

To appear in: *New Nietzsche Studies*, vol. 5 , nr. 1/2 (2002), p. 12-25.

DOI: 10.5840/newnietzsche200251/22

Nietzsche and the Paradox of Environmental Ethics ;

On the Concept of Nature within Nietzsche's Critique of morality

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In this paper, I offer a systematic inquiry into the significance of Nietzsche's philosophy to environmental ethics. Nietzsche's philosophy of nature is, I believe, relevant today because it makes explicit a fundamental ambiguity that is also characteristic for our current understanding of nature. I will show how the current debate between traditional environmental ethics and postmodern environmental philosophy can be interpreted as a symptom of this ambiguity. I argue that, in light of Nietzsche's critique of morality, environmental ethics is a highly paradoxical project. According to Nietzsche, each moral interpretation of nature implies a conceptual seizure of power over nature. On the other hand, Nietzsche argues, the concept of nature is indispensable in ethics because we have to interpret nature in order to have a meaningful relation with reality. I argue that awareness of this paradox opens a way for a form of respect for nature as radical otherness.

I. INTRODUCTION

Max Hallman² has made an interesting comparison between current radical environmental philosophy and the work of the 19th century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. According to Hallman, strong parallels can be drawn between Nietzsche's philosophy and deep ecology.³ In a critical reply, Ralph Acampora⁴ claims that Nietzsche cannot be

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2 Max Hallmann, "Nietzsche's Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 13 (1991): 99-125.

3 According to Andrew Brennan "[deep ecology] argues that human self-realisation depends on identification with nature. Deep ecology started as a doctrine of biospheric egalitarianism — that all living things have the same claim to live and flourish. It evolved into a platform meant to embrace all those who recognize the inherent value of natural things and who share a concern to preserve natural diversity whatever their differences in underlying philosophies. A key point of deep ecology is that all living things are members of larger biotic or ecological communities. The larger community may be regarded as a place of value, with individual needs and projects assessed in terms of their contribution to the good of the larger whole." See

interpreted as a “biospheric egalitarian” (as Hallman does) without seriously distorting Nietzsche’s thinking. Acampora rightfully says that “ecophilosophers need to exercise hermeneutical caution in any attempt to appropriate Nietzsche for environmental ethical designs.”⁵ He advises ecophilosophers who wish to utilize Nietzsche’s thought *not* to rely on his positive moral and political statements (which, according to him, aim at a “high humanism”) but “merely on the latter’s ‘negative’ or deconstructive overcoming of Christian, homo-exclusive values.”⁶

I believe that comparing Nietzsche’s writings on morality and nature with current environmental philosophy does not help us much in trying to understand either of them. Furthermore, I believe, that a division between Nietzsche’s constructive and deconstructive remarks is artificial. It is precisely *in* Nietzsche’s critical remarks that we can discern his positive ethical project. That is why, in this paper, I will examine the significance of Nietzsche’s philosophy for environmental ethics more systematically, by looking at the function of the concept of nature within his critique of morality.

Apart from reminding us to be cautious in our appropriations of Nietzsche’s texts, there is another sense in which hermeneutics can help us determine the relevance of Nietzsche to environmental ethics. I believe that Nietzsche’s philosophy can be read as a hermeneutics of moral experience⁷, that is, as an attempt to illuminate (aspects of) our moral sensibility and our moral discourse. Nietzsche — who died in 1900 — looked at both nature and morality in a “untimely” way. He thought he was at least one hundred years ahead of his time. That would make his work relevant for us today. Indeed, I believe that Nietzsche’s work provides us with an illuminating interpretation of some problematic aspects of our current understanding of nature.

Nietzsche does not give an *answer* to the environmental ethical question of how to relate to nature; rather, he radicalizes the environmental ethical question itself. Nietzsche’s

Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, (New York: Routledge 1998) vol. 3, p. 333.

4 Ralph Acampora, “Using and Abusing Nietzsche for Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics*, 16 (1994): 187-94.

5 Ibid., p. 187.

6 Ibid., p. 194.

7 For this meaning of hermeneutics, see Paul J. M. van Tongeren, “Moral Philosophy as a Hermeneutics of Moral Experience,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (1994): 199-214.

philosophy gravitates around the tension between two aspects of contemporary life that are equally fundamental, but that seem to contradict each other. On the one hand, we feel the need for a commonly accepted criterion to determine whether a moral intuition is right, on the other hand, we know that such a criterion doesn't exist. We do not seem able to conduct our lives without presupposing such a criterion, although all previous attempts to legitimate absolute moral standards have turned out to be mere projections of ethical presumptions of a certain contingent age and culture. I believe that this moral tension has its counterpart in environmental philosophy: on the one hand, there is definitely a need for a normative concept of nature; on the other hand the attempts to elaborate the concept of nature as a basis for moral orientation have become very problematic in our time. Nietzsche examines this fundamental crisis in our current understanding of the world, and in doing so, might help us to understand better the problematic aspects of our current relationship with nature. This knowledge might enable us to respond to those problems more adequately.

In section two, I discuss a major debate within current environmental philosophy — that between (what I refer to as) “traditional environmental ethics” on the one hand, and “postmodern environmentalism” on the other. I believe that this debate clearly shows the topicality and need of studying Nietzsche in environmental philosophy. In the third section, I give a brief outline of Nietzsche's concepts of nature and morality and the relation between both concepts within Nietzsche's critique of morality. In the fourth section I will present Nietzsche's own ethics as a moral engagement with nature and point out some particularities of his approach that come forward as soon as we apply Nietzsche's critique of morality to his own moral philosophy. In the fifth section , I formulate a Nietzschean critical analysis of current environmental ethics. I will argue that the ethical project of recognizing nature's “intrinsic value” leads to a paradox. From a Nietzschean perspective, each normative engagement with nature presupposes a normative conception of nature, that in turn implies a process of interpretation. But because each interpretation is necessarily contingent and restrictive, each environmental ethic that conceptualizes nature's “intrinsic value” relies on a conceptual and practical seizure of power over nature, similar to the one it wants to criticize. I conclude in section six with a brief discussion of the positive contribution Nietzsche has to offer to environmental ethics. Despite the radicalness of his critique,

according to Nietzsche, it is possible to conceive nature in a less “violent” way. I show that the awareness of the paradox of environmental ethics might lead to a — paradoxical — form of respect for nature as radical otherness.

II. “TRADITIONAL” ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS VERSUS POSTMODERN ENVIRONMENTALISM

One of the leading questions in environmental philosophy nowadays is whether or not we can conceive nature in non-domesticating ways. The answer to this question has far-reaching consequences for environmental ethics. Roughly speaking there are two possible answers to this question, that correspond to two different currents in environmental philosophy.⁸ “Traditional” environmental ethicists start with the assumption that it *should* at least be possible to conceive nature in a non-domesticating way. The debate between anthropocentrists, weak anthropocentrists, non-anthropocentrists, and ecocentrists is only about how this can be done. Ecocentrists think it is possible to recognize the “intrinsic value of nature”, whereas anthropocentrists do not. However, even most anthropocentrists do not want to reduce our relationship with nature into pure instrumentalism. “Weak anthropocentrist” Eugene Hargrove, for instance, regards an aesthetic appreciation of nature as essentially nonviolent and non-domesticating.⁹ Thus, even if we assume that we can only see nature from a human perspective, then it is still conceivable that nature can speak to us in its own terms. Therefore, in a way, *all* traditional environmental ethicists (more or less explicitly) presuppose that it is possible to have a conception of nature that is essentially non-domesticating and nonviolent.

On the other hand, there are postmodern environmental philosophers, who deny such a possibility. According to them, each conception of nature is a domestication per se. They argue that concepts such as *nature* and *wilderness* (signifying a realm opposed to culture) are *social* constructions that function within the cultural project of trying to control and understand reality.¹⁰ They point to the contingent character of the different cultural

⁸ In this brief sketch, I cannot do justice to the many nuances within the debate. Of course some postmodern environmental philosophers consider themselves to be ethicists and vice versa.

⁹ Eugene Hargrove, *Foundations of Environmental Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1989).

¹⁰ I am not suggesting that these interpretations can be changed at will — as those opposed to this postmodern approach mistakenly think. The meaning of nature is the result of a historical process that cannot

interpretations of nature.

The ideological presuppositions of both approaches in environmental philosophy hamper a productive exchange of views. Both approaches start from opposite directions and are not willing or able to consider the other's merits. Therefore, a reconciliation between the two can hardly be conceived. Nevertheless, I think that it is possible to bring these two approaches together, albeit not in a conciliatory (pacifying) way. For this reason, I want to examine the philosophical framework of Friedrich Nietzsche, an author who normally does not get much attention from environmental philosophers. I believe that Nietzsche presents a line of thought that exceeds the differences of opinion within the current debate and that can give some new insight into the ambivalent character of our relationship with nature.

Nietzsche strongly emphasizes that we can only know *interpretations* of nature and never nature as it is in itself. At the same time his thesis regarding the universal struggle for power seems to contain a metaphysical account of the all-embracing nature of which human beings are an integral part. At first glance both aspects seem to contradict each other in the same way as traditional environmental ethics and postmodern deconstruction do. Nevertheless, I show that these seeming contradictions in Nietzsche's position are intended, and are based on an insight into the inevitably paradoxical and ambiguous nature of our moral relationship with reality. In the next section, I present Nietzsche's views on nature and morality. I show that Nietzsche's account of nature differs from usual postmodernism in some crucial aspects.

III. NIETZSCHE'S VIEW OF NATURE AND MORALITY

According to Nietzsche, reality in itself is irrelevant for human beings. It is the *meaning of reality* that constitutes the world we live in. Each meaning — be it moral, aesthetic or other — is the result of a process of interpretation of reality, and interpretations are primarily social phenomena. One could say that human beings¹¹ can only know reality in a domesticating way. Thus, at first sight Nietzsche's position resembles postmodern constructivism.

be controlled at an individual level.

11 In fact, the same could be said of nonhuman beings.

Nietzsche argues that each moral engagement with nature requires a conceptual identification of nature which can, in the end, be conceived as a violent exclusion of alternative explanations. According to Nietzsche, interpretation is essentially “will to power”. Nevertheless, *nature* is still a key concept in his philosophy, contrary to most postmodern theories.

Nietzsche’s philosophy is naturalistic in a radical sense. He argues that human beings are an integral part of nature, and should therefore understand themselves naturalistically. Nietzsche has strong methodological objections against “metaphysical” explanations of ourselves as moral beings that presuppose a non-natural “miraculous source” of morality.¹² He explains all of the different aspects of human existence as symptoms of an underlying natural process.

Nietzsche defines human beings as “yet undetermined animals.”¹³ The essence of human beings is — to put it paradoxically — that they have no essence. Unlike other animals, human beings can shape their lives in many ways. Moreover, moral interpretations of reality differ throughout history and within different cultures. Nietzsche emphasizes that there are numerous possible articulations of moral meaning in reality.

However, moral values necessarily claim to be more than contingent. In contrast with judgments of taste, moral judgments do not just claim to say something about the valuing subject, but also about *what is the case* with the matter that is being valued. However, because of this absolute (ontological) claim, each morality suppresses other moral interpretations. While morality restricts human nature, the same can be said regarding all nature.¹⁴ Within a particular morality, nature can only be perceived in a particular way. As seen from the viewpoint of nature, morality is a violent restriction of nature’s expressiveness. This is even true for an environmentalistic morality.

On the other hand, morality occurs naturally within human nature. According to Nietzsche, morality *is* the naturally occurring “organization” between different passions and impulses

12 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human, A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986), vol. I, sec. 1.

13 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil, Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. with commentary by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), sec. 62.

14 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books 1974), sec. 109.

within ourselves.¹⁵ Nietzsche argues that our passions and instincts have to be understood both as physical forces and as interpretive entities. He introduces the concept of “will to power” to provide the physical concept of “force” with an inner side.¹⁶ The struggle between passions within human nature can therefore be regarded as a struggle between different interpretations. Because Nietzsche’s vantage point is that human nature is not different from nature as a whole, nature as a whole can be seen as a struggle between several instances of “will to power”.¹⁷

According to Nietzsche, morality is the total outcome of the struggle for power between these different interpreting forces in human nature. As a result, each particular morality is a particular interpretation and disciplining of human nature and, consequently, nature as a whole. However, because each particular organization is contingent, it reflects just one possibility.

Nietzsche conceives of the violent character of morality against nature itself as something “natural”¹⁸ in this way putting Nietzsche’s former characterization of morality as anti-natural into perspective. Nietzsche turns his constructivistic approach into a “quasi-ontology”: reality is interpreting and being interpreted. Nietzsche presents a cosmology in which everything is “will to power and nothing else”.¹⁹ Insofar as moral values are anti-natural seizures of power, morality itself is part of nature.

15 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, sec. 6: “[...] his [the philosopher’s] morality bears decided and decisive witness to *who he is* — that is, in what order of rank the innermost drives of his nature stand in relation to each other.” See also *Beyond Good and Evil* sec. 187: “In short: moralities are also merely a *sign language of the affects*.”

16 Friedrich Nietzsche: *Sämtliche Werke : kritische Studien Ausgabe* (Colli-Montinari edition, Berlin: DTV / De Gruyter 1988) Vol. 11, Juni-Juli 1885 36 [31] (=The Will to Power, sec. 619).

17 The very notion of “will to power”, for that matter, does not appear as frequently and as unambiguously in the writings that Nietzsche himself published during his sane life, as one might think after reading *The Will to Power* — long believed to be his Magnum Opus. In the 1960s, however, Karl Schlechta unmasked this book as an erroneous systematization of some posthumous fragments. Since then, the Colli-Montinari-edition has confirmed Schlechta’s judgment. It is a pity that this book still has so much influence on Anglo-Saxon Nietzsche-reception even today. See Friedrich Nietzsche: *The Will to Power*; trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968).

18 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, sec. 188: “Every morality is, as opposed to *laissez aller*, a bit of tyranny against ‘nature’; but this in itself is no objection, as long as we do not have some other morality which permits us to decree that every kind of tyranny and unreason is impermissible. [...] Consider any morality with this in mind: what there is in it of ‘nature’ teaches hatred of the *laissez aller*, of any all-too-great freedom, and implants the need for limited horizons and nearest tasks — teaching the *narrowing of our perspective*, and thus in a certain sense stupidity, as a condition of life and growth.”

19 Heidegger points out that Nietzsche does not say that everything *wants* power — that would be the same as saying that *not everything is* “will to power”, because then there would be something else that *is not* “will to power” but that *has* “will to power.”

So far I have discussed only the two descriptive elements of Nietzsche's account of the agonistic character of nature. Together they constitute his "anti-metaphysical metaphysics" of "will to power". "Will to power" is a paradoxical formula, according to which only interpretations matter to people, but which at the same time provides an account of reality that reflects this insight.

IV. NIETZSCHE'S MORAL ENGAGEMENT WITH NATURE AS OTHERNESS

The concept of *nature* also has a normative function in Nietzsche's philosophy. Whereas postmodernists are inclined to deny the possibility of an adequate ethical relationship with nature as it really is, Nietzsche is more ambiguous. His critique of morality does not bring morality to an end, but aims at deepening moral evaluation. Morality is criticized because it is violence over nature, but this critique itself is morally motivated. In many instances, Nietzsche pleads for a "naturalization" of mankind.²⁰ But how are we to understand such a plea? How can Nietzsche's own moral statement be morally binding, when one has to admit that each interpretation of nature — and therefore also Nietzsche's own interpretation of nature as "will to power" — is a contingent seizure of power? How can Nietzsche's plea convince us? Does his moral engagement not just repeat the same violence he criticizes in morality?²¹

I think this problem can be solved by looking at a strange characteristic of Nietzsche's thinking. This aspect of his work can be understood better when put in contrast with two major traditions of Nietzsche reception, both of which can be criticized for oversimplifying Nietzsche's theory of "will to power."

20 E.g. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, sec. 109: "When will we complete our de-deification of nature? When may we begin to 'naturalize' humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?" See also *Beyond Good and Evil*, sec. 230: "To translate man back into nature; to become master over the many vain and overly enthusiastic interpretations and connotations that have so far been scrawled and painted over that eternal basic text of *homo natura*; to see to it that man henceforth stands before man as even today, hardened in the discipline of science, he stands before the *rest* of nature, with intrepid Oedipus eyes and sealed Odysseus ears, deaf to the siren songs of old metaphysical bird catchers who have been piping at him all to long, 'you are more, you are higher, you are of a different origin!' — that may be a strange and insane task, but it is a *task* — who would deny that?"

21 See Paul van Tongeren, *Die Moral von Nietzsches Moralkritik* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1989), chap. 6.

In the first approach, Nietzsche's theory of "will to power" is interpreted as an ontology.²² From this perspective, we could make an interesting comparison between Nietzsche's metaphysical account of nature and the ontological presumptions of deep ecology, as does Max Hallman.²³ From this viewpoint, we could conceive the struggle of wills to power as a Nietzschean way of speaking about an ecological web of dynamic relations. Tempting though such an interpretation may be, it does not reflect the main issue of Nietzsche's philosophy. An ontology asserts something about the world as it is, whereas the theory of "will to power" is a certain perspective that is aware of its own perspectival character. Therefore, Hallman's approach cannot do justice to Nietzsche's radical perspectivism.²⁴ An almost opposite approach can be found in twentieth-century French poststructural²⁵ Nietzsche scholars, who interpret the doctrine of "will to power" mainly as an expression of Nietzsche's critique of unifying ideologies. These authors argue that Nietzsche's most important message is that we can only have a plurality of interpretations of nature. The problem with this approach (which strongly resembles postmodern environmentalism) is that the notion of "nature" seems to have lost all meaning. However, the notion of nature as something beyond my interpretations — as an (albeit unknowable) underground of conscious life — is essential if we try to understand Nietzsche's critique of morality. Morality can be criticized as tyranny over nature, only if nature is something other than interpretation. We cannot ignore statements of Nietzsche such as "in reality everything is will to power and nothing else."

In contrast with what these two common interpretations assert, Nietzsche consciously combines the ontological with the anti-metaphysical perspective. The tension between these two aspects gives his philosophy a particular and fascinating dynamic. The German Nietzsche-specialist Wolfgang Müller-Lauter²⁶ has shown convincingly that Nietzsche's

22 Insa Eschebach — from whom I borrowed this distinction — discusses the major German Nietzsche-receptions of the 1930s as examples of such an account (Insa Eschebach, *Der verehrte Maßstab* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1990), pp. 52-81). However, I think that some studies of Nietzsche's *naturalism* are "ontologizing" Nietzsche's concept of "will to power" in a similar way.

23 Hallman, "Nietzsche's Environmental Ethics," pp. 119-23.

24 Note that Acampora criticizes Hallman for another reason, saying that Hallman's emphasis on Nietzsche's alleged "ecological egalitarianism" is misguided (Acampora, "Using and Abusing Nietzsche for Environmental Ethics").

25 E.g. Bataille, Foucault, Deleuze, and Lyotard.

26 Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, "Nietzsche's Teaching of Will to Power," trans. Drew E. Griffin, *Journal of*

philosophy is constantly moving between these two perspectives. On the one hand, Nietzsche gives a metaphysical account of nature as something “bodily” underlying our interpretations. This quasi-ontology states that all of reality is a struggle between different wills to power. This approach, however, is put in perspective by the other (anti-metaphysical, critical) statement that even this quasi-naturalistic metaphysical account of reality is just one possible interpretation amongst others. Because of the peculiar nature of Nietzsche’s ontology these two aspects do not so much contradict, as correct and restrain each other. The statement that everything is a struggle of interpretations is put in perspective by the admission that this account is itself an interpretation. On the other hand, in recognizing the perspectival character of his statement, Nietzsche confirms the original statement that everything is indeed a struggle of interpretations. Both seemingly contradictory aspects evoke each other. Nietzsche provides us with an interpretation of reality that affords insight into the “logic” of our inevitably perspectival way of understanding the world we live in, while remaining aware of its own perspectival nature.

As I noted earlier, these seeming contradictions in Nietzsche’s philosophy do not justify the conclusion that his work is nonsensical. I believe that Nietzsche’s philosophy reveals a fundamental ambivalence that is characteristic of our time. In several moral debates this ambivalence regarding our understanding of nature can be recognized. On the one hand, nature seems to have lost its status as a solid, unambiguous ground for moral judgments, on the other hand, we do not seem to be able to articulate certain moral experiences without referring to a more or less normative concept of nature.²⁷

Nietzsche’s moral engagement has to do with this ambivalence. Nietzsche wants to get rid of the moral arrogance of human beings who think of themselves as special and higher than the rest of nature. He criticizes the (false) moral self-images of human beings and he wants to show that people are in fact just nature and nothing else (in spite of what they want to

Nietzsche Studies, 4/5 (Autumn 1992/Spring 1993): 37-101.

27 Hub Zwart, for instance, shows that “all ethical theories regarding the moral significance of animals are grounded in an ontological assessment of the animal’s way of being”. Zwart examines three different ontological perspectives on the “nature of animals,” that not only lead to different degrees of moral obligation towards animals, but also to different conceptions of the kind of moral obligations we have towards them. My argument is that the awareness that more than one ontology exists, radically complicates any moral assessment. See Hub Zwart: “What is an Animal? A Philosophical Reflection on the Possibility of a Moral Relationship with Animals,” *Environmental Values* 6 (1997): 377-92.

believe). He wants to “translate man back into nature.” In a way, Nietzsche’s ethics can be interpreted as a modern version of Stoic ethics, which calls for humans to follow nature. However, unlike ancient Stoicism, Nietzsche’s naturalistic ethic does not ground in an essentialist concept of (human) nature. We cannot derive any particular understanding of good and evil from his concept of nature.

Nietzsche pleads for a naturalization of humanity, although in his analysis we cannot know nature as it is in itself. If we could, human beings would indeed have a privileged position in reality. This is why Nietzsche goes to some lengths to prevent identification of the nature that is being corrupted by morality. Each time Nietzsche criticizes a particular concept of nature as a tyrannical interpretation, he does so from the point of view of an opposed interpretation. Never does Nietzsche give a “true” interpretation of nature. If each interpretation rests on a seizure of power, claiming truth would be naive. Instead, Nietzsche’s interpretation of nature as will to power is an interpretation that shows that our world is composed of interpretations. Nonetheless, in confronting each particular concept of nature with an opposed concept, Nietzsche is motivated by something that transcends mere interpretation. This reality could again be called “nature”, although we have to bear in mind not to “metaphysize” this concept.

I conclude that in Nietzsche’s normative use of the concept of nature, nature means that which in the end *cannot be but at the same time always has to be* “grasped.” The fact that nature does not have a moral measure evokes a meaning of nature that precedes and transcends our moral activity. One could say that in an absolute sense nature is something strange and different. But at the same time the notion of this nature functions as a criterion of human self-criticism, that is: it functions within a human interpretative framework.

V. THE PARADOX OF ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Nietzsche’s analysis has far-reaching consequences for environmental ethics. According to Nietzsche, each environmental ethic that relies on a particular normative concept of nature is in fact a tyranny over nature. However, this tyranny cannot be avoided, because each morality is tyrannical and functions within the project of trying to get a grip on nature. In

fact, the environmental ethical question “how should we relate to nature?” itself becomes problematic. Each possible answer to this question presupposes a moral criterion. But if each morality itself is a particular relation to nature, then this moral criterion itself should be the subject of critical inquiry. Therefore, in Nietzsche’s philosophy the environmental ethical question of “how to relate to nature” leads directly to a critique of morality.

Nietzsche’s view of morality and nature involves an ambiguous assessment of the project of environmental ethics. In order to have a meaningful moral relationship with nature — in order to have an *ethos* — human beings have to interpret and appropriate nature. Although nature can be seen as something strange, the only way we can articulate the meaning of our relationship with nature is within the various interpretive frameworks we live in. Nietzsche argues that modern man is aware of the fact that each moral interpretation of the world is thoroughly contingent. We could be aware that each moral valuation of nature is necessarily contingent and can be regarded as a seizure of power: as a restriction of nature’s expressiveness.

This paradoxical knowledge, however, can be mobilized in an “ecological” way, and can help as a therapy for environmental ethics. The awareness of the radical otherness of nature can lead to a new attitude of listening and respect for nature and awareness of human finitude. According to Nietzsche, each value is man-made, because it is impossible to see nature as it is in itself. A morally meaningful relationship with nature presupposes interpretation of reality and in a way a seizure of power. This is even true for an environmentalist approach. As a result, concepts such as the “intrinsic value of nature” or even “attunement with nature” become problematic. These concepts pretend to mirror an insight into nature as it is in itself, and thus leave behind anthropomorphic interpretation. However, Nietzsche shows that even these environmentalist’s concepts can be interpreted as attempts to master nature. What is more, such interpretations are in a way more violent than others, because such concepts as “intrinsic value of nature” suggest that the moral meaning of nature exists “objectively” — that is, independently of the moral subject. In doing so, these concepts legitimize only one way of interpreting nature and rule out other possible understandings. Consequently, they restrict the ways in which nature can express itself.

According to Nietzsche, there are no metaphysical grounds for intrinsic value. However, this

lack of grounds does not imply that an authentic moral concern for nature is not possible. Although in Nietzsche's view our relationship with nature is problematic per se, there is still room for moral concern. It is precisely because of his normative engagement with nature that Nietzsche criticizes absolute claims about the moral meaning of nature.

Nietzsche's thinking is valuable for environmental ethics because of the tense combination of a hermeneutical ontology, on the one hand²⁸, and a transcendental concept of nature (as a normative horizon that cannot be identified) on the other.²⁹ If Nietzsche's analysis is true, each normative engagement with the wildness in nature remains paradoxical in the deepest possible way — because it tries to identify that which cannot be identified.

It is at this point that the recent pleas for a new kind of wilderness philosophy become problematic. According to Neil Evernden,³⁰ for instance, nature provokes a feeling of awe because it challenges each human appropriation. Evernden argues that we respect nature because it is not of our making. What he seems to forget, however, is that each possible relationship with nature requires interpretation. It is one thing to point out that something escapes interpretation, it is another to say that we should no longer interpret and appropriate nature. The latter is only possible at the expense of sheer indifference toward nature.³¹

If this paradox is characteristic of each environmental ethic, then perhaps we should look for concepts that reflect this ambivalent nature of our moral relationship with nature. I believe that the aesthetic notion of "the sublime" can be seen as an attempt to articulate this paradox in such a way that it can be recognized in concrete moral experiences of nature. Sublime nature withdraws itself from us, it is inconceivable, and it provokes wonder and a feeling of awe. However, it does not allow us to identify its exact meaning or to construct a system of ethics that could justify our actions.³² Sublime nature reminds us of the fact that there is something "out there" that is valuable in a way we cannot control, identify, or

28 See Jim Cheney, "Postmodern Environmental Ethics: Ethics as Bioregional Narrative," *Environmental Ethics* 11 (1989): 117-34.

29 See Roger Paden, "Nature and Morality," *Environmental Ethics* 14 (1992): 239-51.

30 Neil Evernden, *The Social Construction of Nature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

31 The same can be said with regard to William Cronon's position in: "The Trouble with Wilderness" in: William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: Norton, 1995): 69-90.

32 See Robert Frodeman, "Radical Environmentalism and the Political Roots of Postmodernism," *Environmental Ethics* 14 (1992): 307-19.

possess. This sublime nature, however, is not just convenient. Wild nature can be beautiful and sublime, but can also be discomforting, perhaps distressing sometimes. We cannot have one without the other. We can only experience something of value, when we dare to risk losing it.

On the other hand, we have to admit that, in the end, the notion of “the sublime” is itself yet another contingent attempt (easy to localize historically) to identify the inconceivable in nature. Again the same paradox arises.

VI. CONCLUSION

If we are to take Nietzsche’s critique of morality serious, then we cannot settle for a convenient comparison between deep ecology and some isolated fragments of Nietzsche’s philosophy, as Hallman did. Acampora is right in his warning that “any attempt to appropriate Nietzsche for environmentally ethical designs” is at risk of ventriloquizing one’s own moral voice “into an authoritative but alien mouthpiece”.³³

However, I have shown that Acampora’s warning does not necessarily mean that Nietzsche is irrelevant to environmental ethics. I have argued that Nietzsche’s philosophy is relevant for us today, because he points to a key characteristic of our current understanding of the world: the tension between the need for a normative concept of nature, on the one hand, and our being conscious of the problematic nature of any attempt to develop such a concept for moral orientation, on the other. Nietzsche’s philosophy elaborates on the problems connected with such an ambivalent understanding of the world. By doing so, he might make us more sensitive to the underlying fundamental ethical problems that we face today.

As a key concept in Nietzsche’s critique of morality, *nature* functions as a counterpoint for any moral interpretation of nature. Nietzsche not only criticizes the dominant anthropocentric attitude towards nature, but *all* appropriations of nature. At the same time, he urges us to make better interpretations of what nature really is, since, according to Nietzsche, we cannot get rid of nature. Although we are inevitably trying to master nature, we remain aware of the fact that the world is not of our making. We find ourselves already

33 Acampora, “Using and Abusing Nietzsche for Environmental Ethics,” p. 187.

“in context’, we live in a world that is already there. This otherness of nature seems to provoke a sense of awe. Many poets and philosophers have tried to articulate this sense, and have tried to show that nature is of value, simply because it exists. For Nietzsche too, nature is more than the surplus of each interpretation. Nature is also characterized by positive attributes such as creativity, greatness, forcefulness, independence, and necessity. Nietzsche exhorts us, though, to be cautious in using such positive attributions, as they can be nothing more than attempts to articulate the moral meaning nature has *for us*.

Nietzsche points out that the conflict between traditional environmental ethics and postmodern environmental philosophy is not just an academic misunderstanding, but can itself be regarded as a symptom of a crisis in our current relationship with nature. He urges us to go beyond the debate between relativistic constructivism and moralistic value realism, and try and find new modes of thinking of nature that more adequately reflect the ambivalent status of nature in our time. His philosophy makes us alive to the risk of repeating the hubris against nature in our attempts to identify the moral meaning of nature in itself. At the same time, it challenges us to assess our moral experiences of nature with honesty, self-criticism and sensitivity .