

November 10, 2014

Dear All—

Below you'll find a current draft of the talk I'll be presenting later this month at the American Academy of Religion. You'll note that it's brief—very. The panel I'm on is titled *What Kind of Anthropocentrism is Appropriate in the Anthropocene? Answers from Emerson and Thoreau*. It's hosted by the Religion and Humanism Group. In order to accommodate all four panelists, a Q-and-A, and the group's business meeting we've been asked to keep our presentations to 15 minutes each. The draft as you'll find it below is 500-600 words too long. I'll be eager to hear your thoughts on how I might shorten it while deepening interest, maximizing clarity, and maintaining an appropriate level of generality.

I mean for this project to have a life beyond the AAR. To that end, I'm especially looking forward to talking through these ideas (their relationship to Theology on the one hand and Animal Studies on the other) with you. Let me just sketch here the outline of where I think a fuller treatment of these themes might begin:

In his iconoclastic *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*, Walter Benn Michaels makes a book-length bid for ideas-over-identities. His central claim is that in theory, politics, literature, criticism, history, and perhaps most surprisingly, *ecology*, we've fallen prey to identitarian thinking and thereby abandoned the task of adjudicating between truth and falsity, good and bad. Bemoaning the good old days of the Cold War ideology (wherein ideas and not identities were at stake), Michaels traces an isomorphism between the reduction of beliefs to perspectives, speech to sounds, literature to marks or traces, and intention to affect or embodiment. As Michaels see it, this reduction cuts both ways: Arenas properly void of human meaning are celebrated as articulate and literate while articulateness and literacy lose their specificity as modes of human meaning. The stain is not a stain, but a poem. The poem is not a poem, but a stain. Race (sex, gender, class, age, nationality, culture) is granted the status of 'political platform,' while political platforms fold into features, attributes, identity markers.

In the space of discourse the results are familiar enough: We make a truth-claim and are met with the response, "Well that may be true for you, but . . ." As Michaels points out, in this response our claim is not relegated to a perspective so much denied its status as a claim. By way of proof he reminds his reader that *claims* can be contested (affirmed, denied, qualified, and so on) while *perspectives* defy contest. This is because claims imply a world that is singular and shared, while the logic of perspective shakes out in so many atomized worlds—each unassailable by the other.

This atomization is furthered by postmodern, poststructural, and posthistorical 'reading' practices. Again by Michaels' lights, such practices confuse objects of interpretation with objects of experience. Much as identity is something one just *is* (not something one means, something one might be asked to answer for), experience is something one just *has* (again, not something one might be held accountable for). What drops out in the confusion is twofold: In the case of proper objects of interpretation, we no longer attend to authorial intention; in the case of proper objects of experience, we pretend to find authorial intention where there is none. For Michaels, Susan Howe's

materialist 'reading' of Emily Dickinson's empty pages, flattened envelopes, and stray marks serve as a touchstone for this move and its stakes. Whereas interpretations, as much as claims, are vulnerable to contest and on grounds offered by the object of interpretation; experiences are invulnerable (unassailable) and for the simple reason that they offer no such grounds. Identity politics would make islands of us, and reading practices such as Howe's threaten the communicability of our judgments. *On what grounds could one possibly contest Howe's 'interpretation' (experience) of eighty-six blank pages?*

It's with this question that Michaels is able to forge the link to deep ecology. Deep ecologists don't presume to speak for the trees. Rather they insist that the trees are already speaking. They would have us listen to the trees and learn (remember?) how to speak 'tree' ourselves. This is the force of 'learning to think like a mountain' (a motivational mantra deep ecologists borrow from the American nature writer Aldo Leopold). As David Abrams puts it in *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More than Human World*, brooks literally chatter, winds literally howl, and for this reason we must "renounce the claim that 'language' is an exclusively human property" (78-80). Like all deep ecologists, Abrams views the denotative and connotative dimensions of human language as derivative of language's expressive materiality. This 'expressive materiality' is not only shared with animals of every order. It belongs also to lichens, rock formations, tidal washes, the working of electrons and the movement of the spheres.

It's no surprise then that Michaels objects to deep ecology. He insists that by claiming to read a set of judgments off of the environment, deep ecologists dement the standing of their judgments qua judgments. Either they are expressing human judgments *about* the environment which might be augmented or countered by further human judgments, or they are individually *experiencing* the environment in such a way that judgment (for instance the judgment that we ought not chop down all the trees) and its concomitant quest for community (*we* ought not chop down all the trees), is quite irrelevant. Either they are proffering ideas, which implies a certain dualism between what we think, what we say, and what *is*. Or they are asserting identities where *assertion* is redundant and beside the point.

So much for Michaels. My thought is that there's something he's getting right in all of this, and then something else that he's missing entirely—namely the proximity of judgment and experience (idea and identity) which in turn bears on and lends legitimacy to deep ecology and (perhaps) some version of postmodern aesthetics and even (possibly) identity politics.

Let's go back to the confused commonplace that what's true for you may not be true for me. I suggest we think of this expression in terms introduced by Kant in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*. What's being expressed is not an empirical judgment, nor a judgment of beauty or taste, for such judgments claim universal validity (never mind that they rarely win it). Rather, what's being expressed is an individual preference which has no such pretensions to representative speech. What's true for you isn't true for me, because what's true for you is of the Canary-wine-is-nice variety. Likes and dislikes of this sort are unimpeachable. I can no more argue with them than with your experience of a sunset or your cultural history.

Now the danger of identity politics, postmodernism, poststructuralism, posthistoricism, and deep ecology is that they reduce human life to preference and leave us without a shared world to talk about.

[In my opening remarks on Monday I'll take up the idea of universal validity and relate it to the purposeless purposiveness we find in nature. I'll also try to say something about how this larger project funds the talk below.]

Thank you all for taking the time to read through this. Thank you also (in advance) for your thoughtful engagement and simple help. I'm so looking forward to our conversation.

Yours—
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Religion and Humanism Group
What Kind of Anthropocentrism is Appropriate in the Anthropocene?
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The Starry Heavens Above Me and the Moral Law Within:
Transcendentalism's Claim Against Deep Ecology

I.

What kind of anthropocentrism is appropriate in the Anthropocene?

Deep ecology's answer is unequivocal: *None*.

Deep ecologists reject anthropocentrism as a form of chauvinism: an inappropriate preference for what one takes to be one's own kind. As deep ecologists understand it, our all-too distinct geological era (the Anthropocene) testifies to the too-long run our species-prejudice (anthropocentrism) has had in our thoughts, words, and deeds. In each of these registers—thought, word, deed—deep ecologists press for a radical egalitarianism in which human interests enjoy no special privilege over the interests of innumerable other species, habitats, and the broader natural systems they belong to.

Call 'egalitarianism' deep ecology's first fundamental principle.

Its second is 'self-realization.' Deep ecologists seek to overcome the narrow human self with its narrow self-interest (sometimes called the 'false self') through identification with the true, ecological, and ecosophical self. This 'true self' is indistinguishable from the *ecos-* or *oikos* (those innumerable species, habitats, and natural systems). It is *ecosophical* in that it embodies what deep ecologists conceive of as the logic and wisdom of the *oikos*.

Now in the context of the project of self-realization, anthropocentrism drops away as a coherent threat, which is to say egalitarianism falls away as a principle: There is no distinct humanity with which to identify, no distinctly human interest to privilege over any other, or to subsume in the service of others. This is to begin to mark a tension between these two principles, one which critics of deep ecology exploit with varying degrees of antipathy. Two examples from rather distant critical quarters will suffice:

[First Example]

1. In her monograph, *Spinoza and Deep Ecology: Challenging Traditional Approaches to Environmentalism*, Spinoza scholar Eccy de Jonge points out that "deep ecologists aim to shift the focus from morally considering individuals to considering the whole, to the relationships that obtain between species rather than to individuals themselves, but at the same time hold us morally responsible for the domination of nature."¹ We might reformulate de Jonge's concern thus: Deep ecology is constituted by a series of moral judgments; but as a neutral monism that self-consciously collapses the ethical and ontological,² deep ecology can't admit of the alterity

¹ De Jonge, Eccy. *Spinoza and Deep Ecology: Challenging Traditional Approaches to Environmentalism*. Ashgate Publishing, 2004. Print. 29

² Arne Naess, "The World of Concrete Contents," *Inquiry*, Volume 28, 1985, pages 417–428; "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to being in the World" 12 March, 1986 Murdoch University *The Fourth Keith Roby Memorial Lecture in Community Science*

moral judgment requires; deep ecology then has no way of accounting for the distinctly human freedom and responsibility it traffics in.

[Second Example]

2. In his critique of deep ecology, literary scholar and critic Walter Benn Michaels takes a slightly different tack. He notes that deep ecologists forward their ecosophy (their logic or wisdom) through meaningful propositions, but attribute these propositions to the natural world. (In deep ecology, mountains literally think, brooks literally chatter, and hunted mammals literally write their tracks in the snow. Deep ecologists renounce “language as an exclusively human property,” and recognizes as *lingual* all diachronic traces, marks, and sounds.³) Michaels argues that to stretch the concept ‘language’ thus is to render it useless. He notes that unlike objects of experience and identities, meaningful propositions can be disputed, qualified, clarified, elaborated, paraphrased, assented to, and so on. He effectively poses the challenge: What could it possibly mean to paraphrase a weather pattern or dispute a glacial erratic?⁴ In the first example, deep ecologists are found guilty of issuing judgments which undermine the possibility of judgment. Here deep ecologists trade in language which undermines the possibility of language.

We might push both critiques further observing that once ‘the human’ is thoroughly naturalized via self-realization, it becomes difficult to understand why we *anthros* with our consequent anthropocene shouldn’t be viewed with the same moral equanimity as landslides, solar flares, beaver dams, and the preponderance of dandelions in the grass. The very notion that there is something to be done *by us* seems to belie a difference between the morally anonymous functioning of the cosmos, and the moral particularity of the human person.

But let’s stop here.

II.

I want us to note that the critique of deep ecology resembles a textbook refutation of skepticism.

The skeptic knows she can’t know. She makes a claim against claim-making. She expect us to understand that she can’t be understood. In the case of deep ecology, she asserts herself only to desert herself, judging that she cannot or must not judge.

Refuting her skepticism is as simple as pointing out that she performs a contradiction.

Or is it? The skeptic stands rebuffed. Her skepticism, I suspect remains.

[And in this I mean to be channeling both Hannah Arendt’s reading of Kant and Stanley Cavell’s reading of Wittgenstein which owes a great deal to Kant.] The skeptic’s skepticism remains because it has yet to be acknowledged, yet to be addressed in all of its reality, which is to say all of its insight and truth.

What is the truth of her skepticism?

³ David Abrams, “The Spell of the Sensuous,” 80, 82, 96

⁴

The skeptic recognizes that our understanding is partial and perspectival: We experience not the thing-in-itself (whatever that might mean), but the thing as-it-appears-to-me. While the thing as it appears-to-me is usually (happily) also the thing-as-it-appears-to-us, there's no metaphysical promise that I will not suddenly find myself alone in my perceptions: tickled by a joke no one else gets, abandoned to a horror no one else shares in.

At that juncture (a juncture characterized by solitude) questions of my educability and the educability of my fellows come to the fore. (These are questions of community formation, specifically communities of judgment or taste.) What's crucial is that in the space of education our claims will remain as vulnerable as ever, our knowledge as far from what we imagine certainty to mean. (No appeal to metaphysical authority will work to rescue us from the task of persuasion.)

My thought is that the skeptical fantasy of invulnerable claims, and certain knowledge is the fantasy of a community that did not stand to be achieved. A community simply 'given,' which is to say also a community in no way realized. I'll return to this thought in a moment.

The deep ecologist registers, among other things, her shocked disappointment. Everywhere she finds tokens of how very poor our judgment can be, how unconscionably violent our self-assertion. Hers is a horror that only a few of us (granted, more and more of us) share in. And we might guess that her horror doubles in her felt isolation.

It's not that the critique of deep ecology (recall those two examples) is wrong exactly. It's that it issues from the wrong spirit. In its quick sophistical dance ('look, you're making a judgment,' 'look, you're asserting yourself,') it slips the grip of the skeptic's shock, her disappointment, her horror. In this way it serves to *reinforce* these.

What would be truly impressive is a critique that loosed the grip of these from the inside out. This would be perhaps, not a critique at all, but a mutual persuasion, which is to say education, or even communion.

III.

I'm going to switch gears. We'll come back to deep ecology and its relationship to skepticism in a moment.

Henry David Thoreau, in his final season at Walden, watches with delight as the spring sun thaws a freshly cut bank of the railroad. Wet sand and clay burst through the frost—like lava, like leaves, like “the lacinated, lobed, and imbricated thalluses of some lichens,” like “coral,” “leopard's paws,” “bird's feet,” brains, lungs, bowels, “excrements of all kinds,” or yet again like rivers finding their way to the sea. The sun rounds the sky. And now the opposite bank sets about thawing. Thoreau remarks that it's no wonder “the earth expresses herself in leaves outwardly, it labors so with the idea inwardly.” His image is one of pregnancy and it proves seminal for him and he too begins to labor with the idea. He determines that:

Internally, whether in the globe or animal body, it is a moist thick *lobe*, a word especially applicable to the liver and lungs and the leaves of fat ([*leibz*], *labor*, *lapsus*, to flow or slip downward, a lapsing; [*lobos*], *globus*, lobe, globe; also lap, flap, and many other words); *externally* a dry thin *leaf*, even as the *f* and *v* are a pressed and dried *b*. The radicals of *lobe* are *lb*, the soft mass of the *b* (single lobed, or *B*, double lobed), with the liquid *l* behind it pressing it forward. In globe, *glb*, the guttural *g* adds to the meaning the capacity of the throat. The feathers and wings of birds are still drier and thinner leaves. Thus also, you pass from a lumpish

grub in the earth to a fluttering butterfly. The very globe continually transcends and translates itself, and becomes winged in its orbit.⁵

What's going on here? Laboring with the idea of 'leaves,' Thoreau discovers a principle of unity between mineral, plant, and animal. This principle courses through the human as well ("What is man but a mass of thawing clay?" he asks⁶) so that within himself he finds not just leaves and lobes but presently the entire globe. As Thoreau sounds it out, g- l- b-, we find his principle of unity extended: Not just the world, but the words by which we know it, exhibit this feature of leafing superfluity and overflow.

Recall that deep ecology is a neutral monism—spirit and nature (meaning and material) belong to the same substance; ethics (in so far as we can even conceive of a monistic ethics) is coextensive with ontology. My question is: Is Thoreau, in his discovery of a ontological principle of unity and his intimations of this discovery's ethical import, a proto-deep ecologist? I think not and for reasons that bear back on skepticism.

IV.

Deep ecologists suspect that human forms of experience—in so far as they are picked out as uniquely human—cut us off from, rather than put us in touch with the 'outside' world. They fantasize experience unmediated by forms of experience, the thing-in-itself (the *oikos*) uncompromised by the painful 'as-it-appears-to-me' of judgment. They collapse ontology and ethics so that what *ought to be* is already given in what *is*. They cast our language as false or meaningless, and name as 'true' and meaningful not a language at all, but what traces, marks, and sounds we find in nature.

Thoreau is sensitive to this skeptical suspicions he shares in the disappointment that motivates it; and he's intimately acquainted with the fantasies it invites. We might see his entire project as prompted by the anxiety that our judgment has become so debased, our language so inflated, that we might as well lose both as valuable currency. Critical to our understanding of Thoreau, is this fact: rather than abandon judgment or language (with their attendant possibilities for falling in and out of community with one another), Thoreau seeks to redeem these. He tests the temper of each word in succession, bites down on his judgments, re-minting them with the seal of his approval. Why? How?

Well because Thoreau (via Emerson, via Hedge, via Marsh, via Coleridge) follows Kant in the critical turn. He knows his forms of experience to be *both* limits upon and grounding conditions of his relation to the world. More generally he knows his lack is the seat of his every gain. (His poverty engenders his wealth, just as his hunger engenders his satiety.)

[Several years ago I was at a conference. The speaker quoted Cavell's suggestion that we "are chafed by our skin, by a sense of powerlessness to penetrate beyond the human conditions of knowledge."⁷ After the talk the philosopher sitting in front of me turned around, held her hands out as if in supplication. "Yes," she said, "but our skin is also the site of every caress we've ever known." I want to say that so too, those human conditions of knowledge which we are so powerless to penetrate mark the surfaces on which our every intimacy is staged.]

This skin between each of us and our world, this slight—and I mean it to be very slight indeed—distance between what Emerson, in his extended essay "Nature," calls the "me" and "the NOT ME" is the ground upon which experience is given, not anonymously or uncontroversially, but as *mine*, and mine to avow. This is the ground upon which an ethical claim can be coherently lodged against the

⁵ Thoreau, "Spring," *Walden*

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy." *Must We Mean What We Say?* 61

ontological. [As Arendt never tires of reminding us, *Victrix causa deis pacuit sed victa Catoni*, The conquering cause pleased the gods, but the conquered cause pleased Cato. So too anthropocentrism and its consequent anthropocene are manifestly authorized by the course of nature. Whether we in turn authorize it—lending our ethical authority to nature’s ontological authority—is a real choice, indicating the uniqueness (which is not to say superiority) of our anthropological form of life.]

Emerson also calls the dualism I’m pushing for that between Nature and Soul. He’s perfectly clear that this is not to mark a distinction between the human and the inhuman. A great deal of the human belongs to nature (for instance everything bodily, everything past, all finished artifice, our constitutions, talents, and modds). The relevant distinction is rather between what I’ve already followed him in calling the [all caps] NOT ME” (Nature) and the lowercase “me” (Soul). This little me, this Soul, is gorgeously undefined. It is something formal or categorical, the sheer edge of the present, the only actionable point, a pivot on which one might turn and on which a turn can mean a new vision of the world.

IV.

There’s something more to be said about Thoreau. (This will be the note I conclude on.) It has to do with the conditions by which he finds himself—twenty years after the publication of Emerson’s “Nature”—witness to the thawing banks. Thirteen chapters prior Thoreau has written of the transcontinental rail running through his yard: “We have constructed a fate, an *Atropos*, that never turns aside. Let that be the name of your engine.”⁸ This steam engine, this fate is a human construction: It points up the ways in which we bind ourselves in an ontology far more effectively than the gods ever could. When Thoreau walks the rails, in the book’s final chapter, “Spring,” he does the one thing *Atropos* cannot do: He turns on the track. I take this turn, this unfatedness or freedom, to be a picture of the only dualism Thoreau will admit of: namely, that of the many tracks we find ourselves on and the turn we might yet make. That are we are thoroughly ‘tracked’ within and without is evidenced by the passage we looked at just a moment ago. The idea of ‘leaves’ grows in us as it grows in the mud: as steadily as a child and as independently of our will. The world and our words collude to determine the contours of our vision.

And yet for all that its *we* who do the seeing (who have eyes to see or don’t), we who prove ourselves pregnable—and so capable of getting something new—by what fates befall us.

Deep ecologists have, I think, manifestly turned on the track. Like the skeptic, they present us with a vision of the world that is by turns sobering and inspiring. This is a vision we desperately need to see. Insofar as deep ecologists can’t yet give an account of how they themselves have come to turn, to be ‘converted,’ they struggle, I think, to successfully convert others.

I wish I had titled my paper not “Transcendentalism’s Claim Against Deep Ecology,” but “Transcendentalism’s Appeal to Deep Ecology,” or “What Transcendentalism has to offer Deep Ecology.” What I think it has to offer is a vision of freedom, which is to say also responsibility: a vision of that actionable point.

[Words: 2,655]

⁸ “Sounds”