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RESEARCH ARTICLE

## (A)wake for 'the Passions of this Earth': Extinction and the Absurd 'Ethics' of Novel Ecosystems

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### Abstract

Drawing on the work of Albert Camus this paper offers a critique of certain ecomodernist discourses around 'novel ecosystems'. These new species 'assemblages' are frequently defended, or even celebrated, as exemplifying resilience and adaptability to the environmental repercussions of a global situation inaccurately glossed as 'The Anthropocene'. Here the increasing prevalence of economically generated changes, including the accelerating translocations of species, are set against earlier conservation values emphasizing protection of 'natural' and 'native' ecologies. The proliferation of novel ecosystems, together with an instrumental emphasis on their functional, 'pragmatic', and economic benefits, appears to make environmentalists' *ethical* concerns about the loss of endangered others seem 'absurd' and frames conservation as a Sisyphean and hopeless task. Yet Camus early work provides arguments for ethical / political resistance in just such absurd and extreme circumstances.

### Keywords

**novel ecosystems; extinction; ethics; Camus**

## Waking up to 'Reality'

*Difficult waking. To live is to hurt others, and through others, to hurt oneself. Cruel Earth!  
How can we manage not to touch anything? To find what ultimate exile?*

Albert Camus.<sup>1</sup>

These remarks, in Camus' *American Journals* for 1949, express his waking feelings after witnessing the aftermath of a traffic accident in Rio the previous night. It was the second road death he had seen in just ten days. In the first case he describes how a bus

*hits a poor old black man, sends him flying like a tennis ball, drives around the body and takes off... Nobody comes to help... Later on I learn that they'll put a white sheet over him – which will slowly turn red with his blood – set candles around him, and the traffic will continue to bypass him until the authorities arrive.<sup>2</sup>*

Later, prior to his troubled night he had seen

*a bleeding woman stretched out in front of a bus. And a crowd looking on in silence without helping her... Much later I hear the sound of an arriving ambulance. During all that time the poor dying woman was left moaning in the street.<sup>3</sup>*

Strangely, even as he professes his 'disgust' at the crowd's behaviour Camus never seems to explicitly consider that he, himself, might have tried to help the 'poor dying woman'. Though clearly troubled by the plight of these unknown individuals, (in a way he assumes the assembled crowds were not) he too had become just another onlooker. Could his realizing this explain his waking to difficult ethical and 'existential' questions?<sup>4</sup> How to live in a world where such hurtful events are commonplace, a world where lives are caught up in an incessant and often destructive trafficking of activities and effects? How, given that we are enmeshed in this contemporary, cruel, 'ecology' could we possibly 'manage not to touch anything', not to hurt others, and not be hurt ourselves?

As Camus suggests, this does indeed seem an impossible task, one that could actually be accomplished only through a kind of *exile* from Earthly existence. But since there is no other world, since this *is* our existential situation, then (other than suicide) there is no escaping our involvement in such entanglements. In this sense, perhaps the emotional (dis)stance Camus imputes to the crowd observing the collision's aftermath might be interpreted as the only 'realistic' option available, a mode of accommodation to the unavoidable prevalence of regrettable events. Such occurrences, we might be tempted to say, are just 'facts of life', troubling 'accidents' beyond ones control, and perhaps in some sense even an 'inevitable' or 'natural' corollary of life. After all, we all have to die sometime.

Such an approach does not, of course, deny our ontological and existential situation, our involvement in a world where we cannot help but touch upon and affect others in so many ways. Rather it is often a (self-protective) response to it. Its justification, though, depends in part upon the extent to which particular events can be 'naturalized' as inevitable expressions of 'the way of the world' so that we believe that there is little we can do to alter things. So rendered, it can even foster a kind of ethical nihilism that considers that any attempt to take responsibility for ones 'necessary' involvement, for lives and deaths that are all, *ultimately*, accidents of nature, would be *absurd*.

For Camus, though, this recognition of the ultimate absurdity of human concerns marks the beginning of philosophy, ethics and politics, not its nihilistic end. '[W]renched from

one's ontological complacency<sup>5</sup> as witnesses to life's 'accidents', we must face up to the apparent absurdity of caring for, valuing, and understanding things despite living in what he characterizes as an intransigent and ultimately incomprehensible world. If we reject this ethical possibility, if we really cannot or will not care, if we suppress, sever, or lack the passion(s) and concerns that too are consequent upon, and created through, our earthly involvements with others, then we can only become further emotionally, ethically, (and politically), *estranged*. That is to say, we are all at risk of becoming mere onlookers on life, even on our own lives. Camus's fictional 'outsider' Meursault, emotionally unaffected even by his mother's death or the murder he later commits, provides an extreme figuration of this worldly estrangement *and* its apparently 'rational' justification.<sup>6</sup>

It is difficult (at least for an environmentalist) not to draw comparisons here that go far beyond the busy streets of post-war Rio, far beyond even the bounds and questions concerning the absurdity of *human* existence, to include the wider consequences of our earthly involvements. For ecology wakes us to a troubling awareness that we are all complicit (sometimes less, sometimes more) in the harms caused to so many of those other beings, species, and communities thrown under the bus of modern life. And here too, as witnesses to what promises to be the Earth's sixth great extinction, we often seem reduced to no more than an on-looking crowd.

To be sure, the scale of the tragedy and the individuals and species involved are so very different, but the dilemma, or rather the 'dialectics', are so very similar. Indeed, these cases are more than just analogous. There are direct continuities (social, historical, economic, ecological, psychological etc.) between road 'accidents' in Rio and the (usually, but certainly not always) accidental extirpation of other species. The ever increasing pace of change and movement,<sup>7</sup> the rise in urbanization and traffic (automotive, commercial, informational), the sense of alienation and exile, the massive expansion of side-effects and unintended consequences,<sup>8</sup> the self-interested failure to attend to the lives and deaths of so many others. All of these features have long been recognised as consequent upon, indeed characteristic of, modern capitalist societies. And the same socio-economic forces that influence every aspect of Rio's citizens' lives and deaths are also directly implicated in the ongoing destruction of the Brazilian rainforests and all its subsequent extinctions. Indeed the devastation of the rainforest fuels, sometimes quite literally, the ever more expansive circulations of capital, products, people and vehicles, in cities like Rio.<sup>9</sup>

Whether we consume soy or beef, cocoa or sugar, palm oil, gasoline, or biofuels, global capitalism ensures that we touch others in so many ways that hurt. There seems no possibility of self-exile from these circumstances, no earthly place to which an individual can travel to escape. To be sure, this particular 'ecological' mesh, this novel iteration of the absurd, is no longer (if it ever was) just woven by something called 'Nature', (a complicated term but still of crucial ethico-political importance) nor even by diverse, localized, 'socio-natures'.<sup>10</sup> It has been 'accidentally', yet also systematically, manufactured according to over-arching 'principles' of economic growth, expansion, and profit.

This condition, which Guattari<sup>11</sup> refers to as Integrated World Capitalism, (IWC) is, of course, a very specific mode of worldly involvement. It is historically particular, but also particularly environmentally damaging and particularly prone to objectifying its victims, accidental or otherwise, as 'biological resources', 'collateral damage', 'natural capital', and so on. All such terms serve to both universalize and naturalize this specific form of worldly involvement while facilitating the emotional / ethical detachment necessary to re-integrate every aspect of the world in ways that service capital and narrow, short-term, self-interest. This

novel anthropogenic, or more precisely capitalogenic,<sup>12</sup> ‘system’ has now, unfortunately, become a kind of ‘Second Nature’ (in so many senses) to so many. And when almost every action within this absurd system exudes innumerable possibilities of cascading negative repercussions (and so much environmental literature shows this) it might often appear more ‘realistic’ to just stand and watch the accident and its repercussions unfold. Even those most concerned all too often become no more than silent witnesses after the event of each successive extinction, reduced to the environmental equivalent of laying out white sheets and lighting candles for a species’ passing.

Yet mourning also matters,<sup>13</sup> as an expression of a heartfelt sense of loss concerning an ecological and emotional connectivity. It suggests the existence of a concern for other lives and thus of continuing possibilities for future ethical and political involvement and resistance rather than simply acquiescence. Such ethics and feelings can become politically tangible, as they did in Camus’s call for resistance against the seemingly unstoppable momentum of fascism in the 1930’s. ‘Man [sic] is mortal. That may be; but let us die resisting; and if our lot is complete annihilation, let us not behave in such a way that it seems justice’.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, even though resistance to a historical situation seems absurd, and *in absolute existential terms*, as Camus points out, all action might be judged ultimately absurd, we need also to recognize that resistance is nonetheless the right path to follow. For Camus, as we shall see, the recognition of existential absurdity can generate resistance and collective action if and when we come to recognize and express ethical connections between our lives and those of others here on Earth. Meursault’s rational estrangement fails completely to make any such connections; his life and all others make no sense to him because there is no ultimate reason for them and emotional attachments are pointless. Against this, as we shall see, Camus offers only a form of ‘mundane’ and ‘absurd hope ... tempered by an awareness of the limits to human comprehension<sup>15</sup> in the face of a Sisyphean task. This, however, still leaves the possibility of generating emotional and ethical community and resistance with others.

Today we face a situation, framed as existentially inescapable, referred to as the Anthropocene. The ecomodernist discourses that circle this ‘inescapable’ concept regard it as absurd to do anything other than accept, and work with, the inevitability of the existential onslaught, the species genocide, capitalism has unleashed on other species. (A recent United Nations sponsored report suggests that the Earth might lose a million species.<sup>16</sup>) Many critics of capitalism too, argue that there is no such thing as nature and hence nothing left to save (see below). The latest iteration of this ecomodernism revolves specifically around debates about ‘novel ecosystems’. Here the loss of other species, habitats, communities, at least those that are of no instrumental value to humans, is framed as a ‘natural’ necessity and hardly a matter for mourning at all. Rather such losses are met with a rationalized indifference that (rather ironically) depends upon the *naturalization* of this ongoing ecological erosion. In this sense, we might say, the celebration of novel ecosystems associated with certain forms of ecological modernization exemplifies the ecological equivalent of Meursault’s estrangement and ethical nihilism.

## Novel Ecosystems

*Conventional conservation operates ‘on the grossly mistaken belief that we can halt ongoing extinctions, [which] fuels our preoccupation with saving relics and ghosts.’ What conservationists should really be doing ... ‘is turning our attention to the new assemblages of organisms that are emerging’ as a result of our activities.<sup>17</sup>*

Novel ecosystems are the future – the new wild<sup>18</sup> states Pearce in his recent polemic against 'traditional' conservation values and celebration of novel ecosystems. Conservationists must 'ditch their obsessions with lost causes'<sup>19</sup> in favour of a 'more optimistic, human-friendly vision'.<sup>20</sup> A 'blinker approach'<sup>21</sup> to saving 'relics and ghosts' by, for example, trying to control introduced species translocated from other regions, actually excludes 'a wide range of options for *rebooting* the wild' (my emphasis).<sup>22</sup> 'For nature it matters not a jot where a species comes from, *if it does a useful job*. [Indeed] if conservationists *don't wake up quickly*, they risk becoming the *enemies of nature rather than its saviours*' (my emphasis).<sup>23</sup>

Pearce then, proposes another kind of 'difficult waking' to 'reality'. Conservationists, he suggests, are living in a dreamworld, tenaciously holding on to 'idealized notions' of 'pristine pre-human landscapes' that 'are about as true to nature as Disneyland'<sup>24</sup>: They are in denial of the anthropogenic influences that now, more than ever, impact all ecosystems and drive change.<sup>25</sup>

Inevitably then, witnessing the continual, indeed accelerating, erosion and destruction of all these (falsely idealised) landscapes also leads conservationists to be unduly pessimistic, to underestimate nature's resilience and fail to grasp future opportunities.

*[W]e must give up some of our romantic ideas of nature being passive and fragile...nature is actually dynamic and **can-do**. This should change our approach to nature conservation. In fact, conservation as currently practiced becomes the enemy. By seeking only to conserve and protect the endangered and the weak, it becomes a brake on evolution and a douser of adaptation. If we want to assist nature to regenerate we need to promote change, rather than hold it back.*<sup>26</sup> (my emphasis)

Unfortunately, when the 'brakes' are off, individuals, species, entire communities, fall under the wheels of this anthropogenic 'evolutionary' juggernaut. But never mind, according to Pearce, 'nature overall is doing fine',<sup>27</sup> witness even extreme cases like the radioactive surroundings of Chernobyl and the coral atolls used as sites for U.S. nuclear weapons tests. Bravo test may have 'destroyed three islands, irradiated the ocean, and blasted millions of tons of coral, sediment, and marine life into the air. Yet today two-thirds of the atoll's former coral species are back, along with some newcomers'.<sup>28</sup> Such natural 'resilience' is surely a cause for celebration! Of course, 'nobody in their right mind' says Pearce, 'would want more such places',<sup>29</sup> but then, why not? Only a few pages later we find him citing ecologist Chris Thomas' views that:

*human activity, including human-caused climate change, could trigger an evolutionary explosion that might **counterbalance the extinctions and could leave us with more species than before**.*<sup>30</sup> (my emphasis)

'Explosion', is perhaps, an unfortunate choice of term given his previous example. But Pearce clearly seems to be suggesting that future generations (of humans) might even *profit* by our eradicating current species, lineages, and ecologies. Of course, he would not put it quite this way: Rather than *killing* or *driving* beings to extinction, he employs a language of *letting* (relics) *die*, but this (not so subtle) casuistry completely ignores the actual causes for individuals, species, and communities' endangerment. A moderately savvy critic might also ask who the 'us' left with this novel ecological smorgasbord at some indeterminate future time (Thomas<sup>31</sup> actually suggests a 'million years' or so from now) could possibly be? 'Us'? Really?

Thomas at least admits that 'the total number of species on the planet is declining',<sup>32</sup> and drastically, a fact Pearce himself continually tries to elide by focusing on local increases in absolute numbers of species that occur due to many of the same 'cosmopolitan' species being

deposited in quite different locales. Moreover, Thomas's arguments do not actually, as Pearce seems to imply, run counter to 'the conventional narrative ... that climate change may be leading toward ... the earth's sixth great extinction.'<sup>33</sup> Rather Thomas is addressing 'nature's' response to that extinction. Indeed, Thomas has previously argued that 'at least 15-40% of ... species' including a 'third of the world's coral species' (those same resilient 'survivors' of nuclear tests) 'are effectively committed to extinction by 2050',<sup>34</sup> due to the various impacts of climate change already underway.

Pearce's argument here then is certainly deceptively 'simple'.<sup>35</sup> Mass extinctions

*create opportunity for evolution to go into overdrive. Every species lost would create space for new species to move in. And the most invasive of the aliens would be the ones best able to take advantage. The species conservationists most fear are precisely the ones that nature most needs.*<sup>36</sup>

These species are the 'dynamic elements, the go-getters, survivors, gene-spreaders and all-round carpet-bagger colonists that could turn ecological disaster into evolutionary triumph!'<sup>37</sup> Species that are 'opportunistic, versatile, aggressive, and prolific, will globalize their activities'.<sup>38</sup> These 'super-species ... have shown the way'<sup>39</sup> and 'will take charge as ... the relic species either perish or are confined to nature's intensive care wards'.<sup>40</sup> (all quotations my emphasis)

Parallels with the language of neoliberalism (and even Social Darwinism) seem starkly obvious here. Such parallels are to be found in all forms of ecomodernism, although many such approaches avoid the question of mass extinctions altogether<sup>41</sup> but here they emerge within 'scientific' debates explicitly focused on the question of extinction of non-human species.<sup>42</sup> Those that cannot innovate in an increasingly competitive environment will simply fall by the wayside. Extinction is their inescapable and 'natural' fate. Pearce argues that if we want to 'grow' nature, as politicians now seek to 'grow' economies, we need a conducive (business-like) environment that actively promotes the very changes hindered by romanticized attachments to endangered others. Nature, like the capitalist economy, 'needs' those 'aggressive', 'opportunistic', 'go-getters' who will globalize their activities and 'colonize' the planet. It's only 'natural' that they should 'take charge'. After all, to employ what has now also become trite business-speak, it's 'in their DNA'. In any case, from Pearce's perspective: *There is no alternative*. And if conservation's ambulance is too late and "nature's intensive care wards" prove ineffective? Well luckily 'there is no compelling evidence that the planet's total *stock* of species is of any intrinsic importance to the *functioning* of nature' anyway (my emphasis).<sup>43</sup>

According to Pearce then, if extinction does not matter to ecosystem functioning, (whatever that may be) there is no reason to be overly concerned about such losses: They will be made good in the (very) long term anyway. Rather than a fragile nature needing protection we should envisage a new *resilient* nature for the Anthropocene era, a nature now glossed as a force akin to an 'invisible (ecosystemic) hand' that will continue to bring new opportunities to market. Yet strangely, this post-natural nature can only thrive if we acquiesce to the conditions that encourage evolutionary free-enterprise.

Stranger still, despite the gusto with which Pearce applies the language of the business school and boardroom to 'nature', what is entirely absent in his book is any admission that this novel environmental situation might actually be driven by modernity's economic excesses, still less that we might strive to curtail them. Despite the key roles played by trade and capital, colonialism and profiteering in creating novel ecosystems and bringing about extinctions his book contains no analysis of globalization or commodification, indeed the word 'capitalism'



does not even appear in its index. Rather his rhetoric actively works to explicitly and implicitly *naturalize* the current neoliberal condition, to make *it* the unchangeable and unchallengeable 'reality' against which decisions need to be made, a reality against which all resistance is futile, where ethical concerns are not just outdated, but simply an absurd nostalgia for an idealized Edenic past.

Pearce is not, of course, alone in proselytising a form of capitalism friendly ecomodernism. His views only echo and amplify those of an influential constituency in the circles of professional 'environmental managers' that includes figures such as Peter Kareiva previously Chief Scientist and Vice President of The [U.S.] Nature Conservancy and now director of the Institute of the Environment and Sustainability at UCLA. Both Pearce and Kareiva have associations with the Breakthrough Institute founded in 2003 by Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger of *The Death of Environmentalism*, fame.<sup>44</sup> The institute describes itself as advocating a 'positive, optimistic paradigm called ecomodernism...grounded in real-world trends'.<sup>45</sup> By real-world trends they seem to mean those dictated by capitalism (though again the word capitalism is often conspicuous by its absence or at least any negative connotations). This is combined with a *blind faith* in inevitable technological (and social) progress: The 'solution to the unintended consequences of modernity is, and has always been, more modernity'.<sup>46</sup>

Faith seems the right word here because Shellenberger and Nordhaus<sup>47</sup> have gone so far as to propose a kind of humanistic 'modernization theology' to set against their (incredibly superficial) characterization of a 'nihilistic ecotheology' stuck in a 'rhetoric of doom'.<sup>48</sup> 'The good news' that modernization theology brings 'is that we already have many nascent, promising technologies to overcome ecological problems' including 'a new generation of nuclear power plants' to solve climate change, more genetic engineering to increase agricultural yields, laboratory grown meat for those who find vegetarianism too 'difficult', and that we will soon be able to create 'new habitats and new organisms, perhaps from the DNA of previously extinct ones' (my emphasis).<sup>49</sup> From this naively historicist position<sup>50</sup> continual technological progress will provide a cornucopia of reasons why species extinction and habitat loss need not concern us overmuch.

Similar tropes appear in Kareiva's writings. Here again we have the same straw environmentalists / conservationists, (rarely, if ever, actually identified, still less quoted): All are pictured as being mired in an idealized (Holocene) past in denial of the dawning of a shiny new Anthropocene era. Obsessed with preserving species they pointlessly 'create parks that are no less human constructions than Disneyland'<sup>51</sup> and have not yet woken to the fact that 'people are actually part of nature and not the original sinners who caused our banishment from Eden'.<sup>52</sup> Here again Kareiva's message is that nature is 'resilient' not fragile, and the same examples of Chernobyl and the atom bomb test sites are paraded to prove this. As with Pearce there seems no recognition that 'nature's' recovery in these areas is obviously linked to the forcible *absence* of any human presence following these disasters and the fact that they became, by necessity, temporary capital-free zones, liberated from constant transformation and exploitation.<sup>53</sup> Here too the (anthropocentric) message is that extinctions per se do not matter.

*In many circumstances, the demise of formerly abundant species can be inconsequential to ecosystem function. The American chestnut, once a dominant tree in eastern North America, has been extinguished by a foreign disease, yet the forest ecosystem is surprisingly unaffected. The passenger pigeon, once so abundant that its flocks darkened the sky, went extinct, along*

*with countless other species from the Steller's sea cow to the dodo, with no catastrophic or even measurable effects.*<sup>54</sup> (my emphasis)

The ecological modernist, it seems, can look upon extinction with the same nihilistic detachment that Camus' Meursault shot dead the Arab on the beach. Instead of harping on about extinctions and environmental disasters, environmentalists, we are told,

*should seek to support and inform the right kind of development – development by design, done with the importance of nature to thriving economies foremost in mind. ... Instead of scolding capitalism, conservationists should partner with corporations in a science-based effort to integrate the value of nature's benefits into their operations and cultures (my emphasis).*<sup>55</sup>

All such arguments, Kareiva claims, have nothing to do with being 'some sort of fawning capitalist. I actually have come to this conclusion from a purely scientific perspective!' How so? Well, Kareiva states:

*in ecology one of the most important concepts is that of 'keystone species'—these are species whose presence and activities fundamentally shape the dynamics and structure of ecosystems. Examples of keystone species are killer whales, wolves, starfish, and mountain lions. If one considers the planet earth and asks what are the keystone species for our global ecology, it is hard to conclude anything but major global corporations.*

So here we have it, the explicit naturalization of the most environmentally destructive economic system the Earth has ever seen. Major global corporations are re-envisioned not as nature's destroyers but as (post)natural keystone species. And if this is so, then 'old school' environmentalists must indeed be entirely mistaken. Because the conclusion of such an argument seems incontrovertible. From this same 'purely scientific perspective' [sic] if corporations are the planetary ecosystems' 'keystone species' then ecologically informed conservationists would obviously have to agree that the health, future and value of the world actually depends on preserving corporations. They are just too important to let fail.

Naïve environmentalists (myself included) thought that corporate greed and the exploitation of the planet for short-term profit was hurting what *we* think of as 'nature'. But from an ecomodernist perspective nothing could be further from the new Orwellian (or perhaps just Trumpian) truth. For in the Anthropocene, ecological modernization marches forward to prosperity under the banner 'Capitalism is nature!', or at least the fundamental keystone that structures and shapes what now counts as natural. *Every other* view of nature has already been dismissed as a romantic myth. Nature is now explicitly re-envisioned as a 'system' fully integrated with world capitalism (IWC). Consequently, of course, ecomodernist 'environmentalists' [sic] need no longer concern themselves with saving superfluous species that do little or nothing towards servicing this economy.

This whole absurd perspective is riddled with contradictions, not least the naturalizing of a manufactured situation that is supposed to undermine the concept of nature even as it calls upon its own, newly formulated idea(l) of a resilient, can-do, all inclusive nature prospering in environmental adversity. Nature both no longer exists and yet is still miraculously all inclusive, it is threatened and yet needs no saving since it is not at all fragile, it cannot be countermanded and yet it has enemies (since its principles are apparently at odds with everything conservationists strive to do). Since even corporations now count as keystone species it seems that literally *everything* that happens can now be deemed 'natural', but this (as John Stuart Mill long ago pointed out)<sup>56</sup> makes nature an entirely vacuous concept even as it is used to



justify the worst anthropogenic horrors. The real bottom line here is a concerted attempt to manufacture a naturalized model of capitalism/nature that justifies not just giving up on, but railroading many fellow earthlings into oblivion. A vision that also demands that we become party to making corporate capitalism more resilient and the world ever more technologically dependent! This is the novel 'Nature' revealed by its self-appointed saviours, those who aim to facilitate and manage its resurrection in ever more serviceable forms.

## Absurd Ethics

*And here are trees and I know their gnarled surface, water and I feel its taste. These scents of grass and stars at night, certain evenings when the heart relaxes – how shall I negate this world whose power and strength I feel? Yet all the knowledge on earth will give me nothing to assure me that this world is mine.<sup>57</sup>*

The traffic deaths in Rio, like the extinction faced by so many species, are, even when 'accidental', still the more or less directly manufactured consequences of this global system of technological capitalism. This is not to say that death and extinctions *per se* are not natural (or existentially inevitable), but that *these* deaths and *these* extinctions at this point in time, in this way, are neither naturalizable nor (for the most part) inevitable. They are consequent upon our responses, or lack of responses, to a particular historical, social, economic, technological situation.

To say that everyone dies does not absolve the drivers of those fatal Rio buses from ethical responsibility, still less the person, like Camus' Meursault, who would pull the trigger of a gun. As argued earlier, Meursault acts as though nothing matters because, he argues, everyone will eventually die anyway, life is *ultimately* pointless. Such a claim certainly exposes the groundlessness (in any *absolute* sense) of all socially accepted values (a fact Meursault's moralistic interlocutors find difficult to accept). But this truth, that everything changes, that all passes, that all is connected, is not, Camus argues, an excuse for estrangement and ethical nihilism but the very beginning of exercising an ethical capacity to attend to real existing others in their specificity. This is possible however *absurd* such ethico-political attention may seem in the grand this-worldly scheme(lessness) of things; history; nature.

We need to start then, as Camus does, not by using this absurdity as an excuse or justification for inaction but by recognizing that its fundamental inescapability affects everything, even our own lives and deaths. Ultimately, of course, everything on Earth will become extinct as the sun expands. Ultimately each one of us will die. But this does not make existence and life in the here and now, for us or for other species, pointless or worthless. Even when we cannot 'grant a meaning to life' this does not necessitate 'declaring that it is not worth living.'<sup>58</sup> Even Meursault, that archetypal nihilist, recognizes, and then struggles to repress, this difference between his rationalized recognition of his ultimate mortality and the immanent failure of his appeal against execution.

*Well then I'll die. Sooner than other people obviously. But everybody knows that life isn't worth living. And when it comes down to it I wasn't unaware that it doesn't matter very much whether you die at thirty or at seventy, since in either case, other men and women will inevitably go on living for thousands of years even. Nothing was plainer. It was still only me who was dying, whether it was now or it was twenty years' time. At that point the thing that would rather upset my reasoning was that I'd feel my heart give this terrifying leap at the thought of having another twenty years to live.<sup>59</sup>*

For Meursault the leap of his heart comes too late, and is too transient, to allow any emotional and ethical connections to others. Condemned in the solitary confinement of his cell it can only affect him. There are clear ecological parallels here with the rationales put forward by Pearce et al for dismissing the importance of contemporary extinction.

Let us presume that neither of the traffic victims Camus saw die in Rio threw themselves under those buses. They were not suicides. The lives of that particular man and that unique woman had worth for them (and almost certainly for others) right up until that last moment, even as she called out in pain and no help came. What those meanings were may, or may not, have been clearly formulated. They might have become palpable only in rare moments when the heart relaxes, through the bustle of everyday life, through involvement in a great cause, in the touch of friends, lovers, family or even the rough texture of a tree's bark. Perhaps they sought some other-worldly religious guarantee that life was not meaningless, perhaps they never for a moment doubted it ultimately was, but still they found life worth living. And yet their lives nonetheless ended, as all our lives will. Are we to recognize the importance of these particular lives, to feel this, care about it, mourn their passing, or just to deny their significance as anything other than social functionaries? Were they too just relics, ghosts, ill-adapted to a changing urban ecology, not fit for a world of speed and greed?

Of course, since they are always ostensibly humanists, the ecological modernist might challenge such analogies. They would distinguish between the eventual benefits and promissory notes of capitalism and technology for (some) human beings and the obviously disastrous finality of the consequences meted out to so many other species. Such species, as we have seen, are only valued instrumentally in terms of their benefits (especially their economically quantifiable benefits) to a market based abstraction and / or a *metaphysical* entity termed 'humanity'. Contra Camus's remarks above, the ecomodernist never has a moments doubt that the 'the world is mine', both in the sense of its succumbing to human knowledge and ordering and its being a human possession to be employed and managed with little or no concern for anything else. This instrumentality is at the core of Pearce's call for a 'more optimistic, human-friendly vision'<sup>60</sup> of a world yet to come. But, for Camus such optimism is itself absurd, just as absurd as anything that conservationists might dream of.

The difference here is not then one, as Pearce and Kareiva frame it, of a dreamy romanticism versus wakeful science, but of those who care about certain non-human others lives and existences and those who (for whatever reasons) really don't, those for whom these other lives are just, at best, at the instrumental service of cold logic and economic forces, or just passing curiosities and abstractions. It is this detachment, this estrangement from the other beings of the world and its naturalization, the banality of ecological evil, that ecological modernism's apologists propound. Capitalism and its depredations are naturalized, becoming the second nature that constitutes every earthling's anthropogenic fate—resistance is not only futile (and a terrible waste of time and resources!) but irrational. And now that the Anthropocene is declared with geo-logical certainly conservationists are told that they have already lost the battle and the deaths and extinctions that will follow are just 'facts of life'. We should get with the program, distance ourselves, harden our hearts, be realistic and resilient.

*'Ecological change is the norm, not the exception. The ideology that informs restoration ecology basically seeks to deny evolution and prohibit change.' It would be, he [Shapiro] said, a 'Sisyphbean' task – referencing the mythical king of Corinth doomed to eternally rolling a rock up a hill, only for it to fall back to the bottom every time he neared the summit. Ouch'.<sup>61</sup>*

How smug. But this isn't the kind of knockdown argument Pearce obviously thinks it is. Conservation is indeed a Sisyphean task, a constant struggle against overwhelming forces to keep threatened species from going extinct. But the forces are not natural, they are those manufactured and induced by the idols of capital and technology, by the artificial gods of profit that constantly attempt to turn every environmental success into a market opportunity, that unceasingly demand that everything be once again placed at Mammon's command in the form of (ecosystem) services rendered. So long as these gods rule (and perhaps even beyond) then conservation's task will continue to be unceasing but this is precisely why, as Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus* points out, 'Sisyphus is the absurd hero' who defied the gods:

*His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth.*<sup>62</sup>

Even if life is ultimately meaningless, absurd, the passions of this earth, the passion for life and lives is something worth struggling for, something that also arises through those accidents by which we recognize our being implicated and involved in matters of life and death, in ecologies of (ir)responsibility. This is not, as Camus muses, a comfortable situation to wake to. Everything we do will have consequences, sometimes unfortunate and even fatal consequences, for others and for ourselves. Ethics is always an incomplete and in some senses impossible task. As his later novel *The Plague*<sup>63</sup> attests, even a *natural* event brings out ethical ambiguities that belie and challenge the rationales of those who resist this pestilence. Amongst the novel's characters, nobody is perfect and no set of moral rules suffices to quarantine those acting from ethical critique.<sup>64</sup> But, written between 1942 and 1946 *The Plague* is also a deliberate analogy for a situations that cannot by any stretch of the imagination be deemed natural, namely the plague of fascism then encircling the globe and the murderous nihilism that accompanied and fed it. (Camus, we should remember was amongst the relative few who actively joined the resistance.) As Novello suggests, Camus' response to absurdity is to break

*the fixed stance of logic, which claims to take absurdity in charge by reducing man [sic] and world to monotone functions or 'abstractions'... the brutal invasion of war / plague marks the retreat of the beauty of the world and of its 'glorious faces'... it negates the human communication between intelligence, heart, and flesh; it marks the violent and violating reduction of living human beings to the levelling logic of domination.*<sup>65</sup>

What then, we might ask, of the manufactured plague that has come to threaten the mass extinction of so many more-than-human species, habitats, communities—is this ecological holocaust too not something to be resisted? If the doctor's 'absurd' attempts to prolong life are not to be judged worthless then why, we might ask Pearce, should we regard conservationists working in 'nature's intensive care wards', with any less respect than medical practitioners? Why describe them only as blinkered day-dreaming fools trying to resurrect a dead and dying nature that should be left to its anthropogenic fate? Perhaps, after all, they are more awake to the world and its inhabitants' fate than those who deaden it with monotone abstractions regarding its functionality.

The responses to extinction exemplified by those that do recognize and experience some community with other Earthly beings, non-human and human, are so very different. They, like Camus, so feel called to resist. To take just one example, Extinction Rebellion has recently organized a series of deliberately disruptive but entirely non-violent protests that started in the UK in 2018 and is now spreading across the world. Protesters 'rebel for life' against the

supposedly inevitable outcomes of fossil fuel generated climate change. Resisting is not an easy option. Protestors are arrested and charged with offences including obstruction and criminal damage, for example, for gluing themselves to the revolving doors of Shell's London headquarters. (Following the protests in April 2019 alone 1130 protestors were arrested in such actions in London.) They are effectively resisting an existentially absurd situation, absurdly described as the Anthropocene, where anything but compliance with capitalism is regarded as the wrong kind of green. Their efforts certainly seem Sisyphean, but despite their lack of financial resources they have begun to offer a 'mundane hope' of other possibilities. Like Camus they are willing to resist because they experience the passions of the Earth.

In recognizing absurdity, in contemplating and resisting hurt and torment, we silence 'all the idols', those insistent demands that would dictate the form of our lives. And in the 'universe suddenly restored to its silence, the myriad wondering little voices of the earth rise up'.<sup>66</sup> Listen to them!

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## Notes

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Breakthrough Institute accessed 26th Feb. 2018 <<http://thebreakthrough.org/people/profile/peter-kareiva>>. Unfortunately, even organizations, like the World Wildlife Fund, that accommodate themselves to capitalism by adopting / pioneering, such methods will find it little use in saving many species from extinction. For as Pearce notes, the idea that "each last individual species is somehow essential to maintaining the 'ecosystem services' that nature provides for us ... services such as carbon storage ... is a romantic illusion. Those services are best done by the species on hand that do it best. In much of the world that increasingly means nature's pesky, pushy invaders." Pearce, p.177. For a critique of such commodification see Sian Sullivan, 'Ecosystem Service Commodities' - A New Imperial Ecology? Implications for Animist Immanent Ecologies with Deleuze and Guattari', *New Formations*, 2010, no.69, pp.111-128.

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