

On Human Separatism

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Abstract

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This is a dissertation about human separatism. Human separatism is the social imaginary according to which Humanity should aim to use technology to “separate” itself from nature. It is incoherent and self-undermining. But it has also proven persistent and resilient, and appears to be intensifying in the face of fears about phenomena like climate change.

In chapter 1 I unpack three distinct conceptions of “separation” that I argue have prevailed at different times in European philosophical and cultural history. The first is ontological, or related to being; the second is epistemological, or related to knowing; and the third is “nomological”, or related to law-making and laws. These correspond roughly to Ancient thought (in Plato and Augustine), Early Modern thought (in Bacon and Descartes) and Modern thought (in Kant and the contemporary “Ecomodernists”), respectively. I also offer some reasons for concluding that the concept of separation is in general incoherent.

In chapter 2 I reflect upon why this imaginary has proven so difficult to overcome.

Specifically, following existential psychology, I propose that it is a perverse manifestation of

terrors that are central to the human condition. In particular it is a manifestation of the fears we have as human beings about our limited agency and our mortality or finitude.

These fears are powerful enough to override rational thinking. Insofar as fantasies about separation from nature provide a salve for them, these fantasies persist over time. Insofar as fears of death and mortality are more and more front-and-centre for us as individuals and collectives, these fantasies become ever-more resilient to critique, and continue to intensify.

In chapter 3 I consider some challenges that emerge when we attempt to gather resources for imaginative alternatives to separatism. I consider the ideas that we might either (a) invent a new story from whole cloth, or (b) appropriate the stories and theories of other cultures and attempting to graft them onto our own. I reject these approaches, and explore some resources from critical ecofeminism as intellectual tools to understand them, and develop some design parameters for alternative approaches.

In chapter 4, I explore the narratives of some First Nations Australian cosmologies as they speak to the relationship between human beings and the natural world in the work of the First Nations writers Mary Graham and Tyson Yunkaporta. I then consider what might be involved in presenting some of these same insights in terms that adhere to the design parameters I set out in chapter 3. I propose that the genre of narrative tragedy is a powerful place to do some of this work. To flesh out this claim, I offer a series of detailed reflections

on narrative tragedy, drawing on the work of Julian Young, and suggest that tragic narratives offer a powerful place for metabolizing existential anxieties, for coming to terms with ecological reality, and for encouraging and engaging in dialogue about imaginative alternative futures.

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¹ Gretel Ehrlich, quoted in Davis, *The Wayfinders*, 210–13.

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Dedication

For Ibu Beth Mylius



1932-2022

Introduction

*It eluded us then, but that's no matter – tomorrow we will run faster,
stretch out our arms farther... And one fine morning –*

- F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

Questions about human nature – and the relation between human beings and “nature” – have been central to political theory since the beginning of the discipline. In recent decades, as climate change looms larger and larger in the collective consciousness, these questions have gained new urgency. This is significant: because the way we imagine ourselves and our relationship with the natural world has a huge influence on the way we imagine our approaches to climate change, other social issues, and designs for the future in general.

This is a dissertation about human separatism. Human separatism is the imaginary that proposes that our goal, in politics and life, should be to use technologies we discover or invent to “separate” ourselves from nature. It is an imaginary that is incoherent. And yet it

has repeatedly proven persistent in the face of failure, and resilient in the face of critique. In fact, it appears to have progressively intensified, even as its destructiveness stacks up.

Whether or not it is called “human separatism”, this imaginary has adherents in positions of great social power (billionaire techno-utopian Elon Musk is one example) and a powerful capacity to capture both private and public imaginations. It also has connections to many of the central themes of contemporary political inquiry, including sovereignty, agency, and freedom. For all of these reasons it deserves sustained critical attention and investigation.

The core premise of this dissertation is that human separatism is self-undermining. This is because it is committed to two premises that are incompatible. On the one hand, human separatist argue that we human beings are *already* separate from nature, by virtue of whatever characteristic or capacity – *logos*, language, culture, rationality – is supposed to make us unique in the universe. Unique, here, always means something more than “mere” distinctiveness. To claim that a creature is distinctive is simply, and often truthfully, to claim that it has characteristics or capacities that we have not observed anywhere else. In this sense, human beings are indeed distinctive. So too are many other creatures. But human separatism takes this view with respect to human beings and turns it into a crypto-religious metaphysical claim. On the separatist view, human distinctiveness is something so radically novel that it puts us in a club that will admit no other members. Only we are distinctively

distinctive – so much so that we are “separate”.¹ Even, or perhaps especially, amongst those separatists who profess commitments to absolute standards of rationality, this sits as an article of faith.

This premise, that human beings are already separate from nature, is destructive in itself.

There is a good deal of environmental thinking that explores the consequences of this thought. The second premise of human separatism, however, which is the focus of my dissertation, is the second separation claim that separatism makes. When separatists turn their imaginations to the future, they begin to argue that – despite whatever “separateness” we are already imagined to have – we must not be not separate *enough*. Separating from nature thus becomes the goal, explicit or implied, of the various technological and social projects it proposes.

This claim can be read as animating a significant strand of European philosophy, which I discern in incipient form in Plato and see evolving to the present. From an intellectual perspective, the problem is that it turns out to be immensely difficult to specify what

¹ The relationship between distinctiveness claims and separation claims is rarely specified; in many cases the distinction itself is not even acknowledged. And yet the commitment of human separatists to the stronger claim, and their commitment to the view that separateness means something different than distinctiveness, is quite clear in separatist arguments – both from the strong negative reactions these arguments evince to the claim that human beings are no more or less special than other creatures in any “objective” sense, and also from a consideration of the efforts to which such arguments go to centralise discussions of human nature and human being on the characteristic that is imagined to “separate” us from everything else.

“separateness” from nature would consist in. In fact, it is impossible. We cannot specify what it would mean for human beings to become “separate” from nature without resorting to (a) claims that are really just distinctiveness claims, and should be discussed as such, to avoid resort to illegitimate metaphysical leaps and implications; or (b) unfalsifiable and speculative, and hence articles of faith alone. Pursuing “separation” from nature is not a legitimate or desirable goal for us, because it is not possible for us to imagine what achieving it would look like. The notion of being separate from nature itself makes no sense. If we chase it anyway, like Gatsby chasing his green light and drowning in the water, we are chasing a fantasy that will eventually consume us.

From an anecdotal perspective, the thought that “separation” makes no sense is something that many already understand. But it is here that the story gets interesting: because – even amongst those who concede the point – the allure of the goal seems to remain. Yes, we say, it’s probably nonsensical. But aren’t there situations where indulging nonsense leads to real-world change? Breakthroughs or innovations? Paradigm change? Does this not mean that indulging the thought is somehow good – especially if, against all probability, and in ways we cannot possibly predict, keeping the hope alive is itself the thing that makes those changes possible?

This second phenomenon, which is psychological and emotional, is at least as important as the first to a clear-eyed understanding of the perils and powers of separatism. Some environmentalists would like to dismiss the thought itself as the province of fools. It is so self-evidently false, they would say, that we shouldn't even dignify it by engaging it. This approach is not productive: simply asserting that something one does not like is "foolish" is not a way to make it go away. If environmentalists do not pursue a sophisticated understanding of the cultural and psychological mechanisms that underpin human separatism, and render it so disastrously seductive, they will condemn themselves to watch as it reanimates itself, again and again. They will also, and perhaps more tragically, rob themselves of resources for reflecting pragmatically on the kinds of emotional, psychological and cultural needs that alternatives to separatism must meet – the kinds of capacities that better stories need to have – and the kinds of practices these new stories need to appear in, if they are to have a hope of displacing separatism as a dominant principle in modern ethical life.

Before I outline my argument in more detail, let me reflect briefly on the term "separatism". In political theory and more broadly, this term is conventionally used as a label for the ideas of groups of humans who are seeking to secede from, or become independent of, sovereign jurisdictions that are controlled or led by other humans. It is in this sense that we might speak of "Catalonian separatists" or "Chechen separatism". Importantly, as these examples

make clear, the term is pejorative. Chechens or Catalonians who are sympathetic to the movement in question will be more likely to refer to it as an “independence movement”, and refer to themselves as “freedom fighters”. In the same way, those I would label “human separatists” do not usually self-identify in this way. Instead they call themselves “eco-pragmatists”, “rational progressives”, “techno-utopians”, or “Ecomodernists”.

Whatever one’s views on particular current or historical separatist/independence movements, the term in the intra-human case at least makes sense. Regardless of whether we think Catalonians should or should not “separate” or become independent from Spain, we can coherently imagine what it might mean for this to occur – we can form a picture of the world with it occurring – and then have arguments about whether or not it should take place. The same cannot be said for separation from “nature”. It is for this reason that I have chosen to use the term “human separatism” to refer to the view I am critiquing. I think it is both more truthful as a description of the goals of the thinkers at issue, and more provocative as a way to encapsulate their tragic hubris.

Summary of chapters

The basic structure of my argument is as follows. First, I aim to show how ideas about human separateness from nature have evolved over philosophical and cultural history.

Second, I consider the question of why they have proven so persistent. Third, I reflect on some of the difficulties that face those of us who seek to overcome them, and propose one approach to dealing with these difficulties. Finally, I present some work that attempts to take this approach, in engaging with the anti-separatist stories and theories of other (non-European) cultures, and imagining a future beyond separatism.

I will now detail these steps/chapters in turn.

Chapter 1: A History of Human Separatism

In chapter 1, I offer a genealogy and taxonomy of two concepts that are central to human separatism: “Humanity”, and “separation”. In particular, I aim to show how, from the very beginnings of European political philosophy conventionally construed, preoccupations with the separation of human beings and nature form a central part of political and social thinking. More specifically, the sleight-of-hand described above – the subtle shift between claims about human distinctiveness, and stronger claims about human *separateness* – manifests itself from these beginnings. This sleight-of-hand survives a great deal of development and change across the generations and the centuries, through major early modern thought into modern and now contemporary thought, undergoing changes along the way. In parallel with these changes, an increasingly centralised and agency-oriented

conception of “Humanity” comes into being. In the contemporary context, these two concepts, combined with a muscular concept of “technology”, provide the crucial fuel for separatist ideas.

The Ancient thinkers I consider are Plato and Augustine. In the work of both these thinkers, the conception of separation that is operative is an ontological one. Separation from nature is imagined in terms of the existence of two ontologically different realms (the Material Realm and the Realm of Forms for Plato, the City of Man and City of God for Augustine), and its achievement is imagined as something that is possible for individual human beings, using reason or intellection. In Plato there is not yet any concept of “Humanity” as a collective; in Augustine there are the seeds of one, but they are limited to passivity, to a conception of a collective Humanity as that body or group of individuals who find themselves blessed by the Christian God.

The Early Modern thinkers I consider are Bacon and Descartes. In the work of these two thinkers, I suggest, the conception of separation that is operative has shifted to an epistemological one. Now, separation from nature is imagined in terms of the possibility of achieving objective or complete knowledge of “nature”, with an emphasis on the kinds of practical possibilities that this affords to human beings. The achievement of this separation begins to shift from something that is solely the purview of individual human beings –

Augustine's men of faith or Plato's philosopher-kings – to something that might be achieved by these special individuals and then disseminated to the collective of humans as a whole. In conjunction with this, an idea of Humanity appears in clearer form, although not yet in its contemporary form. In both Bacon and Descartes "Humanity" is a subject of history, the entity that the development of "Arts" (Bacon) or sciences (Descartes) will benefit.

The main Modern thinker I consider is Kant. In the work of Kant, I propose, the conception of separation that is operative has shifted to a *nomological* one – that is, one related to the understanding and operation of laws. Now, separation from nature is imagined in terms of the possibility of realising the development of a realm of moral laws which transcends the purely natural laws that are operative in the broader, nonhuman world. And the achievement of this separation becomes something that is no longer the purview of individual human beings – Kant is quite explicit about this – but a possibility for "the species" as a whole. As a part of this development, an idea of Humanity emerges that is much closer to the one we associate with invocations of the concept in the present. For Kant, Humanity is an *agent* of history – a self-conscious actor that is the protagonist of an inevitable (because teleological) journey towards freedom and progress.

The contemporary thinkers I consider – still broadly under the rubric of "modern" thought – are the "Ecomodernists". The Ecomodernists are a loose group of self-identified "modernist"

or “environmentally pragmatist” thinkers, many of whom are associated with the Breakthrough Institute in Oakland, California. They reject the conventional environmentalist emphasis on achieving sustainability through “harmony” with nature in favour of the view that no such harmony will be needed if we, Humanity, can use technology to facilitate the “decoupling” – that is, separation – of our human social and material systems from ecological systems. Their philosophy is crude in comparison to Kant’s (and indeed, for that matter, any of the thinkers previously mentioned). But they appear to take quite literally the idea that Humanity itself is an individualistic agent – even a “geological force” – and that it can, through reason and science, inaugurate a good human age, or Anthropocene. The specific proposals they offer for the achievement of this decoupling are nuclear energy, intensive agriculture, and mass urbanisation.

In offering this conceptual history, one of my central aims is to show how, even as the concept of separation (and with it, the concept of Humanity) becomes increasingly subtle and sophisticated, the same aporia continues to exist at its core. This aporia is the shift I mentioned earlier: the constant slippage between claims about human distinctiveness, and stronger – unjustifiable – claims of human *separation*. In all the thinkers I discuss, this aporia is disguised through various intellectual sleights-of-hand. But close attention continues to reveal it, most obviously through the repeated resort to suggestive but vague metaphorical language. It is also revealed across these various evolutions in the stubborn

persistence of paradoxes and confusions related to time (at what moment in the past or future, exactly, are human beings supposed to become “separate”) and also space (*where*, exactly, does this separate realm of being, knowledge or law in fact exist, and how is its relation to its under-sphere defined?).

In all instances, therefore, I make the claim that the concept of “separation” makes no sense. This means, as I explore in the following chapters, that continuing to use it can only be a self-destructive move.

Chapter 2: An Analysis of Human Separatism

With this history outlined, in chapter 2 I turn to a follow-up question. If “separation” is incoherent a concept – if there is no effective way for us to define what it would mean to “separate” from nature, and hence no way for us to practically achieve this – why has the fantasy of doing so proven so persistent? And not only this: why has it proven, in fact, outright resilient to rational critique (as evidenced by its ability to “brush off” objections to it), and continued to intensify?

My strategy for answering these questions is to begin considering human separatism not in the terms in which it presents itself – as logical and rationally-oriented – but in existential-

psychological terms, as a response to deeply-felt desires and fears that manifest themselves in intellectual terms. More specifically, I suggest, it is productive and deflationary for us to “read” separatism not as a coherent political goal, but as a perverse manifestation of terrors that are central to the human condition, and particularly fears of our inherently limited agency (our inability to control everything about our lives and in the world) and our mortality, or the inevitability of our eventual deaths. All these terrors, and especially our fears about mortality, are so powerful that they can effectively override reason, as existentialist psychology has shown. Insofar as fantasies of separation from nature provide a salve for these fears and anxieties, they persist through change over time; and insofar as fears of death and mortality are more and more front-and-centre for us as individuals and collectives, these fantasies become ever-more resilient to critique, and continue to intensify.

I start this analysis by exploring what it means to claim that the concept of “separation” is incoherent. Specifically, I suggest that it cannot be framed in a way that is neither speculative nor question-begging. This should make it inadmissible as a foundation for normative projects.

Next I turn to explore some of the literature from modern psychology – most obviously, Ernest Becker’s 1974 *The Denial of Death*, along with some contemporary work in the field of “Terror Management Theory” (which takes its cue from Becker’s work) – on this

phenomenon, terror of death. I consider the many layers that this terror has, and the power over reason that it takes. I then consider the ways in which theories of human nature can be understood as a central cultural response to these multi-layered fears of death. These theories, which are close to cultural universals, are narrative in their structure, “time-making” in their orientation, and anxiolytic or anxiety-reducing in their function. These capacities mean that they can serve, imagined well, as effective salves for these various terrors.

I continue my argument by framing human separatism as a specific, and perverse, theory/story of human nature. I show how it has all the features of such theories, as outlined a moment earlier, and suggest that the changes in its content over time leave this underlying set of continuities untouched. I then explore how these two things – the fact that human separatism is a theory of human nature, and the fact that (as part of being such a theory) it is a response to our fears of mortality and death – can explain not only its persistence, but also its resilience and intensification. Specifically, I suggest, human separatism is resilient because it cannot be falsified, is difficult to challenge using reductionism, and exploits the limits of induction; because it exploits the so-called “narrative fallacy” with respect to past events, creates a perpetual “cliffhanger effect” with respect to the present, and incessantly rewrites the future; and because it works fast, “travels light”, and promises a complete solution to human terrors. And it has intensified, in turn, by co-opting developments in philosophy and technology, as well as the concept of progress;

because it has exploited linear conceptions of time, the idea of a modern rupture, and contemporary ideas of agency; and because it has benefited from the gradual erosion of other social spheres of meaning, the proliferation of technologically-mediated human relationships to “the environment”, and the explosion of anxieties about global matters from climate change to human extinction.

For all these reasons, I suggest, human separatism – despite its rational incoherence – presents an immense emotional and practical challenge.

Chapter 3: An Ethos of Human Anti-Separatism

In chapter 3, I turn my focus in a new direction. If we grant that human separatism is incoherent, but persists because it meets certain psychological needs – we are faced with questions about the form that alternative stories might take. Here, we confront a series of further challenges. In particular, I suggest, it may seem as if we can respond to human separatism either by inventing a new story from whole cloth, or by appropriating the stories and theories of other cultures and attempting to graft them onto our own. These approaches will not work; but more than this, to attempt them would be unconscionable. To understand why this is so, and to develop a set of considerations to guide engagement with these other

cultures and stories, I explore some new ways of framing the ethos of human separatism and examining alternatives.

I begin by examining some of the literature on the concept of “coloniality” – a concept that has gained traction over the past few decades as a way of critiquing dominant forms of intercultural relations. I consider several different definitions of this term, but conclude that it is ultimately too vague and too static (that is, too focussed on conditions, as opposed to relationships) to serve my purposes. With this in mind, I turn to a second critical language that I suggest is more compelling as a means to articulate the problems with human separatist approaches to other cultures, and so the different ethos that anti-separatist would ought to take up.

This second language is critical ecofeminism. Focussing on the work of the Australian philosopher Val Plumwood, I outline critical ecofeminism’s assertion that European thought has been dominated by a form of reasoning, and specifically a form of relating to otherness, that is oriented towards domination and mastery. This “master rationality” is centred upon dualisms: entrenched binary oppositions that are interrelated and constructed around domination and negation. I explore Plumwood’s analysis of these dualisms and their effects, with a focus on the five perverting effects – backgrounding, radical exclusion, relational definition, instrumentalization and homogenisation – that she proposes they involve.

Next, I apply Plumwood's analysis to human separatism in particular. In doing this, I consider the ways in which the perverting effects of dualisms appear in both the way human separatism construes the relationship between "Humanity" and "nature", *and* in the posture or ethos it adopts with respect to other cultures' narratives about this relationship. I argue that these effects are especially clear in the projects and proposals of the Ecomodernists, again in both their theory and their practice.

With these considerations in mind, I turn finally to outline some "design parameters", both positive and negative, that I propose anti-separatist projects should adopt as they attempt to engage with the stories and theories of other cultures, as part of the project of imagining theories and stories of human nature that are not separatist. I make a set of concrete suggestions about the kinds of approaches to these other stories that such projects should avoid (in order to avoid perpetuating the corrosive relationships that human separatism involves); and a set of concrete suggestions about the kinds of approaches to these other projects that they should adopt, in order to "critically affirm" (in Plumwood's words) the context and content of these other stories, and gather inspiration for work to produce new stories "at home".

These methodological and ethical considerations put me in a position to embark on just such an engagement in my final chapter.

Chapter 4: A Practice of Human Anti-Separatism

In chapter 4, I undertake two tasks. First, I explore the narratives of some First Nations Australian cosmologies, as they speak to the relationship between human beings and the natural world, in the work of the First Nations writers Mary Graham and Tyson Yunkaporta. I outline some of the ways in which these narratives encapsulate and facilitate complex political and social thought – a fact that has often been denied in colonial engagements with these narratives – and involve detailed theories of human nature. These theories of human nature, I propose, respond to broadly the same kinds of emotional and psychological concerns as their European counterparts: but they do so in non-separatist ways. In particular, I consider how a series of core concepts or approaches play into these theories and stories. These are: Country, law, and relationship (as described by Graham); and patterns, narcissism, and yarning (as described by Yunkaporta).

With these inspirations or provocations in mind, I turn to my second task: considering what might be involved in presenting some of these same insights, but in terms that adhere to the design parameters I set out in chapter 3. I ask, in other words, where in the European

tradition we might start to seed some of these ideas in ways that take inspiration from cosmologies like those of First Nations Australians, but in a non-exploitative and non-dominating fashion; and how we might draw on existing cultural frameworks and resources to present these ideas in compelling and legible terms.

My central claim for this second task is that the genre of narrative tragedy is a powerful place to do some of this work. To flesh out this claim, I offer a series of detailed reflections on narrative tragedy, drawing on the work of Julian Young. I consider some of the ways in which tragic narratives can facilitate reflections on the human condition, and in particular, the situatedness of human beings in their context, and the dangers of overweening human hubris. I explore how these same narratives, moreover, can facilitate emotional (and not just intellectual) processing or metabolization of this condition: with a structure that has been honed over many years for precisely this purpose, and in terms that integrate catharsis as philosophical or intellectual reflections alone are incapable of doing. And I suggest that tragic narratives offer a powerful place for encouraging and engaging in dialogue about imaginative alternative futures, for both experts and non-experts. I reflect on the existing history of this function in tragic narrative; explore how tragic narratives can facilitate group conversation on political and ethical themes; and propose that they are, therefore, an ideal place for reflection on alternative social possibilities and futures.

With these general reflections in mind, I turn finally to the tragedy of human separatism itself. Human separatism is already a tragedy, in both content and form. But more than this: the genre of tragedy, for the reasons outlined above, is a powerful place both to relate this tragedy as it unfolds, and to imagine non-separatist alternatives. It provides the resources for compelling and effective depictions of the hubris, incoherence, and danger of human separatist ideas. It offers us, potentially, another tool for coming to terms with the fact that, despite the seductive allure that such fantasies involve, we will never be “separate from nature”. And it offers a wealth of creative possibilities for those of us who are keen to talk together about alternatives, in a generative and deep-rooted way.

Having made these arguments, I conclude with a brief summary and set of reflections on some possible next steps.

Some methodological notes and clarifications

I want to offer two brief methodological notes, on the approach I take to authors and ideas in the chapters that follow.

My use of a discourse-analytic approach

My primary sources in the thinking I do here are texts. As I noted above, one of my central goals is to take human separatism seriously. This means engaging with its presence in the texts I explore, not as a metaphor or some other sort of figurative language that cannot be taken in earnest, but as a pointer towards some more deeply-rooted set of commitments.

The most obvious example of this approach is my insistence on asking what the concept of human “separateness” from nature would need to consist in, in order for it to be something other than simple distinctiveness, and in order for it to license normative projects and consequences that simple distinctiveness claims cannot license.

In the context of environmental thinking, Kallis and Bliss have described this broad approach as “discourse-analytical”:² in line with their writing, I will adopt this term as well where relevant to this project and my work.

My framing of social imaginaries

In my analysis here, I treat human separatism as an *imaginary*: a sort of background story and ethos that sits as a backdrop to other activity and thought. I should say a few words about what imaginaries are and how they work.

² Kallis and Bliss, “Post-Environmentalism.”

As Charles Taylor writes in his *Modern Social Imaginaries*, an imaginary is something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. ... [the term names] the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.³

He notes some ways in which there are “important differences between [a] social imaginary and social theory”, and specifies that he “adopt[s] the term imaginary ... because [his] focus is ... the way ordinary people “imagine” their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends”: and because “theory is often the possession of a small minority, whereas ... [a] social imaginary [is] shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society” – a fact that makes “the social imaginary ... that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy”.⁴

³ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 24.

⁴ Id.

He also notes that the “social imaginary at any given time is complex”, incorporating “a sense of the normal expectations we have of each other, the kind of common understanding that enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life”, and “some sense of how we all fit in carrying out the common practice” – an understanding, importantly, that is “both factual and normative”, which means that it includes “a sense of how things usually go, ... *interwoven with an idea of how they ought to go*”.⁵ In line with the reflections I offer in chapter 1 about theories of human nature, Taylor notes how social imaginaries assume “some notion of a moral or metaphysical order, in the context of which the norms and ideals [it narrates] make sense”.⁶

Significantly, a social imaginary “has no clear limits” – making it the “very [essence] of what contemporary philosophers have described as the “background” – and is a “largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense they have”.⁷ This means that it can “never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines[,] because of its unlimited and indefinite nature”.⁸ This “background”, which “makes sense of any given act”, is “wide and

⁵ Id 25, my emphasis.

⁶ Id 26.

⁷ Id.

⁸ Id.

deep”: and while it “doesn’t include everything”, the relevant sense-giving features can't be circumscribed”: as such, for Taylor, “we can say that sense giving draws on our whole world, that is, our sense of our whole predicament in time and space, among others and in history”.⁹

The concept and related ideas have also been explored by thinkers like Benedict Anderson, Cornelius Castoriadis, and John Searle (although Searle tends to talk of “social reality”). In invoking it here, I hope to situate the story I am offering about human separatism in an intellectual and disciplinary context that I hope will provide some further resources for grasping it.

Significantly, the position I take here speaks against the pure materialist position according to which the ideas of a given place and time are *solely* determined by material factors. At the same time, it does not discount this materialist position entirely: to the contrary, the use of evolutionary theory as central testifies to the relevance and effects (not to mention effectiveness) of embodied and external/material concerns.

I want to distinguish this from several other approaches that have historically been taken to questions of a similar sort. It is not a Lovejovian analysis of a “unit idea”; nor is it

⁹ Id 29.

straightforwardly a Hegelian analysis of a dialectic. It is instead an attempt to do justice to the fact that ideas have heft, and that potent (in the present context, anxiogenic) ideas have a heft all of their own. This heft is even greater than that of many other, “lesser” (less effective) ideas. In evolutionary terms, we might say, the arc of history bends not towards justice or progress but towards evolutionary or reproductive fitness. This presents a great many challenges. Rather than treating it as grounds for cynicism or despair, however, I take the view that we should use it as an opportunity to explore how the strange vitality of certain ideas should be worked with, as we continue in the very human project of coming to terms with ourselves and our world, and in working with the tragic enabling constraints of our own lives towards a more “ecological” set of imaginaries for our collective futures.

The contribution this dissertation makes to scholarship

The contribution I aim to make to scholarship in this dissertation has three components.

The first relates to the account of the separation thesis and its relationship to distinctiveness claims that I develop; the second relates to the psychological and affective turn I make as a way to understand this thesis; and the third relates to the use I make of tragic narrative and the tragic sensibility as a means to engage this thesis at the same time as engaging with the worldviews of non-European cultures and perspectives.

My account of the separation thesis

I am to develop a novel account of the relationship between legitimate claims about human distinctiveness within nature, and illegitimate claims about human separateness *from* nature.

I am to show not only that the latter kinds of claims precede modernity (contra the view of a good deal of environmental scholarship¹⁰), but also to show how we can usefully distinguish at least three different versions of them, which evolve over philosophical time.

These are ontological separation claims, epistemological separation claims, and what I call nomological separation claims, which correspond broadly to Ancient, early Modern and Modern political expression.

I focus my attention on this distinctiveness-separation distinction, which is an analytic distinction, in order to overcome what I believe is a pitfall of a good deal of scholarship in environmental thought. That scholarship tends to pitch its discussions at the level of values and beliefs. For instance: it first imagines anthropocentrism (a common target of attack) as involving claims about human superiority or specialness, and then seeks to argue against this view in the same way that others argue against bigotries like racism or sexism. I have engaged this claim and developed my own alternative approach in other work.¹¹

¹⁰ One influential example is Leiss, *The Domination of Nature*.

¹¹ Mylius, "Three Types of Anthropocentrism."

In this longer work, I begin from the premise that this approach – pitching the discussion at the level of values and beliefs – cedes too much ground to its opponents from the outset.

Discussions about values and beliefs cannot be finally adjudicated. In response to the argument, for instance, that normative anthropocentrism is morally wrong, a normative anthropocentrist can simply declare that they disagree, and then leave the room.

Environmental thinkers can claim the moral high ground (and often do just this, as a sort of rear-guard strategy); but their opponents can simply dismiss or ignore this claim and continue on their way. In practical terms, nothing changes.

The same is not true, I think, if the discussion is pitched at the level of analytic claims.

These kinds of claims can be more finally adjudicated. The claim that human beings are distinctive in a certain way *within* nature, for instance, can be falsified according to the methods of natural science, through the identification of creatures or species with the same capacity it has been suggested is distinctive to humans. And the claim that human distinctiveness somehow also entails or leads to human “separateness” can be rejected either by showing that the terms cannot coherently refer to different things (in which case, they are useless) and/or by showing that the leap from a distinctiveness claim to a separation claim involves a sleight-of-hand that makes it irrationalist and illegitimate.

These two approaches do not of course mean that opponents of environmental projects will simply give up and be converted. But they do, I think, place environmental thinkers on a stronger argumentative ground. Instead of simply claiming that the views of their opponents are undesirable (a claim that is deeply subjective) they can begin to claim that those views are *incoherent* and *irrational* (a stronger claim to rebut). They can therefore begin to corral their opponents in a certain way, by forcing them either to present a compelling case for the way in which distinctiveness claims can legitimately entail separation claims, or by forcing them to concede that their views are irrationalist (and therefore, in many cases, that they contradict the commitment to Enlightenment rationality and/or scientific irreligiosity espoused by those same thinkers).

Perhaps counterintuitively, taking this approach also enables me in the later chapters of this work to turn usefully towards emotional and psychological approaches, which lead into my interest in narrative. If human separatism cannot be rationally defended – as I think it cannot – and yet insists on persisting despite this, we should look for the cause of this persistence in a different place. This place, I suggest, is human psychology. Human separatism persists because it serves as a powerful salve for human terrors about finitude and death. These terrors may be partially rational, but they are never wholly rational; it thus makes sense that they require salving in both rational and non-rational terms.

Making this shift is useful, I suggest, because it moves the discussion away from straightforward idealism. It rejects the thought, in other words, that the kinds of problems environmental thinkers are concerned with will be able to be solved simply by thinking better: by inventing clearer arguments or concepts. This kind of work is necessary, but it cannot be sufficient. It is also important to take seriously the embodied and psychological reasons that coping mechanisms like separatism arise in the first place. To do this is to grant the experiences of one's opponents (and, in truth, probably oneself) an *a priori* validity. Facing mortality and death *is* terrifying. And it is also to open a great deal of space for creative investigation and debate about the ways that are not separatist ways in which this experience can be salved and metabolised/resolved.

My turn to a psychological and affective reading of the separation thesis

The second contribution I aim to make is to turn in a new direction, to existential-psychological analyses of fears about mortality and agency, to account for the persistence of the separation thesis. Environmental political theory and environmental philosophy, as well as “environmental” texts more generally, have already offered a great deal of reflection on the ways in which emotion and affect, in particular, intertwine with environmental

worldviews.¹² Many of these reflections revolve around the significance of personal experiences of the natural world (as in Aldo Leopold's remembrances of the "fierce green fire" dying in the eyes of a gun-shot wolf¹³), and/or around the spiritual or religious dimensions of environmental experience (as in Muir's discussions of the romantic element of national parks¹⁴). Two further important strands consider the connections between feelings of social and ecological alienation,¹⁵ and between phenomena like "nature deficit disorder" and other lived experiences either as catalysts for or hindrances to environmentally positive actions.¹⁶

In offering the existential-psychological reading of the separation thesis that I offer here, I aim to contribute to this literature and this knowledge by offering a further angle of entry into questions about the emotional and experiential element of ecological concerns.

Specifically, I aim to bring a literature that I believe has significant power – that which has developed around Becker's *Denial of Death* and its central premises – to bear on the specific question of why an incoherent and irrationalist posture towards "nature" and the future can continue to have such political and psychological weight. In doing this, my goal is to open

¹² See, as one overview, the discussion of deep ecological views in Nash, *The Rights of Nature*. See also Nash and Miller, *Wilderness and the American Mind*.

¹³ Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: And, Sketches Here and There*.

¹⁴ Jedediah Purdy provides a useful discussion of this paradigm or imaginary of nature in Purdy, *After Nature*.

¹⁵ For instance, Vogel, *Against Nature*. See also Jeremy Bendik-Keymer's discussions in Bendik-Keymer, "The Self-Work of Planetary Justice"; Bendik-Keymer, "Acceptance Governance."

¹⁶ One especially influential discussion of this phenomenon is Louv, *Last Child in the Woods*.

another field of inquiry into the separatisms I explore, and also to suggest a new and creative way of thinking through them and engaging with them, with a view to moving beyond them.

My use of tragedy and a tragic sensibility

The third contribution to knowledge I aim to make appears in my reflections upon narrative tragedy, and upon what might be called a “tragic sensibility”, as a way both to engage with separatism in creative and generative ways, and as a way to engage questions about intercultural engagement and relationships in the process. The latter set of questions – questions, in effect, about the ethics and politics of attempting to engage with or learn from the knowledge of other cultures in the aftermath of European colonialism – have long been central to postcolonial scholarship in many fields, including political theory. They have also long been acknowledged by environmental writers as kindred concerns: on the thought that there are resonances between the structure and logic of different emancipatory social projects (as a matter of theory), and on the thought that there should be alliances between those seeking different kinds of justice (as a matter of practice). To my knowledge, though, the “link” between these two fields or bodies of inquiry has to date revolved primarily around the substance of the questions at issue, and not as much on the question of sensibility or ethos in the specific sense I develop those terms here.

My aim is to contribute to these literatures by suggesting that narrative tragedy provides a novel way in to conversations both about futures beyond separatism and ecological destruction, and a novel way in to conversations about how the perspectives, stories and experiences of non-European cultures (and especially First Nations cultures) can be engaged with by those from dominant cultural backgrounds in their quests for ecological alternatives to current paradigms. In particular, I want to suggest, considering tragic stories alongside one another, and also considering the stories of First Nations cultures *as* tragic stories (and/or as evincing a certain sort of tragic posture with respect to the dilemmas of political and ethical existence) serves as a very powerful way to engage in conversations with those stories and cultures without succumbing to some of the problems that beset more conventional approaches. These problems include, but are not limited to: patronising or paternalistic readings of other cultures' narratives and theories; exploitative or appropriative engagement with those narratives or theories; and context- and ethos-free readings of those narratives and theories.

I also aim to suggest, for want of a more apt phrase, that the (careful) cultivation of a "tragic sensibility" can be of great assistance to environmental political theory in general, and to environmental political theory seeking to process and move beyond separatism in particular. This is because such a sensibility captures something of the pathos and

significance of questions about finitude, agency, care, and justice that animate both environmental-political and conventional political-theoretical texts, while also offering new imaginative and practical (i.e., craft-oriented) resources both for: (a) reading and engaging with political theory and the narratives of other cultures; and for (b) writing and producing political theory that is generative in form and content, and writing and producing narratives beyond political theory that engage the questions I raise here.

Thinking through stories and myths can be used to connect the tragic sensibility that emerges from a consideration of human limits in the face of climate change with first nations narratives and scholarship. This approach offers a new way of thinking about environmental political theory, one that recognizes the importance of cultural narratives and the ways in which they shape our perceptions of the world and our place within it.

By using this method, I hope to offer a small demonstration of how cultural narratives can be used to bridge the gap between different perspectives and disciplines, and bring a new level of nuance and depth to our understanding of environmental challenges. I also hope that this approach can go some way to fostering greater interdisciplinary collaboration, and encouraging overlaps between projects to integrate First Nations knowledge with the questions of environmental political theory.

Chapter 1: a history of human separatism

when the soul [via its reason] investigates by itself it passes into the realm of what is pure, ever existing, immortal and unchanging.

- Plato, *Phaedo*

we are laying the foundations in the human understanding of a true model of the world, as it is and not as any man's own reason tells him it is.

- Bacon, *Novum Organon*

reason is the ability of a creature to extend the rules and ends of the use of all of its powers far beyond its natural instincts.

- Kant, *Idea for a Universal History*

1.0 Chapter Introduction.

1.0.1 The fictions of “humanity” and “separation” play an important role in contemporary environmental political debates.

The imaginary that I am calling human separatism is influential because it reflects a simple truth: there is power in a good story. The story that separatism tells is one of triumph and possibility. It has a clear and sympathetic protagonist – “Humanity”. This protagonist has a clear quest – to “decouple” itself from nature. And this quest has a clear end state or goal – the achievement of a “good Anthropocene”, or a “human planet”, governed by “knowledge and technology, applied with wisdom”.¹

One particularly potent contemporary example of human separatist ideas appears in the “Manifesto” published in 2015 by an eclectic group of thinkers (mainly scientists and economists) who call themselves “Ecomodernists”. Like many separatist narratives, this document is framed as if the story it tells involves no politics and has no history.² This is despite the fact that many of the Manifesto’s authors situate their individual writings

¹ Asafu-Adjaye and Blomkvist, *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*, 6.

² This is, itself, a quintessentially Modern move. On modernity and ideas of rupture, see Dube, *Enchantments of Modernity*. On Ecomodernist “ignorance” of history, see Monbiot: Monbiot, “Meet the Ecomodernists.”

explicitly in the “Western” tradition, and frame themselves as opponents of those “traditional” environmental thinkers who argue that human systems must be brought into harmony or balance with ecological systems if they are to become sustainable.

Ecomodernists argue that no such harmony or balance is required. They propose instead that human societies can simply “decouple” themselves from the natural world, and continue as before. They thus make a significant portion of traditional environmental thought into the antagonist or villain of their work. (The subtitle of Shellenberger and Nordhaus’ book “*Break Through*” is “Why We Can’t Leave Saving The Planet to Environmentalists”.)

In particular, the Ecomodernist version of the human separatist narrative proceeds as if its two key fictions – its protagonist, “Humanity”, and its quest, separation from nature – exist in an intellectual vacuum. This makes it more difficult to critique. It also makes it more difficult to have a thoughtful conversation about why, despite its many flaws, the human separatism embodied in Ecomodernism continues to appeal to otherwise clear-minded thinkers.

One of my goals in this chapter is to help address this vacuum. I do so by offering a history and a taxonomy, of sorts, of these two fictions. As a brief note on method: in offering the history I offer here, especially when it comes to the work of the Ecomodernists, I follow

Kallis and Bliss in taking a discourse-oriented or discourse-analytical approach. This means that I take the words the Ecomodernists use seriously and seek to understand what constructs, ideologies and ideas might lie behind them.

The thought here is that it should not be possible to hide behind the claim, for instance, that the usage of some particular term or other is simply suggestive, or “merely a metaphor”. It should not be possible to shift between claiming that a particular proposition is literally or figuratively meant, depending on which (at any given moment) enables one to defend one’s point most easily. Allowing this shift facilitates the sleight-of-hand I explore below, by allowing separatist thinkers to (a) imply that there is a distinction between “distinctiveness” and “separation” when it suits their purposes (that is, to imply that separation is something more than mere distinctiveness) and yet (b) avoid the need to define what this distinction is, and collapse it at will, when they are challenged.

Both fictions – “Humanity”, and “separation” – turn out to have deep roots. In view of this, my hope is to contribute a relatively simple argument to the large literature that exists on the history of philosophy, and specifically on the authors I consider below. My argument will be that both the fiction of Humanity and the fiction of “separation” from nature have evolved over the arc of European philosophical history, in response to:

1. one another;
2. their own internal conceptual dynamics or contradictions; and
3. developments in European history generally.

Here is my argument in outline. I propose that the concept of humankind as a collective – a precursor to the concept of Humanity that is familiar in the modern period – first emerged as a passive designator for the set of creatures (namely, humans) that were imagined to be favoured in the eyes of the God of the Christian tradition. This is to say that it was not yet evident in the work of the Greeks, but rather appeared in the work of thinkers like Augustine. Much later in the same history, the idea of humanity turned out to be a good fit for invocation as an active agent in its own right, as European colonial and globalisation projects took hold.

In parallel with these developments, at least to an extent, occurs the development or evolution of what I am calling the “separation thesis”. This is the idea that the defining feature of human existence – but paradoxically, also the end or goal of human life – is “separation” from the natural world. I propose that this thesis appears first as an ontological claim: when the problems with this ontological conception of separation become too big to ignore, the claim re-emerges as an epistemological claim. This, too, turns out to have glaring problems. And so the claim re-emerges as what I will call a “nomological” claim, because it is

related to the ways in which modern philosophy imagines the relation between realms of laws (*nomos* [νομός] is the Greek for “law”). It is this nomological conception of separation that animates modern separatist imaginations.

I am only discussing a small set of thinkers here: Plato, Augustine, Bacon, Descartes, and Kant. All of these names are part of the conventional canon. I acknowledge that this approach has significant limitations. In particular, it is not difficult to identify thinkers who rejected the ideas of Humanity and/or separatism I examine here, including many who worked at the same time as these five. Aristotle, Spinoza, and Darwin are three examples.

Perhaps more relevantly, a great deal of work has been done in the ecofeminist and decolonial traditions on the ways in which these ideas manifest in contemporary philosophy. The work of Val Plumwood and Carolyn Merchant comes especially to mind.³ Another thinker who comes to mind is Catharine Mackinnon. Following her work, I take claims about *separation* – radical difference - to be logically prior to claims about hierarchy, or radical ranking. An account of how ideas about separation have developed can thus complement, but does not displace, analyses of how, on the basis of such imaginary separations, different

³ E.g. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*; Radford Ruether, “Ecofeminism”; Ronnie Zoe Hawkins, “Ecofeminism and Nonhumans: Continuity, Difference, Dualism, and Domination”; Gaard, *Ecofeminism*; Merchant, *Reinventing Eden*.

forms of hierarchy can be produced, “justified”, and re-maintained.⁴

There are also many other world traditions, including Buddhism and many First Nations cosmologies, which are anti-separatist from their beginnings. I will engage with the work of some First Nations Australian authors in my final chapter: in the meantime, my hope is that the conceptual resources I develop in this chapter, as someone trained and socialised primarily in the European tradition, might be of use to those (be they inside that tradition or out) who hope to move beyond human separatism in their work.

The genealogy that follows is divided into three broad sections, which correspond roughly to the conventional periodisations of Antiquity, Early Modernity, and Modernity. In the first I focus on Plato and Augustine; in the second, Bacon and Descartes; and in the third, Kant. In the third I also offer some reflections on the Ecomodernists. I treat the concepts of Humanity and separation together in each of these three sections. But let me outline the story I tell about each of them briefly here before beginning.

⁴ See Mackinnon, “Difference and Dominance: On Sex Discrimination.” Thanks to Megan Rodriguez for drawing my attention to this piece.

1.0.2 The concept of “Humanity” has gone through three different iterations over European philosophical history.

The story I recount below has the fiction of Humanity evolving through three stages or phases. These are (a) Humanity as *object* of history; (b) Humanity as *subject* of history; and (c) Humanity as *agent* of history. On my reading, as I noted above, there is no concept of Humanity as object of history in Plato, but one can be read out of Augustine. At that point in the story, though, the term does little more than name the group that is supposed to be the favourite of Christianity’s God. Many centuries later, by the time Bacon and Descartes come on the scene, the rise of rise of experimental science has facilitated a conception of Humanity as a subject of history. Humanity – or more commonly, “mankind” – is the subject that individual human scientists and innovators devote their efforts to helping and advancing.

Later still, with the emergence of Modernity proper, Humanity comes to be imagined not merely as a subject of history, but as an *agent* of history, capable of driving historical movement either as a collective or (eventually) in its own name. Kant imagines Humanity as “both the cause...and the agent” of its own progress, which he takes to occur at the level of

the species, not the level of individual human creatures.⁵ This conception of Humanity as “cause and agent” paves the way for the radicalization of Humanity in the work of 21st century thinkers, including the Ecomodernists. As climate change comes to the forefront of philosophical consciousness, Humanity starts to be imagined not simply as the agent of history in a moral sense, but as the geological agent of history. It is this Humanity which is imagined to exist apart from individual human beings, and which gives its name to the “Anthropocene”. Thus the broad trajectory of Humanity in European thinking: from “God’s children”, to “God species”.⁶

1.0.3 The concept of “separation from nature” has also gone through three different iterations over European philosophical history.

The ways in which separation from nature is imagined, as I noted above, also proceeds through three broad stages in the story I am telling. These are what I am calling the ontological, epistemological, and nomological conceptions of separation. Before Humanity exists as a concept, and during the time it is imagined simply as a passive object of history, it is simplest to imagine separation from nature in ontological terms. To declare that human beings can separate from nature during this period is to declare that there exists some other

⁵ The phrase is Kant's: Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, 179.

⁶ Lynas, *The God Species*.

realm apart from the one in which human beings find themselves on a day-to-day basis (Heaven, for example, or the Realm of Forms). And it is to assert that we, human beings, can “have intercourse with”⁷ this world as a result of some special capacity we have. This is separation as it can be drawn out of the ideas of both Plato and Augustine.

A good time later, as Humanity becomes a subject of history, and as subsequent thinkers grapple with the apparent limitations of the ontological idea, separation ceases to be something that can be easily imagined in ontological terms. In place of these terms, it becomes possible to imagine separation as an epistemological matter, which is to say, a matter of knowledge. In nascent form in Bacon, and then wholeheartedly for Descartes, the claim that Humanity can separate from nature is the claim that we, human beings, can build ourselves a God’s eye view⁸ of things: a “certain and unshakeable”⁹ body of knowledge that informs our practical activities.

This idea persists for many years. But it too has powerful tensions. As Humanity becomes an agent of history, the concept of separation evolves as well. By the time of Kant, at least partially in response to contradictions in the epistemological conception of separation, it becomes easiest to imagine separation from nature in nomological terms. Humanity is

⁷ This phrase appears in Plato: *Republic* 490.

⁸ Or “view from nowhere”: Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*.

⁹ This phrase is from Descartes: Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 43.

imagined as an entity that creates its own laws, and thus its own nature. (The multivalence of “nature” here is worth dwelling upon.) To say that Humanity can separate from nature now is to say that it is, so to speak, “autonomous” from nature – or might, if it fulfils itself, becomes so.¹⁰

With this conception of separation comes the idea that Humanity might one day govern itself entirely according to its self-created laws: in other words, that it might “separate” from nature not by accessing some other realm, or by achieving objective knowledge, but by achieving something like perfect agency. This idea evolves in the context of the Industrial Revolution (and also the French and American ones). Once again, it does not completely supersede prior conceptions of separation, but rather synthesises or sublates them in specific ways. This, again, is a broadly dialectical reading.¹¹ Note that I do not wish to suggest here that it is an idea that was espoused by Kant: his philosophy is far more complex than this. I suggest instead that it is an idea that is facilitated by some of the architecture of Kantian thinking, if that thinking is stripped of its nuance and its dialectical complexities.

Like the concept of Humanity as agent of history, it is this nomological conception of

¹⁰ On the history of the concept of autonomy generally, see Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy*. On the history of the concept of sovereignty generally, see Grimm, *Sovereignty*.

¹¹ A particularly thoughtful analysis of the way in which different imaginaries of nature can coexist (or conflict) with one another is Purdy, *After Nature*.

separation that is radicalised by 21st century thinkers. This occurs in the aftermath of the two World Wars and amidst the “Great Acceleration”¹² that follows. As discussion of the “Anthropocene” takes centre stage, separation becomes “decoupling”. This is a vision of separateness which proposes that Humanity can use technology to steer the planet in accordance with its (that is, Humanity’s) own self-made laws. Not only is Humanity supposed (in this new age) to be capable of creating its own kingdom of laws, which kingdom is imagined to be separate from the “natural laws” that held sway previously. It can combine this realm of laws with its technological and scientific prowess to insulate itself entirely from nature and necessity. Nature – necessity – thus becomes something that Humanity can hold at arms’ length from itself, and engage exclusively for its ends and on its on its (Humanity’s) terms. The problems of this conception of separation are many, and its consequences are becoming clear. But the story of what this means for environmental political thought into the future remains to be told.

Let me offer a few contextual notes before I continue. As I have mentioned, my goal is to show how separation claims are central to the work of the European tradition. But I want to make clear that they are not always apparent on the surface. Instead, they are very often submerged. They appear as a sort of effect of other ideas, but they are rarely made explicit by themselves. This raises an interpretive or hermeneutical challenge. What is the best place

¹² McNeill and Engelke, *The Great Acceleration*; Steffen et al., “The Trajectory of the Anthropocene.”

to look for ideas that tend to appear not in themselves, but as the products or outcomes of other ideas?

1.0.4 Theories of human nature turn out to have a central place in these many evolutions.

As I see it, the best response to this challenge is to pay close attention to a particular moment in the thought of the philosophers I consider below. This is the moment that they move from talking about what makes human beings distinctive to talking about what this distinctiveness means: what its normative consequences are. Here again I follow the course outlined by Stevenson et al. These authors identify four features of theories of human nature:

1. a background metaphysical understanding of the universe and humanity's place in it;
2. a theory of human nature in the more specific sense of a distinctive set of claims about human beings, human society, and the human condition;
3. a diagnosis of some typical defect, what tends to go wrong in human life and society;

4. a prescription for correcting what goes wrong and an ideal for how human life should best be lived.¹³

The relevant movement here is the movement between claims 1 and 2 (which might, in principle, be called “descriptive”, though with attention to the problems of this term) and 3 and 4 (which are implicitly, and then explicitly, prescriptive or normative).¹⁴ On its face, the claim that humans are distinctive is simply the claim that they are one-of-a-kind, unusual, or unique. In the language of contemporary science, a distinctiveness claim is a falsifiable claim (or can be made so). Humans are distinctive because they are the only creatures we have observed which have some capacity or other. But there is nothing in this to suggest that they are metaphysically special or that they are somehow exempt from the rules that govern other life on earth. (This is, of course, the central claim of evolutionary theory in general, and Darwinian theory in particular.)¹⁵

As philosophers discuss this, though, their language often starts to shift. One minute human beings are (simply) “distinctive”; the next, they’re something else. This something else is imagined to be something that can never be reduced to “mere” distinctiveness – but its

¹³ Stevenson et al., *Thirteen Theories of Human Nature*, 1–2.

¹⁴ Theories of human nature are of course one of the main places in human thought where the descriptive is nearly impossible to separate from the prescriptive or normative. (We can compare this challenge to the famous discussion in Quine, “Main Trends in Recent Philosophy.”)

¹⁵ Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex, Volume 1*.

precise nature is never quite identified. I argue that this something else is *separateness*.

Perhaps it is not stated plainly, but it appears in the gaps between other ideas, as a shadow and a consequence. Unearthing this sleight of hand is one of my goals in the sections that follow.

As a second note: it is challenging to strike the balance here I hope to achieve, between unearthing a particular idea – human separatism – and claiming that it is espoused by certain thinkers. This is not a dissertation in philosophy: my goal is not to offer a “correct” reading of the philosophers whose work I engage, in the sense that my project could be rejected if one were to find a contrary reading or contrary evidence. My wager is rather that the idea of separation from nature must come from somewhere: and a useful place to look is the work of some of the most influential thinkers in the European tradition.

Certainly I think epistemological separation is espoused by both Bacon and Descartes. The case of ontological separation (depending on how one reads Plato and Augustine) is somewhat more complex. And the case of nomological separation (taking its inspiration from Kant) is more complex still. My goal is not to offer a “conspiratorial” reading of these philosophers which suggests that the entirety of their work can be reduced to some nonsensical claim about the separation of humans from nature. Still less is it to advocate for human separation from nature myself. Instead, I seek to explore what I see as a persistent

theme or motif in European thinking (whether or not it is intended as such by the thinkers in whose work it is persisting). This is not the claim that human separatism necessarily flows from the work of any of these thinkers. It is instead the claim that the ideas of these thinkers can be taken and (on one view) distorted, or used in bad faith, to license an interpretation of the world and of the goals of human politics that is anti-ecological and destructive. This idea might trap us all: and so the resources to investigate and move beyond it are worth developing, whatever their form.

The structure of my reflections on the individual thinkers here follows the same general form. First I examine the idea of Humanity the thinker's work might evince. Then I consider how this involves an idea of human distinctiveness. Next, I show how this blurs into an idea of human separateness. Finally, I consider how this other claim – to “separateness” - informs ideas about the ends of politics and human progress. As I am reflecting here, I pay particular attention to the poetic or religious imagery that thinkers often use at this stage of their arguments, in the belief that this imagery is another sign of the conceptual paradoxes and aporiae that arise when separateness comes onto the scene.

Section 1 treats Plato and Augustine; Section 2, Bacon and Descartes; Section 3, Kant and some contemporary Ecomodernist thinkers.

1.1 In Plato and Augustine we find a vision of humanity as an object of history and an ontological conception of separation.

1.1.1. Plato's work has no conception of Humanity, but does have a strong emphasis on individual separation via intellection.

Plato (c. 425-c. 348BCE) does not seem to have any conception of Humanity as a unified entity.¹⁶ Platonic writings do sometimes use terms that are translated as “Humanity” or “the human race” (often the term is *Anthropos*, ἄνθρωπος) – as in the *Republic*, when Socrates declares that “Until philosophers rule as kings ... cities will have no rest from evils, ... [and nor] will the human race;¹⁷ or the *Phaedo*, where Socrates tells Cebes, “do not confine yourself to humanity if you want to understand this more readily”.¹⁸ But these various references do not suggest any sustained conception of Humanity as a collective in its own right, and certainly do not support any inference to a conception of Humanity as an actor or

¹⁶ Unless otherwise mentioned, all references to Platonic writings are taken from Plato, *Plato: Complete Works*.

¹⁷ 473c-d.

¹⁸ 70d. There are also various invocations of the first person plural form, as in the *Symposium*: “among animals the principle is the same as with *us*” (207d, my emphasis).

a subject of history. (Note also that this concept of “subjects of history” itself suggests ideas about progress and linear temporality that would probably have been alien to the Greeks.)¹⁹

Where references to collectives of humans are made in Plato, they tend to be made at an intra-species level, to distinguish Greeks from “foreigners”²⁰ or “Barbarians”, as when Young Socrates imagines “taking the Greek race away as one, separate from all the rest”.²¹ The ways in which “lower” human beings - women, children, slaves – are treated in Plato’s works as in some way “closer” to nature also suggests that no firm line or binary is imagined to exist between humans and “nature” writ large.²²

This makes sense when one remembers that the Greeks lived – and understood themselves to be living – in a world that was “very large”, with places that were “strange”²³ and “foreign... far beyond [their] ken”.²⁴ Socrates tells Simias in the *Phaedo* that their community is situated “around the sea in a small portion of [the Earth] between Phasis and the pillars of Heracles, like ants or frogs around a swamp; many other peoples live in many such parts of it”.²⁵ With that said, Plato’s imaginative facility is on full display a moment later, when

¹⁹ On Ancient Greek conceptions of time, see Rosen, *Time and Temporality in the Ancient World*; Purves, *Space and Time in Ancient Greek Narrative*.

²⁰ *Minos* 32.

²¹ *Statesman* 262.

²² Plumwood 105.

²³ *Phaedo* 109b.

²⁴ *Republic* 499c.

²⁵ *Phaedo* 109.

Socrates offers a rendering of Earth as he supposes it must appear from space:²⁶

it is said that the earth, looked at from above, looks like those spherical balls made up of twelve pieces of leather;... up there the whole earth has these colors, but much brighter and purer than these...the earth is a sight for the blessed... many other living creatures upon the earth, and also men, some living inland, others at the edge of the air, as we live on the edge of the sea, others again live on islands surrounded by air close to the mainland.²⁷

For contemporary readers this will evoke the twentieth century's "Earth Rise" photography,²⁸ although it precedes these images by more than two thousand years. These kinds of "God's eye" view of Earth have been variously celebrated and critiqued for their effects on how humans imagine the planet and their relationship to it: as either representing a vision of Earth as vulnerable and fragile, or representing an unattainable objectivity or quietist detachment. In Plato's case, in any event, this sense of size and foreignness – of a world

²⁶ Compare, for example, Shapin, "Placing the View from Nowhere"; Smee, "The Most Stirring Photo from the Apollo Mission Wasn't of the Moon. It Was of the Earth."

²⁷ 109-111.

²⁸ Smith, "Apollo 8."

where humans lived, until recently, “in scattered isolation... being destroyed by wild beasts”²⁹ – speaks against the existence of any concept of Humanity in Plato’s works.

If Plato’s thought does not imagine a single Humanity, though, it certainly imagines – or facilitates the imagining of – the idea that individual humans might “separate” themselves from nature. The kind of separation that Plato imagines is ontological in nature, as mentioned above. Plato develops a conception of reality that is ontologically dualist. He suggests that there exist two different “worlds”, or “realms”: the realm of the material, on the one hand, and the realm of Ideas, or Forms – *Eidos* – on the other.³⁰ The material realm is the realm perceived by the senses. The entities it contains are imagined to be time-bound, perishable, and “deficient”, in the sense that they “fal[!] short” of their cousins in the realm of Forms. That realm of Forms, on the contrary, is imagined as timeless (that is, outside of time or change: once again, concepts of *time* are central here (and with them, the influential resolution of what David Graeber calls the “quarrel between Parmenides and Heraclitus”)³¹. It is also imagined as imperishable and perfect. It is, so to speak, a Library of specimens or exemplars, which entities in the material world “strive to reach” or “strive to be like” but can never emulate fully.³²

²⁹ *Protagoras* 322.

³⁰ See *Meno* 81-86; *Phaedo* 73-80, 109-11; *Republic* 402-3, 472-83, 500-17.

³¹ Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*, 50.

³² *Phaedo* 75a-b.

This dualist ontology serves as the backdrop for Plato's conception of human beings. He conceptualises humans as creatures that are distinctive on Earth by virtue of their possession of a soul (*psyche*) and their corresponding capacity for reason and speech (*logos* [λόγος] – a term that has both these connotations and more, depending on context, including “reckoning”, “correspondence”, “relation”, “explanation”, “narrative”, and “utterance”).³³ This soul for Plato is somehow both a voyager *from* the world of Forms, and a conduit *to* that world. It is a voyager from that world, because it is immortal, and resides in that realm both before its birth into human bodies and after its death and “escape” from them.³⁴ And it is a conduit to that world because it can be trained to re-visit that world in some form while it is still “caged” in the body on Earth.³⁵

It is “like the divine... intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, always the same as itself”, in contrast to the body, which is “human, mortal, multiform, unintelligible, soluble and never consistently the same”.³⁶ The soul, like the realm of Forms, is “invisible” and “deathless”,³⁷ but it “makes use of the body to investigate [things in the material realm], be it through hearing or seeing or some other sense”.³⁸ Dropped unceremoniously into the material realm,

³³ “Logos.”

³⁴ *Phaedo* 79-83.

³⁵ Republic 490, 514-21.

³⁶ *Phaedo* 80b.

³⁷ *Phaedo* 79b, 80b, 106-7.

³⁸ *Phaedo* 79c.

it finds itself “imprisoned in and clinging to” the body, and “forced to examine other things through [the senses] as through a cage”.³⁹ Fortunately, though, it retains a “kinship” with the realm of Forms and is “fitted to grasp” that realm, to “ge[t] near what really is”, or even “hav[e] intercourse with it” (!).⁴⁰ (This is but one example of the penetrative imagery that feminist readers of the tradition have examined in detail⁴¹).

With this conception of an otherworldly soul in hand, Plato builds out his normative program. Here, ideas about the distinctiveness of human beings seem to start blurring into something altogether different. If a perfect realm is imagined to exist, it starts to seem as if it must make sense that the goal of life on Earth should be transcending or separating oneself the material world in order to gain access to this realm. And it starts to seem as if this is a process that is done by “withdraw[ing] from the senses”,⁴² in order to pass, “by itself”-that is, without the body – “into the realm of what is pure, ever existing, immortal and unchanging”.⁴³ Unsurprisingly, at least for those who have read any Dewey,⁴⁴ this move “upward”⁴⁵ is achieved via reasoning, and specifically by philosophy: a true philosopher “uses

³⁹ *Phaedo* 82e.

⁴⁰ *Republic* 490.

⁴¹ See, eg, Merchant, *Reinventing Eden*; Merchant, *The Death of Nature*; Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions*.

⁴² *Phaedo* 83a.

⁴³ *Phaedo* 79d.

⁴⁴ It is useful to compare Dewey’s broadly sociological or materialist reading of Plato and his intellectual descendants, as thinkers who – whether earnestly, cynically, or somewhere in between – found a way to justify and guarantee the nobility of their own chosen profession, even as they differentiated themselves from earthly others.) See Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty, 1929*; Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*.

⁴⁵ *Republic* 532c.

reasoning to stay near the form”,⁴⁶ and “bids the soul to gather itself together by itself, to trust only itself and whatever reality, existing by itself, the soul by itself understands”.⁴⁷

Indeed, it is “only a philosopher’s mind [that] grows wings”: a philosopher “stands outside human concerns and draws close to the divine... gazes aloft, like a bird, paying no attention to what is down below”.⁴⁸

In this the soul, via philosophy, effects a form of “training for death” (*Phaedo* 81a),⁴⁹ by working via “dialectic” and intellection to remove itself from the unsatisfactory and contemptible realm of material existence.⁵⁰ This is the famous “allegory of the cave”, which imagines precisely this “ascent”, “from a day that is a kind of night to the true day”, moving the soul “from the realm of becoming to the realm of what is”⁵¹). We are told that “when the soul investigates by itself it passes into the realm of what is pure, ever existing, immortal and unchanging, and being akin to this, it always stays with it whenever it is by itself and can do so; it ceases to stray and remains in the same state as it is in touch with things of the same kind, and its experience then is what is called wisdom”.⁵²

⁴⁶ *Sophist* 253d.

⁴⁷ *Phaedo* 83a-b.

⁴⁸ *Phaedrus* 249.

⁴⁹ This emphasis on death sounds similar to, but in my view should not be confused with, ideas about death as they are developed in Buddhism. For a treatment of Buddhist ideas on death and the afterlife, see Becker, *Breaking the Circle*.

⁵⁰ *Republic* 532c, and generally 514-21, 529-33.

⁵¹ *Republic* 521, and see also 529-33.

⁵² *Phaedo* 79d. The framing in terms of “information” is anachronistic. It flows primarily from Shannon: Shannon, “A Mathematical Theory of Communication.”

This conception of human being or human nature serves as Plato's answer to the problem that plagues his dualist ontology. If the realms of reality and forms are as separate as Plato imagines them to be, how can any relationship, let alone any transfer of information, occur between them? For Plato, the imagined existence of the soul answers this question. So it is that separation is imagined in Plato. There is not yet a Humanity which might be imagined to be separate, or able to become so. But individual human beings, who are distinctive by virtue of their capacity for *logos*, are able to use this capacity to become something more than merely distinctive: that is, separate. They can move outside or shift beyond the realm of the material and imperfect to an otherworldly "somewhere else". This somewhere else is, perhaps, a *utopia* – both "the best place" and "no place at all", in More's famous renderings.⁵³

I want to draw attention to two rhetorical or logical paradoxes that seem to appear often in separatist work. The first has to do with time, and appears when we ask about the moment human separation is supposed to take place (have taken place). This problem of time or temporality might therefore also be recast in terms of space: the realm of Forms, and the soul, are at once "here" and "there", "there" (intelligible) and "not-there" (invisible), imagined

⁵³ See his *Utopia* in More, "Utopia." He plays here on the similarity between *utopia* and *eutopia*.

to exist in the interstices of the material and earthly realm without their relation ever quite becoming clear.

On the one hand, we are told, the soul is already separate from the material realm. It is a temporary traveller from the realm of Forms. On the other hand, this pre-existing separation is not separate enough. If it were, presumably, the soul could simply wait out its time on Earth, and then be reunited with that other realm on death. Instead, apparently, the soul must strive to achieve separation, by virtue of its own efforts, during this life. This is another indication that the problems with the separation thesis go much deeper than its proponents might imagine.

The second appears when we consider the terms in which this separation is expressed. Separation, we are told, is a - perhaps the - supremely rational activity for human beings. It is the soul's destiny, in some sense, to transcend its Earthly prison and take its place amongst the timeless world of Forms. But the details of how this separation is meant to take place can apparently only be presented to us in figurative terms. We are given vivid descriptions of charioteers and their unruly horses;⁵⁴ exits from caves of darkness;⁵⁵ and images of brilliant suns and divided lines.⁵⁶ But it is never made clear – and perhaps cannot

⁵⁴ *Phaedrus* 246-7, 53-4.

⁵⁵ *Republic* 514-21.

⁵⁶ *Republic* 508-11.

be made clear – the steps by which this separation might occur, or the ways in which we might know when it is done. We only read statements *that* it occurs: through dialectic, for example, or withdrawal. But the nature of this separateness – what it consists in – remains metaphorical. This is so even as the thinkers at issue build their arguments upon readings of the term that seem to need to be taken literally if they are to have the implications their proponents want them to.

(As a side point, it might be said – as is said in Buddhism – that this is because the desired outcome is one that is incapable of representation in thought or language: that it is somehow “non-conceptual”. But in Buddhism this claim is made in the opposite, Heraclitean direction: as the claim that it is the impermanence and inseparability of things which is non-conceptual and can only be known by something like pre- or non-conceptual intuition. The Buddhist claim as I understand it is thus that intellection removes us from unity with the world around us, not that it facilitates such unity.⁵⁷)

It is curious, and perhaps more even than this, that an activity which is presented to us as the pinnacle of rationality is incapable of being non-figuratively described. The relationship between imagination and reason is of course a complicated one. This complication is mirrored in the complexities of the relationship between literal and figurative speech (as in

⁵⁷ Compare Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*.

the Ancient writings on Rhetoric, including the *Phaedrus*), and the relationship between sincerity or clarity as opposed to sophistry, fiction, and manipulation (*Phaedrus* again, and also Plato's infamous discussion of "noble myths" or "noble lies").⁵⁸ But it is at least plausible to wonder whether these two phenomena point to a far more prominent – or even determinative – role for imagination in the ways in which the impossible dream of separation from nature appears in the European philosophical tradition. This is to say: perhaps separation is not merely best represented via metaphor (but also representable in other ways) – it may well be that it can *only* be represented through metaphor.

This would suggest that it is fundamentally a matter of invention or imagination. Plato did not of course have access to the intellectual techniques or advances of those who follow him in the European tradition: but his is an extraordinary mind, and one suspects that if there were a non-metaphorical account of "separateness" to be had, he would have found it. I will suggest below that these paradoxes can lead us to take these various separation claims not at face value – as statements about the actually-existing world – but rather as statements of desire or aspiration, statements that concern the world as we wish it could be, and which as such point to deeply-held fears and insecurities about the inevitability of death and the related limits on agency that characterise, or perhaps even constitute, the human condition.

⁵⁸ *Republic* 415.

To summarise: no conception of Humanity writ large appears in Plato; but Plato clearly claims that human beings can “separate” themselves from nature at an individual level by cultivating their soul’s removal from the material realm in favour of the realm of perfect Forms.

1.1.2 Augustine’s work births a passive conception of Humanity and Christianises Platonic separation.

It is in Augustine (354-420 CE) that we find the European tradition’s first relevant conception of Humanity as a collective. It appears as Augustine’s answer to the question – for whom is Christ supposed to have died? Augustine’s answer, of course, takes its lead from the Bible: Christian Scripture asserts that “Christ died for *our* sins”,⁵⁹ that he did this in order to “rescue *us* from this present evil age”,⁶⁰ and that, though humans are sinful, Christ died “for *us*”.⁶¹ Augustine thus speaks of a “world community” and of “the human race” (*homines*).⁶²

⁵⁹ *1 Corinthians* 15:3.

⁶⁰ *Galatians* 1:4.

⁶¹ *Romans* 5:6-8, my emphasis.

⁶² Books VIII-XVI, 414, 416. Unless otherwise mentioned, all references to Augustine’s writings here are to the “Fathers of the Church” edition of *City of God*. This edition is divided into three volumes: Books I-VII, VIII-

(The more specific problem Augustine is responding to is whether Christ died for all humans or only members of the Israelite tribe. He suggests that “Israelites in both flesh and faith make up the City of God which became the mother of Christ Himself”,⁶³ but he also seems to suggest that all humans are nonetheless capable in principle of accessing that same City as it now appears. Is the City of God the *mother* of Christ, then, or the *product* of his death? When, precisely, did it emerge? These are the same issues that appear with Plato’s theory of Forms.)

Augustine’s imagined Humanity, though, is still decidedly passive. It is certainly a more passive conception than appears in later thinkers. For Augustine, Humanity is simply an object of history: an entity encompassing all those who are loved by God and capable of accepting his grace (and also, of course, his overwhelming authority). Beyond this, though, Augustine seems to remain committed to the idea that there exist significant divides between particular groups of human beings. For Plato these groups were Greeks and “others”; for Augustine, the relevant categories are Christians and “others” – Greeks, Romans, Assyrians. (Here lies an early version of the confusion about whether – like Judaism – Christianity should be imagined as somehow isomorphic with particular ethnicities.) Like

XVI, and XVII-XXII: Augustine, *City of God, Books I-VII*; Augustine, *City of God, Books VIII-XVI*; Augustine, *City of God, Books XVII-XXII*. Unless otherwise noted, I cite the volume for ease of reference.

⁶³ Books XVII-XXII, 66.

the Platonic dialogues, moreover, both the *City of God* and the *Confessions* are suffused with a sense that the world beyond Augustine's own knowledge and experience is old, foreign, and vast.⁶⁴

Augustine inherits Platonic dualism and Christianises it. Plato's realm of material things and realm of Forms become the realms of Earth and Heaven; the Platonic soul-body distinction becomes the distinction between the soul longing for heaven and the fallen, sinful flesh. The biblical scriptures, which for Augustine are "unerring",⁶⁵ make it quite clear that "the corruptible body is a load upon the soul", and that the soul is "weighed down" by the body, which has become depraved "as a consequence of sin and its punishment".⁶⁶ (This is because to have the body being inherently negative would presumably be to cast aspersions on God's creations, which must by definition be perfect (in that they were made by God whose creative force can know no criticism)).

And yet: just as the soul in Plato longs for "intercourse" with the realm of Forms, the Christian soul for Augustine longs to return to God through *logos*, forsaking its "earthly pilgrimage" in favour of "eternal life".⁶⁷ The metaphor of the journey or pilgrimage is notable

⁶⁴ See the discussion in Esler, *The Early Christian World*.

⁶⁵ Books VIII-XVI, 489.

⁶⁶ Id 319.

⁶⁷ Id 366.

here: just as escape from the cave of ignorance for Plato requires forward movement, agency, and struggle, so too in Augustine does the “earthly pilgrimage” require a great deal of effort on the part of humans, individual and collective, to overcome the obstacles to their participation in the plan set out for them by god.

It is at this point that we see claims about distinctiveness and separation begin to blur together, as they did in Plato. For Plato the soul is destined to return to the realm of Forms after death. Augustine imagines a similar return, but for him it is much less certain, much less assured. Human souls might achieve “eternal life”: but they could just as well end up under “eternal punishment”.⁶⁸ This means that action is required. To increase the chances of their achieving the right kind of separation after death, Christians must strive for the right kind of separation during their lives on Earth. This is so even if that separation is more “a solace for unhappiness than the joy of beatitude”: more “pardoning of sins than ... perfection of virtues”.⁶⁹

Also new in Augustine is the idea that this separation can be, in a certain sense, collective. Plato is clear that specific individuals can achieve communion with the realm of Forms as individuals, but there is no suggestion that in doing so they come together (as it were).

⁶⁸ Id.

⁶⁹ Books XVII-XXII, 246.

Augustine, however, emphasizes the communal aspect of the separation that is sought. “So much for the philosophers’ ‘happy life’”, he says. “What we Christians like better is their teaching that the life of virtue should be a social life. For, if the life of the saints had not been social, how could the City of God ... make progress [towards] its appointed goal?”⁷⁰

As in Plato, separation – now conceived of as communal – becomes a central goal for human life on Earth. Augustine’s “explanation” of how this collective separation should happen takes place in the extended metaphor that he uses to structure his entire project. This is the metaphor, of course, of the Two Cities. On the one hand there exists a “City of Man” (or “Earthly City”); on the other, a “City of God” (“Heavenly City”). These two cities, like the bodies and souls of individual humans, are “linked and fused together” while on Earth.⁷¹ Though they have different “destin[ies]”, they are “at present inextricably intermingled”,⁷² and will only be fully “separated” at the time of the “Last Judgment”.⁷³ As long as the City of God is “wayfaring on Earth”,⁷⁴ it is “in exile”,⁷⁵ trapped “like an alien”⁷⁶ inside its godless twin. In order to achieve their separation, Christians must come together to forsake the Earthly City and partake, so far as they can, in the City of God as it appears in

⁷⁰ Id 202.

⁷¹ Books I-VII, 72.

⁷² VII-XVI, 188.

⁷³ Books I-VII, 72.

⁷⁴ Books XVII-XXII 228.

⁷⁵ Books VII-XVI, 448.

⁷⁶ Books XVII-XXII, 83.

the domain of historical time. Augustine figures history, indeed, as the period bracketed by their “original cause” and then their “final consummation”,⁷⁷ presumably in Christ: “from the time when children were born to the first couple until the day when men shall beget no more ... the whole time of world history in which men are born and take the place of those who die and depart.”⁷⁸

As a side point: in describing the Earthly City, Augustine appears to have Rome in mind: he “take[s] the bulk of [his] material from Greek and Roman history”, but believes that “Rome plays the role of a second Babylon”.⁷⁹ His task is “nothing less than the task of defending the glorious City of God against those who prefer their own gods to its Founder”.⁸⁰ We are told that it was in fact the City of God itself which “moved [Augustine] to undertake his work: specifically, “with God’s help”, to “challenge the view of those who hold that the Christian religion is responsible for all the wars desolating *this miserable world* and, in particular, for the recent barbarian sack of the City of Rome”.⁸¹

Plainly, the choice of “city” as the operative image is intended to invoke a *spatial* conception of the community in question: a city that is “temporal and earthly”.⁸² At the same time,

⁷⁷ Books VII-XVI, 414.

⁷⁸ Id.

⁷⁹ Books XVII-XXII, 86.

⁸⁰ Books I-VII, 17.

⁸¹ Id 76, my emphasis.

⁸² Id 280.

Augustine tells us that the City of Man is “not akin to a ‘state or nation’ in some geographical sense”.⁸³ Its members, who are the “builders” of the “tower” (of Babylon?), are “not the ‘sons of God,’”; they live “*an exclusively human life*”.⁸⁴ He is reluctant to offer a more detailed description of the nature of this earthly city, declaring that while “Scripture make[s] some mention of [it]”, he himself will provide descriptions “only in so far as [is] necessary to bring the City of God into clearer light by contrast”.⁸⁵ We are given to understand, however, that it is a sort of spiritual collective, made up of the faithless: “men and women without faith as opposed to those who believe”.⁸⁶ The presence of these faithless individuals makes the City of Man into a place with a “passion...for domination” at its “very heart”,⁸⁷ and from its secular bowels “issue the enemies against whom the City of God must be defended”.⁸⁸

This invisible City of God, on the other hand, has a “loftiness” that is “above the pinnacles of Earthly greatness”.⁸⁹ Augustine takes even the term “City of God” to be “justified by that Scripture whose divine authority puts it above the literature of all other people and brings under its sway every type of human genius”... “in this Scripture,” he tells us, “we read:

⁸³ Id xvi.

⁸⁴ Books VIII-XVI, 497, my emphasis.

⁸⁵ Id 430.

⁸⁶ Books XVII-XXII, 278.

⁸⁷ Books VII-XVI, 426.

⁸⁸ Books I-VII, 18.

⁸⁹ Id.

‘Glorious things are said of thee, O City of God’; and, in another psalm: ‘Great is the Lord, and exceedingly to be praised in the city of our God, in His holy mountain, increasing the joy of the whole earth’; and, a little later in the same psalm: ‘As we have heard, so have we seen, in the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of our God: God hath founded it for ever’... ‘God is in the midst thereof, it shall not be moved’.⁹⁰ For Augustine, “[t]hrough these and similar passages too numerous to quote, we learn of the existence of a City of God whose Founder has inspired us with a love and longing to become its citizens”.⁹¹

Like Plato’s realm of Forms, the City of God. is intelligible to the human soul, although secure from the “shifting winds of time”.⁹² It is a community of those who “find their joy in God and in one another in God”.⁹³ as such its residents have “eternal blessedness”.⁹⁴ (It is also a place where men can dwell amongst their superiors, “holy angels hav[ing] announced this City and ... invited [men] to their society, desiring us to be fellow citizens with them” – not to “honor them as our gods, but [...rather,] with them, worship Him who is their God and our God [...and] become a sacrifice to Him”.⁹⁵) “Glorious beyond compare”, it is a place where “victory is truth, dignity is holiness, peace is happiness”.⁹⁶ Because of its link to the

⁹⁰ Books VII-XVI, 187.

⁹¹ Id.

⁹² Books I-VII, 18.

⁹³ Books XVII-XXII, 228.

⁹⁴ Books XVII-XXII, 220.

⁹⁵ Books VIII-XVI, 163.

⁹⁶ Books I-VII, 127.

unearthly realm, it provides an important security to its vulnerable members: “How different is the safety in the case of the City of God!... [it is] “salvation[, ...] not merely safety.”⁹⁷

In contrary to the all-too-human City of Man, the City of God is “supernatural”,⁹⁸ and “each and all of [its] citizens are personally immortal”.⁹⁹ The “members” or “citizens” of this heavenly city are said to be “in a holy communion both with Him to whom they adhere and one with another, and they form a *single community*, ... which is also His living sacrifice and His living temple”.¹⁰⁰ In its true or complete form, the City of God exists somehow outside of time, just like the realm of Forms. And yet, in ways that remain unspecified, it is also supposed to manifest itself somehow on Earth, albeit in a form that is only a shadow of its manifestation in heaven. The “peace” that is possible for those who enter the City of God in its earthly incarnation is said to be the “only real peace” that is available “for any rational creature”.¹⁰¹

On the basis of this account of the two cities, Augustine formulates the normative political goal that drives his project. Human beings, who are distinctive by virtue of their favour in the eyes of god, must use this distinctiveness to separate themselves from everything else, by

⁹⁷ Books XVII-XXII, 430.

⁹⁸ Books VIII-XVI, 375.

⁹⁹ Books XVII-XXII, 415.

¹⁰⁰ Id 262, my emphasis.

¹⁰¹ Books XVII-XXII, 246, my emphasis.

making their lives “here below” into “a means to that end which [they] ardently lov[e] and confidently hop[e] for”.¹⁰² This hoped-for “end”, or “reach[ing of] that blessed country”,¹⁰³ is the fulfilment by death of the separation started on Earth. At death, individuals who have forsaken the City of Man for the City of God as it appears on Earth are converted to permanent residents. (As the relationship between the body and soul in Plato is represented very often as a struggle or a trial (when it is not being represented as a journey), so too in Augustine is the relationship between the Earthly and Heavenly Cities figured as a fight, perhaps to the death.)

Augustine is more willing than Plato to acknowledge the fictive elements of his treatment. He asserts that the account which he is offering is a “narrative”,¹⁰⁴ and acknowledges that his writings describe the City of God and the City of Man “*as though* they were two cities”.¹⁰⁵ These are two cities which, he says, “continu[e] to progress concurrently and to give their respective colors to human history”.¹⁰⁶ But he refuses to concede that this way of writing means that he is claiming they are wholly imagined, or merely metaphorical. “Our conception”, he tells us, “must be based on what God foreknew and forewilled, ... not on human fancies that could never come true”.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Id 231.

¹⁰³ Books I-VII, 127.

¹⁰⁴ Books XVII-XXII, 84.

¹⁰⁵ Id, my emphasis.

¹⁰⁶ Id, my emphasis.

¹⁰⁷ Books VIII-XVI, 37.

Nonetheless, there is a telling confusion of registers, temporalities, and metaphors in Augustine's description of the two cities: a confusion that recalls the paradoxes of time and poetry in Plato. The City of God, like the Platonic soul, is represented as somehow existing both inside and outside of time: it has both a "temporal stage", during which it "journeys as a pilgrim among sinners and lives by faith", and an "eternal" one, which emerges after a moment of "final victory and...perfect peace", once "justice [has] turned into judgment".¹⁰⁸ There is a further spatial element to the paradox here as well: the City of God is figured at once as a place that is entirely separate from (and superior to) the earthly realm, and yet somehow already present in that realm. As a consequence, human members of that City are figured as both already separate from the City of Man and not separate enough (because they must continue to strive until – or maybe for - their deaths).

With respect to Augustine's poetic language: the city of God, like the world of Forms, is imagined as rationally accessible for human beings. But it is only ever described in Augustine via metaphor and allegory. The metaphors of journeys, pilgrimages, and dwellings described above, along with the metaphorical attribution to Christ of "founder" status.¹⁰⁹ It is unclear, as mentioned above, how exactly the earthly incarnation of the City of God is supposed to

¹⁰⁸ Books I-VII, 17.

¹⁰⁹ Books XVII-XXII, 33.

be derived from or supervenient upon its heavenly cousin. Augustine laments how “much difficulty” he experiences in “trying...to make [its nature] clear”.¹¹⁰ Separation, once again, is represented as a rational aim for collectivities of human beings: but its nature is never given a rational description.

To summarise: Augustine’s conception of Humanity as a collective is thin and passive; but he goes further than Plato in proposing that collectives of human beings within this general entity Humanity are capable of separating from nature during this life, via entry during their earthly existence into an invisible City of God that is somehow separate from the Earthly city in which their bodies are condemned to dwell.

¹¹⁰ Books XVII-XXII, 219.

1.2 In Bacon and Descartes we find a conception of Humanity as a subject of history and an epistemological conception of separation.

1.2.1 Bacon's work secularises Humanity as a subject of history and develops a theory of separation via objective knowledge.

The arrival of Bacon (1561-1626) heralds a significant development of themes already present in Plato and Augustine.¹¹¹ A great many things have happened in the meantime, of course, including the Renaissance. Val Plumwood attributes the emergence of human-nature dualism to this period, although, as I have said, I would argue that it has roots in earlier thought which were reified during that moment. Here, of course, is a limitation of the conventional scheme of periodisations: that it skips more than a thousand years and condemns a significant body of thought to an intellectual "dark age".¹¹²

¹¹¹ Compare Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature.*, for a useful discussion of this move.

¹¹² One discussion of this phenomenon is Green, "Periodization in European and World History."

The development in question for my purposes, however, comes in the form of an “activation” or “subjectification” of the concept of Humanity. Where Humanity in Augustine was merely an object of history – a convenient placeholder – in Bacon it becomes for the first time a subject of history. By inventing new ways of manipulating objects and phenomena, Humanity starts to help itself. (In practice, the claim is more that certain *parts* of Humanity help certain other parts. But important at the outset is this idea that Humanity helps itself as opposed, for instance, to waiting patiently for God to help it, or getting stuck in what for Bacon is false modesty about its own capacities. Here we see ideas that will echo much later in Nietzsche.)¹¹³ In this moment, “man [becomes] a God to man”.¹¹⁴ This marks a significant break from the passive conception of Humanity in Augustine, and sets the stage for many conversations in subsequent thought. The emphasis on break or rupture is a temporal rupture that parallels the spatial, epistemological and (as we shall see) nomological separations which characterise so much modern thought, and which seem to be taken to follow from these originary temporal ruptures.

Bacon’s conception of Humanity emerges as he reflects on the significance of exploration and discovery for the progress of science. “[L]arge parts of the New World and the farthest parts of the Old are becoming known everywhere,” he says, and “as a result of [these] long

¹¹³ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

¹¹⁴ Bacon, *The New Organon*, 100.

voyages and travels, many things in nature have come to light and been discovered".¹¹⁵ His life coincided both with the beginnings of the scientific revolution, of which he was a standard-bearer, and the first waves of European colonialism.¹¹⁶ (There is of course a great deal of debate about how, precisely, these two historical phenomena influenced one another.)

Bacon scorns the naiveté of prior thinkers, "who called all northern peoples Scythians and all western peoples Celts indiscriminately, knew nothing in Africa beyond the nearest part of Ethiopia, nothing of Asia beyond the Ganges, much less the territories of the New World, even by report or consistent and believable rumour".¹¹⁷ He is similarly scathing about "the travels of Democritus, Plato and Pythagoras, which certainly did not take them far from home, [but] were celebrated as major undertakings".¹¹⁸ They never investigated anything: they "simply "declared", he says, that "most climates and zones, *in which uncounted nations live and breathe*, were ... uninhabitable".¹¹⁹

As a side note, the terms in which Bacon criticises his predecessors are almost as important as the substance of his various critiques. His work is shot through with contempt for those

¹¹⁵ Bacon 97, 106.

¹¹⁶ One useful discussion is Adas, "Colonialism and Science."

¹¹⁷ Bacon 60.

¹¹⁸ Id.

¹¹⁹ Id, my emphasis.

who advocate self-limiting behaviours, whom he sees as feckless, effeminate, and cowardly. More than this: they are his enemies, because they “think it is a sign of an immoderate and immature mind” when someone “believes or promises more” than is already possible.¹²⁰ They “lack ... hope” and their methods are “feabl[e]”.¹²¹ As such, they must be destroyed. Bacon calls all men to arms “whose care and concern is not merely to be content with what has been discovered and make use of it, but to penetrate further; and not to defeat an opponent in argument but to conquer nature by action; and not to have nice, plausible opinions about things but sure, demonstrable knowledge”.¹²² Only such men, he believes, will be able to “join” with him to “pass the antechambers of nature which innumerable others have trod, and eventually open up access to the inner rooms”.¹²³

Bacon’s only greater scorn is for the spiritual and philosophical approach that he believes gave rise to this effeteness and parochialism: the approach of contemplation and discursive detachment that he finds in those before him. As he sees it, (European) Humanity’s explorations of the physical world must both further and be furthered by a practical, material, and outcome-oriented approach to thinking and to science. And it is the scientific method, with its emphasis on experimentation, falsifiability, and practical efficacy (as

¹²⁰ Id 77.

¹²¹ Id 142.

¹²² Id 30.

¹²³ Id.

opposed to reflection, speculation, and mere theoretical coherence) that will allow people to do this. It would be “a disgrace to mankind if wide areas of the physical globe, of land, sea and stars, ha[d] been opened up and explored... while the boundaries of the intellectual globe were confined to the discoveries and narrow limits of the ancients”.¹²⁴ And this, he says across the text, is for the benefit, variously, of “man”, “mankind”, “the race of mankind”, “humanity”, and the “whole human race”.

For all this, Bacon is clear that Humanity is not (yet?) undifferentiated or homogenous. He sees a “great...difference between the life of men in any of the most civilised provinces of Europe and in the most savage and barbarous region of New India” – a difference that he believes is due “not to soil, climate or bodily qualities, but to Arts”.¹²⁵ Here we see the language of cultural and religious superiority found in Plato (the Greeks) and Augustine (the Christians) into a technical and scientific register. “Man is a god to man” in theory perhaps, but in practice it is a particular subset of Humanity that will invent the Arts that save all others.

This tension between the idea of Humanity in principle and its applications in practice is one that persists down to the present. (Here there are echoes of both the fetishisation of

¹²⁴ Id 69.

¹²⁵ Id 100.

European traditions, institutions and civilising missions, as well as the image of individual, Promethean geniuses that will spread so widely and deeply through modern thought. Also worth noting is the “royal we” – a normative plural? – that Bacon adopts in much of his writings.) Whether he views other cultures as simply lacking the scientific innovations that have emerged in Europe, or outright incapable of achieving them (such that they must be brought by Europeans) is not made explicitly clear.

This move from reflection to action is mirrored in Bacon’s account of human distinctiveness. For Plato and Augustine, it is the possession of a capacity for reason that makes humans distinctive. But for Bacon it is the consequences of this possession that are worth talking about. (This is the shift to “practical efficacy” that characterises so much modern thought.)¹²⁶ Humans alone amongst all species produce “Arts”: technologies and crafts that yield extraordinary “products and results”.¹²⁷ In contrast to the Ancients, who focussed far too much on “Anticipation[s] of the Mind”, as opposed to the “Interpretation of Nature” (Bacon’s own approach):¹²⁸ on developing abstract, speculative theories of everything that went nowhere and had no material consequences. For Bacon, it is results alone that must “guarantee... the truth of [our] philosophy”.¹²⁹ We alone can “present, alter and prepare

¹²⁶ See Leiss, *The Domination of Nature*.

¹²⁷ Bacon 60.

¹²⁸ Id 30.

¹²⁹ Id 60.

natural bodies and the materials of things”¹³⁰ in ways that “endow human life with new discoveries and resources”,¹³¹ and give rise to “benefits [...that] may extend to the whole human race”.¹³²

Where for Plato and Augustine reason is perfected when it allows human beings to abdicate from the concerns of everyday life, for Bacon it is “better and more perfect”¹³³ when it is directed towards “conquer[ing] nature by work”.¹³⁴ He tells us that there are only three states or “*regime[s]*” that nature accepts: “She is either free and unfolding in her own ordinary course, or driven from her state by the vicious and insolent assaults of matter and by the force of obstructions, or constrained and shaped by human art and agency”.¹³⁵ It is in the third state – “in artificial things” – that “nature accepts the yoke from the empire of man; for these things would never have been done without man. A completely new face is given to bodies by *human effort and agency*”, and this creates “a different theatre”.¹³⁶ There is no such thing as useful fecklessness. “[T]ruth and usefulness”, “knowledge and power”, are “a

¹³⁰ Id 227.

¹³¹ Id 66.

¹³² Id 99.

¹³³ Id 11.

¹³⁴ Id 16.

¹³⁵ Id 223-4, my emphasis.

¹³⁶ Id.

pair of twins”;¹³⁷ “the road to human knowledge and the road to human power are ... almost the same”.¹³⁸

It is at this point that Bacon’s claims about human distinctiveness blur into something different altogether. If more knowledge means more power, it seems to follow that objective knowledge would mean vastly increased power. By “objective” knowledge, here, I mean something like Nagel’s “view from nowhere”: a conception of the world whose detail does not depend on its observers.¹³⁹ If we could use our capacity for reason to discover everything about how nature works, then we could use this knowledge to shape it completely to our own desires: to “generate and superinduce on [objects] a *new* nature or new natures”,¹⁴⁰ and “bring forth *things which have never been achieved*”.¹⁴¹ We will be able to “subordinate the transformation of concrete bodies from one thing into another within the bounds of the Possible”.¹⁴² This kind of knowledge would be, of necessity, collective: it would transcend “any man’s own reason”, and form a “true model of the world”.¹⁴³ In understanding the “causes” and the “forms” of things, and “comprehend[ing] the unity of nature in very different materials”, Humanity will be able to manipulate them however we please.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁷ Id 24, 96.

¹³⁸ Id 103.

¹³⁹ Nagel.

¹⁴⁰ Bacon 102.

¹⁴¹ Id 103.

¹⁴² Id 102.

¹⁴³ Id 96.

¹⁴⁴ 103.

As another side note, it is worth noting that “forms” here means something different than it does in Aristotle. Bacon is scathing of Aristotle, whose philosophy “slaughtered the other philosophies with vicious disputations, it made pronouncements on every single question; and ... formulates objections at [Aristotle’s] own whim, and then deals with them, so that everything is certain and settled.”¹⁴⁵ Plato doesn’t fare much better: we are told that he and his school elevated “lack of conviction” to a fundamental “dogma”, philosophy, an approach that leads the mind to “despai[r] of finding truth”, so that “everything becomes very much feebler”, and people are “turn[ed...] aside to agreeable discussions and discourses, and a kind of ambling around things, rather than sustain[ing] them in the severe path of inquiry”.¹⁴⁶

In any event, for Bacon, if we follow the program outlined we will be able to bring forth all that which we desire, and keep all that we detest away from us. We will, in short, “renew and extend the power and empire of the human race itself over the universe of things”.¹⁴⁷ and in so doing, achieve “firmer foundations for human power and human greatness, and extend their limits more widely”.¹⁴⁸ We will have wrested control over “the human situation”,¹⁴⁹ and be able to “provide more reliable and secure directions for present and

¹⁴⁵ Id 55.

¹⁴⁶ Id 55-6.

¹⁴⁷ Id 100.

¹⁴⁸ Id 90.

¹⁴⁹ Id 24.

future generations”.¹⁵⁰ When we come to know all things, we shall be as Gods – self-sufficient, detached, and omnipotent. (This is, it is worth noting, a particular view of God – the “Catholic” view? – a view that has been critiqued by, amongst others, process theology.¹⁵¹)

With the seeds of this idea in hand, Bacon has the centrepiece for his political program. The goal of all human endeavour must be the achievement of objective knowledge of nature: and with it, the capacity to make the world into a place that fulfils our needs and our desires. Bacon is not shy about the stakes of this project: they are existential. We must “stake the whole race on the victory of art over nature”.¹⁵² Bacon is emphatic that this is not an impulsive, juvenile, or immature undertaking: we are not “grasp[ing] at golden apples like a child”.¹⁵³ This language of maturity and immaturity will reappear in Kant’s famous emphasis on Enlightenment as “exit from immaturity”. It also echoes the allocation of children (like women and slaves) to the realm of nature that we have seen back to the Greeks.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ Id 11.

¹⁵¹ For one overview, see Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology*.

¹⁵² Bacon 91.

¹⁵³ Id.

¹⁵⁴ Compare again on these interpretations Songe-Møller and Cripps, *Philosophy Without Women.*; Tuana, *Feminist Interpretations of Plato*.

Perhaps this is a dangerous gamble: but it is a “majestic” one.¹⁵⁵ What’s more, we must never allow ourselves to succumb to the fantasy that, because an art fails to achieve some goal, that this goal must be “impossible in nature”.¹⁵⁶ To do so simply hinders “the progress of the sciences and [the] opening up [of] new tasks and provinces”.¹⁵⁷ It is nonsense to “suppose that there is a kind of ebb and flow of knowledge, through the turnings of time and the ages of the world”,¹⁵⁸ or that there exists some “law” that knowledge and civilisation “in some periods [will] grow and flourish, in others decline and fall”, such that “when [people] have reached a certain level and condition, they can go no further”.¹⁵⁹

Here are the seeds of an idea of linear progress, understood in three ways – emotionally or psychologically; with relation to past frameworks; and with relation to practical outcomes: as both necessitating and facilitating “the abolition of despair and the acquisition of hope by dismissing or correcting the errors of the past”.¹⁶⁰ “This too might be cited as ground for hope,” Bacon tells us, “that some of the things discovered in the past were such as no one would be likely to have any inkling of before they were discovered; anyone would have flatly rejected them as impossible”.¹⁶¹ As Humanity works to achieve its ends, it must guard

¹⁵⁵ Bacon 100.

¹⁵⁶ Id 73.

¹⁵⁷ Id 76.

¹⁵⁸ Id.

¹⁵⁹ Id 77.

¹⁶⁰ Id 84.

¹⁶¹ Id 85.

against the “despair... has been among the most powerful causes which have delayed and retarded the progress of the sciences”.¹⁶² Even

if the whole human race had dedicated itself and its efforts to philosophy, and the whole earth had been, or should become, absolutely filled with universities and colleges and schools of learned men, they could not have made, and cannot make, any progress in philosophy and the sciences worthy of the human race without such a Natural and Experimental History as we shall now prescribe. On the other hand, when such a history has been developed and built up well, with the ancillary and illuminating experiments which will occur or will have to be devised in the actual process of interpretation, the investigation of nature and the sciences will be the work of a few years.¹⁶³

Here we see foreshadowed the anti-critical and pseudo-apolitical thinking that will echo in Ecomodernism.

¹⁶² Id 89.

¹⁶³ Id 223.

This “despair” is unwarranted, Bacon thinks, when we consider, for example, how the invention of “mechanical things” – like the “art of printing, gunpowder and the nautical compass” – have “changed the face and condition of things all over the globe... and innumerable changes have followed; so that no empire or sect or star seems to have exercised a greater power and influence on human affairs than those mechanical things”.¹⁶⁴

Nor should we suppose that the task before us is somehow ideological or political: for the “improvement of a political condition usually entails violence and disturbance; but discoveries make men happy, and bring benefit without hurt or sorrow to anyone”.¹⁶⁵ We must compose our minds with purpose, and “obe[y]” the impulse that will help us “overcome the difficult and dark things of nature”.¹⁶⁶ (The term “obeying” appears in the gendered phrase “one does not have empire over nature except by obeying her”).¹⁶⁷

But this should not be understood as an obedience of deference or respect, or an adherence to constraints or inbuilt limits. Instead what is being “obeyed” is something more like a blind logic of the unfolding or unfurling of things. “Man is Nature’s agent”,¹⁶⁸ and so philosophy must “let man recover the right over nature which belongs to him by God’s gift, and give it scope; right reason and sound religion will govern its use”.¹⁶⁹ Here are intimations of the kind

¹⁶⁴ Id 100.

¹⁶⁵ Id 99.

¹⁶⁶ Id 10.

¹⁶⁷ Id 137.

¹⁶⁸ Id 24.

¹⁶⁹ Id 101.

of teleology or necessity/inevitability of progress that will surface in Kant, as discussed below. In Bacon, of course, the question of how, exactly, reason and religion will govern the use of this “right of nature” remains unanswered.

The paradox of time is not as much of a problem in Bacon as it is in Plato and Augustine, although time does figure in interesting ways in Bacon’s writing, as when he asserts that

Of twenty-five centuries in which human memory and learning is more or less in evidence, scarcely six can be picked out and isolated as fertile in sciences or favourable to their progress. There are deserts and wastes of time no less than of regions. We can only count three periods which were high points of learning: one among the Greeks; a second among the Romans; the last among us, the western nations of Europe”.¹⁷⁰

Bacon also scoffs at the idea that the term “antiquity” should be used to refer to the Ancients: “True antiquity”, he says, “should mean the oldness and great age of the world, which should be attributed to our times, not to a younger period of the world”.¹⁷¹ It is true

¹⁷⁰ Id 64.

¹⁷¹ Id 68.

that “that age is ancient and older in relation to us”; but “with respect to the world itself, it was new and younger”; and Bacon is clear that just as “we expect from an old man greater knowledge of things human and a more mature judgement than from a young man ... in the same way it is reasonable that greater things be expected from our age than from old”¹⁷².

Here again is the imagery of childhood and adulthood, which echoes again when Bacon declares that “after [a person] has grown up and become his own master, let him use his own judgement”¹⁷³.

But the paradox of time is less significant in Bacon because, for him, separation is always figured as something still to come: he is quite clear that it has not yet been achieved in his time. (Otherwise, why bother with science?) But he does fall victim to the paradox of poetry. His descriptions of what objective knowledge and power will mean are replete with metaphors of gambling, conquest, war, and sexual penetration/domination (As just one example: given that the Ancients “acted so foolishly”, he says, “it is no wonder that nature [did] not give them access to her”).¹⁷⁴ He writes with hyper-masculine emotional overtones – even as he implies that human capacities have separation from nature (via the achievement of objective knowledge) as their only rational use.

¹⁷² Id.

¹⁷³ Id 31.

¹⁷⁴ Id 20. This language and its impacts have been discussed in detail in Leiss, *The Domination of Nature*; Merchant, *Reinventing Eden*; Merchant, *The Death of Nature*.

At times, his imagery is outright religious: he admires “the prophecy of Daniel on the last times of the world”, which asserts that “Many shall pass through, and knowledge will be increased”.¹⁷⁵ For Bacon, this “obviously” – if “enigmatically” - means that “it is in the fates, that is, in providence, that the circumnavigation of the world ... and the increase of the sciences should come to pass in the same age”.¹⁷⁶ (This emphasis on the completion of exploration and mapping resonates with themes in Benedict Anderson¹⁷⁷). As they achieve separation from nature, human beings will become its “high priests”: we will be the “skilled interpreters of its oracles”.¹⁷⁸

To summarise: in Bacon we see the emergence of a much more active conception of Humanity, along with a practical – as opposed to merely intellectual – conception of separation. Humanity can and should assist itself, without waiting for death or the intervention of Gods, by expanding its knowledge of the world to the point that it can control everything around itself.

¹⁷⁵ Bacon 78. The original edition used this as its title page motto (id fn 47).

¹⁷⁶ Id.

¹⁷⁷ See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

¹⁷⁸ Id 18.

1.2.2 Descartes's work entrenches Humanity as a subject of history and intensifies ideas about separation through objective knowledge.

Descartes (1596-1650) inherits and reifies both Platonic and Christian dualist themes, and connects them to the subjectivist method he develops as part of his investigations into his *cogito*. His ideas parallel Bacon's in many ways. His work also evinces many of the insecurities about human knowledge and the human condition that I will consider in chapter 2.

Like Bacon, Descartes invokes "mankind".¹⁷⁹ With this said, his writing also evinces some of the intra-human distinctions that remain problematic for all ideas of Humanity: as when he writes that an individual who is raised "among the French or the Germans, develops differently from the way he would if he had always lived among the Chinese or among cannibals".¹⁸⁰ In any event, Descartes' invocation of "mankind" comes in the context of his argument that the revelation of universal abstract principles and abstract knowledge is a "law", which "obliges [humans] to procure, as far as it is in [their] power, the general good of all mankind".¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method of Correctly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, 6.

¹⁸⁰ *Id* 16.

¹⁸¹ *Id* 51.

Although his philosophy is in many ways immensely abstract, he professes nonetheless to be interested in knowledge that is “very useful in life”, “unlike the speculative philosophy that is taught in the schools”.¹⁸² This seems to suggest a sort of confusion – what is more abstract than the idea of sitting and withdrawing completely from one’s senses, as Descartes does in his armchair? – but becomes clearer when this idea of epistemological separation or objective knowledge is factored into the equation. He enthuses in his *Meditations* that “Over [the] last few days [he has] grown so accustomed to withdrawing [his] mind from the senses, and [has] so thoroughly grasped that true perceptions of bodily things are very rare, but that more can be known about the human mind, and still more about God, that [he] can now direct [his] thought without any difficulty away from things that can be imagined and towards those that are *purely intelligible, and detached from all matter.*”¹⁸³

This turning towards the purely intelligible is possible because knowledge that is “very useful in life” can be

turned ... into a practice by which, knowing the power and action of
fire, water, air, stars, the heavens, and all the other bodies that are

¹⁸² Id.

¹⁸³ Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 38.

around us as distinctly as we know the different trades of our craftsmen, we [can] put them to all the uses for which they are suited and thus make ourselves as it were the masters and possessors of nature.¹⁸⁴

These moves will enable us to develop “a host of inventions” that will make our enjoyment of “the fruits of the earth and all the commodities that can be found in it” into something “effort[less]”.¹⁸⁵ He continues, showing an emphasis on physical health:

principally also for the preservation of health, which is without doubt the highest good and the foundation of all the other goods of this life. For even the mind depends so much on the temperament and disposition of the organs of the body that, if it is possible to find some way of making men in most cases wiser and more skilful than they have been hitherto, I believe that it is in medicine that it must be sought.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ Id 51. (This sits in a sort of tension with the comments he makes elsewhere about the role of things like “imaginary space” in achieving these ends: “I decided to leave this earth wholly for them to discuss, and to speak only of what would happen in a new world, if God were now to create enough matter to compose it somewhere in imaginary space”. Descartes was of course the inventor of the coordinate system for representing images in 2-dimensional space that now bears his name.)

¹⁸⁵ Id.

¹⁸⁶ Descartes *Meditations* 55.

To achieve this goal, Descartes believes he needs to “prov[e]” that there is a “real distinction between the human soul and the body”.¹⁸⁷ that the “natures” of these two entities are “not only ... different, but also in a sense *contrary*”.¹⁸⁸ He writes, in a famous passage:

since I know that whatever I clearly and distinctly understand can be produced by God such as I understand it to be, then if I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing without another, this is sufficient for me to be certain that the one is distinct from the other, since they can at least be produced separately by God. By what power this separation comes about makes no difference to the judgement that the things are distinct. Next, from the very fact that I know I exist, and that for the moment I am aware of nothing else at all as belonging to my nature or essence, apart from the single fact that I am a thinking thing, I rightly conclude that my essence consists in this alone, that I am a thinking thing. And although perhaps (or rather certainly, as I shall shortly claim) I have a body, which is very closely conjoined to me, yet because, on the one hand, I have a clear

¹⁸⁷ Id 84.

¹⁸⁸ Id 55.

and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am a thinking and not an extended thing, and, on the other, a distinct idea of the body, in so far as it is only an extended and not a thinking thing, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it".¹⁸⁹

For Descartes, this task is essentially religious. "[M]ost of the impious," he writes, "refuse to believe that God exists and that the human mind is distinct from the body".¹⁹⁰ For him, this is a lamentable state of affairs. After he has finished his work, though, "there will be no one else in the world who dares to question the existence of God or the real distinction between the human soul and the body".¹⁹¹ Nor will they doubt, on the basis of his sceptical arguments, that "the soul is not subject to death", but is rather "immortal",¹⁹² because he has managed to "form a concept of the soul that is as clear as possible, and entirely distinct from any concept of the body".¹⁹³ He says that "what convinces many people that there is a problem in knowing Him and even of knowing what their soul is, is that they never raise their mind above the realm of sensory things".¹⁹⁴ God is also invoked as the entity of force which puts Descartes' ideas of itself, as it were, "into" him: he says these ideas could only have been "put into [him] by a nature which was truly more perfect than [his], and one

¹⁸⁹ Id 55.

¹⁹⁰ Id 4.

¹⁹¹ Id 6.

¹⁹² Descartes *Discourse* 49.

¹⁹³ Descartes *Meditations* 10.

¹⁹⁴ Descartes *Discourse* 32.

which even had in itself all the perfections of which [he] could have any idea, that is to say, in a word, which was God”.¹⁹⁵ For Descartes, “as long as we simply remember that our minds have to be considered as finite, and God as incomprehensible and infinite, these arguments will never cause us any difficulty.”¹⁹⁶

This emphasis on the absolute separation in nature of the soul and the body ties into Descartes’ most famous work, which is establishing “incontrovertibl[e]” – that is, objective – knowledge, or knowledge removed completely from the body.¹⁹⁷ (Kant will come to call this “pure reason”). Descartes famously specifies four “precepts” that guide him in this investigation, in another passage worth quoting in full:

in the place of the great number of precepts that go to make up logic, the following four would be sufficient for my purposes, provided that I took a firm and unshakeable decision never once to depart from them. The first was never to accept anything as true that I did not incontrovertibly know to be so; that is to say, carefully to avoid both prejudice and premature conclusions; and to include nothing in my judgements other than that which presented itself to my mind so

¹⁹⁵ Id 30.

¹⁹⁶ Descartes, *Meditations* 34.

¹⁹⁷ Descartes, *Discourse* 94.

clearly and distinctly, that I would have no occasion to doubt it. The second was to divide all the difficulties under examination into as many parts as possible, and as many as were required to solve them in the best way. The third was to conduct my thoughts in a given order, beginning with the simplest and most easily understood objects, and gradually ascending, as it were step by step, to the knowledge of the most complex; and positing an order even on those which do not have a natural order of precedence. The last was to undertake such complete enumerations and such general surveys that I would be sure to have left nothing out.¹⁹⁸

Significantly, after developing his various “maxims”, Descartes “sets them aside”, along with “the truths of the faith *which have always held first place in my beliefs*”.¹⁹⁹ This is after pledging a moment earlier to “adhere to the religion in which God by His grace had me instructed from my childhood”.²⁰⁰ Reason is also called into the service of religion – specifically, Christian religion – when Descartes writes that

¹⁹⁸ Id 17.

¹⁹⁹ Id 25, my emphasis.

²⁰⁰ Id 21.

although it is sufficient for us Christians to believe by faith that the human soul does not perish with the body and that God exists, yet it seems certain that unbelievers cannot be convinced of the truth of religion, and scarcely even of any moral values, unless these first two truths are proved to them by natural reason.²⁰¹

Just as “Archimedes claimed, that if only he had a point that was firm and immovable, he would move the whole earth”, so too are “great things ... to be hoped, if [he] can find just one little thing that is certain and unshakeable”,²⁰² by “raising” his mind “above the realm of sensory things”.²⁰³ Descartes takes himself to have found just such a “little thing”²⁰⁴ in his assertion that *Cogito, ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am – or more clearly, “I am, because I think”). This “clear and distinct”²⁰⁵ knowledge is linked to God (who is said to have “inscribed” it in us, just as a “craftsman...makes himself known in his handiwork”²⁰⁶) and shows that if we “can clearly and distinctly understand one thing without another, this is sufficient for [us] to be certain that the one is distinct from the other, since they can at least be produced separately by God”.²⁰⁷ But he is coy when it comes to explaining how this

²⁰¹ Descartes *Meditations* 3.

²⁰² Id 17.

²⁰³ Descartes *Discourse* 32.

²⁰⁴ Descartes *Meditations* 17.

²⁰⁵ Descartes *Discourse* 33.

²⁰⁶ Descartes *Meditations* 37.

²⁰⁷ Id 55.

separate production occurs: “By what power this separation comes about makes no difference to the judgement that the things are distinct”.²⁰⁸ Separation is also linked to both “omnipotence” and “indifference”: “God’s supreme indifference is the supreme indication of his omnipotence”.²⁰⁹

Descartes is even more vicious than Bacon in separating Humanity from “beasts”: the latter have “no soul distinct from the body”,²¹⁰ “no mental powers whatsoever”,²¹¹ and “do not think”.²¹² The human-animal divide as he imagines is not one of mere “degree”:²¹³ it is a difference in kind. And his chief evidence for its existence is the fact that animals cannot (in his view) *speak*.

There are no men so dull-witted and stupid, not even madmen, that they are incapable of stringing together different words, and composing them into utterances, through which they let their thoughts be known; and, conversely, there is no other animal, no

²⁰⁸ Id 205.

²⁰⁹ Id.

²¹⁰ Id 199.

²¹¹ Descartes *Discourse* 48.

²¹² Descartes *Meditations* 203.

²¹³ Id 204.

matter how perfect and well endowed by birth it may be, that can do anything similar.²¹⁴

It is “unbelievable that the most perfect monkey or parrot ... should not be able to speak as well as the most stupid child, ... unless their soul were of a wholly different nature to ours”: and this proves “not only that animals have less reason than man, but that they have none at all”.²¹⁵ In this context, for Descartes, the “error” of failing to separate humans and animals is so grievous that it is second only to the “error of those who deny the existence of God”.²¹⁶ Both ideas are basically evil: beyond denying the existence of God, “there is [no idea] which causes weak minds to stray more readily from the narrow path of virtue than that of imagining that the souls of animals are of the same nature as our own”.²¹⁷

Descartes’s work becomes entangled with questions about time (which are also questions about place) when he faces the Platonic problem of how the separate body and soul communicate with one another. He notes in puzzlement that the mind seems to be “so closely conjoined to [the body] that it forms a single entity with it”,²¹⁸ but resolves that the two must nonetheless be “really distinct”,²¹⁹ and somehow commune in the place where

²¹⁴ Descartes *Discourse* 47.

²¹⁵ Id.

²¹⁶ Id 48.

²¹⁷ Id.

²¹⁸ Descartes *Meditations* 12.

²¹⁹ Id 55.

“‘common sense’ is said to reside”²²⁰ (that is, the pineal gland²²¹). In full he writes: “we must conclude that all things we clearly and distinctly conceive as different substances, as mind and body are conceived, are indeed substances really distinct from each other”.²²²

As expected, Descartes ends up having recourse to poetic language and to metaphor to describe this interrelation. It is “not sufficient [to understand the soul as] lodged in the human body like a pilot in his ship”, because it would have to be “more closely joined and united with the body in order to ... compose a true man”.²²³ Significantly, he reflects specifically on the role of imagination:

this power of imagining I possess, in so far as it differs from the power of understanding, is not integral to my essence, that is, to the essence of my mind; for even if I lacked it, I should nonetheless certainly remain the same person as I now am. From this it seems to follow that the imagination depends on something distinct from me.²²⁴

²²⁰ Id 61.

²²¹ Lokhorst, “Descartes and the Pineal Gland.”

²²² Descartes *Meditations* 10.

²²³ Descartes, *Discourse* 48.

²²⁴ Descartes *Meditations* 52.

But then he slides again into metaphor: “[W]hen we know how different flies and ants are, we can understand much better the arguments which prove that our soul is of a nature entirely independent of the body”.²²⁵ He appears to suggest that requiring a rational description of the various phenomena he is examining would be unreasonable, because “deduc[ing]” it would “depend on an explanation of the whole of physics”.²²⁶ This enables him, in effect, to avoid the question, even as he mocks those “many authors” who have “judged that it is very difficult to discover its nature” or would dare to believe “that it perishes along with the body”.²²⁷

To summarise: Descartes is emphatic that the body and soul are already completely separate: and, on the basis of this separation, proposes that human beings can achieve objective knowledge that they can use to better Humanity.

²²⁵ Descartes *Discourse* 48.

²²⁶ Descartes, *Meditations* 11.

²²⁷ *Id* 4.

1.3. In Kant and then the Ecomodernists we find a conception of Humanity as an agent of history and a “nomological” conception of separation.

1.3.1. Kant’s work entrenches a unified conception of Humanity and emphasises collective nomological separation via reason.

The work of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is the most obvious precursor for the concept of Humanity as a single, rational agent. Both Bacon and Descartes invoked the idea of “duty” when talking about the ability of human beings to better themselves and their conditions. This echoes and intensifies the Cartesian seeds of the same idea – duty – mentioned above. At least from the view of something like “common sense”: when we discover we have certain capacities, we also become able to see how it would be foolish, a lost opportunity, or a shame, not to develop or use them to their fullest extent.

This is something like the idea found in Aristotle: but Kant goes even further. He posits Humanity as something that is morally irreducible to the collective of human beings, and translates this Humanity’s quest to free itself from the shackles of necessity - often figured

as nature – into a rational necessity. Humanity for Kant is defined, as a species, by its need for freedom of this sort. Not only is Humanity capable of separating from nature: it must do so, in a certain sense, if it is to become the fullest version of itself.

Kant develops his ideas against the backdrop of both the industrial revolution (which began around 1760) and the American and French revolutions - although he himself, famously, never strayed far from the town of Königsberg. His relationship to colonialism is complex but he is generally viewed as anti-domination. He does, however, say that “not every culture is sufficient to attaining this ultimate end of nature”.²²⁸ And yet, despite his lack of personal travels, he has a clear awareness of cultural and ethical diversity:

We can observe peoples for whom the uniformity of their extraction can be established on the basis of the uniformity of their language, as is the case, for instance, with the Samoyeds of the Arctic Ocean, on the one hand, and a people with a similar language that lives two hundred miles away in the Altai Mountains, on the other. In this case another people, specifically the Mongolians, a mounted and hence warlike people, has thrust itself in between and thus has scattered the

²²⁸Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, 39. This text contains references to the variety of Kantian writings I use below.

one part of the tribe from the other into the most inhospitable, icy regions, where it certainly would not have ventured out of its own inclination. ... The same is true of the Finns that live in the northernmost region of Europe, the Lapps, with regard to the equally remote Hungarians, whose language is related to theirs, but from whom they are separated by Gothic and Sarmatic peoples, who forced themselves between the two.²²⁹

There is a sort of prefiguring of Darwin here, at least with respect to science: but it is inflected by intriguingly normative inflections (like the reference to the “mounted and *hence* warlike” Mongolians (emphasis mine)).

These revolutions in knowledge also raised the theoretical question – which reappears when one considers the work of the Ecomodernists – about the role of reason in designing the future. Generally it is said that thinkers like Rousseau were adamant that humans could imagine the world as it should be, entirely from first principles, and then act in concert to bring this world into physical being, while others – like Burke - argued that it was precisely this fetishization of abstract reason that *led* to the “Terror” that characterised the later parts of the French revolution in particular. This is a debate that has come down to us in the

²²⁹ Id 88-9.

form of the debate between “progressives” and “conservatives”, on the one hand, and the debate between “idealists” and “realists” or “materialists” on the other (depending on the point of view one’s analysis takes). Kant is fairly clearly in the camp of the progressive idealists, though he incorporates the arguments of his opponents in nuanced and sophisticated ways.

He is also witness to the ongoing intensification of European colonial exploration.²³⁰ He invokes “Humanity”²³¹ and “the whole of humanity”²³² even more explicitly than Bacon, both in his popular work and his philosophical writings. It even figures in his famous categorical imperative. Humanity, for Kant, is “a race of rational beings that strive continually to make progress, against obstacles, from evil to the good”.²³³ And elsewhere: the “natural vocation of [its] character consists in continuous progress toward the better”.²³⁴ “Giving a description of the character of a certain species of beings”, Kant tells us, requires two things: “that it can be brought under one concept together with other species that are familiar to us”, and that the characteristics of specific members of the species that distinguish them from one another be “given and used as the peculiar property ... to distinguish it”.²³⁵

²³⁰ His views on this topic are debated: Flikschuh and Ypi, *Kant and Colonialism*.

²³¹ Id 64.

²³² Id 61.

²³³ Id 175.

²³⁴ Id 167.

²³⁵ Id 164.

He laments the difficulties that arise from the fact that humans don't seem to have rational creatures besides themselves to compare themselves with: "if we compare a species of beings that is known to us (A) with another species that is unknown to us (non A), then how can we expect or demand of ourselves that we describe the character of the first, if we lack the mediating concept of comparison"?²³⁶ What is more, "Even if our highest concept of a species is that of an earthly rational being," he says,

"we shall be unable to describe its character, since we have no knowledge of rational, extraterrestrial beings that would allow us to state their peculiar property and characterize the earthly ones among the rational beings in general. It therefore seems that it is simply an impossible task to describe the character of the human species, since this task could only be accomplished by a comparison of two species of rational beings through experience, a comparison which the latter does not make available to us. In order to assign the human being his class within the system of living nature and thereby characterize it, we are left with no option but the following conclusion: that *the human*

²³⁶ Id.

*being has a character that he himself creates, by means of his ability
to perfect himself in accordance with ends that he sets himself*²³⁷

It is, in other words, the species that is not only rational but that strives always to improve itself: that is, to *progress*. This connection between rationality, freedom, and progress is a crucial feature of Kant's writings on Enlightenment and political futures.

Individual human beings for Kant are distinctive because of their capacity for reason. At least, this is the case on Earth: He says explicitly that while “we know only one species of rational beings *on earth*”²³⁸ – ourselves – there is no reason in principle to assume that humans are the only rational creatures in the universe: that is, another “mass of creatures that arose from one demiurge”.²³⁹ The rationality of these other creatures might manifest itself differently to human rationality: “It could be the case that there are rational beings on another planet that can only think out loud, both while awake and while asleep, who, irrespective of whether they are together with others or alone, can have no thoughts”.²⁴⁰

²³⁷ Id, my emphasis.

²³⁸ Id 172.

²³⁹ Id 174.

²⁴⁰ Id.

This is contrast to humans, for whom it is “an essential part of the makeup of both the [individual and the species] that it can try to explore the thoughts of others while withholding one’s own thoughts”²⁴¹ – that is, that humans are not transparent to each other (or even to themselves, as Freud would learn), and can dissemble, manipulate and lie.²⁴² The distinction between definitions of rationality that grow out of its instantiation in human beings in particular as opposed to definitions that are, so to speak, more formal, prefigures the ontic/ontological distinction that will appear in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*.

Like his predecessors, Kant links this rationality to speech, and this in an explicitly Biblical context: “The first human being was thus able to stand and walk. It was able to speak”.²⁴³ But he also reflects on other features that he believes makes humans distinctive: “[a]mong the living inhabitants of the earth,” he says,

the human being is clearly distinguished from all other natural beings by his technical predisposition to manipulate objects (that is, mechanical manipulation connected with consciousness), by his pragmatic predisposition (that is, his skill at using other human beings to further his own ends), and by his moral predisposition (that is, to

²⁴¹ Id 175.

²⁴² Kant 200.

²⁴³ Kant 25, quoting Genesis 2:20.

act according to the principle of freedom under laws applying both to himself and to others).²⁴⁴

For Kant, “any one of these three levels alone is sufficient to distinguish the human being’s character from that of other inhabitants of the earth”.²⁴⁵ Intriguingly, a few moments later he finds evidence of this rationality in the very constitution of the human body itself: as something that

lies already in the shape and organization of [the] hand, fingers, and fingertips, in part through their construction, in part through their fine sensitivity. Nature has by this means designed [humans] not for merely a single manner of manipulating objects, but rather generally for all forms of manipulation.²⁴⁶

In these various linkages he agrees with Plato and Augustine. But he then goes further, and develops a meaning for “rationality” that is more nuanced than their various conceptions. Instead of referring simply to the human capacity for intellection and/or speech in general, “rationality” as Kant sees it is what humans achieve when they use their reason to create

²⁴⁴ Id 165.

²⁴⁵ Id.

²⁴⁶ Id 166.

their own character. Again, for Kant, humans distinguish themselves by virtue of the capacity of each member of their *species* as a rational being to “endow itself with a character in the first place, both for itself as an individual and for the society in which nature places it”.²⁴⁷ The “Self-making” or “self-forming” element here is crucial. He goes further and refers to these various activities and makings as the “intelligible character of *humanity in general*”.²⁴⁸

Kant thus echoes both Bacon and Descartes when he says that the solution to the problem of “political expediency” is such that it “requires a great deal of knowledge of nature, *so that nature’s mechanism can be employed to promote the desired end*”.²⁴⁹

The question of agency is also linked to this question of what nature “wills” or “impels”:
“[nature] impels humankind to take the step that reason could have told it to take without all these lamentable experiences: to abandon the lawless state of savagery and enter into a federation of peoples”.²⁵⁰ Crucially, it “also wills that humankind attain this, like all the ends of its vocation, by its own efforts”.²⁵¹ As “Nature’s highest intent for humankind...the development of all of the latter’s natural predispositions” is something – as many have noted

²⁴⁷ Id 172.

²⁴⁸ Id 167.

²⁴⁹ Id 101.

²⁵⁰ Id 10.

²⁵¹ Id 8.

– that Kant says “can be realized only in society, and more precisely, in a society that possesses the greatest degree of freedom”.²⁵²

In Kant’s abstract scheme, which has rationality at its centre, human beings “became equals of all rational beings”.²⁵³ This is possible because they – we – can reflect on what is right and wrong, and then use this reflection to create our own laws (or “give laws unto ourselves”). In slightly more modern language, we might say, “make laws for themselves.” This is a capacity that they have, of course, as a result of those other, more general capacities: we can use our ability to think and speak (*logos*) to give ourselves reasons to act/reasons for acting (*rationes*). In Kant’s words: a human being “has a character that he himself creates, by means of his ability to perfect himself in accordance with ends that he sets himself”.²⁵⁴

Everything depends here on the distinction between merely possessing the capacity for reason in principle, and exercising that capacity in fact. (As it does for Bacon.) A rational being that fails to exercise its rationality is merely an “*animal rationabile*”: it is “*endowed with the capacity of reason*”, but not yet a properly “*animal rationale*”.²⁵⁵ It is only in when humans stop being creatures that can make laws for themselves, and start actually making

²⁵² Id.

²⁵³ Id 28.

²⁵⁴ Id 164.

²⁵⁵ Id 164, my emphasis. This is of course Aristotle’s famous phrase from the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

laws for themselves, that they become completely human beings. Before this point they are, like all other creatures, shaped by the operation of pre-existing natural laws. This is to say: the “laws” of sexual reproduction, competition for resources, etc. (The question of who or what *endowed* us with these capacities is complex for Kant as it is for other thinkers. Thus the question of faith is important and complex for Kant.²⁵⁶)

Humans are, in other words, *by nature autonomous* - *auto* (*self*) + *nomos* (*law*). This idea that we are “autonomous, by nature” sets up the conflict that Kant, like those before him, understands himself to be engaging: the fact that humans are *at once* “by nature” (creatures of instinct, etc) and “autonomous” (capable as a result of their capacity for reason of making laws that go above and beyond natural laws in structuring and regulating their own behaviour).

This relationship between laws – and we might say, “conflict of laws” (to retool a phrase from the study of law) will turn out to be immensely important in later chapters. Claiming humans are formally autonomous (they have, as creatures, the capacity to give themselves reasons for their actions or laws that they decide will guide their actions in a certain way) does not imply that they must also be substantively autonomous (they actively exercise this

²⁵⁶ Some of his own writings on the topic appear in Kant, Wood, and Di Giovanni, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*. A useful commentary is Wood, *Kant and Religion*.

capacity). They might be stopped from exercising it by their own immaturity, by the domination of others, or by some other factor.

It is from this picture of distinctive individual humans that Kant formulates his conception of Humanity as a species striving for progress in the form of Enlightenment. Given that individual human beings have this capacity to give laws unto themselves - to create their own characters – it follows for Kant that we have a duty to do the same at the level of our species. The question of duty and necessity is complex in Kant. The most famous of Kant's duties – the one that really defines his deontological (that is, duty-based) philosophy, is his categorical imperative, according to which we should “Act so that [we] use humanity, as much in [our] person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as end and never merely as means”.²⁵⁷ With this said, although “humankind is a mere trifle for the omnipotence of nature ... it is no trifle that the rulers of humankind would take members of the species to be trivial and treat them as such by yoking them as animals, as a mere tool for their ends... This would be *an inversion of the final end of creation itself*”.²⁵⁸

This duty is driven, at least in part, by the clashes that occur amongst us as a result of our “unsociable sociability”.²⁵⁹ On the one hand, we have “an inclination to associate with one

²⁵⁷ See the note on the formulation of his moral laws in Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, xviii.

²⁵⁸ Id 159, my emphasis.

²⁵⁹ Id 6.

another, because in such a condition [we] feel [our]selves to be more human”: but on the other hand, we have a “strong tendency to isolate [our]selves, because... [we] want to direct everything only to [our] own ends”.²⁶⁰ Kant explicitly describes the “character of the species”, which he says is “evident based on the collected historical experience of all times and among all peoples”, in similar ways:

taken collectively (as the human race as a whole), [they] are a mass of persons that exist next to one another and after one another and who cannot do without peaceful coexistence and yet cannot avoid constant strife amongst one another, and who therefore consider themselves to be destined by nature to a coalition that forms a cosmopolitan society ... through mutual coercion under laws that they themselves originate, a society which is constantly threatened by divisiveness yet progresses overall.²⁶¹

The task as Kant sees it is in a sense to reconcile these two tendencies (an idea that will become an even more explicit driving force for history in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*).

²⁶⁰ Id 6-7.

²⁶¹ Id 174.

Our tendency to isolate is an “immatur[e]” state of affairs, and we must use our reason to “emancipat[e]” ourselves from it.²⁶² He goes on to define “immaturity” as “the inability to make use of one’s intellect without the direction of another”²⁶³ which “another” we might understand in this context to also mean “nature”. The German *Unmundigkeit* can refer to both legal and “natural” (that is, physiological) maturity. This is, indeed, the “main point” of enlightenment.²⁶⁴ To do so is no less than to complete the “education of humankind”.²⁶⁵ Kant explicitly focusses his discussion at the level the level of “the entirety of its species — that is, taken collectively ...and not [with respect to] the education of each individual”.²⁶⁶

This education consists in moving from a stage of existence where Humanity merely “works ... to preserve itself and its species”; through a stage when it “trains, teaches, and educates its species for domestic society” – that is, becomes civilized; to a stage, finally, when it “governs its species as a systematic whole ... organized according to principles of reason”.²⁶⁷

The third, and only the third, is an enlightened state of being or society. But the “distinguishing characteristic of the human species ... in comparison with the idea as such of possible rational beings on earth” – that is, earthly rational beings in general – is that

²⁶² Id 17.

²⁶³ Id.

²⁶⁴ Id 47.

²⁶⁵ Id 171.

²⁶⁶ Id.

²⁶⁷ Id 164.

“nature has sown in [humans] the seeds of discord”.²⁶⁸ Hence the “unsociable sociability” described just above.

For Kant, this process of progress is an explicitly teleological one. “One can regard the history of the human species at large as the realization of a *concealed plan of nature*”²⁶⁹ and as a “destiny”.²⁷⁰ Elsewhere he calls this teleology, variously, “the development of humanity”²⁷¹ (again understood in certain terms as an *exit* from the controlling impulses of animality) and as “the moral destiny of the human race”.²⁷² He proposes that “the human race shall attain this end” and “predicts[s]... a progression of the human race ... toward the better that can not be completely reversed”.²⁷³ In his mind, this is elevated to the status of a rational principle:

That the human race has always progressed and will further progress toward the better is thus not merely a well-intentioned proposition and one to be recommended from a practical perspective, but rather is justifiable even for the most rigorous of theories.²⁷⁴

²⁶⁸ Id.

²⁶⁹ Id 13.

²⁷⁰ Id 25.

²⁷¹ Id 65.

²⁷² Id 56.

²⁷³ Id 183.

²⁷⁴ Id 158.

Supposedly, there is “experience” in the “human race” which suggests that that race “has a makeup and capacity to be both the cause of human progress toward the better and ... the agent thereof”.²⁷⁵ “When we ask the question of whether the human species (as a whole) is improving steadily,” he writes,

we are concerned not with the natural history of the human being (with the question, say, of whether new races of human beings could come into being in the future), but rather with a moral history of the human being. Yet this moral history is not one given according to the concept of the human species (*singulorum*), but rather is concerned with the whole of human-kind, as it is socially united on earth yet divided into distinct peoples (*universorum*).²⁷⁶

This teleology “is understood as the underlying wisdom of a higher cause which is directed toward the objective final end of the human species and which predetermines this course of

²⁷⁵ Id 154.

²⁷⁶ Id 150.

events in the world".²⁷⁷ As such, "the human race is constantly progressing with respect to culture as the natural end for the same".²⁷⁸

Interestingly, though, he seems to come to this teleological theory initially out of a kind of despair: given that "one does not know, in the end, how one ought to conceive of our species, one so thoroughly conceited about its own superiority",²⁷⁹ he thinks that the

only option for the philosopher here, since he cannot presuppose that human beings pursue any rational end of their own in their endeavors, is [to] attempt to discover an end of nature behind this absurd course of human activity, an end on the basis of which a history could be given of beings that proceed without a plan of their own, but nevertheless according to a definite plan of nature.²⁸⁰

There is a kind of bootstrapping that goes on to lift humankind – via Kant – out of its own despair and into the realisation that nature does, indeed, have a rational plan.

²⁷⁷ Id 85.

²⁷⁸ Id 62.

²⁷⁹ Id 4.

²⁸⁰ Id.

In his view, “nature intends that every creature attain its vocation by developing all the predispositions of its nature in a manner purposive to attaining [its] destiny”.²⁸¹ In other creatures – that is, “nonrational animals”²⁸² – this development occurs at the level of individual beings. “Herein”, he says, “lies the wisdom of nature”.²⁸³ In the case of Humanity, though, things happen differently. Kant does not seem to believe that every human can or will achieve Enlightenment individually: but he does believe that Humanity can and will achieve Enlightenment at the level of the species. (It is in this sense that Humanity is the driver or “agent” of history for Kant.) “Not every individual fulfills the end of nature”, he says, but “in the case of humankind only the species attains this vocation”.²⁸⁴ And elsewhere: “that which seems confused and irregular when considering particular individuals can nonetheless be recognized as a steadily progressing, albeit slow development of the original capacities of the entire species”.²⁸⁵

In “the case of all other animals, when they are left to their own devices, each individual fully attains its entire vocation, whereas in the case of the human being only the species attains this.”²⁸⁶ One human being “can postpone enlightenment for his own person, and even

²⁸¹ Id 172.

²⁸² Id.

²⁸³ Id.

²⁸⁴ Id.

²⁸⁵ Id 3.

²⁸⁶ Id 167.

then only for a short time, with regard to that which is his responsibility to know²⁸⁷ – but: “to renounce it for his own person, and more still for his descendents [sic], amounts to violating *the sacred rights of humanity*”.²⁸⁸ (The status of this “likely” is worth some debate. This seems to imply as a matter of practice that if enough humans attain Enlightenment they will be able to oversee the Enlightenment of the entire species: an idea that veers again into questions about elitism, intra-human authority, and the role of genius.)

In part this is because achieving Enlightenment in one’s own person is a challenge indeed. Only “very few [humans] have succeeded through their own intellectual toil in emerging from immaturity”.²⁸⁹ It is “much more likely that an entire public should enlighten itself”.²⁹⁰ while individuals are mortal, the “species is immortal”,²⁹¹ and so it “ought ... [to] attain the full development of its predisposition”.²⁹² The status of this “ought”, again, is complex – both externally and internally, exogenously and endogenously, generated. Most individuals “would have to live an inordinately long period of time in order to learn how to make full use of all of [their] natural predispositions”.²⁹³ More positively, though, it is also because humans can accumulate and transmit their culture and their knowledge over time. “The impulse to

²⁸⁷ Id 21.

²⁸⁸ Id.

²⁸⁹ Id 18.

²⁹⁰ Id.

²⁹¹ Id 6.

²⁹² Id.

²⁹³ Id 5.

pursue scientific knowledge, as a form of culture that ennobles humankind, bears no correlation for the species as a whole to the span of an individual's lifetime".²⁹⁴ (This emphasis on scientific knowledge is significant.) This "impulse" is the one that "gradually leads our species from the low level of animal nature to the highest level of humanity by its own art (an art which nature compels humankind to invent)".²⁹⁵

Humanity, therefore, becomes a moral agent in its own right: an entity that is both emergent from and irreducible to "all human beings". And this moral agent is "compelled" by nature (which has endowed it with reason) to achieve "a civil society": an "externally perfect" and "cosmopolitan" constitution that enables "nature [to] fully develop all of its predispositions in humankind".²⁹⁶

It is here that the blurring between distinctiveness and separation begins. This is because for Kant the transition is, as we have seen, nomological. It is not ontological – involving entrance to entering a different realm – or epistemological –involving the achievement of objective knowledge of nature. Instead it consists in creating a realm or regime of laws that floats - as it were – "above" or "outside" the realm of merely natural laws, and

²⁹⁴ Id 168.

²⁹⁵ Id 11.

²⁹⁶ Id 13.

structures/facilitates the full development of Humanity in specific and supranatural ways.²⁹⁷

(Here we see again a certain paradox: the human impulse to perfection is both natural (in the sense of teleological) but also supra-natural (in that it is only by moving above, beyond, or outside of “regular” natural laws that human beings can achieve it).

“As the only being on earth that possesses reason and which therefore has the capacity to freely set ends for itself”, Kant writes,

[man] is indeed properly regarded as a master of nature, and when one understands nature as a teleological system, he is, according to his vocation, the ultimate end of nature. But he is this only conditionally, to the extent that he understands this and possesses the will to establish a relationship of means and ends between himself and nature that, independent of nature, can be sufficient unto itself and hence a final end.²⁹⁸

It is the case on this view that “[a]ll of a creature’s natural predispositions are destined eventually to develop fully and in accordance with their purpose”.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁷ Id 29.

²⁹⁸ Id 38.

²⁹⁹ Id 4.

The “emergence of the human being from the paradise that reason presents to him as the first dwelling of his species”, Kant tells us, is “nothing other than the transition from the brutishness of a merely animal creature to humanity”.³⁰⁰ Humanity is separate from the rest of nature because it is “both the cause...and ... the agent” of its own progress.³⁰¹ Here, too, human capacities are linked with “stages” of reason, which in turn are linked in fascinating ways with time:

The third stage of reason, after it had meddled with the immediately felt needs, was the conscious anticipation of the future. This ability to enjoy not just the current moment in life but also to represent to oneself the future, often far in advance, is the most distinguishing mark of the human being’s capacity to prepare himself for distant ends in accordance with his destiny. But it is also the most inexhaustible source of worry and distress aroused by the uncertainty of the future, something from which all animals are free.³⁰²

³⁰⁰ Id 29.

³⁰¹ Id 154.

³⁰² Id 27. He goes on: the “fourth and final stage, by means of which reason completely raised the human being above its society with animals, was that he understood (however vaguely), that he was actually the end of nature, and that nothing that lived on earth could compete with him in this regard. The first time that he said to the sheep, “the coat that you wear was given to you by nature not for you, but for me,” and stripped it of this coat and put it on himself ... he became aware of a privilege that he, by virtue of his nature, had over all

Humanity is so much the engineer of its own ends, in fact, that the rest of nature becomes a “system of ends” for the achievement of a separate, enlightened Humanity. Humanity is not mere “an end of nature like all other organized beings,” but “also as the *ultimate* end of nature here on earth”.³⁰³ The “civil constitution” he proposes must be enacted is intended to embody the “highest degree of the *artificial elevation* of humankind’s predisposition to the good” – because “only by being weakened does the tame cattle become more useful to the human being than the wild beasts”.³⁰⁴ And Humanity’s reason, as it manifests in this process, involves “extend[ing] the rules and ends of the use of all of its powers far beyond its natural instincts”.³⁰⁵

This extension of rules and ends, and of powers, is directed towards escaping from necessity altogether: “nature wills that human beings abandon their sloth and passive contentment and thrust themselves into work and hardship”, in order that they “find means ... to cleverly escape the latter”.³⁰⁶ Humans “were intended to produce everything themselves”: “all the joys that can make life pleasant, their insights and prudence, and even the goodness of their will

animals. He now no longer viewed them as his fellows in creation, but rather as means at his will’s disposal and as tools for attaining any chosen ends” (id 27-8).

³⁰³ Id 37.

³⁰⁴ Id 170.

³⁰⁵ Id 5.

³⁰⁶ Id 7.

were intended to be entirely the products of their own efforts” – and “[they] should take the full credit for this themselves and have only themselves to thank for it”.³⁰⁷ Emerging from the “brutishness of mere private force” to “civilization” and then to “moral” being involves reaching a “higher level”.³⁰⁸ And it is something that Humanity must do completely for itself.

Nature has “willed that human beings produce everything that extends beyond the mechanical organization of their animal existence completely on their own”; they “shall not partake in any happiness or perfection other than that which they attain free of instinct and by means of their own reason.”³⁰⁹ (Interestingly, he does say that the term “nature”, “when speaking here merely of theory (not of religion)” – is to be reserved for “denoting the limits of human reason”.³¹⁰ Here, again, are raised questions of faith and its relation to knowledge, as were raised in the tradition right back to Plato and Augustine.) This is because “nature does nothing superfluous and is not wasteful in the use of its means to attain its ends” – an idea that in a certain sense prefigures Darwin. And because the “mere fact that it gave human beings the faculty of reason and the freedom of will based on this faculty is a clear indication of its intent with regard to their endowments”.³¹¹

³⁰⁷ Id 5-6.

³⁰⁸ Id 191.

³⁰⁹ Id 166.

³¹⁰ Id 86.

³¹¹ Id 5.

Humanity's "role" on Earth is thus "very artificial": although "we do not know how it is with the inhabitants of other planets and their nature", if we can "fulfill this task that nature has set *us* well, then we may well be able to flatter ourselves that we can lay claim to no mean status among our neighbors in the universe".³¹² There is an element of domination in this process, which is also a part of the "will" of this same nature: "By ensuring that human beings could live anywhere on earth, nature has also willed in a despotic fashion that they ought to live all over the earth".³¹³ And, in language that echoes Bacon's (about "staking the whole race"), Kant is clear that achieving Enlightenment – achieving separation from necessity and thus from nature - "salutary" – is also "harsh and strict, a treatment of humankind by nature that is coupled with hardship and verges on the destruction of the entire race".³¹⁴

Questions about time and temporality emerge in Kant in particularly poignant terms, as he grapples with the question of when, exactly, Humanity will separate from nature, and what role hope in this outcome can and should play in human striving for progress and perfection. Humanity "can work its way up toward its vocation only through the progress of a series of an indeterminately large number of generations", but the "goal always remains in the

³¹² Id 9.

³¹³ Id 88.

³¹⁴ Id 171.

distance”.³¹⁵ This is the famous “regulative ideal” that will come to be so central in modern thinking: what Kant calls a “wish, or rather [an] empty longing (for one is conscious of the fact that what is wished for can never be had) ... [for] an age where one is freed from all the imagined needs that luxuriousness loads upon us”.³¹⁶ The mention of imagined needs is significant here.) This is, he says, “a consoling outlook on the future, in which the human species is represented at a remote point in the distant future where it is finally working itself toward the condition in which all the seeds that nature has planted within it can be fully developed and its vocation here on earth can be realized”.³¹⁷ It is something – the ever-receding horizon of hope – that becomes profoundly important, but which is also (we might say) profoundly unscientific, or at least, eminently a matter of faith.

This horizon of hope is importantly, even centrally, faith-oriented. Kant says that “philosophy, too, can have its chiliastic beliefs, but this is a chiliasm the idea of which, although only from very far away, can itself promote its realization, and which is, for that reason, anything but fanciful”.³¹⁸ Here, again, there is an intertwinement of poetic language with questions about faith. Achieving Enlightenment is the ultimate in rationality for Humanity, but faith is inextricably intertwined with it in ways that seem to push towards

³¹⁵ Id 166, my emphasis.

³¹⁶ Id 35, Kant’s parenthesis.

³¹⁷ Id 16.

³¹⁸ Id 13.

non-rationality or even irrationality. (Part of the complexity of terms here stems from whether we consider faith to be irrational or at least potentially rational/adaptive in some circumstances.)

To summarise: Kant concretises and “teleologises” the conception of Humanity as a unified entity, and links the separation of this Humanity from nature (understood as necessity) through enlightened self-legislating and self-fashioning.

1.3.2. The Ecomodernists develop a conception of Humanity as a unified agent and emphasise collective separation via technological “decoupling”.

With the Ecomodernists, the conception of Humanity I have been tracing in this study arrives at perhaps its most radical form. The Ecomodernists often describe their work as “radical pragmatism”.³¹⁹ But in my view it is really what Unger calls “*shrunk* pragmatism”:³²⁰ a kind of brutal “pragmatics” that strays far from the spirit of the original philosophy of the pragmatists themselves. The conception of “Humanity as a unified actor” is not exclusive to the work of Ecomodernists. One excellent preparatory history is Lynn Hunt’s

³¹⁹ Lewis, “The Education of an Ecomodernist,” 1.

³²⁰ Unger, *The Self Awakened*, ch 1.

(though she is focussed more on the evolution – or as she says, invention – of human rights.)³²¹ But I focus on their usage because it is they who imagine Humanity specifically as able to “decouple” (that is, separate) itself and its impacts from nature. This is of course the larger question about separatism generally: what it means to at once be clearly part of nature and yet clearly striving not to be part of it in some sophisticated sense. The Ecomodernists self-consciously identify in a group in their Manifesto.³²²

Writing as they are against the backdrop of Darwinian evolution, climate change science, and the twentieth-century advent of a series of globalizing technologies - chief amongst which are nuclear weapons, spaceflight, and the internet – the Ecomodernists tend to take this “decoupling” of Humanity from nature as the centrepiece of their “inspiring vision” for political thought.³²³ as the purpose and ultimate goal of a politics that is imagined as “positive, *humanistic*, and *rational*’.³²⁴ Lewis writes that the “dismissive views of modernity” he had absorbed as an environmentalist came to seem “stale and unsupportable”, because the indigenous communities he visited “wanted nothing more than engagement with the modern world, provided that it was accomplished on their own terms.³²⁵ For him, “there is

³²¹ Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*. Thanks to Raffael Fasel for drawing my attention to this text.

³²² Asafu-Adjaye and Blomkvist, *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*.

³²³ Lewis 16.

³²⁴ Shellenberger, *Apocalypse Never*, 9. My emphasis. Page references are for a digital version of the text and may vary across editions.

³²⁵ Lewis 8.

nothing uniquely destructive about the West”.³²⁶ Shellenberger similarly proposes that his view is devoted to defending “what one might call mainstream ethics” – what he calls “the moral case for humanism, of both secular and religious variants, against the anti-humanism of apocalyptic environmentalism”.³²⁷

Humanity for the Ecomodernists is imagined as a unified agent, capable of acting in its own name, to “manage”, “control”, “direct”, or “manipulate” nature. In this they take the basic Kantian idea of a unified Humanity and radicalise it. Humanity for the Ecomodernists is understood in Darwinian terms as a species, but not only or merely as a species (although it is important to note that Darwin himself rejected this exceptionalism³²⁸). Instead, and in line with Shellenberger’s call for a straightforwardly anti-critical humanism,³²⁹ Humanity is declared a “specia[l]” species – one whose “specialness” stems primarily from its world-building and (as it were) self-insulating capacities. In general, Humanity in Ecomodernist work is imagined either as a “God species” or as one that must reluctantly but nobly “shoulder the mantle of planetary stewardship”.³³⁰

³²⁶ Id.

³²⁷ Shellenberger 9.

³²⁸ Darwin.

³²⁹ Shellenberger 270, my emphasis.

³³⁰ Lynas, *The God Species*; Ellis, “Planet of No Return.”

Humanity (or occasionally, “humankind”) is invoked with great frequency in Ecomodernist writing. For Shellenberger it is “humankind” that is “forced to cope with” various threats and humankind that has “enough atomic firepower to destroy itself”; it is also humankind that would need to “realiz[e] the dream of universal prosperity” through “cheap and abundant energy”.³³¹ For Stewart Brand, most famous for the *Whole Earth Catalog* that was a mainstay of both homesteading and techno-utopian movements in the 1970s, the oceans are said to absorb “humanity’s” carbon emissions; “humanity” runs on “large amounts of power”; and needs, in responding to climate change, to “do something that is almost unimaginably difficult”.³³²

For Ruth DeFries, the project is one of understanding “how humanity thrives in the face of natural crisis”.³³³ Humanity for DeFries – one of the most nuanced of the Ecomodernist writers – has “control” but sometimes engages in “meddling”³³⁴ it has a “cumulative knowledge”, and has engaged in “a “never-ending cycle” of manipulations of the planet’s endowments”.³³⁵ For Mark Lynas, it is Humanity that now (through synthetic biology) “has the potential to design and create life from scratch”; Humanity that has “potential...and ambition”; and Humanity that has access to technologies, like genetic engineering, that “can

³³¹ Shellenberger 33, 36, 161.

³³² Brand, *Whole Earth Discipline*, 26, 32.

³³³ DeFries, *The Big Ratchet*, 1.

³³⁴ Id 196, 205.

³³⁵ Id 205.

help [it] limit its environmental impact and feed itself better in the process”.³³⁶ Technological innovations are either “good for” or “for the good of” Humanity; and it is Humanity that makes “progress”, must engage in “climatic management” and is now “powerful enough, and increasingly knowledgeable enough” to take “more intelligent” approaches to climate change and other ecological challenges.³³⁷

The distinctiveness of human beings – and Humanity – is a given in Ecomodernist work. Shellenberger, as already noted, is interested in “affirm[ing] humankind’s specialness”.³³⁸ For DeFries, human beings are no “ordinary mammal”; one of the goals of her writing is to reconstruct how *we became extraordinary*.³³⁹ For Lynas, the distinctiveness of Humanity is “not about evolution, but adaptation”: adaptation that has allowed for the “Great Leap Forward” of our “industrial emergence”.³⁴⁰ (Lynas does not specify whether his “Great Leap Forward” is in any way related to the Chinese usage.)

All of these claims to distinctiveness revolve around the capacities imputed to Humanity to develop specific technologies for manipulation, regulation, prediction, and control. For DeFries much of this relates to the production and provision of food: she explores how “how

³³⁶ Lynas 11, 18, 20.

³³⁷ Id 112, 115, 235.

³³⁸ Shellenberger 270.

³³⁹ DeFries xi, my emphasis.

³⁴⁰ Id 30.

human civilization evolved to manipulate nature so much that most people live in cities³⁴¹ – a fact made possible because, although it is a “species ... like any other ... [in that it]manipulates its surroundings to expand its territory and grow in numbers” – it is at the same time “differen[t]” because it has such an “extraordinary ability ... to twist food from nature”.³⁴² She writes often of the “toolbox” or “toolkit” Humanity has to achieve this “world-dominating” presence.³⁴³ For others, like Shellenberger, the technology in question is the provision of abundant energy and material affluence. He writes even more vehemently about the way that “our capability for modifying environments is far greater than ever before”,³⁴⁴ and technologies are imagined as “major parts of what made us humans”.³⁴⁵ (The two he has in mind in this context are “fire and deforestation for meat production”.³⁴⁶)

It is here, though, again, that these claims about distinctiveness through technology start to blur into something else. Technology gradually appears not only as something that makes humans distinctive in the empirical or quantitative sense, but as something that has greater, even metaphysical, effects on our powers and our presence. It comes to be imagined as something that enables Humanity, in effect, to hold itself at arms’ length from nature, and to “manage” nature exclusively for its own ends. This involves “transform[ing other] species

³⁴¹ Id 12.

³⁴² Id 3.

³⁴³ Id 16, 86, 87.

³⁴⁴ Shellenberger 14.

³⁴⁵ Id 45.

³⁴⁶ Id.

to be more and more at the service of humanity” – our ability to do which had already “grown so massive that few constraints were left to prevent a ratchet [food production] on a scale never seen before”.³⁴⁷ Lynas emphasises how past technological developments have “freed humanity from the iron grip of what [were once] the strictest laws of nature”.³⁴⁸ Ausubel, another Ecomodernist writer, argues that “Humans have always exploited the territories within reach”, but suggests that the question now is “whether the technology that has extended our reach can now also *liberate* the environment from human impact”.³⁴⁹

Here arrives the most significant word in the Ecomodernist vocabulary, which is “decoupling”. This decoupling is said to occur “in both relative and absolute terms”: relative decoupling involves “human environmental impacts ris[ing] at a slower rate than overall economic growth”, such that “Overall impacts may still increase, just at a slower rate”.³⁵⁰ Absolute decoupling involves situations where “total environmental impacts — impacts in the aggregate — peak and begin to decline, even as the economy continues to grow”.³⁵¹ Here appears a logic of infinitude. The implication appears to be that growth can continue, forever, even as (in the case of absolute decoupling or separation) impacts decrease. The Manifesto does not specify the extent to which “begin[ning] to decline” must continue to

³⁴⁷ DeFries 171.

³⁴⁸ Id109.

³⁴⁹ Ausubel 3, my emphasis.

³⁵⁰ Asafu-Adjaye et al 11.

³⁵¹ Id.

become sustainable. For this to occur forever the impacts would presumably need to approach zero. (This might not be the case if it could be shown that there were a boundary or threshold beyond which ecosystems could regenerate despite some limited human impact. The details of these ideas go beyond the scope of this chapter.)

Throughout, the emphasis is on “efficiency”.³⁵² Ausubel, similarly, casts the matter in terms of “efficiency gains”.³⁵³ Ellis invokes decoupling specifically in the context of “decoupling most of humanity from agricultural livelihoods and direct interactions with rural lands”.³⁵⁴ this, he says, is involving “most of humanity ... defecting from the older ways, which will soon become hobbies for the elite and nostalgic memories for the rest of humanity”.³⁵⁵

Throughout, the emphasis on management, direction and gardening/domestication is quite explicit. Ausubel casts this as humanity’s having “liberated ourselves” from “the environment” – a matter that he believes should be followed by the “liberat[ion of] the environment itself”.³⁵⁶ In line with this universalising project – concepts paralleling technological universalism – Nordhaus and Shellenberger say that the goal is to “abandon the “small is beautiful” ethic”³⁵⁷ because in fact “big is beautiful”.³⁵⁸ The “Liberator” for Ausubel is “human

³⁵² Shellenberger 133.

³⁵³ Ausubel 5.

³⁵⁴ Ellis 5.

³⁵⁵ Id 6.

³⁵⁶ Ausubel 9, 13.

³⁵⁷ Nordhaus and Shellenberger, “The Long Death of Environmentalism,” 12.

³⁵⁸ Id 11.

culture”,³⁵⁹ whose “most powerful tools are science and technology”, which can “increasingly decouple our goods and services from demands on planetary resources”.³⁶⁰

It is important to note that the Ecomodernists often emphasise that they are *against* the idea of “separateness”³⁶¹ from nature. In this they borrow a set of well-established ideas and critiques from political ecology.³⁶² Shellenberger in particular castigates “mainstream” environmentalists for adopting what he takes to be such a separation-based view. With Nordhaus, he writes that “Environmentalism [has come to be] more about protecting a supposed “thing” – “the environment” – than advancing the worldview articulated by Sierra Club founder John Muir, who nearly a century ago observed, “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe”.³⁶³

A short time later, the two write that the “concepts of “nature” and “environment” have been thoroughly deconstructed. ... If one understands the notion of the “environment” to include humans, then the way the environmental community designates certain problems as environmental and others as not is completely arbitrary”.³⁶⁴ Lynas writes that “Listening to

³⁵⁹ Ausubel 2.

³⁶⁰ Id.

³⁶¹ Others have noted this too: for example, Kallis and Bliss, “Post-Environmentalism.”

³⁶² Id. On political ecology, compare: Robbins, *Political Ecology*; Peet, Robbins, and Watts, *Global Political Ecology*; Forsyth, *Critical Political Ecology*.

³⁶³ Nordhaus and Shellenberger *Death* 9.

³⁶⁴ Id 12.

some environmentalists talk, it is easy to get the feeling that humanity is somehow unnatural, a malign external force acting on the natural biosphere from the outside".³⁶⁵ This, he says, is "wrong": because Humanity is *part* of nature. DeFries makes a similar point: "Human civilization is part of nature, and nature is part of human civilization."³⁶⁶ Marris writes that "Our mistake has been thinking that nature is something "out there," far away".³⁶⁷

The misleading nature of these claims can be made clear with reference back to the different kinds of separation thesis outlined earlier. It is true that the Ecomodernists appear to reject claims about human ontological separation from nature of the kind that appear in Plato and Augustine. They also appear to reject epistemological separation claims (which would involve the assumption that Humanity could achieve "objective knowledge", of the kind that appear in Bacon and Descartes). This, along with many political ecologists, is what it meant by the claim that "Humanity is part of nature". But being "part of nature" in ontological or epistemological terms does not preclude the possibility of striving for other kinds of separation.

³⁶⁵ Lynas 32.

³⁶⁶ Defries 7.

³⁶⁷ Marris 6.

Here, in fact, the Ecomodernist project is separatist at its core. The term “decoupling” suggests the appropriate analytical point of entry, because it raises the question: what kinds of logics are necessary to achieve complete or absolute “decoupling”? While rejecting ontological and epistemological separation claims, the Ecomodernists wholeheartedly embrace the idea of nomological separation. This is a separation that is imagined to occur in terms of control, direction, management, predictability, and – crucially – *efficiency*. Shellenberger talks of Humanity’s “emancipation ... from nature” as a “project that ... [has] centrally occupied humanity for thousands of years”.³⁶⁸

This kind of nomological separation takes the idea of nomological separation whose seeds appeared in Kant – the idea that Humanity can establish a realm of laws that are not natural laws and that enable it to create itself – and takes it to an absurd extreme. Not only are humans *autonomous*: they are *so* autonomous, so creative of their own laws and comprehensive of the laws of the systems below themselves, that they can hold themselves completely at arms’ length from nature, and insulate themselves from nature’s impacts, that they become as it were the directors of nature. In this way nature becomes no more than a “rambunctious garden”.³⁶⁹ something like an unruly child (the echoes of Kant seem significant here) that can be disciplined and moulded, but whose occasional outbursts and outpourings

³⁶⁸ Shellenberger and Nordhaus, “Evolve,” 4.

³⁶⁹ Marris.

never offer any significant threat or even cause for mention in the context of a completely decoupled human existence.

This idea of decoupling or separation thus forms the basis for the Ecomodernist political project. Shellenberger and Nordhaus offer a summary: “the solution to the ecological crises wrought by modernity, technology, and progress will be more modernity, technology, and progress”.³⁷⁰ For Marris, “We are already running the whole Earth, whether we admit it or not”.³⁷¹ As such, she says, “to run it consciously and effectively, we must admit our role and even embrace it”.³⁷² Specifically, this involves embracing the idea of Earth as “a global, half-wild rambunctious garden, tended by us”.³⁷³ For Brand, “humanity” is “stuck” in the role of “planet[ary] stewardship”³⁷⁴ – a situation that has arisen or occurred because “humanity’s role has expanded to the point that the entire Earth is our niche”.³⁷⁵

Lynas is perhaps the most explicit: for him, Humanity has become a “God Species”, and the goal is to examine and direct an “Age of Humans”.³⁷⁶ The question in all of this “not whether humans and our civilizations will survive” – but instead one about what “kind of ... planet we

³⁷⁰ Nordhaus and Shellenberger *Long Death* 11..

³⁷¹ Marris 8.

³⁷² Id.

³⁷³ Id.

³⁷⁴ Brand 336.

³⁷⁵ Id.

³⁷⁶ Lynas 4.

will inhabit”.³⁷⁷ This is a paradigm of “waste management”,³⁷⁸ which revolves almost exclusively around “Economic development”.³⁷⁹ It is a future that involves “managing the planet”.³⁸⁰ and the question is reduced to one of whether “humanity [can] manage the planet—and itself—toward this transition to sustainability”.³⁸¹

In a sort of inversion of Kant, the Ecomodernists derive a duty or obligation from this unintended altering: “We’ve forever altered the Earth”, Marris writes, and as such, “we cannot abandon it to a random fate”.³⁸² Instead it is our “our duty” to “manage it” – a task that she says might be “pleasant” or “even joyful”, if only “we embrace it in the right spirit”.³⁸³ For Ellis, similarly, “The Earth we have inherited from our ancestors is now our responsibility”.³⁸⁴ But he is emphatic that “It is not natural limits that will determine whether this planet will sustain a robust measure of its evolutionary inheritance into the future”.³⁸⁵ Natural limits fall away in the face of human technology: and even though “Our powers may yet exceed our ability to manage them”, Ellis is sanguine that “there is no alternative except to shoulder the mantle of planetary stewardship”.³⁸⁶

³⁷⁷ Nordhaus and Shellenberger *Evolve* 7..

³⁷⁸ Shellenberger 70.

³⁷⁹ *Id.*

³⁸⁰ *Id.* 276, caps removed.

³⁸¹ *Id.* 293.

³⁸² Marris 243.

³⁸³ *Id.*

³⁸⁴ Ellis 7.

³⁸⁵ *Id.*

³⁸⁶ *Id.*

In fact, the very idea of natural limits is crippling: to “creat[e] that future will mean going beyond fears of transgressing natural limits and nostalgic hopes of returning to some pastoral or pristine era”, to a project that frames the Anthropocene not as a “crisis”, but instead as a time “ripe with human-directed opportunity”.³⁸⁷In sum, the idea is that Humanity, by virtue of having dominated everything and by virtue of having a capacity to “decouple” itself, has given itself a duty to do this. There is a sort of legalistic idea here too of having *assumed* a duty by virtue of one’s actions. Here we see an interesting combination of the invocation of technological efficacy (as in Bacon) and the idea of duty (as in Kant). We might also read this as a kind of perversion of Aristotelian ideas: not “should implies can” but “can implies must”.

As with the complex relationship to separatism, so too does Ecomodernist work – in particular, Shellenberger’s – demonstrate the paradoxical relation to “religious” approaches³⁸⁸ and ideas that is characteristic of naïve modernism. As already noted, Shellenberger views environmental “rationalists...[as needing] to go beyond rationalism and re-embrace humanism, which affirms humankind’s specialness”. Having emphasised the priority of science against “apocalypticism”, though, he then declares that some sort of religious or

³⁸⁷ Id.

³⁸⁸ Marris 47-8.

crypto-religious approaches will be necessary to maintain this priority: “Attempts to affirm the boundary between science and religion will thus likely not work so long as apocalyptic environmentalists speak to deep human needs for meaning and purpose and environmental rationalists don’t”.³⁸⁹ (It is worth noting that in addition to these questions about religiosity and the nature and place of religion, the technologies required appear to keep changing. For Shellenberger it is originally wind and solar; then he turns against these in favour of nuclear; and then he seems to go beyond nuclear to advocate other invasive procedures like GMO.)

Ecomodernist writers and thinkers, as scientists, might respond to these claims by asserting that their use of the terms “humanity” and “decoupling” are merely turns of phrase.

Humanity on this view might be said to be simply a synonym for “the human species”; and decoupling might be said to be simply a term that specifies a particular quantitative understanding of the relationship between impacts and regenerative or other capacities.

More simply, this is the – modernist – claim that the terms are both anhistorical and apolitical.

My response, grounded in the discourse-analytical approach I have taken here, would be to say that this is not plausible. Ecomodernist writers at various places make clear that their projects are explicitly political (Shellenberger, as Kallis and Bliss note, ran for Governor of

³⁸⁹ Shellenberger 270.

the US State of California³⁹⁰). Their work also demonstrates clear understandings of the connotations, and not merely the denotations, of the various terms in their work. These are the “thick” or “thicker” senses of phrases and terms that have been addressed at great length by various philosophers and theorists of meaning and reference.

In sum: Ecomodernists imagine Humanity as a unified agent, capable of acting independently of any of the human beings that make it up, in not only moral but geological domains. They purport to reject separatist theses, but only in order to advance what is ultimately both a more subtle and wide-ranging but also more pernicious conception of nomological separation, according to which Humanity’s technology can become so powerful that it can, in effect, hold nature entirely at arms’ length, and direct its activities in ways that respond entirely and exclusively to human priorities and insulate human lives and livelihoods from “natural” impacts of all kinds.

1.4. Chapter Conclusion.

In this chapter I have offered a selective genealogy of two conceits – fictions – that I take to be central to Ecomodernist work: the fiction of Humanity; and the fiction of separation from

³⁹⁰ Kallis and Bliss, “Post-Environmentalism.”

nature. I have aimed to show, through a limited set of examples, how both have evolved in particular directions in response to one another, their own internal tensions, and developments in the world. I aimed to show how the concept of Humanity emerged first as a passive object or receptacle (in Augustine), before showing how it came to serve as a subject or focus of human action (as in Bacon and Descartes), and then an agent of history (in Kant), with the latter being the idea that is radicalised in the work of the Ecomodernists (and others who write in various ways on the Anthropocene). More fundamentally for my following argument, I have aimed to show how the idea of separation from nature can take several forms. It might be an ontological claim, as in Plato and Augustine; an epistemological claim, as in Bacon and Descartes; or a nomological claim of some variation, as in Kant and as in the Ecomodernists.

In the next chapter, I turn to the central question that I think emerges from this history. Given that they are incoherent, and antithetical to the rationalistic spirit of contemporary science, why do ideas about “separation” from nature continue to emerge and re-emerge so stubbornly?

Chapter 2: an analysis of human separatism

*where shall we find a good charmer for these fears, Socrates, he said,
now that you are leaving us?*

- Plato, *Phaedo*

*his haste was not due to ambition but to anxiety; if in the human way
of things, anything should happen to him, there would still be extant
an outline and plan of the thing which he had conceived in his mind.*

- Bacon, *Novum Organon*

*he discovered in himself a capacity to choose a way of life for himself
and not, as other animals, to be bound to a single one. The
momentary delight caused by his noticing this advantage must have
been followed by anxiety and fear... He stood at the edge of an abyss.*

- Kant, *Conjectural Beginning of Human History*

2.0 Chapter Introduction.

In the last chapter I made my case that the European philosophical tradition plays host to a phenomenon I called human separatism, which is defined by its embrace of what I called the separation thesis. In this chapter I hope to analyse this phenomenon in more detail. I do this with a view to exploring what will be required to overcome it.

Let me first recap the history I offered in chapter 1. According to the separation thesis, human beings or “Humanity” can and should achieve true freedom by “separating” from nature. They are supposed to be able to do this by using some capacity or feature that is imagined as distinctive in or exceptional to them.

This thesis has a series of different incarnations, which we can link in an intellectually productive way with different periods of European philosophical history. It has an ontological version, which I detected in the work of Plato and Augustine; an epistemological version, which I detected in the work of Bacon and Descartes; and a nomological version, which I detected in the work of Kant.

To imagine ontological separation is to imagine that human beings can and should enter another realm of existence (the realm of Forms, the City of God) as a result of their rational or intellectual capacities. To imagine epistemological separation is to imagine that human beings can and should flesh out an “objective” or God’s-eye view of nature as a result of these same capacities. And to imagine nomological separation is to imagine that human beings can and should remove themselves from the “jurisdiction of nature” by developing their *own* technology and laws, which are imagined to somehow insulate them from the laws of nature; annul or suspend the laws of nature; or even supersede or eliminate the laws of nature altogether.

My goal in offering this history was twofold. First, I wanted to show how the blurring of claims about human distinctiveness with claims about human separation have been a feature of European philosophy from its beginning. Second, I wanted to show how – on this basis – contemporary separatist projects that might otherwise seem “new” or “innovative” are no more than crude revivals and intensifications of a fallacy that has been in currency for more than two millennia.

In this second chapter, I offer a deeper analysis of this phenomenon of human separatism. My starting-point is this: the concept of “separation from nature” is a paradox. Rationally speaking, it is incoherent. And yet it has: (a) persisted through seismic changes in

philosophy and culture; (b) proven immensely resilient to critique; and (c) continued to intensify in scope and power into the present.¹ This paradox merits understanding and explanation.

The explanation I offer here is the following one. Human separatism has survived because it responds effectively – perversely, but effectively – to our terror of finitude and death. It offers a theory of human nature that salves this terror in what we might call the “perpetual short term”: the temporality of anxiety, in which the past and future disappears. Human separatism is narrative in structure, “time-making” in capacity, and anxiolytic in function. In the short-term, it achieves its end – soothing terror – with stunning effectiveness. The problem, of course, is that politics and sustainability are not simply a matter of the short term. And human separatism represents a profound example of a short-term “solution” to a problem which, applied repeatedly over the long term, becomes destructive in the extreme.

The chapter has the following structure. In section 1, I explain why the separation thesis is incoherent. In section 2 I analyse its persistence. In section 3 I examine its resilience. And in section 4 I describe its intensification. I conclude with a summary and some notes on next steps.

¹ Anderson’s observations about the “paradoxes” of nationalism are an inspiration here: Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 5.

2.1. Human separatism is incoherent.

As an imaginary, human separatism is incoherent. This is because the central concept upon which it depends – the concept of “separation” from nature – is incoherent.² It is not possible (I want to suggest) for us to form a clear mental picture of what “separation” would mean for human beings *in practice*: that is, beyond the bare assertion that a state of separation could exist). As such, it is not possible to imagine a future in which human beings, the human species, or Humanity, is “separate” from nature, and it is not possible to bring such a future about. We cannot offer an account of what such “separation” would consist in, I have suggested, without resorting to metaphorical language of a sort that ultimately raises more questions than it answers.

In the context of the modern, nomological conception of separation, this incoherence be demonstrated via a sort of *reductio ad absurdum*. I proposed in chapter 1 that this conception of separation imagines “nature” as a realm: one that is isomorphic with the realm of necessity. And it imagines “Humanity” as a second realm (or as the creator of a second realm): one that is isomorphic with the realm of freedom.

² My discussion here owes a good deal to Martin Hägglund’s discussions in Hägglund, *This Life*.

The claim that Humanity can separate itself from nature thus amounts to the claim that the realm of freedom can be separated from the realm of necessity, and that the jurisdiction or scope of the former can be expanded until it is infinite or absolute: until it displaces or eliminates the realm of necessity entirely, either in actuality or for all practical purposes. This is tantamount to claiming that the realm of necessity is itself unnecessary, and that its contingency can be revealed and then made actual by human effort. (Specifically, via the operation of “technologies” whose necessity-transcending power can never be adequately explained). But the nature of such a state of affairs cannot be intelligibly specified.

Imagining the realms of necessity and freedom in a coherent way requires acknowledging that the latter is supervenient upon the former. A supervenience relationship is one in which a particular fact is “entailed by or consequent on the establishment or existence of another”.³ The existence of the realm of freedom depends upon the existence of the realm of necessity. There must exist a realm of necessity for it to make sense that a realm of freedom can exist. The realm of necessity is not merely a “limit” on the realm of freedom that can be rendered accidental or contingent; it is an *enabling constraint* for that realm to exist and persist in the first place. Eliminating the realm of necessity would have the effect of eliminating the realm of freedom, because freedom is a concept that only makes sense when set against the

³ “Supervenience.” For more on the ins and outs of the topic, see also McLaughlin and Bennett, “Supervenience.”

concept of necessity. By the same logic, eliminating the realm of “nature” would have the effect of eliminating the realm of humans.

I want to propose that this incoherence claim is stronger than two other, weaker claims with which it is easily confused. These are the claims that:

1. A world of absolute or infinite freedom – separation from nature – is *impractical* (difficult to achieve, but feasible).
2. A world of absolute or infinite freedom – separation from nature – is *impossible* (not achievable, but useful as a sort of orienting dream or regulative ideal).

These claims are weaker because they continue to admit the possibility that the concept of “infinite freedom” or “separation from nature” makes sense. The claim that this idea is itself incoherent should be understood to defeat these other two claims.

The consequence of this incoherence is that the separation thesis should be inadmissible in any argument that purports to rely on reason to imagine the future. This is a fundamental premise of Enlightenment thought. If incoherent concepts are nonetheless used as linchpins in thinking, they hasten reason along its passage towards what Adorno and Horkheimer

called the “Dialectic of Enlightenment”,⁴ turning it into a self-destructive and totalitarian caricature of itself.

2.2 Human separatism is persistent.

Granting my argument in Section 1 leads to our paradox. Human separatism is incoherent: and yet it has persisted over time, and through great changes in philosophy, history, and culture, including the transition from “pre-modernity” into Modernity.

This persistence strongly suggests that it is a response to something that (a) has remained a constant for human beings for the entirety of their existence and (b) is more powerful than calculating reason. The best candidate for this something, and the one that most aptly explains the lengths to which the tradition has gone to preserve its paradoxical desires, is fear of mortality and death.

2.2.1 Human beings are terrified of death.

⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

All of us will die. And this is a fact that we feel intensely at various moments in our lives, and a fact that, for existential psychology (as described below) is something that sits as a constant background to our existence. The importance of this fact has been testified to by its presence in artistic and cultural ritual throughout human history. But it has also been borne out by more recent work in, amongst other fields, the experimental psychological discipline of Terror Management Theory, which I consider in some more detail below.

Death is something that must concern all living creatures.⁵ But the symbolic cognitive capacities, or capacity for *logos* – the very same capacity that the European tradition has held up as the mark of our distinctiveness – enables this terror to feed upon itself in extraordinary ways. The unmotivated nature of the symbols we use often threatens, if we look too closely upon it, to collapse back into arbitrariness. The freedom we enjoy in our imaginations cannot be decoupled from the possibility of madness or chaos that is its monstrous underside or inverse. And when we leave our imaginings behind we return to a world in which there exist constraints on our agency that we will never overcome. The chief

⁵ I intend this claim to be read with the sense Martin Hägglund gives it in Hägglund 2019: that as creatures, phenomenologically speaking, we are practically committed to concern about our own deaths (insofar as, even minimally, we cannot “simply live”, but must take action to sustain our lives – even if this action is as simple as the action of breathing). Importantly, Hägglund uses the term to refer to an *ontological* sense (as opposed to an “ontic” one, to use the Heideggerian distinction), and thus to refer to a condition, not to a factual claim about the actual experience of specific individuals. Couching the claim in this way allows him to avoid critiques which seek to argue, for instance, that some human individuals in fact do not experience such terror (by virtue of being in vegetative states, or etc).

of these constraints is death. This fact haunts us, in the sense that it “follows us around” as a shadow or potential shadow on each moment of our existence.

The anthropologist Ernest Becker has called this condition an “existential paradox”.⁶ We are possessed, he writes, of an “identity”, a “mind that soars, out to speculate about atoms and infinity”, an imagination that can “place [us...] at a point in space” and let us “contemplate [the planet] bemusedly”.⁷ We experience ourselves as capable of “immense expansion, ... dexterity, ... ethereality, ... [and] self-consciousness”: as if we were “small god[s]”.⁸ And yet we are “worm[s] and food for worms”.⁹ Becker’s language in describing this dilemma is reminiscent of the “dark ecology”¹⁰ of writers like Annie Dillard.¹¹ “Man”, he writes,

is out of nature and hopelessly in it; he is dual, up in the stars and yet housed in a heart-pumping, breath-gasping body that once belonged to a fish and still carries the gill-marks to prove it. His body is a material fleshy casing that is alien to him in many ways – the strangest and most repugnant way being that it aches and bleeds and will decay and die. Man is literally split in two: he has an

⁶ Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 26. For more on similar themes, see also Becker, *Birth and Death of Meaning*.

⁷ Id.

⁸ Id.

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ Compare Morton, *Dark Ecology*. “Dark” ecological writers generally assert that they are writing against what they see as the overly rosy picture painted by romantic “deep” ecologists.

¹¹ Compare Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Dillard’s descriptions of the monstrous side of natural creatures is evocating and compelling.

awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever.¹²

This writing shows the hallmarks of the preoccupation with human distinctiveness that runs through the European tradition. It also shows the difficulty of avoiding language that might veer away from distinctiveness and towards “separateness”. The phrases “dual”, “split in two”, and “out of nature” are three examples in this passage. In what follows it should be understood that I am interpreting Becker’s argument exclusively in terms of claims about distinctiveness.

2.2.1.1. This terror of death has multiple layers.

In human beings – again as a result of our capacity for symbolic cognition – this terror encompasses more than merely the terror of one’s own mortality and annihilation as an individual being. It certainly includes this; but it also extends imaginatively and somatically to fears about the death of our whole species, the extinction of life, and the potential foundationlessness of meaning in general. These terrors are nested. This means they can trigger and intensify each other. At the risk of jumping ahead in the story, the present

¹² Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 26.

historical moment is one in which all of these terrors have converged in horrendous and overwhelming ways.

Terror of one's own individual death is an experience that goes beyond, and cannot be captured by, rational or intellectual cognition alone.¹³ It manifests at the level of the organismic body as well as the level of conceptions. With this said, the capacity for symbolic cognition offers new and disturbing ways for it to manifest. Symbolic cognition enables, and perhaps forces, individuals into imagined confrontations with their own eventual nonexistence in the world.¹⁴

Terror of extinction – that is, the death of one's own "kind" – is also likely to be pre-rational. But the capacity for symbolic cognition affords new ways of experiencing this terror, too. Benedict Anderson famously argued for the existence (in the context of nationalist movements) of what he called "imagined communities": fictive groups comprised of individuals who will "never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them", and yet possess – as a result of their imaginative capacities – an "image of their communion".¹⁵

¹³ For overviews that include experimental results, compare Harvell and Nisbett, *Denying Death*; Vess, *Handbook of Terror Management Theory*.

¹⁴ As Karen Armstrong observes, with Sartre: "the imagination is the ability to think of what is not": Armstrong, *The Lost Art of Scripture*. Armstrong is discussing Sartre, *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*.

¹⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

The capacity to imagine oneself as part of a community of “Humanity”, or as part of a species, is an example of this same logic at work. (Though the question of “communion” is more fraught here than in the case of intra-human nationalism, and it is fraught enough there). Along with the capacity to imagine oneself as part of a larger “Humanity” comes the capacity to imagine that larger Humanity itself being destroyed or disappearing. This causes terror.

The same capacity also facilitates terror about the potential extinction of life itself. This is so regardless of one’s views about the distinctiveness or otherwise of human beings. As an added twist, the terror can also manifest in certain individuals as terror of what the philosopher Danielle Celermajer calls “omnicide”:¹⁶ the extinction of life at the hands of human beings.

Fourthly and finally, the human capacity for symbolic cognition also facilitates terror about the potential ungroundedness or indeed nonexistence of meaning in general. This is a fear that philosophers have examined for millennia as part of their investigations into nihilism. In the present age, with its emphasis on the arbitrary and unmotivated nature of symbolic

¹⁶ Celermajer, “Best of 2020.”

cognition and the subsequent weakening of the capacity to maintain faith in the existence of any “objective” meaning, this terror can expand and ramify.

These terrors, as I noted, are interrelated. I fear my own death. But perhaps I am comforted in the face of this fear by the thought that I will live on through either my literal or symbolic “immortality projects” (having children, for instance, or my legacy in creating art, or in setting up a wilderness preservation foundation).¹⁷ Even if I do not feel my own personal immortality projects have been successful, perhaps I will take solace from the fact that Humanity itself will continue. But that comfort too can vanish when I am confronted with the possibility – indeed, the statistical likelihood – that Humanity itself will one day disappear¹⁸. This thought becomes all the more terrifying if I acknowledge the possibility either that the extinction of Humanity might come about as a sort of suicide, and/or that human actions might also destroy all other forms of life as well (as in fears about nuclear war). Perhaps I will then look for solace in the thought that meaning itself might somehow be capable of surviving all these eventualities. But if this comfort is erased – either by (a) the thought that meaning of the kind that matters to me is isomorphic with Humanity and so will die with them; or (b) the thought that meaning is isomorphic with life, which is itself

¹⁷ Compare Harvell and Nisbett, 6-8.

¹⁸ On the basis, most obviously, of the fact that (as Discovery Magazine notes) it is generally “estimate[d] that somewhere around 99 percent” of all once-existent species have now become extinct: Hamer, “99 Percent Of The Earth’s Species Are Extinct—But That’s Not The Worst Of It.”

in danger of disappearing; or (c) the thought that meaning itself is illusory or permanently groundless – I am thrown back into the depths of my confrontation with death, finitude, powerlessness, and meaninglessness.

In sum: human existence is anxietytic. In Becker's words, it presents "a terrifying dilemma to be in and to have to live with".¹⁹ The world "piles up" on humans and they "pil[e] up" on themselves.²⁰ Death "haunts" every moment of their action and experience.²¹ In William James' memorable phrase, is the "worm at the core" of life itself.²²

2.2.1.2. This terror of death is more powerful than reason.

Emotional and affective concerns, if they are strong enough, are capable of overriding reason.²³ Terror of death is perhaps the strongest possible emotional and affective concern.

This is true in both an evolutionary sense and a somatic one.

Philosophy in the European tradition has been aware of this fact, and concerned about it, from its beginnings. In particular it has been concerned about the ways in which

¹⁹ Becker 26.

²⁰ Id 28.

²¹ Id ix.

²² Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core*. Quoting James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

²³ Compare Damasio, *Descartes' Error*. Damasio offers experimental evidence against Descartes' conclusions.

overwhelming emotion is capable of becoming destructive and self-destructive, both at an individual level (in those people who are perceived to let their appetites rule their decisions) and at a collective one (in those societies which permit themselves to be ruled by the “mob”). In many instances this eventuality has been framed as a betrayal or repudiation of what it means to be human as such. The sustained emphasis on the capacity for symbolic cognition as the mark of human distinctiveness makes clear why this is so. Language, reason, and the growth into both has been associated in the tradition with individuation and individuality per se, such that its abdication or abandonment can be imagined as itself a kind of death or self-annihilation.

To be clear: this is not the claim that the inevitability and/or potential benefit of emotion has been neglected within the dominant strands of the European tradition. A good deal of thought has been devoted to both (a) the need in practice to find ways to engage skilfully with emotion (assuming one grants, even if reluctantly, that it is unlikely ever to disappear completely from the theatre of human existence); and (b) the outright benefits of cultivating, referring to, or engaging with certain emotions in particular forms, in both individual and collective contexts.

Despite these counter-strands, however, the dominant imaginary in the European tradition has proposed that society must provide training to strengthen reason so that this balance is

shifted – and, ideally, reversed. Plato’s metaphor of the charioteer and his unruly horses (*Phaedrus* 246a-254e) is a clear early example. This emphasis on the strengthening of reason in directions that will override emotion is evident in the work of both Bacon and Descartes, and reaches an apex of sorts in the Enlightenment emphasis on absolute reason as capable of solving most or all problems. This line of thought has been critiqued both “from the left”, by the Frankfurt School and its descendants, and “from the right”, by Burkean conservatives and theirs.

This emphasis on the use of reason to suppress, overwhelm, or eliminate emotion has been the subject of sustained critique from many directions. In the present context, three critiques are worth mentioning. The first line of critique holds that, certainly as a matter of contingent history but perhaps also as a matter of logical necessity (once the reason-emotion binary is introduced), reason tends to become correlated with masculinity and/or whiteness (in the context of intra-human relationships), and humanness (in the context of human-animal and human-nature relationships), and thus becomes used to denigrate, dominate and discipline humans, non-humans and others who are viewed either as having weak or defective reasoning capacities (such that they cannot override emotion) or as having no reasoning capacities whatsoever. Powerful examples of this line of critique can be found in

the work of feminist and ecological feminist thinkers in particular: Genevieve Lloyd, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Val Plumwood are three prominent examples.²⁴

The second line of critique holds that this focus on the potentially self-destructive nature of emotion is misguided, because reason possesses within it precisely the same capacity for self-destruction. One powerful example of this tradition is the work of the critical theorists emerging with and descending from the Frankfurt School. In the wake of the Second World War in particular, but via a line of thinking that can be traced back to at least the Counter-reactionaries to the French Enlightenment (like Burke²⁵) and likely further, these thinkers made the case for reason unbound as tending towards precisely the same self-immolation feared of emotion – and ultimately, via its association with absolutizing and bureaucratic rationality (as analysed by Weber²⁶), culminating in “triumphant calamity”.²⁷

The third line of critique has emerged out of the work of a set of neuropsychologists and others over the last twenty to thirty years. It is perhaps less usefully described as a critique and more usefully as a reframing. On this reframing, which draws heavily from evolutionary-biological and evolutionary-psychological approaches to human cognition, emotion is an

²⁴ Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*; Ruether, “Ecofeminism”; Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*.

²⁵ Burke et al., *Revolutionary Writings*.

²⁶ Weber, *Economy and Society*.

²⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1.

evolutionary adaptation, and, as such, a non-negotiable feature of the human condition. The work of Antonio Damasio, Ian McGilchrist, Franz de Waal and others investigates the ways in which it is a function both of the bicameral brain (considered synchronically) and what Paul McLean (controversially) dubbed the “triune” or tripartite brain (considered diachronically).²⁸ This leads them to suggest that it is both interwoven with and often insurmountably capable of overriding reason in particular circumstances and configurations.

From the perspective of this chapter, the central point emerges from a synthesis of these three critiques. The matter at issue is not intellectual or rational – or not only intellectual or rational – but embodied and emotional. This is inevitable, and under the right conditions, it becomes debilitating.

2.2.2. Theories of human nature are a response to this terror of death.

It is plausible that existential terror has existed for as long as human beings have had the kinds of capacities for symbolic cognition that we now associate with their (our)

²⁸ For a deeper dive on these themes, see Damasio, *Descartes' Error*; Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*; McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary*; Waal et al., *Primates and Philosophers*; Waal, *Good Natured*. The “triune brain” narrative, which frames the brain as a combination of “reptilian”, “limbic” and “neocortical” elements, is increasingly criticised as overly simplistic, although the idea that the brain has evolved is of course not controversial, and the interaction of these various brain regions remains the subject of intense study. Compare “Triune Brain - an Overview | ScienceDirect Topics.” and Yale Medicine Magazine Staff, “A Theory Abandoned but Still Compelling.”

distinctiveness. And they – “we” – have developed many different tools for engaging with it. For the purposes of the present argument, the most relevant such tools can be found in the world’s various theories of human nature. These theories form the bedrock of a great deal of thought in both “Western” and non-Western traditions.

Stevenson et al note that these theories tend to have four elements. As they put it:

a “theory of human nature” [in the wide sense] encompasses the following:

1. a background metaphysical understanding of the universe and humanity’s place in it;
2. a theory of human nature in the more specific sense of a distinctive set of claims about human beings, human society, and the human condition;
3. a diagnosis of some typical defect, what tends to go wrong in human life and society;
4. a prescription for correcting what goes wrong and an ideal for how human life should best be lived.²⁹

²⁹ Stevenson et al., *Thirteen Theories of Human Nature*, 1–2.

This summary suggests the three features of theories of human nature that I use to structure my analysis in the rest of this chapter. *Theories of human nature are (a) narrative in structure; (b) “time-making” in capacity; and (c) anxiolytic in function.* I will consider each of these points generally before exploring how they apply to human separatism – and, more specifically, identifying how they explain its persistence, its resilience, and its intensification.

2.2.2.1 Theories of human nature are narrative in structure.

Theories of human nature are narratives. In simpler terms: they are stories. This is not all they are, and it is not the only way to construe them. But it is a useful way to construe them, especially for the present argument.

In making this claim, my goal is not to enter the kinds of analytic debates about the necessary and sufficient conditions for an account of events or of facts to constitute a story that have dominated much of the literature on the topic.³⁰ Nor is it my intention to make a factual historical claim about the relation between the evolution of theories of human nature and the evolution of story structure, or to claim that stories are inherently noble or dignified, or alternatively inherently simplistic or foolish, as a cultural mode of communication and

³⁰ For some useful lists of such references, see: Kroon and Voltolini, “Fiction”; “Literary Theory | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy”; Rivkin and Ryan, *Literary Theory*. E.M. Forster’s work is considered a classic, and Dorrit Cohn’s offers another useful perspective: Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*; Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction*.

meaning-making. I simply propose the four elements of theories of human nature outlined by Stevenson et al can be easily and usefully transposed onto descriptions of the “building-blocks” of narrative – setting, character, structure and plot – as they have been discussed by theorists and practitioners of storytelling for many years.³¹ This transposition appears in the following way.

1. The account of the world and its “background metaphysics” offered by a theory of human nature establishes a *setting*: describing the rules of the story-world, or the logic of the world in which the narrative is to take place.
2. The account of human distinctiveness in that world establishes a *character* (or characters): human beings, imagined as either protagonists or antagonists.
3. The account of the “wrongness” in the world and its origin offers a *structure*: a focal point around which the action of the narrative is able to revolve.

³¹ Examples include: Copley, *Narrative*; Fink, *Dramatic Story Structure*; Yorke, *Into the Woods*, 2013; Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*; Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey*.

4. The explanation of how this wrongness can be fixed, and what the world will look like when it is, offers a *plot*: a path or journey towards an obvious, satisfying and compelling “end” or destination.

In line with the argument I made in chapter 1, it is worth noting that the blurring of descriptive and normative elements in these narratives occurs very easily, and often more or less invisibly. Narratives are not simply a description of reality – though they may present themselves as such – but are instead value-laden and normative. In the context of theories/narratives of human nature in particular, they are geared and/or have evolved towards providing meaning and structure, and a framework within which to make ethical decisions and resolve political disputes. Put another way, the “descriptive” elements of their framing work in the service of their normative goals, and are often influenced by them.

In the terms used above: (1) and (2), or the account of human distinctiveness set against a general background cosmology, are generally presented in such theories as if they are simply straightforward, value-free claims about what is. Really, though, even these are normative.

This is true in two senses. They are normative in the minimal sense that they specify a framework or schema that creates path dependencies for subsequent arguments or plots. But they are also normative in the stronger sense that they are value-laden, selecting and emphasising one perspective on the world which implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) de-

prioritises or denigrates others. Plato's ontologically dualist Theory of Forms is a powerful example: it serves as his "background metaphysical understanding", but is also used by many (including Plato himself) as a cudgel to criticise other approaches and theories, like Heracliteanism.

Even if (1) and (2) are construed as more descriptive than I construe them here, (3) and (4) are explicitly normative. They move beyond simply describing or purporting to describe or imagine the world, and humans within the world, to diagnosing a problem and proposing a solution. The diagnosis of problems or defects is straightforwardly evaluative. It is also normative in that it suggests the space of possibilities for the prescriptions or remedies that humans might strive for. It is useful here to distinguish between the prescription a theory of human nature offers (the claims it makes about the course of action that should be taken to respond to the defect or problem it has established) and the prognosis it suggests, or the claims it makes about what will change or what kind of world will come into being if these actions are taken successfully.

These elements have evolved to be closely related. The prescription flows from the diagnosis, which is linked to the distinctiveness claims, which emerge against the background assumptions. This is true of both the elements of theories of human nature and accounts of the building-blocks of narrative.

2.2.2.2 Theories of human nature “make time”.

As well as – and in fact, because of – their being narrative in structure, theories of human nature make time. More precisely, they partake of (or better, set up and then exploit, or at least partake of) *narrative* time and temporality.³² This capacity of narrative is once again linked to and stems from the facilities afforded to human beings by their capacity for symbolic cognition and language.

Two key features of this cognition are its modality and its “time-travelling” capacity.³³ These have been studied from many directions. Narrative time, and the creation and operation of temporality in narrative, have also been studied from many directions. In their entirety, these two inquiries go beyond the scope of my argument here. I therefore limit myself to explaining what it means to say that theories of human nature “make time”, and identifying three implications of this fact.

³² The phenomenon of narrative time has been studied from many directions. Some examples include Clandinin, *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry*; Ames, *Time in Television Narrative*; Straub, *Narration, Identity, and Historical Consciousness*; Currie, *Unexpected*; Caplan, *How Strange the Change*; Tymieniecka, *Temporality in Life As Seen Through Literature*.

³³ Suddendorf and Corballis, “Mental Time Travel and the Evolution of the Human Mind”; Michaelian, *Mental Time Travel*; D’Argembeau and Van der Linden, “Emotional Aspects of Mental Time Travel.”

The phrase “make time” can have many interpretations. For my purposes I use it in three ways. Theories of human nature “make time” in three ways. First, simply by their telling, they create narrative time: an imagined reality that can be, but is never necessarily, isomorphic with “real time” as it occurs in the world. This also gives them a great facility to *shift* their relationship to that “real” temporality, often without being explicit that they are doing so. This feature turns out to be immensely important for their resilience, as I will discuss below.

Second, theories of human nature “make time” by presenting this time that they create as (somewhat paradoxically) “timeless”, or “outside of time”. They tend to be imagined and related as if they are permanent: as if their four elements have always been the way they are, and will continue to be this way into the future. The cosmos will continue to be the cosmos; that which makes humans distinctive will remain the same over time; the problems caused by this distinctiveness or by the world will equally remain the same across time, and so will the solution. This is related to the invocation of “perennial questions” in philosophy, with all its pros and cons, and functions to create both continuity and a temporal space within which to understand and imagine or forecast development or evolution.

Third, theories of human nature “make time” in the sense that they create a structure within which it is possible to allocate and/or defer questions, explanations and possibilities, and

thus “make time” in the sense of “making time *for*” or “making time *to*”. This leads directly into the discussion of their anxiolytic or palliative function, which I turn to now.

2.2.2.3 Theories of human nature are anxiolytic in function.

With this understanding of theories of human nature as both narrative and normative, it becomes possible to better understand their anxiolytic function, and the way in which they discharge or fail to discharge it. In the face of existential terror, theories of human nature offer a time-tested means to make sense of the world. The cosmology they offer provides a starting-point: a paradigm that already serves to “frame and tame” the chaos of existence, by positing an order to which subsequent parts of the theory, or elements of the narrative, will be obliged to comply.³⁴ The sense of specialness/distinctiveness – or “main-characteriness” – next, offers a felt sense of agency and possibility, both of which are essential to human psychological wellbeing. According to such theories, human beings are not simply entities in a world: we are *distinctive*. We have certain powers and capacities that lead us to “stand out” against the general cosmological background. The diagnosis or account of problems provides a focal point for questions about action. The goal or end suggested by this diagnosis, finally, offers telos or endpoint for that action focal point for

³⁴ Compare Thomas Kuhn’s distinction between “normal” and “revolutionary” science in Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

action and reflection. Taken together, these things provide a way to make sense of existential terror, attack it, and/or keep it at bay.³⁵

The relatively new field of “evolutionary literary theory” (which is also sometimes referred to as “literary Darwinism”, or “evolutionary criticism”) as developed in the work of thinkers like Joseph Carroll, reads narratives through an evolutionary lens.³⁶ Work in this field has made the argument for interpreting the presence (and indeed, the centrality) of narratives in human culture as an evolutionary adaptation.³⁷ This suggests not only that theories/stories have functions, but also that those theories/stories that perform their functions well are apt to be selected for over and over as humans move through evolutionary-cultural time.³⁸ Inversely, it suggests that those theories/stories that have persisted over time must have features which have enabled them to “out-compete” others that either did not perform the relevant functions, or performed them less effectively. It also suggests that such persistent theories/stories are likely, as it were, to have been honed to maximum effectiveness. This or

³⁵ Compare again Vess, as well as Harvell and Nisbett.

³⁶ Carroll's work includes Carroll, *Evolution and Literary Theory*; Carroll, *Literary Darwinism*; Boyd, Carroll, and Gottschall, *Evolution, Literature, and Film*. Other relevant work includes Saul and James, *The Evolution of Literature*; Easterlin, *A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory and Interpretation*; Boyd, Carroll, and Gottschall, *Evolution, Literature, and Film*; Gottschall and Wilson, *The Literary Animal*; Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories*; Cooke and Vanderbeke, *Evolution and Popular Narrative*.

³⁷ See, e.g., Austin, *Useful Fictions*.

³⁸ Id.

a similar point has been made in the observations of some writers on archetypal narratives like folkloric stories and fairytales.³⁹

This argument has several disturbing implications. Most relevantly in the present context, it suggests that the persistence of theories/stories depends more forcefully on whether they alleviate anxiety than whether they are “true”, or even intelligible.⁴⁰ This is an especial problem when the theories/stories in question are not, or not only, entertainments or distractions, but when they become culturally central: when they come to inform not only the orientation of particular individuals to the world, but the orientation of cultures in general. It is here that the discussion returns to human separatism.

2.2.3 Human separatism is a theory of human nature.

I am now in a position to make my central descriptive claim about the phenomenon of human separatism. In short: it is a narrative theory of human nature that is both time-making and anxiolytic.

³⁹ Compare Mircea Eliade's and Bruno Bettelheim's psychoanalytically-influenced discussions in Eliade, *Cosmos and History*; Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*; Franz, *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales*. On folklore generally see McCormick and White, *Folklore*; Bronner, *Folklore*.

⁴⁰ Austin, *Useful Fictions*.

2.2.3.1 Human separatism possesses the elements of theories/narratives of human nature.

These elements can be summarised in line with the four-part rubrics of both theories of human nature and of narrative, as these correlate with one another.

1. Account of the world/setting and story rules: Reality has, or can have, two places/spaces/realms.
2. Account of human distinctiveness/central characters: Humans are distinctive because we are the only creatures that can access (pre-modern and early modern separatism) or create (modern separatism) the second of these places/spaces/realms.
3. Account of problem/narrative structure and drive: we have not yet fulfilled or completed this task (indeed, this purpose). As such we are hostages to the whims of the first place/space/realm.
4. Account of solution/plot and teleology: we must find a way to live permanently in the second place/space/realm and so “separate” forever from the first one.

2.2.3.2 Human separatism soothes existential terror.

I am also now in a position to answer the question that has framed this section. Human separatism has persisted because it responds to emotional impulses that are stronger than, or capable of outweighing, rational thought. The most significant of these is existential terror. Human separatism serves as an effective salve for this terror. This has led it to be selected for repeatedly over cultural-evolutionary time.

I have now addressed the first part of the paradox of human separatism that I identified in the Introduction to this chapter. I have not yet addressed the second and third parts of that paradox: its resilience and its intensification. Understanding human separatism as a narrative theory of human nature, and one which is both time-making and anxiolytic, also offers intellectual resources for understanding these paradoxes. It is to these that I now turn.

2.2.4 Section summary.

In this section I have analysed the persistence of the separation thesis. I have argued that this persistence can be explained by the fact that it is a response to existential terror, which is itself a permanent feature of the human condition. Human separatism has proven itself

capable of being repeatedly available or at hand in response to this persistent fear, and has thus itself persisted over otherwise momentous changes in philosophy and culture.

I turn now from considering the persistence of the thesis to considering its resilience.

2.3 Human separatism is resilient.

In addition to being persistent, human separatism is resilient. By this I mean that, in addition to reappearing over time, it has shown itself capable of combating, defusing or avoiding many of the critiques that have appeared against it. Human separatism may have a “venerable” pedigree, but its critics do too, whether or not they frame their criticisms in these terms (that is, whether they argue against the position I have labelled human separatism, or some other, similar position). This resilience warrants its own explanation.

In this section, I propose to address it through the prism of the three features of theories of human nature I identified above. As a reminder, these were: (1) narrative structure; (2) time-making capacity; and (3) anxiolytic function.

2.3.1 The narrative structure of human separatism contributes to its resilience.

Both philosophy and science have long focussed on the development of reason, and the capacities of inquiry to identify and resolve problems by rational means. By “reason”, here, I mean broadly the capacity that human beings have to think through experiences and problems in certain kinds of repetitive, logical and consistent ways. Narratives, though, are both older than and “adjacent to” this human capacity for reason. This gives them the capacity to elude or blunt the tools of rational critique.

In this subsection I will consider three, with respect to human separatism in particular – falsifiability, reductionism, and induction.

2.3.1.1 Human separatism cannot be falsified.

Falsification is a first key tool of reason to which human separatism is immune. To be falsifiable, a proposition, hypothesis, or argument must be capable of being disproved, via

the production of contrary evidence. This is Karl Popper's famous definition of what it means for a proposition, hypothesis or argument to be "scientific".⁴¹

Human separatism is unfalsifiable because it makes untestable metaphysical assumptions that cannot be made testable. It is unfalsifiable because it makes claims about the future, which tend to be viewed as unfalsifiable by definition.⁴² And it is unfalsifiable because it imagines a world that is in important ways adjacent to, but not isomorphic with, our own.

All of these capacities of human separatism grow out of the capacities of narrative, which – again – grow out of the broader human capacity for imagination, which is itself rooted in and facilitated by symbolic cognition. This is yet another example of the complex interplay between the activities of imagination and the capacities of human beings that the European tradition has held up as evidence of their distinctiveness.

2.3.1.2 Human separatism is difficult to challenge using reductionism.

⁴¹ Popper's most famous statement comes in Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*; Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. Note that Popper's work is not without its critics: a discussion appears in Thornton, "Karl Popper."

⁴² The literature, and particularly the philosophical literature, on modality, conditionals, the truth of future tense statements, fictionalism, etc., goes beyond my focus here. For some introductions see the resources available in Øhrstrøm and Hasle, "Future Contingents"; Garson, "Modal Logic"; Kment, "Varieties of Modality"; Eklund, "Fictionalism."

Reductionism is a second key tool of reason to which human separatism is immune.

Reductionism involves isolating the component parts of an entity or phenomenon under consideration, and then investigating or undermining them individually, until the entire entity is reinforced or undermined.

This tactic is difficult to use with respect to human separatism because – as a narrative – its various “elements” are intertwined. They are difficult to isolate in non-arbitrary ways. They also tend to be mutually reinforcing, such that the dismantling of one element will be compensated for, so to speak, by the strengthening of another. (Here again the “immune response” analogy is close at hand.) The “descriptive” account of the world/setting and story rules, and the account of human distinctiveness/central characters, flow smoothly into the normative account of problem/narrative structure and drive and the account of solution/plot and teleology that the theory/narrative provides.

Put another way, the structure of human separatism enables it to demand the “suspension of disbelief” that characterises a great many famous and compelling narratives.⁴³ But this gives it a holistic coherence and an internal logic that makes it difficult to challenge. Even immanent critiques, which proceed by “accepting” the rules of the theory/narrative world in

⁴³ The phrase is Coleridge’s (from Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*.): but the concept goes back to Aristotle’s *On Poetics*. I’ll discuss this text at greater length in chapter 4.

order to show how they fail by their own criteria, are difficult to deploy against human separatist thinking. This is because accepting the premises entails accepting that the very idea of separation from nature is intelligible or coherent, after which critiques about “practicality” and “possibility” are merely frittering around the edges.

2.3.1.3 Human separatism actively exploits the limits of induction.

Induction is a third key tool of reason to which human separatism is immune. In fact, human separatism *exploits* the limits of induction as a method of rational argument, even as it tends to disguise this move behind various ingenious plot twists and premises.

To reason inductively is to select specific instances of some phenomenon and then extrapolate to general conclusions. It is immensely useful as a practical tool for day-to-day, real world engagement. But it has significant limitations. These limitations arise because (i) the future is uncertain; (ii) inductive extrapolations are in many cases misleading at scale; and (iii) human beings and other living creatures tend, wrongly, to overestimate the strength of the trends they identify as a result of inductive processes.

Taken together, these limitations give rise to what philosophers have called “Hume’s problem”, or “the problem of induction”.⁴⁴ Bertrand Russell provides a clear-eyed overview of its contours in his *Problems of Philosophy*. “The mere fact that something has happened a certain number of times”, as he writes, “causes animals and men to expect that it will happen again”.⁴⁵ The fact of repetition or habit makes it tempting to assume continuance or even lawlike regularity. As an everyday heuristic, this can be very useful. But, as Russell notes, it is also “rather crude”, and “liable to be misleading”.⁴⁶ This is especially true with respect to habits or predictions that relate to large spatial and temporal scales, or relate to low-probability, high-impact scenarios. In Russell’s example, the chicken who sees her farmer approach each morning with a bucket of spinach will come to treat his appearance as a kind of law. *Est agricola, ergo cibus est*. And this will indeed be a kind of law, at least from the perspective of the chicken, who doesn’t have all the information about *why* the farmer is feeding her, until the day he comes down the track without a bucket and everything is different.

Human separatism exploits and distorts the fact that human beings have developed technologies that can be imagined as incomplete or partial “separations from nature”. This can make it tempting to assume the existence of a “law” according to which complete or

⁴⁴ See the resources in Henderson, “The Problem of Induction.”.

⁴⁵ Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, 35.

⁴⁶ *Id.*

absolute separation is simply a matter of continuing in the same basic direction. If an opponent claims that separation from nature is impractical or impossible, human separatists can simply claim that (in the absence of contrary evidence, which is impossible to produce), it is better, more positive, or more productive to proceed on an *as if* basis:⁴⁷ to act according to the belief or hope that separation *is* practical or possible, and see what happens. They can tell a story according to which things that would have seemed impossible to “our” predecessors are now not only possible but banal: like air travel, or the internet. And they can ask whether the proposed impracticality or impossibility is “really” an impracticality or impossibility – whether it is in objective or necessary, permanent and inescapable – or whether it simply *looks* this way, as a matter of accident or circumstance, from the contingent perspective of the present.

In the contemporary context specifically, human separatism in particular can tap into and take advantage of the larger Modern narrative that “progress” depends precisely upon pursuing impossible dreams. In the right circumstances, this converts hubris into a positive. They can claim that keeping the faith was the thing that gave the relevant innovators the energy or drive to continue until the black-swan technology was found. On this narrative,

⁴⁷ On the “philosophy of as if”, see Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of “As If”: A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*.

giving up would represent a betrayal of the strivings of one's intellectual predecessors, or even of one's species.

This larger narrative is deeply woven into Modern philosophy and culture, from Kant's "regulative ideal" to the US Constitution's quest for a "more perfect union".⁴⁸ It makes a virtue of the thought that progress-in-fact depends upon the embrace of a certain kind of faith in the motivating power of progress-as-dream. It can propose that the pursuit of incoherent dreams will, at worst, be harmless. And it can remain unperturbed even if this faith is rationally unreasonable or even absurd.

These, then, are three ways that the narrative structure of human separatism enables it to remain resilient: by blunting and eluding rationalistic critiques.

2.3.2 The time-making capacity of human separatism contributes to its resilience.

The "time-making" capacity of human separatism is a second factor that contributes to its resilience.⁴⁹ This capacity also grows out of human separatism's narrative structure. It is

⁴⁸ Thanks to Ryan Milov-Cordoba for drawing my attention to this example.

⁴⁹ Compare the work of Reinhardt Koselleck: Koselleck, *Futures Past*; Koselleck, *Sediments of Time*; Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History*.

related to the particular, and often peculiar, capacities for modality and “mental time travel” afforded by human imagination and/or symbolic cognition.

In this subsection I consider the effects of this time-making capacity with respect to three dimensions of time: the past, the (narrative) present, and the future.

2.3.2.1 Human separatism exploits the narrative fallacy with respect to past events.

Human separatism develops resilience first by imagining a specific kind of past, and imagining itself in a specific kind of relation to that past. Having identified its narrative drive – the project to achieve or movement towards “completing” separation from nature – it looks backwards into human history, and then selects events and developments which either fit or can be made to fit this narrative. This is a powerful example of what psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky call the “narrative fallacy”: the human tendency to attribute dubious chains of causality and linkage to otherwise unrelated events.⁵⁰ Human separatism assimilates past events of all kinds into its narrative: and in so doing, it establishes an “objective” imaginary timeline and an *ex post facto* justification for its own existence. This, in turn, exploits confirmation bias, and also what Kahneman and Tversky call the

⁵⁰ Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Tversky and Kahneman, “The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice.”

“commitment” and “availability” heuristics, according to which narratives tend to become sticky and memorable events are imagined to be more important, respectively.⁵¹

Three particular examples are instructive: the evolution of language; the emergence of cities; and the development of mechanisms for harnessing nuclear energy. All three have been assimilated to human separatist narratives, even though the justification for imagining any of them as examples of “partial separation” from nature is both speculative and tenuous.

The evolution of language was precisely this, as Terrence Deacon has suggested: an *evolution*.⁵² It is likely to have occurred gradually and as a result of various incremental evolutions that turned out to be adaptive. But – especially mythologised as a single “big bang” event – human separatism can reimagine it as an instance of the world “prompting” humans and/or offering them the tools required to begin the process of separation.

The emergence of cities occurred in response to a wide variety of factors,⁵³ which varied greatly in different spatial and temporal contexts. This, too, is retrospectively reimaged by human separatism as either an instance of further partial “separation”, or as an instance of

⁵¹ Id.

⁵² Deacon, *The Symbolic Species*; Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*. For a variety of perspectives on language evolution, see Tallerman and Gibson, *The Oxford Handbook of Language Evolution*; Fitch, *The Evolution of Language*; Hauser, Chomsky, and Fitch, “The Faculty of Language: What Is It, Who Has It, and How Did It Evolve?”; Berwick and Chomsky, *Why Only Us*; Christiansen and Kirby, *Language Evolution*.

⁵³ See Mumford, *The City in History*; Wilson, *Metropolis*; Scott, *Seeing like a State*; Scott, *Against the Grain*.

separation which, though not evident as such at the time, can be construed in this matter with the benefit of hindsight (which is imagined as “20/20”, or “objective”, as the common saying goes).

The development of mechanisms for harnessing nuclear energy occurred as a result of innovations in pure theory, combined with practical imperatives that were both more immediate in their nature and more “human, all too human” in their focus: namely, the desire to possess overwhelming force capacity to defeat Nazi and allied forces during the Second World War.⁵⁴ Oppenheimer’s invocation of the Bhagavad Gita notwithstanding,⁵⁵ the focus at the time of the emergence of those weapons was explicitly oriented towards a target that was abhorrent and profane.

2.3.2.2 Human separatism creates a “perpetual cliffhanger effect” with respect to the present.

Human separatism develops resilience second by inventing for itself a specific relation to the present. It frames this present as a time in which its goal is forever “about” to be achieved.

⁵⁴ See Kingery, *Nuclear Energy Encyclopedia*; Burns and Siracusa, *A Global History of the Nuclear Arms Race*; Cirincione, *Bomb Scare*; Mahaffey, *Atomic Awakening*; Cooke, *In Mortal Hands*; Reed and Stillman, *The Nuclear Express*.

⁵⁵ *J. Robert Oppenheimer*.

With one more advance in carbon capture technology, one further innovation in supply chains, one last quantum leap or moonshot, “we” can be figured as likely to have achieved our aim. Emerging technologies, problems, and questions can all be interpreted through this lens, and Humanity can be imagined as close – tantalisingly close – to the outcome it has fought so hard for, for so long. This narrative device is widespread across popular science writing which takes a broadly techno-utopian or ecomodernist approach to its subject; in “manifestos” and similar documents that aim to generate interest in broadly separatist political programs. It is also apparent in documents like white papers, which are used to generate interest on the part of those whose capital wealth can be used to finance experimental advances and technologies.

Consider two examples of narratives offered by the Ecomodernist Manifesto that align with this narrative logic. One relates to human population, and the other relates to agriculture. “Today’s population growth rate”, the manifesto’s authors write, “is one percent per year, down from its high point of 2.1 percent in the 1970s”.⁵⁶ This is because nowadays, population growth “is primarily driven by longer life spans and lower infant mortality, not by rising fertility rates”. From this, the authors infer that “it is very possible that the size of the human population will peak this century and then start to decline.”⁵⁷ This concrete example

⁵⁶ Asafu-Adjaye and Blomkvist, *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*, 12.

⁵⁷ *Id.*

represents a particular way of figuring progress in human wellbeing. Once – the narrative goes – the laws of necessity dictated that human life spans be limited to somewhere between twenty and forty years. The advent of modern medical care, however, combined with other improvements in quality of life, has tended to annul the operation of these laws of necessity, with the result that contemporary humans (at least in some parts of the world) are free to live into their seventies, eighties, or even nineties. Increasingly, these innovations include things like organ transplants, stem cell research, and other forms of genetic manipulation, which move beyond slowing the decay of ageing to either arrest it, or potentially reverse it altogether.

The same basic narrative appears in the context of the manifesto's reflections on agricultural productivity. The manifesto's authors write that, along with the "growth of cities [and their] economic and ecological benefits", progress in agricultural technologies "have resulted not only in lower labor requirements per unit of agricultural output but also in lower land requirements": and that, as a consequence, "during the half-century starting in the mid-1960s, the amount of land required for growing crops and animal feed for the average person declined by one-half", and "Human use of many other resources is similarly peaking."⁵⁸ This is of a piece with narratives about the "green revolution" in agriculture,⁵⁹ and the ways in

⁵⁸ Id 13.

⁵⁹ See Kilby, *The Green Revolution*.

which this shifted understandings about the contingent nature of crop yields, soil fertility, and density of nutrient output. Once, on this story, these outputs were limited to particular capacities, in line with the features of particular landscapes and their ecosystems. The advent of nitrogen fertilisers and advanced mechanical and harvesting equipment, however, shifted these limits, radically increasing the productivity of particular portions of land in ways that facilitated much larger harvests and yields, and increased the nutrient density of crops, leading to a capacity to sustain exponentially larger human populations.

The use of this “just around the corner” framing creates what is, in effect, a perpetual cliffhanger effect. This has several consequences. First, it creates a sense of suspense. This facilitates the continued renewal of focus, attention, and interest. Second, it creates a sense of anticipation. This can be delivered upon or withheld according to the need to maintain interest in the narrative more broadly. Third, it creates a sense of frustration. To be “so near, and yet so far” from one’s established aim, and to hang suspended in such an uncomfortable position for so long without resolution or catharsis, serves as a device to exhaust and overwhelm emotional capacities, and create a situation in which the energies and attentions required for reasoned and calculating analysis are either unavailable or otherwise unwelcome. The “time-making” capacity of human separatism thus contributes to its resilience second as it interprets and interferes with the present.

2.3.2.3 Human separatism incessantly rewrites the future.

Human separatism develops resilience third by orienting itself in very specific ways with respect to its imagined futures. In effect, it continually rewrites itself, and in particular seeks to erase its own past and its failed predictions about the achievement of separation, in order to justify the deferral of the future it has promised, but failed to deliver upon. This is a profoundly Modern approach to the future tense, as captured famously in the ending of Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*. There, as the narrator observes, Gatsby "believed" in the "orgiastic future that year by year recedes" before him and the other characters – and, by implication, Modernity more generally. This future, as the narrator suggests, "eluded us then, but that's no matter": because, he writes, "to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther", until "one fine morning –" ...⁶⁰

This perpetual deferral has been critiqued in philosophy and political theory with respect to the infamous "end of history" thesis advanced by thinkers including Francis Fukuyama.⁶¹

Human separatism exploits it especially well by virtue of what is, in effect, a narrative trick.

This narrative trick is most often observed in the rhetoric used by the leaders of cults and

⁶⁰ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 176.

⁶¹ Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*. And see Alabi, *Fukuyama's "End of History"-Thesis*; Hochuli and Hoare, *The End of the End of History*; Hughes, *Liberal Democracy as the End of History*; Welsh, *The Return of History*; Dale, *Hegel, the End of History, and the Future*.

other destructive political organisations whose doomsday dates pass without incident. Harold Camping is an especially notorious user of this narrative technique, having repeatedly “revised up” the predictions about the end of the world he continued to calculate on the basis of biblical numerology. One of his most famous recent predictions asserted that the end of the world would occur on the 21st of May, 2011, which was – he declared – exactly 7,000 years after the Flood that occurred in the Book of Genesis. He then “accounted” for the failure of his prophecy by asserting that he had made a mathematical error, and that fixing the error led him to the revised date of the 11th of October, 2011.⁶² This date was also unblemished by apocalypse. Although Camping’s prophecies are especially easy to mock, the technique is widely deployed in other forms of political discourse. Prominent recent examples include its use as part of Renaud Camus’ white nationalist “Grand Replacement” theory, and its corresponding Anglophone theories about “white genocide”.⁶³

Human separatism exploits the same basic technique to opposite emotional effect. Where the writings of Bookings, R. Camus and others are eschatologically negative, human separatist predictions are “eschatologically positive” or messianic. As the dates of hypothesised separation pass, or the technologies hypothesised as final appear and fail to

⁶² McFadden, “Harold Camping, Dogged Forecaster of the End of the World, Dies at 92.”

⁶³ Camus, *Le grand remplacement*.. For analyses that treat the idea of “white genocide” and other ideas on the contemporary American right, see Hinton, *It Can Happen Here*; Stern, *Proud Boys and the White Ethnostate*; Rodriguez, *White Reconstruction*; Gardell, *Lone Wolf Race Warriors and White Genocide*.

have the separating effect they have been promoted as having, its narrative justifies and rewrites the future (which is now a “past future”⁶⁴) in order to maintain fidelity to the positive emotional heft and appeal of the narrative overall. In the human separatist context it does not matter that this future image is incoherent. Its resolution, once the anxiety is satisfied, can be infinitely deferred until the craving hits again.

The time-making capacity of human separatism thus contributes to its resilience in the affordances it offers human separatist narratives with regard to the past, present, and future.

2.3.3 The anxiolytic function of human separatism contributes to its resilience.

The anxiolytic capacity of human separatism is a third factor that contributes to its resilience. This, too, grows out of its narrative structure.

In this subsection I consider three ways this anxiolytic capacity contributes to the resilience of human separatism: the fact that it works fast; the fact that it “travels light”; and the fact that it offers the fantasy of a total or permanent solution to terror and anxiety.

⁶⁴ Compare again Koselleck, *Futures Past*.

2.3.3.1 Human separatism works fast.

Existential terror – as noted above – is often overwhelming and all-consuming. In the face of such overwhelming anxiety, narratives or other palliatives that work faster are apt to be selected over those that work more slowly.

The narrative that human separatism offers is capable of kicking in extremely fast. This enables it to serve as a sort of life-raft in moments when individuals or societies are confronted and consumed by existential terror. The narrative that Humanity might use technology to decouple from nature is capable of serving as a sort of mantra, to be repeated in the “infinite present” of anxiety, until the anxiety episode passes and the associated feelings are soothed. In the context of such acute episodes, the long-term benefits or detriments of the particular palliative are not considered.

This acute short-term anxiolytic benefit, which can – like other sorts of palliatives – be reached for whenever existential terror strikes, contributes to the narrative’s resilience.

2.3.3.2 Human separatism “travels light”.

In addition to working fast, human separatism “travels light”. Its theoretical and narrative elements are flexible and portable. This means that they can be directed towards, or attached to, whatever manifestation of existential terror happens to be most present or overwhelming at some particular moment.

If existential terror is manifesting at some given moment as a fear related to the instability or groundlessness of meaning, agency or existence in an individual’s own life, human separatism can attach to this fear, and offer visions of a future in which that individual’s own future separation and safety or certainty is assured. If it is manifesting (either in individuals or in societies at large) as a fear related to the instability or groundlessness of meaning, agency or existence at a species level, human separatism can shift to offer a vision of a future in which the separation of the species, even if not its individuals, is assured. If it is manifesting as a fear related to the instability or groundlessness of meaning, agency or existence at the level of life in general, human separatism can similarly attach to this fear, and offer a vision of a world in which life itself is somehow divided and preserved by separation from necessity or nature. And if it is manifesting as a fear related to the instability or groundlessness of meaning, agency or existence *per se*, human separatism can

attach to this fear, and offer a vision of a world or future in which meaning, via separation and agency, becomes permanently or objectively founded and incapable of further disruption.

This portability and malleability is a second way in which its anxiolytic function of human separatism contributes to its resilience.

2.3.3.3 Human separatism promises a total solution.

As well as both working fast and travelling light, human separatism totalises its proffered solutions. It is maximally anxiolytic, because it dangles the possibility of not just a temporary but a permanent exit from the kinds of anxiety that loom so large for human beings.

Separation is, by definition, imagined as a complete or absolute solution to the problems of finitude and mortality. This is true of all its manifestations, which hold “separateness” up – however it is conceived of – as the highest fact or potential achievement of individual and collective human experience. This enables it to outcompete other narratives or palliatives that offer only visions of a provisional or temporary escape from existential terror.

As with fairytales and other simple narratives, the black-and-white nature of this narrative combines with its capacities to work fast and travel light to contribute to its resilience.

2.3.4 Section Summary.

In this Section I have analysed the resilience of human separatism: its capacity to combat, defuse or avoid many of the critiques that have appeared against it. I mounted this analysis through the lens of the three features of theories/narratives of human nature identified in section 1: (1) narrative structure; (2) time-making capacity; and (3) anxiolytic function. I suggested that the narrative structure of human separatism assists it to defeat or exploit the limits that are present in three key tools of reason – falsification, reductionism, and induction. I suggested that its time-making capacity exploits the narrative fallacy with respect to past events, creates a “perpetual cliffhanger effect” with respect to the present, and incessantly rewrites the future to cover its own predictive failures. And I suggested, finally, that its anxiolytic function contributes to its resilience by enabling it to work fast, travel light, and promise complete or permanent solutions to the terror that roils human beings.

In the next section, I consider how these same three features of theories/narratives of human nature not only facilitate the resilience of human separatism, but have also facilitated its intensification into the immensely destructive form it takes at present.

2.4 Human separatism is intensifying.

In addition to persisting over time, human separatism and the separation thesis that drives it have *intensified*. By this I mean that they have become less constrained and more profligate in each of their successive iterations. This intensification has occurred in two dimensions.

The early modern, epistemological version of the separation thesis represents an intensification of the pre-modern, ontological one. And the nomological version of the separation thesis that characterises late Modernity represents a further and yet more virulent intensification. The first of these intensifications has culminated or “finished”. The second is ongoing.

The transition from pre-modern thought into Modernity is well-covered ground in academic philosophy and history. Environmental political theorists have often have interpreted this transition as one that involved or facilitated a change in kind in the capacities of human beings to manipulate and dominate themselves and their surroundings.⁶⁵ This reflects a broader tendency to frame the matter at hand primarily, or even exclusively, in terms of

⁶⁵ See Leiss, *The Domination of Nature*.. Compare also Nash, *The Rights of Nature*; Vanderheiden, *Environmental Political Theory*.

“domination”. This tendency is not limited to environmental political thought, but also appears in (for example) the republican and neorepublican traditions.⁶⁶

I do not disagree, exactly, with this work, or this approach. But I want to propose that it is incomplete and, on its own, insufficient. I have two reasons for this view. First, the view that domination “started” with Modernity is clearly false. Second, and more significantly, one cannot understand *why* this view is false by analysing history in terms of domination alone. There is also a need to understand and analyse the concept of separation.

This thought rests on three claims. First: separation is prior as a matter of logic (though not of practice) to domination. Second: an analysis in terms of separation offers intellectual and practical resources to complement the analysis in terms of domination.⁶⁷ Not only this: it has the potential to place it on a broader and firmer footing, especially in environmentalist contexts, where its political, emotional and intellectual power is at risk of being exhausted. Third: an analysis that proceeds in terms of separation allows us to illuminate not only how and why separation (and domination) were transformed by the transition from pre-modern thought into modernity, but also – and now most pressingly – how they were transformed, and continue to be transformed and intensified, *through the passage of modernity itself*.

⁶⁶ E.g. Pettit, *Republicanism*.

⁶⁷ See Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*; Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*.

To return to the language of chapter 1: a great deal of attention has been paid to the transition between ontological and epistemological conceptions of separation/domination; but nowhere near enough has been paid to the further transition between the epistemological and nomological conceptions, and the intensifications of separatist dreams that this latter-day conception has both empowered and facilitated. To fully understand and respond to this evolution and continuing intensification, we need to have access both to analyses of separation and domination.

I want to acknowledge the risk that these two analyses (of separation and domination) might be construed as reproducing the reason/emotion distinction, either in terms of the concepts being analysed or in terms of the persona or temperament of those doing the analysis. I seek to avoid this. The concepts can and should be analytically distinguished, but with a firm understanding that the goal of this move is cumulative and complementary. The analysis of separation is prior in a logical sense to the analysis of domination, but in historical terms the analyses have been reversed. In the same way, just as I have proposed the analysis of domination offered by much environmental philosophy is incomplete without a preceding analysis of separation, so too is any account of separation, including the one I offer here, inadequate and incomplete without a link, proposed or practised, to the excellent

analyses of domination that have already been completed. The intention is additive, not adversarial.

With this as background, I argue in this section that paying attention to the narrative structure, time-making capacity, and anxiolytic function of human separatism enable us to better understand not only its persistence or resilience, but also how it has intensified, and continues to intensify, as Modernity proceeds.

2.4.1 The narrative structure of human separatism has enabled its intensification.

The narrative structure of human separatism has enabled its intensification in several respects. Here, I consider three: the way human separatism has co-opted developments in philosophy, and specifically Kant's freedom/necessity framework; the way it has co-opted developments in technology, and specifically the move away from material and embodied technologies to technologies of economy and governance; and the way it has co-opted the concept of progress, and incorporated it with skill and zeal. In all cases I seek to emphasise that this intensification did not simply occur during the transition from the premodern to Modern period and then stop. It has continued to change *during* the modern period, and this

change is usefully linked to the shift from epistemological to nomological conceptions of separation.

2.4.1.1 Human separatism has co-opted key resources in Modern philosophy.

Many have noted the philosophical originality and ingenuity of Kantian thinking. What has been less fulsomely commented upon is the way in which the reintroduction of a sophisticated conception of necessity and freedom paved the way for a vision of separation that was at once eminently compelling, fantastically seductive, and immensely difficult to move beyond. I do not claim here that this was or was not Kant's aim, but rather that it is a way in which the concepts he (re)introduced and developed have been used.

Kant's reintroduction and reinterpretation of the themes of necessity and freedom both echoed, but also qualitatively transformed premodern reflections upon the relationship between *physis* and *nomos* that had already appeared in premodern thought. But the move to imagine separation in terms of "realms" – as noted in chapter 1 – combined with the increased focus on the practical and material efficacy of technologies to create the possibility of a thought of a sort of "nomological technology": a capacity to manipulate not merely objects or entities, but laws themselves. This conception of separation was maximally incoherent, but also maximally abstract, in the sense that it obscures the relation between

concepts and materiality, or the ideal and the real. This made it even more capable than prior visions of separation of commandeering the extreme terrors of death and subsequent desires for increased agency and power that flowed underneath Modern philosophy.

Contemporary human separatism hijacks and distorts the freedom/necessity distinction, as I have already noted. It does so by superimposing this distinction onto the Humanity/nature distinction (or perhaps, by doing the reverse), and then using this superimposition to structure its imagining of an incoherent idea of “infinite freedom” that is at once nonsensical and deeply compelling.⁶⁸ This co-optation of Kantian thought must be understood as much more capacious and sophisticated, and thus much more dangerous, than the separatism underpinned by the “merely” epistemological conception of separation in Bacon and Descartes.

2.4.1.2 Human separatism has co-opted Modern developments in technology.

As well as co-opting the philosophical/conceptual resources offered by Kant, human separatism has co-opted developments in material technologies to empower its own increasingly intense narrative heft. First, and most simply, the sheer amount of technology in

⁶⁸ This coexists with fantasies about “abolishing death”, which Becker (1974) remarks upon, as do many others. Martin Hägglund’s more recent discussion is a powerful one: Hägglund, *This Life*.

the world has increased. This much is obvious in the various optimistic writings produced in the aftermath of the Second World War, of which promote the idea of “better living through [X]” (for example, chemistry).

Second, though, the development of increasingly sophisticated and interventionist technologies, their increasingly “magical” character,⁶⁹ and their progressive removal from the sightlines of everyday life, has meant that the fetishisation and “quotidianisation” of separation could be intensified even as its incoherence has been more and more skilfully obscured. Separatism could become something that “we” in general could participate in or aspire to, as opposed to something which needed to be imagined as accessible only to those with specialised forms of intellectual or other training. In combination with the resources offered by Kantian thought, it could be imagined by a far broader range of individuals and organisations as offering abstract, vague and somewhat mysterious “law-altering” capacities, whose value and goal was clear even as their precise workings remained forever shrouded.

This phenomenon continues to occur in the “black-box” writings of those who advocate – for example – for carbon removal technology as a panacea for climate change, while denying, downplaying, or ignoring the many facets of that technology and its feasibility that do not

⁶⁹ Compare Stivers and Stirk, *Technology as Magic*. and Arthur C. Clarke’s infamous aphorism that “any sufficiently advanced technology [will be] indistinguishable from magic”: Clarke, *Profiles Of The Future*.

fit their narrative (most obviously, the fact that carbon capture and removal represents both an immensely complex scientific, logistical and engineering problem, and the fact that its workings and efficacy are far from settled or obvious⁷⁰).

This twofold change, which was again a change that occurred *within* the temporal and imaginative horizon of modernity, not as part of a change from pre-modernity into modernity, further facilitated the intensification of human separatist narratives.

2.4.1.3 Human separatism has co-opted Modern concepts of progress.

With the advent of later modernity, as opposed to early modernity, there emerged a fully-fledged conception of linear progress.⁷¹ Human separatism has proven itself eminently capable of adopting and co-opting this fully modern conception of progress.

Late modern conceptions of progress have a faith-based logic. According to this logic, hitting limits is never a reason to stop, readjust, or change course. Instead, it is a reason – in fact, an imperative– to double down. It commands that work proceed until whatever limit is in

⁷⁰ See *Climate Intervention*; Sikdar and Princiotta, *Advances in Carbon Management Technologies*; *Carbon Dioxide Capture and Storage*; Bellamy et al., *Governing Carbon Dioxide Removal*.

⁷¹ John Grey's discussion is useful: Grey, in Vess, *Handbook of Terror Management Theory*, 297.

play has been revealed not as inevitable (or natural, or necessary) but as contingent, and thus as (a) political, (b) manipulable, and (c) contemptible.

Niebuhr's famous Serenity Prayer proposes that we should cultivate "the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference".⁷² But human separatism, with its faith in the intelligibility of practical infinities, rejects the idea that Humanity should ever accept the existence of things it cannot change. If there is nothing that we cannot change, then Niebuhr's distinction becomes pointless, and adhering to his dictum becomes a falsely modest abdication of the possibilities of human power. On this logic, if natural limits always turn out to be simply mythological, fearing them is nothing but childish. This rejection of the guiding role that emotions like fear can play in self-regulation is of a piece with the rejection of emotion as a form of reason that often takes place in Enlightenment thought more broadly.⁷³

By adopting a late modern conception of progress and turning it to its own ends, human separatism became capable of intensifying itself beyond imaginations of both ontological and epistemological separation into the especially virulent imaginations of complete nomological

⁷² "Who Wrote the Serenity Prayer?". The theme of addiction again recurs here, imagined as a phenomenon in which a body is taken hostage by a desire that can never be satisfied, because it has in a sense become infinite.

⁷³ Compare Merchant, above, and also Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*. In a different disciplinary context, compare Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*; Damasio, *Descartes' Error*.

separation that now proliferate, and indeed dominate, contemporary techno-utopian and ecomodernist ideologies and projects.

2.4.2 The time-making capacity of human separatism has enabled its intensification.

The time-making capacity of human separatism, too, has contributed to its progressive intensification. In this sub-section I consider three ways in which this is so: the way that contemporary human separatism has exploited linear conceptions of time; the way it has co-opted the idea that Modernity involves both an originary rupture and an ongoing, incessant parade of novelty; and the way it has worked to imagine agency as the capacity to predict and direct the future.

2.4.2.1 Human separatism has exploited linear conceptions of time.

Time in the Ancient European world was imagined as circular.⁷⁴ This concept of time and temporality was a key part of the “general background metaphysics” in the theories/narratives of human nature in that period. As such, it exerted a profound paradigm-

⁷⁴ Rosen, *Time and Temporality in the Ancient World*. It remains imagined in this way for many other-than-Modern contemporary cultures, including Indigenous ones.

and world-shaping influence on the contours and directions of Ancient thought. Against the backdrop of time as circular – a backdrop that reflected larger, “natural” (?) rhythms of everyday life, like the cycles of days and seasons – the growth and decay of societies came to be imagined in terms of a process of birth, maturation, senescence, and death.

This background conception of time meant that one of the key problems that Ancient political thought took itself to be solving was how to delay the cycling of a progress that was otherwise viewed as inevitable. The challenge was not to speed time up: it was to pause time at a certain, optimal stage of development, and *not* go further. Aristotle, for instance, devised his theories about mixed constitutionalism against the backdrop of an understanding (which he inherited from Plato) that left unchecked, human societies would “naturally” senesce and die, just like their organic inhabitants.⁷⁵

In premodern times the problem was thus one of preservation, or of maintaining a sort of optimal equilibrium. To Modern sensibilities, immersed as they are in the waters of linear conceptions of time, this sounds like conservatism. But a better term might be “conservationism”, with its echoes of contemporary environmentalism. (This is not to say that this “conservationism” was problem-free: just as contemporary “conservationism” is not problem-free.)

⁷⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*.

Human separatism was constrained by this conception of time. Even if individual humans achieved something like internal ontological “separation” during their lifetimes, the ultimate “separation” would have to wait until after death. This was the source of Plato’s infamous claim in the *Phaedo* that philosophy itself should be “training for death”, or “training for dying” – a claim that sounds similar to, but should not be confused with, either Buddhist or modern-nihilistic notions about living in relation to death.⁷⁶

The emergence of a linear conception of time, however, proved both fertile and “de-constraining” for human separatist ideas. A linear conception of time makes it possible to reject the idea that “everything that goes around, comes around”, in favour of a conception of change as potentially *permanent*: as capable of being wielded like a sort of “ratchet”,⁷⁷ and made (via various processes, including technological processes) irreversible. This conception of irreversibility – of making things permanent, of leaving a state behind forever, of never going back – meshed well with the separatist idea that what was needed was precisely such a permanent exit from the place/space/realm imagined as the source of Humanity’s

⁷⁶ Compare Hanh, *No Death, No Fear*. Plumwood is highly critical of Plato’s approach in this respect: see Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Compare also the discussion and critique of Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*.

⁷⁷ Recall DeFries, *The Big Ratchet*.

problems. Linear conceptions of time helped facilitate the intensification of human separatism.

2.4.2.2 Human separatism has exploited the idea of a modern rupture.

The second relevant change in conceptions of time that arrived with Modernity and intensified into late Modernity was the move to understand time in terms of rupture. This idea of “rupture” lent itself to many different contexts and applications. Most obviously, it could be used to imagine (and so conjure into being) two intellectual and cultural periods which were imagined radically or even incommensurably distinct from one another. These were the pre-modern – the “before” – and the Modern, or the “after”. (The “postmodern” does not really disturb this basic idea of rupture, because it still centres the modern (just as talking of “post-Socratics” centres Socrates⁷⁸). Just like the sleight of hand that conjures the move from distinctiveness to separation, the exact cause and instant of this momentous “rupture” often hides itself in shadow. More precisely, it is (like many imaginary chasms) constantly in the process of being reimagined and renarrativised. This process continues even as the sheer volume of narratives and discussions works to bootstrap a distinction into existence, so that the prophecy fulfils itself.

⁷⁸ Compare my discussion of a similar phenomenon with respect to anthropocentrism in Mylius, “Three Types of Anthropocentrism.”

As well as being wielded to facilitate the imagination of an overarching or Ur-rupture dividing “our”, Modern time from “their” pre-Modern time, the concept of rupture has been used on more immediate spatial and temporal scales. It is deployed to emphasise (and thereby imagine or invent) various “paradigm shifts”, quantum technological leaps, and differences in kind. This, too, meshes neatly with the idea of an abyssal or absolute divide that lies at the centre of human separatism.⁷⁹ It serves as a further “unchainer” or intensifier for human separatist thought.

2.4.2.3 Human separatism has imagined agency as time-directing capacity.

A third significant consequence of the “time-making” capacity of human separatism lies in its capacity to imagine agency in terms of the capacity, as it were, to literally *make time*: by increasing productivity towards infinity, decreasing work towards nothing, and predicting in order to control the nature and unfolding of the future.

This move has its roots in the emergence of the kind of science espoused and practised by thinkers like Bacon and Descartes. But it really bursts out of its bounds once the move is made away from both ontological and epistemological conceptions of separation into fully

⁷⁹ Compare and contrast the discussion in Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*.

modern nomological ones. It draws heavily on the “nomological” or realm-oriented imaginary of Kantian philosophy to imagine and reimagine agency in terms of a capacity to predict and thus control the future. With very few exceptions,⁸⁰ realms of laws are imagined as fields/spaces/places that are, by definition, time/less. They are imagined to be both unchanging in themselves, and outside of time in the aggregate. To be able to create, and not just enter or perfect, such a realm, was an idea that further unchained human separatism. No longer did it need to imagine its aspirational separations in terms of places that already existed, or spaces whose contours were in some sense given in advance. It could both create a realm of timeless laws from scratch, which is to say, exactly in accordance with its own desires, and then populate this realm with laws that, by their very nature, would (once invented) themselves be entirely outside of time.

This imaginative possibility represents a significant shift, and indeed an intensification, of the pre-existing but nascent goal of “controlling time”. To collapse both the past and future into an eternal present, in which absolute separation ruled the day, would be at once to attain infinite or absolute nomological capacity and to step outside temporality and mortality forever. Not only to direct time but to be capable of exempting oneself from its logic and flows entirely: this was a third significant consequence of the “time-making” capacity of

⁸⁰ Unger and Smolin, *The Singular Universe and the Reality of Time*.

human separatist narratives that enabled their further intensification from an early to a late modern context.

2.4.3 The anxiolytic function of human separatism has enabled its intensification.

The anxiolytic function of human separatism has also played a significant role in its capacity to intensify itself, including *through* Modernity (and not merely “into” it). I will again consider three ways in which this is so: the way in which human separatism has benefited from the loosening of dialectical and cosmological constraints; the way it has attached itself to fears about the Janus-faced nature of technologies; and the way it has parasitised the increasing existential anxiety that now shapes the present.

2.4.3.1 Human separatism has benefited from the erosion of dialectical and cosmological constraints.

The ontological separation thesis was confined – even if subconsciously – by the larger cosmological contexts in which it manifested itself in Greek and early Christian thought. Those contexts provided a horizon, and an account of overwhelming power (natural and/or Godly) into which any human pursuit of “separation” had to fit. The problems with this

approach to cosmology have been widely discussed. But along with these terrors it provided a stable source of meaning that could “frame and tame” existential terror, and maintained separation as something that was individual and internal. The ontological separation thesis was, ultimately, focussed inwards. It advocated for a form of separation that was imagined to take place in individual bodies and minds (towards communion with the realm of Forms and/or the Kingdom of God). This served as a theoretical constraint upon the ambitions of the forms that concrete separatist projects might take.

The epistemological version of the separation thesis that characterised early Modern thought emerged in, and as a result of, a context in which these constraints were either lessening or being destroyed. The cosmological horizon against which separatism was being developed had shifted to one in which human expansionism was imagined not merely as possible but indeed as a sort of end whose achievement the reigning powers (and especially Christianity’s God) would actively encourage, if His words could only be heard. Simultaneously, as William Leiss has observed⁸¹ and as I explored in chapter 1, the epistemological separation thesis began to be imagined as a social or collective project. Its achievement came to be imagined in terms that were more explicitly externalised: not in terms of individual internal communion or theoretical logical coherence (the premodern focus on which Bacon now scorned) but instead in terms of “products and results” – “real world outcomes”. The

⁸¹ Leiss, *The Domination of Nature*.

horizons of potential human achievement were thereby broadened: but so too were the potential frights of arbitrariness and meaninglessness. Bacon, Descartes and their theoretical cousins appear to have responded to this at least in part by continuing to profess an adherence to the ways in which their activities should be understood as part of the unfolding of a larger heavenly Plan.

By the time of Modernity proper, with the development of the nomological conception of separation, the move to strip away constraining cosmologies and dialectical philosophical movements that began in early modernity had reached its full fruition. Paradoxically, this also involved an intensified narcissism. Intellectual battles about the priority of rationalism, and eminently practical and destructive battles about the spoils of colonialism, worked themselves through in full view of many spectators.

To be sure, this stripping-away was not necessarily present in the work of the thinkers (like Kant) whose work forms the basis for contemporary visions of separatism. But it enabled the imagination of a world in which God was dead, or in which He was reborn, in Humanity's clothing. This was a world in which Humanity had *taken the place* (and the power) of God: whether by design, or stealth, or force. Superstition and arbitrary belief in external authorities were repudiated. Authority was drawn inwards and then blown outwards. This resulted, amongst other things, in the "disenchantment" of the world in general, and of the

natural world in particular, which Weber discerned.⁸² Environmental and political thinkers have already focussed great attention on the consequences of this move.

The narrative gained further strength because it resonated with the idea that various principles, rules or limits that had previously appeared as “laws” had, with human effort, been shown to be either contingent, or otherwise promulgated by some particular human authorities masquerading as interpreters of divine, natural, or necessary power. The move from this position to a position that figures nature and necessity as itself arbitrary is not so larger. With this move, it becomes possible to wonder whether natural necessity itself might – when humans get the technology right – prove not merely “contingently contingent” but *necessarily* contingent.

This sense of freedom is immense. But with it comes extreme anxiety. Without a God, Church or King to stabilise things, Humanity would be thrown back upon its own resources, for good or ill. The Enlightenment (at least in its idealised representation of itself) rejected these external authorities. But in so doing it brought humans face-to-face with a dilemma that is too much for any individual organism to handle on its own, and certainly too much for organisms with rapacious and often self-consuming self-representative capacities. A

⁸² Weber, *Economy and Society*; Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. And compare Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*; Asprey, *The Problem of Disenchantment*; Germain, *Discourse on Disenchantment*, A.

narrative that could address this increased anxiety, like human separatism, could continue to intensify.

2.4.3.2 Human separatism has intensified as technological prowess has increased.

I suggested above that the narrative structure of human separatism enabled it to incorporate developments in technology into its narrative of progressive development. This increasing technological capacity, though, had a corresponding anxiogenic effect. The possibility – but also the terror – of the increased powers facilitated by human technologies was already evident in Ancient thought, often in the form of narratives. The ambivalent narratives about Prometheus are one particular example. But in general, as an historical matter, the ontological separation thesis emerged in societies whose technological bases were still small. This meant that they could not facilitate expanded material and manipulative ambitions.

By the time of early Modernity, and the emergence of the epistemological separation thesis, the technological capacities and agencies of human beings had intensified and increased. This was the world into which Bacon and Descartes were born: one in which rapid advances in science, agriculture, medicine, etc., along with the increase in European travels and the intensification of colonialism and contact with non-European peoples, gave rise to a sense of extending, and perhaps infinitely extensible, power. Even in the early modern period, many

were those who worried about the effects of such development on the nature of human beings and the human soul. Often, these worries were framed in Christian or other religious terms: as the idea that, like Prometheus, human advances were either eschewing or usurping a power that did not belong to them. At the same time, at least from a contemporary perspective, the technologies possessed by those in the early modern period remained remarkably rudimentary in their intensity and scope. This was, after all, still the time of plagues and famine, of relatively short life expectancies and high rates of infant and maternal mortality (to take some of the indicators used by contemporary thinkers as frameworks for constructing progress narratives).⁸³

By the time of Modernity proper, with the emergence of the nomological separation thesis, the Industrial Revolution had caused further vast shifts in human capacities for instrumental manipulation, extension and agency in general. Factories emerged, as did more obviously modern forms of capitalism, intensifying agriculture, and the seeds of more widespread forms of mass communication. Here, again, critics lurked at every stage. Blake's invocation of "dark Satanic mills"⁸⁴ is one example. Even Kant was concerned about the relationship or lack of relationship with religion and its (implied or actual) cosmological constraints. This much is evident in his observations about the complexities and dangers of denying

⁸³ Asafu-Adjaye and Blomkvist, *An Ecomodernist Manifesto.*, and compare Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*; Pinker, *Enlightenment Now.* and even Shellenberger, *Apocalypse Never.*

⁸⁴ Blake, *Milton a Poem, and the Final Illuminated Works.*

knowledge to make room for faith.⁸⁵ Whether “Satanic” or otherwise, critics and careful observers of this technological expansion expressed themselves in terms that related once again to terror and anxiety. Specifically, they showed a fear of the potentially self-destructive powers of increased human technology.

This fear has only increased further, and required more constant suppression, into the contemporary period: the Romantics, in the 18th century, and then the various critics of technology and other forms of human instrumental agency from World War 2 to the present – be they scientists, deep ecologists, anarcho-primitivists, or others – grew ever more articulate and forthright in their fear and concern as the technological powers and agency of “Humanity” extended to include the manipulation of atoms for nuclear weapons, the advent of vast systems of industrial agriculture and urbanisation, and the internet.

All of these developments can usefully be imagined as part of a straight line attached directly to originary fears about the dual and potentially self-undermining nature of increasing human agency. They can also be understood as factors in the critiques of the concept of the “Anthropocene” that has emerged over the last twenty years.

⁸⁵ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* Bxxx.

2.4.3.3 Human separatism has benefited from proliferating anxieties.

As well as the stripping-back of dialectical and cosmological constraints, and the developments of increased material bases for technology and agency, awareness of and triggers for the various nested layers of existential anxiety have vastly increased. This has triggered the further intensification of human separatism. I suggested above that four existential fears appear as nested in the lives of human beings. These are: terror of individual mortality; terror of collective mortality; terror about the mortality of life itself; and terror about the potential meaninglessness of existence. At present, all of these fears are currently being triggered together: by the global coronavirus pandemic, by renewed fears of nuclear conflict, and – most relevantly to this dissertation – by climate change.

Climate change, as Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests, disrupts the “ontic certainty” of the world.⁸⁶ (The term he is using is Husserl’s.) In more everyday terms, it challenges the idea that “the Earth” can be taken for granted as a passive background to human activity: that it can be dismissed or ignored as a “stable and unshakable” place against which the far more important dramas of human existence might take place. (When in fact, as Chakrabarty notes, the Earth “actually has always been a fitful and restless entity in its long journey

⁸⁶ Chakrabarty, “Anthropocene Time,” 30.

through the depths of geological time.”)⁸⁷ It reinvigorates the terror, long repressed, that the “Mother” of human existence might be, or have become, “defiant”, in Clive Hamilton’s terms, or even that it might *always* have been “autonomous”, in Caroline Merchant’s⁸⁸ Merchant’s work is especially useful in this regard, not only because it traces this fear and its responses through history – thus challenging the (modern) assumption that present (modern) experience is somehow novel – but also because it does so in terms of the language of *autonomy*, or law-making power, which I have been using as my frame.⁸⁹

This is not a new terror, but it has been greatly exacerbated, and brought back into wider consciousness, by the increasingly visible effects of global climatic disruption. This emphasis on the loss of Earth as a “ground” for human activity triggers fears on all four fronts.

Certainly it raises individuals’ fears of their own deaths. It has provoked a great deal of discussion about both mass extinction and the potential extinction of “Humanity”.⁹⁰ And it reanimates terror of nihilism.

⁸⁷ Id 31.

⁸⁸ Hamilton, *Defiant Earth*; Merchant, *Autonomous Nature*. This echoes fears of natural disasters right back to the Greeks, and has parallels in the ways other cultures (and ours) “propitiate” nature in various ways.

⁸⁹ See Merchant, *Autonomous Nature*., and also more broadly Merchant, *Reinventing Eden*; Merchant, *The Death of Nature*.

⁹⁰ Bostrom and Cirkovic, *Global Catastrophic Risks*., and see Leigh, *What’s the Worst That Could Happen?*; Moynihan, *X-Risk*; Ord, *The Precipice*; Schuster and Woods, *Calamity Theory*.

Concern about nihilism has been central (or at least, openly central) to European philosophy for longer than fears about climate change (although these, too, go back further than is often suspected.⁹¹). This terror, too, is made possible by the human capacity for symbolic cognition. Symbolic cognition gets much of its power from what linguists call its “unmotivated” nature. In more everyday language, the fact that words, or more technically “symbols”, do not need to resemble the “things” to which they refer.⁹² This is a great part of what gives human communicative systems their immense flexibility, creativity, and power. But it also makes possible the thought that perhaps *all* things are arbitrary. This is the same as the thought that meaning or significance per se might be incapable of any objective ground or firm foundation. The collision of these terrors makes our present historical moment anxiogenic from many different directions and in many different ways. This, in turn, provides fertile ground for the intensification of human separatism, which can step into the breach to play an increasingly urgent and powerful anxiolytic function.

2.4.4 Section Summary.

In this section I have offered an account of the intensification of the separation thesis. I framed my analysis around the three features of theories/narratives of human nature

⁹¹ See Merchant, *Autonomous Nature*; Coen, *Climate in Motion*.

⁹² See Peirce, “The Logic of Signs.” and compare Kockelman, “Four Theories of Things”; Kohn, *How Forests Think*.

identified in section 2: narrative structure, time-making capacity, and anxiety function.

With respect to narrative structure, I suggested that human separatism has intensified by co-opting and assimilating developments in philosophy, technology and progress. With respect to time-making capacity, I suggested that human separatism has exploited linear conceptions of time, modern ideas of rupture, and modern reimaginings of agency in terms of nomological and time-escaping capacity. With respect to anxiety function, finally, I suggest that human separatism has benefited from the loosening of dialectical constraints, parasitised itself upon the increasingly obvious nature of the double-edged sword of human technological and material development, and stepped into the breach in response to vastly proliferating existential terror and anxiety across all potential levels.

2.5 Chapter Conclusion.

This concludes my analysis of human separatism. As a recap: I started from the proposition that the concept of “separation from nature” is a paradox, because - rationally speaking - it is incoherent, and yet the record shows it to have (a) persisted through seismic changes in philosophy and culture; (b) proven immensely resilient to critique; and (c) continued to intensify in scope and power into the present. I explained this paradox by suggesting, first, that human separatism has survived because it responds effectively - perversely, but

effectively – to our terror of finitude and death. It offers a theory of human nature that salves this terror in what we might call the “perpetual short term”: the temporality of anxiety, in which the past and future disappears. Human separatism is narrative in structure, “time-making” in capacity, and anxiolytic in function. I then used these three features of the theory/narrative of human separatism to analyse its resilience and its intensification.

I hope I have now provided a clearer picture of the ways in which the persistence, intensification and resilience of human separatism present a formidable challenge to environmental political theory. An incoherent idea that has evolved to make itself not simply “persistent” but actively resilient and desirous of ever-increasing intensification is a foe indeed. In the next chapter I will turn to offer some reflections on what all these considerations mean for steps forward, for those who would take an approach informed by a broadly decolonial environmental political theory and philosophy.

Chapter 3: an ethos of human anti-separatism

although [it] is an illusion, Western people were (and still are) habituated to the [story] of 'travelling', metaphorically, toward some great unknown where they hope that what might be waiting for them is, if not Heaven, then maybe, Happiness, Love, Security, a Theory Explaining Everything.

- *Mary Graham, Some Thoughts on the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews*

nothing is less rational ... than the pretension that the specific cosmic [story] of a particular ethnies should be taken as universal rationality, even if such an ethnies is called Western Europe.

- *Anibal Quijano, Coloniality and Modernity-Rationality*

the narratives and celebrations of modernity are only half [the] story.

- *Walter Mignolo, On Decoloniality*

3.0 Chapter Introduction.

In the last two chapters I offered a philosophical history of human separatism, and an analysis of its existential-psychological underpinnings. This puts me in a position to consider some of the challenges that face those like myself, who have been brought up within and disciplined by the European tradition, as we seek to imagine alternatives.

Let me recap the argument so far. In chapter 1, I outlined three conceptions of “separation from nature”. These were (1) an ontological conception of separation, according to which the goal of human life should be to accede to a separate place; (2) an epistemological conception of separation, according to which the goal of human life should be to accede to a separate *space*; and (3) a nomological conception of separation, according to which the goal of human life should be to accede to a separate *realm*. I explored these three conceptions with reference to the work of Plato and Augustine, Descartes and Bacon, and Kant, and then suggested that the latter conception is what drives the work of contemporary Ecomodernist thinkers.

In chapter 2, I explored the paradox that this idea of “separation” represents. It is incoherent: and yet it has (a) persisted through seismic changes in philosophy and culture; (b) proven

immensely resilient to critique; and (c) continued to intensify in scope and power into the present. I proposed that this has occurred because human separatism has evolved into a perverse but effective salve for human terrors about finitude and death. It is narrative in structure, “time-making” in capacity, and anxiolytic in function. These things mean that displacing it is difficult.

At this point, a risk arises. Let us grant that the content of human separatist narratives is incoherent, and thus accept that “separation from nature” can never be achieved in practice. It is tempting to suppose that the appropriate next step is to come up with a theory or narrative that meets the psychological needs that separatism does, but has content that is somehow “not separatist”. Alternatively, we might look around and see that other cultures appear to have such stories and theories already, and then decide that what we need to do is simply take those stories and improve upon them for ourselves. It is tempting, in other words, to suppose that we might be able to come up with a purely idealistic solution: one that involves us changing our concepts, but not (or not substantially) changing our behaviour.

This is not so. Developing narratives with non-separatist content is a necessary condition for moving beyond human separatism, but it is not a sufficient one. This is because human separatism is not only a story, but a set of practices – what might be called an ethos. This

ethos could be called “colonial”, and I referred to it in this way in the early stages of my thinking for this project. For reasons that will become clear as the chapter unfolds, I would now prefer to call it simply “domination-oriented”, or “dominating”. The domination-oriented ethos of human separatism unfolds in quite practical terms, as a particular approach to relationships with worlds and imaginaries that it construes as radically other to itself. I detect this approach both in the ways in which human separatist thinkers imagine “nature”, and in the ways that they engage with (for example) First Nations thinkers who do not share their views.

The thought that guides this chapter is that those of us who wish to move beyond human separatism must take care that we are avoiding both these things: that is, both the substantive ideas of human separatism, and its accompanying ethos. If we do not do this well, we risk ending up in a performative contradiction – advocating for a non-dominating, non-separatist approach to “nature”, but doing so in a way that takes a dominating approach (like that of human separatism) to other cosmologies and worldviews.

With this in mind, my argument in this chapter runs as follows. Other cultures and traditions have narratives and theories that are anti-separatist in their content and implications. Those who seek to move beyond separatism will need to learn from these cultures and traditions. But we need to find ways to do so that do not simply reproduce the

relationships of domination or exploitation that have proven problematic in the past. This means, first, developing an understanding of the logic that underpins those relationships of domination and exploitation, and then looking for alternative ways to relate to otherness, and attempting to put these into practice.

In more concrete terms, I will suggest, this means involves engaging with these other narratives in ways that are carefully critical, dialogue-oriented, and self-conscious. Ignoring them is not feasible; but nor is approaching them simply with a view to “copying” or “taking” their ideas. To do this, as I say, would seem to me to repeat the same gesture that animates human separatism in the first place. The challenge is to find ways to encounter these other narratives and practices in ways that let us revise our own concrete narratives, in ways that make sense in our own contexts. The narrative and journeys of other cultures may serve as inspirations, but they cannot be cut-and-paste sources. Nor can they remove our need to reckon with the concrete histories of violence and domination caused (at least in part) by the dominating postures adopted by some of our forebears.

The chapter has the following structure. In section 1, I reflect on the provinciality of human separatism, and contrast its contents and posture with some of the theories and narratives that appear in other contexts and cultures. (By “provincial”, here, I mean the fact that it appears universal and perhaps even necessary or “natural” as a way to understand human-

nature relationships, when it is in fact contingent and specific to particular cultures and histories.¹) In section 2, I explore the concept of “coloniality”, drawing primarily on the work of the influential thinkers Aníbal Quijano and Walter Mignolo. I suggest that this concept is thought-provoking, but does not provide the clarity needed for the task at hand. In section 3, I consider an alternative to this common language: critical ecofeminism, and specifically the work of the Australian philosopher Val Plumwood. I propose that this body of thought offers a clearer set of conceptual resources for thinking beyond separatism. In section 4, I deepen my previous analysis of human separatism by considering some of the ways in which it is oriented towards domination and mastery in both theory and practice. In section 5, finally, I reflect on what I think this all means for political-theoretical work on human separatism that wants to engage with narratives from other cultures and contexts. I conclude with a summary and some notes on my next and final chapter.

3.1. Human separatism is a contingent and provincial imaginary.

¹ The term is Dipesh Chakrabarty's: it appears most famously in Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

In the last chapter, I suggested that human separatism responds to the human condition. Specifically, I suggested that it responds to our terrors of finitude and death. I now want to draw attention to the cultural and historical contingency of this response.

3.1.1 Human separatism is not the only possible response to the human condition, or even the only actually-existing one.

Human separatism is a response to human fears about finitude and death. But it is far from the only possible response that we can imagine. A moment's reflection, in fact, suggests that alternatives already exist in the narratives and cosmologies of other ("non-European"?) traditions. The existence of these other narratives shows us that:

- a. can be sustained (as a matter of theory or logic);
- b. have been sustained (as a matter of historical reality); and
- c. continue to be sustained, in many places around the world, often in hostile or unforgiving circumstances (as a matter of present politics and practice).

The third observation is especially important. As Julia Gibson has emphasised, it is easy for those working from the European tradition to acknowledge that alternatives are possible,

but to assume that they must have been destroyed by colonial encounters.² This assumption is sometimes couched in triumphalist terms – as the suggestion that all alternatives have been “out-competed” by European modernity. And it is sometimes couched in self-flagellating terms, as the suggestion that the destruction wrought by colonialism has been so complete that it is impossible to resist or to escape. Both these assumptions are unhelpful. They block us from recognising and being provoked by the knowledge, creativity and resilience that continue to be nurtured in the stories of other cultures and lifeways. They also act as a barrier to our becoming accountable to this recognition and its consequences.

3.1.2 Other cultures have developed narratives and theories of human nature that can be said to be “non-separatist”.

It is difficult to make broad claims about other cultures and approaches without fetishising, romanticising, or essentialising their concrete particulars. This is what Edward Said memorably calls “Orientalism”.³ Orientalism is a particular risk where the claims in question are coming from the standpoint of a dominant tradition.⁴ Even with this caution, I want to suggest that there is good evidence for calling a variety of non-European cosmologies and stories, or at least parts of these stories and cultures, “non-separatist”. The two examples I

² Gibson, “Holographic Ethics for Intergenerational Justice.”

³ Said, *Orientalism*.

⁴ On this theme generally, compare Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*; Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.

have in mind are narratives and cosmologies that have evolved in some Australian and American Indigenous cultures,⁵ as well as the narratives of some forms of non-mystical Buddhism.⁶ In saying this, I do not mean to suggest that these cultures are “naturally” anti-separatist, or that they are immune to separatist tendencies, or that they are “exclusively” anti-separatist. Nor do I mean to say that they are “naturally” better at relating to ecosystems, or something like this. These claims would be Orientalist (and also false). What I mean to claim is simply that these alternatives exist in reality already, and that for this reason we should think about ways to engage with them ethically.

Importantly for my purposes, these alternative stories and theories engage with human fears about mortality and the finitude of agency, just like separatism. In this they respond to the same thing that I suggested is a part of bringing separatism about: the human condition, and specifically, the difficulty of coming to terms with our own limited agency and mortality. What makes these other stories significant is the fact that, rather than proposing that the only rational response to the terror of death is to attempt to destroy, escape or transcend the conditions that provoke it, they seem to look for ways that we might flourish amidst, or

⁵ Citations for these narratives can be difficult, as they are often placed within complex oral traditions and have cultural permissions associated with their telling and retelling. One written collection is McKay, *Gadi Mirrabooka*. For a discussion of the challenges at issue, see Hamilton, “Exploring and Sharing Australian Indigenous Narratives.” See also the chapters by Pat Mamanyjun Torres and Lester-Irabinna Rigney in Kunnie and Goduka, *Indigenous Peoples’ Wisdom and Power*. On research questions and methodologies, see Wilson, *Guantánamo North*; Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies*.

⁶ Compare Hanh, *The Diamond That Cuts Through Illusion*; Hanh, *The World We Have*; Hanh, *No Death, No Fear*.

even because of, these enabling constraints. In this way, they orient themselves less towards domination, and more towards creativity and care.

This does not mean that peoples in these cultures are unaware of the challenges – grief, depression, anger – that can arise in the process of grappling with finitude and death. But it seems to me that in treating it as a feature of reality, instead of something which is contingent, accidental or contemptible, these others become able to live out a radically different perspective on the relationship between life, enabling constraints, and freedom. All these things make them thought-provoking to engage with.

3.1.3. Failing to engage with these other narratives would be unconscionable.

Given that these other narratives exist, it would be an error to refuse or decline to engage with them. To make this move would be to repeat the Eurocentrism that has been the target of so much critique from European and non-European thinkers alike.⁷

I want to suggest that this would be true whether we sought to devise a new narrative or new story *ex nihilo*, or whether we sought to refine our own stories, but only by drawing on so-called “minor” thinkers or themes in our own stories and histories. The first strategy

⁷ As one example, see Getachew and Mantena, “Anticolonialism and the Decolonization of Political Theory.”

would be a straightforward reproduction of the central theme of modernity: proceeding on the basis of the assumption that radical novelty, which transcends all relation to its own histories, is not only possible in theory but desirable in practice. This sounds a lot like the incoherent quest for some “separate” place – ontological, epistemological, nomological – that animates human separatism. The second strategy would simply reproduce the approach that a great deal of critical thought has taken over the last few decades: an approach that has some merits, but is ultimately incomplete.

In saying this I do not mean to deny the achievements of European self-critique. The archaeologies and genealogies offered by thinkers like Foucault offer an important companion to the work I look at here. My argument in chapter 1 owes a good deal to these resources and thinkers. What I want to claim, instead, is that we should not and cannot limit ourselves to self-critique, or to critical work alone. We must engage in constructive and reconstructive work. This must involve reckoning with what the European tradition and its offshoots have cast aside or attempted to hold at arms’ length from themselves. And this, in turn, means finding ways to approach these “cast-outs” from a new and more respectful perspective.

3.1.4 But engaging with these other narratives unselfcritically would also be unconscionable.

It is well and good to say that “we” must engage with the theories and stories of other cultures. In practice, though, this task is deeply fraught. Much of this fraughtness grows out of the legacies of colonialism. One of these legacies is the concrete, ongoing harms that continue to beset once-colonised communities. Another is a justified mistrust on the part of those who keep the stories of other cultures alive into the present of “new and improved” attempts by European thinkers to engage in dialogue. In this context, claiming that ideas from these cultures can be appropriated and “grafted onto” European ways of thinking, or even claiming that the stories of these other cultures should be adopted wholesale by the European tradition (as some naïve environmentalists seem to do), are both unconscionable moves.

This raises a challenge. How can these illegitimate approaches be labelled and characterised?

A good deal of academic literature in recent years has sought to describe these legacies as part of a broader historical condition, or state of history, which it refers to as “coloniality”.

This word is a nominalisation of the term “colonial”, on the model of “modernity” as a nominalisation of “modern”. I have come to conclude, for my own part, that this approach is not the most helpful for understanding or responding to human separatism. In the next

section I explain why I believe this to be so, and in the section after that, I consider the language of critical ecofeminism as a potential alternative.

3.2. The concept of coloniality offers a starting-point for conversations about the approach that anti-separatism should take, but is ultimately too confused to be of great use.

Coloniality is a difficult concept to define. In part, this is because it is a concept that is supposed to work against particular kinds of abstraction. Ultimately, it fails to do this effectively. It is too inert to provide the conceptual resources for the project I am undertaking. By inert, here, I mean that it orients itself towards a noun, a static condition – an “ity” – and so fails to offer the kind of focus on processes and relationships that is necessary for reconstructive work.

Even though I will conclude that this is so, I consider the concept here for three reasons.

First, the concept of coloniality has been a focal point for contemporary critical work on

questions of inter-cultural dialogue and relationship in the shadow of historical domination. Second, I think that it does draw attention to a set of questions and facts that are indeed significant, even if it proves insufficient as a means to work with them. Third, it is the most straightforward way to show why I think a complementary approach is needed, and what this complementary approach should focus on.

To unpack the concept and its limitations, I will consider three different definitions of the term. According to the first, coloniality is a concrete condition or state of history that is co-emergent with the condition of modernity. According to the second, it is a quixotic intellectual quest for the realisation of abstract universals. According to the third, it is a posture or ethos that produces destructive relationships with radical otherness. Each of these is interesting but ultimately wanting.

3.2.1 Coloniality has been defined as a concrete historical condition that subsists beneath the abstractions of modernity: but this definition is too simplistic and too static.

The concept of coloniality first appears as a term for the “dark underbelly” of modernity: one that seeks to bind the advent of European social and cultural modernity to the concrete historical practices of European colonialism. This binding, I think, is very important. But on

its own it does not provide enough of a path for reconstructive projects.

Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano is the thinker generally credited with articulating this linkage between modernity and coloniality.⁸ For Quijano, the term coloniality designates – and so draws attention to – a legacy of European colonialism that manifests itself in many of the cultures around the world (Latin America, North America, Africa, Australia) whose worlds were invaded from the late 1400s through to the early 1900s by the five then-dominant powers of Western Europe.⁹ Importantly, coloniality as a condition is supposed to be capable of persisting even after colonialism as “an explicit political order” has been pushed out or withdrawn.¹⁰ In logical terms, the process of colonisation is to the condition of coloniality as the process of modernisation is to the condition of modernity. Colonisation and modernisation are concrete events or processes that are discrete in space and time; coloniality and modernity are conditions or states of history and society that can transcend spatiotemporal boundaries.

Part of Quijano’s aim in introducing the concept is to offer a narrative about modernity that

⁸ See Quijano, “The Return of the Future and Questions about Knowledge”; Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality”; Quijano, “Paradoxes of Modernity in Latin America.”. One useful discussion of Quijano’s work appears in Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*.

⁹ That is: England, Spain, France, Portugal, and the Netherlands. See the discussion in Reinhard, *A Short History of Colonialism*; Wesseling, *The European Colonial Empires, 1815-1919*; Cavanagh and Veracini, *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism*.

¹⁰ Quijano *Coloniality* 170.

is not framed in terms of modern abstractions. Such abstractions tend to imagine the condition of modernity in ways that are often oddly unrooted in particular history, or figure it as severable from that history, and therefore frame it in ways that quarantine it from and make it unaccountable to historical and cultural particulars. The concept of modernity has historically been used as an organising principle by a great deal of European thought seeking to narrate its own emergence and distinctiveness (or perhaps, “separateness”?) from its own past. It is most famously figured as the pivot upon which the distinction between “the Ancients” and the “Moderns” is supposed to rest.¹¹

The Ancients, on this schema, were “back then”, “out of our time”: they were, indeed, “pre-modern”. The Moderns – a category which includes “us” – exist “now”, in kinship with all those who live after the rupture (provided that they are enthusiastic about its outcomes).¹²

On the narrative that modernity tells about itself, its own birth constituted a world-historical moment, which occurred either as a result of a set of developments in the realm of ideas (for example, with respect to the purpose of structure of government) or in the realm of material productions (for example, with respect to the emergence of science).

¹¹ As, for instance, in Constant's famous *The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of Moderns*.

¹² On this point compare Latour's famous discussion in Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.

For Quijano and other postcolonial thinkers, there was indeed a rupture involved with the emergence of the modern project: but it was not the self-individuating rupture that modern thought imagines for itself. It was, instead, a “mutation of intersubjective relations among the populations of the world”.¹³ This “mutation” was both caused and facilitated by the concrete historical adventures of the five European colonial powers. In encountering cultures and ways of life that were radically foreign to their own, those powers found their worldviews challenged and provincialized. But they responded to this experience in ways that were probably already determined by their own cultural philosophies, by seeking variously to subjugate the difference they encountered or else to convert it into resources for their own colonial projects.

To understand the development of modernity without reference to these concrete historical events is to risk imagining it in ways that reproduce the ahistorical narratives that animate so much European philosophy. It is to return to theories like those that animate Hegel’s “universal history”.¹⁴ Amongst other things, these stories assume the possibility of a detached, objective (“separate”?) third-person standpoint from which it is possible to narrate, evaluate and guide the evolution of human history generally.

¹³ Quijano *Return* 77.

¹⁴ See Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. and compare Dale, *Hegel, the End of History, and the Future*; Williams, “The End of History in Hegel and Marx”; Gillespie, *Hegel, Heidegger, and the Ground of History*.

For Quijano, the two conditions – coloniality and modernity – are non-severable. The colonial imaginary, in his terms, was “born in the Americas” (that is, in the execution of the concrete processes of colonialism), after “its core expression was elaborated in Europe (that is, in the development of European philosophical modernity).¹⁵ As such, “[d]uring the same period as European colonial domination was consolidating itself, the cultural complex known as European modernity/rationality was being constituted”.¹⁶ Quijano is emphatic that this “confluence between coloniality and the elaboration of rationality/modernity was not in any way accidental”: this much he reads from “the very manner in which the European paradigm of rational knowledge was elaborated”.¹⁷

From my perspective it remains important to treat the two as distinct. My reason for doing this is the same as my reason for offering the analysis above, which proceeded in terms of the concept of “separation” as distinct from the concept of “domination”. I suggested earlier that failing to attend to this distinction can lead us to think as if the kind of domination that concerns us began with (and was perhaps dependent upon) the advent of philosophical and cultural modernity. As I argued in chapter 1, there are good grounds to suppose that the imaginary at issue has origins that extend back far earlier in the dominant strand of the

¹⁵ Quijano *Return* 77.

¹⁶ Quijano *Coloniality* 171.

¹⁷ *Id* 172.

European tradition. This remains plausible even if those origins only began to “metastasise”, as it were, or become progressively less constrained, later in the narrative.

It is useful to view the imaginary of coloniality through broadly the same lens. Insofar as it refers to an actualised historical condition, it can be said to be co-emergent with modernity. But the logic and ethos that facilitated it should be seen to have their roots in pre-Modern European thought and practice, including in pre-modern waves of European colonization. These roots, incipient or dormant, could become unchained with the advent of the technologies and other historical developments that facilitated both European modernity, and European colonialism.

It is important to frame the matter in this way precisely to avoid the temptations of the “rupture” narrative, according to which European modernity and European coloniality represented a complete rupture or break from all that came before them (such that they cannot be assimilated to or traced back to the conditions that gave rise to them). Used to describe coloniality, this narrative is negative – the rupture led to the production of domination and cruelty orders of magnitude greater than that which had been possible before its occurrence – but it continues to adhere to the same basic rupture-oriented logic that can easily lead thought in unhelpful directions.

The concept of coloniality, seen in this light, intended to serve as a sort of corrective to this tendency, returning a measure of concreteness to the otherwise oddly dislocated self-imaginings of European modernity. In this respect it is useful: stories of conceptual development and material history should indeed be told together. From a practical perspective, though, thinkers who seek to use it for reconstructive projects run more or less immediately into similar problems to those that face thinkers attempting to define modernity, also construed as an historical condition.

The first problem is that it sets up a false choice. In binding modernity and coloniality together, it suggests that the only options moving forward are to:

1. Acknowledge that coloniality is bad and should be gotten rid of (a claim that seems reasonable), but in so doing, commit oneself to the claim that modernity is also bad and must be gotten rid of (a claim that seems less reasonable).
2. Acknowledge that coloniality is bad, but argue that the benefits of the modernity that it is hitched to are so great that they cannot be abandoned, and thus suggest that the lesser of two evils is to accept coloniality as an inevitable product of modern expansion.

This choice is overly restrictive. It does not allow for nuanced considerations of the ways in which some of the developments heralded by philosophical or material modernity are desirable and need, therefore, to be reconstructed in ways that do not perpetuate colonial domination.

The second problem is that, even supposing that one finds a way around this false choice, it is difficult to determine what movements against coloniality should propose in concrete terms. In other words, beyond the general assertion that domination is negative – an assertion that is not limited to the literature of coloniality – there is little guidance offered by the concept itself about the form that reconstructive work should take.

From my perspective, this means that the historically-oriented definition of the term is inadequate. This leads me to consider a second possible approach to the concept, which seeks to define coloniality in terms of the goals it is imagined to pursue.

3.2.2. Coloniality has been defined as a fixation on the realisation of “abstract universals”: but this definition is too vague.

Building further upon these two understandings, a second approach is to conceptualise coloniality in terms of the philosophical distinction between abstract and concrete universals.

This approach takes up a distinction that has a long philosophical pedigree,¹⁸ but it, like the concept of coloniality itself, ultimately turns out to be difficult to specify with sufficient precision. In broad terms, it appears to rest on a distinction between ideas that are imagined without reference to, or in outright opposition to, any form of relationship to experience as it manifests in specific times and places – concepts whose fulfilment, if it were possible, would come from their transcending their own histories and genealogies, to float above reality and adjudicated without reference to any of its concrete particulars – and ideas that are imagined in terms that integrate their boundedness to specific times and places, and are accountable to those times and places, even as they continue to aspire to particular forms of universality. This is a thought-provoking point, but it is ultimately – itself – not clear enough to be immediately useful.

In philosophy, the distinction is often attributed to Hegel.¹⁹ For Hegel, as Charlotte Baumann suggests, an “abstract universal [is] the form [that] a false type of knowledge and society [takes]”, while a concrete universal is “a positive aim”, or a form of knowledge and society that one should endeavour to bring about or to achieve.²⁰ From this perspective, the

¹⁸ In philosophy, the distinction appears as a part of debates about the nature and varieties of universal concepts (or universals) that are at least as old as Plato. It emerges as part of a broader interest on the part of Ancient philosophers and their descendants in identifying what state of things is most necessary or most primordial: whether, for instance, being is prior to becoming, or difference is prior to identity. The theory of Forms, which I outlined in chapter 1, is one example of this debate in action.

¹⁹ For instance, by Cargile in the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*: Cargile, “Concrete Universal.”

²⁰ Baumann, “Adorno, Hegel and the Concrete Universal,” 73.

distinction names two kinds of knowledge or two ways of knowing: one that is truthful or desirable, and one that is somehow false, corrupt, or incomplete. Framed in these terms, the distinction gestures at a useful insight. But further discussion of the distinction in philosophical language, and especially Hegelian language, does not make things much clearer. It tends towards assertions that, for instance, “universal[s]... must shape an adequate relation between the form of totality and determinate matters” if they are to be “concrete”, or assertions that abstract universals “reproduc[e] the much-reviled frame of bad infinity” where concrete universals “consis[t] of the speculative synthesis of speculation with worldly experience”.²¹ This difficulty manifests itself even in the work of noted interpreters of Hegel, like 20th century philosopher Theodor Adorno.²²

To summarise: philosophy seems to contribute the thought that abstract universals (and so, “coloniality”) are part of a way of way of knowing that in some way seek to absorb or “annex” what is foreign to itself, and which, for this reason, is undesirable or unethical. Concrete universals, in contrast, instantiate or represent a way of knowing the world that does not seek to annex or absorb what is foreign to it (although it continues to pursue some form of “universality”, or universal application). This, as I say, gestures at something useful. But it continues to be unacceptably unclear.

²¹ Mascot, “Hegel and the Advent of Modernity.”

²² Baumann.

A second domain that uses the distinction is the domain of mathematics and cognitive science. Here, the distinction is taken up as a statement about the difference between self-participating and non-self-participating universals, and about the distinctive ends of different reasoning processes. The work of Richard Shillcock provides a useful overview of its treatment. For Shillcock, “the full extent” of the distinction’s usefulness appears “with the twentieth century consideration of set-theoretic paradoxes”.²³

For Shillcock, abstract and concrete universals emerge from different processes of reasoning towards abstraction. Abstract universals result from “Galilean” or “one-over-many” abstraction, and are supposed to be a “natural and necessary way of creating categories and providing theoretical traction on a domain, particularly so in the cognitive domain which is typically perceived dualistically as separate from the physical”.²⁴ In set-theoretic terms, they are “non-self-participating”: they do not themselves appear as entities in the sets they describe or define.²⁵ They are “categor[ies]” that “operat[e]... as a kind of (relatively empty) species-name unifying a range of different entities”. This makes them very powerful. But it also means, significantly, that they are “invariably defeated by new data”: because they

²³ Shillcock, “The Concrete Universal and Cognitive Science,” 69. Shillcock cites Ellerman, “Category Theory and Concrete Universals.”

²⁴ Shillcock 66.

²⁵ Id. Shillcock offers by way of example the concept of a “verb” – which is “not [itself] a “doing word””; he notes that “people can speak English, French, and Pirahã, but no-one speaks “language””, and he observes that (the term) ““largeness” is not itself large”: id.

“always encounte[r] some aspect of the real world that [they were] not intended to cover, thereby defining the limit of the theory/model in which [they] featur[e]”.²⁶ They are thus “theory-derived entities that [offer] valuable multiple perspectives on the ordered relations within [some particular] domain, but ... fail to provide access to the complete contents of the domain, and understanding thereof.”²⁷

Concrete universals, on the other hand, are supposed to result from “materialist abstraction”:²⁸ They are “identified by a process of abstraction that takes away (in the mind of the modeller) more and more of the real-world domain until only the critical entity remains”.²⁹ The process of identifying concrete universals, in other words, “identifies something material that is a far abstraction within the domain”, but continues to have content in and of itself, and – as such – continues to be related to the domain in intimate ways, in contrast to abstract universals, which are “theory-dependent [and] relatively contentless entit[ies]”.³⁰ In set-theoretic terms, concrete universals are “self-participating”: they appear as members of the sets that they themselves define or describe. They still make claims to a form of universality or universal application: but they can “be exemplified in

²⁶ Id.

²⁷ Id 67, my emphasis.

²⁸ Id 63. It is thus related to, although usefully distinguished from, the contrast between deductive and inductive reasoning.

²⁹ Id 71.

³⁰ Id.

individuals which have different properties, so that there need be nothing further in common between these individuals than the fact they exemplify the same concrete universal".³¹

This language is a little more tractable than the philosophical language considered above, but it still makes it difficult to specify the ways in which these distinct reasoning processes might appear in the context of questions about politics and history. I therefore turn, finally, to a third way of framing the distinction, which appears to take elements of the two distinctions above and adopt them for its own specific purposes. This third approach appears in postcolonial theory.

From philosophy, postcolonial thinkers take the thought that abstract universals are false or problematic attempts to achieve absolute knowledge. From the set-theoretic definition, though implicitly, they take the thought that this is at base a result of their attempting to transcend particulars (to escape their own participation in the worlds or sets that they describe). To these two elements, postcolonial thinkers add a concrete historical specification. Abstract universals, they propose, are the kinds of universals that have traditionally been sought by European thought, and especially modern European thought, which cannot be disentangled or considered apart from the material and historical trajectories of European colonial expansion. Concrete universals are the kinds of universals

³¹ Id, following Stern, "Hegel, British Idealism, and the Curious Case of the Concrete Universal."

that have manifested themselves both in non-colonial contexts, and in work which engages colonial logic in order to historicise and provincialise it, or return it to its proper context and milieu, instead of allowing it to float abstractly outside of time and space, or history and culture/nature.

This is useful because it acknowledges the obvious reality that the pursuit of universals is not unique to the “European tradition”. In the context of theories and narratives of human nature, this makes particular sense. These theories do not merely offer a “distinctive set of claims about human beings”: they also aim to offer a “metaphysical understanding of the universe and humanity’s place in it”.³² This means that they seek universals. As Walter Mignolo notes:

All known storytelling about the creation [and unfolding] of the world (including scientific ones, like the Big Bang), and about the creation of the living species (including recent storytelling about the anthropocene) to which the narrators telling stories about the origin of the world belong, aim at and claim totality. It could not be otherwise. The narrators of the Popol Vuh, of the Legend of the Fifth Sun (as well as sacred books such as the Bible and the Qur’an) as

³² Stevenson et al., *Thirteen Theories of Human Nature*, 1–2.

well as of the many cosmological narratives of ancient China or ancient India, or of any other non-Western texts we might consider, would aim at the totality.³³

The central thrust of Mignolo's argument is that, despite this (as it were) universality of universals, not all "aiming at the totality" proceeds in the terms specified by the minds of "Western Christian philosophers of the European Middle Ages", or adopts adopt the abstract terms in which those philosophers "formulated their own local totality".³⁴ Those terms, for Mignolo, were so powerful precisely because they "succeed[ed] in overpowering or disavowing similar claims in other cosmologies";³⁵ but this is not in itself a warrant for their quality, and in fact seems more like a demonstration of their viciousness.³⁶

Quijano makes the same point. As he notes, in "virtually in all known cultures, [and in] every cosmic vision", "all systematic production of knowledge is associated with a perspective of totality".³⁷ In non-European contexts, though, this totality is imagined to

³³ Mignolo and Walsh 164.

³⁴ Id.

³⁵ Id.

³⁶ Here Mignolo appears to follow the same thought as Quijano, according to which the imaginary at issue emerged in the late middle ages or with the advent of early modernity; as noted above, I would instead propose that its origins lie a good deal earlier.

³⁷ Quijano *Coloniality* 177..

includ[e] the acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of all reality; of the irreducible, contradictory character of the latter; of the legitimacy [and indeed] the desirability, of the diverse character of the components of all reality and therefore, of the social”.³⁸

From my perspective, this tendency towards imagining totalities is linked to the capacities and tendencies of symbolic cognition in human beings. But it does not have to lead to abstract or “placeless” universals. Instead, as Quijano and Mignolo both suggest, it is interesting to explore the thought that this way of dealing with universals is correlated in important ways with Quijano’s “colonial[ity]/modernity”.³⁹

When we understand that the “European” way of imagining universals is not the only possible way of imagining universals, it becomes clear that we do not need to try to “reject the whole idea of totality”, or reject universals in general (a task that is, in any case, probably impossible).⁴⁰ Instead, as Quijano says is required is movement “to liberate the production of knowledge, reflection, and communication from the pitfalls of European rationality/modernity”.⁴¹ Doing this, he says, should aim at “clear[ing] the way for new

³⁸ Id.

³⁹ Id 176.

⁴⁰ Id 177.

⁴¹ Id.

intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings, as the basis of another rationality” – one that “may legitimately pretend to some universality”.⁴²

This is a powerful thought. But the problem remains that it is difficult to define the difference between different kinds of universal with enough clarity to define paths forward. With this in mind, I turn to a third approach to defining the concept. This third approach defines coloniality in terms of its ethical consequences.

3.2.3 Coloniality has been defined as a condition that exploits and oppresses non-dominant cosmologies: but this definition is too broad.

A third possibility is to characterise coloniality as involving a particular posture with respect to radical otherness. Postcolonial scholarship, in particular, explores the idea that there is something problematic about the way in which the dominant strand of the European tradition has tended to relate to its “others”: those outside itself, against whom and over whom it tends to define and test itself and its projects and trajectories.⁴³ The claim here is not simply that European countries continue to dominate their former colonies in concrete

⁴² Id.

⁴³ Quijano explicitly frames his analysis in terms of “imaginaries”, or “the imaginary dimension”: Quijano *Return* 77. On the concept of imaginaries more generally, see Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*. See also Lennon, *Imagination and the Imaginary*; Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*.

matters (although this argument can and has been made). Rather it is the claim that a particular imaginary, or way of relating, which has many origins in Europe, was exported by the countries of that continent as part of their concrete colonial practices, and that it – along with the many other legacies of that historical period – continues to suppress and oppress alternatives as it shapes the world into the present. As a concrete historical phenomenon, moreover, colonial expansion involved “the imposition of the use of the rulers’ own patterns of expression”, and “their beliefs and images with reference to the supernatural”.⁴⁴ This description applies both with respect to the teleologies that are imagined for the world in modernity, and for the “separation” of humanity from nature that is supposed to be facilitating them.

On this account, coloniality is problematic because it facilitates the incessant reproduction of a destructive and dominating posture or ethos in encounters with radical otherness (human, “natural”, or otherwise). The posture or ethos at issue involves seeing radical otherness as simultaneously an existential threat and a source of potentially enormous resources – if only the threatening character of its otherness can be harnessed, assimilated, or neutralised. This is, in a word, totalitarian. It facilitates engagements with radical otherness which seek overwhelmingly to extract or appropriate the resources of that otherness which the approach believes will be useful to itself, on the way to attempts to absorb, assimilate or subsume that

⁴⁴ Id 169.

otherness generally so that it cannot threaten the realisation or completion of the approach. This is despite the fact that this completion is, in reality, impossible: because, as even Hegel noted, the constitution of particular subjectivities depends upon the existence of “othernesses” against which it can continue to recognise itself, or force itself to continue to be recognised.⁴⁵

Of the three definitions of coloniality I have considered here, this is the one that comes closest to the emphasis I think is needed. In suggesting that the problem with coloniality is a problem of *relating*, as opposed to leaving open the possibility that it is an exclusively conceptual issue, it gestures in more practical and reconstructive directions. At the same time, I propose, this gesturing is not enough. What is needed is a framework that offers a clearer picture both of the problem at hand, and gets specific about alternatives. In the next section, I explore the idea that work in critical ecofeminism can provide this framework.

⁴⁵ Hegel's discussion appears as the “master-slave dialectic” in Hegel, *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel*.

3.3. Critical ecofeminism offers more practical resources for considering the kinds of concepts that anti-separatist projects need to explore, and the kinds of relationships they need to pursue with the stories and practitioners of other cultures.

Critical ecofeminist thought offers a better framework than writing on coloniality for my project for at least two reasons. First, it foregrounds processes and relationships, instead of conditions or states of history (i.e., static nouns). Second, the insights it offers turn out to be applicable both to the content of human separatist ideas, and the dominating approach of human separatist projects. To say the same thing in more technical terms: critical ecofeminism, and its focus on the problems of dualism, offers a language for describing both (a) the problems with the logic of human separatist thought about relating to otherness in theory; and (b) the problems with the practical relationships that human separatist projects take to otherness in practice. This makes it a good candidate for generating positive

alternatives.

Critical ecofeminism takes up many of the same themes as postcolonial critique, with a slightly different emphasis. Like most bodies of critical work, it is not homogenous, but “diverse”, containing “different and sometimes conflicting positions and political commitments”.⁴⁶ It encompasses the writing of a broad range of authors, including Charlene Spretnak, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Karen J. Warren, and Carolyn Merchant. In what follows, I will focus on the writing the Australian philosopher and logician Val Plumwood. Plumwood’s work is distinctive, from my perspective, for its clarity and rigour. In addition to her ecofeminist work, Plumwood made significant contributions to the study of nonclassical logics as part of her work with the Canberra Circle in the 1980s). Her 1993 *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* is especially noteworthy in this regard. Although there have been a great many debates and developments over the subsequent years, including many which take up themes of Plumwood’s work, *Feminism* continues to stand as a powerful articulation of the logic underlying relationships of mastery, and a discussion of the ways in which this logic manifests in apparently discrete concrete domains. In particular it offers a clear-eyed articulation of the logic of dualisms that has become such a prominent focus of subsequent critical thought.

⁴⁶ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 36.

Plumwood describes her own goal as finding a language for describing “the commonalities as well as the specifics of oppression[s]”.⁴⁷ Following bell hooks, she argues that work to overcome specific forms of oppression must find ways to exist both “apart from and as a part of the larger struggle to eradicate domination in all forms”.⁴⁸ In this respect, although it does not use the term, Plumwood’s text is a significant contribution to the literature on “intersectionality”.⁴⁹

3.3.1 Critical ecofeminism proposes that European thought has been dominated by a form of rationality oriented towards domination and mastery.

Plumwood begins by articulating the “master form of rationality” that she argues operates across a variety of domains in “Western” culture.⁵⁰ This “master rationality”⁵¹ is constituted by the “multiple, complex cultural identity of ... master[y]”,⁵² and forms part of the “dominant conception of reason” that unite the central strands of conventional European thought.⁵³ Practically speaking, for Plumwood, it serves as “a legacy, a form of culture, a

⁴⁷ Id x.

⁴⁸ Id, quoting Hooks, *Talking Back*, 22.

⁴⁹ The founding text for this term is Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins.”

⁵⁰ Plumwood i.

⁵¹ Id.

⁵² Id 5.

⁵³ Id 42.

form of rationality, [and] a framework for selfhood and relationship”, which has “come to shape us all”.⁵⁴ Given its focus on mastery, significantly, it is also a “logic of colonisation”.⁵⁵

One of its more important manifestations in the present context is its “construction of human identity as ‘outside’ nature”.⁵⁶ This treatment resonates clearly with my exploration of human separatism in general and separation claims in particular.

The relevant logic of colonisation or mastery, as Plumwood describes it, is constituted around a set of dualisms, and specifically around a “dualised structure of otherness and negation”.⁵⁷ Proposing that “negation is the key axis of comparison among implicational systems”, she argues that if “negation is interpreted as otherness, then the way that negation is treated provides, together with other features, an account of how otherness is conceived in a given system”.⁵⁸ Such an account can be used to buttress claims that identify the problems with this negation and highlight it as its abstract formulation appears in different concrete domains.

In the years since Plumwood’s writing, this emphasis on dualisms has become a focus of critical thought almost to the point of cliché. Even so, I would maintain that Plumwood’s

⁵⁴ Id 190.

⁵⁵ Id 41.

⁵⁶ Id 2.

⁵⁷ Id.

⁵⁸ Id 56.

early articulation of dualist logic provides a powerful tool for critical thought, and one that is much clearer than (for instance) writing that attempts to take its cue directly from Hegel or from Derrida.

Dualisms, as the name suggests, are binary pairs: man/woman, master/slave, human/nature. They might also be described in the form *P/not-P*, where *P* is the dominant or master position and not-*P* is its “other”: man/not-man, master/not-master, human/not-human, etc.⁵⁹ Although they are easily imagined as “freefloating systems of ideas”, Plumwood argues that in history and fact they are “closely associated with domination and accumulation”, and serve as the “major cultural expressions and justifications” of those values.⁶⁰ They engender “more than [relations] of dichotomy, difference, or non-identity, and more than ... simple hierarchical relationship[s]”.⁶¹ Where hierarchies, at least in principle, can be “seen as open to change, as contingent and shifting”, dualistic constructions generally become naturalised and so entrenched. They provide a “way of construing difference in terms of the *logic* of hierarchy”,⁶² and involve a “process by which contrasting concepts (for example, masculine and feminine gender identities) are formed by domination and subordination and constructed as oppositional and exclusive.”⁶³

⁵⁹ Id.

⁶⁰ Id 42.

⁶¹ Id 47.

⁶² Id 32, my emphasis, referencing Derrida, *Positions*.

⁶³ Id 31.

For Plumwood they are an important feature of “process[es] in which power forms identity, [and] which distort both sides of what [they] split apart, the master and the slave, the coloniser and the colonised, ... human and nature”.⁶⁴ In this sense, dualisms as Plumwood describes them represent “an alienated form of differentiation”, in which “power construes and constructs difference [from itself] in terms of an inferior and alien realm.”⁶⁵ They involve the imagination of orders of being as “systematically higher and lower, as inferior and superior, as ruler and ruled”: and in so doing, “treat the division as part of the natures of beings construed not merely as different but as belonging to radically different orders or kinds”.⁶⁶

In dualistic identity constructions, Plumwood writes, “the qualities (actual or supposed), the culture, the values and the areas of life associated with the dualised other are systematically and pervasively constructed and depicted as inferior”.⁶⁷ It is in this sense, for Plumwood, that – following Albert Memmi – “colonisation creates the colonised just as it...creates the colonizer”.⁶⁸ The “relationship of denied dependency” that they manifest “determines a certain kind of logical structure, in which the denial and the relation of

⁶⁴ Id 32.

⁶⁵ Id 42.

⁶⁶ Id 48.

⁶⁷ Id 47.

⁶⁸ Id, quoting Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 91.

domination/subordination shape the identity of both the relata".⁶⁹ It leads to "relation[s] of separation and domination [being] inscribed and naturalised in culture",⁷⁰ up to a point where there emerges "intense, established and developed cultural expression[s] of such a hierarchical relationship", which "construct central cultural concepts and identities so as to make equality and mutuality literally unthinkable".⁷¹

In the context of intra-human relations of domination, Plumwood notes, this can lead to "the inferiorised group [internalising] this inferiorisation in its identity and collud[ing] in [its own] valuation, honouring the values of the centre, which form the dominant social values".⁷² This is a theme that has long been a focus of political thought, including in the writings of Simone de Beauvoir on gender, and the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois on race.⁷³

One of the contributions of critical ecofeminism, viewed as an inspiration for environmental political theory, is the way it extends this focus to the dualism of "humanity" and "nature".

It is important to note that Plumwood is not making the claim that there is no such thing as difference or distinctiveness. She is not claiming that distinctiveness as a property of relationships does not exist. This would be false. Instead, she is claiming that dualistic

⁶⁹ Id 41.

⁷⁰ Id 47.

⁷¹ Id.

⁷² Id.

⁷³ For instance, Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*; Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*; Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880*.

articulations of difference enable a posture of mastery and domination to be “institutionalised and ‘naturalised’ by latching on to existing forms of difference”.⁷⁴ This is one language for describing the sleight-of-hand I described in chapter 1, which sees claims about human distinctiveness converted into claims about human “separateness”. It is not the fact of distinction *per se* that is problematic; instead it is its “dualistic construction”.⁷⁵

The focus on logic and the structural relations between dualisms here is powerful because it enables connections to be made between the unfolding of various forms of domination. This, in turn, allows for lessons learned in one domain to be deployed or considered in another. It also moves away from the idea, common to certain forms of critical thought, that all forms of domination can and should be understood as reducible to one real-world property or identity characteristic (e.g., class). Couching the discussion in terms of the idea of a “master identity” allows Plumwood to avoid “repeat[ing] the mistakes of a reductionist programme such as Marxism, which treats one form of domination as central and aims to reduce all others to subsidiary forms of it which will ‘wither away’ once the ‘fundamental’ form is overcome”.⁷⁶ (The same caution is necessary to avoid reducing all the world’s ills to “coloniality”). On her account, it is not one single form of domination or mastery that serves as the archetypal form from which others grow or stem. Instead, as noted, it is “the multiple,

⁷⁴ Plumwood 42.

⁷⁵ Id 33.

⁷⁶ Id 5.

complex cultural identity of the master” – “formed in the [concrete] context[s] of class, race[,] species and gender domination”, that should be the target of critique.⁷⁷

Plumwood’s central argument, then, is that the “way of being constructed as other” that appears quite often through European thought – and certainly appears in separatism – has a “logical pattern’ that is consistent across constructions of otherness in a variety of different domains. This underlying connection or resonance between the logical structure of various dualisms “can have their derivation from or connection to [the] basic form revealed by making explicit further implicit assumptions which connect them”: assumptions that Plumwood refers to as “linking postulates”.⁷⁸ These are “assumptions normally made or implicit in the cultural background which create equivalences or mapping between the pairs” – as, for instance, where “the postulate that all and only humans possess culture maps the culture/nature pair on to the human/nature pair”.⁷⁹

As well as enabling lessons to be deployed across concrete domains, this focus on the underlying logic or structure of dominating relationships offers an anchor for thinking amongst an often-confusing flurry of ideas and practical activity. In contexts where “[b]oth

⁷⁷ Id.

⁷⁸ Id 45.

⁷⁹ Id.

rationality and nature have a confusing array of meanings”,⁸⁰ and where there are often slippages between these meanings, and between literal speech and metaphor, this capacity to identify linkages offers a useful orienting-point. It also allows for a clearer consideration of the ways in which “in most of [its] meanings[,] reason contrasts systematically with nature in one of its many senses” – whether these are imagined as related to “emotions, the body, the passions, animality, the primitive or uncivilised, the non-human world, matter, physicality [or] sense experience.”⁸¹ It allows for an acknowledgement that, even as the meanings of reason and nature “are multiple [and may] have shifted” over time, “the strategies of mastery [continue to be] played out between the mastering one and dualised other”.⁸²

In terms that resonate quite explicitly with my discussion of separatism, Plumwood notes how

[v]ariations in the concepts of nature and reason have enabled the long-running story of reason and nature to remain relevant, to guide changes in technological development and to provide a reliable conceptual response to widely varying circumstances and opportunities. The flexibility of these concepts has enabled the

⁸⁰ Id 19.

⁸¹ Id.

⁸² Id 191.

strategies of mastery to be transferred across sites of oppression as mastering reason invades and colonises those others counted as nature.⁸³

She also notes, in terms that inspire my analysis in chapter 1, “dualisms such as reason/nature may be ancient, but others such as human/nature and subject/object are associated especially with modern, post-enlightenment consciousness” – but even when this happens, “the ancient forms do not necessarily fade away because their original context has changed”: instead, they are often “preserved” through subsequent conceptual revolutions in the form of what Plumwood calls “residues”.⁸⁴

In more concrete terms, the central link between these different forms of domination as Plumwood sees it is “exclusion from the master category of reason”.⁸⁵ It is this that “links the domination of humans to the domination of nature”, and vice versa.⁸⁶ “Nature”, in its various senses, ends up being imagined as a “field of multiple exclusion[s] and forms of control, not only of non-humans, but of various groups of humans and aspects of human life which are cast as natur[al]”.⁸⁷ This approach generates intellectual and practical projects that are

⁸³ Id.

⁸⁴ Id 43.

⁸⁵ Id 4.

⁸⁶ Id.

⁸⁷ Id.

“centr[ed] around [the master’s] distance from the feminine, from nature as necessity, from such ‘natural’ areas in human life as reproduction, and around control, domination and inferiorisation of the natural sphere”.⁸⁸ They are “interrelated and mutually reinforcing”;⁸⁹ and they lead to a “systematically distorted” view of the world, with an entrenched inability to “acknowledge dependency on nature” (or, for that matter, anything else).⁹⁰

To be defined as “natural” in this context is to be defined as “passive, as non-agent and non-subject” – as the “the ‘environment’ or invisible background conditions against which the ‘foreground’ achievements of reason or culture...take place”.⁹¹ The general conclusion Plumwood draws from this network of dualisms is that

Because western culture has conceived the central features of humanity in terms of the dominator identity of the master, and has empowered qualities and areas of life classed as masculine [or human] over those classed as feminine [or natural], it has evolved as hierarchical, aggressive and destructive of nature and of life, including human life.⁹²

⁸⁸ Id 34.

⁸⁹ Id 42.

⁹⁰ Id i.

⁹¹ Id 4.

⁹² Id 30.

At this point I want to note that the breadth of this view means that it can be easily caricatured, as a sort of sophomoric or Nietzschean dismissal of meaning or reason in general. For this reason it is crucial to note the qualifications that Plumwood herself offers. As she notes, the move to reject specific conceptions or imaginaries of reason does not involve rejecting reason as a category *per se*. Nor does it imply “the rejection of all attempts to structure or systematise reason”,⁹³ or the rejection of work to understand, contextualise and develop human logics and reasoning practices. It is not, in this sense, irrationalist. Instead, it involves the “rejection of those [imaginaries of reason] which promote dualistic accounts of otherness”.⁹⁴ In more detailed terms:

critiquing the dominant forms of reason which embody the master identity and oppose themselves to the sphere of nature does not imply abandoning all forms of reason, science and individuality. Rather, it involves their redefinition or reconstruction in less oppositional and hierarchical ways. To uncover the political identity behind these dominant forms of reason is not to decrease, but rather greatly to increase, the scope and power of political analysis.⁹⁵

⁹³ Id 42.

⁹⁴ Id.

⁹⁵ Id 4.

3.3.2 Dualism as a logical structure has five core perverting effects or consequences.

Moving towards more practical considerations – those which allow for the identification of problematic features in particular projects and forms of relating in practice – Plumwood identifies a set of five features that she proposes form the core of dualist constructions of ideas. These are: “backgrounding”; “radical exclusion” or “hyperseparation”; “incorporation” or “relational definition”; “instrumentalism” or “objectification”; and “homogenization” or “stereotyping”.⁹⁶ I will consider each of these in turn.

Background or denial of dependence, as Plumwood defines it, is “a complex feature which results from the irresolvable conflicts the relationship of domination creates for the master”, as he “attempts both to make use of the other, organising, relying on and benefiting from the other’s services, and [simultaneously attempts] to deny the dependency which this creates”.⁹⁷ Denial, she notes, “can take many forms”: including “making the other inessential, denying the importance of the other’s contribution ... [and] treating the other as the background to the master’s foreground”.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Id 48-53.

⁹⁷ Id 48.

⁹⁸ Id 48.

What Plumwood calls the “backgrounding” of nature involves the “denial of dependence on biospheric processes”, and consists – similarly to the view I have been exploring in this dissertation – in “a view of humans as apart, outside of nature”, and a view of nature as “a limitless provider without needs of its own”.⁹⁹ For Plumwood, this denial of dependence is of a piece with similar denials of dependence “on the whole sphere of reproduction and subsistence”.¹⁰⁰

Radical exclusion or hyperseparation for Plumwood arises from the fact that “the other [needs] to be treated as not merely different but inferior, part of a lower, different order of being”: and it consists in “demand[ing] not merely distinctness but radical exclusion, not merely separation but hyperseparation”.¹⁰¹ This corresponds to the distinctiveness/separation discussion I have engaged in through this dissertation. For Plumwood, this “relation of radical exclusion has special characteristics”: as she notes, “for non-identity or otherness, there need be only a single characteristic which is different, possessed by the one but not the other, in order to guarantee distinctness according to the usual treatment of identity” (for instance, as she notes, Leibniz’s Law).¹⁰² In situations “[w]here items are constructed or

⁹⁹ Id 21.

¹⁰⁰ Id.

¹⁰¹ Id 49.

¹⁰² Id.

construed according to dualistic relationship”, the master “tries to magnify, to emphasise and to maximise the number and importance of differences and to eliminate or treat as inessential shared qualities, and hence to achieve maximum separation”.¹⁰³

Incorporation or relational definition, the third feature of “dualistically construed opposites” as Plumwood describes them, is that “the underside of a dualistically conceived pair is defined in relation to the upperside as a lack, a negativity”.¹⁰⁴ This is the another way of describing the P/not-P framing of dualisms: the second element in the pair, not-P, has an identity wholly prescribed by its lack of whatever characteristic makes the first entity distinctive (humanness, for instance, or reason).

Instrumentalism or objectification, a fourth characteristic of dualisms as Plumwood describes them, consists in the view that the entity “on the lower side of the dualism[is] obliged to put aside [its] own interests for those of the master or centre”, and is “conceived of as his instruments, a means to his ends”, and as “part of a network of purposes which are defined in terms of or harnessed to the master’s purposes and needs”¹⁰⁵ – even as, significantly, “the relationship is usually ... presented as being in the interests of the dominated as well as the

¹⁰³ Id.

¹⁰⁴ Id 52.

¹⁰⁵ Id 53.

dominator”.¹⁰⁶

As a part of this process, for Plumwood, the “lower side is also objectified”, and imagined as a domain “without ends of its own”, such that its ends can be “defined [solely] in terms of the master’s ends”.¹⁰⁷ This precludes possibility of “empathically recognis[ing]” the other or imagining it as in some sense “moral kin”, and facilitates the imposition of various desires, ends, or purposes in accordance with the master perspective or view.¹⁰⁸

Homogenisation or stereotyping, the fifth feature of dualisms described by Plumwood, arises out of the fact that the “dominated class must appear suitably homogeneous if it is to be able to conform to and confirm its ‘nature’”. It means that “differences among the inferiorised group are disregarded”.¹⁰⁹ The complexities, internal distinctions and – often – tensions in the inferiorised group are flattened or smoothed over in favour of a bland and universalising characterisation of their sameness.

These five characteristics, as Plumwood notes, work in tandem to create the kinds of dualistic identity pairs that facilitate attitudes of mastery and domination.

¹⁰⁶ Id.

¹⁰⁷ Id.

¹⁰⁸ Id.

¹⁰⁹ Id, quoting Hartsock, “Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women,” 160–61.

3.3.3 Purporting to respond to dualisms by “inverting” or “dissolving” them is not an effective or adequate response.

The fact that dualism has a *logical* structure means that “escape from dualised relationship and dualised identity represents a particularly difficult problem, involving a sort of logical maze”.¹¹⁰ In the face of this “maze”, two common – but counterproductive – strategies often appear in the literature. The first involves what Plumwood calls “uncritical reversal”, and consists in simply attempting to “flip” the dualism at issue: to suggest that, where once humans were at the top of the hierarchy, now “nature” must be considered to be so, and so forth. The second is what she calls “uncritical equality”, and consists in purporting to dissolve the distinction altogether – to claim, for instance, that differentiating between humans and “nature” is either illegitimate and/or impossible.

The first strategy, inversion or reversal, appears in a good deal of misanthropic-leaning deep ecology, as well as in some more liberal work. It does not succeed because, as Plumwood notes, it “attempt[s] to treat dualism as a simple hierarchy”, and fails to “atten[d] to the identity-forming functions of colonisation”.¹¹¹ As a consequence of this, any “new identity”

¹¹⁰ Id 42.

¹¹¹ Id 61.

imagined via such a process will continue to be “specified in reaction to the coloniser and still in relation to him... accept[ing] wholly or partly the dualistic construction of identity”, and thus making the break from the previous identity an “illusion”.¹¹² The hope that the problem at issue will be solved simply by “affirming the slave’s character or culture” is misguided, because “this character as it stands is not an independently constituted nature, but equally represents a distortion”, and “reflects...the master’s character and culture”.¹¹³

Importantly in the present context, this means that (both for women and for other “others”), “access to technological means of separating from and mastering nature... will not provide a genuine liberatory alternative”, but instead simply “reactively preserves and maintains the original dualism in the character of what is now affirmed”.¹¹⁴ It does not, in other words, attend to the fact that the problem is not distinction per se, but the relationship of domination that it can, contingently, engender. This point can be made obvious by considering intra-human dualisms. Here it would suggest, for example, that the binary male/female should be inverted so that, where men have historically dominated women, now women are entitled to dominate men. Such an approach quite clearly perpetuates a logic of unilateral power, hatred, and alienation, rather than seeking for relationships that allow for truth-telling, catharsis, accountability, and regeneration.

¹¹² Id.

¹¹³ Id 32.

¹¹⁴ Id.

The second strategy, dissolution or merger, often appears in work inspired by the linguistic or postmodern turn in fields like gender studies. It also appears as a part of some broadly monist approaches to environmental ontologies. This strategy does not work either. In large part this is because it relies upon the thought that it is the fact of drawing distinctions *per se*, as opposed to the idea that a certain posture or ethos that can be used in drawing distinctions, that is the problematic thing about dualisms. This is not a sustainable or practical position to take. In a fundamental way, the capacity to *make* distinctions between entities, even imagined distinctions, is both a primordial feature of language and, arguably, a condition of possibility or enabling constraint for human symbolic cognition in general.

Speaking more practically, attempting to “outlaw” it is unlikely to succeed. The “resolution” to dualism cannot be “merger” – the “elimination of the problematic boundary between the one and the other, the coloniser and the colonised”.¹¹⁵ This is a failure of imagination which leads to problems that are potentially as significant as the move to hyperseparate or dualise. From a pragmatic perspective it also robs communities of imaginative vocabularies by which to continue discussing ideas and considering alternatives.

To elaborate on this point, Plumwood offers a critique of Judith Butler’s work on the

¹¹⁵ Id 59.

“unsettling” of existing identities. Butler famously argues, in Plumwood’s words, for the “proliferat[ion of] gender configurations” that are supposed to “destabilis[e] substantive identity and depriv[e] the naturalising narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists”.¹¹⁶ For Plumwood, this move is as misguided as the strategy of inversion or reversal, and does not address the underlying issue. This is because, as she notes, “the problem of dualism ... [does not consist in] binarism, the number two, or the setting of limits to the self by the boundary of otherness”.¹¹⁷ As such, the “fracturing of binarism” is “not sufficient for escaping the deep structures of colonization”,¹¹⁸ which are perpetuated not through binaries themselves but through the ethos or posture that they facilitate.

As the career of subsequent movements in identity politics have made clear, this “dissolution of gender identity through destabilisation and the definitive act of parody recommended by poststructuralists” ends up “form[ing] anti-identities which become further identities”, that are “still defined essentially in relation to the objects of parody which originate in the problematic of colonization”.¹¹⁹ In more straightforward terms: domination is just as possible in cultural contexts where there are dozens of gender identities as it is where there are two.

¹¹⁶ Id 63, quoting Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 146.

¹¹⁷ Id.

¹¹⁸ Id.

¹¹⁹ Id.

As in strategies of inversion or reversal, this “not only continues to tie the subject to the master”, but also “has to face the problem of allowing for a multiplicity of responses to traditional gender identity”, and so – as a “parodic strategy” – can “hardly be universally prescribed as the only possible stance feminists [and others] might adopt towards [binaries like]... gender ideals”.¹²⁰ To be clear, this is not the claim that no work should be done to facilitate a broader range of gender expressions, or broader understandings of “naturalness” and “nature”. It is instead the simpler claim that any such work, taken alone, will never be enough (and, done unskillfully, might perpetuate the underlying issue).

These two points can be applied both to the searches for anti-separatist content in narratives, and to the relations between cultures that are adopted or assumed as part of these searches.

In the first case, purporting to reverse the priority of humans and nature, or purporting to outlaw the distinction, are both strategies that are likely to fail. In the second, reversing the priority of “Europeans” and “other”, or erasing this distinction in the name of a blanket “Humanity”, are equally likely to fail.

Here Plumwood agrees with the Marxian social ecologist Murray Bookchin that (in

¹²⁰ Id.

Plumwood's words), "the use of the blanket category 'human' obscures highly relevant cultural and other differences between human groups, and differences in responsibility for and benefits from the exploitation of nature".¹²¹ A "universalised concept of 'humanity'", as she sees it, "can be used also to deflect political critique", and can be used to "obscure the fact that the forces directing the destruction of nature and the wealth produced from it are owned and controlled overwhelmingly by an unaccountable, mainly white, mainly male elite".¹²² This is the same critique, incidentally, that has been applied to work using the concept of the "Anthropocene": that it is problematic because it implies that "it is simply humanity as a species which is the problem and ... use[s] the blanket concept 'human' to cover over vitally important social, political and genderbased analyses".¹²³

At the same time, as Plumwood writes, notes, it is valid and important to critique "the way human identity has been treated in particular influential cultures".¹²⁴ This is because – as the provinciality of human separatism suggests – it is "the development ... of a particular concept and practice of human identity and relationship to nature which is the problem, not the state of being human as such".¹²⁵ This means that critiquing the relevant imaginaries of "humanity" and human being "must be part of the familiar and healthy practice of self-

¹²¹ Id.

¹²² Id 12.

¹²³ Id.

¹²⁴ Id.

¹²⁵ Id.

critical reflection, not an acultural and ahistorical expression of self-hatred and collective human-species guilt”.¹²⁶

As part of this reflection, Plumwood argues, “the question of relation to nature [must be] explicitly put up for consideration and renegotiation”.¹²⁷ If it is not, it will turn out to have been “already settled—and settled in an unsatisfactory way—by the dominant western model of humanity”.¹²⁸ This model, as noted, is one of “domination [over] and transcendence of nature, in which freedom and virtue are construed in terms of control over, and distance from, the sphere of nature, necessity and the feminine”.¹²⁹ In other words, an imaginary of infinite freedom, set up in opposition to nature and necessity (and, in Plumwood’s terms, the feminine), like that which animates the imaginary of human separatism.

Crucially, just as the move to critique particular conceptions of reason should not be confused with irrationalism, so too is it important to avoid conflating critiques of particular logics with some form of “illogicism”. Plumwood acknowledges that logic “has had a worse reputation than most other disciplines among feminists”, and has been seen “as a sphere of unlimited abstraction and contest for mastery of the other”.¹³⁰ But she is adamant that such

¹²⁶ Id.

¹²⁷ Id.

¹²⁸ Id 23.

¹²⁹ Id.

¹³⁰ Id 55, quoting Walkerdine, *The Mastery of Reason*, 199.

a view is not compelling. It is, instead, an “indiscriminate condemnatio[n]”, which has the same sort of dominating (and impractical) overtones as that which it seeks to condemn. For Plumwood, these blanket condemnations “hide rather than expose the politics of reason”, because they “obscur[e] the extent to which the selection of particular practices and types of theories has operated to support” particular, and contingent, perspectives.¹³¹

This kind of hostile approach shoots itself in the foot, as it were, by “discount[ing] the diversity of practices and theories” that are intelligible across classical and non-classical traditions, and also across the European/non-European distinction. In so doing, it robs itself of potential avenues of learning and of inspiration. In the context of science, such avenues include feminist and Indigenous approaches to knowledge production. In the context of logic, they include work on paraconsistent, non-classical and Buddhist logics.¹³²

Here, Plumwood’s perspective resonates with Quijano’s. It is mistaken, as she writes, to suppose that logic is “monolith[ic]”: that “there is just one Logic, one way to order the world”, when in fact there is a great diversity of ways.¹³³ In reality, from a critical perspective, and just “as in other areas of knowledge”, “there are competing and contested

¹³¹ Id.

¹³² Id.

¹³³ Id.

accounts of reason, and correspondingly of logical systems".¹³⁴ Moving forward, "[s]election from among them [can be] made in accordance with the principles of theory selection used in other areas, and is influenced by the same sort of [desired] social relations".¹³⁵

3.3.4 What is needed instead is critical affirmation, which proceeds not only in terms of logic but also in terms of narratives or stories.

If neither inversion/reversal nor merger/equality are feasible strategies for responding to dualisms, the question arises: what other strategies are possible? Here, Plumwood maintains, a clear-eyed understanding of the "structural features" of dualisms can be used to "clarif[y] some of the steps which need to be taken in overcoming dualised identity".¹³⁶ These must consist, she notes, in terms that are again reminiscent of Quijano's, in "the reconstruction of relationship and identity in terms of a non-hierarchical concept of difference".¹³⁷

What is required, she suggests, is "critical affirmation".¹³⁸ Such affirmation treats the past (dualistic) imagination of identities as "an important if problematic tradition which requires critical reconstruction, a potential source of strength as well as a problem, and a ground of

¹³⁴ Id 56.

¹³⁵ Id.

¹³⁶ Id 60.

¹³⁷ Id.

¹³⁸ Id 64.

both continuity and difference with traditional ideals” – and should be able to “correct the distortions of western culture through the affirmation and empowerment of the areas of culture and life” that were previously ignored, humiliated or denied.¹³⁹ Escaping the relevant dualisms and their logic “requires a dialectical movement”; one that “recognise[s] both the relationship and continuity denied by backgrounding and radical exclusion, and ... affirm[s] the difference and independence of the other denied by incorporation and the definition of the other in relation to the self as lack and as instrument”.¹⁴⁰

This critical affirmation, in Plumwood’s terms, is “not just recognition of difference, but recognition of a complex, interacting pattern of both continuity *and* difference”.¹⁴¹ The concrete cases in the discussion she offers focus on the intra-human debate about feminine difference (which has, of course, been a significant focus for political theory), but they can – given the correspondence in logical structures she identifies – be applied to the humanity/nature dualism. Critical affirmation and reconstruction, she proposes, will have features that correspond to and aim to correct or remedy each of the five features of dualistic approaches that she identifies.

Backgrounding and denial of dependence should be addressed by incorporating “a move to

¹³⁹ Id.

¹⁴⁰ Id 67.

¹⁴¹ Id, my emphasis.

systems of thought, accounting, perception, decision-making, which recognise the contribution of what has been backgrounded, and which acknowledge dependency”.¹⁴² Radical exclusion should be addressed by “affirm[ing] continuity”, even as it “reconceive[s] relata in more integrated ways, and break the false choice hyperseparation presents in reclaiming the denied area of overlap”.¹⁴³ Incorporation should be addressed by “review[ing] the identities of both underside and upperside”, with a view to “rediscover[ing] a language and story for the underside”, as well as “reclaim[ing] positive independent sources of identity and affirm[ing] resistance”.¹⁴⁴ Instrumentalism should be addressed by “recognising the other as a centre of needs, value and striving on its own account”, whose “ends and needs are independent of the self and [must] be respected” in their own right”.¹⁴⁵ And homogenization, finally, should be addressed by “recognising the complexity and diversity of the ‘other nations’ [that] have been homogenised and marginalised in their constitution as excluded other, as ‘the rest’”.¹⁴⁶ Plumwood notes how these remedies “correspond to the central conceptual and cultural concerns of various liberation movements”:¹⁴⁷ and indeed, since the 1993 publication of her work, have been taken up and developed in a variety of different directions.

¹⁴² Id 60.

¹⁴³ Id.

¹⁴⁴ Id.

¹⁴⁵ Id. It should be noted that the question of what this recognition and respect consist of in practice remain fraught, and must continue to be acknowledged as a question with ineradicable political and ethical dimensions

¹⁴⁶ Id.

¹⁴⁷ Id.

For my purposes it is significant, finally, that Plumwood couches her discussion explicitly in terms of “stories”.¹⁴⁸ This resonates with the account of imaginative vocabularies I aim to suggest here. In her concluding remarks, Plumwood speaks in terms of “remaking the story” that has guided this particular development.¹⁴⁹ She proposes that although the “master story of colonisation” can appear “so finely knit and familiar it could almost pass for our own bodies”, we do “still [have] some power” to reject the definitions of the master story, and can “remain active and intentional subjects, and ... effect change, on ourselves and on the course of the social world”.¹⁵⁰ Narratives of domination have exhausted themselves, and those under their sway, with their focus on “conquest and control, ... capture and use, ... destruction and incorporation”.¹⁵¹ But there is “inspiration for new, less destructive guiding stories [that] can be drawn from [other] sources”.¹⁵² For Plumwood in this regard this can include “subordinated and ignored parts of western culture, such as women’s stories of care”.¹⁵³ For my purposes, it also includes narratives from other cultures.

Plumwood suggests that we can “gain new ideas from a study, undertaken in humility and

¹⁴⁸ Id 190.

¹⁴⁹ Id 195.

¹⁵⁰ Id.

¹⁵¹ Id 196.

¹⁵² Id.

¹⁵³ Id.

sympathy, of the sustaining stories of the cultures we have cast as outside reason”.¹⁵⁴

Sustainable futures, she suggests, “depen[d] increasingly on our ability to create a truly democratic and ecological culture beyond dualism”.¹⁵⁵ “If we are to survive into a liveable future”, she writes, “we must take into our own hands the power to create, restore and explore different stories, with new main characters, better plots, and at least the possibility of some happ[ier] endings”.¹⁵⁶ Amongst other things, she notes, this should involve “learn[ing] to recognise and eject the master identity in culture, in ourselves, and in political and economic structures”, just as “the project of expelling the master from human culture and the project of recognising and changing the colonising politics of western relations to other earth nations converge”, and “both these projects converge with the project of survival”.¹⁵⁷ A “central part” of all these projects, she writes, again with Quijano, is “that of remaking reason in a different mould from the master mould”.¹⁵⁸

From the perspective of the arguments I have made in this project, both the content of any such alternative story and the processes by which it is imagined and developed sought should “find a form [that] encourages sensitivity to the conditions under which we exist on the earth”: one that “recognises and accommodates the denied relationships of dependency and

¹⁵⁴ Id.

¹⁵⁵ Id.

¹⁵⁶ Id.

¹⁵⁷ Id.

¹⁵⁸ Id.

enables us to acknowledge our debt to [the many] sustaining others” that exist around us, be they human or otherwise.¹⁵⁹ Such a “democratic culture beyond dualism”, facilitating the “ending [of] colonising relationships” and the “finding [of] a mutual, ethical basis for enriching coexistence with earth others”, should involve work to “realign reason not with the master formations of elite control and the rational egoism which fails to acknowledge the other as a limiting principle, but with social formations built on radical democracy, co-operation and mutuality”.¹⁶⁰

Here again is a reflection upon the strength and resilience of difference: an exploration of the alterative and more ecological “rationality of the mutual self, the self which can take joy in the flourishing of others, which can acknowledge kinship but also feast on the other’s resistance and grow strong on their difference”.¹⁶¹ “Such a rationality”, Plumwood writes, “could begin to treasure the incomparable riches of diversity in the world’s cultural and biological life, and to participate with earth others in the great dialogues of the community of life”.¹⁶²

To summarise: Plumwood’s critical ecofeminist ideas offer a more powerful vehicle than the

¹⁵⁹ Id 196.

¹⁶⁰ Id.

¹⁶¹ Id.

¹⁶² Id.

literature on coloniality does for devising creative approaches both to the content of human separatist ideas, and – as part of this process – the process of relating in non-dominating ways to other cultures and cosmologies, and especially those that seem from the outside to contain insights or practices that might serve as inspirations for anti-separatist work in the context of modern or European traditions. In the next two sections, I will consider how her critique can be applied to human separatism specifically, and then how her suggestions for reconstructions can be used to develop some design parameters for anti-separatist work.

3.4. Human separatism is dominating in both theory and practice.

I am now in a position to deepen the analysis of human separatism I offered in chapter 2. I argued there that the concept of “separation” is incoherent, but was not yet in a position to articulate, except negatively, what this incoherence consisted in, or what its consequences were. With the resources I have introduced in this chapter, I can specify both the negative consequences of this incoherence in theory, and also its consequences in practice.

Human separatism perverts the way we imagine the present and the future, and is colonial and dominating in its ethos and unconscionable as a view to be continued with. It is not merely a consequence of terrors of death: it is a sort of opportunistic perversion of human needs. It is a warping of desires for belonging, purpose, and meaning: desires that are themselves both understandable and in fact deeply humane, but also capable of manifesting in pathological ways, when they must exist amongst broader contexts of domination and failures of accountability and processing.

3.4.1 Human separatism is dualist in both theory and practice.

The beating heart of human separatism – the thought that it is possible and desirable to “separate” from nature – is based on a dualistic imagining of the relationship between *Homo sapiens* and the natural world. On the one hand is “Humans”: on the other, “nature”. This, in turn, gives rise to a dualistic set of practices or approaches to that relationship, which are geared towards and result in domination. It also, and not coincidentally, fits neatly with the kinds of dominating posture towards intra-human others, like those from the cultures that past adventures in colonialism have already impacted and displaced, which human separatist projects can easily adopt. It is this second concern that becomes a particular issue for those who would seek to engage with these other views as part of a quest to move beyond human

separatist thinking (which must, my argument goes, also involve moving beyond human separatist forms of *relating*).

In addition to “Humanity” and “nature”, “technology” and “separation” are also framed in ways that suggest they have no history and no cultural specificity – when in fact, as I have aimed to suggest here, each of them are imagined in terms that are in fact highly provincial. Despite this, the narratives of human separatism present them as if they are relatively content-free and therefore politically neutral, given, or “natural”. They are also framed in terms that enables them to frustrate questions about their accountability to specific times, places, and peoples, as well as other beings. The concept of separation, in particular, hides its genealogy and cultural/historical specificity, even as it subtly adapt itself in response to changing material and cultural contexts. They hide their own specificity – their emergence from a particular “ethnie”, in Quijano’s terms, and thus their embeddedness in a particular cosmology and form of rationality – behind abstract universality.

There are hints in this respect of the critique of abstract universals as articulated in postcolonial scholarship, but it is here that Plumwood’s analysis, and specifically her

articulation of the five features of dualistic relationships (backgrounding, hyperseparation, relational definition, instrumentalisation and homogenisation), becomes useful.¹⁶³

3.4.1.1 Plumwood's five features of dualisms appear in the conceptual framework of human separatism.

Human separatism backgrounds nature – “den[ying human] dependence on biospheric processes” and tacitly endorsing a view of nature as “a limitless provider without needs of its own”¹⁶⁴ – in the process of imagining Humanity as a worldwide actor with the potential to exert its agency over everything else in the world. Its embrace of the modern concept of progress, in particular, sets the stage for a hubristic account of this Humanity as the protagonist, not just of Earthly life, but potentially of the solar system or even the universe. It also sets up the imagined move to “insulate” or “decouple” humanity from its dependencies upon and embeddednesses within the natural world.

Human separatism purports to exclude nature – or in Plumwood's terms, “hyperseparate” Humanity from nature – as part of its two contradictory core premises. These are, recall,

¹⁶³ There is a broad body of ecofeminist thought already dedicated to describing the consequences of dualistic understandings of the relationship between humanity and the natural world. Rather than attempting to summarise it here, I will limit myself to outlining the way in which Plumwood's terminology in particular can map onto this particular dualism as it appears in human separatism.

¹⁶⁴ Plumwood 21.

that human beings are somehow already separate from nature – that nature should “be treated as not merely different but inferior, part of a lower, different order of being” – and must at the same time consummate this separation or difference by “demand[ing] not merely distinctness but radical exclusion, not merely separation but hyperseparation”.¹⁶⁵ The story of human beings that it tells “magnif[ies], emphasise[s] and ... maximise[s] the number and importance of differences [from nature] and ... eliminate[s] or treat[s] as inessential shared qualities”,¹⁶⁶ including limited agency and mortality. It results in a slippage between empirical and metaphysical, descriptive and normative, distinctiveness and separation claims about “humanity” and human beings, which intensifies the backgrounding outlined above.

Human separatism incorporates or relationally defines “nature” – imagining it as “defined in relation to [Humanity] as a lack, a negativity”.¹⁶⁷ This move appears, again, as part of the narration of whichever feature of human beings is being imagined as the thing that separates us from everything else. The most obvious example of this is the discussion of reason and freedom that threads itself through the tradition: as ecofeminists have repeatedly noted,¹⁶⁸ nature is defined as the domain characterized by the absence or lack of (human) capacities for freedom, and thus as a place of brute necessity, amorality and determinism. Nature is

¹⁶⁵ Id 49.

¹⁶⁶ Id.

¹⁶⁷ Id 52.

¹⁶⁸ For instance, Carolyn Merchant: Merchant, *The Death of Nature*.

nothing but a place with no humans, or an entity or set of processes without familiar human characteristics and possibilities.

Human separatism instrumentalises “nature” when it imagines nature as a “means to [the] ends” of human beings, and “a network of purposes which are defined in terms of or harnessed to the master’s purposes and needs”.¹⁶⁹ importantly, even as it “present[s the relationship] as being in the interests of the dominated [natural world] as well as the dominator”.¹⁷⁰ This move, as noted earlier, precludes any “empathically recogni[tion]” of natural systems or other creatures beyond their orientation towards the purposes of human beings. If nature has no “needs” – or if that term is too anthropomorphic, no boundaries, dependencies, or regenerative requirements – it can be reimagined as an entity that stands in reserve (in Heidegger’s phrase¹⁷¹) for human desires and ends.

Human separatism homogenises “nature”, finally, as evident in the breadth of the term itself, and also in the abstract, de-localised senses in which technology is supposed to be able to facilitate “decoupling” from human systems without reference to local histories, characteristics, or conditions. Everything outside Humanity and its trajectories is lumped-together as lumping-together of everything outside humanity as “nature”. This makes the

¹⁶⁹ Plumwood 53.

¹⁷⁰ Id.

¹⁷¹ From Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*.

category of nature immensely broad, and flexible, and often – as Plumwood notes – self-contradictory, serving as it does as a catch-all for everything from biospheric processes, to assumptions of ahistoricity or “apoliticality”, to expressions of philosophical determinism.

In all these ways, human separatism in theory evinces the kinds of relationships described as part of Plumwood’s study of the “logic” of domination and of mastery.

3.4.1.2 Plumwood’s five features of dualisms also appear in the practical ways that human separatism engages with other cosmologies and their practitioners.

As well as being dualistic in its conceptual structure, human separatism demonstrates a dualistic approach in practice: in the concrete ways it relates to human otherness, and specifically other imaginaries of the human-nature relationship. It is not only “nature”, in other words, that human separatism imagines in dualistic terms, in these respects, but also the other human cultures, perspectives on and approaches to “nature” that might otherwise pose a challenge to its own universal application. Here, the dualism at issue is something like human separatist views/other views, or a master human view as opposed to other human views and conceptions of “nature” and the natural world. This is an important posture or ethos to pay attention to, because – as I will argue in section 5 – it is this set of relations or practices that even anti-separatists are at risk of reproducing, if they are not careful, in their

attempts to engage with the cosmologies and stories of other cultures as a part of their various projects.

Human separatism backgrounds the cosmologies and practitioners of other cultures in the way that it “attempts both to make use of” their insights into the structure and functioning of natural systems – insights developed in many cases over hundreds or even thousands of generations – and exploits the knowledge and labour of local populations, even as it “den[ies] the importance” of that labour and knowledge.¹⁷² Examples may seem workaday, but they can include moves to exploit local populations in research; incorporations of the ideas and experiences of these populations without attribution; etc. In these kinds of cases, the care and perspectives of others are assimilated to human separatism’s dominating project, often over the objections of the relevant practitioners themselves.

Human separatism backgrounds the cosmologies and practitioners of other cultures when it imagines itself to have evolved *sui generis*, without any need for exposure to or influence by the other cultures that were, in fact, central interlocutors as European-oriented ideas about nature were taking shape.¹⁷³ It views humans as somehow “outside of nature” (although, as I noted above, not “outside” enough) – but can all-too-easily relegate “natives” to the realm of

¹⁷² Plumwood 48.

¹⁷³ For a rebuttal of this point see Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*.

“nature”, or requires them to adopt broadly modernist understandings of the natural world in order to participate in colonial systems.¹⁷⁴ This contributes to the sense that human separatism is the only possible way to imagine human relationships with the world, which further backgrounds other imaginaries and perspectives.

Human separatism radically excludes the cosmologies and practitioners of other cultures when it treats them, implicitly or explicitly, as “not merely different but inferior, part of a lower, different order of being”.¹⁷⁵ One example of this exclusion consists in the patronising thought, common in early anthropology, that other cultures’ approaches to “nature” are in some sense merely superstitious, spiritualistic, or “unscientific”, in contrast to the rationalistic approaches of modern and separatist thought.¹⁷⁶ Such a move robs those other approaches of the histories and (in many cases) deep sophistication and nuance with which they engage questions about “nature” and ecosystems. It also intensifies the backgrounding described above.

Human separatism incorporates or relationally defines the cosmologies and practitioners of other cultures when it narrates them as essentially “not rational”, “less than modern”, or

¹⁷⁴ A challenging read in this regard is Watson, “Buried Alive.”

¹⁷⁵ Plumwood 49.

¹⁷⁶ On this point, see the recent writings of Philippe Descola – most relevantly, Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*; Descola, *The Ecology of Others*.

“undeveloped”. Examples of this posture or ethos, again, are most evident in early colonial writings, like those of the first arrivers in various parts of the world; but they also manifest themselves in modern-day “civilising missions”, which seek, often rather ostentatiously and without great self-insight, to bring the benefits of technological or social systems to other populations in ways that are not sensitive to the histories of their places.

Human separatism instrumentalises the cosmologies and practitioners of other cultures when it approaches them either as resources to be appropriated (where they are identified as having local or other forms of knowledge that might be useful to the universalising project of human separatism) or as vectors for its own growth (as receptive populations through whom separatist ideas can be transmitted or in whom they can be inculcated). This involves requiring the relevant others to “put aside [their] own interests for those of the master or centre”, and conceiving of them and of their actors as “part of a network of purposes which are defined in terms of or harnessed to [separatist] purposes and needs”¹⁷⁷ – even as, commonly, the influx of separatist practices and thought is presented “as being in the interests of the dominated as well as the dominator”.¹⁷⁸ In extreme cases, this manifests in an encouragement of the desperate “more British than the British” attitude that has historically appeared in the upper classes of colonised populations, or the double

¹⁷⁷ Id 53.

¹⁷⁸ Id.

consciousness or shame- and cringe-oriented consciousness that often manifests itself in these populations, as explored by thinkers from Fanon to Du Bois.¹⁷⁹

Human separatism homogenises the cosmologies and practitioners of other cultures, finally, when it groups them all together under the simple category of “views that are not modern”.

This smooths over the reality that there is, in fact, immense diversity in these views: the details of the perspectives of First Nations Australians on “nature” are vastly different from those of Vietnamese Zen Buddhists or members of the Sami Nation. More than this, there is immense diversity even amongst the practitioners or inheritors of specific cosmologies amongst this set – between liberal and conservative First Nations Australian thinkers, for example, or gradualist and revolutionary social organisers. To deny this fact as human separatism does is to deny the agency and history of these other communities, including their often long-running internal debates about the structure and ordering of their societies and local worlds.

These observations are significant for three reasons. First, they indicate that the dominating posture or ethos of human separatism is by no means limited to “nature”. It also manifests as an ethos that centralises the domination of other cosmologies and cultures. Second, they show how this posture has practical and relational implications – how it is not simply an

¹⁷⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

inert or conceptual puzzle to be solved, but represents a way of being and relating in the world. Third, and most positively, they offer a starting point for those who seek to devise alternatives. I will return to this latter point below. Before doing this, though, I want to offer some other brief reflections on the dominating nature of human separatist frameworks and practices.

3.4.2 This dominating approach is evident in both theoretical and practical approaches to contemporary separatist projects, like those of the Ecomodernists.

I have used Ecomodernist writings throughout this dissertation as a concrete example of separatist ideas in contemporary environmental thought and practice – although, as I noted in the introduction, I take human separatism to be an imaginary that extends far beyond the work of Ecomodernist thinkers. It is nonetheless useful to briefly consider the ways in which Ecomodernism specifically is oriented towards mastery and domination.

3.4.2.1 The theoretical background to Ecomodernism has dualist and dominating characteristics.

In theoretical or conceptual terms, in Ecomodernist thought, the concepts of “Humanity” and “nature” become isomorphic with the concepts of “freedom” and “necessity” in general. In this context, the quest to use technology to “separate” them from one another then comes to stand in for any action which (it can be imagined) ratchets the jaws of the realm of freedom open wide enough to swallow the realm of necessity forever. The very abstractness of this narrative makes it modular and immensely portable – exportable – just like the redemptive and civilising narratives of other colonial undertakings.

More than simply being unaccountable to particular contexts, however, the core concepts of Ecomodernism tend to exhaust, overwhelm and subsume the specifics of the times and places into which they insert themselves. This causes problems, because, as a universalist imaginary like this one grows outwards, it necessarily encounters other narratives or lifeways that are foreign to its logics and its modus operandi. To maintain its status as the concretisation of an abstract universal when it runs into these other narratives and lifeways, it must treat all of these alternatives as resources or threats. It can brook no alternatives and no true disagreement with its own core premises.

In particular, it cannot permit the existence of any competing claims either to the impossibility of universal applicability in theory, or the subsistence of alternatives in practice. Human separatism cannot be human separatism, in other words, unless all of Humanity – all

human beings – have been gifted separateness, or forced to become separate. And ecomodernism, to say the same thing in a different way, cannot be ecomodernism unless all humans have been inaugurated into “modern” ways of living. No humans can be permitted to remain in the world if they are “not separate” or “not modern” – or not in the process of becoming these things – because this would mean that the imaginary could not be considered universal, and thus mean that it failed on its own evaluation.

In this dynamic are echoes of the kinds of problems encountered by other totalising ideologies, including Christianity and capitalism, as they grapple with the existence of cosmologies and social logics that are radically other to theirs. If one’s worldview depends for its coherence on the achievement of totality or abstract universal applicability, true pluralism becomes impossible.¹⁸⁰ Alternatives become simultaneously potential resources and probable threats. This approach proceeds somewhat paradoxically, as noted above, from a mixture of greed and fear. Otherness in the real world represents the possibility of new resources: new inspirations, untapped energy sources, emergent markets. This is true for human separatism, and Ecomodernism, as for other colonial projects.

At the same time, these new resources represent potentially fatal threats to the universalizing project, and so they must be assimilated or neutralized as quickly as possible

¹⁸⁰ Plumwood 180.

to avoid their becoming more fundamental threats. In practice, this generates exploitation, extraction, assimilation, or oppression.¹⁸¹ In the context of Ecomodernist human separatism, its outcomes can be stated with fairly brutal crudeness. If humans exist who are not separate from nature, they must either be “made separate” – forced to be free¹⁸² – or classified as other-than-humans. The former move brings them into the abstract totality; the latter excludes them as matters of concern, by legislating that they are not needful of the protections afforded by the veil of separation. Both of these outcomes have obvious parallels in the experience of colonised communities.

3.4.2.2. The practical proposals and attitudes of Ecomodernism also have dualist and dominating characteristics.

Ecomodernism is also oriented towards dualism and domination in its practical proposals.

Consider the three specific technological proposals that the Ecomodernist Manifesto espouses as paths towards “decoupling”: nuclear energy, intensive agriculture, and mass urbanisation.¹⁸³ According to the Manifesto itself, nuclear energy, intensive agriculture and

¹⁸¹ Eduardo Kohn and Eduardo Vivieros de Castro are other oft-cited anthropologists who have explored these questions: for instance in Kohn, *How Forests Think*; Kohn, “Anthropology of Ontologies”; Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*.

¹⁸² As considered in the debate about (and between) Rousseau and his critics: Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy*; and, *the Social Contract*; Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty*.

¹⁸³ Plumwood 183.

mass urbanisation are three technologies that will “make life better for people, stabilize the climate, and protect the natural world”.¹⁸⁴ It offers a set of empirical statements in support of this claim that are beyond my expertise to confirm or rebut. From a philosophical perspective, though, they appear somewhat arbitrary. Reflecting upon the theoretical reasons that these might have been chosen reveals a good deal about the nature of the necessity human separatism seeks to transcend, and in so doing, confirms its dominating ethos (or, indeed, its “coloniality”).

As a first observation, these three technologies relate to three “inputs” for human life:

housing, nutrition, and fuel. These can be related to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Human beings, as organisms, require shelter, energy for their own bodies, and energy for their activities as conditions for their pursuit of “higher” activities, like self-actualisation.¹⁸⁵

Beginning with them suggests an understanding of individuals which is individualistic, unit-oriented, and abstract. It matters not whether the individuals in question exist in

Johannesburg, Sydney, or Beijing; whether they are old or young; whether they are black or white, gay or straight, female or male. In this there are echoes of the debates about liberal universalism. As with Rawls’ basic structure, the subjective importance of these in the lives of the individuals in question is supposed to be irrelevant.

¹⁸⁴ Id 7.

¹⁸⁵ Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation.”

All three of these proposals (nuclear energy, intensive agriculture, and mass urbanisation) are of a piece with the backgrounding, radical exclusion, incorporation, instrumentalism and homogenisation that Plumwood's framework identifies and describes.¹⁸⁶ In being oriented towards "decoupling" – a term that, as noted, disguises the ideological influence of separatist ideas behind a veil of scientific and technical objectivity – these approaches to energy, food and living spaces involve an oversimplistic and caricatured perspective on the complexities of social and natural processes, especially where they are presented as technological panaceas or cure-alls for "environmental" problems.

The individuals the Manifesto provides for are imagined as abstract actors in an abstract space, who require abstract energy (food and power) to sustain their abstract activities. Their existence is not specified beyond this. The society in which they live can be conceived as one which involves neither relations nor accountability. Instead it should consist simply in the quest to furnish the resource necessities of food, energy and shelter in ways that are decoupled from – that is, unrelated and accountable to – the specific times and places they exist. Matters beyond this are conceptualised as belonging to the private sphere. The function of society – and "humanity" – is simply to provide the stage upon which those

¹⁸⁶ Plumwood 48-53.

individuals may choose to act. In this the Manifesto is basically consonant with naïve liberalism.

In essence, I want to suggest, Ecomodernism seeks to overcome not only practical necessity but also moral necessity, and in so doing, overcome politics. The most obvious necessity that human separatism proposes to transcend is practical necessity. This is the necessity imposed by the various realities of material resources. Transcending necessity in this context would presumably involve abolishing limits on physical consumption. This is the explanation that is closest at hand. I want to argue, however, that human separatism also imagines a world in which another kind of necessity has been transcended. This other necessity is moral.

Necessity in a moral context can be understood not just as the constraints or requirements imposed by nature, but also as those imposed by history, as a domain whose occurrences are capable of making moral demands upon the present and thus constraining it. If we can transcend or sever our connections or relatedness to history, we do not merely become fully modern: we also become free to deny history's moral demands. History becomes something "separate" from us, and we become free to do whatever we want, not only in physical terms, but in moral terms, as well.¹⁸⁷ On this narrative, which I propose is a thread of Ecomodernist

¹⁸⁷ George Monbiot has observed that the Ecomodernists are curiously "ignorant of history": Monbiot, "Meet the Ecomodernists." He makes this observation in the context of their failure to reckon with the idea that, as

thought, the past appears (like physical necessity) as a dead weight on the present: a source of nightmares that suffocate the living and interfere unacceptably with their freedom. As a perspective taken by a cultural tradition whose own violence was a source of a great deal of these nightmares, this is an unconscionable position.

To deepen this analysis it is helpful to introduce the tripartite distinction developed by Hannah Arendt in her 1958 work, *The Human Condition*. For clarity, I am not introducing this work here with a view to engaging in a detailed discussion of it: instead, I want to use it briefly as an illustration of my overarching point. Arendt distinguishes between three interrelated activities in the lives of human beings: labour, work, and action.¹⁸⁸ She describes these as “fundamental”, in the sense that “each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to [humans]”.¹⁸⁹ Labour is “the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body”; work is “the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence”, and “provides an “artificial” world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings”; and action is the activity which “corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world”.¹⁹⁰ For Arendt this is “the only activity that goes on directly

James Scott has observed, modernity’s “certain [large-scale] schemes” – especially those related to technologies of various kinds – have rarely lived up to their lofty aspirations in practice Scott, *Seeing like a State*.

¹⁸⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*., especially chapter 1.

¹⁸⁹ *Id.* 7.

¹⁹⁰ *Id.*

between men without the intermediary of things or matter”.¹⁹¹ All three of these activities are necessary in the lives of human beings, for different reasons and in different ways.

The most intuitive “decoupling” that the Ecomodernists imagine is decoupling from labour, in Arendt’s sense: a separation from the need to spend any time on the kinds of practices that keep one’s body alive. Technology is imagined as something that might make activities of basic sustenance unnecessary, or as close to it as is practically possible. The second decoupling is decoupling from labour, again in Arendtian terms. Technology need not make labour impossible; people could still work at producing artificial things if they so chose. But they would not need to do so. Their working would thus have become a part, in the Kantian/Marxian sense, of the realm of freedom.

My argument here is that Ecomodernist “decoupling”, and human separatism more generally, should also be understood as a movement to make action in Arendt’s sense unnecessary.

Action, at its core, is relation: it is politics.¹⁹² In a world in which human beings or humanity are not “separate” from nature, questions about values will always arise. Questions about values are also questions about politics, which is one of the spheres in which, and practices

¹⁹¹ Id.

¹⁹² From my perspective, relating – contra Arendt – goes beyond intra-human relationships to encompass relations between humans and “others” (even if “politics” is not possible between all beings in the ways the European tradition imagines it). Examining this point in detail is beyond the scope of my current argument.

by which, questions about values are worked out. If Humanity can “decouple” from nature by inventing technologies that replace natural laws with human-made ones, and so free itself from any kind of dependence upon the whims of the natural world, this imaginary would suggest that it can then become free to focus its energies upon the development of other laws. This might include laws about moral matters; but it does not need to. The development of such laws would be just as optional an activity as anything else.

On this imaginary, humanity becomes separate from nature when human beings become “free” from (the need for) action, free from the need to act, to relate, and thus free from politics itself. The “infinite freedom” promised by decoupling or separation from nature is imagined as a state of permanent or eternal ease: a sort of perpetual leisure (that is, “free time”¹⁹³). Technology, with its nomogenetic (law-generating) capacities and also its law-manipulating and law-directing capacities, becomes the perfect intermediary, stand-in, or go-between.

“Decoupling” from nature, then, is also decoupling from history – and most obviously, decoupling from the immensely difficult questions that arise when one considers the legacies of things like European expansionism and colonialism. This expansionism and colonialism exploited and continues to exploit not only other cultures and peoples but also other species

¹⁹³ Compare Hägglund, *This Life*..

and the natural world. It is also to decouple, in effect, from discomfort. Any desires that can be imagined or exist can be satisfied: any pleasures achieved. Decoupling or separation from nature engenders “ease”, in the sense of leisure, but it also engenders ease in the sense of in bourgeois comfort: the removal of any need to reckon with topics, like histories of violence, which call one’s privileges into question or make one uncomfortable.

The echoes of the modern emphasis on the incessantly new are clear in this imaginary, too. With every new revolution, every new technological innovation, the past and its injuries, brutalities and failures can be imagined as erased. In its place there can be inserted an imaginary past, in which things were golden, or “great”: a past that can then be bizarrely inverted, as recent authoritarian populist movements have demonstrated with great moment, to become not merely an imaginary past but also the guide for an imaginary future.

From the perspective of a dominant tradition, the seductive quality of this story should be evident. Politics – action, in Arendt’s sense – is not “ease-y”: it is often immensely difficult, for reasons and in ways which do not admit of clear-cut intellectual solutions. Relating often involves, takes place amidst, and often gives rise to, misunderstanding; misconception; histories of harm and conflict; misdirected desires; dishonesty; and other profoundly challenging and unsettling experiences. This is not to say that this is all it is. But it is an inescapable part of what it is. Ecomodernist and other separatist narratives seek to escape

politics and relating because both of these activities are imagined as irritating chores. They are imagined as things that chew up time which one might otherwise be using to do things that are more pleasurable or important – although the nature of these other things is never specified concretely.

Ecomodernism, in imagining a world free of the need for politics, is not merely separatist, but escapist. Humanity is not merely separating from nature; it is escaping from necessities, like the necessity of politics and moral relating, which human separatism imagines as freedom-stifling and life-destroying. This fantasy takes its clearest form in the proclamations of those who would argue that Humanity should literally “escape” from the Earth, or achieve “independence” from its clutches. But it is also evident in those technological proposals that advocate decoupling more generally.

To summarise: human separatism, and its contemporary manifestation in Ecomodernism, involves a dominating posture or ethos not only with respect to “nature”, but also with respect to other human cosmologies and their practitioners. It involves a destructive and unethical posture with respect to politics, morality, and history (namely, that all three are a hassle to reckon with, and should therefore be engaged with a view to their being discarded); and a destructive and unethical posture with respect to deep difference (namely, that it, too, is a hassle to reckon with, and should therefore be neutralised, destroyed, or

assimilated in the service of conceptual unity). In these various ways it is predicated upon the denial of the positive possibilities of encounters with radical otherness, and the relentless push for universalising frameworks and systems that propose to liberate but always end up denying concrete and lived/felt experiences of politics.

3.5. These considerations suggest some “design parameters” for anti-separatist projects.

I am now in a position to return to the challenge with which this chapter began. I suggested there that the development of narratives with non-separatist content, through engagement with narratives from other cultures, is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for moving beyond human separatism. This is because, as noted earlier, it is quite possible to reject human separatist ideas in theory (for instance, by rejecting dualistic understandings of the human/nature distinction) while perpetuating the underlying *ethos* of human separatism.

It is perhaps useful to briefly recap some of the lessons from chapters 1 and 2 about the content that anti-separatist narratives are likely to need, and the kinds of effects it is

important that they have. Following Stevenson et al's criteria,¹⁹⁴ an anti-separatist theory or narrative of human nature will need, as a minimum set of parameters: a background metaphysics (one that is process- and relationship-oriented, as opposed to dualist and Platonic); a vivid account of human distinctiveness that does *not* slide into separation claims; a diagnosis of what goes wrong (which can, on this formulation, serve as a chance to describe human separatism itself – as the “thing that goes wrong”) and the symptoms of this failure or wrongness; and a prescription and prognosis (these being the most difficult to articulate).

The additional analysis in chapter 2 allows for a further set of specifications, related now to both the content and the “style” or effect of anti-separatist narratives. These can be framed in positive terms – as features the theory or narrative should aim to conform to or include – or in negative terms, as features the theory or narrative should aim to avoid.

Positive criteria	Negative criteria
Coherent	Incoherent
Framed in terms of distinctiveness	Framed in terms of “separateness”
Uses narrative structure	Rejects narrative structure

¹⁹⁴ Stevenson et al., *Thirteen Theories of Human Nature*.

In this chapter I have argued that it will be useful to engage with the narratives and theories of other cultures and communities, especially the narratives and theories of First Nations cultures, which are or have been in one way or another “outside” the totalising narratives of modernity and separatism. The considerations I have described here lead me to suggest a further set of design parameters for this process in particular, related both to the substantive content that is being sought from these other perspectives, and – crucially – the attitude, posture or *ethos* that is adopted in making this engagement.

I will first make this point negatively, by describing some of the approaches I would propose that anti-separatist projects should not take; and then positively, by outlining some of the approaches that they can.

3.5.1 Critical ecofeminism implies a variety of *don'ts* for anti-separatist projects as they engage with the non-separatist narratives of other cultures.

The sorts of approaches that anti-separatist projects should *not* take can be outlined most straightforwardly by returning to Plumwood's five features of dualisms. These were, as a reminder: backgrounding, radical exclusion, incorporation, instrumentalism and

homogenisation. These overlap, as suggested above, but provide a useful first set of cautionary notes.

Avoiding an attitude of backgrounding in engagement with other cultures suggests the need to engage with the members of those other cultures, and with their narratives, as subjects of history, and not merely objects of it: as agents in their own right. One useful recent example is Graeber and Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything*. Avoiding an attitude of radical exclusion suggests the need to take care to avoid engagement with these other stories through the lens of the idea that their purposes or forms are somehow alien or foreign to "ours". Avoiding an attitude of incorporation, as with avoiding backgrounding, suggests the need to engage with the chosen narratives and theories in ways that attempt understand them from the inside out, rather than the outside in.

Avoiding an attitude of instrumentalisation – perhaps the most significant in this context – suggests the need to take care not to be approaching the narratives and cultures at issue simply with a view to extracting or appropriating themes or practices in a dominating, ungrateful or careless fashion. Avoiding an attitude of homogenisation, finally, suggests a need to avoid condescending to or infantilising the cultures being engaged with by treating them either as repositories of "pure" ("noble savage") or holy knowledge, and/or by downplaying the complex political and ethical debates that happen within the realms of

those cultures as well (for example, by recognising the clashes between authoritarian and anarchist First Nations thinkers, or “conservative” and “liberal” First Nations thinkers, to the extent that these labels apply: and where they don’t, taking critical guidance from the thinkers in those cultures themselves about the sorts of differentiations it might be useful or practical to make).

These criteria are useful, but they remain negative. Plumwood’s discussion of “critical affirmation” suggests a set of positive parameters as well, to which I now turn.

3.5.2 Critical ecofeminism also implies a variety of *dos* for anti-separatist projects as they engage with the non-separatist narratives of other cultures.

To take a posture of critical affirmation, as Plumwood suggests, in engaging with other cultures whose narratives and theories might have lessons for anti-separatist projects, means a variety of things. It suggests requirements at the moment that European-oriented thinkers engage with the narratives and theories of other cultures, and (significantly) with their keepers and custodians. They also establish requirements at the moment that European-oriented thinkers “come home”, to engage with the narratives and cultures they grew up in, and explore the ways in which new versions might be imagined or explored. (This distinction is artificial, but I hope it captures something of the iterative process that is needed.)

As a first matter, work to engage human separatism should treat other narratives as models, not as sources or resources. To treat them straightforwardly as sources would be to essentialise them, to deny the resources of one's own narratives and contexts, and to deny the extent to which they, even in their own fullness, have had to engage with the distortions and disruptions visited upon them by coloniality. To treat them as resources, on the other hand, would be to repeat the extractive and exploitative gesture that also characterises a different moment of colonial engagement.

More concretely, this is to say that the project of moving beyond separatism in the European tradition is likely to require a different path for those who find themselves having been brought up in its waters than it is for those who understand themselves to be part of something that has always been, in some sense, "outside" European thought: geographically, ideologically, practically, or in some combination of these forms. There is a need to listen, critically and carefully, as well as seeking to "fix" or perhaps "overcome" one's own limitations.

To do this is first of all to acknowledge those others as subjects, and to acknowledge the reality of their having been alive, as Kyle Powys Whyte notes, to the depredations of coloniality for a very long time, indeed since it began. Such communities have worked and

fought, often at quite great cost, to sustain and preserve their own traditions, and often to “stretch and transform”¹⁹⁵ those ideas which they found they must engage with and encounter. To propose that one has come to a realisation about the limitations of a tradition that has never been identified before, and thus that one has invented or discovered something radically “new”; to propose that this inaugurates a great break with the past, whose resources must thus be worthless; to propose that this newness must thus strive to become itself a replacement abstract universal; and to propose that, if the realisation of this replacement universal is achieved, thus will be progress: all of these are centrally modern ideas.

To “self-critique”, then, in the context of being critical of a tradition of which one is part but whose borders and limits one’s own work can never exhaust or even delimit, must with this realisation begin from the thought that if one’s tradition is exhausted, then one must, not quite “abandon” it, but look in the face of this realisation to guidance from others. This should proceed in the service of making many context-specific stories that, as well as rejecting separatism, engage with the wounds caused by colonialism. It must be relational first, and so deny separateness and emphasise reciprocity. But it should also take up the resources of the European “tradition” in ways that are creative and which themselves deny its monolithic nature.

¹⁹⁵ Getachew and Mantena, “Anticolonialism and the Decolonization of Political Theory,” 380.

To return to Plumwood's own terms: anti-separatist engagement with these narratives and cultures should treat past failures of ethics and imagination as "an important if problematic tradition which requires critical reconstruction", and seek to "empowe[r] ... the areas of culture and life" that were previously ignored, humiliated or denied.¹⁹⁶ This, as she suggests, "requires a dialectical movement to recognise both the relationship and continuity denied by backgrounding and radical exclusion" in past dominating engagements with (for example) First Nations narratives, and a dialectical movement to "affirm the difference and independence of the other denied by incorporation and the definition of the other in relation to the self as lack and as instrument".¹⁹⁷ It involves "not just recognition of difference, but recognition of a complex, interacting pattern of both continuity *and* difference".¹⁹⁸

Engagement with these narratives should thus address backgrounding and denial of dependence by emphasising the "contribution of what has been backgrounded", and "acknowledg[ing] dependency"¹⁹⁹ on those narratives when this acknowledgement is appropriate. It should address radical exclusion by "affirm[ing the] continuity" that exists between different cultural perspectives on the human-nature relationship – most obviously,

¹⁹⁶ Plumwood 64.

¹⁹⁷ Id 67.

¹⁹⁸ Id, my emphasis.

¹⁹⁹ Id 60.

that all of them emerge out of attempts to come to terms with the human condition – even as it “reconceive[s] these] relata in more integrated ways”.²⁰⁰ It should address incorporation by working to “rediscover[r] a language and story for the underside”.²⁰¹ in this case, treating the narratives being engaged with as primary sources in their own right.

It should address instrumentalism or objectification by “recognising the other as a centre of needs, value and striving on its own account” – in more concrete terms, by paying close attention to the specific histories and contexts of these other narratives and theories.²⁰² And it will address homogenization, finally, by “recognising the complexity and diversity of the ‘other nations’ [that] have been homogenised and marginalised”: a move that, as I noted above, should consist both in affording them the respect of critical engagement, not fetishization or parroting; and also by paying attention to the differences, distinctions and complexities that exist within and between practitioners of those other narratives and cultures.

Amongst others, these considerations suggest some further needs: to (1) reject the assumption that there will ever be a final solution, even a conceptual solution, to the problems that relating with other humans and other creatures and ecosystems can generate

²⁰⁰ Id.

²⁰¹ Id.

²⁰² Id.

– and in this way, rejecting the “End of History” narrative that has underpinned a great deal of European and colonial thought; to (2) reject the move to have recourse to concepts which apply independently of context, or are imagined to be capable of doing this: by checking, that is, whether the concept under consideration – for example, “progress” – is really being imagined as “concept-in-the-abstract”, and if so, why this is happening; and to (3) rejecting the search for equivalents, analogues, or derivatives of European abstractions in the narratives and theories of other cultures, where this move involves the implicit assumption that those concepts might be able to be assimilated to or replaced by more sophisticated or systematic concepts as developed via abstract universal thought.

Stated more positively, the task is one of imagining and engaging in terms of concreteness and of local context. At the moment of encountering the narratives and theories of other cultures, this involves being alive to the ways in which those narratives have evolved to be adapted to the circumstances in which they have arisen. These circumstances are likely to be geographical as well as spatiotemporal; they are likely to take careful account of the specifics of the localities (weather, history, landscape) in which they have emerged. They are also likely to be anchored in the particularities of the places in which they are told, and to make the most sense, as it were, when told in those places, or when understood through the prism of those specific, concrete places.

In the context of engaging with the narratives and theories of European culture and its derivatives – in seeking to replace separatist narratives with something else – the push to imagine reality in these terms also has consequences. They are captured in the thought that, even if a phenomenon is “universal”, it cannot be grasped, reckoned with, or understood, unless its instantiations in particular contexts are being used as the lens through which to understand it; and unless this context is being understood not merely as a stage but as an enabling constraint, which is to say, a situation, set of circumstances, or condition which both facilitates and limits the phenomenon at hand.

The journey might be universal, as is proverbially said, but the experience of that journey is unique. This is true of the phenomenon explored in chapter 2 – the facticity of mortality and the emotions explored by death – but it is also true of the response to that experience, or the engagement with life and its conditions, and the search for structure, meaning and purpose, through the general form of narratives.

In the context of colonial and human separatist narratives, then, this quest for concrete universals means that the concrete histories of those narratives themselves – and most importantly, the damage they have caused – must itself become, as it were, part of the story. The quest to repair the damages caused by the incoherent pursuit of “separateness”

must itself be a part of the narratives that anti-separatist thinkers seek to imagine and explore.

In this are echoes of the concreteness of understandings that manifest in, for example, Australian and North American Indigenous cultures. Kyle Powys Whyte has explored how those who live amongst such cultures often find the apocalyptic imaginaries of European narratives either naïve or problematic. After all, as Whyte notes, colonialism for those cultures was itself already an apocalypse, in their concrete situation as its victims and survivors.²⁰³ They are, therefore, in the process of living in and with “post-apocalyptic” situations, again in their own contexts. For those who would seek anti-separatist narratives strong enough to overcome the allures of separatism, and especially the allures of techno-separatism, the emphasis on relationships and relational repair, as it will need to manifest in the context of specifics attempt to repair and regenerate, must be a central focus moving forward.

3.6. Chapter Conclusion.

²⁰³ Whyte, “Indigenous Climate Change Studies.”

In this chapter I have offered a further account of the challenges implicit in overcoming human separatism. In section 1, I reflected on the provinciality of human separatism, and some of the implications of the fact that alternatives are already in existence in the narratives and theories of other cultures. In section 2, I explored the concept of coloniality, before concluding that it does not provide a strong enough set of conceptual resources for the questions I am considering. In section 3, I detailed the critical ecofeminist thought of Val Plumwood, with a view to showing how it offers more powerful conceptual resources in this regard. In section 4, I deepened my previous analysis of human separatism by considering some of the ways in which it is oriented towards domination and mastery, both in theory and in practice. And in section 5 I made some concrete suggestions about the postures I think anti-separatist projects should adopt as they engage with and seek to learn from other approaches and then as they bring some of these lessons back home.

It is, as I have been arguing here, vital to overcome human separatism. But to do this does not simply mean rejecting ideas about the possibility of “separation from nature”. It also means, and indeed requires, rejecting the deeper logic that these ideas both incarnate and reproduce or generate. Exploring alternatives to these narratives presents a significant ethical, intellectual and relational challenge.

Chapter 4: a practice of human anti-separatism

you have to work at holistic reasoning. You have to grow it from a lived cultural framework embedded in the landscape and the patterns of creation you follow there.

- Tyson Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*

our actions today are cyclical performances; they are guided by our reflection on our ancestors' perspectives and on our desire to be good ancestors ourselves to future generations.

Kyle Powys Whyte, *Indigenous Climate Change Studies:*

Indigenizing Futures,

Decolonizing the Anthropocene

there never was and there never will be a paradise.

Mary Graham, *Some Thoughts on the
Philosophical Underpinnings
of Aboriginal Worldviews*

4.0 Chapter Introduction.

In the previous chapter, I reflected on the kinds of engagement with non-European cultural narratives that I believe are necessary if we are to move beyond human separatism, understood as both an imaginary (which seeks to tell us how we should imagine the future) and an ethical posture (which seeks to tell us how we should relate to radical otherness). In this fourth and final chapter, I aim to offer one more concrete model for this kind of engagement. The model I offer is rooted in some considerations of First Nations Australian cosmologies; in some reflections on narrative tragedy, as a form that is legible to the European tradition but not confined to it; and in some concrete ideas for stories that can embody the pathos and hubris of human separatism and point towards alternatives.

Let me first recap the argument I made in chapter 3. I suggested that there was a risk, in seeking to confront human separatism, that European-oriented environmental thinkers might either (a) attempt to invent new stories from whole cloth; or (b) attempt to appropriate the narratives of other cultures for European-inflected ends. Both these moves, I proposed, would reproduce the kinds of ethos, or way of relating, that underpins separatism more generally.

To avoid these outcomes, I suggested, there is a need to stop attempting to imagine the future through abstract concepts that pay no attention to the dialogical, provisional, and care-oriented nature of relationships. In place of such an approach, there is a need to develop new narratives, and engage carefully with the relationship- and dialogue-oriented narratives and theories of other cultures in the process. Taking this step allows a move beyond exclusively critical work (that rejects the narrative of “separation from nature” but does not offer alternatives) into creative and constructive work that explores concrete alternatives.

My argument in this chapter runs as follows. If we want a powerful example of anti-separatist narratives, along with a relationship-oriented cosmology to frame them in, the cosmologies of First Nations Australians is one place we might look for inspiration.¹ The structure, content and aspirations of many cosmologies amongst First Nations peoples are inherently anti-separatist. They are also concrete: local, high-context, and linked to what in First Nations Australian English is known as “Country”, a term which encapsulates both physical territory and the many relationships it guides and preserves.

¹ A note on terminology: in line with current recommended usage, I have worked to use the term “First Nations peoples” to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian peoples. Exceptions – where I use the terms “Indigenous” or “Aboriginal” – generally occur as part of direct quotations. For some information on terminology, see “Terminology Guide”; “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.”

Although it would be unacceptable to attempt to appropriate the specific contents of these localised cosmologies, it is still possible to learn from them in a variety of ways. More specifically, we can: (1) consider the ways in which they imagine human beings in ecological and spiritual contexts; (2) reflect on their relationship to the places from which they have emerged; (3) ask questions about how they are incorporated into individual and collective thought and life for First Nations Australian communities; and (4) consider their use of ritual, metaphor, emotion, embodiment, story, and dialogue, or “yarning”, as ways to foreground a relational and ecologically-oriented approach to politics.

Having considered them in this way, we can turn back to the European tradition, to ask questions about the kinds of languages or resources that might be available there for facilitating engagements and dialogues that parallel these First Nations Australian ones. In particular, we can show that one powerful place to look is the body of work in this tradition on narrative tragedy and its creative and imaginative possibilities. Reflections on tragedy have long been woven into reflection and dialogue about politics and ethics in European and European-inflected contexts. Engaging with some of this work, and sketching the outlines of a story that represents, and moves beyond, human separatism, is one means of continuing to engage the challenges I have explored in this project. In taking this approach, I am inspired amongst other works by Graeber and Wengrow’s recent *Dawn of Everything*, which suggests

a variety of moves against the grain to take seriously First Nations contributions to existing European thought.

The chapter has the following structure. In section 1, I offer some reflections on the anti-separatist nature of some First Nations Australian cosmologies,² drawing on the work of the First Nations Australian writers Mary Graham and Tyson Yunkaporta. In section 2, I consider the ways in which the patterns or lessons that emerge from the focus of these stories resonate with the tragic narrative form in the European tradition. In section 3, finally, I offer a concrete sketch of the ways in which tragic narrative structure can be used both to narrate and capture the complexity and pathos of human separatism, as it has occurred and continues to occur in contemporary thought. I conclude by suggesting some other endings to these narratives: endings in which cathartic or ecological insights take us at least one step down the path to imagining more ecological futures.

4.1. Many First Nations Australian cosmologies have anti-separatist orientations.

² I use the rather clumsy term “some” here and in what follows as a means to include that I’m not intending to generalise about cosmologies beyond those described by the authors whose work I am referring to.

4.1.1. First Nations Australian cosmologies encapsulate complex political and ethical thought.

The cosmologies, narratives and cultures of First Nations Australia have long been recognised as repositories both of ecological knowledge, and of ways of imagining relationships to land and culture that are profoundly other to European-oriented ways of thinking. More recently, as part of a broader attempt to correct the oversimplifications projected onto them by European colonial thinkers, a significant amount of work has been done to present their social, political and ethical components to non-First Nations peoples. Much of this recognition has been due to the work of First Nations Australians themselves. One list of influential voices might include thinkers, artists and activists like Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Jack Davis, David Unaipon, Lionel Fogarty, Doris Garimara, Ali Cobby Eckermann, Wesley Enoch, Anita Heiss, Larissa Behrendt, and Bruce Pascoe.

In this section, I consider the writing of two contemporary First Nations Australian writers – Mary Graham and Tyson Yunkaporta – on the content, form, and orientation of some cosmologies in First Nations Australia. Graham describes herself as “a Kombu-merri person[,] affiliated with the Waka Waka group through her mother”.³ Yunkaporta describes

³ Graham, “Some Thoughts on the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews,” 193.

himself as “a boy who belongs to the Apalech clan from Western Cape York, a Wik Mungkan speaker with ties to many [First Nations] language groups ... including adoptive ties.”⁴

Both Graham and Yunkaporta write into European textual traditions and engage with European-inflected ideas. But they do so while maintaining and communicating a sense of the cosmological otherness that underlies their own thought and experience, and that of the communities to which they belong. Graham proposes “A View of the West from an Aboriginal Perspective”.⁵ Yunkaporta is explicit that he is “not reporting on Indigenous Knowledge systems for a global audience’s perspective”, but instead is “examining global systems from an *Indigenous Knowledge* perspective”.⁶ To be clear with definitions: for Yunkaporta, an Indigenous person is “a member of a community retaining memories of life lived sustainably on a land-base, as part of that land-base”.⁷ And “Indigenous Knowledge” is “any application of those memories as living knowledge to improve present and future circumstances”.⁸

It is useful at the outset to return to the point I alluded to at the end of the last chapter,

⁴ Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk*, 13. Note that the page references to this text are to an ebook edition, and may display differently depending on readers’ software and configurations.

⁵ Graham 185.

⁶ Yunkaporta 21, my emphasis.

⁷ *Id.* 41.

⁸ *Id.*

and note the ways in which the colonial encounter has shaped First Nations peoples' understandings of their own realities. These understandings are particularly relevant where they push back against the "future apocalypse" narratives that appear in a good deal of (European-oriented) environmental political thought. First Nations philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte notes how, for First Nations peoples around the world, these glibly-imagined apocalypses have long been lived reality. In his words:

the colonial period already rendered comparable outcomes that cost Indigenous peoples their reciprocal relationships with thousands of plants, animals, and ecosystems—most of which are not coming back. As [Anshinaabe writer Lawrence] Gross claims, "Native Americans have seen the end of their respective worlds... Just as importantly, though, Indians survived the apocalypse. This raises the further question, then, of what happens to a society that has gone through an apocalyptic event".⁹

Yunkaporta makes a similar observation. The "apocalypse", he writes, "is real".¹⁰ Although "apocalypses have proven to be survivable in the past", he asserts, they "usually mea[n] that

⁹ Whyte, "Indigenous Climate Change Studies," 159.

¹⁰ Yunkaporta 67.

your culture and society will never be the same”.¹¹

Even so, there are deep wells of creativity and resilience that await those who might look for them. Many of these manifest the kind of explicit focus on ecological and future-oriented imagining that is of such importance to environmental political thinkers. “All over Australia”, Yunkaporta writes, First Nations peoples “have stories of past armageddons, warning against the behaviours that make these difficult to survive[,] and offering a blueprint for transitional ways of being, so that our custodial species can continue to keep creation in motion”. These stories, he suggests, should be seen both a powerful repository for First Nations communities themselves, and as a place of learning for non-First Nations cultures and communities. (The subtitle of his work is “How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World”).

This does not mean that there is a single “simplistic message” that can be taken from engagement with Indigenous narratives and practices.¹² As Yunkaporta sees it, one oversimplified message that non-First Nations peoples often take from First Nations cultures runs as follows :

First Peoples have been here for x-thousand years, they know how to

¹¹ Id.

¹² Id 24.

live in balance with this place and we should learn from them to find solutions to sustainability issues today. [Here are] some isolated examples of sustainable practices pre-colonisation.¹³

For Yunkaporta, this narrative is retrograde because it offers very little in the way of “insight... today, for the problems we are experiencing now”.¹⁴ It is “formulaic”; “carefully curated” for “outsiders”; and referable safely to the past.¹⁵ This robs it of its disruptive and generative potential.¹⁶ It ignores the fact that First Nations “stories and their connections can tell us more than the mere fact that [First Nations peoples] have existed for a certain number of millennia”.¹⁷ And it tends to generate “discussion[s] of Indigenous Knowledge systems [that involve] a polite acknowledgment of connection to the land rather than true engagement”.¹⁸ This kind of “simplistic categorization” leads to “historical contexts of interrelatedness and upheaval [being] sidelined”, and leaves the “authenticity of Indigenous Knowledge and identity [to be] determined by an illusion of parochial isolation”: rendered as just “another fragment of primitive exotica to examine, tag and display”.¹⁹

¹³ Id.

¹⁴ Id.

¹⁵ Id.

¹⁶ Graham makes a similar point. The concrete legal and political “developments of the [1990s-2000s] with regard to Aboriginal land rights/Native Title” in Australia, she proposes, “highlighted the ambivalent relationship Australians have with land in this country, and their uncomfortable relationship with Aboriginal people”: Graham 186.

¹⁷ Yunkaporta 31.

¹⁸ Id 25.

¹⁹ Id 20.

From Yunkaporta's perspective, there is a deeper problem still with narratives like this one. They engage with "Indigenous Knowledge [...not] at the level of how, [but] only at the level of what".²⁰ They imagine it as "a resource to be plundered rather than a source of knowledge processes".²¹ This leads to deep misunderstandings. The "key to Aboriginal Knowledge", in contrast, lies for Yunkaporta "in the processes[,] rather than just the content".²² It is "the Dreaming process [that] is the key".²³

This process, in Yunkaporta's terms, is "all about seeing the overall shape of the connections between things". It involves "Look[ing] beyond the things [themselves to] focus on the connections between them", and then "look[ing even] beyond the connections to see the patterns [those connections] make".²⁴ This, in his view, is one way to "use an Indigenous pattern-thinking process to critique contemporary systems, and to impart an impression of the pattern of creation itself".²⁵

Viewed from this perspective, First Nations Australian cosmologies offer a set of critical and reconstructive lenses for challenging their own imaginations of the past, the present, and the

²⁰ Id 46.

²¹ Id.

²² Id 93.

²³ Id.

²⁴ Id 74.

²⁵ Id 25.

future. They can offer resources for engaging the “the complexities and frailties of human societies”; for “limit[ing] destructive excesses in [human] systems”; and – in language which makes their pragmatic orientation quite clear – for “deal[ing] with idiots”.²⁶ Crucially, the goal of these various reflections is never to pin things down in permanent form – to “end” or “complete” knowledge, or come up with a final, perfect form of its separatist application. “[R]eal knowledge”, Yunkaporta argues, “will keep moving in lands and Peoples”, and people will have to “move on with it... too”.²⁷

I want to note that I come to Graham and Yunkaporta’s writings as an Australian who, while deeply interested in First Nations cosmologies, is not himself a member of any First Nations group. (I am, rather, a white Australian, and my roots in Australia go back about five generations and then veer up to Europe). This means, as I suggested in chapter 3, that my ability to offer “summaries” of the cosmologies they present is fraught. This is especially so where the summaries in question occur in the context of work with its roots in European and colonial contexts. With this in mind, in proceeding in what follows I have aimed to use the words of Graham and Yunkaporta themselves wherever possible. My goal is not to offer any kind of authoritative treatment of the cosmologies they offer, but instead to suggest some ways in which they appear to me to capture the anti-separatist orientation of much

²⁶ Id 31

²⁷ Id 25.

First Nations Australian practice and thought.

I would also note that this does not mean treating First Nations cultures as either fetishized purities or sources of savagery. The second approach is violent, and the first is paternalistic and patronising, implying as it easily seems to that “Native” peoples in various parts of the world are not capable of sophisticated defences of their own cultural practices and behaviour, and would not want to be called to account in the same way that European thinkers are.

One of my hopes is that the reflections below might serve as a starting-point for others – especially others interested in environmental political theory and its possibilities and implications – to learn more about the cosmologies and practices in question for themselves. For my own part, I explore them in order to turn towards some questions about narrative tragedy in the following section of this chapter.

4.1.2. First Nations Australian cosmologies involve detailed theories of human nature.

In chapter 2, I drew upon Stevenson et al’s framework for considering theories of human nature. As a reminder, those authors propose that theories of human nature encompass -

1. a background metaphysical understanding of the universe and humanity's place in it;
2. a theory of human nature in the more specific sense of a distinctive set of claims about human beings, human society, and the human condition;
3. a diagnosis of some typical defect, what tends to go wrong in human life and society;
4. a prescription for correcting what goes wrong and an ideal for how human life should best be lived.²⁸

As a tentative starting-point for the more detailed overview below, the First Nations Australian cosmologies described by Yunkaporta and Graham might be described in terms of these four elements as follows.

1. Background metaphysical understanding: "Country" – Land or Earth, conceived of as an embodied and law-orienting force – is the horizon and enabling constraint for all existence, including human existence, and the primary source of all law: relationships are paramount, and intra-ecological relationships are both anchors of, and models for, relationships within human communities, as well as relationships

²⁸ Stevenson et al., *Thirteen Theories of Human Nature*, 1–2.

between humans, other beings, and Country.

2. Theory of human nature: Humans are a “custodial species”: distinctive by virtue of our capacities for and relationship to Dreaming (engaging in metaphorical and spiritual practice), and charged by virtue of this distinctiveness and capacity for knowledges and actions with tasks related to custodianship and the maintenance of laws.
3. Diagnosis: The central defect – not just for humans but also for other species – is narcissism, defined both in terms of pretensions to separateness or exceptionalism and in terms of “idiocy” (in Yunkaporta’s terms); isolationism; and hubristic or fragile pridefulness.
4. Prescription: practices for correcting narcissism involve returning to Country and its lessons, and re-establishment of equilibria via yarning (wide-ranging, creative and collaborative conversation and storytelling); ceremony and learning across generations; and the invigoration or reinvigoration other embodied cultural practices.

With this said, the cosmologies described by Graham and Yunkaporta stretch and blur the distinctions between these four elements of Stevenson et al’s framework in important ways. I would emphasise three features of this blurring in particular. First, the cosmologies that Yunkaporta and Graham describe interweave observation, or experience, on the one hand,

and prescription, or guidance, on the other. Second, they centre three notions – Country, Relationship, and Law – each imagined thickly, and in terms of their existence as a set of enabling conditions for understanding and navigating (human) existence generally. Third, they place a crucial and explicit emphasise on narrative and story, along with other richly metaphorical cultural practices, as a part of sustaining, guiding, teaching, and learning about relation and ecological political action. In what follows, I unpack the writing of both thinkers in turn, with a view to exploring how these various elements show up in their work, and with an eye to the ways in which their fundamental diagnosis of the problem – what Yunkaporta calls “narcissism” – has resonances with human separatism.

4.1.3. For reflections on the First Nations emphasis on Country, Law, and relationship, it is useful to turn to the work of Mary Graham.

Mary Graham’s 2008 *Some Thoughts on the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews*, offers a clear and cogent overview of the basics of some First Nations Australian cosmologies. Her account demonstrates the interwoven nature of reflections on human situatedness, purpose and action, which makes it a useful point of departure for my inquiry here.

For Graham, a deep difference exists between the “logic” that structures First Nations

cosmologies and metaphysics, and the logic that structures “Western” cosmologies. “Western logic”, she writes, “rests on the division between the self and the not-self, the external and the internal.”²⁹ (Here there are already intimations of the human-nature distinction as it will be reified in human separatism). From the standpoint of this division, she argues, “the viewpoint of the human individual ... is taken to be the window between the external world of fact and the internal world of beliefs”; and “things can only ever appear as either true or false if they are to appear to ‘be’ at all.”³⁰

“Aboriginal logic”, in contrast, “maintains that there is no division between the observing mind and anything else”.³¹ It does involve imagining “distinctions between the physical and the spiritual”; but it conceives of these “aspects of existence [as] continually interpenetrat[ing] each other”.³² The “whole repertoire of what is possible”, as a consequence, “presents [itself] or is expressed as an infinite range of Dreamings”, and the universe is imagined to be constituted around a “transformative dynamic of growth”.³³

Against this backdrop, Graham argues that two “Basic Precepts” serve as the axioms of First Nations Australian cosmologies, and function to structure First Nations ecological and

²⁹ Graham 189.

³⁰ Id.

³¹ Id.

³² Id.

³³ Id 191.

cultural worlds.³⁴ These two precepts run as follows:

- a. “The Land [Country] is the Law”;
- b. “You are not alone in the world”.³⁵

The concept of Land – or “Country” – encompasses the geological and geographical landscape as it does in the European imaginary; but it also extends far beyond this. In the First Nations context, Country is imagined in thick, relational terms, as both the source and the purpose of human existence. In terms of the language I have used in this dissertation (which is, I would note, manifestly foreign to the conversation itself), Country is an enabling constraint and a horizon for *all* life. It is the foundational principle and the horizon of possibility and intelligibility for human life, relations, and action, including normative action.

From a European-inflected perspective, terms like “Country”, “Law”, and “Dreaming” risk appearing as abstractions. In fact, they name phenomena that are both intensely local and avowedly concrete. As I understand it (from the outside), Country can be said to extend beyond the borders of a particular community’s Country as a result of the human capacity for symbolic and metaphorical cognition. As it manifests in life, however, and in the

³⁴ Id 183.

³⁵ Id 183.

concerns of particular communities, it is always *particular* Country – this bush, this mountain, this river ecosystem – that appears as the concrete referent for the term. The stories, theories and experiences in terms of which individuals and communities encounter Country are experienced and retold in terms of the rich detail of particular places.

In these tellings and retellings there occurs a mingling of the spiritual and the physical, in line with the metaphysical starting point outlined above. The “domain of spirit”, indeed, which Graham asserts “has been lost to Western society”, is something that, “[f]rom an Aboriginal perspective, ... resides in the relationship between the human spirit and the natural life force”.³⁶ This, in turn, is nestled within and sustained by Country.³⁷ Country, moreover, is a perpetual and stabilising presence for the potential chaos of human activities: “Ideas are myriad and ever changing”,³⁸ so country and the relationships and laws that it allows are “the only constant in the lives of human beings”.³⁹

It is Country that constitutes and enables relationships between entities and human beings. For First Nations people, Graham writes, the “two most important kinds of relationship” are “firstly, those between land and people and, secondly, those amongst people themselves”:

³⁶ Id 186.

³⁷ Id 188.

³⁸ Id 189.

³⁹ Id 191.

with “*the second being always contingent upon the first*”.⁴⁰ In fact, the matter is even stronger than this. The very “identity” of First Nations peoples, Graham argues, “is essentially always embedded in land and defined by their relationships to it and to other people”.⁴¹ It is the “land, and how we treat it, [that] *determines our humanness*.”⁴²

“Aboriginal people maintain”, Graham suggests, “that humans are not alone”.⁴³ We are “connected and [indeed] *made* by way of relationships with a wide range of beings, and it is thus of prime importance to maintain and strengthen these relationships.”⁴⁴ Identity, imagined in this way, “emerges out of a place in the landscape with meaning intact” – as distinct from “Ideology, ...[which] provides a sharp focus for ideas and a definition of the human individual, where this in turn places the individual, as human, against land, as mere backdrop”, and leads to “Meaning [...being] moulded to fit this framework”.⁴⁵

In the First Nations context as Graham relates it, then, human beings are human beings *because* of their relationships to and situatedness in Country. Forgetting or abdicating these relationships and the obligations and possibilities they impose make people in a sense less than themselves. “Because land is sacred and must be looked after”, Graham writes, “the

⁴⁰ Id 183, my emphasis.

⁴¹ Id 189.

⁴² Id 184.

⁴³ Id 187.

⁴⁴ Id 189.

⁴⁵ Id 190.

relation between people and land becomes the template for society and social relations".⁴⁶ To put the matter more pithily still: "all meaning comes from land".⁴⁷

Human beings are always embedded in places, and these places as they can be experienced are always specific and concrete. Forgetting, misunderstanding or denying this fact leads to destructive and self-destructive consequences. "Where there is a breach between" spirit and Country, as Graham puts it,

[or] when the link between the two is weakened, then a human being becomes a totally individuated self, a discrete entity whirling in space, completely free. Its freedom is a fearful freedom however, because a sense of deepest spiritual loneliness and alienation envelopes the individual. The result is then that whatever form the environment or landscape takes, it becomes and remains a hostile place. *The discrete individual then has to arm itself not just literally against other discrete individuals, but against its environment*—which is why land is always something to be conquered and owned. Indeed *the individual has to arm itself against loneliness and against nature itself*.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Id 182.

⁴⁷ Id 184.

⁴⁸ Id 188, my emphasis.

It is in light of this reality that human beings must engage and explore the “most basic questions” of existence. These questions, as Graham notes, “have not changed much over time” – “despite advances in technology”.⁴⁹ And they are not merely historical or conceptual: they are also ethical and political. They include questions like:

1. “how do we live together (in a particular area, nation, or on earth), without killing each other off?”
2. “how do we live without substantially damaging the environment?”
3. “why do we live?”⁵⁰

“Over vast periods of time,” Graham writes, Aboriginal people invested most of their creative energy in trying to understand what makes it possible for people to act purposively” – or, in other words, to understand “what is it exactly that makes us human?”.⁵¹ One of the central goals of social life, Graham suggests, is to “find the answer[s]” to these questions “in a way that does not make people feel alienated, lonely or murderous”.⁵² A central tragedy of the colonial encounter, in Graham’s view, is that “Westerners seem to have been unable ... to

⁴⁹ Id 181.

⁵⁰ Id 181.

⁵¹ Id 189.

⁵² Id 183.

recognise” the ways in which First Nations imaginaries of law can function “as a system of natural moral law which establishes an extended, spiritual identity between land and person”⁵³ – and which, in so doing, offers a nuanced imaginary for conversations about precisely the kinds of questions that “environmental” thinking is engaged in.

The concept of “Law” captures some of this importance. It stands, Graham proposes, for the “complex relationship between humanity and land which extends to cover every aspect of life”.⁵⁴ It provides a framework for explaining and understanding “the origins and meaning of the cosmos (including the observer)”, in a way that seeks to be “rationa[[]], and [offer] empirical support”.⁵⁵ It is “is grounded in the perception of a psychic level of natural behaviour, the behaviour of natural entities”.⁵⁶ It is “valid for all people only in the sense that all people are placed on land wherever they happen to be, so that the custodial ethic, which is primarily an obligatory system, may be acted on by anyone who is interested in looking after or caring for land”.⁵⁷ For Graham, this means that First Nations Law and “the custodial ethic... cannot be idealogised: it is a locus of identity for human beings, not a focus of identity”, because “we can [only] achieve the fullest expression of our human identity in a location in land”.⁵⁸

⁵³ Id 194.

⁵⁴ Id 190.

⁵⁵ Id 192.

⁵⁶ Id 189.

⁵⁷ Id 190.

⁵⁸ Id.

In this sense, she says, “Aboriginal Law is ‘grown’ not ‘made’”.⁵⁹ The “perfectability [sic] of human beings”, for Graham, “was never a concern for Aboriginal Law”.⁶⁰ Instead, engagement with Law has always been “an attempt to understand what it is that makes us human”; “why ... we act with purpose”; “where this will [to act with purpose] come[s] from”; “why... we experience the events that occur in our lives”; and “why... the experience of one person [is] different from that of another”.⁶¹

Against this backdrop, the second precept – “You are not alone in the world” – can be seen to cut in two directions. At first glance, it reads as positive or soothing: there exist antidotes for individualistic loneliness and isolation. A moment’s reflection, though, suggests another set of implications. You are not *alone*: your actions do not affect only you. You must be accountable. This precept, combined with the first, establishes a practical set of consequences for the application of Country and Law, in terms primarily of the notion of custodianship.

As Graham describes it, “each person [in a First Nations community] has a charter of custodianship empowering them and making them responsible for renewing that part of the

⁵⁹ Id 192.

⁶⁰ Id 191.

⁶¹ Id 193.

flora and its fauna”.⁶² “Aboriginal people”, she writes, “have ... map[ped] the great repertoire of human feeling to such an extent that its continuities with the psychic life of the wider world become apparent”.⁶³ Although “the details of this metaphysics var[y] widely across the land with the physical environment” – another mark of the concrete universality of the cosmologies at issue – the “spiritual basis”, or “understanding that what separates [viz., distinguishes] humans from animals is the fact that each human bears a creative and spiritual identity which still resides in land itself” serves as a foundation for the “religious, social, political and economic force throughout First Nations Australia”.⁶⁴

The custodial ethic, importantly, is communicated, demonstrated and maintained through narratives. “Stories”, Graham writes, are “like [the] archives” of Indigenous communities.⁶⁵ Significantly, although there are “myriad variations” in their details – depending on concrete local landforms, histories, and contexts – “the theme [always] stays the same”.⁶⁶ That theme is custodianship, and the custodial ethic: and its various examinations serve as a vivid depiction of consequences, generative or destructive, of ways of life that adhere to or transgress its boundaries. In this sense, the custodial ethic as Graham describes it becomes a perspective that “allow[s...] natural wisdom to assert itself within the limits of accumulated

⁶² Id 183.

⁶³ Id 187.

⁶⁴ Id 185.

⁶⁵ Id 184.

⁶⁶ Id.

community experience and knowledge”.⁶⁷ It is, as she writes, a “philosophy, not just a green solution to environmental degradation”.⁶⁸ And its explication is a shared project, of a sort: “[E]veryone in the traditional Aboriginal community is acknowledged to have something unique to offer, because of his or her spiritual identity and personal experience of life”, and because of the fact that “Aboriginal personal identity extends directly into land itself”.⁶⁹

Understanding and maintenance of this ethic, for Graham, as it is “based on and expressed through Aboriginal Law”, is something that is “essential not only [for] Aboriginal society but [for] any society that intends to continue for millennia and wants to regard itself as mature”.⁷⁰ Developing “collective responsibility to land” is something that is “vital[,] if people are even to attempt to transcend ego and possessiveness”.⁷¹ Such responsibility facilitates a “transcendence of ego” that enables, amongst other things, “a sense of communal, rather than individuated, identity, and [... a] reflective engagement in all activities.”⁷²

The custodial ethic, as Graham describes it, also has temporal ramifications. It necessitates “looking to the long term” and “thinking strategically”.⁷³ Importantly, though, “long-term

⁶⁷ Id 194.

⁶⁸ Id 192.

⁶⁹ Id.

⁷⁰ Id 191.

⁷¹ Id 190.

⁷² Id.

⁷³ Id 185.

views and goals” cannot be “developed and maintained” simply by “having theoretical blueprints”⁷⁴ – by simplistically rationalistic procedures of abstraction and universalisation. In

Graham’s terms:

From an Aboriginal perspective, the goal must not be seen as a high moral ideal or ‘holy grail’. The custodial ethic is achieved through repetitive action, such that gradually, over time, the ethic becomes the ‘norm’. For Aboriginal people, the land is the great teacher; it not only teaches us how to relate to it, but to each other; it suggests a notion of caring for something outside ourselves, something that is in and of nature and that will exist for all time.⁷⁵

All these presentations offer a profoundly “other” way of imagining human embeddedness than those presented by separatist traditions.

4.1.4. For reflections on the First Nations emphasis on patterns, narcissism, and yarning, it is useful to turn to the work of Tyson Yunkaporta.

⁷⁴ Id.

⁷⁵ Id.

In his 2021 *Sand Talk*, Tyson Yunkaporta offers a set of cosmological and ethical reflections that parallel Graham's in powerful ways. His work focuses on the kinds of practical, embodied and communal activities that are associated with rituals like yarning (a particular form of conversation) and storytelling. These make his writing a useful point of entry for inquiries about practical paths to overcoming human separatism, in ways which are mindful of the complexities of approaching this task from within postcolonial contexts.

Yunkaporta's starting premise, like Graham's, is the thought that there exists a "fundamental disagreement" between First Peoples and what he calls "Second Peoples": colonizing societies.⁷⁶ This disagreement occurs at the level of cosmological imaginaries and principles. It concerns, in Yunkaporta's terms, the very "nature of reality and the basic laws of existence".⁷⁷ "First Peoples' Law", Yunkaporta argues, "says that nothing is created or destroyed because of the infinite and regenerative connections between systems".⁷⁸ From a First Nations perspective, Yunkaporta writes, existence is constituted by pattern and by relationship. "[N]othing can be known or even exist", he writes, "unless it is in relation to other things".⁷⁹ And the "things that are connected are less important than the forces of connection between them".⁸⁰ Put differently: "Relationships between systems are just as

⁷⁶ Yunkaporta 48.

⁷⁷ Id.

⁷⁸ Id.

⁷⁹ Id 134.

⁸⁰ Id 133.

important as the relationships within them”.⁸¹

There is, in other words, “a pattern to the universe and everything in it”, and the “knowledge systems and traditions [of Indigenous peoples] follow this pattern to maintain balance”.⁸² For First Nations peoples, Yunkaporta argues, “Nothing is created or destroyed; it just moves and changes”: and as such, creation is “in a constant state of motion, and we must move with it as the custodial species or we will damage the system and doom ourselves”.⁸³ This is in stark contrast to “Second Peoples’ law”, according to which “systems must be isolated and exist in a vacuum of individual creation”, in ways that “begi[n] in complexity but simplif[y] and brea[k] down until they meet their end”.⁸⁴ This sets up a deep contrast between approaches from the outset.⁸⁵

Human distinctiveness, in the First Nations context as Yunkaporta describes it, is imagined against the backdrop of this emphasis on relationships. “We exist to form [...] relationships,” he proposes, because it is relationships “which make up the energy that holds creation together”.⁸⁶ And these relationships shape the condition and the nature of human beings as

⁸¹ Id.

⁸² Id 12.

⁸³ Id 43.

⁸⁴ Id 48.

⁸⁵ Id 67.

⁸⁶ Id 133.

creatures and as species: “[b]eing in profound relation to place changes everything about [us]”.⁸⁷

Significantly, the patterns and relationships that manifest themselves at large scales are “repeated in the interconnected and diverse stories of many smaller regions”, in concrete and embodied terms. In place of reflections on the radical separateness of “Humanity” and “nature”, they generate a way of imagining the world in which “there is no difference between you, a stone, a tree or a traffic light” – precisely for the reason that “[a]ll contain knowledge, story, pattern”.⁸⁸ One of the illustrative examples Yunkaporta offers is particularly revealing in this respect. “In the home language of my family”, he writes,

there is no word for culture. There is a phrase that approximates that concept, but the meaning is untranslatable into English. *Aak ngamparam yimanang wunan*. If you look at the direct translation of each word, the meaning comes out as ‘being like our place’.⁸⁹

In this context, for Yunkaporta as for Graham, the notion of Law takes on immense importance. Framed as the “stories and values of the Dreaming at the centre of two equal

⁸⁷ Id 194.

⁸⁸ Id 31.

⁸⁹ Id 193.

halves”, Law is imagined as that which enables the “relationship between people and land [to be] balanced perfectly ... so that the needs of the people are always in a sustainable balance with the needs of the land”.⁹⁰ It also gives rise to the deep difference that Yunkaporta describes between the fundamental questions of First Nations Australian cultures and those of what he calls “adolescent cultures” – a phrase that for my purposes includes those cultures that advocate for human separatism.⁹¹ Adolescent cultures, Yunkaporta argues, “always ask the same three questions”.⁹² These are:

1. Why are we here?
2. How should we live?
3. What will happen when we die?⁹³

For Yunkaporta, these questions are at once too misleading and too banal. They overcomplicate straightforward things, and miss complex things. From a First Nations perspective, he suggests, human beings are a “custodial species”.⁹⁴ As such, our purpose is to learn and practice the “protocols [that emerge] for agents in a complex dynamic system”.⁹⁵ This does not require our separateness from nature; nor does it require our subsumption

⁹⁰ Id 66.

⁹¹ Id 85.

⁹² Id.

⁹³ Id 84.

⁹⁴ Id.

⁹⁵ Id.

within it. Even as “new cultures” insist on asking the questions above, again and again, for Yunkaporta the answer is “easy”.⁹⁶ we are here to “look after things on the earth and in the sky and the places in between.”⁹⁷ And this account of our existence shapes questions about the ways we should act in the present and the ways we should imagine for the future.

The simplicity of these answers does not mean, however, that adhering to them is a straightforward thing to do. Even more than Graham, Yunkaporta emphasises the process- and relationship-oriented implications of these understandings of Country and Law, and the consequences of this way of imagining for the kinds of questions that are asked. He also dwells at length on the ways in which knowledge and action are accumulated, nourished, and shared. These implications are eminently practical. First Nations peoples have “worked within self-organising systems for thousands of years to predict weather patterns, seasonal activity and the dynamics of social groups”, before “manag[ing] responses to these complexities in non-intrusive ways that maintain systemic balance”.⁹⁸ Within these contexts, no imaginary of separation is desirable or even possible: “While interventions are possible from within these dynamic systems, they cannot be controlled from the outside”.⁹⁹ This understanding, Yunkaporta argues, is one of the reasons that First Nations cosmologies and

⁹⁶ Id 90.

⁹⁷ Id 89.

⁹⁸ Id 78.

⁹⁹ Id 78.

cultures have managed to sustain their resilience.

The emphasis on relationships also shapes knowledge acquisition and transmission. “In Aboriginal worldviews”, Yunkaporta writes, “relationships are paramount” in and for these activities: and as such, “[t]here can be no exchange or dialogue until the protocols of establishing relationships have taken place”.¹⁰⁰ Participants in a conversation, in other words, articulate themselves to one another as living, concrete individuals, and not simply as abstract purveyors of particular theoretical ideologies. For Yunkaporta, the establishment of these protocols revolve around the answering of questions like:

Who are you?

Where are you from?

Where are you going?

What is your true purpose here?

Where does the knowledge you carry come from and who shared it with you?

What are the applications and potential impacts of this knowledge on this place?

What impacts has it had on other places?

¹⁰⁰ Id 133.

What other knowledge is it related to?

Who are you to be saying these things?¹⁰¹

These questions matter, he writes, because the “only sustainable way to store data long-term is within relationships—deep connections between generations of people in custodial relation to a sentient landscape, all grounded in a vibrant oral tradition”.¹⁰² Knowledge is only “sustainable over deep time” when it is “patterned within [the] forces of connection”.¹⁰³ In these contexts, it can “endur[e,] because everybody carries a part of it, no matter how fragmentary”,¹⁰⁴ and because “each part reflects the design of the whole system”. It follows that “[i]f you want to see the pattern of creation you talk to everybody and listen carefully”;¹⁰⁵ it also follows that “[a]uthentic knowledge processes are easy to verify if you are familiar with that pattern”.¹⁰⁶ At the same time, these patterns cannot always be encountered, depicted, or described in explicit ways. It is often necessary to “show patience and respect, come in from the side, sit awhile and wait to be invited in”.¹⁰⁷

It is against the backdrop of these reflections that Yunkaporta sets out his account of the

¹⁰¹ Id.

¹⁰² Id 132.

¹⁰³ Id 133.

¹⁰⁴ Id 21.

¹⁰⁵ Id.

¹⁰⁶ Id.

¹⁰⁷ Id 33.

original challenge facing human societies, from a First Nations Australian perspective. That challenge is the “ancient seed of narcissism”.¹⁰⁸ This diagnosis is strongly resonant with the critique I have offered of human separatism. Narcissism, Yunkaporta argues, is a theme that First Nations Australian narratives and cultures spend a great deal of effort encountering, processing, and seeking to deflect and/or constrain. It is constituted, he writes, by the “deman[d] that simplicity and order be imposed upon the complexity of creation”: a demand that runs contrary to the pattern of things, and so requires more and more energy and effort to sustain over the longer term, even as its destructive consequences emerge and take precedence over other implications and activities.¹⁰⁹ For Yunkaporta, narcissism leads to the “break[ing] down [of] creation systems”: and it culminates the infect[ion of] complex patterns with artificial simplicity” in the service of “exercising a civilising control over what some see as chaos”.¹¹⁰

From this perspective, then, narcissism is “an imposition of stupidity and simplicity over wisdom and complexity”.¹¹¹ But the of challenge of dealing with stupidity or idiocy is not a simple one for human beings. This is because, as Yunkaporta writes – in refreshingly plain-spoken terms – “Some people are just idiots[:] and everybody has a bit of idiot in them from

¹⁰⁸ Id 12.

¹⁰⁹ Id.

¹¹⁰ Id 13.

¹¹¹ Id 13.

time to time”.¹¹² The idiocy of narcissism manifests itself, he proposes, in the form of an internal voice: the “one inside that whispers, ‘You are special. You are greater than other people and things. You are more important than everything and everyone. All things and all people exist to serve you.’”¹¹³ This thought, for Yunkaporta, is the ultimate “source of all human misery”.¹¹⁴ A guiding thought in the First Nations context, then, as Yunkaporta describes it, is the thought that “[a]ll Law-breaking comes from that first evil thought, that original sin of placing yourself above the land or above other people”.¹¹⁵

Crucially for my purposes, the manifestations, consequences, and overcomings of this “first evil thought” are bound up closely in First Nations cultures with narratives: stories. For Yunkaporta, there is a “big story”, or “meta-story”, which “connects and extends all over Australia through massive songlines in the earth and sky” – one that “goes everywhere that turtles go—and there are turtles all over the world, even in desert country, so it connects everybody”.¹¹⁶ They are “ancient paths of Dreaming etched into the landscape in song and story and mapped into our minds and bodies and relationships with everything around us”.¹¹⁷

The “way each person knows those stories is subjective—how they are known in that time

¹¹² Id 33.

¹¹³ Id.

¹¹⁴ Id.

¹¹⁵ Id 34.

¹¹⁶ Id 23.

¹¹⁷ Id 29.

and place by that person is a unique viewpoint that is sacred, a communication between earth camp and sky camp, between people and a sentient cosmos”.¹¹⁸ At the same time, “The moment is not just about celestial bodies forming an orderly queue—it is also about a thousand different stories that converge and the pattern they create in a dialogue between earth and sky and [the individuals who encounter them]”.¹¹⁹

One concrete story Yunkaporta offers, as an illustration of this convergence, is that of the Australian emu, as related to him by Noel Nannup, an elder in the Nyoongar community of south-western Australia. Once upon a time, the story goes, there was a “meeting in which all the species sat down for a yarn to decide which one would be the custodial species for all of creation”.¹²⁰ Emu, at this meeting, “made a hell of a mess, running around showing off his speed and claiming his superiority, demanding to be boss and shouting over everyone” – a scene reflected metaphorically in the landscape in “the dark shape of Emu in the Milky Way[,] [with] Kangaroo ... holding him down, Echidna ... grasping him from behind, and the great Serpent ... coiled around his legs”.¹²¹ Emu, for Yunkaporta is “a troublemaker who brings into being the most destructive idea in existence: I am greater than you; you are less than me”.¹²² His narrative serves as a concrete representation of the dilemmas facing human

¹¹⁸ Id 30.

¹¹⁹ Id 30.

¹²⁰ Id 34.

¹²¹ Id 33.

¹²² Id.

societies, and a reflection back to them of their own selves and challenges.

A great part of the practical wisdom of First Nations society, Yunkaporta argues, comes from the fact that it “was designed over thousands of years to deal with [exactly] this problem”.¹²³ Narcissistic behaviour “needs massive checks and balances to contain the damage it can do”,¹²⁴ and “Containing the excesses of malignant narcissists is a team effort.”¹²⁵ Stories are a key part of this communal process. They are, as Yunkaporta asserts, “powerful tools”.¹²⁶ “[I]f you want to take control of your life or work towards some kind of sustainable change in the world,” he writes, “you need to harness the power of story.”¹²⁷

Significantly, though, taking this action involves “more ... than simply telling ... stories”: it also involves “compar[ing] our stories with the stories of others to seek greater understanding about our reality”.¹²⁸ Amongst other things, this is because “Powerful metaphors create the frameworks for powerful transformation processes, but only if they have ... integrity”.¹²⁹ Metaphors that “lac[k] integrity only damag[e] connectedness—an action that is known [in

¹²³ Id.

¹²⁴ Id.

¹²⁵ Id.

¹²⁶ Id.

¹²⁷ Id. Unfortunately, he notes, their use is not restricted to those with benevolent intent: they “can be even more powerful weapons in the hands of malignant narcissists”. Id.

¹²⁸ Id.

¹²⁹ Id 96.

First Nations culture] as a curse.¹³⁰

Yunkaporta describes the “long tradition” in First Nations contexts of “ritual training in the use of metaphor during initiation into higher stages of knowledge”: a practice that occurs because “metaphor is the way Law, Lore, Women’s and Men’s Business, ritual, Ceremony and magic is worked”.¹³¹ (He goes to say that “ritual and magic aren’t capitalised here because anybody can do” them).¹³² Later he says: “There are no trademarks in this knowledge. It is not specific to any single cultural group and belongs to everyone. You should come up with your own words for these ways of thinking if you decide to use them. You should alter them to match your own local environment and culture”.¹³³

This is necessary, for Yunkaporta, because

We have to be careful of the metaphors we use to make meaning, because metaphors are the language of spirit and that’s how we operate in our fields of existence either to increase or decrease connectedness within creation. We are the custodians who are

¹³⁰ Id.

¹³¹ Id 97.

¹³² Id.

¹³³ Id 153.

uniquely gifted to do this work, so we need to do it consciously and with mastery, within cultural frameworks aligned with the patterns of creation. If we allow the I-am-greater-than deception to enter this process, all is lost.¹³⁴

For Yunkaporta, interestingly, the risk of such a focus taking over is especially strong in print-based cultures. “Oral cultures”, he argues, “are known as high-context or field-dependent reasoning cultures”.¹³⁵ This means that “They have no isolated variables”, and – as such – that “all thinking is dependent on the field or context”.¹³⁶ In contrast, he observes, “Print-based cultures ... are low-context or field-independent reasoning cultures... they remain independent of the field or context, focusing on ideas and objects in isolation”.¹³⁷

He explicitly calls attention to Plato and the Platonic ontology, as one that “may have had something to do with the loss of contextual reasoning in western civilization” – given the ways in which Plato “introduced the idea of studying each idea as an entity in and of itself, disconnected from the rest of the system”, a practice which Yunkaporta charges with having “spawned the scientific method of reductionism and the highly individualised ways of

¹³⁴ Id 96.

¹³⁵ Id 136.

¹³⁶ Id.

¹³⁷ Id.

thinking that came to replace more communal approaches to knowledge in western philosophy”.¹³⁸

Where “high-context cultures demand dialogue and complex agreements”,¹³⁹ low-context cultures often reduce or avoid these arrangements: and “communities can lose their high-context cognitive function through intensive engagement with the global economic system”.¹⁴⁰ For him, “High-context thinkers encountering schooling for the first time are fish out of water”: “arriv[ing] with adaptive, collective, complex and intensely situated logic patterns”, and being accustomed to “operat[ing] within constantly negotiated feedback loops in reciprocal dialogue with the people and environment around them”.¹⁴¹ Their knowledge manifests itself in ways that involve showing, demonstration and evocation, and not merely “telling”, or theoretical explication. They must be disciplined to move outside this situatedness: and, in Yunkaporta’s telling, the resultant “focus on linear, abstract, declarative knowledge alone” that they are left with “not only fails to create complex connectivity but damages the[ir] mind[s]”.¹⁴²

Even in the face of these divergences and challenges, Yunkaporta observes, “Working with

¹³⁸ Id.

¹³⁹ Id 137.

¹⁴⁰ Id.

¹⁴¹ Id 138.

¹⁴² Id 91.

metaphors [remains] a point of common ground between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal knowledge systems".¹⁴³ "Whatever stories your cultural experience offers you," he writes, "you can still perceive spirit through metaphor and bring it into balance to step into your designated role as a custodian of reality." The challenge, though, is how this is done: especially against the backdrop of both the ontological and cultural-historical concerns outlined earlier in this dissertation.

For Yunkaporta, a significant tool for imagining, guarding, and sharing stories comes in the form of "yarning" and "the yarn": a term from First Nations English, evocative of weaving together, which refers to the practice of prolonged, non-linear conversation. But, as Yunkaporta notes, yarning is "more than just a story or conversation".¹⁴⁴ It is rather "a structured cultural activity that is recognised even in research circles as a valid and rigorous methodology for knowledge production, inquiry and transmission".¹⁴⁵ What's more, it is a "ritual": it "incorporates elements such as story, humour, gesture and mimicry for consensus-building, meaning-making and innovation".¹⁴⁶

As an activity and a process, yarning is able to "referenc[e specific] places and relationships

¹⁴³ Id 97.

¹⁴⁴ Id.

¹⁴⁵ Id 105.

¹⁴⁶ Id.

and [remains] highly contextualised in the local worldviews of those yarning”.¹⁴⁷ It involves “overlapping speech”, and is “vibrant and dynamic and deeply stimulating”, as well as “non-linear, branching off into diverse themes and topics but often returning to revisit ideas”.¹⁴⁸ Its “primary” element is “narrative”, which Yunkaporta describes as involving “the sharing of anecdotes, stories and experiences from the lived reality of the participants”.¹⁴⁹ And its “end point” is a “set of understandings, values and directions shared by all members of the group in a loose consensus that is inclusive of diverse points of view”.¹⁵⁰

These features of yarning, as a process, pay heed to the fact that “Solutions to complex problems take many dissimilar minds and points of view to design, so we have to do [it] together”.¹⁵¹ They also pay heed to the fact that “true cultural change doesn’t happen unilaterally”, Yunkaporta writes, because “Cultural innovations occur in deep relationships between land, spirit and groups of people”.¹⁵²

The outcomes of these practices and various proposals for change, for Yunkaporta as for Graham, can never be usefully framed in terms of abstract or ideal blueprints. They must instead be imagined in embodied and relational terms. The “biggest problem with

¹⁴⁷ Id.

¹⁴⁸ Id.

¹⁴⁹ Id 106.

¹⁵⁰ Id.

¹⁵¹ Id 27.

¹⁵² Id 61

contemporary approaches to risk”, Yunkaporta writes, is the illusion of safety as a human right that can be controlled as a variable in advance” – when, as he says flatly, “It cannot”.¹⁵³

In the First Nations context, he writes, “there is no such thing as safety [...] provided by an invisible hierarchy” – such an idea is “complete anathema to [the First Nations] way of being”.¹⁵⁴ In large part, this is because “There is no agency in safety, which places a person in a passive role, at the mercy of authorities who may or may not intervene when needed”.¹⁵⁵

This means, he says, “we have no word for safety or risk ... [but] we have plenty of words for protection.”¹⁵⁶

In summarising the arguments he has offered, Yunkaporta observes that he has sought to answer four questions:

1. What can we know?
2. What do we know?
3. How do we know it?
4. How do we work with that?¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Id 179.

¹⁵⁴ Id.

¹⁵⁵ Id.

¹⁵⁶ Id.

¹⁵⁷ Id 163.

“What we can know”, he writes, “is determined by our obligations and relationships to people, Ancestors, land, law and creation.”¹⁵⁸ We know that “the role of custodial species is to sustain creation, which is formed from complexity and connectedness”; and “the way we know this is through our cultural metaphors”.¹⁵⁹ “The way we work with this knowledge”, in turn, “is by positioning, sharing and adapting [these] cultural metaphors” – a practice that allows for “a broad, common description of Indigenous ways of valuing, ways of being, ways of knowing and ways of doing”, ways that have “a widespread order, a sequence in all cultural activities in which people were sharing or producing knowledge on Country”.¹⁶⁰

Taking this seriously, he writes, leads to “something approximating an appropriate way of coming to Indigenous Knowledge and working towards sustainable solutions”.¹⁶¹ This “way”, again, proceeds via steps in an embodied process. The first step, “of Respect[,] is aligned with values and protocols of introduction, setting rules and boundaries” – a process that is “the work of your spirit, your gut”.¹⁶² The second step, “Connect, is about establishing strong relationships and routines of exchange that are equal for all involved” – given that “Your way of being is your way of relating, because all things only exist in relationship to other things”; and this, it turns out, is “the work of your heart”.¹⁶³ The third, “Reflect, is about thinking as

¹⁵⁸ Id.

¹⁵⁹ Id.

¹⁶⁰ Id 204.

¹⁶¹ Id 163.

¹⁶² Id 205.

¹⁶³ Id.

part of the group and collectively establishing a shared body of knowledge to inform what you will do” – a task that is “the work of the head”.¹⁶⁴ And the “final step, Direct, is about acting on that shared knowledge in ways that are negotiated by all” – a task that is “the work of the hands”.¹⁶⁵ Thus he arrives at a four-part summary of First Nations knowing processes: “Respect, Connect, Reflect, Direct—in that order”.¹⁶⁶

Living amongst these knowing processes, he writes, gives him the hope that “one day everybody [will] find a place under the Law of the land where they live, transitioning our living systems into something that is sustainable in the true sense of the word”.¹⁶⁷ This is because “the small questions of existence ... Why are we here? How should we live? What will happen when we die?... [should give way to] the business of asking some of the bigger questions”: a process that “need[s] living lands and bodies ... [so we should] put these hands of ours to work”.¹⁶⁸ “Future survival of all life on this planet”, he writes, “will be dependent on humans being able to perceive and be custodians of the patterns of creation again, which in turn requires a completely different way of living in relation to the land.”¹⁶⁹ In these ways, his work, like Graham’s, offers a completely different starting-point to that of separatist imaginaries, and a powerful set of alternative approaches to begin with in ways that are

¹⁶⁴ Id.

¹⁶⁵ Id.

¹⁶⁶ Id 205.

¹⁶⁷ Id 206.

¹⁶⁸ Id.

¹⁶⁹ Id 192.

embodied and universally concrete.

4.2. Narrative tragedy is a place in the European tradition that can be used to explore themes and processes that parallel these First Nations explorations.

In the previous section I explored some themes that appear in First Nations Australian cosmologies and stories, and considered the ways that these play into ethical and political dialogues there. I now want to turn my attention to the question I raised in chapter 3, about places in the European tradition that might best serve as a venue for parallel experiences.

My specific interest is in suggesting that storytelling in general – and narrative tragedy in particular – is a place we can develop work that fits the bill: a place we can construct narratives that speak to the concrete situations and histories of European separatist ideologies, in ways which take inspiration from, but do not deal unethically with, First Nations cosmologies. For clarity with regards to what follows: I use the term “tragedy”

broadly, to encompass tragic novels, films, plays, and so forth. I do not intend to buy into the argument that “only” Attic tragedy, or something to this effect, has the power to do the work I am exploring here.

There is a long history in the European tradition of reflection on tragedy, as a genre or form of narrative with particular ethical and emotional possibilities. Much of it, interestingly enough, serves as a rejoinder to Plato, who – in the *Republic* – characterises poets as “liars” and decrees that they must be banned in his imaginary perfect city (the *Kallipolis*). In chapter 1 I suggested that many subsequent thinkers in the European tradition have taken their ontological cues from Plato, and imagined worlds where human beings are (but also must become) radically separate from nature. When it comes to tragedy, though, the response has been quite different. Almost all those thinkers who have considered the matter after Plato have sought to answer Plato’s rejection of poetry (including tragedy) as something dangerous and destructive, by showing how tragic narratives in fact have a great deal to offer in individual and communal ethical and political life.

In his *Philosophy of Tragedy*, Julian Young writes that “[t]wo questions ... have provided the focus of philosophical investigations of tragedy”.¹⁷⁰ These are, he says:

¹⁷⁰ Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy*, 263.

1. "What is tragedy?"
2. Why, in spite of its distressing aspect, do we value [it]?"¹⁷¹

As he shows, philosophers have often attempted to answer the first question in analytic terms – substituting the question "what is tragedy?" for the far duller question, "what are the features a narrative must have in order for us to officially count it as a tragedy?" I don't find this question or approach compelling. In any event, after his overview – which runs from Plato through to Zizek, via thinkers including Hume, Hölderlin, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, Young concludes that the answer is "rather straightforward and simple".¹⁷²

"[T]ragedy", it turns out, is no more or less than "a very sad story".¹⁷³

The answer can be fleshed out by considering two aspects of this "sadness": the content of the story itself, and the effect it has on an audience (reader, viewer, etc). "[W]ith respect to the content of tragedy," Young writes, "Schopenhauer is surely right: 'the presentation of a great misfortune is alone essential'" for a tragic story.¹⁷⁴ Similarly, "with respect to the effect of tragedy Aristotle is surely right: the story needs to be told in such a manner as to generate (among other emotions) fear and pity and their catharsis".¹⁷⁵ Here, he is referring to

¹⁷¹ Id.

¹⁷² Id 263.

¹⁷³ Id.

¹⁷⁴ Id, quoting Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 254.

¹⁷⁵ Id.

the rich, but obscure, definition of tragedy Aristotle offers in the *Poetics*, which most of the philosophers he considers take as their starting-point. Aristotle defines tragedy as

[a]n imitation of action, that is of stature and complete, with magnitude, that, by means of sweetened speech, but with each of its kinds separate in its proper parts, is of people acting and not through report, and accomplishes through pity and fear the cleansing [*catharsis, καθάρσις*] of [frightening or pitiable] experiences.¹⁷⁶

Commentaries on this definition alone could fill several volumes. Two of the key points, though, are those Young mentions. In short: there is no need to be overly pedantic about what “counts” as tragedy in order to have a useful conversation about its creative and ethical possibilities.

More generative and interesting than the question of what tragedy *is*, then, is the question of what tragedy *does*, or what it has the potential to do, offered effectively. Young writes that the majority of philosophers in the tradition have begun from the assumption that

¹⁷⁶ Aristotle, *On Poetics*, 17. As I refer to Michael Davis and Seth Benardete’s translation, and the words in that translation matter for my argument, I will cite the page numbers of that work rather than the sections of Aristotle’s text.

“there must be something beneficial, something ‘positive’, we derive from tragedy”.¹⁷⁷ This benefit, moreover, “must be very important indeed”, so that it can “outweigh the distress” that tragic stories cause: “so important”, in fact, that it may well “render tragedy the highest form of literature, [or even] of all art”.¹⁷⁸

The benefit tragedy offers, Young notes, is what Schelling came to call the “tragic effect”.¹⁷⁹ It is *this* question, more than the analytic or definitional one, Young argues, which turns out to have been of most interest to thinkers who have considered the matter. “In almost every case”, he writes, the “real interest [of these thinkers] has been ... the question of what makes tragedy ‘great’, what it is in its ‘highest vocation’, what it needs to be like in order to have the greatest significance of which it is capable in the economy of human life as a whole”.¹⁸⁰

Young proposes that almost all modern philosophers writing about tragedy (with the exception of Hume¹⁸¹) offer one of two basic responses to this question. These responses might be called “emotional” and “intellectual”, or alternatively “experiential” and “knowledge-oriented”. They “locate[the tragic effect] either on the level of sense and emotion or on the level of intellect and cognition”: “identif[ying it] either as a special kind of (possibly

¹⁷⁷ Young 1.

¹⁷⁸ Id.

¹⁷⁹ Id.

¹⁸⁰ Id.

¹⁸¹ Id 265 and chapter 4.

bittersweet) pleasure... or else as the acquisition of some kind of knowledge".¹⁸²

For Young, the first response is "Kantian", and the second is "Hegelian". The first group includes Kant himself and his intellectual successors, as well as "Schelling, Hölderlin, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and, probably, Lacan", and its members "believe that what is really important about tragedy is the experience of a state of being in which one overcomes the pain and finitude of life".¹⁸³ The second group includes Hegel, as well as "Kierkegaard, Benjamin, Schmitt, Camus, Miller and Žižek", and its members "think that what is really important about tragedy is the presentation (and maybe resolution) of ethical conflict".¹⁸⁴ In the first case, tragedy offers an experience of the sublime; in the second, it offers an intellectual sublation.

Young argues that "it [is] possible to adjudicate between these two traditions".¹⁸⁵ The "sublimeist" (Kantian) approach, he writes,

is a response to the 'death of God', which happened towards the end of the eighteenth century. Essentially, theorists in this tradition want

¹⁸² Id 1.

¹⁸³ Id 266.

¹⁸⁴ Id.

¹⁸⁵ Id.

tragedy to take over the task of providing the 'metaphysical comfort' for the suffering and finitude of life formerly performed by religion."

"The trouble" with this argument, though, is that

elevating tragedy that produces the 'feeling of the sublime' into tragedy in its 'highest vocation', ... does not pick out what Aristotle calls 'the pleasure that is peculiar to tragedy', does not show why tragedy in particular plays a vital role in human life ... [which means that the] Kantian account of the tragic effect fails ... to show why we value tragedy as providing something we could acquire by no other means.¹⁸⁶

The "ethical" (Hegelian) approach is more capacious. It "does not exclude the feeling of the sublime as a tragic effect": but it specifies that

the important 'effect' offered [to] us by tragedy is a productive engagement with ethical dilemmas. That the need for such an engagement is no historically local phenomenon is obvious. Human

¹⁸⁶ Id 267.

beings always have, and always will, need to work on, and through,
ethical conflicts.¹⁸⁷

Young notes, importantly, that “Hegel himself... claimed that while tragedy performed this function in antiquity, philosophy can now do it even better”.¹⁸⁸ But he holds, “as Schopenhauer said of Plato’s expression of a similar view”, that this “is ‘one of the greatest errors of that great man’”.¹⁸⁹ It is an error because “while philosophy can engage the intellect in moral *agon*, only tragedy can also engage the feelings and emotions”: given that “only tragedy can engage the heart as well as the head, only it can engage the whole person, and so only in tragedy lies the possibility of a significant ‘effect’ on how we act”.¹⁹⁰

This does not mean, as Young writes, “that philosophy can never generate an emotional engagement with ethical *agon*” – but it means that “to do so it must *also* be tragedy”.¹⁹¹ It must recognize that “what makes [a tragic] drama so engrossing is that against a background of powerful (and powerfully restrained) passions, it crackles with high-tension, intellectual electricity”.¹⁹² “Philosophy that truly engages” the whole person, in other words,

¹⁸⁷ Id 268.

¹⁸⁸ Id.

¹⁸⁹ Id.

¹⁹⁰ Id.

¹⁹¹ Id.

¹⁹² Id, my emphasis, quoting Schopenhauer 212.

“must also be, in the broadest sense of the word, poetry”.¹⁹³ Here are resonances with the kinds of ideas that I outlined in my overview of Graham and Yunkaporta’s work, above.

Having said all of this, however, Young also returns to the pragmatic point. The “two kinds of effect are not, of course, mutually exclusive and some philosophers ... have allowed ‘the’ tragic effect to embrace both”.¹⁹⁴ It is this synthetic conclusion that I find most compelling, and it is this that I will assume for the following discussion.

I want to note, as a methodological point, that I will not be analysing specific existing tragedies to make the points I am attempting to make here. This is for two reasons. First, there already exist analyses of significant tragedies (*Antigone*; *Oedipus Rex*; even perhaps *Breaking Bad*) written by others. Second, though, from my perspective taking such an approach would risk diluting the argument that I am keen to make. It would risk turning what follows into a literary or comparative literary analysis, of the kind that one might find in an English or Comparative Literature dissertation. These are not in themselves bad, but they are a different kind of text than the one I want to offer here. My goal is not to show how one particular existing tragedy already does some of what I am exploring well. It is

¹⁹³ Id 268.

¹⁹⁴ Id 1.

rather to suggest that the genre of tragedy generally is one we should be working in as we seek imaginative responses to the problems of separatism moving forward.

The structure of this section is as follows. First, I consider the ways in which tragic narratives facilitate reflections upon the nature of the human condition – and, specifically, how they facilitate reflection upon the situatedness of human beings in contexts larger than themselves, and upon the consequences of human hubris. Next, I reflect upon the ways that they facilitate *emotional* (not merely cognitive or intellectual) metabolising of this condition. Third and finally, I suggest some ways in which they can, viewed in context, offer a starting-point for imagining alternative futures, promoting dialogue and shared imagination: and, ideally, help us to undo some of the atrophying of the emotional and imaginative vocabularies that have come to constrain our minds and lives in certain ways.

4.2.1. Tragic narratives facilitate reflections upon the nature of the human condition.

Tragic narratives in the European tradition already have a great facility with, and a broad vocabulary for, exploring the human condition and its consequences. In particular, tragedy offers a broad vocabulary for depicting the situatedness of human beings in contexts and regimes of (natural) law that are larger than themselves; and for depicting *hamartia* – “fatal

flaws” – and hubris and their ramifications. This means that they can both serve as a location for work that parallels the creative and ethical possibilities offered by the First Nations Australian cosmologies I considered above: and, looking forward, can offer a variety of possibilities for depicting human separatism and imagining alternatives.

4.2.1.1. Tragedy is a vehicle for exploring the situatedness of human beings in their contexts.

Tragic narratives have long been preoccupied with showing human beings in contexts that are larger than themselves. This preoccupation extends back to the beginning of the tradition. Michael Davis observes that even Aristotle’s *On Poetics* – “while certainly about tragedy” – is not *only* about tragedy.¹⁹⁵ It also concerns human action more generally: and it offers a set of reflections on “the very structure of the human soul in its relation to what is”.¹⁹⁶ In other words, tragedies and reflections on tragedies explore the embeddedness of human beings (or their “souls”) in relation to “nature” (or “what is”).

More specifically, as Julian Young notes, tragedies are essentially concerned with the ways in which these conditions place constraints upon human action, and the consequences of

¹⁹⁵ Davis xii.

¹⁹⁶ Id vii.

disregarding these constraints. “There will always be a ‘fate’”, he writes, “that limits human pride and ambition” – in Camus’ words, “a limit that must not be transgressed” – for the simple reason that “We are not masters of the universe.”¹⁹⁷ Similarly, although we may “yearn for infinitude, for eternal life ... that is something excluded from the human condition”, because “Individuals are essentially finite, mortal.”¹⁹⁸

At many moments, relevantly enough, depictions of this condition take advantage of representations of the sublime, which are often representations of the natural world: as Young notes, quoting Kant, On this point, Young’s observations on Kant and the sublime are relevant, as well:

Examples of the dynamically sublime are ‘bold, overhanging, and as it were threatening rocks; clouds piled up in the sky, moving with lightning flashes and thunder peals; volcanoes in all their violence of destruction; hurricanes with their track of devastation; the bound- less ocean in a state of tumult; the lofty waterfall of a mighty river’. ... such objects have a might which, if we were in the wrong place at the

¹⁹⁷ Young 254 quoting Camus, *On the Future of Tragedy*, 302.

¹⁹⁸ Young 118.

wrong time, would destroy [us].¹⁹⁹

Many of the most famous tragedies in the European tradition are constructed around the crises and conflicts that occur as human beings grapple with their situatedness in contexts beyond themselves, and their need to find ways to function within these contexts or die. This is as true of *Antigone*, where both Antigone and Creon are forced to confront the ramifications of multiple systems of law, as it is of *Death of a Salesman*, where Willie Loman confronts the overwhelming realities of an alienating economic system. Significantly, the kinds of systems tragedy depicts and explores often generate concerns that are directly relevant to those of human separatism: the rise and consequences of technology, the emotional challenge of death, the difficulty of ethical and social change, the seduction of hubris, and the complexities of imagining the future in ways that do not succumb to the lure of easy “solutions” to the problems of the past. These are themes, as noted above, which figure prominently in a great deal of First Nations Australian thinking. This suggests that narrative tragedy is a potentially useful place for similar explorations, which runs less of a risk of engaging unethically or appropriatively with that thinking.

From a philosophical perspective, a good deal of the exploration of these themes in tragedy

¹⁹⁹ Young 103, quoting the passage that can be found in Kant and Pluhar, *Critique of Judgment*, 261. (Young uses a slightly different translation but I have cited the Pluhar edition for consistency across this project.)

comes through plot – in the Greek, *muthos* (μύθος). From the *Poetics* onwards, plot refers to more than just the sequence of events that an author creates or unfolds. Davis suggests that part of its goal is to “provide... an account of the deeper function of which the presence of the gods in particular [Attic] tragedies is merely the surface manifestation”:²⁰⁰ that is, again, to provide an account of the ways in which human fears and ambitions collide with larger, constitutive realities. In Ancient tragedies, these collisions can occur (albeit in complex ways) as part of interactions with “the Gods”, writ large. In more contemporary tragedies, they might take the form of class structures, natural disasters, or historical and familial complexities.

For Aristotle, as for many who follow him, this means that the “greatest” part of tragedy,²⁰¹ is the “putting together of events”: because “tragedy is an imitation, not of human beings, but of actions and of life.”²⁰² “[W]ithout action”, in other words, “tragedy could not come to be”.²⁰³ As such, “Story is the first principle and like the soul of tragedy, and characters [come] second”.²⁰⁴ “It is the story alone,” as Davis notes, “that differentiates one tragedy from another”.²⁰⁵ In other words – Aristotle’s – “character shows up in the choice that one

²⁰⁰ Young 103.

²⁰¹ Id 20.

²⁰² Id.

²⁰³ Id 21.

²⁰⁴ Id 22.

²⁰⁵ Davis xxvii.

makes’’: which is to say, through action.²⁰⁶ Tragedies *have* characters, and the characters matter, but they are also swept up amidst, or come to represent the logic of, a much larger condition and experience.

Whatever form these depictions take, they share a capacity to depict human beings in a context that they cannot fully understand, let alone control: and yet must come to terms with, at peril of suffering and death. They are, in Davis’s words, depictions of “what cannot be otherwise”:²⁰⁷ of the “limit[s] *beyond which [human beings] cannot go and remain human*”.²⁰⁸ Hegel, who is often considered the most sophisticated writer on tragedy since Aristotle,²⁰⁹ offers reflections on the same basic theme in the context of his own writing on tragedy, and argues that the “divinity” of the laws or systems depicted in Greek tragedies “suggests that they cannot be challenged by human beings”. (Hegel, for his part, relates this thought back to his analyses in the *Phenomenology* of Ancient culture more generally, when he suggests that in that context “no individual [could] criticise, set himself in judgment on, and so apart from, communal ethos because ethical substance [*Sittlichkeit*] constitute[d] his very ‘being’”).²¹⁰

²⁰⁶ Aristotle 23.

²⁰⁷ Id, my emphasis.

²⁰⁸ Id, my emphasis.

²⁰⁹ Id chapter 7.

²¹⁰ Id 128.

The ways in which these stories unfold, as Young writes in discussing *Oedipus*, “tell[] us something about human nature in general”: they depict, in Leon Golden’s words, “the fundamental limitation of the human intellect in dealing with the unfathomable mystery that surrounds divine purpose”.²¹¹ In more Hegelian terms, these depictions involve a thesis and antithesis – the world and its humans, we might say, or events and responses – leading to a synthesis, or conclusion.²¹²

4.2.1.2. Tragedy is a vehicle for exploring human hubris and its consequences.

Against this general backdrop, tragedy is famous for its specific explorations of hubris. Just as hubris – as narcissism and in its other forms – is a central feature of First Nations Australian narratives, hubris is a central theme in tragedies, and consists, in the most general terms, in getting too big for one’s boots: in presuming a power or agency that one does not have, or purporting to transcend a limit that is in fact an enabling constraint, beyond which it is impossible to tread without inviting self-destruction. Tragic narratives, as well as philosophical reflection on tragic narratives, offer a great deal of scope for exploring these themes. As Davis notes, being “a rational animal”, in Aristotle’s famous

²¹¹ Young 32, quoting Golden, “Catharsis,” 58.

²¹² As Young notes, “Although scholars doubt that [Hegel] intend[ed] this schema as a general account of the logic of history [in which context it is more often discussed] ... it fits very well what he has to say about the ‘dialectical’ structure of tragedy”: id 127.

phrase, “does not mean [...having] a battle within us sometimes won by our good part and sometimes won by our bad part”:²¹³ rather, it means that “we learn through suffering or undergoing (*pathei mathos, πάθει μάθος*)”, because “there is something irrational about our rationality”.²¹⁴

It is this “something “that “the tragic formula [can] sho[w]” in powerful ways when it is deployed effectively.²¹⁵ Tragedy “distinguishes itself from other forms of poetry by making the poetic character of human action thematic.”²¹⁶ As a form of storytelling, it can be “especially revealing of human action because it not only tells a story that is significant or meaningful, *but also makes the fact that the story can be meaningful a part of the story it tells.*”²¹⁷

One of the crucial ways in which tragedies explore this theme is through a device known to the Greeks (and now, to students of creative writing) as *hamartia* (χαμαρτία). Young observes that “The meaning of this word has been much debated. It has been variously translated as tragic ‘fault’, ‘flaw’, ‘mistake’, ‘fallibility’, ‘frailty’ and ‘error’”.²¹⁸ There is a

²¹³ Id xxvi. For Davis, indeed, Aristotle “can define human beings as at once rational animals, political animals, and imitative animals because *in the end the three are the same*”: Davis xxviii, my emphasis.

²¹⁴ Id.

²¹⁵ Id.

²¹⁶ Id xxv.

²¹⁷ Id, my emphasis.

²¹⁸ Young 51.

great deal of variation here, as Davis argues: the “sequence [of terms] constitutes a continuum with the implication of quite serious moral or quasi-moral blameworthiness, at one end, and complete or nearly complete blamelessness, at the other”.²¹⁹ The most commonly-held view, though, is that a character’s *hamartia* involves at least some blameworthiness on their own part. This is particularly true in Modern tragedies, which take place against the backdrop of the broadly individualistic ontologies that have come to shape Modern culture more generally.

Hamartia in this sense is a capacity or potential, one that might not be inevitably actualised, but is likely to be actualised unless it is constrained or channelled in some way. This reading of *Hamartia* fits with Hegel’s writings as well as Aristotle’s: in the same way as Aristotle, Young notes, Hegel rejects the view that tragedy can be about innocence brought down by ‘fate’, because such a story would “merely be a ‘sad [one]’”.²²⁰ To be powerful, “the suffering of the tragic hero must be self-inflicted” – it “must be the result of some ‘fault’ for which the hero is ‘blameworthy’”.²²¹

Here, as in the First Nations Australian cosmologies I considered above, *hamartia* is inescapable. In Yunkaporta’s terms, human beings inevitably find themselves, as a result of

²¹⁹ Id.

²²⁰ Id 118.

²²¹ Id 134: the word “blameworthy” is Hegel’s.

their very condition, grappling with the potential and danger of their own narcissism. But this does not mean that narcissistic actions are blameless: and indeed, a great deal of the power and pathos of tragic narratives comes from watching a character who is, as it were, hijacked by that narcissism. This can even occur, at moments, despite certain efforts of the character themselves: when they find themselves, despite an awareness of their own limitation or flaw, *addicted* to that flaw, destructively pursuing it because they are driven to do so by forces that override everything else, and in contexts where the guardrails to prevent them doing this have been eroded or removed.

The *hamartia* of tragic characters, therefore, offers a mirror for precisely the kinds of challenges that human separatism tends to present. As I have argued, the idea of “separation” from nature is an incoherent idea: and yet, it persists and intensifies even in the face of repeated demonstrations of this incoherence. An exploration and questioning of *why* this might be – the many reasons, “natural” and “cultural”, which make it so hard for us to go another way – is another crucial part of tragedy. Hubris is one of the drivers of the “ethical conflict”, in Hegel’s terms, which serves as the engine for both the story and the reflection on the story that is possible for the audience.

In short: in depicting hubris, tragic narratives work against the kind of false utopianism or wishful thinking in Ecomodernist and other separatist writing. Hubris must be reckoned with,

constrained, channelled, and dealt with, because it cannot be invented away. As Young writes, in the context of a discussion of Schelling: “Tragic misfortune ... must not be something that can be overcome by strength or cunning, for if it could be then ‘fate’ would not be involved. The adversity the hero confronts must be insuperable.”²²² In fact, the attempt to invent it away – to propose that there are technological or technocratic solutions to social problems which can render the work of political and ethical dialogue unnecessary – is itself a kind of hubris that tragic narratives are able to depict.

“The world that the eighteenth-century individual thought he could conquer and transform by reason and science”, in Young’s terms, has “taken shape, but it is a monstrous one ... Rational and excessive at one and the same time, it is the world of history.”²²³ For present purposes, “history” here includes precisely the kinds of traps and concrete occurrences and outcomes that cannot be invented away or otherwise easily avoided: they must instead be metabolized, processed, come to terms with. All of these things suggest powerful resonances with narratives offered in some First Nations Australian cosmologies.

²²² Id 98.

²²³ Id 256

4.2.2. Tragedy facilitates emotional, as well as intellectual, metabolization of this condition.

A second function of tragic narrative that makes it well-suited for the tasks I am describing here is its capacity – in Aristotle’s words – to “accomplis[h] through pity and fear the cleansing [*catharsis*, *καθάρσις*] of [frightening or pitiable] experiences”.²²⁴ Tragedy has a powerful, and perhaps unique, capacity to facilitate the processing of complex insights: and it does so in terms that are not just cerebral, but emotional. This “tragic effect”, indeed, has been one of the central things that philosophers have pointed to as they have sought to understand the genre’s power. It parallels the emotional and whole-person experiences described by Graham and Yunkaporta in their consideration of rituals and practices like yarning in First Nations communities.

Catharsis turns out to be a challenging phenomenon to isolate and define: Aristotle himself never defines it, and as Young writes, “it is possible to regard a great deal of the two-millennia-long attempt by philosophers to explain the tragic effect as an attempt to explain what Aristotle meant – or at least should have meant – by ‘catharsis’.”²²⁵ In what follows, however, I will suggest that it is not in fact necessary to arrive at an analytic definition of

²²⁴ Aristotle 17.

²²⁵ Young 43.

catharsis in order to understand its significance. To riff on the memorable phrase of William Rehnquist's, we know it when we feel it. In the next two subsections I will describe the ways in which the structure of tragedies is adapted for this purpose, and the ways in which it can perform this role better than philosophy alone.

4.2.2.1. Tragedy has a structure that has been honed for precisely this purpose.

Many studies of tragedy dwell at length on the structure of tragic narrative. They focus on *hamartia* and nemesis, or turning points and midpoints, or rising and falling action around a climax.²²⁶ (The precise terminology they use depends on their audience, just as food writing in newspapers differs from recipe writing in cookbooks. One is geared towards those who want to watch; the other is geared to those who want to make.) There are a variety of things we should “aim at” and “beware of” as we are “putting together stories” – given that the story, as noted, is the “basis [on which] tragedy will do its job”.²²⁷ The act of designing the “most beautiful” tragedies is “not simple but [...] a complex weave” – and it is “imitative of fearful and pitiable things”.²²⁸ My argument in this subsection is that this structure makes it especially well-suited to telling the kinds of stories I’ve been exploring in this work: in

²²⁶ Commonly-cited texts amongst practitioners include Freytag, *The Technique of Drama*; Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*; Vogler, *The Writer's Journey*. Others I have found personally powerful include Yorke, *Into the Woods*, 2015; Aronson, *The 21st Century Screenplay*.

²²⁷ Aristotle 32.

²²⁸ Id.

ways, again, that will allow for fruitful dialogue and exchange with First Nations Australian writers and thinkers.

As a side note: in both literary criticism and practical guidance, the spirit of accounts of tragedy can be lost in debates about how didactic or restrictive the “models” or guidelines are supposed to be. In particular, work on the structure of tragedy is often viewed by professional writers as formulaic or didactic. This is a fair concern, but dwelling upon it to the exclusion of thinking about the lessons of reflections on tragic structure would be a mistake. It mirrors the error of focussing on the analytic question of what tragedy “is” (or what features it must have if it is to be “real” tragedy) instead of the question of its possibilities, which is to say, what it can *do*. In a similar fashion, reflections on what differentiates Ancient from Modern tragedies (or, more insidiously, prognostications – which seem to occupy a great deal of past-minded Modern thinkers – on why Modern tragedies are not *really* tragedies proper, in the Ancient way) are common in the literature, but not of especial interest for my purposes.

Understanding structure is certainly a key part of the process for writers of tragedies. But even for people who don’t fall into this category, reflections upon the structure of tragic narrative can be illuminating and important. In the first place, this is because the structure of tragic narratives has been honed over a great many years to perform the function it

performs, which is of interest in the context of my argument. In the second place, though, and more broadly, this structure very often mimics the experiential processes that people go through as they come to terms with events in their own worlds. This is part of why it can play the instructive or ethical function that has been recognised in it right back to Aristotle.

The “greatest” part of tragedy,²²⁹ Aristotle writes, is the “putting together of events”: because “tragedy is an imitation, not of human beings, but of actions and of life.”²³⁰ “[W]ithout action”, in other words, “tragedy could not come to be”:²³¹ and this means that “Story is the first principle and like the soul of tragedy, and characters [come] second”.²³² For Aristotle, establishing a set of themes that others will inherit through millennia, tragedies are designed around four key phases/moments. These can be usefully put into pairs for my purposes.

First there are “entanglements” [*desis*, δέσεις] (the Greek term is more commonly rendered as “complications”) and “unravellings” [*lisis*, λύσεις] (sometimes rendered as workings-out or consequences). Then there are (3) *peripeteia* (περιπέτεια), or reversals, and (4) *anagnorisis* (αναγνώριση), recognitions.²³³ The first pair might be called phases, which correspond

²²⁹ Id 20.

²³⁰ Id.

²³¹ Id 21.

²³² Id 22.

²³³ I have ignored the singular and plural in the Greek for present purposes.

roughly to the first and second halves of the story. In Aristotle's terms, the "entanglement [...] what is from the beginning until that part which is an extreme from which it changes into good fortune or misfortune" (usually interpreted as the midpoint): and the "unraveling [...] what is from the beginning of the change until the end".²³⁴ The second are often called "story beats" or "plot points". They involve "change into the contrary of the things being done",²³⁵ and "change[s] from ignorance [*agnoia, αγνωία*] to knowledge [*gnosis, γνώση*]"²³⁶

The capacity of tragedy to deliver reversals and recognitions is most important for my purposes. For this reason, I will treat complications and consequences rather briefly. Tragic narratives, perhaps obviously, have a first half (rising action, in Freytag's terms) and a second half (falling action, again in Freytag's terms).²³⁷ These two halves are separated by a crucial piece of action or a revelation that occurs at the midpoint of the narrative. Practising writers have spent a great deal of ink trying to articulate the form that this midpoint beat should take, and the features it should have.

Two useful interpretations run as follows. First: from the end of the first half of the story to the midpoint, the actions the protagonist takes on their outward journey make their

²³⁴ Id.

²³⁵ Id 30.

²³⁶ Id.

²³⁷ Id.

situation better. From the midpoint to the end of the second act, the actions they take make their situation worse, and they are forced to seek new resources and tools in their attempts to survive and (maybe) thrive. In more technical terms, the entanglements of the first half of the story tend to be increasingly complicated ripple effects of the *hamartia* that drives the story itself. The unravelings of the second half depict the consequences of the hubris this *hamartia* generates, and the ways in which the character at issue succeeds or fails to come to terms with these consequences.

Reversals and recognitions are more central for my purposes. In general terms, reversals are events, behaviours, consequences which subvert the expectations of the characters (and often the readers/viewers). They show, in simple terms, everything going in unexpected directions. Recognitions, in turn, show moments of insight on the part of the central characters, and prompt moments of insight for the audience. They can be false – later revealed as flawed incomplete – or truthful, for want of better words.

The greatest recognition of all tends to come close to the ending of the story, and might equally be described as the moment of epiphany. Done well, epiphanies are immensely satisfying for audiences. They provide a sort of turn of the key: a moment at which the lessons of the story (if lessons they are) can start to be internalised and learned. For Aristotle, “recognition is most beautiful when it comes to be at the same time as ...

reversal".²³⁸ when an event prompts the realisation on both the part of the characters and the part of the audience. Recognitions – epiphanies – thus point beyond the story as it is told, to the kinds of ponderings that we do in the days and weeks (and perhaps, lifetimes) after experiencing powerful narratives.

As an interesting side note, a great deal of philosophical writing on this aspect of tragedy since Kant involves the concept of the “sublime” – and this concept is often described in terms that link it back to the natural world. (Kant memorably offers, as examples of the “dynamically” sublime, “bold, overhanging, and as it were threatening rocks; clouds piled up in the sky, moving with lightning flashes and thunder peals; volcanoes in all their violence of destruction; hurricanes with their track of devastation; the boundless ocean in a state of tumult; the lofty waterfall of a mighty river”²³⁹.) “Nature”, quite vividly, serves as a point of emphasis for questions about catharsis and the sublime.

Reversals and recognitions, then, are “two [crucial] parts” of the story: “and a third” – in Aristotle’s words – is “suffering”.²⁴⁰ But this suffering is not usually gratuitous (or if it is, its gratuitousness becomes the point). Many others have already written on the nature and function of sufferings and ordeals undergone by characters in tragic narratives, so I will not

²³⁸ Id.

²³⁹ Young 103, quoting Kant 28.

²⁴⁰ Aristotle 31.

dwell on the theme in detail here. I will limit myself to saying that, as in life, “effective” suffering facilitates learning, for us as for those who watch us.

The need to present suffering is also tied up with the (empathy-generating) need to present *failure*: because, as Davis writes, “present[ing] in action a successful reflection on action (*epieikeia*) would not arouse wonder and so lead to reflection; it would be too pat, and so essentially invisible.” It is for this reason that tragedies must present *failures* – the hubris, the mistakes, the miscalculations – because it is these that will result in the “stimulation of pity and fear”.²⁴¹

Tragic narratives therefore have a great many features in their structural “toolkits” that can be fit to the kinds of stories I am exploring here. I will consider how this might happen for stories of human separatism in more detail in Section 3, below.

4.2.2.2. Tragedy integrates emotions in ways that philosophy often does not.

As well as their useful structural features, tragedies are able to engage the emotions – including and beyond catharsis – in ways that touch the heart, as well as the mind. As Michael Davis writes, in his introduction to Aristotle’s *Poetics*: when it comes to our

²⁴¹ Davis xxv.

reflections on the human condition, “[w]e need the whole story, and only poetry gives it to us”: because it “lets us see inside [people] so that we can celebrate” the ways they come to terms with the human condition itself.²⁴² Tragedy, in the same way, “has as its goal making visible the most important thing about human beings, which, as essentially invisible, cannot be shown as it really is”²⁴³ – in short, the processes and relationships through which we process and come to terms with our world and with our lives. In this, tragedy “distinguishes itself from other forms of poetry by making the poetic character of human action thematic.”²⁴⁴

To understand the power of tragedy in this regard, it is key to understand the ways in which it mirrors and mimics life: including the concerns of life that are dealt with in philosophy. “The two meanings of *poiesis* – doing and poetry”, Davis writes, “are related much as talking and singing, walking and dancing, acting and acting”: because “Human doing is double”, or “has a self-conscious part and an unself-conscious part”.²⁴⁵ Like philosophy, this doubleness arises (amongst other things) from the human need, which we find ourselves charged with as a result of our capacity for symbolic cognition and language) to consider the facticity of our own deaths. The fact “[t]hat we can contemplate the possibility of our own deaths is what

²⁴² Id xv.

²⁴³ Id xvii.

²⁴⁴ Id xxiv.

²⁴⁵ Id xvii.

makes it possible for us to attempt to fashion our lives as wholes”; but “as we never really experience our lives as wholes, this contemplation [can only ever be] a sort of fiction”.²⁴⁶ “Poetry”, he writes, “makes it possible to experience our action as whole before it is whole” – Aristotle’s “complete[ness]” – and in a way that this wholeness “becomes a part of the experience itself”.²⁴⁷

Philosophy in its greatest forms has been engaged with these concerns and fears right back to Plato. (“Where shall we find a good charmer for these fears, Socrates, he said, now that you are leaving us?”²⁴⁸) But even those most enamoured of philosophy have, from time to time, acknowledged that the passions they find aroused in philosophical texts might not be shared by every member of the human species. Hegel himself believed that philosophy could perform the ethical function he ascribed to it better than tragedy: but Hegel was a particular philosopher. And “this”, Young quips, “as Schopenhauer said of Plato’s expression of a similar view, [was] ‘one of the greatest errors of that great man’”.²⁴⁹

It is unnecessary for philosophers to suppose that rationalistic ideas alone *must* be able to fulfil the entirety of the functions that they ask for. To hope that this is the case is to fall

²⁴⁶ Id xvi.

²⁴⁷ Id.

²⁴⁸ *Phaedo* 78.

²⁴⁹ Young 268, quoting Schopenhauer 212.

into the same trap that I explored above, which can arise as a defensive reaction to fear of emotion, including fear of death: the attempt to “cover” all reflection with a desiccated rationalism, not because this is actually capable of doing all is necessary, but because it stems from a fear in the individual thinker themselves.

As Young puts it, “while philosophy can engage the intellect in moral *agon*, only tragedy can also engage the feelings and emotions” – “only tragedy can engage the heart as well as the head, [so] only it can engage the whole person, and so only in tragedy lies the possibility of a significant ‘effect’ on how we act”.²⁵⁰ Stories, in contrast, have a much better claim to being able to arouse these passions, even for those who are not philosophically inclined. (Here is the second link to Plato I described above: Plato feared this transporting effect²⁵¹ of narratives so much he sought to outlaw them. Plato, as Young writes, proposes that where “good and decent” men, whose lives are “led by reason”, do their “best to repress grief and other powerful emotions”, tragedy will cause problems by “indulg[ing] the part of the soul that revels in states of high emotional excitement”, will therefore “undermin[e] reason”, understood as “our ability to cope with life”, and “should, therefore, be banned”.²⁵²)

²⁵⁰ Id.

²⁵¹ “Transportation” is not an idle term here. On narrative transportation theory, see ***

²⁵² Young 32.

Young, like others, is emphatic that this is not the same as the “claim that philosophy can *never* generate an emotional engagement with ethical agon”: clearly it can.²⁵³ Instead it is the “point... that to do so it must also be tragedy[: ...] must also be, in the broadest sense of the word, poetry.”²⁵⁴ Given that the concerns I have been dealing with in this dissertation are so closely related to emotion and embodied experience – most significantly, as they manifest in overpowering terrors of death, which must be processed or emerge in ways that are destructive or monstrous – this makes tragedy another powerful fit. It also serves as another point of resonance with the Australian First Nations cosmologies I described above. These, as Yunkaporta observes, are well aware of the need for a place for emotional reflection, as well as intellectual understanding.

I have now explored two features of tragedy that I believe present powerful parallels with Australian First Nations cosmologies – its particular thematic interests, and its emotional capacities. In the next section I turn to consider how it also, like those cosmologies, has the potential to serve as a conversation-starter, and a source of collective and co-created instruction about alternative possibilities and futures.

²⁵³ Young xvi.

²⁵⁴ Id, my emphasis.

4.2.3. Tragedy allows for creative dialogue about alternative futures.

One of the key features of Australian First Nations cosmologies, as I suggested above, is their capacity to facilitate ethical conversation, experience-sharing, and collective reflection and conversation. This takes place, as Yunkaporta notes, through “yarning”: communal, free-flowing and creative investigation and consideration of issues of importance to an ethical and political community. Stories are not generally consumed “in private” – and even if they were to be consumed in this way, they would not be consumed for the private good alone.

Tragedy, I want to suggest, can play the same function. To make this point, I want to briefly outline some of the reflections that have already taken place in the tradition on the ethical and instructive functions of tragedy; and I want to “zoom out”, as I begin looking forward to human separatism, to consider the importance of the contexts in which tragic narratives are experienced. Crucially, I want to pay attention to the power of experiencing these stories with others, and/or having the opportunity to discuss and consider them together after the story has reached a conclusion. These opportunities allow narratives to become seeds for conversations – or yarns – about humans, nature, and the future. Here again lie powerful possibilities for engaging human separatism.

The proposals and reflections below are straightforward, and not especially philosophically or technically complex, and this is part of the point. One element of my argument here about the fetishization of technology as a means to engage ecological problems has been that it – the move always towards more complexity and technical sophistication – is a part of the problem. This extends to philosophical reflection as well. To give two examples: the fact that terror of death is “simple” to understand does not mean it is easy to engage with. Similarly, the fact that conventional tragic narrative structure is relatively simple to describe does not mean that it is easy to write compelling tragedies. In this context, adding more and more complexity can sometimes serve as a hidden tool to avoid confronting what really needs confronting: which is, precisely, the difficulty of simple things.

4.2.3.1. Tragic narratives have long had an ethical function.

Tragic stories are not simply depressing stories: they are “not meant to cause utter despair of goodness in the world”.²⁵⁵ They are, or can be – as Aristotle himself recognised – a means to “guid[e] the soul”²⁵⁶. This guiding function is the focus of the so-called “Hegelian” view on tragedies that I outlined above. The “goal of tragedy”, writes critic Leonard Conversi, “is not suffering” alone, but also “the knowledge that issues from it, as the denouement issues from

²⁵⁵ Davis xxii-xxiii..

²⁵⁶ Aristotle 22.

a plot”.²⁵⁷ And this knowledge, contrary to what some might fear, does not need to be reactionary or formulaic – a conservative defence of hierarchy or the status quo. As Michael Davis argues, it does not need to “simply support [some existing] morality”:²⁵⁸ instead, it can be used as a tool to “subver[t] moral naivete”.²⁵⁹

Given my focus in this dissertation on the question of human distinctiveness, it is interesting to note that Aristotle links the features of tragedy that facilitate its ethical function to the features that make us distinctive as creatures. The pleasure human beings take in sharing stories, for him, has “two [natural] causes”:²⁶⁰ first, the fact that “to imitate is natural to human beings from childhood”,²⁶¹ and something that it is “natural for everyone to take pleasure in”;²⁶² and second, the fact that it involves a specific kind of “learning” – a “contemplating”, which involves “a coincidence of learning and figuring out what each thing is”.²⁶³ In other words: humans enjoy stories, and stories can teach us, at least in part because (a) we are symbolic creatures (and are therefore capable of sophisticated forms of mimesis and imagination) and (b) stories can engage our reasoning capacities in exciting ways.

²⁵⁷ “Tragedy - Theory of Tragedy | Britannica.”.

²⁵⁸ Davis xxiii.

²⁵⁹ Id.

²⁶⁰ Aristotle 8.

²⁶¹ Id.

²⁶² Id.

²⁶³ Id 9.

Michael Davis finds this link in the very title of Aristotle's original text. The Greek *Peri Poietikes* (Περὶ ποιητικῆς) tends to be rendered in English as "On Poetics". This might suggest that the text, and the tradition it inaugurates, is exclusively or only about "the art of poetry".²⁶⁴ Indeed, it has often been read in this way. This impression is not wrong, exactly: but it is limiting. Far more capacious is a reading that sees the tradition as interested in "the art of whatever it is that the verb *poiein* [ποιεῖν] means". Davis notes that in everyday ancient Greek, this very word would have had a broad remit – covering situations now covered in English with both "to make" or "to do". (Other European languages, like German [with *machen*] and French [with *faire*] capture the interrelatedness here better than the English).²⁶⁵ Taking this route, Davis argues, would suggest that *Peri Poietikes* is a text "On the Art of Action".²⁶⁶ It suggests, in line with what I have been exploring, that "[dramatic] acting [has] something to do with action [generally]", and that narrative, and especially tragic narrative, is "somehow ... at the center of human life".²⁶⁷

If we follow Aristotle in believing that "all human action seems to aim at some good," Davis writes,

²⁶⁴ Davis x.

²⁶⁵ Id.

²⁶⁶ Id xiii.

²⁶⁷ Id.

and if the existence of instrumental goods points toward a good for the sake of which we choose all the others, and if there is a science of this highest good, and if as Aristotle says this is political science, or *politike* ... then one would expect *poietike* and *politike* to be very closely linked.²⁶⁸

Tragedies, then, are not simply entertainment. They are also opportunities for sophisticated reflection on ethical and political questions, presented in ways that encourage their readers or audiences to reflect on the same things in their own lives.

Young summarises the point in his own overview of tragedy by concluding that “the important ‘effect’ offered us by tragedy is a productive engagement with ethical dilemmas”.²⁶⁹ The “need for such an engagement”, he notes, moreover, “is no historically local phenomenon”: wherever they are, and whatever technologies they may have access to, “Human beings always have, and always will, need to work on, and through, ethical conflicts”.²⁷⁰ In the First Nations context I explored above, this exploration takes place through cosmologies and yarns: in another context, it can take place, *inter alia*, in tragedies.

²⁶⁸ Id xviii, my emphasis, references removed. The identification of political science as the science of the highest good appears in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (at 1094a).

²⁶⁹ Young 284.

²⁷⁰ Id.

4.2.3.2. Tragic narratives can facilitate group conversation.

The thought that tragedies facilitate ethical engagement leads naturally to questions about where this ethical engagement takes place. One of the other powerful features of narrative tragedy, I now want to argue – and another way in which it offers some of the possibilities of “yarning” in First Nations Australian contexts – is that this engagement is *collective*.

Stories, in simple terms, are made to be shared. This is true both anecdotally (considering the enthusiasm with which people discuss and dissect their favourite films, novels, and plays) and more technically or formally (considering the communicative function of narrative generally).

This means that, with some thought, tragedies can be utilised as a starting-point for widespread conversation and collaborative learning. And it is, I think, the most useful explanation that has been offered for the significance of tragedies in Ancient life (a theme that, for better or worse, has been a focus of tragic scholars). Reading a play on the page is a rather dry experience, like reading the summary of a novel. Seeing the play performed, or reading the novel in earnest, makes the story come alive.

Scholars of tragedy have spent a great deal of energy arguing about whether the resolution in a tragic narrative needs to happen before the story ends, for the story to have the desired effect, or whether it can permissibly happen “afterwards” – in the mind of the reader, viewer, etc. From my perspective, this energy is somewhat misplaced. It matters less *when* this resolution happens than it matters *that* it happens. Something that is powerful, although probably out of the hands of the author of the story to facilitate (at least in modern mass media contexts) is the kinds of conversations that people who have just gone through the story together can have. Book clubs, film discussion groups and English literature classes come to mind; so too do roundtable discussions, panels, and festivals. These can certainly risk being too effete or bourgeois in their context. But, with care on the part of a facilitator, teacher, or elder, they have powerful possibilities. We want to talk about stories after we have seen them, and the greater they are (anecdotally speaking), the more we want to share and talk about them, experience and resolve them in our minds and lives together.

The heft of good tragedy also means that it can facilitate conversations about even the most challenging of topics. Young notes that even after the cathartic experience that narratives can provide, “one fear, fear of death ... remains with us.” Young’s thought here is reminiscent of Becker’s: this fear, he says, “is the deepest (though usually repressed) fear that human beings have”, and they have sought “Since the dawn of culture ... to find an antidote” to it. This antidote cannot be permanent, as even powerful epiphanies do not

“stop” life. (In this I would disagree with Schopenhauer, who argued – in Young’s words – that “Tragedy does not merely provide temporary relief from an excess of fearfulness”, but instead (along with the “‘tragic view of life’ that it fosters”) might “remove our deepest kind of fear completely”).²⁷¹

But even if sharing narratives cannot *remove* our fears, they can help us understand and come to terms with these fears. And in doing this, like good psychotherapy, they can offer us resources for conversations about what comes next. As in my discussion in chapter 2, there are some Buddhist overtones here too: sharing reflections on the human condition together allows us to relate to our fears in a different – more caring and non-destructive – way. We can build an understanding that is facilitated by tragedy and completed by conversation, shared contemplation, and dialogue.

4.2.3.3. Tragic narratives can generate reflection on alternative possibilities and futures.

As well as creating opportunities for people to process complex emotions, in a communal way, tragic narratives also have the capacity to generate reflection about alternative possibilities and futures. They have, in short, the capacity to help us undo some of the

²⁷¹ Id 55.

imaginative atrophy that has taken place, at least in part, as a result of long immersion in human separatism. This represents both a challenge to the authors of tragedies – how they might write narratives that play this role – and to those who would facilitate group conversation or teaching using tragedies, after a group of readers or an audience has read or seen them. To return to Aristotle: “*poiesis* is more philosophic and of more stature than history”, not only because “poetry speaks rather of the general things while history speaks of the particular things”,²⁷² but also because history (merely?) “speak[s] of what has [already] come to be”, where poetry – including tragedy – can “speak of what sort of things would come to be, i.e., of what is possible”.²⁷³

I will address this possibility in two parts: one directed towards the authors of tragedies, and the other directed towards conversational facilitators. First, the authors. The question that arises in this context is the following: what if the action went the other way after the midpoint? In conventional tragedies, as suggested above, the power of the story often issues from the sense that a slow-motion train wreck has been put into place. Events are underway as the result of the *hamartia* of the protagonist or protagonists that have a terrible sense of inevitability. We can, however, imagine narratives that ask this question differently after the midpoint of the story.

²⁷² Id 27.

²⁷³ Id.

It is possible to imagine stories where the central character, or a minor character, arrives at the realisation *in time to stop what is going to happen*: to take a kind of agency, but one that runs contrary to conventional (and status-quo conserving) “hero” stories, which involve “beating” the opposing force (e.g., nature), and instead seeks to accept or come to terms with fate, and so open the possibility of crafting life and the world to the extent one can in a more “ecological” way. This would involve integrating a truer understanding of the enabling constraints of one’s existence, in time to make changes or structure futures that made good on the power of this knowledge.

Second, for the facilitators of conversations about tragedies: here, an audience or set of readers can be encouraged to reflect upon imaginative alternatives both by engaging with tragedies that end in conventional ways (e.g., with the death of the protagonist) and those that experiment with other directions.

For those that are more conventional, this would suggest a set of study or dialogue questions like the following:

1. What was it about the protagonist that led them to make the decisions that they did? (What was their *hamartia*?)

2. How did this *hamartia* lead to the collapses and destructions that unfold in the plot?
3. At what points might the protagonist, or others around the protagonist, have acted differently? What might have happened if they had?
4. What does the unfolding of this particular story suggest about the human condition?
5. How might these observations apply in the context of the communities, challenges and questions we are dealing with together today?

For those that experiment with different directions – for instance, by depicting a compelling way in which a protagonist makes a different choice than the one that seems inevitable for them, given their *hamartia* or the situation they find themselves in, some questions might run roughly as follows:

1. What was it about the protagonist that led them to make the decisions that they did? (What was their *hamartia*?)
2. Why, despite this *hamartia*, did they act in a way that staved off their own self-destruction, or the destruction of others/destruction generally? What might this teach us?
3. What enabled them to take the actions they took? What did they need to have done or come to terms with before they could take these different actions?

4. How does this story encourage us to consider the nature of the human condition and the enabling constraints that are a part of it?
5. How might these observations apply as we imagine alternative futures for our own communities, challenges and questions?

The specifics of further questions are a matter for the teachers, elders, and other facilitators who are keen to enable this kind of conversation in their own communities. This is, first, because many of them will depend upon the concrete content of the stories being used as provocations and conversation-starters; and, second, because the concrete content of the specific questions will have a lot to do with the circumstances of the community using the work to guide its reflections. In either case, though, I want to propose that the same basic thought continues to hold: tragic narratives are an excellent tool for facilitating conversation about imaginative alternative futures, both within the worlds of the stories at issue and within the worlds of those who think and feel with them in order to move forward.

To conclude: in this section I have argued that tragic narratives are one place that the European tradition can look “within itself” if it wants to both explore themes that run in parallel to those in the European tradition, and in the kinds of ways that are necessary. First I considered how tragic narratives facilitate reflections upon the nature of the human condition, and specifically upon hubris. Next, I explored how they can help facilitate

emotional, as well as intellectual, coming-to-terms with this condition. Finally, I suggested that they can be powerfully viewed as seeds for beginning communal discussion and honing new forms of imagination of the future.

In the next section I turn to consider how we might imagine these things with respect to tragic narratives about human separatism – and its alternatives - in particular.

4.3. Human separatism is a tragedy.

I have now explored some reasons why narrative tragedy can serve a powerful complement to philosophy in coming to grips with the human condition and its consequences. Tragedy facilitates experiences and exchanges that are cathartic and creative, and in this it can parallel – but, I think, not appropriate – some of the processes and approaches that are evident in particular First Nations Australian cultures.

In this final section, I turn to the history – the story – of human separatism in particular. I seek now to consider the opportunities that the general lessons above offer in this specific context. My reflections will broadly follow the same themes as those in section 2. First, I will explore how tragic narratives can offer a powerful way to depict human separatism and its

consequences. Second, I will propose that tragic narratives can offer a way for us to come to terms with the fact that we will never be “separate from nature” – a coming-to-terms that we must have, if we are to avoid repeating the destructive gesture of separatism. Third, I will propose that there is great scope to devise tragic narratives that offer community starting-points for imagining and discussing alternative ecological futures.

4.3.1. Tragic narratives offer a powerful way to depict human separatism and its consequences.

Human separatism, as I have explored, explicitly situates itself as a theory/story of human nature, in Stevenson et al’s terms. It offers a background metaphysics (the world is dualist); an account of human distinctiveness (we are capable of separating); a diagnosis of “our” problem (we haven’t yet separated and so are hostage to nature’s laws); and a prognosis (we can achieve infinite freedom) and prescription (we should use technology to separate from nature). I suggested back in the Introduction that this narrative has tended to be presented, and is certainly presented by the Ecomodernists and other contemporary separatist thinkers, as uncritically and unequivocally positive.

With the ideas I have explored here in hand, though, is it now eminently possible to imagine the story of human separatism in a different way: not as a story of triumph and of progress,

but as a tragedy. The world, in fact, is made up of systems of enabling constraints. These are complex patterns and processes that cannot be straightforwardly segregated from, nor isolated outside, the processes and systems of our species. It is certainly the case that we are distinctive as a species: we have evolved particular forms of symbolic cognition and language, and we have capacities for self-reflexive observation, imagination, and sophisticated forms of coordination and material agency. But – as the old saying goes – this greatest strength is also, in a sense, our greatest challenge. With our imaginative and symbolic capacities comes an understanding of the reality of death, and the truth of the fact that our agency has limits. The world is amenable to us in many ways; but it will never be *ours*.

This realisation is vast, and it is difficult. For most of us, at various times, it becomes overwhelming. This does not mean it cannot be processed. But it opens the door for perverse attempts to “process” the experience, which are not really in earnest at all. Surely, the story goes, this state of affairs must be a mirage. History has shown us how every limit we have encountered as a species has ultimately fallen, with human ingenuity and time. Surely death and our limited agency are not *true* limits. Surely the Earth’s carrying capacities or planetary boundaries, for that matter, are not true limits. They can be manipulated using technology. And even if they cannot, we can segregate ourselves from

them, so that – should the worst happen, and the world collapse – we will be safe inside *our* worlds.

This story sets the stage for the writing of tragedies that have the potential to rank with the world's greatest. The ingredients explored in the previous section are all present. There is a complex system of powers that extends far beyond individual comprehension. There is a set of iron laws, which are related to human actions and laws in certain ways, but never fully answerable to them. There is a set of cascading, inevitable consequences, which flow like clockwork out of moves to overcome or undermine them. And there is, finally, a complex and deeply flawed protagonist, desperately convinced of its own power but exquisitely sympathetic nonetheless, fighting harder and harder to resist reality. The ingredients are present: what remains is for political theorists – but more than them, novelists and playwrights and screenwriters and raconteurs of all stripes – to begin combining them.

The *peripeteia* or reversals (changes of fortune) might be figured as the various “signs” from the world at large that the path chosen is not sustainable: the increasing evidence of things like climate change and other forms of destruction. Each of these, though, can be accommodated – as I suggested above – by the modern/European view of the superiority of its own views. They are “incorporated” or “absorbed” by this view until there is a point at which they cannot be.

Nemesis in this rendering of the narrative might be imagined as “climate change”: but it might also be rendered as self-undermining destruction. It is the *logic of the view itself* that is the nemesis at issue: as with all the greatest tragedies, the protagonist – “Humanity” – contains the seeds of its own downfall in itself (as part of its *hamartia*). In contemporary language, a “nemesis” tends to be imagined in specific or personalised terms, as a particular being (an “enemy”): but, as noted above, it can just as well refer in more general terms to “the inescapable agent of someone’s or something’s downfall” – or, interestingly, “retributive justice” – a reading which would sit well with the thought that the Laws of Country or nature reassert or re-orient/establish themselves as for themselves).

There is a slippage here between land, morality, ethos, and human laws: a slippage that hearkens far more to older debates, where the sphere of self-satisfied human exclusion was not so clear or ordinary (“ordinarised”), and where – in terms like those Amitav Ghosh notes²⁷⁴ – the potential for unexpected events to erupt into everyday life was taken more in stride, or unable to be escaped/required to be reckoned with.

Catharsis – epiphany – can imagine itself in this narrative in two distinct forms. One would be the epiphany that comes too late (although perhaps epiphanies always already come too

²⁷⁴ Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*. See especially the Introduction and chapter 1.

late): the realisation of what has happened after all is lost, on the field strewn with corpses, in the aftermath of battle. In this, which is perhaps always true, there can only ever be grief. The other possibility, though – and it is always a remote possibility, a “fool’s hope”, a tentative and fragile thing – is realisation *before* the end, before death’s end, before the end of the play – before the End of History: and this realisation, leading to catharsis, and a different kind of grief, a grief directed in a different way.

This different grief would not, or not only, be about that which has in physical reality been lost, but also about that which one had so fervently *wished* might have been possible – the loss of a fantasy, a dream. These, as psychologists well know, are just as worthy of big grief. But this grief, as it is processed – cathartically – as it is metabolised throughout the cultural and imaginative system – offers possibilities for coming together through tears, to ask about what work is necessary moving forward.

The *hamartia* at issue, in turn, gives rise to the hubris of human separatism: a grandiose, illusory, fragile and unsustainable confidence in the capacity of human beings to transcend or “separate” themselves from their own circumstances (and indeed, perhaps, their own fatal flaw: as in the context of attempts by the imaginary of European modernity to imagine itself as capable of separating itself from its own violent histories, and in so doing, to destroy or

eliminate any need to stand accountable for them, and to those whose worlds they've harmed or changed.)

Considered more specifically, the *hamartia* of human separatism is narcissism, driven by terror of death. *Hamartia*, as I noted above, has a double-edged meaning: it can be translated as either "error" or "fatal flaw". The former suggests an intentional action; the latter suggests an inbuilt characteristic or quality. I would retain the double significance here, because – as Tyson Yunkaporta observes – there seems to be something inevitable about the kinds of narcissism or self-absorption that manifest themselves in human beings.²⁷⁵ This *hamartia* would be a "fatal flaw" – given, or imposed – rather than a choice.

At the same time, given the symbolic capacities of human beings, there is an intentional element to the narcissism which presents itself also. This is a different way of presenting the point I made in chapter 2: that although terror of death is universal, human separatism is contingent. Given the circumstances of mortality and impermanence, human separatism – a reflexive, narcissistic response – nonetheless remains a choice. It is therefore *hamartia* in both senses: a tendency or potentiality that will not inevitably, but has clearly, become actualised.

²⁷⁵ See again Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk*.

There are already a variety of groups and initiatives working to raise awareness of the need for artists and others to tell “climate change stories” in new and different ways. These include groups like the not-for-profit Good Energy Project; the legal organisation NRDC’s spin-off initiative, Rewrite the Future; and Columbia’s Climate Imaginations Network, where I serve as founding convener.²⁷⁶ These groups have not, to my knowledge, written on tragedy in particular. But there is immense scope to build, using resources provided by these organisations and initiatives as well as others, narratives that fit the criteria and start the conversations I have been outlining here.

As with other forms of craft, we can imagine the basic ingredients for this story leading to an immense variety of specific narratives. These could be designed to focus on a specific element of the separatist story; or they might be designed to facilitate audiences coming to terms with a specific element of the human condition as it in fact presents itself. The tragedy of human separatism might be recounted against the backdrop of almost any environment, setting, or situation. They might seek to evoke a particular affect or emotion – possibility, or solastalgia²⁷⁷ – in ways that respond to and incorporate local conditions.

²⁷⁶ See www.goodenergystories.org; www.nrdc.org/rewritethefuture; www.climateimagination.org.

²⁷⁷ The term is Glenn Albrecht’s, and was coined as a means to refer to the feeling of longing for a place that is no longer as it was because of climate change. It takes inspiration of course from the term *nostalgia*: Albrecht, *Earth Emotions*.

We can imagine stories about a group of North American scientists who want to save the world by sending humans into space. We can imagine stories about a Northern European coastal city that builds ever-larger dykes and structures instead of exploring the need for managed retreat. We can imagine stories about a Latin American property developer who destroys the syntheses of First Nations communities because he wants to “guarantee economic development” by clear-felling the Amazon.

The details of the stories might be different; but their underlying resonances are the same.

In every case, it is the hubris of separatism that can be shown to motivate the destruction of the plot: and this hubris, in turn, can be shown to be driven by fear. In every case, the outcome can be shown with devastating precision, to raise questions and reflections on the logics at work and the flaws that underlie them. The White Whale can never be caught; and everybody who tries, eventually, ends up sinking.

As well as taking inspiration from reflections on the structure and function of tragic narrative, like those I outlined above, these stories can take inspiration from parallel First Nations Australian narratives and cosmologies. Amongst other things, this may mean:

1. providing an embodied and expressive place for dialogue about the dangers of narcissism and separatism;

2. facilitating warnings about the risks of these forces if they are left unchecked;
3. offering a starting-point for conversation about the apparent inherency of narcissism to the human species;
4. enabling creative dialogue about the ways in which this narcissism can be metabolised and redirected;
5. depicting the interconnected nature of reality;
6. presenting the weight of responsibility which comes from an awareness of the nature of that reality (in First Nations terms, the significance of humans' being a custodial species).

To summarise: human separatism is a tragic story, in all the freighted senses of that word. The existing structures and concerns of tragic narrative – the human condition, quests for meaning, human hubris – make the genre/form powerfully suited to capturing it in all its overwhelming poignancy and devastation.

4.3.2. Tragic narratives offer a way for us to come to terms with the fact that we will never be “separate from nature”.

I suggested above that one of the most powerful features of tragedy – the one that has preoccupied philosophers and tragedians alike over the centuries – is its power to facilitate

catharsis, in ways that are both intellectual *and* embodied, emotional *and* cerebral, rather than privileging one over the other. This is a second feature of tragic narratives that means they are capable both of resonating with First Nations cosmologies, and of depicting human separatism and its consequences.

When it comes to human separatism, as I explored in chapters 1 and 2, emotion – and thus the need for catharsis – appears in at least three different ways. First: the experience that gives rise to human separatism is fundamentally an embodied-emotional experience. We have the visceral realisation of the fact that our agency has limits, and that we will eventually, inevitably, die. This experience is never simply cognitive: it is all-encompassing. In Becker's words, again, it is "a terrifying dilemma to be in and to have to live with".²⁷⁸

It is this experience, second, which gives rise to the emotional response, disguised as an intellectual one, which forms the beating heart of separatism as a political project. If only – if *only* – we can find some way to square the circle, and to convert our accounts of human distinctiveness (against all rationality) into an account of human *separateness*, then perhaps we can transcend this reality, and with that move, the fear that that reality creates in us. Our desperate joy at the power of our ever-more-sophisticated technologies to defer, delay, and insulate us, mirrors the power of the first fear in intensity. It also provides one of the

²⁷⁸ Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 26.

most powerful imaginative engines of modernity, and the stories of modernity. Given the overwhelming odds stacked against us – the almost guaranteed eventuality of failure – how delicious would it be if we somehow cheated the gods/God/nature/the Earth by cheating death? How immense and terrible would our own sovereignty be, if we could do this? I frame this as a rhetorical question because this is the only kind of question it can be. No answer to it is possible, because that future is incoherent as a future *for us*, as mortal humans.

If we are to go in a different direction, third, we face the need to metabolise a third experience which is equally embodied/emotional in nature. This, I want to propose, is the most challenging of all, and the one towards which tragedians should devote the deepest of their energies. In the simplest terms, the experience at issue here is grief. It is difficult to accept that we will die, that our worlds as we know them will come to an end. As other traditions have known – First Nations and certain Buddhist ones among them – and as our tradition has known but in repressed or sublimated ways: it is hard to accept this kind of change. Perhaps it is no exaggeration to suggest that it is the hardest of all tasks that face creatures like us, human beings.

With this in mind, It is not coincidence that the psychoanalytic term for the healthier diversion or channelling of emotions linked to catharsis – *sublimation* – echoes the term sublime in many ways. Sublimation, as Becker notes, is not always a bad thing. Both terms

have their roots in the Latin *sublimare*: “raise up”. Processing this grief, collectively as well as individually, is a precondition for imagining in different ways. As such, and contrary to the assertions of those who would write about the “End of History”, it can never be “ended” or “finished”.

This is not merely because we may think, over the course of our lives, that we have confronted and made our peace with death (as we witness, for instance, the deaths of others whom we love) – only to then be confronted with it again, as we see changes in the world, and then as we come towards a death ourselves. It is also because, in simplistic terms, there are new ones of us being born all the time: and each of us – each of them – will need to go through the process some way or the other. Virtue can never be perfected; for life will always bring new circumstances. Politics, and relating with it, cannot “end” – because general rules will always fail, eventually, when faced with novel circumstances. Tragedy done well, in other words, forces us to continue to in the ambiguities, the forever-unfinished character, of life as it unfolds.

Here are echoes too of the emphasis on yarning and teaching as Yunkaporta describes them, and on the education of children as Graham describes that practice. Nobody can come to terms with our deaths for us: we must do it for ourselves. It is a task we must do individually; but we don’t have to do it alone. We see ourselves reflected, but we also have a

powerful sense of communion. These ideas, it is worth noting, have often been dismissed in facile ways by academics (as “uncritical” or unsophisticated”), or otherwise downplayed. In line with my reflections in chapter 2, I want to suggest that this is less a function of their actual lack of sophistication and more a reflection of the unwillingness or inability of the commentators themselves to allow themselves the vulnerability for the creative experience to seep in.

Tragedy is a powerful place for the facilitation of these experiences precisely because of the way it can walk characters – and ourselves – through overwhelming emotional experiences like these. We can imagine narratives that depict the seduction of the paths of hubris: characters doing everything they can, more and more desperately, to deny the realities of their condition and their fate. We can imagine narratives that depict the social consequences of these failures, especially when they take place in the bodies and minds of powerful people. At the time of this writing, two Americans who have dominated global conversation more than is equitable – Mr Musk and Mr Trump – both come to mind.

There are already powerful structural templates, explored by Campbell, Truby, Yorke, and many others,²⁷⁹ which are practical in nature, for others to write tragedies and for us to

²⁷⁹ Again, as above: Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*; Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey*; Yorke, *Into the Woods*, 2015.

compose and experiment with them ourselves. We can imagine dialogues and monologues, encounters and exchanges, riffs, designs and motifs, which present these things in ways that lead us into – and through – the experience, and which resonate long after the curtains have gone down. And we can imagine all these narratives being presented and re-presented through concrete stories which capture something of the immense complexity and pathos of the experiences at hand themselves: both the overwhelming experience of the impossibility of separateness, and – we can hope – the catharsis that appears if we find ways to come to terms with them.

4.3.3. Tragic narratives offer a starting-point for us to talk together about, and creatively imagine, alternative futures.

The third reason for proposing tragedy as a powerful vehicle for exploring these themes in embodied and generative ways is that it can be integrated into the lives of groups and of communities. It can be productive of ethical conversations without being didactic – precisely because, unlike many other kinds of text or cultural production (including academic writing), it does not always need to have an “argument”.

To make the conversation concrete, I want to consider two specific themes here. First is the question of how a tragic story that opened itself to imagining alternatives might develop and

take place. Above I suggested that it would be useful for writers to consider the midpoint – or perhaps the second-act turning point, or lowest point, as a place for action to go the other way. What if, instead of retelling the tired modern story of “triumph against all odds” (important, in human terms, as this story may sometimes be), we told a story about “coming to terms with natural reality”?

Let me be emphatic that I do not intend this as an apologia for conservative stories. I am not advocating for stories which purport to normalise or legitimise human-on-human domination or oppression. A story where a working class character “realises” that “their place is in the factory”, or where a woman character realises “her place is in the kitchen”, is far from what I have in mind. Instead, I am suggesting that there is a place in tragedy to ask questions – even if these questions have no resolution in the tragedy as creative piece itself – of how we respond to enabling constraints, like the existence of nature, in ways that cannot intelligibly be transcended. This is one of the key differences, indeed, between the stories that I have in mind and the quietist, bigoted “teaching” stories just above: that those are illegitimate from the perspective of freedom because we can intelligibly imagine an alternative, and indeed, can consider ways to bring it into being.

Imagine a narrative which depicted a character’s – or better, a community’s – grappling with and coming-to-terms with the incoherence of the quest to “separate from nature”: and then

depicted their complex, messy, halting quest to live alternatives. The language here is abstract, but the narratives we imagine would be concrete. What is more, they would take up precisely the kinds of concerns that have animated political theory since its beginnings. Morrow provides one useful summary of these questions:

1. What are the ends of politics and political life?
2. Who should rule?
3. How should society and government (in the broadest sense) be structured?
4. How can injustice be challenged and changed?²⁸⁰

A second “summary” that can be brought into conversation with these questions is the summary offered by First Nations American philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte, whose work I referred to above, for considering what “sustainability” means. Whyte proposes that, from a First Nations perspective – and contrary to many conventional readings of the term – the “things” that are in need of being sustained are kinship and memory.²⁸¹ Narratives that take up the challenge I am outlining here could weave these two bodies of questions together in fascinating ways. In line with one of the emphases of recent decolonial scholarship, moreover, they could seek ways of rehabilitating or retelling stories of the past – of colonial

²⁸⁰ Morrow, *History of Western Political Thought*.

²⁸¹ Whyte, “Masterclass.”

invasions, of historical resistances, and of resilient practices – in ways that suggest possibilities for the future.

Importantly, the kinds of altered trajectories of tragedy I am imagining here would not somehow be free of conflict. Conflict, as noted by Hegelian writers on tragedy (and then by many writers of textbooks and “how-to” manuals for practising writers), is one of the “engines” of narrative unfolding. There are many ways that tragedy might emerge in the stories I am suggesting here. It might come in the form of a kind of argument: the community or individual whose realisation has already taken place seeking ways to communicate their realisation to others. Or it might come in a kind of tension embodied in the character and plot development itself: individuals representing the separatist unwillingness to accept reality, and others seeking to understand and to facilitate – not force – the capacity of those same individuals to come to terms with reality and find a place where they belong during this life itself.

The second theme I want to consider is the capacity of tragedies, like all narratives, to seed conversations, and to be a shared experience from which a community (however defined) comes together to reflect upon and process these immensely difficult questions in their own contexts, places, and lives. I explored above how Yunkaporta writes of yarning, in the First Nations Australian context, as a kind of creative, unstructured dialogue, often emerging

from a story told by elders. The analogy is relevant here also. “Ecological tragedies” might serve as the starting-point for conversations in communities with questions like the following. Where are our current values reflected on the page, or stage, or screen? Where do they diverge? What are the values embodied by the characters in these narratives – and why are they being held up, if held up they are, as desirable and intelligible alternatives?

For those who are philosophically inclined, we can imagine conversations that seek to complement the experience of a tragic narrative with resources from philosophy: an ad hoc class in existentialist philosophy, or narrative structure, or political theory, in the best pragmatic tradition: imagining ideas as languages to start creative conversations, which offer as many in the community as possible some new vocabularies for coming to terms with the world as it appears in front of them. Here, again, the goal would not be primarily didactic: it would, instead, be to embody or show the lessons of these various explorations in a narrative form that makes them digestible to a far broader audience.

The broader point I want to make here is that tragedies – like academic presentations or ideas – should not be considered in a vacuum, as themselves “the end”, or the whole story. They are but half the story, half the picture. If we use the language of describing narrative at a meta-level, in parallel with those who think on liturgy, to consider the rituals and experiences within which the experiencing of tragedies might themselves be designed (just as

they apparently were, for those philosophers who like to fetishise them, in the collective experience of theatre-goers in Ancient Greece), we can consider the watching of the tragedy as the first half of the story. By the end, the story on the screen or page has finished, but the spectator or reader has been taken to a different world. It is, in a sense, irresponsible, or at least incomplete (missing an opportunity) to disgorge them back into the world without offering at least some minimal space for them to reflect and to internalise what they have seen.

The practical details of this would need to vary with the situation. Perhaps they are talk-backs, or book clubs, or radio phone-ins. Suggesting that these practical undertakings are programmatic is really a way to distract from the underlying need here, just as attempts to take Tocqueville's or Rousseau's proposals for the rituals of a civic religion seriously can often lead to ham-fistedness and a (probably rightful) sense of clumsiness and oversimplicity. There cannot be any single way in which conversation would be said to be facilitated, because this – like so many other things – would need in part to be the province of those who know in the communities themselves. These might be the elders or the teachers – as in the First Nations Australian contexts described above – who bring the community together around the literal or the metaphorical fire (in the park, perhaps, or the kitchen table, or the dinner table) and start the conversation.

To summarise: tragic narrative offers possibilities for many different kinds of engagement, and many different kinds of “engagers”. It offers resources for those who would write tragedies, for those who would watch them, and for those who would teach (with) them. These stories, perhaps, are yet to be written: but there is nothing stopping any of us from writing them. This will not in any way replace the other concrete activities being done to move modern societies away from separatism (finding, for instance, concrete policies and technological/architectural/other designs that embody an anti-separatist logic). But they are a necessary complement, as stories are to philosophy, for humane explorations of all these themes.

4.4. Chapter Conclusion.

To conclude: in this chapter I have offered some suggestions about ways that tragic narrative can be imagined as helpful in the specific context of human separatism. I suggested that the complex and widespread hubris that appears in separatism is well-suited to tragic depiction. I proposed that tragic narratives offer a way for us to come to terms with the fact that we will never be “separate from nature”. And I suggested that there are many ways in which encountering tragic narratives together, and using them as starting-points for community conversations, *as well as* individual reflection, might allow us to continue the

task of reclaiming and rehabilitating our imaginative vocabularies, for thinking about the future, after they have been atrophying as a result of human separatism.

In the Conclusion to the overall project that follows, I will summarise the ideas and arguments I have presented in this dissertation and offer some final reflections about engaging with human separatism moving forward.

Conclusion

*Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.*

- Mary Oliver, *Wild Geese*

Over the course of this dissertation I have considered a variety of angles on human separatism: the incoherent idea that the goal of human technology and politics should be to “separate” from nature. At its heart, I have suggested, this is a tragic idea, in all the freighted senses of that term. It is tragic because it is sad; because it grows out of terrors that are prior to, and more powerful than, cerebral reason; and because it leads to hubris. At the same time, developing a clear-eyed understanding of its contours paves the way for some reflections on how it can be engaged, metabolised, and moved beyond, at both the levels of theory and practical action.

Julian Young, the theorist of tragedy, observes how for Albert Camus, “authentic tragedy ... occurs only in times of cultural uncertainty”.¹ It “coincide[s]”, in Camus’ view, “with an evolution in which man, consciously or not, frees himself from an older form of civilization and finds that he has broken away from it without yet having found a new form that satisfies him.”² This openness – taking steps to break away from an existing tradition, but without having settled on a new one – is characteristic of the kind of feeling that is likely to exist in tragic depictions of human separatism.

The larger point I have hoped to make here is that the imaginary of human separatism has atrophied our imaginative vocabularies for too long. In the face of the visceral terror we have of mortality – now exacerbated by the tragedy of climate change – it has prevented us from imagining truly alternative postures and possibilities for human understandings of, and relations with, the natural world. Recall the starting-point of Ecomodern thinking: that there is no need to pursue any kind of balance or harmony with “other” systems, because technology will save us in the end. This is of a piece with the broader, naively modern creed according to which the solution to the problems of technology (or environmental destruction, or capitalism) should be more technology (or environmental destruction, or

¹ Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy*, 236. Quoting Camus, *On the Future of Tragedy*, 298.

² Id 252.

capitalism). Approaching this creed as a tragic one, we gain the potential for some new creative resources as we work to imagine alternatives in both theoretical and practical terms.

Chapter recap

In chapter 1, I offered a genealogy of two of the central fictions in human separatism, “Humanity”, and “separation”. I suggested that there is a long-running tradition of slipping between claims about human distinctiveness, and stronger claims about human *separateness*: one that persists across generations and through otherwise great cultural and historical change.

I argued that Plato and Augustine can be seen as repositories of, or inspirations for, separatism of an ontological flavour, with the way they frame their ideas in terms of dualistic distinctions between the Material Realm and the Realm of Forms, and between the City of Man and City of God, and consider the task of human life to be achieving transit from the first of these realms to the second via intellection. I suggested, in line with this view, that any conception of Humanity in their works is vague and thin, and extends most probably only to an image of a collective united (in Augustine’s terms) by their having been blessed by the same Christian god.

Next, I argued that Bacon and Descartes represent a separatism with an epistemological flavour, and explored how both thinkers imagine separation from nature in terms of the possibility achieving objective or complete knowledge of “nature” and harnessing the practical possibilities that this kind of knowledge might bring. In line with this view, an idea of Humanity appears in the work of these two authors in a clearer form, as a subject of history, or the entity that the development of “Arts” (Bacon) or sciences (Descartes) will benefit.

Third, I argued that Kant – or, better, certain ways of reading Kant – can be seen as inspirations for a separatism with a *nomological* or law-oriented flavour. With the birth of modern ways of thinking come the possibility of imagining human separation from nature in terms of the development of a realm of moral laws that transcend the brute determinism of natural laws, and which – bringing back a theme from earlier modern thinking – can be used to establish realms of manipulation and control that exempt human beings from the operation of such laws, and so insulate us from the depredations of the world. In line with this view, separation becomes a matter for the human species writ large: and an idea of Humanity emerges which sees the human collective as an *agent* of history, a self-conscious actor that is the protagonist of the teleological thrust of history towards progress and infinity.

Finally, I argued that the Ecomodernists take elements of the Kantian and earlier modern views and deploy them in various incoherent ways to reject the conventional environmentalist emphasis on achieving sustainability through “harmony” with nature, in favour of the view that we can use technology to “decouple” ourselves from natural systems. In line with this view, I explore how literally they take the idea that their imagined Humanity is an individualistic agent – a “geological force” – which can inaugurate the dawn of a new and blessed human age.

In chapter 2, I proposed a way of approaching this incoherent line of reasoning that does not simply engage it at face value. I suggested that the best way to understand its persistence, resilience and intensification is to approach it through an existential-psychological lens: as a perverse response to genuine, and often overwhelming, desires and fears. Incoherent as it is, I proposed, human separatism has proven to be a powerful salve for human fears about mortality and our limited agency, by promising a world in which constraints need not exist and sovereign freedom can be infinite. Using Ernest Becker’s *Denial of Death*, I consider the many layers that this terror has, and the power over reason it can take. I then explored how theories of human nature can be read as a response, amongst other things, to this terror. I suggested that they are narrative in their structure, “time-making” in their orientation, and anxiolytic or anxiety-reducing in their function, and that these capacities make them powerful tools for soothing existential terrors.

In line with this approach, I argued that it is useful to construe human separatism in just this way, as an emotionally powerful but intellectually incoherent theory of human nature. I proposed that this lends it characteristics that mean it cannot be falsified, is difficult to challenge using reductionism, and exploits the limits of induction; that mean it exploits the so-called “narrative fallacy” with respect to past events, creates a perpetual “cliffhanger effect” with respect to the present, and incessantly rewrites the future; and that mean it works fast, “travels light”, and promises a complete solution to human terrors. I also suggested that it has co-opted developments in philosophy and technology, as well as the concept of progress; has exploited linear conceptions of time, the idea of a modern rupture, and contemporary ideas of agency; and has benefited from the gradual erosion of other social spheres of meaning, the proliferation of technological prowess, and the proliferation of anxieties about global matters from climate change to human extinction.

In chapter 3, I considered the question of responses. I suggested that the task of responding to human separatism in ways that do not perpetuate its underlying ethos is immensely difficult. I considered two illegitimate possible approaches: purporting to invent a new story from whole cloth, or purporting to graft the appropriated theories and stories of other cultures onto ours. I explored the language of coloniality and suggested that this was

inadequate as a means to approach the task at issue. And I suggested that critical ecofeminism, especially as articulated by Val Plumwood, is a more tractable alternative.

In line with this view, I outlined the critical ecofeminist argument that European thought has been dominated by a form of reasoning, and specifically a form of relating to otherness, that is oriented towards domination and mastery. I considered Plumwood's argument that this rationality is centred upon dualisms, which have particular deleterious effects: backgrounding, radical exclusion, relational definition, instrumentalization and homogenisation.

I then applied this framework to human separatism specifically, to consider the ways in which the perverting effects of dualisms appear in both the way human separatism construes the relationship between "Humanity" and "nature", *and* in the posture or ethos it adopts with respect to other cultures' narratives about this relationship. I claimed that these various effects are manifest in the theoretical and practical proposals of the Ecomodernists.

I closed chapter 3 with an outlined of some "design parameters" that I proposed anti-separatist projects should adopt. I make a set of concrete suggestions about the kinds of approaches to these other stories that such projects should avoid, and a set of suggestions

about the kinds of approaches they should adopt, in order to try to “critically affirm” them, and to gather inspiration with a less domination-focussed ethos.

In chapter 4, I undertook two tasks. I first offered some reflections on First Nations Australian cosmologies and their anti-separatist focuses, via an engagement with the work of the writers Mary Graham and Tyson Yunkaporta. After considering some of the complex political and social thought, and the detailed theories of human nature, which manifest in these theories and stories, I suggested that they respond to broadly the same kinds of emotional and psychological concerns as their European counterparts, but in far more “ecological” ways.

With this in mind, I turned to the question of venues within the European or modern tradition that might serve as testing-grounds or seed-beds for some of these ideas. I focussed in particular on narrative tragedy as a useful place to do this. I examined some of the ways tragic narratives can facilitate reflections on the human condition, and in particular, on enabling constraints and hubris. I explored how tragic narratives can facilitate emotional as well as intellectual metabolization of this condition, via a structure honed for precisely this purpose, and in terms that integrate powerful opportunities for catharsis. I also proposed that tragic narratives offer us a place to engage in dialogue about imaginative alternative

futures, individually and in groups, and proposed that this makes them an ideal place for the sorts of reflections I think are necessary as part of moving out of separatism.

I concluded by framing human separatism as a tragedy in its own right. Using the reflections above, I explored some specific ways in which the genre of tragedy can depict the hubris, incoherence, and danger of human separatist ideas; but also offer us another tool for coming to terms with the fact that we will never be “separate from nature”, and provide a range of creative possibilities for imagining alternatives, together.

Final thoughts

It is my hope that these reflections and arguments have contributed something to an understanding both of how this is wrong, and why it is wrong: and not just wrong, but immensely destructive. But I also hope that they have suggested some new possibilities, for ways in which dialectical engagements with human separatist ideologies and practices might help us move past the self-sabotage that separatism represents. This solution cannot reproduce the tired path of separatist approaches. But nor can it afford to dismiss or ignore them, and the underlying logics of domination that they represent.

What is needed instead is to combine the provocations offered by separatism with learnings from the narratives and perspectives of peoples and cultures who have always seen things differently: to develop an environmental political theory and storytelling that remain inspired by and legible to modern and European thinking, but work to learn from others, through appropriately ethical engagements. These engagements do not simply involve claims about pluralities of governance, or other such thin responses. Nor do they do not involve simply rinsing and repeating the old story about how science and faith became split in European thinking, such that this split must now be healed. Instead, they look both to the creative resources of other traditions, and the creative resources of “our” own tradition, to facilitate processes of theoretical and practical change.

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