

Is it Ecologically Just to Be? Anti-Natalism in Eco-Deconstruction

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Man beholds the earth, and it is breathing like a great lung; whenever it exhales, delightful life swarms from all its pores and reaches out toward the sun, but when it inhales, a moan of rupture passes through the multitude, and corpses whip the ground like bouts of hail. (...) Future's curtain unravelled itself to reveal a nightmare of endless repetition, a senseless squander of organic material. The suffering of human billions makes its entrance into him through the gateway of compassion, from all that happen arises a laughter to mock the demand for justice, his profoundest ordering principle.

Peter Wessel Zapffe — The Last Messiah, §II.¹

Nature giving birth to man was a dying mother: she gave 'being' to the one whose coming into the world was her own death sentence.

Georges Bataille — Inner Experience.²

Introduction

In the first season of the critically acclaimed television anthology series *True Detective*, one of the show's protagonists, self-proclaimed philosophical pessimist Rust Cohle, explains his worldview to his visibly uncomfortable partner as follows: 'I think human consciousness was a tragic misstep in evolution. We became too self-aware. Nature created an aspect of nature separate from itself. We are creatures that should not exist by natural law,' before concluding, 'I think the honourable thing for our species to do is to deny our programming, stop reproducing, walk hand in hand into extinction, one last midnight, brothers and sisters opting out of a raw deal.'³ I had recently finished co-editing a collection on the relevance of Derrida's work to

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environmental philosophy while watching this show, and found myself coyly wishing to remind Cohle that, at least deconstructively, the arche-writing of nature's pro-gramme had been in the process of de-naturing itself long before humans arrived on the scene, originarily so, in fact.⁴ Nonetheless, there seemed to me to be something worthwhile with respect to the overpopulation question in examining anti-natalism — the idea that we ought to cease or at least limit our reproduction, its more pessimistic variants suggesting that humanity is something which above all should not be and that it is better never to be born — as something honourable, indeed ethical, as a matter of justice, the question 'is it just to make more children' being an important correlate of one attributed to Levinas, *is it just to be?*⁵

For this piece, I've attempted to reposition this central question in an ecological context to submit the ontological notion of human existence to an environmental-ethical examination. Levinas recounts the following:

I think that philosophical discourse is independent of this guilt and that the question "Have I the right to be?" expresses above all the human in its concern for the other (...) It is now my principal theme: is not my place in being, the *Da* of my *Dasein*, already a usurpation, already a violence in respect to the other? A preoccupation that has nothing ethereal about it, nothing abstract: the press speaks to us of the Third World, and we are well off here, our daily meal is assured. At the cost of whom? One can ask oneself this. Pascal said the I is detestable. In the sovereign affirmation of the I, the perseverance of beings in their being is repeated, but also the consciousness of the horror that egoism inspires in myself. Pascal also says that my place in the sun is the image and the beginning of the usurpation of the whole earth.⁶

If many are to be believed, *True Detective*'s creator Nic Pizzolatto borrowed Cohle's monologue a bit too closely from the influences cited in the show's writing, particularly Thomas Ligotti's *Conspiracy against the Human Race: A Contrivance of Horror* (2010), but also David Benatar's *Better Never to have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (2006) and Eugene Thacker's *In the Dust of this Planet: Horror of Philosophy Volume 1* (2011).⁷ As we will see, each of these

works expresses something of the horror and panic of existence of which Levinas speaks that is perhaps familiar to those concerned with overpopulation and human effects on its others; a thought of one's being as something which should not be, — a *meontology* within which we might hear both Heidegger's translation of Plato's *mē on*, ('that which really should not be'⁸) and an ontology of the detestable ego, *the me* — a glacial, suffocating guilt and shame which catches one by the throat, as if from the Outside-in, when one ponders the billions, indeed trillions of lives made unlivable by one's very breathing, a breath sucked out of the lungs of uncountable others in a perverse inverted mirror-image of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, as of course, Derrida triggers in asking: 'Who can know how many people or living beings he or she will have killed without knowing it in the course of a lifetime? Without knowing it at all or without knowing it consciously, all the while knowing it unconsciously?'⁹ From a geopolitical, and indeed ecological perspective, as Derrida suggests in his final interview, such is the structural and originary condition of survival in reprieve [*en sursis*], 'in a world that is more inegalitarian than ever, for the millions and millions of living beings — human or not — who are denied not only their basic "human rights," which date back two centuries and are constantly being refined, but first of all the right to a life worthy of being lived.'¹⁰

This paper will attempt to examine certain convergences between a death drive at play in pessimistic anti-natalism, a life drive at play in affirmative biopolitics (much of which I read to be grounded in the inalienable natural right and power of the Spinozist *conatus essendi*, the sovereign affirmation of the perseverance of beings in their being), and an eco-deconstructive account which invites us to think life:death on Earth differently. As we saw Levinas say, 'in the sovereign affirmation of the I, the perseverance of beings in their being is repeated, but also the consciousness of the horror that egoism inspires in myself.'¹¹ Here, both the persistence of beings in their being (affirmative biopolitics) and the horror of egoism (taken up in pessimistic anti-natalism) are revealed as structured by the sovereign affirmation of the I. As Cary Wolfe has noted, a difficulty implied by much work in affirmative biopolitics is that it replays many difficulties encountered in environmental ethics in the 1970s and 80s in Deep Ecology and biocentrism.¹² A refusal to inquire into the ecological justice of being with respect to the

overpopulation question might itself be read to be symptomatic of this unconditional affirmation of life. But to conclude that ecological justice can be met only by giving ourselves death, whether immediately or through ceasing to reproduce, is also profoundly misguided. My thesis in this essay is that anti-natalism in many of its contemporary pessimistic formulations maintains this logic of human sovereignty, power and good conscience, a purely human capacity to recognise a problem with its overpopulation, feel guilty or anxious about it, and give itself death in an attempt to exonerate itself. Let me be clear as to my title, then: I in no way intend to disclose such anti-natalist tropes in deconstruction, rather, I wish to show how, like everything else, when it comes to anti-natalism, '*ça se déconstruit*,' it can be deconstructed, it deconstructs itself; the conditions of possibility of its discourse force the impossibility of its premisses and axioms in their rigour and purity. Deconstruction, for Derrida, is precisely an experience of the impossible, and the question 'is it ecologically just to be?' must itself confront the impossibility of thinking the world beyond human extinction. In thinking this impossibility, I argue, the horror and panic of being expressed in antinatalist pessimist responses to overpopulation undergo a certain conversion in their premisses and open onto ethics itself, which allow us to ask impossibly difficult questions about ecological justice and overpopulation while thinking otherwise the affirmation of life. I do not therefore propose any eco-deconstructive 'solution' to the overpopulation question, but rather attempt to clarify certain presuppositions concerning life, death and human sovereignty in responding to this question which foreclose a more direct engagement with its ecological-ethical consequences.

As Levinas suggests, facing the question 'have I the right to be?' 'is not a question of asking ourselves in the name of I know not what abstract law whether we shouldn't take our own lives [*nous donner la mort*], but of finding reasons to live, to be worthy of being.'¹³ But this question, as we saw above, expresses the *human* concern for the other for Levinas. While Derrida's critique of Levinas's anthropocentrism is well known, the latter's thought allows us to triangulate a point between, or rather outside of, what we might stake as a dilemma between pessimistic anti-natalism and affirmative biopolitics on these life and death questions.¹⁴ And while Spinoza writes that philosophers ought never think of death, and Heidegger that death is the possibility

of an impossibility, each respectively thinking life and death as power, Levinas asks us to think death otherwise than being, as the impossibility of possibility, a powerlessness. While death certainly illustrates a dilemma between being and not being, Levinas suggests the following:

To be or not to be is not the ultimate alternative, and in any case not the ultimate or most urgent question (...) It is true, of course, that to speak of life and death is to speak of urgent questions. But is the couple life and death reducible to being and not being? Is it not a metaphor for it? We must get back to the concrete determination of death.

My being called into question by the singular death of the other allows us to think this death beyond the opposition between being and non-being. In our persistence in being, Levinas writes, we use the metaphor death-life 'forgetful of our properly human vocation of dis-inter-estedness, [*dés-inter-esement*], i.e. of disengagement with respect to our being and care for the being of the other.' The human, Levinas writes, is this return to a bad consciousness, a fear (*crainte*) for the other and for the violence and killing my existence brings with it, a crisis in being, 'to the possibility of its fearing injustice more than death.'¹⁵ But what if the shame one feels in thinking about all the lives made unlivable by one's very being were itself, if we turn to Derrida, not only human, nor the honour Cohle expresses in denying our reproductive *pro-gramme*; 'are shame, honour and dignity the proper of the human?' Derrida's response is, of course, in the negative.¹⁶

A deconstructive response to the overpopulation question, and in turn that of whether it is just to be, can only negotiate two senses of the word just; on the one hand, justice is owed to the incalculable singularity of the other *in each case*, itself each time uniquely the birth and death of *the* world, along a logic that remains to be demonstrated, while on the other, justice is owed *in general*, and requires the calculation, counting and enforcement of ethico-juridico-political laws, rights, and policies. This difficulty is further compounded by what Derrida identifies as a preference for one's own, an irrecusable yet unjustifiable hierarchy structuring any modality of living-together (it is never our own who are overpopulating). My being-there immediately occupies the place in the sun of the other, but also 'the rest of the

starving world, (...) the immense majority of humankind and even those living (not to mention the others, dead or nonliving, dead or not yet born),’ those who do not belong to my family, nation, race, continent, religious or linguistic culture, etc. All these others, Derrida writes, are themselves singularities, ‘others, a wholly other form of alterity: one other or some other persons, but also places, animals, languages.’¹⁷ It becomes difficult in this context to justify feeding oneself ‘before coming to the rescue of the billions of starving people in the world,’ not to mention feeding one’s cat at the expense of one sickly and starving in Asia.¹⁸ Such aporias in the calculation of justice, exacerbated by overpopulation, are not only an economy of human justice but concern the living in general.

Like Levinas, Derrida also calls upon us to hear Hamlet’s ‘to be or not to be?’ in a different way, beyond the logic of the living and the non-living, the human and the nonhuman, being and non-being, of the present and its others; its sense is rather the element of ‘the non-knowledge and the non-advent of an event, of what remains to be: to do and to decide.’¹⁹ If ‘economy,’ or the ontological violence between countless singularities persevering in their being, living off the lives and deaths of one another, is itself the aporetic structure of any living or being-together, and, Derrida writes, one must ‘connect the motif of ecology, this great and new dimension of “living together” to that of economy,’ that is, an eco-deconstructive response to overpopulation must calculate with the anecological. In this calculation, one cannot even presuppose, Derrida writes, ‘what “living” means, or that living is worth more than dying — which is far from being self-evident, any more than it is not self-evident that certain forms of ‘dying’ do not represent a certain manner of “living together.”’²⁰ Any living-together on earth is structured by the anachrony of a time out of joint; we do not live alone, but haunted by the ghosts of environmental destruction and overpopulation, human and otherwise, those who have already gone and those yet to come, those of our children born either into increasingly unlivable situations or, in the rich white north-Atlantic democracies, ones fostering the suffering of increasingly innumerable others.²¹ The matter of learning to live with these ghosts more justly is what I wish to broach here in thinking overpopulation and asking ‘is it ecologically just to be?’

I: Ecologies of Life:Death: Affirmation and Negation

This section will begin to situate contemporary pessimistic responses to overpopulation within the context of Derrida's own reflections on life-death, particularly in his 1974–5 seminar *La Vie la mort*, on the work of biologist François Jacob, Freud's death drive, and Nietzsche's Will to Power.²² Thacker, Ligotti, and Benatar all draw on the tradition of philosophical pessimism looking to Arthur Schopenhauer in developing their views. The latter's philosophy of the Will politically culminates in 'the actual over-population of the whole planet, the terrible evil of which only a bold imagination can conjure up to mind.'²³ This philosophy can be thought ecologically as well. As Roberto Esposito puts it, Schopenhauer takes the Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes*, the war of all against all, to its most extreme conclusion; 'nature, itself an expression of the unstoppable will to live that governs the world, is traversed, is indeed constituted, by a relentless struggle between its components.'²⁴ Derrida, for his part, almost never mentions Schopenhauer, if only to signal Freud's own dis/avowal of the traffic of inheritances in developing his thought of the *Todestrieb*, the death drive or the death instinct, and the dualism of instinctual life. As Derrida cites Freud in *The Post Card* (1987), "we have unwittingly steered our course into the harbour of Schopenhauer's philosophy. For him death is the '*eigentliche Resultat*' [the true, proper result, the appropriate, properly named result—this is a citation] and to that extent the purpose of life,' while the sexual instinct is the embodiment (*Verkörperung*) of the will to live."²⁵ An opposition between the death drive and that towards reproduction already lets itself be read.

The death-drive, however, itself ends up confirming the logic of the proper, of re-appropriation and I believe as well of human sovereignty for Derrida.²⁶ Indeed, the oceanic feeling willed in the return to the inorganic can itself be shown to be an effect of the carnophallogocentric structure of human subjectivity.²⁷ The only other references to Schopenhauer in Derrida come up in *Signsponge* (1984), in citing Ponge: 'If I prefer La Fontaine—the slightest fable—to Schopenhauer or Hegel, I certainly know why.'²⁸ It is, in fact, a certain fabulation of Schopenhauer's with which we might conclude in thinking anti-natalism in an eco-deconstructive sense. Whether recalling one of his favorite what we might call 'non-power animals,' the hedgehog, or another unrelated beast which strangely tells the same

fable due to convergent evolution, Derrida evokes another adoption of Schopenhauer by way of Freud in *Politics of Friendship* (2005), where the latter's pessimistic theory of man is drawn into the sphere of the political, decrying any philosophy of optimism as worthless [*sans valeur*]; 'the interdict 'thou shalt not kill' confirms that we descend from a generation of murderers... The *si vis vitam, para mortem* [if you wish for life, prepare for death] that Freud proposes as a substitute for the *si vis pacem para bellum* [if you wish for peace prepare for war], only confirms this fundamental political pessimism.' Schopenhauer's 'dilemma of the porcupines' parable serves as an illustration; 'some porcupines give up cuddling each other to ward off the cold: their quills hurt them. Obligated one cold winter day to huddle together, they end up, finding a mean distance between attraction and repulsion.'²⁹ It is indeed in this sense that we must read Derrida's '*il faut bien vivre ensemble*,' [we must live together/we must live together well] itself a modification of his earlier '*il faut bien manger*,' [one must eat/one must eat well] but one which becomes all the more complicated when the porcupines are so numerous they cannot turn around without impaling each other on one another's spines. In situations of such overcrowding, other placental mammals have the tendency to spontaneously abort.

It is in Nietzsche, however, that we find the most difficult figure for thinking together eco-deconstruction, anti-natalism and overpopulation and the complex interplay between pessimism and affirmation. This is because, as Diana Coole hints in 'Too Many Bodies' when examining the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, there is little room for critical reflection on overpopulation in what we might call 'affirmative biopolitics,' which champions the counter-power of life's resistance against biopolitical control.³⁰ Much work in affirmative biopolitics, as we noted, can be read precisely as the affirmation of life bound up in the natural right of the *conatus essendi*, situating ethics as a maximisation of dynamic, powerful and indeed violent action, lamenting an overburdening moral concern for the other.³¹ As is well known, Derrida not only mentions in his final interview that deconstruction is always on the side of the 'yes,' of the affirmation of life, '*affirmez la survie*' were his last words, read by family at his funeral. But one must not at all therefore attempt to recuperate Derrida within what some have called the 'affirmative turn to life' in contemporary theory. The affirmation of life never goes without a

thought of death in Derrida, as in his heartbreaking admission in his ‘Circumfession,’ (1993) recalling some of his dying mother’s last few clear words, ‘I want to kill myself,’ a phrase he claims manifests itself illegibly in all of his writings; “‘I want to kill myself’ is a sentence of mine, me all over, but known to me alone, the *mise en scène* of a suicide and the fictive but oh how motivated, convinced, serious decision to put an end to my days.’ A desire bound in tears and prayers, but one less concerned with ending his life than ‘a sort of compulsion to overtake each second, like one car overtaking another, doubling it rather. . . the memory of what survives me to be present at my disappearance,’ where even one who understands the entirety of his work would miss that

I have lived in prayer, tears and the imminence at every moment of their survival, terminable survival from which “I see myself live” translates “I see myself die,” I see myself dead cut from you in your memories that I love and I weep like my own children at the edge of my grave, I weep not only for my children but for all my children, why only you, my children?³²

Because even through such tears, the hope nonetheless remains that one would be thanked either for ending their lives or choosing not to procreate, that one would survive their own auto-erasure to see, as if by shimmering but blurred outline, the traces of their non-existing children weeping over their sacrifice, the porcupines happily free to gauge their distances from one another as they please—I will have let life live-on better by extracting myself from the violent tangles of the web of life. I think of Roberto Esposito’s beautiful study of Elias Canetti in *Categories of the Impolitical* (2015) here. For both Canetti and Nietzsche, Esposito writes, power and antipower are inextricable from the structure of subjectivity. This structure indeed constitutes a biological law, that of life’s ineluctable relationship with death. As Esposito quotes Canetti,

“with the growing awareness that we are perched on a heap of corpses, human and animal, that our self-confidence actually feeds on the sum of those we survived. . . with this rapidly spreading insight, we find it harder and harder to reach any solution we would not be ashamed of. It is impossible to turn away from life, whose value and

expectation we always feel. But is equally impossible not to live from the deaths of other creatures, whose value and expectation is no less than ours."

Life lives off of the deaths it survives, this is the very logic of the living, and if Derrida writes that '*il faut bien manger*,' Esposito calls for another im-possibility through Canetti, a politics of ascesis; 'how can one live without doing so by surviving others [*vivere senza sopravvivere*]?' How can we achieve the impossible "squaring of the circle?" (...) If the circle could be squared, we would then have to live *without* growing, or grow *without* eating.³³ Esposito finds this echoed in Canetti's character Sonne,

not wanting anything for himself—or more precisely, wanting himself to be nothing—is Sonne's way of giving himself to others, of living *their* life, not abandoning the world but annulling himself in it... "even in the unbiased justice of his conversation one sensed a passion for the world, and my impression was that his only reason for *doing* nothing was that he wished to do no one an injustice."³⁴

And at my closest to responding in the negative to the question in my title, *Is it Ecologically Just to Be?*, through implacable guilt and tears, and in a love for the world, is an intersection of Heidegger's *Schuldigsein*, originary guilt, *Zusage*, the 'yes' in the acquiescence anterior to the question of Being (but also, as we will see below, the panic in this affirmation), and *Gelassenheit*, a releasement or letting be. But this guilt is also that of the bad consciousness of which Levinas speaks, a crisis of being, also a responding to the putting in question of one's being in its radical passivity. "To have to answer for one's right to be, not in relation to the abstraction of some anonymous law, some legal entity, but in fear for the other," the birth of the language of responsibility.³⁵

There is no room for this radical passivity, the impolitical, the nonpower at the heart of power in the affirmative turn to life. Nietzsche, on this reading, would abhor this ascetic denigration of life as a pessimism of weakness. Nietzsche's account of the wisdom of Silenus in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1999) is often recalled in discussions of pessimism and antinatalism due to its Schopenhauerian and Wagnerian inspiration.³⁶ Breaking with the negativity of Schopenhauer's Will,

however, Nietzsche's later thought of the Will to Power is, as Gilles Deleuze puts it, 'a thought which affirms life and the will to life, a thought which finally expels the whole of the negative; to believe in the innocence of future and past, to believe in the eternal return,' a thought which '*justifies* all that it affirms, including suffering, instead of being itself justified by suffering.' But one must keep in mind the differential character of force here. The Will to Power is found in both reactive and active forces, which Nietzsche opposes as a pessimism of weakness to a pessimism of strength; the former correlated to 'the last man, the one who prefers a nothingness of the will, who prefers to fade away passively,' willing its passive extinction (and here, of course, the similarities with the death drive abound) and the overman, the man who wants to perish, who wills an active destruction to convert the reactive forces and the will to nothingness into the affirmation of life.³⁷

When Nietzsche writes that one always has to defend the strong from the weak, he is suggesting, against Darwin, that natural selection necessarily favours the weak: 'I see on top and surviving everywhere those who compromise life and the value of life.' Interestingly, Nietzsche frames the consequences of this as the regrettable translation of reality into morality, of the ontological into the ethical. 'If one translates reality into a morality, this morality is: the mediocre are worth more than the exceptions; the decadent forms more than the mediocre; the will to nothingness has the upper hand over the will to life—and the overall aim is, in Christian, Buddhist, Schopenhauerian terms: "better *not* to be than to be.'" These lower types, Nietzsche writes, 'preponderate through their *numbers*. . . possess great *fruitfulness* and duration,' while the strong and active are accompanied by 'an increase in danger, rapid wastage, *speedy reduction in numbers*.'³⁸ The pendulum swings, and overpopulation becomes in fact a product of the negation rather than the affirmation of life. And this is precisely where Derrida locates the space of the 'ultra' or 'arche-ethical' in Nietzsche. Derrida follows Deleuze in reading Nietzsche's thought as always calling forth a differential concept of force, but inflects this in a way more amenable to thinking the radical passivity necessary for the invention of alternate possibilities in responding to overpopulation. We can read Derrida breaking from affirmative biopolitics' championing of the 'unrestrained power to act' (indeed, Bataille writes that 'considered from the standpoint of action,

Nietzsche's work amounts to failure [*un avortement*, an abortion]³⁹) as follows:

force is not power, finally. It is not something; force is always inscribed in a space where a ruse (not a subjective ruse but a ruse of structure) is possible, making the weakest strongest. And this can be translated into political terms. Always to put oneself on the side of the weakest and the most oppressed is also a kind of confidence in the future.⁴⁰

The word 'force' itself is no longer adequate here. 'The absolute gift, absolute hospitality, imply an experience of absolute weakness, a suspension of the relation of forces.'⁴¹ As he writes elsewhere, 'by coming to the aid of strength, Nietzsche is coming to the aid of weakness, of an essential weakness. It is in this essential weakness that one can locate the place of the "arche-ethics," of the law that I mentioned earlier. *One must defend the weakest who are pregnant with the future.*'⁴² It is in negotiating this differential relay between the weak who, on the one hand, claim that it is 'better *not* to be than to be,' and the weak pregnant with the future that we are confronted an-other thought of pregnancy to be invented, one which can address overpopulation beyond the dialectic of the affirmative and the pessimistic, in an eco-deconstructive sense which calls the very justice of human existence, ecologically speaking, into question, but negotiates this originary violence of being with the protection of the weakest, the trillions of living beings whose lives are made unlivable by an excess of human life, an excess which cannot be thought without evasion as the sovereign property of the human. This is perhaps how we can begin to understand some of Derrida's closing remarks in 'To Speculate on Freud,' where 'the beyond of the pleasure principle would be the affirmation of life rather than the aspiration to return to the inorganic.'⁴³

II: Ecologies of Anti-Natalism and Philosophical Pessimism

In this section, I'll examine more recent convergences between antinatalism, philosophical pessimism, and environmental ethics in developing my argument that, for all its merits, much thinking about overpopulation remains bound to a logic of human sovereignty and

is thus ill-equipped for addressing its ecological-ethical consequences. Overpopulation, as is well known, was one of the central environmental issues of the 1970's. The textbook I use in teaching an undergraduate environmental ethics course, *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions*, frames the discussion in terms of environmental public policy, via what it calls 'the population/poverty' debate, and features all the key classic texts on the issue from an economic standpoint.⁴⁴ In its section on deep ecology, however, we find Andrew McLaughlin suggest that

we should collectively recognise that an increase in human numbers is not in the best interest of humans, much less the rest of life. It is to the credit of the Deep Ecology movement that it clearly gives priority to human population as a problem and calls for a gradual decrease. This does not imply misanthropy or cruelty to presently existing humans. In fact, it implies the reverse.⁴⁵

Norwegian founder of Deep Ecology Arne Naess also addresses the program of overpopulation in more hopeful terms: 'Those who think that *Homo sapiens* is "programmed" to eventually destroy life on the planet should perhaps advise that we leave it before it is too late. There is, however, no good reason to believe that there is such a programming... (Population reduction towards decent levels might incidentally require a thousand years.)'⁴⁶ But it is Naess' compatriot Peter Wessel Zapffe who has proven most influential in contemporary pessimistic approaches to overpopulation, albeit also from an ecological standpoint. Indeed, it is not difficult to read Zapffe's short piece 'The Last Messiah' as depicting precisely the reactive 'last man' of passive extinction, 'a man who has fathomed life and its cosmic ground, and whose pain is the Earth's collective pain,' whose final message 'know yourselves, *be infertile and let the earth be silent after ye*,' is barely uttered before those who hear it 'pour themselves over him, led by the pacifier makers and the midwives, and bury him in their fingernails.' Clearly, all those economically invested in the business of birth must protect their interests. Zapffe's work would become especially influential on Ligotti, whose work was, in turn, influential on the writing of *True Detective*. In 'The Last Messiah,' Zapffe imagines man as 'a break in the unity of life, a biological paradox, an abomination, an absurdity, an exaggeration

of disastrous nature.’ The evolution of consciousness differentiates in kind the suffering of the beast from that of the human. ‘In the beast, suffering is self-confined, in man, it knocks holes into a fear of the world and a despair of life.’ Pivotal to every human mind, he adds, is a relentless ‘*feeling of cosmic panic*.’⁴⁷ Consciousness thus becomes analogous to the horns of the Irish elk, which became too heavy for the animal to survive.⁴⁸ If *Megaloceros* had broken off its horns bit by bit, its survival would come at the expense of its purpose, ‘in other words a continuance without hope, a march not *up to* affirmation, but forth across its ever recreated ruins, a self-destructive race against the sacred will of blood. The identity of purpose and perishment is, for giant deer and man alike, the tragic paradox of life.’⁴⁹ As Ligotti is right to suggest, ‘Zapffe’s paradox’ appears stolen from Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*; human beings must deceive themselves into believing their lives are something that they are not. ‘It is an eternal phenomenon: by means of an illusion spread over things, the greedy Will always finds some way of detaining its creatures in life and forcing them to carry on living,’ until it of course achieves its death, its true, proper, appropriate and properly named result.⁵⁰

Esposito develops a similar account through Schopenhauer’s reading of Xavier Bichat, one which would also be taken up by Michel Foucault and Deleuze. Every living being, he writes, has a double biological layer, the ‘vegetative,’ unconscious layer (that of organic life, the domain of the will and passions), and the cerebral, conscious, ‘animal’ life. Humans, like all other living beings, are far more determined by a force of simple reproductive life, which, left unchecked, as we saw, leads for Schopenhauer to the ‘actual over-population of the whole planet.’⁵¹ Death is also doubled across this reading; while there is the personal death of the individual, animal life, there is also simultaneously a death which is multiple, impersonal and anonymous and which relentlessly eats away at the living being, as Foucault puts it, ‘no longer as a death that brutally cuts down life—as in an epidemic, but as that permanent death, that slides into life, perpetually gnaws at it, diminishes and weakens it.’⁵² It is this element of an impersonal and anonymous death that inspires horror and panic, the realisation that ‘*behind the scenes of life there is something pernicious that makes a nightmare of our world*.’⁵³ If I stress the Bichat-Blanchot-Deleuze-Foucault elements of the anonymous and impersonal here,

it is because this panic directly connects to the cosmic pessimism Thacker develops in *In the Dust of this Planet*. Horror is precisely for Thacker where thinking confronts the limits of its possibility. The world of climate change, global pandemics, natural disasters (and indeed terminal overpopulation) increasingly forces human thought to encounter the impossible possibility of what Thacker calls the world-without-us, the planet (in contrast to the world-for-us; the world, and the world-in-itself; the earth). Neither antagonistic nor neutral to the human, 'the world-without-us lies somewhere in between, in a nebulous zone that is at once impersonal and horrific.' Beyond the subjective world and the objective earth, 'the Planet can thus be described as impersonal and anonymous.' This is perhaps why pessimistic antinatalism provokes such horror as an imagined response to overpopulation; imagining the possibility of human extinction confronts thinking with its own impossibility, it paradoxically thinks the unthinkable. Cosmic pessimism is thus 'the impossible thought of extinction, with not even a single human being to think the absence of human beings, with no thought to think the negation of all thought.'⁵⁴

But this panic and horror have important consequences in thinking antinatalism and overpopulation otherwise. I am tempted to think here of Blanchot's 'question panique,' which 'questions everything by way of what would be outside of everything, questioning the "world" by way of a "non-world" where the question no longer has a question's value, dignity, or power.' Indeed, something within the panic question necessarily exceeds the power to question, 'the question as the impossibility of questioning. In the profound question, impossibility questions.'⁵⁵ It is important here to recall that deconstruction, for Derrida, is precisely an experience of the impossible, and the impossibility of thinking the world-without-us is precisely what thought must confront in asking if it is ecologically just to be. It is also, as is the main philosophical move of this paper, what inscribes the convertibility of pessimistic antinatalist responses to overpopulation into the space of the arche-ethical. The thought of the world-without-us in this eco-deconstructive sense thus allows us to bypass the discussions of 'value' which preoccupy many responses to environmental ethics in the traditions of analytic philosophy; which kind of living being has value and which does not—how far ought we extend moral

considerability, since these often entail the extension (or refusal) of a anthropocentric thinking of value. The Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT) takes a stand against such a view;

a human-centered world view only values other species by what they can do for us, or for “our children’s children.” We’re collectively so centered on our own species that nothing matters except in relation to ourselves. By envisioning Earth’s entire biosphere, acknowledging the intrinsic value of every life form, our voluntary extinction begins to make sense.⁵⁶

This is not to side with Ligotti’s thought of ‘a world that is **MALIGNANTLY USELESS**,’ but VHEMT’s position allows us to bypass the alleged valueless-ness of a world without humans, as Benatar explains, ‘the popular concern about animal extinction is usually concern for humans — that we shall live in a world impoverished by the loss of one aspect of faunal diversity, that we shall no longer be able to behold or use that species of animal.’⁵⁷ In fact, this thought of the world-without-us might allow us to invert and reinscribe the logic of human sovereignty at work in antinatalist pessimist discourses on overpopulation.

But let’s examine this logic in a little more detail. For Ligotti and Zapffe the answer to overpopulation and the dread of being is clear: *we must stop reproducing*. Ligotti quotes an untranslated interview of Zapffe’s:

“the sooner humanity dares to harmonise itself with its biological predicament, the better. And this means to willingly withdraw in contempt for its worldly terms, just as the heat-craving species went extinct when temperatures dropped. To us, it is the moral climate of the cosmos that is intolerable, and a two-child policy could make our discontinuance a pain-free one.”

The logistics and feasibility of such a coercive policy notwithstanding, Ligotti’s more pessimistic position is that there has never been nor will there ever be a good time to produce children, since life on this viewpoint is not something that should be. Ligotti remains unequivocal with respect to whether the horror of being, what we called a

mē-ontology, is the exclusive property of the human. Early in his book, he instantiates this dubious view with the following:

whether or not one agrees that there is a “brotherhood of suffering between everything alive,” we can *all* agree that humans are the *only* organisms that can have such a conception of existence, *or any conception period*. That we can conceive of the phenomenon of suffering, of our own as well as that of other organisms, is a property *unique* to us as a dangerously conscious species. . . for *the rest of the earth’s organisms*, existence is relatively uncomplicated. Their lives are about three things: survival, reproduction, death — *and nothing else*. But we know too much to content ourselves with surviving, reproducing, dying — and nothing else. . . Nonhuman occupants of this planet are *unaware of death*. But *we* are susceptible to startling and dreadful thoughts, and we need some fabulous illusions to take our minds off them.⁵⁸

As Derrida put it to François Jacob in *La Vie la mort*, ‘*Pas un mot de rigoureux dans aucun de ces énoncés* [not a rigorous word in any of these statements].’⁵⁹ This logic continues to play itself out in his text; ‘human beings would certainly not be the first phenomenon to go belly up. But we could be the first to precipitate our own passing, abbreviating it before the bodies really started to stack up.’⁶⁰ (Although, he writes below, ‘no species has given in to pain to the point of giving up its existence, *so far as we know*.’) Later, Ligotti precisely positions himself against Zapffe’s own ‘biosophy’ and environmentalism; a concern for the well-being of the earth and its organisms is rather an ‘act of conspiring to build barricades against the repugnant facts of life by signing on to a cause (in this case that of environmentalism) that snubs the real issue. Vandalism of the environment is but a sidebar to humanity’s refusal to look into the jaws of existence.’ *In truth*, Ligotti continues, humans have one foot in the natural environment and one in ‘other worlds,’ while a few paragraphs later claiming that ‘a world where all organisms are inevitably pushed by pain throughout their lives to do that which will improve their chances to survive and create more of themselves,’ a drive which left unchecked would persist to the last living cell, is not a planet that should be conserved. Ligotti’s suggestion that humans ought to blow up the earth should

they make it to outer space — ‘may it perish along with every other living thing it has introduced to pain’ — might seem like a bit of cartoonish supervillainy, were it not so close to the ‘bombs-not-food’ discourse of early approaches to the overpopulation question.⁶¹ As Garrett Hardin writes in 1970; ‘we send food out of compassion; but if we desired to increase the misery in an overpopulated nation, could we find a more effective way for doing so? Atomic bombs would be kinder.’⁶²

David Benatar’s work, on the other hand, invites us to consider extinction and overpopulation together in a different way. For this author, coming into existence is always a serious harm, and the resulting implication is that we ought not create future people. The ideal human population of the earth is zero, he writes, and while the process of human extinction may be regrettable, it would be better in the long run if there were no more conscious life on Earth. There is an interesting qualification of Benatar’s work that, as a fellow vegan, I feel merits addressing. His argument that most lives are so bad that never coming into existence in the first place is preferable applies to all sentient beings, which ‘do not simply exist. They exist in a way that there is something that it feels like to exist. In other words, they are not merely objects but also subjects.’ Such subjects-of-a-life, as those familiar with environmental ethics in the traditions of analytic philosophy will recognise them, are able to experience *unpleasantness*, which occupies the majority of their lives. But humans, unlike other sentient creatures, can *act* on the harm of coming into existence by ceasing to procreate. Likewise, humans ought also to desist from the breeding of certain sentient animals by the billions who suffer excruciatingly in factory farms before being killed for human consumption. Moreover, ‘there is the suffering inflicted on those animals whose habitat is destroyed by encroaching humans, the suffering caused to animals by pollution and other environmental degradation, and the gratuitous suffering inflicted out of pure malice.’ But when Benatar turns to Schopenhauer, citing “‘life as an unprofitable episode, disturbing the blessed calm of non-existence,’” the unequivocal amount of suffering in the world ‘becomes still more obscene when we consider the suffering of the trillions of animals who share our planet.’ When he addresses the question of environmentalism with respect to overpopulation and extinction,

Benatar argues that one person would constitute overpopulation, 'not because there would have been too many people for the earth, or too many people to be sustained by the earth. Instead, it is because coming into existence is always a serious harm — and one such serious harm would have been one too many.' In fact, Benatar suggests that while this argument appears to have pessimistic or misanthropic overtones, its overall thrust is actually philanthropic, indeed biophilic, and we can even read Levinas's fear for the other here. 'To argue against the infliction of harm arises from concern for, not dislike of, those who would be harmed,' a concern that includes all sentient beings.⁶³ So I think he shares my concern in asking if it is ecologically just to be.

Extinction, for Benatar, can come about in one of two ways; a killing extinction and a dying extinction, active or passive. The two, he writes, can overlap, but there is a moral difference between killing and dying, since killing cuts lives short while dying does not, and it is worse to die earlier than one needs to (although no one is harmed at all by not coming into being). When it comes to organisations championing human extinction for ecological ends, at its most extreme, the active, killing extinction can be seen in ones like the Church of Euthanasia, with its slogan 'save the planet, kill yourself,' or the Gaia Liberation Front. VHEMT, on the other hand, and its slogan 'may we live long and die out,' seems to occupy the opposite end of the spectrum; the 'voluntary' in its title takes a stand against coerced antinatalist policies. But is the ethical distinction between making and letting so clear cut? And what of that between the passive extinction of the last man and the active destruction of the overman that Deleuze reads in Nietzsche? Derrida asks something similar in the second year of *The Death Penalty* seminars (2015), with radically difficult implications for thinking overpopulation. 'Is it an act, is it to act or not to act to let millions of people die of hunger or of disease (for example AIDS). . . Do I make die wherever I let die?' Derrida, rather, intends to inquire into that which, 'before what distinguishes the act of giving death in general (to a living being in general, from homicide to zoo- or biocide in general, to giving-death to the other or to oneself, in the alleged suicide of the living being called animal or called human),' makes the desire and the will of putting to death intolerable. Intolerable, he writes, so as to mark an undecidability between, on the one hand, the impossible,

and on the other hand an ethico-juridico-political inadmissibility or unjustifiability, between two senses of the world 'just.'

It's because the death that one makes or that one lets come, thus, is not the end of this or that, of this being or that being, of someone or something *in the world*. Everytime it dies [*Chaque fois que ça meurt*], it's the end of the world. Not of a world but of the world, of the whole of the world, of the infinite opening of the world. And this is the case for every living being: from the tree to the protozoa, from the mosquito to the human, death is infinite; it is the end of the infinite. The finite of the infinite. . . The infinite makes itself finite, it comes to an end. It's an end of the world that is without equivalent, that has so little equivalent that, with regard to the death of the least living being, the absolute end of the world or, if you prefer, the singular destruction of the earth and of earthly humanity changes nothing, makes not the least bit of difference, remains in any case incommensurable.

The panic question lies within this incommensurability, the impossibility (or an impossibility irreducible to the opposition of possibility and impossibility) of the end of the world; 'Who will ever dare compare and mark a preference among several deaths, among several modalities, several ages for dying, given that with every dying comes the end of the world?' How can one calculate an *over-* to population if each life is both the birth and death of the world? How many ends of *the* world has my being alive precipitated, and how to make sense of this question? The intolerable and the unthinkable here, the only thing worthy of being thought, and which always remains to be thought, is 'the end of the world and the fact that this end remains always imminent.'⁶⁴

III Postscript, to Living Together, Well

Eco-deconstruction cannot tell us what to do about overpopulation as the prescription of a rule; it cannot tell us exactly how much is too much, it cannot deploy a program of antinatalist policies. But it forces the necessary calculation of what counts as *over* to take into account the incalculable element of justice, absolute weakness and the suspension of relations of force beyond human sovereignty. If Schopenhauer's

will and Freud's death drive seem to work together in conceiving of overpopulation and its responses as constituted within a differential of forces, one precluding any political resolution, Derrida allows us to think this impossibility differently. Not, however, towards an organic, symbiotic, or restricted-ecological 'solution' to overpopulation. Rather, it only responds to the questions 'is it ecologically just to be?' and 'how to live together well?' in a manner that would have to be as foreign to the organic as it would to the technological, the human and the nonhuman.

"Living-together" cannot be reduced either to organic symbiosis or to the juridico-political contract. Neither to 'life' according to nature or birth, blood or soil, nor to life according to the convention, contract or institution. . . This excess with regard to the laws of nature as well as the laws of culture is always an excess with regard to the whole, and I do not take its difficulty lightly. It is almost unthinkable, quite near to impossibility, in fact [*justement*].⁶⁵

A deconstructive reading of the question 'is it ecologically just to be' allows for a certain interruption of being; I am called upon by the singular other to justify my place in the sun, my usurpation of the Earth from its others. But it also interrupts the logic by which any general ethico-politico-juridical program, law, or policy could claim itself to be just once and for all in responding to it. This is not to relapse into any quietism, but rather demands that we urgently and constantly negotiate the ecological justice of being in addressing overpopulation, inventing new responses, each time uniquely, impossibly attentive to the general repetition of the each time and the singularity of the unique event, in order to learn to live better with the ghosts of ecological injustice, those past and those to come, and to mourn them more justly. But one can only prepare a place for the invention of other responses to overpopulation from within the violence of being, from within life; indeed, even the wish to have never been born 'either makes no sense or has only a secondary or second, belated, derived sense with regard to this intimate love of life that is attached to itself for itself. Like the radical impossibility of suicide, if not of the suicide effect.'⁶⁶ And only then can one invert and reinscribe pessimistic, antinatalist responses to overpopulation and the horror of being into a difficult, vexed, and

always negotiated affirmation of life and of sharing the earth with its others.

Notes

- ¹ Peter Wessel Zapffe, 'The Last Messiah,' *Janus* 9 (1933). https://philosophynow.org/issues/45/The_Last_Messiah, consulted 15 February 2016, 1:42 p.m.
- ² Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, translated by Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1988), 78.
- ³ 'The Long Bright Dark.' *True Detective, Season 1*. Nic Pizzolatto. HBO, 2014.
- ⁴ *Eco-Deconstruction: Derrida and Environmental Philosophy*, edited by Matthias Fritsch, Philippe Lynes, and David Wood, currently under review by Fordham University Press.
- ⁵ Translated in English as *Is it Righteous to Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, edited by Jill Robbins (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002), I prefer 'just' in rendering *juste*, however, especially given the long history of deconstruction and the possibility of justice, along with the fact that I have considerable difficulty imagining Derrida use the term 'righteous' in his own name. This interview is taken from Levinas's final work, *Alterity and Transcendence*, translated by Michael B. Smith (London, the Athlone Press, 1999). It will be precisely a question of negotiating two senses of 'just,' 'on the one hand the relation to the absolute singularity of the other; and already in the experience of this singularity, a universality, a comparison, a third.' Jacques Derrida, 'Autour des écrits de Jacques Derrida sur l'argent' in Marcel Drach, *L'Argent*. (Paris, La Découverte, 2004), 225. Translation mine. See also *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999). Indeed, overpopulation might be represented as a situation of too many 'thirds' originarily interrupting the demand for justice in the face-to-face ethical relation, were it not the case that even a single third also submits this incalculable demand to some negotiation.
- ⁶ *Is it Righteous to Be?*, 225.
- ⁷ Thomas Ligotti, *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race: A Contrivance of Horror* (New York, Hippocampus Press, 2010); David Benatar, *Better Never to have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006); Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of this Planet: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 1* (Winchester, Zero Books, 2011).
- ⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000), 196.

- ⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Séminaire La peine de mort*, Volume 2, 2000–2001 (Paris, Galilée, 2015), 114. I am grateful to the editors at the *Oxford Literary Review* for providing me with Elizabeth Rottenberg's translations from the forthcoming English edition.
- ¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview*, translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Hoboken, Melville House Publishing, 2007), 25.
- ¹¹ *Is it Righteous to Be*, 225.
- ¹² Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013), 59. Wolfe puts forth some fascinating readings of the work of Roberto Esposito in this discussion. Indeed, Esposito refers to his own philosophy as 'affirmative biopolitics.' However, I think reading Esposito's work on Deleuze, Canguilhem and Simondon through his earlier readings of Bataille and Blanchot point to a wholly other logic I've referred to elsewhere as a biopolitics of double affirmation.
- ¹³ *Alterity and Transcendence*, 165.
- ¹⁴ See especially 'But as for me, who am I?' in Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that I Therefore Am*, translated by David Wills (New York, Fordham University Press, 2008).
- ¹⁵ *Alterity and Transcendence*, 159–60, 160–1, 29.
- ¹⁶ *Séminaire: La Peine de Mort*, Volume 2, 299. As he writes, 'we discussed this several years ago with respect to forgiveness—as to whether there is not a feeling or manifestation of shame in certain animals,' returning to this the following year in the first year of *The Beast & the Sovereign Volume I*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009), 308; 'I remember too that in the intervening seminar on the pardon [1997–99] the question was asked whether certain animals could feel guilty or be in mourning, if they were sensitive to shame and had any culpability of repentance and of asking pardon (a question to which we answered 'yes').' An editorial note in Volume II of the death penalty remarks that the editors have been unable to locate the exact year and section Derrida is referring to here.
- ¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*, translated by David Wills (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008), 71.
- ¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Le Dernier des Juifs* (Paris, Galilée, 2014), 59–60. All translations of this text mine.
- ¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (New York, Routledge, 2006), 19.
- ²⁰ *Le Dernier des Juifs*, 61, 29.
- ²¹ It would be fascinating to study the history of thinking time *hors ses gonds* (often translated as 'unhinged' rather than 'out of joint') in the history of French

philosophy, beginning with Bataille's *Inner Experience*, 74. Levinas's *Existence and Existence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1978), 37; Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton (New York, Columbia University Press, 1994), 88; and *Spectres of Marx*, *passim*.

- ²² See Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987), 355 on all three. 'To Speculate on Freud,' from which these quotations are drawn, initially constituted the final four sessions of his seminar *La Vie la mort*. 'This death is inscribed as an internal law, and not as an accident of life (what we had called the law of supplementarity in the margins of *The Logic of the Living*). It is life that resembles an accident of death or an excess of death, in the extent to which it "dies for internal reasons" (*aus inneren Gründen*). We had located that text of Nietzsche's which said that life is a very rare species of death.' See also Jacob's conclusion to *The Logic of Life: A History of Heredity*, translated by Betty E. Spillmann (New York, Pantheon Books, 1973), and note the similarities with Cohle's monologue. As Jacob writes, natural selection no longer plays the central role in human evolution. 'With the accumulation of knowledge, man has become the first product of evolution capable of controlling evolution. Not only the evolution of others, by encouraging species of interest to him and eliminating bothersome ones, but also his own evolution. Perhaps one day it will become possible to intervene in the execution of the genetic programme, or even in its structure, to correct some faults and slip in supplementary instructions.' *The Logic of Life*, 322.

- ²³ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation Volume 1*, translated by E.F.J. Payne (New York, Dover, 1969), 350.

- ²⁴ Roberto Esposito, *Third Person*, translated by Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge, Polity, 2012), 26.

- ²⁵ *The Post Card*, 268.

- ²⁶ I devote my essay in *Eco-Deconstruction*, as well as the first four chapters of my dissertation, *General Ecology: Life-Death on Earth in Derrida and Others* to this demonstration.

- ²⁷ A note on carno-*phallo*-gocentrism in antinatalist pessimism: Rust Cohle's own concluding alternative to his pessimism in the last episode of *True Detective* reflects precisely an oceanic disappearing in the death drive following his near-death experience in Carcosa. Cohle speaks of feeling his definitions fading as he fuses into a dark, warm substance with his loved ones, 'it was like I was a part of everything that I ever loved (...) just — just fadin' out.' 'Form and Void.' *True Detective*. Nic Pizzolatto. HBO, 2014. Those critical of the misogyny of *True Detective* (a claim which I, for my part, can't entirely back, although I think a discussion of its event

and its oscillation between the constative and the performative is warranted) could note much clearer misogynistic aspects in anti-natalist pessimism; Peter Wessel Zapffe, to whom we will soon turn, is disdainful of the sobbing of women as a repressive distraction from the dread of being; ‘women, in general less cognition-prone and hence more secure in their living than men, preferably use distraction,’ and later speaks of ‘the “martyrdom” of lonely ladies.’ Even Zapffe’s point about “the brotherhood of suffering between everything alive” could be submitted to the deconstruction of fraternity undertaken by Derrida in *Politics of Friendship*, translated by George Collins (London, Verso, 2005) (and even Cohle mentions sisters in dropping out of the raw deal of human existence). One could also engage a comparative study of David Benatar’s *Better Never to have Been* with his more recent *The Second Sexism: Discrimination against Men and Boys* (Hoboken, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012). In fact, eco-feminist discourse has long challenged the oceanic dissolution of boundaries in holistic frameworks such as deep ecology, one it identifies as specifically male-based. As more recent Deep Ecologists have proposed, however, deep ecology and ecofeminism can come together in addressing overpopulation by championing reproductive freedom and fostering the provision of and access to safe and legal abortions. For my part, I think a feminist ethics of care positioned in contrast to a right to life is about as close to my concluding position on overpopulation as anything else.

²⁸ Derrida, *Singsponge/Signéponge*, translated by Richard Rand (New York, Columbia, 1984), 32/33.

²⁹ *Politics of Friendship* (London, Verso, 2005), 135 n 17. See also Elisabeth Roudinesco’s question on this fable in *For What Tomorrow... A Dialogue*, translated by Jeff Fort (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004), 8.

³⁰ This is in the ‘population shaming’ section of her article, ‘Too Many Bodies.’ *Environmental Politics* 22:2 (2013), 195–215. Citing Hardt and Negri’s indebtedness to Foucault, ‘who explains that treating population as a matrix of different races permits the state to kill others as a condition of making life healthier,’ (201) their argument is certainly a legitimate response to discussions of overpopulation in the 1970s. But see a conflicting, Malthusian discussion of political economy in Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, (London, Routledge, 2005), 279–80.

³¹ I’m harshly excising and altering these sentences from their contexts, leaving their authors unnamed so as to not single anyone out in what I am calling ‘affirmative biopolitics’ or the ‘affirmative turn to life’ here. I don’t do this to situate such arguments as strawmen, but rather to signal an interpretive current in contemporary thought I see as incompatible, or at least very difficult to

reconcile with the sorts of issues I'm interested in discussing here. For more on the 'affirmative turn to life,' see *Before the Law*, 63.

³² Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993), 38, 39–40.

³³ Roberto Esposito, *Categories of the Impolitical*, translated by Connal Parsley (New York, Fordham University Press, 2015), 113. Even further impossible if we follow Derrida in reading the logic of living-on or survivance as originary.

³⁴ *Categories of the Impolitical*, 126. In these eco-heliotropics, where, as we quoted in Levinas and Pascal, my place in the sun evokes the horror of the ego of the usurpation of the earth, and as per the death drive, 'the "external" force which disturbs the immanent tendency, and which in a way produces the entire history of a life that does nothing other than repeat itself and regress, is what is usually called nature, the system of the earth and the sun.' *The Post Card*, 354.

³⁵ *Alterity and Transcendence*, 23. See also the conclusion of Esposito's reading of Canetti; "in this kingdom, you must keep quite still. You cannot leave room for any kind of desire: not even the desire to ask questions... It seemed to her that walls and columns retreated to the side within her, and that the world was entering her eyes the way tears do." (*Categories of the Impolitical*, 126–127.) And if this pain is the earth's collective pain, to evoke Zapffe, we can return to Levinas, who writes in the face of all the horrors caused by humans, a goodness might define '*ce qu'il y a de plus humain en l'homme*,' (the English translation, 'the most human thing there is in man' does not capture this ambiguity), both more and no-more-than-human, we might read these tears on the face of the earth itself, 'it defines man, despite its powerlessness (...) "It is beautiful and powerless, like the dew."' *Alterity and Transcendence*, 109.

³⁶ Nietzsche recalls an ancient legend according to which King Midas attempts to capture wise Silenus, and when he eventually does, asks what is best for humans. Silenus breaks out into laughter; 'wretched, ephemeral race, children of chance and tribulation, why do you force me to tell you the very thing which it would be most profitable for you not to hear? The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach *not to have been born, not to be, to be nothing*, however, the second best thing for you is *to die soon*.' Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, translated by Ronald Speirs (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), 23.

³⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson (New York, Columbia University Press, 2006), 5, 19, 174. Deleuze's work is also often invoked in discussions of affirmative biopolitics, but such readings bypass extremely important reflections on passivity, powerlessness, exteriority, and death.

- ³⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York, Random House, 1968) 365, 364, 365. Emphasis added.
- ³⁹ Georges Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, translated by Bruce Boone (London, Continuum, 2008), xxviii.
- ⁴⁰ Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews 1971–2001*, translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002), 35–6.
- ⁴¹ *Drach*, ‘Autour des écrits de Jacques Derrida sur l’argent,’ 232.
- ⁴² *Negotiations*, 226. Emphasis added
- ⁴³ *The Post Card*, 408.
- ⁴⁴ David R. Keller, ed. *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions*. (West Sussex, Wiley-Blackell, 2010)
- ⁴⁵ Andrew McLaughlin, ‘The Heart of Deep Ecology,’ in *Environmental Ethics*, 236.
- ⁴⁶ Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*, translated by David Rothenberg (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 127.
- ⁴⁷ “The Last Messiah,” §§ V, II.
- ⁴⁸ This theory was in fact confirmed by Stephen J. Gould in ‘The Origin and Function of “Bizarre” Structures: Antler Size and Skull Size in the “Irish Elk,” *Megaloceros giganteus*.’ *Evolution* 28:2, 191.
- ⁴⁹ “The Last Messiah,” § III.
- ⁵⁰ *The Birth of Tragedy*, 85. Schopenhauerian/Freudian repression is also present in Zapffe’s work, where the feeling of cosmic panic can be cast aside in certain stances through artistic sublimation; ‘the author does not suffer, he is filling pages and is going to be published in a journal.’} ‘The Last Messiah,’ §III
- ⁵¹ *The World as Will and Representation Volume 1*, 350.
- ⁵² Michel Foucault, “*Society Must be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–6*, translated by David Macey (New York, Picador, 2003), 244. Translation modified.
- ⁵³ *Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, 54.
- ⁵⁴ *In the Dust of this Planet*, 6, 7, 17.
- ⁵⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, translated by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 19, 20.
- ⁵⁶ www.vhemt.org/philrel.htm, consulted 15 February 2016, 1:52 p.m.
- ⁵⁷ *Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, 76; *Better Never to have Been*, 197 n 56.
- ⁵⁸ *Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, 29, 27–8. Emphasis mine.
- ⁵⁹ Jacques Derrida papers. MS-C001. Special Collections and Archives, The UC Irvine Libraries, Irvine, California. Box 12, folder 10–19; *La Vie La Mort (1974–5)*, session 5, page 13.

- ⁶⁰ Again, note the similarities with our citation of Jacob's *The Logic of Life* above on changing our programming in note 22 above.
- ⁶¹ *Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, 52, 80, 78, 79, 80. On the subject of this supervillainy, Ligotti recalls a suggestion made by H.P. Lovecraft to a friend in writing a villain "with a morbid, frantic, shuddering hatred of the life-principle itself, who wishes to extirpate from the planet every trace of biological organism, animal and vegetable alike, including himself." *Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, 59.
- ⁶² Garrett Hardin, "The Immorality of Being Softhearted," in *Environmental Ethics*, 441.
- ⁶³ *Better Never to have Been*, 2, 224, 60, 89, 166–7, 223.
- ⁶⁴ *Séminaire La peine de mort*, Volume 2, 113, 118, 118–9, 120.
- ⁶⁵ *Le Dernier des Juifs*, 34–5.
- ⁶⁶ *Séminaire: La Peine de Mort*, Volume 2, 121.