An Argument for the Global Suicide of Humanity

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The animal rights movement, both as an activist social movement and as a philosophical-moral movement, has introduced a Copernican revolution into Western moral discourse. More specifically, it has removed humanity from the centre of moral discourse and has placed alongside humans other, non-human, sentient beings. The environmental movement has further widened this moral discourse by emphasising a moral responsibility of care for the natural environment as a whole. Each of these movements has developed in response to humanity's violent treatment of other sentient beings and humanity's pollution and destruction of the earth's ecology and stratosphere. Whether the environmental destruction set in place by humans can be halted or reversed remains a pressing and open question. This paper argues that the efforts of governments and environmental bodies to prevent environmental catastrophe will not succeed if such actors continue to be guided by a general modern idea of technological and social progress and an attitude of 'speciesism'. From the standpoint of a dialectical, utopian anti-humanism, this paper sets out, as a thought experiment, the possibility of humanity's willing extinction as a solution to a growing ecological problem.

Introduction

In 2006 on an Internet forum called *Yahoo! Answers* a question was posted which read: "In a world that is in chaos politically, socially and environmentally, how can the human race sustain another 100 years?" The question was asked by prominent physicist Stephen Hawking (Hawking, 2007a). While Hawking claimed not to know 'the solution' he did suggest something of an answer (Hawking, 2007b). For Hawking the only way for the human race to survive in the future

is to develop the technologies that would allow humans to colonise other planets in space beyond our own solar system. While Hawking's claim walks a path often trodden by science fiction, his suggestion is not untypical of the way humans have historically responded to social, material and environmental pressures and crises. By coupling an imagination of a new world or a better place with the production and harnessing of new technologies, humans have for a long time left old habitats and have created a home in others. The history of our species, *homo sapiens*, is marked by population movement aided by technological innovation: when life becomes too precarious in one habitat, members of the species take a risk and move to a new one.

Along with his call for us to go forward and colonise other planets, Hawking does list a number of the human actions which have made this seem necessary. [1] What is at issue, however, is his failure to reflect upon the relationship between environmental destruction, scientific faith in the powers of technology and the attitude of speciesism. That is, it must be asked whether population movement really is the answer. After all, Hawking's suggestion to colonise other planets does little to address the central problem of human action which has destroyed, and continues to destroy, our habitat on the earth. While the notion of cosmic colonisation places faith in the saviour of humanity by technology as a solution, it lacks a crucial moment of reflection upon the manner in which human action and human technology has been and continues to be profoundly destructive. Indeed, the colonisation of other planets would in no way solve the problem of environmental destruction; rather, it would merely introduce this problem into a new habitat. The destruction of one planetary habitat is enough – we should not naively endorse the future destruction of others.

Hawking's approach to environmental catastrophe is an example of a certain modern faith in technological and social progress. One version of such an approach goes as follows: As our knowledge of the world and ourselves increases humans are able to create forms of technology and social organisation that act upon the world and change it for our benefit. However, just as there are many theories of 'progress' [2] there are also many modes of reflection upon the role of human action and its relationship to negative or destructive consequences. The version of progress enunciated in Hawking's story of cosmic colonisation presents a view whereby the solution to the negative consequences of technological action is to create new forms of technology, new forms of *action*. New action and innovation solve the dilemmas and consequences of previous action. Indeed, the very act of moving away, or rather evacuating, an ecologically devastated Earth is an example at hand. Such an approach involves a moment of reflection – previous errors and consequences are examined and taken into account and efforts are made to make things better. The idea of a better future informs reflection, technological innovation and action.

However, is the form of reflection offered by Hawking broad or critical enough? Does his mode of reflection pay enough attention to the irredeemable moments of destruction, harm, pain and suffering inflicted historically by human action upon the non-human world? There are, after all, a variety of negative consequences of human action, moments of destruction, moments of suffering, which may not be redeemable or ever made better. Conversely there are a number of conceptions of the good in which humans do not take centre stage at the expense of others. What we try to do in this paper is to draw out some of the consequences of reflecting more broadly upon the negative costs of human activity in the context of environmental catastrophe. This involves re-thinking a general idea of progress through the historical and conceptual lenses of speciesism, colonialism, survival and complicity. Our proposed conclusion is that the only appropriate moral response to a history of human destructive action is to give up our claims to biological supremacy and to sacrifice our form of life so as to give an eternal gift to others.

From the outset it is important to make clear that the argument for the global suicide of humanity is presented as a thought experiment. The purpose of such a proposal in response to Hawking is to help show how a certain conception of modernity, of which his approach is representative, is problematic. Taking seriously the idea of global suicide is one way of throwing into question an ideology or dominant discourse of modernist-humanist action. [3] By imagining an alternative to the existing state of affairs, absurd as it may seem to some readers by its nihilistic and radical 'solution', we wish to open up a ground for a critical discussion of modernity and its negative impacts on both human and non-human animals, as well as on the environment. [4] In this respect, by giving voice to the idea of a human-free world, we attempt to draw attention to some of the asymmetries of environmental reality and to give cause to question why attempts to build bridges from the human to the non-human have, so far, been unavailing.

Subjects of ethical discourse

One dominant presumption that underlies many modern scientific and political attitudes towards technology and creative human action is that of 'speciesism', which can itself be called a 'human-centric' view or attitude. The term 'speciesism', coined by psychologist Richard D. Ryder and later elaborated into a comprehensive ethics by Peter Singer (1975), refers to the attitude by which humans value their species above both non-human animals and plant life. Quite typically humans conceive non-human animals and plant life as something which might simply be used for their benefit. Indeed, this conception can be traced back to, among others, Augustine (1998, p.33). While many modern, 'enlightened' humans generally abhor racism, believe in the equality of all humans, condemn slavery and find cannibalism and human sacrifice repugnant, many still think and act in ways that are profoundly 'speciesist'. Most individuals may not even be

conscious that they hold such an attitude, or many would simply assume that their attitude falls within the 'natural order of things'. Such an attitude thus resides deeply within modern human ethical customs and rationales and plays a profound role in the way in which humans interact with their environment.

The possibility of the destruction of our habitable environment on earth through global warming and Hawking's suggestion that we respond by colonising other planets forces us to ask a serious question about how we value human life in relation to our environment. The use of the term 'colonisation' is significant here as it draws to mind the recent history of the colonisation of much of the globe by white, European peoples. Such actions were often justified by valuing European civilisation higher than civilisations of non-white peoples, especially that of indigenous peoples. For scholars such as Edward Said (1978), however, the practice of colonialism is intimately bound up with racism. That is, colonisation is often justified, legitimated and driven by a view in which the right to possess territory and govern human life is grounded upon an assumption of racial superiority. If we were to colonise other planets, what form of 'racism' would underlie our actions? What higher value would we place upon human life, upon the human race, at the expense of other forms of life which would justify our taking over a new habitat and altering it to suit our prosperity and desired living conditions?

Generally, the animal rights movement responds to the ongoing colonisation of animal habitats by humans by asking whether the modern Western subject should indeed be the central focus of its ethical discourse. In saying 'x harms y', animal rights philosophers wish to incorporate in 'y' non-human animals. That is, they enlarge the group of subjects to which ethical relations apply. In this sense such thinking does not greatly depart from any school of modern ethics, but simply extends ethical duties and obligations to non-human animals. In eco-ethics, on the other hand, the role of the subject and its relation to ethics is treated a little differently. The less radical environmentalists talk about future human generations so, according to this approach, 'y' includes a projection into the future to encompass the welfare of hitherto non-existent beings. Such an approach is prevalent in the Green Party in Germany, whose slogan is "Now. For tomorrow".

For others, such as the 'deep ecology' movement, the subject is expanded so that it may include the environment as a whole. In this instance, according to Naess, 'life' is not to be understood in "a biologically narrow sense". Rather he argues that the term 'life' should be used in a comprehensive non-technical way such that it refers also to things biologists may classify as non-living. This would include rivers, landscapes, cultures, and ecosystems, all understood as "the living earth" (Naess, 1989, p.29). From this perspective the statement 'x harms y' renders 'y' somewhat vague. What occurs is not so much a conflict over the degree of ethical commitment, between "shallow"

and "deep ecology" or between "light" and "dark greens" per se, but rather a broader re-drawing of the content of the subject of Western philosophical discourse and its re-definition as 'life'. Such a position involves differing metaphysical commitments to the notions of being, intelligence and moral activity.

This blurring and re-defining of the subject of moral discourse can be found in other ecocentric writings (e.g. Lovelock, 1979; Eckersley, 1992) and in other philosophical approaches. [5] In part our approach bears some similarity with these 'holistic' approaches in that we share dissatisfaction with the modern, Western view of the 'subject' as purely human-centric. Further, we share some of their criticism of bourgeois green lifestyles. However, our approach is to stay partly within the position of the modern, Western human-centric view of the subject and to question what happens to it in the field of moral action when environmental catastrophe demands the radical extension of ethical obligations to non-human beings. That is, if we stick with the modern humanist subject of moral action, and follow seriously the extension of ethical obligations to non-human beings, then we would suggest that what we find is that the utopian demand of modern humanism turns over into a utopian anti-humanism, with suicide as its outcome. One way of attempting to re-think the modern subject is thus to throw the issue of suicide right in at the beginning and acknowledge its position in modern ethical thought. This would be to recognise that the question of suicide resides at the center of moral thought, already.

What survives when humans no longer exist?

There continues to be a debate over the extent to which humans have caused environmental problems such as global warming (as opposed to natural, cyclical theories of the earth's temperature change) and over whether phenomena such as global warming can be halted or reversed. Our position is that regardless of where one stands within these debates it is clear that humans have inflicted degrees of harm upon non-human animals and the natural environment. And from this point we suggest that it is the operation of *speciesism as colonialism* which must be addressed. One approach is of course to adopt the approach taken by Singer and many within the animal rights movement and remove our species, *homo sapiens*, from the centre of all moral discourse. Such an approach would thereby take into account not only human life, but also the lives of other species, to the extent that the living environment as a whole can come to be considered the proper subject of morality. We would suggest, however, that this philosophical approach can be taken a number of steps further. If the standpoint that we have a moral responsibility towards the environment in which all sentient creatures live is to be taken seriously, then we perhaps have reason to question whether there remains any strong ethical grounds to justify the further existence of humanity.

For example, if one considers the modern scientific practice of experimenting on animals, both the notions of progress and speciesism are implicitly drawn upon within the moral reasoning of scientists in their justification of committing violence against non-human animals. The typical line of thinking here is that because animals are valued less than humans they can be sacrificed for the purpose of expanding scientific knowledge focussed upon improving human life. Certainly some within the scientific community, such as physiologist Colin Blakemore, contest aspects of this claim and argue that experimentation on animals is beneficial to both human and non-human animals (e.g. Grasson, 2000, p.30). Such claims are 'disingenuous', however, in that they hide the relative distinctions of value that underlie a moral justification for sacrifice within the practice of experimentation (cf. LaFollette & Shanks, 1997, p.255). If there is a benefit to non-human animals this is only incidental, what remains central is a practice of sacrificing the lives of other species for the benefit of humans. Rather than reject this common reasoning of modern science we argue that it should be reconsidered upon the basis of species equality. That is, modern science needs to ask the question of: 'Who' is the best candidate for 'sacrifice' for the good of the environment and all species concerned? The moral response to the violence, suffering and damage humans have inflicted upon this earth and its inhabitants might then be to argue for the sacrifice of the human species. The moral act would be the global suicide of humanity.

This notion of global human suicide clearly goes against commonly celebrated and deeply held views of the inherent value of humanity and perhaps contradicts an instinctive or biological desire for survival. Indeed the picture painted by Hawking presents a modern humanity which, through its own intellectual, technical and moral action, colonises another planet or finds some other way to survive. His idea is driven by the desire for the modern 'human', as we know it, to survive. Yet, what exact aspect of our species would survive, let alone progress, in such a future? In the example of the colonisation of another planet, would human survival be merely genetic or would it also be cultural? Further, even if we can pinpoint what would survive is there a strong moral argument that the human species should survive?

One method of approaching these questions is by considering the hypothetical example of the 'fish people'. Imagine that as a result of global warming sea levels rise to such an extent that the majority of our current terrestrial habitat begins to be covered by water. One consequence is that only species who already live in a watery environment or can adapt to live in water will survive. Scientists respond to this change in habitat by genetically engineering some humans so that they have the capacity to live in water, or, by selecting human candidates who might already have the genetic constitution to survive in water and enhancing their capacity by selective breeding. Within a few generations these new fish people are the only survivors of the species *homo sapiens*. They survive as a new sub-species or

even as a new species. In a general sense one might argue that humanity has successfully adapted to a new environment and has survived. But, how much of what we consider to be 'human' would in such a case survive? In what way are the fish people representatives of 'humanity'?

The example is important because it helps to draw the distinction between the differing notions of the survival of a preferred species and the survival of *life* in general. If the fish people were to mutate via natural selection enhanced by genetic technology into a new species, then while they would share many of their genes with our own species they would also in many ways be radically and fundamentally different. What would over time survive would genetically not be 'us' but something like a genetic cousin, akin perhaps in many ways to our present close genetic cousins, the higher apes – a species with high levels of cognition, degrees of self-awareness and intricate communal forms of behaviour. What investment would we as humans have in the survival of another species which was not our own? If the question of survival is genetic it should not really matter whether the fish people of the future or the apes of the present inherit this earth.

If only some of our genes but not our species has survived, maybe the emphasis we place upon the notion of 'survival' is more cultural than simply genetic. Such an emphasis stems not only from our higher cognitive powers of 'self-consciousness' or self-awareness, but also from our conscious celebration of this fact: the image we create for ourselves of 'humanity', which is produced by via language, collective memory and historical narrative. The notion of the 'human' involves an identification of our species with particular characteristics with and upon which we ascribe certain notions of value. Amongst others such characteristics and values might be seen to include: the notion of an inherent 'human dignity', the virtue of ethical behaviour, the capacities of creative and aesthetic thought, and for some, the notion of an eternal soul. Humans are conscious of themselves as humans and value the characteristics that make us distinctly 'human'.

When many, like Hawing, typically think of the notion of the survival of the human race, it is perhaps this cultural-cognitive aspect of *homo sapiens*, made possible and produced by human self-consciousness, which they are thinking of. If one is to make the normative argument that the human race *should* survive, then one needs to argue it is these cultural-cognitive aspects of humanity, and not merely a portion of our genes, that is worth saving. However, it remains an open question as to what cultural-cognitive aspect of humanity would survive in the future when placed under radical environmental and evolutionary pressures. We can consider that perhaps the fish people, having the capacity for self-awareness, would consider themselves as the continuation or next step of 'humanity'. Yet, who is to say that a leap in the process of evolution would not prompt a change in self awareness, a different form of abstract reasoning about the species, a different self-narrative, in which case the descendents

of humans would look upon their biological and genetic ancestors in a similar manner to the way humans look upon the apes today. Conceivably the fish people might even forget or suppress their evolutionary human heritage. While such a future cannot be predicted, it also cannot be controlled from our graves.

In something of a sense similar to the point made by Giorgio Agamben (1998), revising ideas found within the writings of Michel Foucault and Aristotle, the question of survival can be thought to involve a distinction between the 'good life' and 'bare life'. In this instance, arguments in favour of human survival rest upon a certain belief in a distinctly human good life, as opposed to bare biological life, the life of the gene pool. It is thus such a good life, or at least a form of life considered to be of value, that is held up by a particular species to be worth saving. When considering the hypothetical example of the fish people, what cultural-cognitive aspect of humanity's good life would survive?

The conditions of life under water, which presumably for the first thousand years would be quite harsh, would perhaps make the task of bare survival rather than the continuation of any higher aspects of a 'human heritage' the priority. Learning how to hunt and gather or farm underwater, learning how to communicate, breed effectively and avoid getting eaten by predators might displace the possibilities of listening to Mozart or Bach, or adhering to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or playing sport, or of even using written language or complex mathematics. Within such an extreme example it becomes highly questionable to what extent a 'human heritage' would survive and thus to what extent we might consider our descendents to be 'human'. In the case where what survives would not be the cultural-cognitive aspects of a human heritage considered a valuable or a good form of life, then, what really survives is just *life*. Such a life may well hold a worth or value altogether different to our various historical valuations and calculations.

While the example of the fish people might seem extreme, it presents a similar set of acute circumstances which would be faced within any adaptation to a new habitat whether on the earth or in outer space. Unless humans are saved by radical developments in technology that allow a comfortable colonisation of other worlds, then genetic adaptation in the future retains a reasonable degree of probability. However, even if the promise of technology allows humans to carry on their cultural-cognitive heritage within another habitat, such survival is still perhaps problematic given the dark, violent, cruel and brutal aspects of human life which we would presumably carry with us into our colonisation of new worlds.

Thinkers like Hawking, who place their faith in technology, also place a great deal of faith in a particular view of a human heritage which they think is worth saving. When considering the question of survival, such thinkers typically project a one-sided image of humanity into the

future. Such a view presents a picture of only the good aspects of humanity climbing aboard a space-craft and spreading out over the universe. This presumes that only the 'good aspects' of the human heritage would survive, elements such as 'reason', creativity, playfulness, compassion, love, fortitude, hope. What however happens to the 'bad' aspects of the human heritage, the drives, motivations and thoughts that led to the Holocaust for example?

When thinking about whether the human species is worth saving the naïve view sees these good and bad aspects as distinct. However, when thinking about 'human nature' as a whole, or even the operation of human reason as a characteristic of the Enlightenment and modernity, it is not so easy to draw clear lines of separation. As suggested by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1997), within what they call the 'dialectic of enlightenment', it is sometimes the very things which we draw upon to escape from evil, poverty and harm (reason, science, technology) which bring about a situation which is infinitely more destructive (for example the atom bomb). Indeed, it has often been precisely those actions motivated by a desire to do 'good' that have created profound degrees of destruction and harm. One just has to think of all the genocides, massacres and wars within history justified by moral notions such as 'civilisation', 'progress' and 'freedom', and carried out by numerous peoples acting with misguided, but genuine intentions. When considering whether humanity is worth saving, one cannot turn a blind eye to the violence of human history.

This is not to discount the many 'positive' aspects of the human heritage such as art, medicine, the recognition of individual autonomy and the development of forms of social organisation that promote social welfare. Rather, what we are questioning is whether a holistic view of the human heritage considered in its relation to the natural environment merits the continuation of the human species or not. Far too often the 'positive' aspects of the human heritage are viewed in an abstract way, cut off from humanity's destructive relation with the natural environment. Such an abstract or one-sided picture glorifies and reifies human life and is used as a tool that perpetually redeems the otherwise 'evil' acts of humanity.

Humanity de-crowned

Within the picture many paint of humanity, events such as the Holocaust are considered as an exception, an aberration. The Holocaust is often portrayed as an example of 'evil', a moment of hatred, madness and cruelty (cf. the differing accounts of 'evil' given in Neiman, 2004). The event is also treated as one through which humanity might comprehend its own weakness and draw strength, via the resolve that such actions will never happen again. However, if we take seriously the differing ways in which the Holocaust was 'evil', then one must surely include along side it the almost uncountable numbers of genocides that have occurred throughout human history.

Hence, if we are to think of the content of the 'human heritage', then this must include the annihilation of indigenous peoples and their cultures across the globe and the manner in which their beliefs, behaviours and social practices have been erased from what the people of the 'West' generally consider to be the content of a human heritage. Again the history of colonialism is telling here. It reminds us exactly how normal, regular and mundane acts of annihilation of different forms of human life and culture have been throughout human history. Indeed the history of colonialism, in its various guises, points to the fact that so many of our legal institutions and forms of ethical life (i.e. nation-states which pride themselves on protecting human rights through the rule of law) have been founded upon colonial violence, war and the appropriation of other peoples' land (Schmitt, 2003; Benjamin, 1986). Further, the history of colonialism highlights the central function of 'race war' that often underlies human social organisation and many of its legal and ethical systems of thought (Foucault, 2003).

This history of modern colonialism thus presents a key to understanding that events such as the Holocaust are not an aberration and exception but are closer to the norm, and sadly, lie at the heart of any heritage of humanity. After all, all too often the European colonisation of the globe was justified by arguments that indigenous inhabitants were racially 'inferior' and in some instances that they were closer to 'apes' than to humans (Diamond, 2006). Such violence justified by an erroneous view of 'race' is in many ways merely an extension of an underlying attitude of speciesism involving a long history of killing and enslavement of non-human species by humans. Such a connection between the two histories of inter-human violence (via the mythical notion of differing human 'races') and inter-species violence, is well expressed in Isaac Bashevis Singer's comment that whereas humans consider themselves "the crown of creation", for animals "all people are Nazis" and animal life is "an eternal Treblinka" (Singer, 1968, p.750).

Certainly many organisms use 'force' to survive and thrive at the expense of their others. Humans are not special in this regard. However humans, due a particular form of self-awareness and ability to plan for the future, have the capacity to carry out highly organised forms of violence and destruction (i.e. the Holocaust; the massacre and enslavement of indigenous peoples by Europeans) and the capacity to develop forms of social organisation and communal life in which harm and violence are organised and regulated. It is perhaps this capacity for reflection upon the merits of harm and violence (the moral reflection upon the good and bad of violence) which gives humans a 'special' place within the food chain. Nonetheless, with these capacities come responsibility and our proposal of global suicide is directed at bringing into full view the issue of human moral responsibility.

When taking a wider view of history, one which focuses on the relationship of humans towards other species, it becomes clear that the human heritage – and the propagation of itself as a thing of value – has occurred on the back of seemingly endless acts of violence, destruction, killing and genocide. While this cannot be verified, perhaps 'human' history and progress begins with the genocide of the Neanderthals and never loses a step thereafter. It only takes a short glimpse at the list of all the sufferings caused by humanity for one to begin to question whether this species deserves to continue into the future. The list of human-made disasters is ever-growing after all: suffering caused to animals in the name of science or human health, not to mention the cosmetic, food and textile industries; damage to the environment by polluting the earth and its stratosphere; deforesting and overuse of natural resources; and of course, inflicting suffering on fellow human beings all over the globe, from killing to economic exploitation to abusing minorities, individually and collectively.

In light of such a list it becomes difficult to hold onto any assumption that the human species possesses any special or higher value over other species. Indeed, if humans at any point did possess such a value, because of higher cognitive powers, or even because of a special status granted by God, then humanity has surely devalued itself through its actions and has forfeited its claim to any special place within the cosmos. In our development from higher predator to semi-conscious destroyer we have perhaps undermined all that is good in ourselves and have left behind a heritage best exemplified by the images of the gas chamber and the incinerator.

We draw attention to this darker and pessimistic view of the human heritage not for dramatic reasons but to throw into question the stability of a modern humanism which sees itself as inherently 'good' and which presents the action of cosmic colonisation as a solution to environmental catastrophe. Rather than presenting a solution it would seem that an ideology of modern humanism is itself a greater part of the problem, and as part of the problem it cannot overcome itself purely with itself. If this is so, what perhaps needs to occur is the attempt to let go of any one-sided and privileged value of the 'human' as it relates to moral activity. That is, perhaps it is modern humanism itself that must be negated and supplemented by a utopian anti-humanism and moral action re-conceived through this relational or dialectical standpoint in thought.

The banality of evil, the banality of good

In order to consider whether any dialectical utopian anti-humanism might be possible, it becomes necessary to reflect upon the role of moral action which underlies the modern humanist view of the subject as drawn upon by thinkers such as Hawking. Our argument is that the logical end-point of ethically motivated technical action is a certain type of human apoptosis – the global suicide of humanity. In what follows we set out some aspects of the problematisation of the

modern humanist view of moral action and the way in which this causes difficulties for not only Hawking's project of cosmic colonisation, but also for many in the environmental movement more generally.

Faced with what seems to be a looming environmental crisis spiralling out of control and an awareness of a history of human action which has caused this crisis, the reaction of many environmentalists is, contra Hawking, not to run away to another habitat but to call for new forms of action. The call for urgent political and social action to change human behaviour in relation to the environment is echoed globally not only by environmentalists and activists but also by celebrities and politicians. [6] The response is highly modern in the sense that a problem such as global warming is not considered to be something ordained by fate or the outcome of divine providence. Instead it is understood as something caused by human action for which humans bear the responsibility and, further, that disaster may still be averted if we *act* in such a way to change the course of history. [7]

The move towards critical historical reflection, the assuming of responsibility, and action guided by such an attitude, is certainly a better approach than shutting one's eyes to the violence and errors of human history or placing blind faith in technology. Indeed, criticism of these latter views is heard from within eco-ethics circles themselves, either by labelling such endeavours as 'technofix' or 'technocentric' (Smith, 1998), or by criticizing the modes of action of green-politics as 'eco-bureaucracy' and 'men-politics' (Seager, 1993). However, even if we try to avoid falling into the above patterns, maybe it is actually too late to change the course of the events and forces that are of our own making. Perhaps a modern discourse or belief in the possibilities of human action has run aground, hamstrung by its own success. Perhaps the only forms of action available are attempts to revert to a pre-industrial lifestyle, or a new radical form of action, an action that lets go of action itself and the human claim to continued habitation within the world. In this case, the action of cosmic colonisation envisaged by Hawking would not be enough. It would merely perpetuate a cycle of destructive speciesist violence. Further, general humanist action, guided by some obligation of 'care' for the environment, would also not be enough as it could not overcome an individual's complicity in systematic and institutional speciesist violence.

The question here is open. Could a modern discourse of reflection, responsibility and action be strong enough to fundamentally re-orientate the relationship between humans and other species and the natural environment? If so, then maybe a truly revolutionary change in how humans, and specifically humans in the West, conceive of and interact with the natural world might be enough to counter environmental disaster and redeem humanity. Nonetheless, anything short of fundamental change – for instance, the transformation of

modern, industrial society into something completely different – would merely perpetuate in a less exaggerated fashion the long process of human violence against the non-human world.

What helps to render a certain type of action problematic is each individual's 'complicity' in the practice of speciesist violence. That is, even if one is aware of the ways in which modern life destroys or adversely affects the environment and inflicts suffering upon non-human animals, one cannot completely subtract one's self from a certain responsibility for and complicity in this. Even if you are conscious of the problem you cannot but take part in doing 'evil' by the mere fact of participating within modern life. Take for example the problematic position of environmental activists who courageously sacrifice personal wealth and leisure time in their fight against environmental destruction. While activists assume a sense of historical responsibly for the violence of the human species and act so as to stop the continuation of this violence, these actors are still somewhat complicit in a modern system of violence due to fact that they live in modern, industrial societies. The activist consumes, acquires and spends capital, uses electricity, pays taxes, and accepts the legitimacy of particular governments within the state even if they campaign against government policies. The bottom line is that all of these actions contribute in some way to the perpetuation of a larger process that moves humanity in a particular direction even if the individual personally, or collectively with others, tries to act to counter this direction. Despite people's good intentions, damage is encapsulated in nearly every human action in industrial societies, whether we are aware of it or not.

In one sense, the human individual's modern complicity in environmental violence represents something of a bizarre symmetry to Hannah Arendt's notion of the 'banality of evil' (Arendt, 1994). For Arendt, the Nazi regime was an emblem of modernity, being a collection of official institutions (scientific, educational, military etc.) in which citizens and soldiers alike served as clerks in a bureaucratic mechanism run by the state. These individuals committed evil, but they did so in a very banal manner: fitting into the state mechanism, following orders, filling in paperwork, working in factories, driving trucks and generally respecting the rule of law. In this way perhaps all individuals within the modern industrial world carry out a banal evil against the environment simply by going to work, sitting in their offices and living in homes attached to a power grid. Conversely, those individuals who are driven by a moral intention to not do evil and act so as to save the environment, are drawn back into a banality of the good. By their ability to effect change in only very small aspects of their daily life, or in political-social life more generally, modern individuals are forced to participate in the active destruction of the environment even if they are the voices of contrary intention. What is 'banal' in this sense is not the lack of a definite moral intention but, rather, the way in which the individual's or institution's participation in everyday modern life, and the unintentional contribution to

environmental destruction therein, contradicts and counteracts the smaller acts of good intention.

The banality of action hits against a central problem of social-political action within late modernity. In one sense, the ethical demand to respond to historical and present environmental destruction opens onto a difficulty within the relationship between moral intention and autonomy. While an individual might be autonomous in respect of moral conscience, their fundamental interconnection with and inter-dependence upon social, political and economic orders strips them of the power to make and act upon truly autonomous decisions. From this perspective it is not only the modern humanist figures such as Hawking who perpetuate present violence and present dreams of colonial speciesist violence in the future. It is also those who might reject this violence but whose lives and actions are caught up in a certain complicity for this violence. From a variety of political standpoints, it would seem that the issue of modern, autonomous action runs into difficulties of systematic and institutional complicity.

Certainly both individuals and groups are expected to give up a degree of autonomy in a modern liberal-democratic context. In this instance, giving up autonomy (in the sense of autonomy as sovereignty) is typically done in exchange for the hope or promise of at some point having some degree of control or influence (i.e. via the electoral system) over government policy. The price of this hope or promise, however, is continued complicity in government-sanctioned social, political and economic actions that temporarily (or in the worst case, eternally) lie beyond the individual's choice and control. The answer to the questions of whether such complicity might ever be institutionally overcome, and the problems of human violence against non-human species and ongoing environmental destruction effectively dealt with, often depends upon whether one believes that the liberal hope or promise is, either valid and worthwhile, or false and a sham. [8]

In another sense the ethical demand to respond to historical and present environmental destruction runs onto and in many ways intensifies the question of radical or revolutionary change which confronted the socialist tradition within the 19th and 20th centuries. As environmental concerns have increasingly since the 1970s come into greater prominence, the pressing issue for many within the 21st century is that of *social-environmental revolution*. [9] Social-environmental revolution involves the creation of new social, political and economic forms of human and environmental organisation which can overcome the deficiencies and latent oppression of global capitalism and safeguard both human and non-human dignity.

Putting aside the old, false assumptions of a teleological account of history, social-environmental revolution is dependent upon widespread political action which short-circuits and tears apart current legal, political and economic regimes. This action is itself dependent

upon a widespread change in awareness, a revolutionary change in consciousness, across enough of the populace to spark radical social and political transformation. Thought of in this sense, however, such a response to environmental destruction is caught by many of the old problems which have troubled the tradition of revolutionary socialism. Namely, how might a significant number of human individuals come to obtain such a radically enlightened perspective or awareness of human social reality (i.e. a dialectical, utopian anti-humanist 'revolutionary consciousnesse') so that they might bring about with minimal violence the overthrow of the practices and institutions of late capitalism and colonial-speciesism? Further, how might an individual attain such a radical perspective when their life, behaviours and attitudes (or their subjectivity itself) are so moulded and shaped by the individual's immersion within and active self-realisation through, the networks, systems and habits constitutive of global capitalism? (Hardt & Negri, 2001). While the demand for social-environmental revolution grows stronger, both theoretical and practical answers to these pressing questions remain unanswered.

Both liberal and social revolutionary models thus seem to run into the same problems that surround the notion of progress; each play out a modern discourse of sacrifice in which some forms of life and modes of living are set aside in favour of the promise of a future good. Caught between social hopes and political myths, the challenge of responding to environmental destruction confronts, starkly, the core of a discourse of modernity characterised by reflection, responsibility and action. Given the increasing pressures upon the human habitat, this modern discourse will either deliver or it will fail. There is little room for an existence in between: either the Enlightenment fulfils its potentiality or it shows its hand as the bearer of impossibility. If the possibilities of the Enlightenment are to be fulfilled then this can *only* happen if the old idea of the progress of the human species, exemplified by Hawking's cosmic colonisation, is fundamentally rethought and replaced by a new form of self-comprehension. This self-comprehension would need to negate and limit the old modern humanism by a radical anti-humanism. The aim, however, would be to not just accept one side or the other, but to re-think the basis of moral action along the lines of a dialectical, utopian anti-humanism. Importantly, though, getting past inadequate conceptions of action, historical time and the futural promise of progress may be dependent upon radically re-comprehending the relationship between humanity and nature in such a way that the human is no longer viewed as the sole core of the subject, or the being of highest value. The human would thus need to no longer be thought of as a master that stands over the non-human. Rather, the human and the non-human need to be grasped together, with the former bearing dignity only so long as it understands itself as a part of the latter.

The global suicide of humanity

How might such a standpoint of dialectical, utopian anti-humanism reconfigure a notion of action which does not simply repeat in another way the modern humanist infliction of violence, as exemplified by the plan of Hawking, or fall prey to institutional and systemic complicity in speciesist violence? While this question goes beyond what it is possible to outline in this paper, we contend that the thought experiment of global suicide helps to locate this question – the question of modern action itself – as residing at the heart of the modern environmental problem. In a sense perhaps the only way to understand what is at stake in ethical action which responds to the natural environment is to come to terms with the logical consequences of ethical action itself. The point operates then not as the end, but as the starting point of a standpoint which attempts to reconfigure our notions of action, life-value, and harm.

For some, guided by the pressure of moral conscience or by a practice of harm minimisation, the appropriate response to historical and contemporary environmental destruction is that of action guided by abstention. For example, one way of reacting to mundane, everyday complicity is the attempt to abstain or opt-out of certain aspects of modern, industrial society: to not eat non-human animals, to invest ethically, to buy organic produce, to not use cars and buses, to live in an environmentally conscious commune. Ranging from small personal decisions to the establishment of parallel economies (think of organic and fair trade products as an attempt to set up a quasi-parallel economy), a typical modern form of action is that of a refusal to be complicit in human practices that are violent and destructive. Again, however, at a practical level, to what extent are such acts of non-participation rendered banal by their complicity in other actions? In a grand register of violence and harm the individual who abstains from eating non-human animals but still uses the bus or an airplane or electricity has only opted out of some harm causing practices and remains fully complicit with others. One response, however, which bypasses the problem of complicity and the banality of action is to take the non-participation solution to its most extreme level. In this instance, the only way to truly be non-complicit in the violence of the human heritage would be to opt-out altogether. Here, then, the modern discourse of reflection, responsibility and action runs to its logical conclusion – the global suicide of humanity – as a free-willed and 'final solution'.

While we are not interested in the discussion of the 'method' of the global suicide of humanity per se, one method that would be the least violent is that of humans choosing to no longer reproduce. [10] The case at point here is that the global suicide of humanity would be a *moral act*; it would take humanity out of the equation of life on this earth and remake the calculation for the benefit of everything non-human. While suicide in certain forms of religious thinking is normally condemned as something which is selfish and inflicts harm upon

loved ones, the global suicide of humanity would be the highest act of altruism. That is, global suicide would involve the taking of responsibility for the destructive actions of the human species. By eradicating ourselves we end the long process of inflicting harm upon other species and offer a human-free world. If there is a form of divine intelligence then surely the human act of global suicide will be seen for what it is: a profound moral gesture aimed at redeeming humanity. Such an act is an offer of sacrifice to pay for past wrongs that would usher in a new future. Through the death of our species we will give the gift of life to others.

It should be noted nonetheless that our proposal for the global suicide of humanity is based upon the notion that such a radical action needs to be voluntary and not forced. In this sense, and given the likelihood of such an action not being agreed upon, it operates as a thought experiment which may help humans to radically rethink what it means to participate in modern, moral life within the natural world. In other words, whether or not the act of global suicide takes place might well be irrelevant. What is more important is the form of critical reflection that an individual needs to go through before coming to the conclusion that the global suicide of humanity is an action that would be worthwhile. The point then of a thought experiment that considers the argument for the global suicide of humanity is the attempt to outline an anti-humanist, or non-human-centric ethics. Such an ethics attempts to take into account both sides of the human heritage: the capacity to carry out violence and inflict harm and the capacity to use moral reflection and creative social organisation to minimise violence and harm. Through the idea of global suicide such an ethics re-introduces a central question to the heart of moral reflection: To what extent is the value of the continuation of human life worth the total harm inflicted upon the life of all others? Regardless of whether an individual finds the idea of global suicide abhorrent or ridiculous, this question remains valid and relevant and will not go away, no matter how hard we try to forget, suppress or repress it.

Finally, it is important to note that such a standpoint need not fall into a version of green or eco-fascism that considers other forms of life more important than the lives of humans. Such a position merely replicates in reverse the speciesism of modern humanist thought. Any choice between the eco-fascist and the humanist, colonial-speciesist is thus a forced choice and is, in reality, a non-choice that should be rejected. The point of proposing the idea of the global suicide of humanity is rather to help identify the way in which we differentially value different forms of life and guide our moral actions by rigidly adhered to standards of life-value. Hence the idea of global suicide, through its radicalism, challenges an ideological or culturally dominant idea of life-value. Further, through confronting humanist ethics with its own violence against the non-human, the idea of global suicide opens up a space for dialectical reflection in which the utopian ideals of both modern humanist and anti-humanist ethics may be comprehended in relation to each other. One possibility of this conflict is the production

of a differing standpoint from which to understand the subject and the scope of moral action.

From the outset, global suicide throws into question the linkage between life-value and the subject of moral action. It proposes a moral question, the first moral question, which *must* accompany every human action: *Is my life, and its perpetuation, worth the denial of life to others?*

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Notes

[1] Hawking's list of possible and current causes that might necessitate cosmic colonisation includes: the possibility of nuclear war; human induced global warming; the potential release of genetically engineered viruses.

[2] Two examples of modern 'progress' can be found in Kant and Popper. The first describes the operation of reason, which through reflection upon the world and its own intelligent critical and moral faculties may gradually become more 'enlightened' and morally better. The second describes through empirical scientific inquiry and the method of falsification, the way in which science may build a firm body of knowledge through which it can progress in its knowledge of the world and in the production of technology that can assist the perpetuation of human life. When using the term 'progress' it is a combination of these ideas which we find representative and which figures such as Hawking are ideologically guided by.

[3] Albert Camus in fact considered *suicide* to be the most important philosophical problem. To decide whether one's life is worth living is

the primal question from which any philosophy derives (Camus, 2005).

[4] We do not purport to develop here a full-fledged eco-centric theory, but rather to bring into the moral discourse a solution to a situation taken to the extreme from a humanistic standpoint. However, note that eco-centric ideas are, in some respects, already part of the legal sphere, at least to the extent that questions regarding the standing of trees in court are debated in academia and in the courts (see Stone, 1996).

[5] This blurring, broadening and re-defining of the 'subject' has a history in Western philosophy that precedes the 'deep ecology' movement. It occurs notably in the philosophy of Spinoza. Further, it has also occurred in differing ways, and with differing levels of 'success', in the philosophies of Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Deleuze.

[6] Such calls have been voiced by, for example, prominent celebrities such as Al Gore, Prince Charles, Sting, Leonardo DiCaprio.

[7] The sense of 'modernity' we are drawing upon here is, in part, the sense of the term as given by Habermas (1990) in his distillation of the ideas of Kant, Hegel and their post-modern respondents filtered through the though of the German Romantics, Nietzsche and Heidegger. As Habermas describes the philosophical subject of modernity, the modern, active, intelligent 'I' (which also understands itself as a 'We') reflects upon itself and its others (epistemically, morally, aesthetically, socially, historically) and sets intellectual, technical and moral goals for itself. As it does this it attempts to create a broadly 'humanist' world for itself without the reliance upon a pre-critical ideas of fate, God or transcendent law.

[8] For alternative efforts to suggest an abiding contract between the individual and the environment, consider Naess and Sessions (1984), and Elitzur (2001).

[9] One example is the growing interaction between anti-capitalist social movements and environmental movements within umbrella organisations such as the World Social Forum.

[10] Such a proposal has already been put forward by the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (see VHEMT, 2007).

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