over the meaning, understanding and value of Nature against theologians, ambitious preachers, repressive monarchs and the wider forces that seek to perpetuate public ignorance and contempt for the natural world in order to shore up their regimes. While Spinoza's remarks will usually come either in the defence of his substance monism (*Ethics*) or in defending the freedom to philosophise (TTP), taken together, they offer a powerful corrective to misanthropic views which surrender or misunderstand political agency as a matter of individual behaviour or technocratic/ technological paternalism in the Anthropocene.

The Problem of Anthropocentrism

Since 2010, at the behest of the socialist government of Bolivia, the Secretary-General of the United Nations has published *Harmony with Nature*, a series of annual reports that take a holistic view of attempting to

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²⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.40.

²⁷ We will consider two examples in the final section on temporality.

²⁸ Jaeggi 2005, p. 68.

transform our relationship with nature, from one of utility and exploitation to one of living harmoniously. Whereas most international-level discussions of climate change focus on how to reduce harmful emissions and pollution, these reports call for a more ambitious transformation at the level of ethics and education. As its first report argues, 'Education is critical if people are to be motivated and informed to take the necessary actions to mend the damage already incurred and avoid further damage to the Earth and its ecosystem'.²⁹ Such an education would necessitate a change in mentality 'rooted in respect for Nature and the interdependence of humankind and the Earth'.³⁰ This mission has continued until the present. As the President of the General Assembly of the UN states in its most recent 2020 report, we must collectively realise 'a paradigm shift from a human-centric society to an Earth-centred global ecosystem'.³¹

In its second report of 2011, we find the figure of Spinoza invoked as an anomalous early modern who challenges historical anthropocentrism, indicating what it calls 'the emergence of the environmental movement'.³² While Spinoza's work is left unpacked, it's presented in the wider context of challenges to anthropocentrism, and of philosophies which value nature and that recognise human beings as parts of it. While slight on Spinoza, the Reports outline their intellectual debt to deep ecologist Arne Naess in envisioning a 'new economics' that serves nature, abandons a 'domination paradigm' and recognises 'that every living thing, animal and plant, has an equal right to live or flourish'.³³ Over the 1970s-90s, Naess wrote several important essays arguing Spinoza's use to environmentalism. In particular, Naess's analysis hinged on the *Ethics*, pulling together formulations like the startling equivocation 'God or Nature' (*deus sive natura*) or Spinoza's rejection of human nature being a 'dominion within a dominion' as theoretical resources to establishing a sustainable, loving human relationship with Nature.³⁴ Naess' effort proceeds through two steps:

First, *ontological*: in the *Ethics*, nature is presented as immanent, complete, and equivalent to God (per his reading of *deus sive natura*),

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29 UN General Assembly, *Harmony with Nature* 2010, p. 10. Reports hereafter cited *HwN*.

30 *HwN* 2016, p. 3. I am indebted to Moa de Lucia Dahlbeck for making the connection between the Reports and Spinoza (2019, ch1).

31 *HwN* 2020, p. 2.

32 *HwN* 2011, pp. 6-7.

33 *HwN* 2013, pp. 5, 12.

34 From Spinoza 1985, Preface to Part III, and Part IV, respectively, in *Ethics* (hereafter *E*). Citations of *Ethics* follow standard convention: part is represented by Roman numerals I-V; proposition by p, followed by Arabic numerals; d for demonstration; s for scholium; pref for preface; l for lemma. Citations of *Theological-Political Treatise* (hereafter TTP) and *Political Treatise* (TP) indicate chapter then paragraph numbers (Spinoza 2016). Citations of the Letters (*Epistles* = *Ep.*) indicate their number in Spinoza 1985 and 2016.

in that its being is constituted by the activity of its particular modes. In contrast to the early modern mechanistic view of Nature as passive, inert, made for human mastery, instead the 'Spinozan *identification ... of God with Nature* means reinvesting Nature with perfection, value, and holiness'.³⁵

Second, *ethical*: the equivocation *deus sive natura* surely entails an intellectual love of nature as we might an intellectual love of God. '*Amor intellectualis Dei* implies active loving concern for all living beings'.³⁶ Therefore, rational activity in the *Ethics* involves compassion for all living beings and their 'intrinsic value'. The rational is therefore the ecological.

On a straightforwardly metaphysical level, to proceed from one to two seems possible: if human beings have no privileged position in nature, taken from the perspective of nature as a whole, then why should human beings have any more intrinsic worth than any other matter, be they stem cells, dogs, rivers, electricity pylons or planets? Each are, taken in themselves for Spinoza, merely composites of finite modes of the one substance, perceived through the attribute of extension and understood through the attribute of thought. Zylinska's formulation earlier drew on Jane Bennett, a reader of Spinoza whose 'vital materialism' radically explores this kind of possibility, imputing a kind of agency to all nonhuman bodies as well as redefining human agency as involving a plethora of non-human influences, a 'confederate agency of many striving macro or microactants'.³⁷ This approach, often called new materialism, has been rightly critiqued by Andreas Malm as rendering the concept of agency and intentionality meaningless, diminishing our capacity to recognise the true (human, capitalist) causes of climate change while also, in my view, anthropomorphising nonhuman life.³⁸

Yet perspectives like this also involve some theoretical three card monte in their approach to Spinoza. As Genevieve Lloyd and Karen Houle have demonstrated, this kind of reading overlooks the obvious anthropocentrism elsewhere in the *Ethics* where Spinoza argues that human beings have a right to use animals 'at our pleasure, and treat them as is most convenient for us'.³⁹ For Spinoza, any restrictions on slaughtering animals are founded on 'empty superstition and unmanly compassion', because they involve a category error in confusing animal natures and emotions with human nature and emotions.⁴⁰ As our natures

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35 Naess 2005, p. 383.

36 Naess 2008, p. 239.

37 Bennett 2010, p. 23.

38 Malm 2018, pp. 81-82.

39 Lloyd 1980, pp. 295-297; Houle 1997.

40 EIVp37s1

are essentially different, animals share little in common with us. While Spinoza says that the self-contentment and blessedness of the wise might involve the company of green plants and use of animals, it is human friendship and rational association that makes up the collective he champions. Hasana Sharp summarises the problem well when she writes that Spinoza is 'generally not viewed as a friend to [21st-century] environmental ethics'.⁴¹

A more substantial problem, and one that jeopardises even the theoretical foundations of the *Harmony with Nature* reports earlier, is that Spinoza presents Nature in Part I of the *Ethics* as having no special moral regard for the welfare of human beings over any other things; yet the anthropology of Parts III and IV of *Ethics* are clear in outlining an anthropocentric ethics and politics which identifies the conditions for human blessedness and power, through a collective way of life led by reason. For Lloyd and De Jonge, this anthropocentrism invalidates any attempt at a humanization of the non-human world; there is no valid metaphysical basis for a metaphysics of non-human care.⁴² There are a number of possible counter-defences: Naess' reply to Lloyd with a new argument that human self-preservation is enhanced by 'generosity, fortitude, and love' to value nature, or that, if Spinoza were alive now amid unprecedented climate change, he would have abandoned his anthropocentric moral theory.⁴³ But in each, the argument either begs the question or relies on anachronistic grounds. A third option is possible that involves neither abandoning anthropocentrism in politics and ethics (something Spinoza would consider impossible) nor aspiring that all human beings should rise to a lofty, excellent height of serenity of mind whose probability Spinoza discounts.

In another passage where Spinoza argues we should elevate human welfare above animals, Spinoza dismisses the '*melancholici*' (misanthropes) who claim to despise human behaviour and instead choose the company of beasts and solitude in a life 'uncultivated and wild'.⁴⁴ This appearance of the *melancholics* is interesting, not just in terms of Spinoza's own project but that of Adorno's 'melancholy science' earlier. It reflects how Spinoza's ethics is concerned with a way of life defined by human power and joyous self-contentment, through the development and teaching of our rational powers with other human beings. It implies a shared exuberance and luxuriation in spaces of collective possibility with friends and strangers. Throughout the *Ethics* and the TTP, Spinoza

41 Sharp 2017, p. 159; Lloyd agrees: 1980, p. 294. Cf. Sharp 2011, p. 194.

42 Ibid., 295; De Jonge 2004, p. 145.

43 Naess 1980, p. 315; this second position is attributed (unjustly, I think) by Dahlbeck to Sharp (2019, p. 150).

44 EIVp35s.

renounces the theologians and others who would denigrate either Nature as imperfect or human nature as flawed.

As Moa de Lucia Dahlbeck argues, such instances of anthropocentrism would mean that we cannot use Spinoza for 'an entirely naturalistic and non-anthropocentric ontological understanding of value and moral theory'.⁴⁵ In a careful argument regarding the applicability in international law of 'terrestrial'-wide legislation like that called for in the *Harmony With Nature* or in the work of Bruno Latour, she argues a 'curiously pragmatic' position that the state's laws cannot and should not prescribe a non-anthropocentric relationship with Nature.⁴⁶ Human beings are by nature governed by irrational and self-serving passions, and successful laws must be adapted to the cognitively-weakened *ingenium* (mentality) of the people. Therefore, for Dahlbeck, a 'true' or 'adequate' law in terms of Spinoza's anthropocentric psychological and moral theory is one that sets few restrictions on our behaviour and relies on indirect incentives. Hence 'laws cannot prescribe what our relationship to nature should be', she writes, 'rather, they should recognise our anthropocentrism and guide us towards affective relationships among subjects where this care for nature can then arise'.⁴⁷

While based on reasonable grounds of interpretation, the argument itself reflects a wider crisis of liberal political thought in responding to the problem of climate change, in which nation-states, where they have not already *de facto* ceded their executive power or sovereignty to non-elected financial bodies, are loathe to set any restrictions on behaviour, instead presenting the debate as a matter of voluntary choice and technological innovation which indirectly allows fossil capitalism to continue unimpeded. The appeal to a pessimistic anthropology – in this case, the irrational *ingenium*, or the wider fatalism of the misanthropic position – perpetuates the problem. In Dahlbeck's case, the argument is also out-of-step with a sea change in most global citizens' attitudes to the urgency of transforming economies and restricting carbon emissions *now*. It also, curiously, does not go as far as Spinoza himself in outlining what the statesman should do. While the wise statesman's laws (and in the TTP, Spinoza has the prophet Moses in mind) should reflect the shared mentality of the people, they should not either pander or reinforce harmful prejudice. For a shared mentality is never fixed but dynamic and constantly moulded, empowered by living according to reason or disempowered by living under the rule of fear.

But the wider Spinoza and environmental ethics debate is highly instructive. What our interlocutors have unexpectedly ended up agreeing

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45 Dahlbeck 2019, p. 159.

46 Ibid., pp. 170-174.

47 Ibid., p. 173.

on is the problem of anthropocentrism for environmental ethics. With Naess, Bennett, and a lesser extent Sharp, the issue is addressed by using ontology to outmanoeuvre the veil of anthropocentrism. But this only a problem insofar as anthropocentrism is conceived pessimistically as something inherently rapacious, destructive, aggressive and irrational. Such a misanthropic perspective can be overturned if we accept that collective self-preservation, in the third decade of the 21st century, necessitates transforming our relationship with a profoundly damaged natural world, so that we as human beings can regenerate biodiversity and mitigate worsening climate change and pollution through rapid and immediate cessation in fossil fuel activity. In other words, that we reclaim human survival (not to speak of self-contentment or blessedness) in terms of regard and protection for the natural world upon which human survival depends. And, with the ethical imperative that as rates of extinction and human and nonhuman habitat loss accelerates, as they will over the next few decades, that we act and react neither with the tragic mentality of the misanthropes, nor with the cunning mentality of Prometheus, by means of geoengineering *tekhne* and financial trickery.

This Capital Material

Screeds against the Anthropocene usually agree in vilifying one early modern as the founding father of a war against the natural world. 'Descartes provided a general philosophy of the irrelevance of ethics to the relationship between man and nature', thunders the second *Harmony with Nature* report, inferring that Cartesian mind-body dualism and the mechanistic view of animals implies a disregard for Nature.⁴⁸ Such accounts often quote the *Discourse on Method*, in which Descartes speculates on the aspiration to 'make ourselves, as it were, lords and masters of nature', in order to increase human survival.⁴⁹ It is curious that Descartes becomes recast as an establishment villain at a time when the *New Science* sought to democratise human knowledge against the prevailing status quo of, on the one, mediocre and contradictory Scholasticism, underpinned only by the authority of the universities, and on the other, a scriptural literalism that united Reformers and Counter-Reformers in the immolation of freethinkers and persecution of advocates of Copernican science. In any case, Descartes simply reflected contemporary social and Christian attitudes. We can look back to Genesis 1:28, particularly the 1611 King James Version, for one of the most concise outlines of an anthropocentric, domineering viewpoint:

and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over

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⁴⁸ *HwN* 2011, p. 6. Other proponents include Jason Moore, Claire Colebrook, Bruno Latour, back to Val Plumwood and Carolyn Merchant.

⁴⁹ Descartes 1985, pp. 142-143.

the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth⁵⁰

While some like Lynn White Jr. have argued that this Providence-based outlook rationalised and justified a coming plunder of the natural world that would coincide with the rise of the New Science, the opposite took place.⁵¹ What the work of Copernicus and Galileo subsequently had done was decentre *Anthropos* in decentring the Earth's place in the solar system, while the achievements of the microscope, telescope and the maritime compass brought Europeans into contact with new worlds that made their own vastly smaller. This process is at work in Sir Francis Bacon, an English natural philosopher and statesman whose influence spans not just over Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes and Locke but the wider development of English imperialism. In the *New Organon* (1620), Bacon repeatedly invoke the necessity of dominating nature and of extending the 'empire of the human race itself over the nature of things'.⁵² For Bacon, this involves establishing new scientific institutions and experimental methods that would sweep aside a 'respect for antiquity' that restrained human judgement like 'the effect of a spell'.⁵³ For Bacon, the 'secrets of nature' are not freely given but best yielded under the 'harassments' (an alternative translation is 'torture') of experiments.⁵⁴

In a perceptive commentary, Hadot places Bacon at the centre of a Promethean tradition in European thought which seeks to transform, unveil and reveal its secrets using 'violence, constraint, and even torture'.⁵⁵ In contrast stands the Orphic, of veneration and protection of a deified Nature that Hadot associates with Goethe (and Goethe with Spinoza). Indeed, Bacon is unusual for his open celebration of Prometheus, who represents a Christianised 'State of Man' and anthropocentric right to domination:

man seems to be the thing in which the whole world centres, with respect to final causes; so that if he were away, all other things would stray and fluctuate ... Thus the revolutions, places, and periods, of the celestial bodies, serve him for distinguishing times and seasons ...; the winds sail our ships, drive our mills, and move our machines; and the vegetables and animals of all kinds either afford us matter for houses and habitations, clothing, food, physic.⁵⁶

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50 Bible 2008.

51 White Jr. 1967; for a critique, see Harrison 1999.

52 Bacon 2000, p. 100.

53 Ibid., 175.

54 Ibid., 81; cf. Hadot 2006, p. 93.

55 Ibid.

56 Bacon 1884, p. 395.

While Bacon's Prometheanism shared conventional Christian providence in important ways, it also outstripped it. By the mid-17th century, Joseph Glanvill extended Bacon's claim to 'the *Empire of Man over Nature*', while Richard Eburne mobilised the same providence-domination nexus to justify Caribbean slave plantations.⁵⁷ William Petty, secretary to Thomas Hobbes in his youth, was a decisive figure in establishing the discipline of political economy, principally through his work cataloguing viciously expropriated property in the late 17th century English colonisation of Ireland. He extended this concept to labour discipline. '*People* are therefore in truth the chiefest, most fundamental, and pretious [sic] commodity', he writes, 'out of which may be derived all sorts of Manufactures, Navigation, Riches, Conquests and solid Dominion'.⁵⁸ This raw and idle '*capital material*' as Petty tellingly calls it has been committed by God to the 'Supreme Authority; in whose prudence and disposition it is, to improve, manage, and fashion it to more or less advantage'. In each instance, it is not merely that Nature (or idle humanity) is presented as something passive and inert, it is also that the right human disposition to what becomes *naturalised* is an antagonistic (if purportedly self-defensive) mentality of domination, conquest and violence.

Between 1661 and 1663, the pioneering English chemist Robert Boyle engaged in a fascinating, indirect correspondence with Spinoza, characterised by mutual misunderstanding. Boyle, immensely influenced by Bacon, had aimed to demonstrate the new mechanical or 'corpuscular' philosophy, using experiments that he believed demonstrated the chemical conversion of one substance into another. Spinoza disagreed, and conducted his own experiments to demonstrate that what had taken place was merely a physical transformation in the same substance. This complex exchange is fascinating in its underlying premises regarding Nature. For Boyle, knowledge of nature was yielded through empirical observation and experimentation (a road from Bacon to Newton to modern empirical science); for Spinoza, most experiments were misguided and superfluous. 'No one will ever be able to 'confirm' this by Chemical experiments, nor by any others', he writes, 'but only by [rational] demonstration and computations'.⁵⁹ The problem with Boyle's inherently-anthropocentric approach is that it only regards Nature in relation to human sense perception or needs, and therefore cannot 'explain Nature as it is in itself'.

Yet the encounter left a lasting impact on each. For Boyle, writing on attitudes to Nature later, there were two sources of its inappropriate

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57 Glanvill, *Scepisis Scientifica* (1665); Eburne, *A Plaine Path-way to Plantations* (1624), in Harrison 1999, pp. 98, 101.

58 [Petty] 1680, p. 289. Adorno and Horkheimer: 'The seafarer Odysseus outwits the natural deities as the civilized traveler was later to swindle savages' (2002, p. 39). Both passages should be read alongside the account of primitive accumulation in Marx, *Capital Volume I*.

59 *Ep.6*.

eneration. The first belonged to nameless ‘*Atheists*’ who because they ‘ascribe so much to *Nature*, that they think it needless to have Recourse to a *Deity*, for the giving an Account of the *Phaenomena* of the Universe’. There was only one figure Boyle had in mind.⁶⁰ The second is a debilitating respect among the common people, ‘that the veneration, wherewith Men are imbued for what they call *Nature*, has been a discouraging impediment to the Empire of Man over the inferior Creatures of God’.⁶¹ It is unclear whether these inferior creatures refer to other animals, or other humans.

At the root of the divergence between Spinoza and that of Bacon, Descartes, Boyle and Hobbes is a profound shift in humanity’s relationship with Nature, from one of disenchanting mastery or paternal stewardship to one of participation and intellectual veneration. In the TTP, Spinoza insists that true philosophers strive to understand things as they are, according to the order of Nature; accordingly, ‘they are concerned, not that nature should obey them, but that they should obey nature’.⁶² Yet obeying Nature necessitates not reducing it to standards of human morality or purpose. In an important passage in the TTP, repeated near-verbatim in the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza emphasises this *distance* and *intellectual regard* between Nature and human nature:

Nature is not constrained by the laws of human reason, which aim only at man’s true advantage and preservation. It is governed by infinite other laws, which look to the eternal order of the whole of nature, of which man is only a small part. ... So when anything in nature seems to us ridiculous, absurd, or evil, that’s because we know things only in part, and for the most part are ignorant of the order and coherence of the whole of nature⁶³

On one level, this helps clarify the apparent problem of anthropocentrism earlier: human reason is founded on our own advantage and self-preservation; even if we can regard the laws of Nature as they are in themselves, we cannot overcome our embodied, human condition (nor should we wish to).⁶⁴ Yet it also revels in humanity’s participation in Nature as what the *Ethics* will call *natura naturata* – the totality of all finite beings which collectively and immanently constitute the ‘universal power

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60 Royal Society archives contain two unpublished pages by Boyle (1670s-80s), “Notes for a paper against Spinoza”, denouncing his critique of miracles.

61 Boyle 1996, pp. 3, 15.

62 TTP 6.34

63 TTP 16.10-11; cf. TP 2.8. I am indebted to Antonio Salgado Borge for highlighting this passage.

64 Cf. EIVp37s2.

of the whole of nature'.⁶⁵ Indeed, one of the most subversive challenges of Spinoza's critique of existing ecclesiastical authority, particularly in Chapter 6 on miracles, is the shift in epistemology implied, that God's decrees, commands and providence must be understood as nothing but 'the fixed and immutable order of nature'.⁶⁶ The *Ethics* is clear in insisting that human beings are no 'dominion within a dominion' – subtly overturning the language of Genesis and its readers – and the text is replete with a re-visioning of human beings as finite modes of one substance, a totality that proceeds from the most miniscule part up to 'the face of the whole universe'.⁶⁷

In an insightful commentary of the 'physical digression' of EIIp13s, in which this remarkable re-visioning appears, biophysicist and philosopher Henri Atlan has argued that the text provides a 'protobiological theory' of the individual as a 'psychophysical' compound or union of body and mind.⁶⁸ This anticipates a now-modern biological understanding of human life, in which living and knowing are products of a 'self-organization' of unconscious, deterministic and non-living parts (e.g. 'mechanical', carbon composition). What Atlan carefully insists is that determinism does not imply what Spinoza's critical contemporaries called 'fatalism'; that an ethics of freedom and knowing is made *more possible* through the recognition of our responsibility for acting *and not acting*. Yet Atlan leaves the social and political consequences of this startling reconceptualization of Nature unpacked.

For what these instances reflect is a criticism throughout Spinoza's mature philosophical and project against the devaluation of nature *and* of human nature. In Part 3 of *Ethics*, where Spinoza decries considering human beings in nature as a dominion within a dominion, he writes that prevailing accounts of the human affects mistakenly view human beings as disturbing the order of nature.⁶⁹ Thus such accounts often curse, mourn or laugh at human "vices" instead of rightly understanding human activity within the 'common power of nature', and that human actions and appetites might be approached with the conceptual rigor and naturalistic consistency as geometric 'lines, planes, and bodies'. So too with any attempt to consider Nature itself as imperfect. In a letter to Johannes Hudde, Spinoza writes that 'whatever involves necessary existence cannot have in it any imperfection, but must express pure perfection'.⁷⁰

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65 EIp29s; TTP 16.3.

66 TTP 6.5; cf. 3.7-3.9.

67 *Ep.*64; cf. 'the whole of Nature', EIIp13I7s.

68 Atlan 2018, pp. 70-75, my translations.

69 EIIIpref.

70 *Ep.*35.

In disregarding nature as understood as the dynamic, extended totality of God's being, it is implied that God is by definition 'limited and deficient'.⁷¹ It takes a *falsely instrumental perspective*: it judges the perfection or imperfection of a given thing not solely by its nature or power, but to the extent 'they please or offend men's senses, or because they are of use to, are incompatible with, human nature'.⁷² The problem with cursing human nature, or viewing nature as either imperfect or necessitating 'harassments' from the colonial emissaries of the 'Empire of Man' [sic], is that each engenders prejudices that become organised by ambitious seekers of authority over the common people into superstitions and phantasmagoria of political domination.

Collegial Anthropocentrism

Spinoza did not see Boyle's treatise, written in 1666 but published in 1685, but the Appendix to *Ethics* Part I proceeds with an excoriating critique of providence-grounded and domination-based understandings of God, and of Nature, that underpinned Bacon and Boyle's approaches. While out of necessity of its geometric method, the *Ethics* lacks an Introduction, the Appendix should be read not as a coda but as Part I's concealed entrance, through which the reader is stripped of the prejudices that inhibit understanding its radical substance monism. It subtly provides a solution for the gap between ontological and ethical notions of purposeful ecological human activity that troubled us earlier.

Spinoza begins with an anthropological account of human prejudice. The mistaken but universally-arising illusion of acting in terms of ends, and to see the world in terms of final causes and divine providence, arises from the passive pursuit of our appetites – the 'eyes for seeing, teeth for chewing, plants and animals for food' whose natural causes we do not consider. Spinoza adds that because humans come into conflict through the pursuit of these appetites, and because they lacked understanding of one another, they were compelled to 'turn toward themselves, and reflect on the ends by which they are usually determined to do such things; so they necessarily judge the temperament [*ingenium*] of other men from their own temperament'.⁷³ This same delusion is then applied to God, conceived anthropomorphically as a father-ruler, through this same application of *ingenium*. 'So it has happened that each of them has thought up from his own temperament different ways of worshipping God might love them above all the rest', and 'direct the whole of Nature according to the needs of their blind desire and insatiable greed'. In this way, an anthropological tendency to prejudice becomes the source of anthropocentric superstition.

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71 *Ep.*36. Cf. *Elp*11s; *Elp*17s.

72 *Elapp.*

73 *Elapp.*

This early, instrumentalist and self-serving understanding of *ingenium* is complemented by later appearances in the *Ethics*. In discussing ambition (the 'striving to bring it about that everyone should approve his love and hate', another pertinent affect of the Anthropocene), Spinoza adds that 'each of us, by his nature, wants the others to live according to his temperament'.⁷⁴ In the TTP however, Spinoza sets out the argument that this *ingenium* is inalienable. 'If it were as easy to command men's minds as it is their tongues, every ruler would govern in safety and no rule would be violent', he writes. 'Everyone would live according to the mentality of the rulers'.⁷⁵ But the sovereign cannot have total control of people's inner *ingenium* without destabilising the state, therefore the free republic must allow permission for people to make 'their own judgment about everything according to their own mentality', and speak their minds.

This argument is complemented by others in the text which present *ingenium* as both variable, subjective, often contrary, but one's own ('each person must be allowed freedom of judgment and the power to interpret the foundations of faith according to his own mentality').⁷⁶ There is a certain strand of scholarship in the United States, associated with Lewis Feuer, Steven B. Smith and others, which argues that Spinoza is a proto-liberal defender of unfettered free speech. If this is so, then Spinoza will be of little use to the political problem of transforming prejudiced mentalities sketched out earlier. But something more radical takes place. For what the TTP is focused on is not a mere reinforcement of an individual subjective mentality, but an historico-political analysis of how a shared mentality can constitute but also become transformed within an organised public. This is demonstrated by the work's discussion of how prophets have historically taught persuasive lessons of justice, peace and charity foundational for societal harmony by use of the imagination. In the TTP this occurs principally in the account of the shared 'mentality' of the Hebrew people under the leadership of Moses, though later Spinoza speaks of how Jesus Christ accommodated himself to the 'mentality of the people'.⁷⁷ Moses' gift as a statesman was his understanding of the 'mentality and stubborn heart of his nation'; he developed historical narratives and customs later authorised in scripture that compelled the people to live according to the dictate of reason, without necessarily understanding what these dictates were.⁷⁸

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74 EIIIp31s; EIIIp39s.

75 TTP 20.1, 20.6.

76 TTP pref.28. Cf. TTP pref.12, pref.29, *Ep*.30.

77 TTP 4.33; cf. 4.35; 11.23.

78 TTP 3.41; cf. 4.17; 5.7; 5.27-28.

While Spinoza's Moses has some salutary qualities as a wise statesman, the historical lesson of a failed theocratic Hebrew state was intended as a warning of the dangers of allowing fears, hatred and superstitions to be whipped up by ambitious preachers and political factions. Why were the Hebrews more stubborn, xenophobic or 'stiff-necked' than others, Spinoza asks; '[s]urely nature creates individuals, not nations'? But individuals can indeed adopt shared characteristics through the influence of 'laws and customs' – what Althusser would later call the '*materiality of the very existence of ideology*' – which then lead a nation to have its particular mentality, its particular character, and its particular prejudices'.⁷⁹ To understand this problem, we must go back and seriously consider the TTP's aim of defending the 'freedom to philosophise', as Mogens Lærke has recently proposed.⁸⁰ What Spinoza has in mind is not merely keeping ecclesiastical power in check, but in conceiving of a public space in which individual mentalities are transformed, from self-seeking members of the private sphere, driven by their fear, anger and frustrated desires towards credulous superstition and 'fighting for servitude as if for salvation' under a tyrant,⁸¹ to active, dissenting citizens with public, democratic values.

This occurs specifically in the TTP's account of democracy in Chapter 16. Here Spinoza presents two arguments for democracy over other political forms. *Naturalistically*, it corresponds most to the equality and freedom 'nature concedes to everyone' in the state of nature.⁸² *Epistemically*, it involves large, representative assemblies in which 'collegial' deliberation ensures the wide and free discussion of ideas and testimonies that ensure responsible, reasonable and representative decisions are made.⁸³ These assemblies are not bound to establish total consensus, rather, they seek to mitigate disagreements so that the people 'can openly hold different and contrary opinions, and still live in harmony'.⁸⁴ What matters most is that democracies act in the collective interest, and act with maximal participation and public executive power. In a democracy no-one surrenders their mentality or right to the whole; rather, they act as a part in the whole, and the whole acts through the part.⁸⁵ While Spinoza's argument for democracy often invokes naturalism, he doesn't imply that democratic governance inevitably or often arises.

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79 TTP 17.93-94; Althusser 1997, p. 10.

80 Lærke 2021, ch1.

81 TTP pref.10.

82 TTP 16.36.

83 TTP 16.25; 20.2; 5.23; Lærke 2021, pp. 134-142; Steinberg 2010.

84 TTP 20.37.

85 TTP 16.36.

Democracy instead is a civil accomplishment, through which well-designed laws based on common consent ensure that people can collectively act freely, equally and harmoniously, no longer incapacitated by our equally human tendencies to prejudice, hatred, conflict or destructive and selfish expropriation.

In both cases, the republic becomes more powerful, as citizens participate more, increasing the range and quality of public activity, while citizens themselves become more intellectually active and robust, better capable of understanding the order of nature and the causes of their appetites and sad passive affects, and less vulnerable to superstitions or manipulation through what is today called disinformation. 'To prevent all these things, and to establish the state so that there's no place for fraud', Spinoza writes, 'to establish things so that everyone, whatever his mentality, prefers the public right to private advantage, this is the task, this is our concern'.⁸⁶ Yet to conclude with a programme of civic education or benevolent paternalism does not advance us far in our problem of democratic power. Because 'public right' is not merely a shared affect or mentality; public right must also be ultimately founded in the democratic public's right or power to act politically. If representative assemblies have little executive power, or if the public are excluded from political participation by non-majoritarian institutions, then democracy becomes meaningless. On one level, it leaves us passively beholden to the power of a Prometheus, or else despising our peers and inhabiting a digital silo 'uncultivated and wild'. To engage in a process of consciousness-raising – to cultivate what Hannah Arendt called an 'enlarged mentality' – necessarily involves the demand to retake political *and* economic power democratically and collegially now.⁸⁷

The Post-Anthropocene

What kinds of *ingenia* prevail in the Anthropocene?

In 2018 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned that there was 12 years to act to prevent a climate catastrophe of over 1.5°C in warming.⁸⁸ The third decade of the 21st century will be judged by this warning. But as Bonneuil and Fressoz have argued, we should be deeply suspicious of an apparently recent discovery, 'awakening' or drive for atonement from global capitalists and geopolitical imperialists.⁸⁹ In 1956, the UN estimated that by the year 2000, based on current levels of

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86TTP 17.16.

87 Arendt 1992, p. 43.

88 IPCC 2018, Executive Summary

89 Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016, p. 76.

fossil fuel combustion, there would be a 25% increase in atmospheric CO₂, compared to 19th-century levels.⁹⁰ Commenting on this in and other data, the 1965 President's Science Advisory Committee [PSAC] report concluded that there would be 'measurable and perhaps marked changes in climate, and will almost certainly cause significant changes in the temperature and other properties of the stratosphere'.⁹¹ In a 1978 private research paper for Exxon, scientist James F. Black warned that '[p]resent thinking holds that man has a time window of five to ten years before the need for hard decisions regarding changes in energy strategies might become critical.'⁹²

The failure of critical and decisive action to date lies not in a misanthropic view of human nature, nor does it in a lack of Promethean efforts at geo-engineering (already mooted in the 1965 Report). It lies in a failure of democracy, understood not merely as the tawdry drama of electoral displays of little executive consequence, nor as the banal performance of empty displays of civic participation that act as mere substitutes for the disappearance of working class representation in the State's deliberative assemblies and mass participation in public life. Instead, democracy as an economic-and-political mentality and praxis founded on the equality and freedom, Spinoza said, 'nature concedes to everyone'.

Despite the pressing and urgent nature of climate change, in this essay I've taken an historical approach, because historical evidence and its sometimes-agonistic relationship to collective memory, particularly that perpetuated by the powerful, has become one of the few ways of comprehending the existential threat around us. It would be tempting to say ahead of us, it would be tempting to repeat the mantras that we must act *soon* (never now). But as Andreas Malm rightly observes of the greenhouse effect, our present moment is always determined by '*the heat of this ongoing past*'.⁹³ Were human beings even to not only (if only) reduce carbon emissions over the next decade, but collectively dismantle capitalist and geopolitical-imperialist structures of power, the emissions, ocean acidification and habitat loss of the Capitalocene would still wreak havoc on our shared world.

In this sense what the Anthropocene has also produced is a crisis of temporality. Past events disrupt the present like the retribution of Zeus. Yet the present itself, alone, has captivated our imaginations, the final stage in what David Harvey presciently called three decades ago a 'time-

.....
90 Cf. Kaempffert 1956, p. 191.

91 PSAC 1965, pp. 121, 126-127.

92 Hall 2015, np.

93 Malm 2018, p. 11.

space compression'.⁹⁴ Some of the most popular scholarship on climate change is often most pessimistic. David Wallace-Wells argues that 'global warming has improbably compressed into two generations the entire story of human civilization': the first, ours, its Anthropocene destroyers, leaving the next generation to face a 'semi-mythical' (even Promethean) struggle against cascading tipping points.⁹⁵ Such a sense of doom makes the future unthinkable, a year zero of civilisational collapse, human extinction or global authoritarian government. And in the meantime, as William Vollmann communicates so humanely his *Carbon Ideologies*, 'gloom-and-doom handwringers like me ... were all outnumbered by ordinary practical folk for whom cheap energy and a paycheck incarnated all relevance'.⁹⁶

Adorno is a fine companion in scenes of darkness. *Minima Moralia* ends with an appeal that we face the despair by contemplating all things 'from the standpoint of redemption'.⁹⁷ But the messianism of such a perspective (his dear Walter Benjamin invoked in the passage) necessitates the fashioning of perspectives that 'displace and estrange the world' and reveal its distortions, in a tragic mental striving to glimpse new possibilities. Indeed, faced with the crushing banality of a world in the shape of Bill Gates and Xi Jinping, caustic and mocking negativity is a needed tonic. Never forget Zeus's punishment to Prometheus for the theft of fire: Pandora's box, which when later opened by his hapless brother, Epimetheus, let out into the world the worst of all evils – empty hope.

But Adorno's optical laboratory surrenders the most enchanting lens of all. To consider nature from what Spinoza called 'the perspective of eternity' (*sub specie aeternitatis*).⁹⁸ Such a de-subjectified, anegoic standpoint yields a state of temporary ecstasy, a fleeting recognition of the ways in all forces act on each other, objectively, intelligibly, each small part up to the whole face of the universe. Our human bodies, indeed all living bodies, sharing a carbon nature, like that of the oil, gas and coal we once burned to meet our needs. From which, a loving intellectual regard to do everything in one's power to transform those relations that bind us to each other, so that all other human beings now and possibly hereafter – and all the living and non-living Nature upon which their lives depend – may live with greater opportunities than us for peace, security, intellectual inquiry and self-contentment. *Omnia sunt communia*.

In *Narrative After the Genome* (2021), Lara Choksey provides a wonderful survey of how the rise of genomics, DNA-mapping and the

.....
94 Harvey 1989, p. 240.

95 Wallace-Wells 2019, pp. 29, 79.

96 Vollmann 2018, p. 7.

97 Adorno 2005, p. 247.

98 EIVp62, EVp22-p23, EVp29-p31.

shift to neoliberal capitalism and attack on organised labour of the last half-century was mirrored in contemporary fiction and popular scientific canards like Richard Dawkins' 'selfish gene'. Yet the promises of the genome have been unmet, as biologists increasingly emphasise epigenetics, in which the nature and identity of the organism is constituted by its environment and its relations with others. In our new crisis of the subject, in which neither a romanticised nor techno-modernist ecological vision of individual flourishing remains possible, what Choksey envisions is a new understanding of human life-worlds, defined by complexity, permeability and 'enduring fragility'. 'The limits of genomics are in the narratives that its practices have not been able to read', she writes, 'the ways that time does not capture consequences in advance, but proliferates chance.'⁹⁹

In Spinoza, our relations and encounter with each other and with our world always contain the possibility of understanding and of the collective regeneration of democratic, egalitarian power and friendship. As parts of Nature, yet essentially distinct and different from other animals, human self-preservation, flourishing and self-contentment always remain possibilities (if, even in the sense of Adorno, sometimes "impossible" possibilities) but they require acting in the present, and approaching democracy as a critical and not merely descriptive concept. To act now means ending fossil fuel extraction now, and it means dismantling economic activity based on unsustainable levels of consumption. And it means, democratically, establishing conversations everywhere about what a new, post-capitalist, post-extractivist society might be like, and how it will fashion a new web of relations between care, education and work. To proceed from a damaged life, without relinquishing its uncertainty, fragility or impossibility, towards new acts of collective solidarity and regeneration.

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99 Choksey 2021, p. 193.

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