

MORALITY OR MORALISM?

An Exercise in Sensitization

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Ever since Luc Ferry's book on ecological philosophy appeared, no one seems to have doubted, at least not in France, that to endow any of the world's creatures except human beings with an ethical dimension of any kind could lead only to conceptual absurdities and moral monstrosities.¹ One may take an interest in nature, ecosystems, climate change, hurricanes, or animals, but one must do so in a "strictly scientific and factual" way, never in a moral way. And yet, for some thirty years, the new approaches involved in "science studies" have been seriously altering the division of tasks between facts and values.² Science, technology, and ecological crises—in revealing the ever closer links between humans and nonhumans—are forcing us to reconsider the premature and rather strange confinement of the moral dimension to humans alone. At a time when each of us

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1. Luc Ferry, *The New Ecological Order*, trans. Carol Volk (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995).

2. See Dominique Pestre, *Introduction aux Science Studies (L'arbre, l'animal et l'homme)* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006); Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope. Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

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may suddenly be “seized by scruples”—on boarding a flight, lighting our boiler, driving our car, ordering tropical wood, or eating shrimp—it would seem to be of interest to explore the mechanism whereby the list of beings able to place us under moral obligation to them is either shortened or lengthened.

This essay is intended as an experiment or exercise in sensitization and desensitization, in the immunological sense of those terms. To follow this experiment, the reader must agree to suspend belief in any a priori division between beings capable and beings incapable of obliging us to respond to their call. For a definition of what we mean by *response*, the reader will need to consider the etymology of *respondeo*: I become *responsible* by *responding*, in word or deed, to the call of someone or something.³ If this game rule is accepted, the reader will think it normal to focus on extension and reduction in the class of beings for which one feels (according to one’s capacity to understand their call) more or less responsible. One may become sensitive or increasingly insensitive to the call of certain beings, whether human or nonhuman: that is indeed an everyday experience.

In the schema we have devised for this exercise, the reader will be able to register a number of variations within two dimensions that we need to learn to distinguish from each other. The first dimension entails varying the *distribution* of beings that are capable of interpellating us, in accordance with the familiar division between humans and nonhumans. The second dimension entails varying the *intensity* of the interpellation required to produce a response, *whatever the type* of being under consideration. Through this exercise, we should be able to see that the two dimensions are too often confused with each other and that a text taking a high moral stand from the first perspective (because it maintains a distinction between moral subjects and mere objects) may seem quite different from the second (because the text is insensitive to scruple). Such disparity is found often in the literary genre of “moral reflection,” which presupposes that the only beings whose call we must answer—whose shattering visage, encountered face to face, was Lévinas’s inexhaustible subject—are human beings. In this genre, to be moral is, crucially and definitively, *not to compromise* on the boundary between humans and nonhumans; and we are urged not to get caught up in the wild imaginings of ecologists who want to reopen the question of the range of beings to which we might be led to respond.

The exercise proposed here, in which four contrasting texts are juxtaposed, should enable us to distinguish between *moralism* (which is attentive to the first dimension but not the second) and *morality* (which is attentive to the second dimension much more than to the first). This distinction should somewhat complicate the impression that all ecological thinking must self-evidently be denied the character of moral reflection. Text 1, by André Comte-Sponville, clearly

3. See the entry “*respondeo*” in Félix Gaffiot, *Dictionnaire abrégé latin, français illustre* (Paris: Hachette, 1936).

belongs to the genre of moral reflection and has been chosen to help us define the relative insensitivity of *moralism* to morality.⁴ This insensitivity will be read as contrasting with the attitudes expressed in text 2, a more classical text by Immanuel Kant.⁵ Text 1 takes for granted that responsibility consists in responding to ourselves by listening to the moral law within us—an assumption discoverable in Kant’s text only with great difficulty. Text 3 is a passage from Michel Serres that bears reflexively on the deafness of philosophy to the presence of things—in Serres’s text, to the rock that Sisyphus rolls endlessly back uphill.⁶ Lastly, text 4, also reflexive in character, is by the scientist James Lovelock and concerns how his “Gaia” metaphor may enable reversal of the Kantian solution and thereby allow us to hear again the call of beings to which moralism has taught us to be insensitive.⁷ These extracts can be arranged, very roughly, along a time line in the modern development of human feelings. Kant began a process of desensitization to the call of nonhumans whose return to our attention is marked by Serres’s text and to which Lovelock’s marks a resensitization. Comte-Sponville’s text here represents the zero point in sensitivity to the moral issues that nonhumans pose. (The four extracts are included here in an appendix.)

These texts, each different from the others in style and status, together outline a set of variations that will permit us, in our conclusion, to redefine the very concept of axiology (see chart). But first, the texts in tandem permit us to offer a definition of moral sentiment as a revival of scruple and, accordingly, an *extension* of the class of beings to which the responsible subject learns to respond. Conversely, we can define immorality as the loss of scruple and progressive *restriction* of the class of beings toward which we feel obliged to respond. A condition for arriving at these definitions is that we ourselves must be sensitive not only to the ideas developed in these passages but also to the expressions, scenarios, and actors chosen by each author. The distance between ideas and text, made familiar long since by semiotics, will enable us to juxtapose what an author thinks he is saying to the (often very different) way in which he says it. A philosopher may have the impression of writing a text that bears seriously upon a moral subject, while the same text may testify, on the contrary, to a lack of scruple.

Animals and *Animots*: Where Does the Immoralism of Moralism Come From?

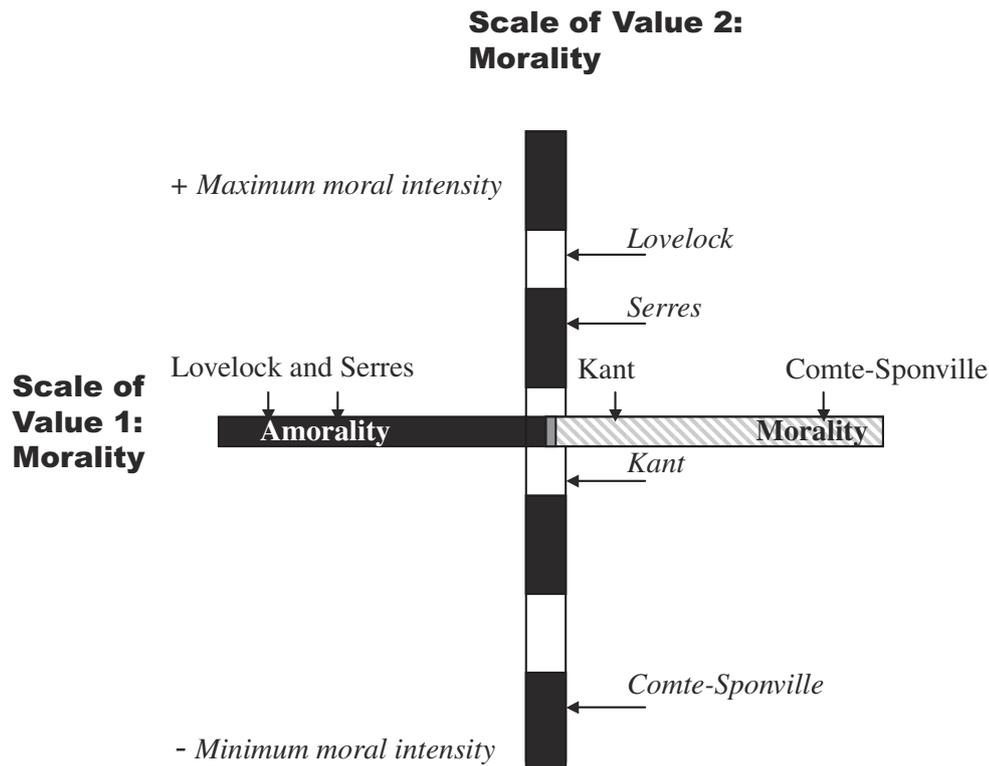
There is some injustice in taking a single text of moral philosophy to represent so important a tendency as moralism. But our first extract, a widely read text of

4. André Comte-Sponville, “Sur les droits des animaux,” *Esprit*, December 1995, 140–49.

5. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (1790; Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), §28.

6. Michel Serres, *Statues* (Paris: François Bourin, 1987), 301.

7. James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia: Earth’s Climate Crisis and the Fate of Humanity* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 16–17.



Summary of the two scales of value, the two axiologies: the first, horizontal scale seeks to mark the gulf between morality and amorality by distributing beings on either side; the second, orthogonal scale seeks to track variations in intensity in scruples concerning this distribution. Note that the four texts discussed in this article are located differently on the two scales; note also that Kant's (text 2) occupies the center in both, which is to be expected since Kant devised the basic modern position on this question but still hesitated over how to define it.

Comte-Sponville's, is a good example of what seems *prima facie* to be a text on a moral subject. From the first line ("Which is worse: to slap a child or to gouge out a cat's eye?"), we tell ourselves that "yes, very decidedly, a serious moral question is being posed." Then the contrast appears between the commonsensical observation that the text is a "moral reflection" and the more diffuse but equally indisputable feeling that the text is indifferent to its "object"—that it exhibits a disturbing levity and coldness with regard to the issue it raises. Text 1 testifies, in other words, to a relative lack of sensitivity.

What is the source of this contradiction between promised moral reflection and manifest immorality? The animals of which the text speaks do absolutely nothing; they are mere stage props. Neither the dogs nor the dolphins are really present; and as for the cats, they do not have an opportunity even to meow. Their presence in the text is purely passive: the author has it on the best authority that they can have no say in what is said about them. Comte-Sponville states, in effect, that his cat is not moral, does not speak, and asks itself only "material" questions.

This exclusion from the moral sphere may be read in both the argument and the form of the text. His cat, which he takes as an example—or, rather, “on whose back” he reflects—is at no point a player.⁸ The author speaks *in place of* his cat, not in its name. He does not lend it his voice as a trustworthy spokesman for a puss he knows well but speaks in its place on the grounds that it has nothing to say on the matter. “What seems clear,” he writes, “is that animal intelligence bears upon facts, not values,” and the author’s relative lack of hesitation produces a disagreeable feeling in the reader.⁹ The exclusion of animals from the realm of morality is reflected in their textual treatment: the cats of which Comte-Sponville speaks are *objects*, in the trivial sense: inanimate and instrumentalized matters of fact. They strongly resemble Derrida’s *animots*, those paper animals that Western philosophy mobilizes in order to think about itself (rather than to think with and about—to learn with and about—others).¹⁰ The text deals with a problem of law, but that is not why the moral question is so easily dismissed. The author does not hold *open* the question of means and ends; and in place of that hesitation, which may be said to define morality, he substitutes a fixed *division* of competence in morality between humans and nonhumans.

It might be argued that animals cannot join in the discussion of their rights, since, “as they are not human beings, how could they?” But it is that appeal to self-evident fact that gives the impression of insensitivity (a reader with doubts should try replacing “animals” with “blacks” or “women” in that argument). Comte-Sponville takes for granted what in Kant (as we shall see) was still a matter for scruple, fear, and trembling. The paucity of scruples in a given text seems bound up with the paucity of actors on the surface of its argument. We might hypothesize that, if a text deals with objects as if they were certainly objects (and thus inconceivably actors), the text is to that degree immoral. How, then, could Comte-Sponville not have questioned the assumption of so rigid a division between moral subjects and amoral objects? On close examination, we can see that his certainty derives not from some unquestioned definition of morality but from a particular view of science. Notice that the author never appeals to positive knowledge. “Reality,” he explicitly tells us, can supply him with nothing, since “meaning, value, the ideal” come only through language—and language, unfortunately, belongs uniquely to humans and not to nonhuman animals. As so often, epistemology is in control of what philosophy permits itself to think.

8. This nice phrase is borrowed from Cathryn Bailey, “On the Backs of Animals: The Valorization of Reason in Contemporary Animal Ethics,” *Ethics and the Environment* 10.1 (2005): 1–17.

9. The exceptions are quickly brushed aside: “Who can know what goes on in the head of a dog or a dolphin? . . . I’d bet my right hand (though that is only an expression:

I’m not sure I would actually take the risk) that they have no moral code.”

10. See Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills (1997; New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

We could object that there is another resource, a *language of reality*: the positive knowledge offered by ethology, biology, and the neurosciences could keep open the question that the philosopher thinks to close. But Comte-Sponville rejects the possibility that anything might be learned from the sciences, for he is seeking “a discourse that does not say what reality is (primary reality, in respect of which even true discourse remains inessential) but rather what it *should* be.”¹¹ In other words, the moralism of this text—its lack of scruple regarding the distribution of beings relevant to morality—accords to scientific facts an objectivity so total that the sciences can have nothing to say about values. Science can teach us nothing, because it veers completely away from genuine “discourse” into mere factuality (“primary reality”) and accordingly becomes “inessential.” It is from reality that one must escape in order to gain access to “what *should* be.” Comte-Sponville’s epistemological realism is so strong that he regards scientific discourse as made superfluous by its own verity—a conclusion testifying to dangerous links that the most extreme rationalism can form with a kind of obscurantism. We must know nothing positive, the author believes, so that we can in the end philosophize morally.¹² But reading even a few books with a little care might have deferred Comte-Sponville’s certainty about the *bêtise* of animals.¹³ He might have learned, for instance, that cats are actually quite recalcitrant about being studied by scientists. Cats are very receptive to people who take an interest in them and are therefore unreliable objects for research in the behavioral sciences. But Comte-Sponville’s text shows no interest in cats or any other kind of animal—it does not take even their suffering as a reason to raise new questions or to doubt his distribution of moral competences—because his sole concern is with human duties.

It would be hard to find another text that is apparently so sensitive to moral questions yet at the same time, and for the same reasons, so thoroughly desensitized. However, our main reason for choosing Comte-Sponville’s text is that it claims to follow in the footsteps of Kant (its “set of absolute and unconditional

11. We should not be misled by the expression, “Language frees desire of reality,” which does not mean that language allows us finally to gain access to the “desire of reality,” but, on the contrary, that it allows desire to escape the grim facticity of reality.

12. One thinks here of the contradictory answer that Élisabeth de Fontenay gave to a journalist who accused her work—since it mobilized “positive” knowledge—of “philosophical subcontracting.” Caught between the violence of this moralistic obscurantism and its evidently aberrant character, she replied: “You are the first person who’s said that to me, and I take it as praise, for it implies that social reality is not absent from my reflective development. However, I have been careful not to make a point of mentioning any knowledge, whether in sociology, ethol-

ogy, primatology or the neurosciences.” Interview with Élisabeth de Fontenay (May 29, 2001, www.philagora.net/philo-fac/le-vivant/vivant-animal.htm [accessed October 26, 2009]) regarding her book *Le silence des bêtes* (Paris: Fayard, 1998).

13. See, e.g., Vinciane Despret, *Quand le loup habitera avec l’agneau* (Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2002); Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), and *The Companion Species Manifesto* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003); Vicki Hearne, *Adam’s Task: Calling Animals by Name* (Pleasantville, NY: Akadine Press, 1986); and Jocelyne Porcher, *Éleveurs et animaux, réinventer le lien* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002).

presuppositions” is as Kantian as is the “categorical imperative” of which cats are deprived). But the silence of animals, which Comte-Sponville regards as untroubling and self-evident, is in Kant a topic demanding painful labors of separation and distancing; he needs to struggle against nature’s deafening call. It is this contrast that interests us. Kant is sensitive to matters that leave Comte-Sponville cold.¹⁴

How to Become Insensitive to Nature’s Deafening Call

To grasp the difference between lack of scruple (“moralism”) and what remained of scrupulous morality at the time when the modern conception of morality emerged, we must agree to pass over Kant’s ponderous style and consider only the astonishing scenario that he describes (text 2). The moral problem that Kant faces is exactly opposite to the one that Comte-Sponville presupposes we must face. Nature is not silent for Kant: the noise it makes is for him frightful and calls out with such force that humanity feels impotent, small, and indeed silent before it. For this reason, we must *learn to become insensitive* to its call. To become moral in the modern way, it is necessary to take shelter from the world and to observe nature as a spectacle “all the more attractive for its fearfulness.”¹⁵ With nature still unmastered, its sounds must be subdued, our fears aroused by merely muffled sounds, because only in such stillness can we hear within us the voice of morality—a voice that bears no relation to the voice of nature. In this famous text, the relation between dimensions is reversed: nature outside is loud and immense; we human subjects are fearful and tiny. Nature’s appeal from inside us amounts to little: we need not “bow down” to it, and “this saves humanity in our own person from humiliation.” Note the seesaw effect: the sense of humanity within rises as the appeal of nature is lowered (this order of precedence will be reversed by Lovelock).

The astonishing character of this text (though we read it at a moment in ecological history very different from that of its original audience) is that, in it, the rivers, volcanoes, hurricanes, and tsunamis do not commit us to anything—and that morality is heard only if we do *not* (or *no longer*) hear them. But the chief interest of the text is that the storm and the elements that compose it seem (unlike Comte-Sponville’s cat) to be thoroughly alive. If we think of Kant’s text as literary, the parts played by the storm clouds and even rocks are not minor; they are fully fledged characters in their own right. Comte-Sponville’s cat does nothing

14. In the terminology of Bruno Latour, Kant is a “modern” philosopher, whereas Comte-Sponville is a “modernist.” A modernist thinks he is modern, while a modern knows that he has never been modern because he is painfully struggling to become so. See Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993).

15. On the “Lucretian” effect of the spectacle of suffering, see Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, trans. Steven Rendall (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

of interest and “one” wonders if gouging out its eye would be moral, whereas for Kant the rocks are “bold and overhanging,” and the “thunderclouds [are] piled up . . . borne along with flashes and peals,” with the result that we feel inferior to them, even humiliated. That drama has disappeared from Comte-Sponville’s world, and in his text nature—reality—has nothing to say.

To be sure, Kant’s is a sublime philosophy of the sublime: “even though as mortal men we have to submit to external violence,” he bravely writes, the humanity within us will be safeguarded. But is it so sure that “humanity would remain”? Kant’s uncertainty is legible in the text: to need shelter from every call of nature if we are to feel the humanity within us might be taken as a weakness. What sort of moralist hears the call of duty only by burying his head in the sand? Kant replies that our high “estimation of ourselves loses nothing by the fact that we must see ourselves safe” before “the sublimity of our faculty of soul” can manifest itself. Bravely said—yet even so, his emphasis appears to be on human fragility rather than survival, let alone triumph. The historical sequel (which he evidently could not have imagined) shows that Kant was right to be worried. For Comte-Sponville, the point was to know whether—even though a cat is neither moral nor intelligent and does nothing of interest—there might be nevertheless a valid reason for not doing it harm. For Kant, *despite* the empirical and cognitive richness of the encounter with nonhumans, and *despite* the promise of intellectual joy and mutual admiration in possible meetings, the issue is one of obliging ourselves to give all that up, to *turn away* from the temptation, so as not to commit an error in judgment.

To change his way of thinking, Kant engaged in an intellectual, even spiritual, exercise in renunciation. The huge effort that he had to make to desensitize himself stands out in the distance between what he claims in his philosophical argument—nature can no longer humiliate us—and what the same nature does *in his text* (it calls out in a thunderous, terrifyingly powerful voice). It is Kant’s hesitation before the nascent division between facts and values, between amoral nonhumans and moral human beings, rather than any affirmation of the superiority of humans as moral beings, that constitutes the moral dimension of his text. Comte-Sponville forgot to tell us that, in order to ask a question such as his (“Which is worse: to slap a child or to gouge out a cat’s eye?”), it was first necessary to withdraw from the world behind a pane of glass. But if the glass breaks, the spectacle becomes a world again—our world—and the feeling of the sublime evaporates. Lovelock will tell us that the glass pane has broken, the sublime has evaporated, the relationship of forces has reversed, and the moral question may today be raised again exactly where Kant began, only the wrong way around. For there is no longer shelter, the threat has returned, Katrina went thataway . . .

“There remained the inexplicable mass of rock”¹⁶

If, for Kant, responding to the voice of humanity within us demands that we be deaf to nature, for Lovelock and for Serres that same deafness is a mark of immorality. Text 3, our text by Serres, focuses reflexively on the difficulty of recognizing the presence of things—of that very *thing* we are talking about here—in the context of moral discussion. Serres’s most striking ideas come by way of overused myths that he refreshes: everyone talks about Sisyphus, he points out, and no one says anything about the rock! “The myth shows the continual fall of the rock,” yet we notice only “the guilty, unhappy hero working like a slave.” Everyone has so “moralized” Sisyphus’s condemnation and predicament that he has become a primary figure of the absurd—but who pays attention to the rock that bears down with all its weight on the myth and shoulders of Sisyphus? We talk of lonely humans and the absurdity of the modern human condition, when the myth raises a question about *things*: why, Serres asks, do we never manage to focus on the thing of which the myth itself tells us so explicitly? To insist, as the myth does, that the rock keeps rolling back, downhill, is to say it is *the rock that counts*; and we fail to understand its role when all we see is an absurd task imposed by a court on a guilty man. “However much it returns to the same place, always identical with itself, no one ever speaks of it”: Serres’s text aims—textually—to make us feel what the myth says of the rock. The reader watches the myth compel Serres to become the eyes and voice of a rock that our attention to Sisyphus has obscured. Serres’s text “rises in moral intensity,” because he is not satisfied with seeing the rock as a prop in Sisyphus’s life story. For Serres, the falling rock is active, repulsed but each time returning; whereas the rest of us see a man with a rock that *does* nothing, that is passively displaced, and that falls by itself without reason.

Serres thinks *with* the rock and tries to invent ways of making rocks exist (*for us*). Even if we are blind to it, the rock remains—“a stubborn object lying in front”—and Serres wants to sensitize us to its presence. But he can involve the rock in the moral dimension only by reconsidering the idea of science that underlies the distinction of fact and value. Once again, epistemology governs the moral question. In our texts by Comte-Sponville and Kant, the voice of facts and the voice of values never overlap. For Serres, however—as all his work shows—these voices are harmonics of a single music. They comprise a single call. Serres therefore must reconsider the split between *cause* (value) in the legal sense and *cause* (fact) in the physical sense (the word *thing* in English meaning etymologically both).¹⁷ In the interpretation of Sisyphus as a piece of absurdist theater, the rock

16. Franz Kafka, “Prometheus,” trans. Willa and Edwin Muir, in *The Complete Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 432.

17. Etymologically, the thing [*la chose*] is a matter that collects or gathers together *because it is disputed*. Yan Thomas, “Res, chose et patrimoine (note sur le rapport sujet-objet en droit romain),” *Archives de philosophie du droit* 25 (1980): 413–26.

rolls without cause, because that thing is not a thing/cause. The rock does not make Sisyphus act; no *thing* is involved in our becoming human. And no one seems to perceive where the absurdity lies: the rock “falls all by itself”! What everyone sees is Sisyphus beginning over and over again; we find the repetition interesting and look for an explanation only “in the head” of Sisyphus. The law of gravity and the weight of things do not count; they are not genuine reasons, genuine causes: “The cause forgot things, the thing will abandon causes, except for those which are succeeded by simple effects.”

Unlike Comte-Sponville, Serres seeks help from the positive sciences when he speaks of morality. Notably, he borrows the concept of interference from multiple causes. The rock of Sisyphus comes within the province of physics and geology, among other sciences, though not within that of the cold knowledge that Comte-Sponville refers to as “real” and therefore “inessential.”¹⁸ Trying to get around the rigid distinction between, and the skewed distribution of our attention to, a scientific cause and a human cause, Serres refuses not to know—unlike Kant who, against his own cognitive appetites, set aside his knowledge so as to experience the sublime.¹⁹ Serres thus invents a kind of writing that shows how, if a rock ultimately has meaning (or value), it is *not in spite of* what the sciences say about it but *thanks to* scientific knowledge. Serres’s *Statues* shows how the sciences teach that rocks are linked to us through an extremely complex history—a “pragmatogony”—in which human subjects and the objects of their world are reciprocally constituted and in which all the interesting realities are situated between those two poles.²⁰

“How to teach ourselves to respond to Gaia”

If Serres formulates moral questions differently from Kant and Comte-Sponville, that is because Serres also reopens basic questions about the sciences. Those two projects are interlinked, since the fact-value distinction is possible only if one

18. Was Roderick Nash thinking of the rocks that take on life under the pen of Michel Serres when he wrote “Do Rocks Have Rights?” *Center Magazine* 10 (November-December 1977): 227–33. This article picks up Christopher Stone’s argument on the legal status of trees in “Should Trees Have Standing?” *Southern California Law Review* 45 (1972): 450–501, which gives many examples.

19. “Similarly, as to the prospect of the ocean, we are not to regard it as we, with our minds stored with knowledge on a variety of matters, . . . are wont to represent it in thought. . . . Instead of this we must be able to see sublimity in the ocean, regarding it, as poets do, according to what the impression upon the eye reveals.” *Critique of Judgement*, §29, 122.

20. An amusing detail is that, almost as soon as he shifts his attention to the rock weighing on Sisyphus’s shoulders, Serres turns away from the myth and depicts himself as Sisyphus, the slave of knowledge (*Statues*, 310): “This work of a slave deaf to the main languages moved those heavy stones in the dark, with neither reward nor respite. Philosopher—who will say it? Sisyphus in any case.” By a sudden zigzag on the scale of value that we are trying to define, we pass here from one extreme to the other. Was the rock merely an opportunity to praise the hateful ego? The rock falls yet again, invisible. Once more a text (in the end) makes the author do something quite different from what the thinker wanted it to do.

embraces a conception of nature that empties the world of morally consequential yet nonhuman beings.²¹ We know how Kant would object to Serres, for Kant objected in his own time to any “natural morality,” and the same objection is to be found in all the critiques of so-called deep ecology that accuse it of anthropomorphism. Since humans alone are moral, the objection goes, you anthropomorphize nature if you claim that it calls out and that we must respond.²² For the humanists and moralists, there is no possibility that any positive knowledge could require us to reconsider the distribution of means and ends. But it is just this other scale of value that we have begun to trace with Serres’s text. Moral intensity increases in proportion to one’s scruples regarding the distribution of active and passive players, ends and means, things or matters of concern and mere objects, nonhumans and humans, the rock and the one who pushes it. Change your conception of science, and you become sensitive to appeals of a kind different from any you have experienced before.

Hence the final text to which we now turn. In text 4, a somewhat dissident scientist presents us with a character called Gaia: the Earth as a totality. The author tells us that Gaia is a being who poses questions and demands answers, and that, even if we cannot hear its voice, it can become—or has already become—an “enemy” who can take revenge. Revenge for what? For our moral disengagement with respect to it. Of course, if Lovelock’s only aim were to help us hear again the din of volcanoes, hurricanes, and vast unchained oceans—all the things that Kant tried to make us forget—then Lovelock and his naive anthropomorphism would be immediately shown the door. But, without being in any way a philosopher, Lovelock is by no means naive; and in this popular text, he reflects explicitly on the scientific, political, and moral reasons that he had to invent his fictional character. “You will notice,” he writes, “that I am continuing to use the metaphor of ‘the living Earth’ for Gaia; but do not assume that I am thinking of the Earth as alive in a sentient way, or even alive like an animal or a bacterium.”

Moreover, recall that Kant’s nature, perceived as a spectacle from inside a protective shelter, was also and primarily a fictional character, carefully introduced to produce the right stage-set for modernity. Lovelock is well aware that he is using a metaphor to reopen political and moral questions—questions about the relations of size, dependence, and responsibility existing between humans and the Earth that gives them life:

Metaphor is important because to deal with, understand, and even ameliorate the fix we are now in over global change requires us to know the

21. On the political consequences of the post-Kantian emptying of nature, see Bernard Yack, *The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

22. At most, this claim authorizes the aestheticization of nature: see Ferry, *New Ecological Order*.

true nature of the Earth and imagine it as the largest living thing in the solar system, not something inanimate like that disreputable contraption “spaceship Earth”. . . . Unless we see the Earth as a planet that behaves as if it were alive, at least to the extent of regulating its climate and chemistry, we will lack the will to change our way of life and to understand that we have made it our greatest enemy.

Metaphor is used here to account as correctly as possible for the living character of the Earth. Gaia is “only” a metaphor because the Earth is not “alive like an animal or a bacterium” and is not reducible to a big rock or a “spaceship.”²³ On the other hand, Earth regulates the climate on which we depend for life. It is crucial to keep the metaphor in unstable equilibrium between figure and fact—between the Earth as an organism and the Earth as a mere object. Hesitancy about our means-ends relationship to the Earth, which is missing from text 1 but present in text 2, gives text 4—Lovelock’s—its moral intensity.

As a set of retroactive effects, metaphorically grouped together by the author, the Earth becomes other and more than an inert object. It reacts to the changes we force it to undergo, and yet, at the same time, it is not a person.²⁴ In bestowing on it a name, Gaia, the author is not playing at being confused; he is playing anthropomorphism against anthropocentrism,²⁵ as if there were several ways to be given the *form* of the human.²⁶ The use of metaphor leads us to treat the other *as if* it were a person, by setting up what he terms a “promising misunderstanding.”²⁷ The inducement to treat Gaia as a person may thus commit us to take an interest in it, to think of ourselves—of her and us—in terms of interaction and reaction. The mobilization of this figure renders this work, which Lovelock addresses to the general public, unclassifiable and can produce a disconcerting experience for readers who are brought to hear the call of beings they thought were mute, when it would be truer to say that those beings had long ago been silenced.²⁸ Though Gaia is presented as a metaphor, the reader is thereby

23. We mean the big rock of philosophy, which is itself irreducible to the rocks of petrologists. See the final chapter, on dolomite rock, in Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), and Lorraine Daston, ed., *Things that Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* (New York: Zone, 2004).

24. The question of the organism as a totality remains open in biology too. See, e.g., Evelyn Fox Keller, *The Century of the Gene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), and esp. Jean-Jacques Kupiec and Pierre Sonigo, *Ni Dieu ni gène: pour une autre théorie de l'hérédité* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).

25. Cf. “Anthropomorphism, and in general the humanization of animals, is a powerful antidote to anthropocentrism and the bad humanism it induces.” De Fontenay, *Le silence des bêtes*, 615.

26. Vinciane Despret stresses that one element in the transformation of ethology has been that researchers felt it necessary to give names to their animals, having concluded that these needed to be identified and recognized if they were to be understood and known. See “Portrait de personne avec fourrure,” in Pascal Picq, Dominique Lestel, Vinciane Despret, and Chris Herzfeld, *Les grands singes: L'humanité au fond des yeux* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2005).

27. Picq et al., *Les grands singes*, 112.

28. We should remember that whether facts speak by themselves or through others is a lively issue in all the sciences. See Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

restored to hesitation about the means-ends relationship between human beings and the Earth. As soon as one ceases to hesitate, as soon as one inclines a bit more to one side or the other, one comes out of metaphor and into a universe of data in which the Earth grows old, falls ill, warms up, self-regulates, adapts, and can resemble a camel. For those who thought that the question of the *ends* of nature had been resolved, this marriage of scientific data to the resource of metaphor reopens it in a fresh way.

It will be recalled that text 2 shows Kant conditioning our moral sense to silence nature's voices, and we would thence be morally sensitive only on the condition that we became insensitive to nature. Lovelock's text does this work in the opposite direction: it poses questions about what Gaia wants and is capable of, about the possibilities of cohabitation; and, in beginning to formulate the question of how life can be divided between human overpopulation and Gaia's survival, Lovelock raises issues in which nonhumans are once more included. Metaphor proves to be an effective means of bringing our persistent rejection of the notion that nature has intentions or ends into sharp contrast with scrupulous concern for the moral ends of nature. These new questions, which come both from scientists and from deregulated retroactive effects—the storms, heat waves, and glaciers taking shape or changing shape before our eyes—compel us to remix science and politics, and to bring politicians, scientists, ecologists, and moral theorists together again for a discussion of how to combine our different commitments. The Earth enters into a moral relationship with us as we begin to ask ourselves how to treat it well.

Some concern is reemerging for the consequences of the decisions that we make about the Earth: we are beginning to fear again, to worry lest we use Gaia merely as a means. This renewed concern leads us to take a different kind of interest, case by case, in all the things we acquire: things that we are realizing are not matters of fact but (in the full sense) things—that is, matters of concern.²⁹ What consequences, we ask ourselves, will follow from this plane trip, from the production of this chaise longue out of rare wood, from the use of wide-mesh nets to catch this delicious fish? Scientific practices and moral experiments are thus intertwined in ways that differ greatly from their relationship in the fact-value distinction, since the practices of geology, biology, and physics now offer us a grip on other ways of acting. The Earth is no longer seen as a spectacle behind a glass pane but is becoming once more part of what counts for us. The priority that Kant established (nature shrinks so we can grow) is being reversed. Nature trembled before us as we grew in strength, and now we tremble as we

29. On “matters of concern” as opposed to “matters of fact,” see Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds., *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

find ourselves dependent on nature precisely because it has become so dependent on us.³⁰ We can no longer say, with Kant, that our humanity will survive even if humankind succumbs to the power of nature. Kant did not foresee a time when the idea of the sublime would seem incongruous or inapt: a time when there would no longer be a thick pane of glass through which we could observe nature, safely, as a spectacle, while comforting ourselves that we exist in a different and separate—a moral—dimension.

Conclusion: Two Different Axiologies

If this exercise in sensitization has had its intended effect, the reader will have felt, when comparing our four texts, that a distinction might be introduced between two scales of value—a distinction summed up in the chart we have provided. The first scale (horizontal in the chart) establishes a clear breach between humans and nonhumans. To place the qualifier “moral” in this scale of value, it must be possible to show that facts and values are kept rigorously separate and that morality-bearing subjects are not being “confused” with “mere objects.” Only the former may be considered as ends, and they may never serve solely as means; only the latter may serve as means and must never be considered as ends. This axiology differs from that of the second scale (vertical in the chart), which does not define a clear-cut separation but rather a gradient stretching by degrees from the utmost insensitivity to the utmost sensitivity. This scale of values is marked by its relative indifference to the nature of beings (human or nonhuman, it matters little) and by the quality of the attention it pays to their appeals (an attempt is made to respond to them, and one thereby becomes responsible for them). If we assume that the moral sense depends on hesitation over what should be considered an end and what should be considered a means, it does not seem impossible to define the first scale as the expression of moralism (the allocative distinction is clear) and the second as the expression of morality (the allocative distinction is hesitant).

It is easy to place our four texts on these two scales. In the context of the first axiology, texts 3 and 4 are immoral or, at the least, offer evidence of scandalous anthropomorphism or of inane and ridiculous sentimentality; whereas Comte-Sponville’s text (1) is impeccably moral. Interestingly, because Kant’s text is more hesitant than the Kantian Comte-Sponville’s, text 2 is not as impeccably moral as text 1. But in the context of the second scale, Comte-Sponville’s text exhibits a terrible lack of scruple and is therefore located almost at the bottom—not quite

30. Nature’s trembling was the theme of another book by Michel Serres: *The Natural Contract*, trans. Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson (1990; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995). Ferry’s understanding of the book is faulty.

at the very bottom because, as we have seen, he does hesitate a bit. Lovelock's text, though not written by a moral philosopher, appears higher on the second scale because it hesitates in every possible way over the sensitivity we should feel for the most diverse beings—and because he hesitates reflexively over the nature of even this hesitation. Serres's text occupies an intermediate position in the second scale. It will come as no surprise to find that, in this second as in the first scale of value, Kant's text occupies the median position, and for the same reason as before. On the one hand, text 2 seems pulled by an injunction not to hesitate, to feel no scruple when the actors are nonhuman subjects, while, on the other hand, this injunction seems still to be debatable and offers the possibility of involvement in a quite different question. Text 2 claims that these nonhuman voices should be silenced because they prevent our hearing the little music of morality within us. But might it not one day be necessary to learn how to listen to them again?

If it is accepted that this chart summarizes our experiment or exercise, two further points should be made. First, it is impossible to reopen the moral questions explored here without modifying our theory of science. So long as objects are taken for what the epistemological tradition has made of them, it will always seem ridiculous to lengthen the list of beings to whose call we should respond scrupulously; doing so will only be seen, in the context of modern epistemology, as contemptible anthropomorphism. It is no accident that in each of our four cases, even that of Comte-Sponville, the position given to positive knowledge defines the degree of freedom that one has to draw up a list of the beings to be taken into moral consideration. It is because he is insensitive to positive knowledge about cats that Comte-Sponville is largely uninterested in extending the range of moral scrupulousness. What a nice revenge for the sciences, which are so often accused of being value-insensitive. To look away from scientific knowledge is (on the horizontal axis) to be moral; but (on the vertical axis) to look away is to abandon moral sense entirely.

A second lesson of this exercise, perhaps more intriguing, is that ecological morality is always approached as if it were a matter of authorizing or prohibiting an *extension* of the moral category to *new beings* (animals, rivers, glaciers, oceans), whereas exactly the opposite is the case. What we should find amazing are the strange operations whereby we have constantly *restricted* the list of beings to whose appeal we should have been able to respond. From this point of view, there is nothing less “natural” than philosophical modernism.³¹ The whole interest of Kant's text is that it displays the extraordinary difficulty that philosophers must have faced, a bit more than two centuries ago, when immunizing themselves against the evidence—contrary to their own arguments—of a proliferation of moral subjects calling out for scrupulous treatment. Nothing is harder than to

31. See Philippe Descola, “Beyond Nature and Culture,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 139 (2006): 137–55.

silence one's scruples. What analysis of our four texts has not taught us, the insistent ecological crises that we face should impress upon our minds: namely, that modernism in philosophy was a brief parenthesis in intellectual history. With hindsight, its moral philosophy and epistemology must strike us as aberrant.

J. M. Coetzee tells us, through his character Elizabeth Costello, that "animals have only their silence left with which to confront us" and that "generation after generation, heroically, [they] refuse to speak to us."³² Unlike Comte-Sponville, who thought he knew there is nothing behind that silence but an incapacity to speak, Coetzee suggests that their silence should be understood as the response of animals to our behavior toward them. Coetzee's sentence is powerful not because it describes an established fact, nor because mankind has "won" its "war" against nonhuman beings definitively, but because changes are underway that will bring humans to hear the silence of nonhumans once more.³³

Appendix

Text 1: Andrew Comte-Sponville, "Sur les droits des animaux"

Which is worse: to slap a child or to gouge out a cat's eye? If the question is pertinent, as I think it is, then whatever answer we give, animals are at least an object of moral theory—or objects in moral theory, or for moral theory—but they are not subjects of it or in it. For it is a question that the cat does not ask itself, cannot ask itself—as it cannot ask other questions of the same order. This one, for example: "Which is worse: to scratch a child or to tear a mouse apart?" Cats have no morality, nor any words with which to realize it. I will be told that they therefore cannot ask themselves any kind of question. Literally, of course, that cannot be denied. But, in the end, I am not sure that an interrogatory or problem-posing attitude is not within reach of a merely motor-sensory intelligence, like that of very small children (before language) or the higher mammals. Animals are not so stupid that they cannot be surprised and pose themselves—silently—such a problem as: "When's the grub coming?" or "Where's that noise coming from?" These are factual questions, which certainly need words to be formulated (to be questions in the strict sense of the term), but which are by no means proven to be purely and simply impossible without language. . . . It seems clear to me that animal intelligence bears only on facts, not on values, in any event not on moral values, and that any notion of *duty*, or blame, is alien to them: their silence is in the indicative, if I may put it so, never in the imperative; and their misdeeds, if there are any, offend only against good sense or their masters—which doubtless comes to the same thing and stops us seeing in them a moral code or what, rightly

32. J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2003), 70.

33. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 70.

or wrongly, we experience as one (such as a set of absolute or unconditional prescriptions). Language frees desire of reality and introduces into the world that which is not and cannot be found in it: meaning, value, the ideal. It thereby permits the irreducibly new and peculiarly human phenomenon of “what ought to be,” or let us say Kant’s categorical imperative: a discourse that does not say what reality is (primary reality, in respect of which even true discourse remains inessential) but rather what it *should* be (which reality by itself could obviously not contain or entail). In fact, I am not absolutely sure of the clarity of that idea. Who can know what goes on in the head of a dog or a dolphin? I know cats better—especially my own two. And I’d bet my right hand (though that is only an expression: I’m not sure I would actually take the risk) that they have no moral code, none at all, and at least that can be accepted as a working hypothesis. Let us assume, then—and it is certainly likely—that my cats have no moral code, that they are not the possible subjects of any duty, of any categorical imperative. I would ask the following question: are they not in some way included in morality, not, to be sure, as subjects of duty but as possible objects for ours, and especially for mine? I don’t see how that can be denied, unless we refuse to accept that it is morally wrong to gouge out—without reason, or with none other than the pleasure to be found in it—one or both eyes of a cat. But, if we have duties to animals (for example, the duty not to make them suffer needlessly), how can it be denied that they have rights?

Text 2: Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Judgement,
trans. James Creed Meredith, §28

Bold, overhanging, and, as it were, threatening rocks, thunderclouds piled up the vault of heaven, borne along with flashes and peals, volcanoes in all their violence of destruction, hurricanes leaving desolation in their track, the boundless ocean rising with rebellious force, the high waterfall of some mighty river, and the like, make our power of resistance of trifling moment in comparison with their might. But, provided our own position is secure, their aspect is all the more attractive for its fearfulness; and we readily call these objects sublime, because they raise the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace, and discover within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature.

In the immeasurableness of nature and the incompetence of our faculty for adopting a standard proportionate to the aesthetic estimation of the magnitude of its realm, we found our limitation. But with this we also found in our rational faculty another non-sensuous standard, one which has that infinity itself under it as unit, and in comparison with which everything in nature is small, and so found in our minds a pre-eminence over nature even in its immeasurability. Now in just the same way the irresistibility of the might of nature forces upon us the

recognition of our physical helplessness as beings of nature, but at the same time reveals a faculty of estimating ourselves as independent of nature, and discovers a pre-eminence above nature that is the foundation of a self-preservation of quite another kind from that which may be assailed and brought into danger by external nature. This saves humanity in our own person from humiliation, even though as mortal men we have to submit to external violence. In this way external nature is not estimated in our aesthetic judgement as sublime so far as exciting fear, but rather because it challenges our power (one not of nature) to regard as small those things of which we are wont to be solicitous (worldly goods, health, and life), and hence to regard its might (to which in these matters we are no doubt subject) as exercising over us and our personality no such rude dominion that we should bow down before it, once the question becomes one of the highest principles and of our asserting or forsaking them. Therefore nature is here called sublime merely because it raises the imagination to a presentation of those cases in which the mind can make itself sensible of the appropriate sublimity of the sphere of its own being, even above nature.

This estimation of ourselves loses nothing by the fact that we must see ourselves safe in order to feel this soul-stirring delight—a fact from which it might be plausibly argued that, as there is no seriousness in the danger, so there is just a little seriousness in the sublimity of our faculty of soul. For here the delight only concerns the province of our faculty disclosed in such a case, so far as this faculty has its root in our nature; notwithstanding that its development and exercise is left to ourselves and remains an obligation. Here indeed there is truth—no matter how conscious a man, when he stretches his reflection so far abroad, may be of his actual present helplessness.

Text 3: Michel Serres, Statues

But interpretations of myth (including my own) and scholarly calculation speak only of the scene and the hero Sisyphus, guilty, unhappy, become a slave. We never see anything but ourselves; human language discusses nothing but crime and punishment.

Still, the myth itself, the stubborn myth, contrives the rock's perpetual fall. It always rolls back down; it has fallen, and it will fall again. Someone takes it back up, pushes, forces, throws it back, rejects it, defers it, moves it, drives it away. It is back here now; often it returns there, too. Yet, however reliably it returns to the same place, always itself the same, no one ever speaks of it. Substitute any thing you would prefer—the statue of a god, a table, or a sink—the interpretations [of the myth] will not change. How to shout through this silent obstinacy? Can there be a finer case of blindness? From the depths of the ages, from the pit of hell, from an abyss of suffering, the tale repeats: the thing returns!—and we Narcissuses speak only of him who rolls it away.

What if, for once, we looked at the rock that is invariably present before our eyes, the stubborn object lying in front of us? . . .

At last, we would understand why the myth of Sisyphus has expressed for so many perpetual motion or eternal return. The scandal or absurdity of endless recommencements always is due to their being an effect without an efficient cause. How can this be? The cause shifts entirely to the courts, the moral code, ethics, crime, arbitration, the human sciences, until it exhausts itself—until nothing is left of it for things themselves—entirely on the head of the accused, whom it charges with all its own misdeeds as well as those of history, as if the rock in itself had no weight, nor the earth any slope or gravity. The (little-known) law governing the fall of heavy bodies gives way, leaving room only for the law that passes through the jurors' mouths or the judge's sentence.

Thus the Latin *res* (“thing”), from which we derive the word *reality*, was the name given to the object of a judicial procedure, its cause, and to the lawsuit itself [*la cause elle-même*], so that the accused bore the name *reus* in antiquity because the magistrates summoned him to appear. As if the only human reality came alone from the courts. Reality weighs on Sisyphus only through the court that sentences him. Positive law precludes or conceals natural law. The rock comes down because the sentence came down.

And yet the rock does fall. Giordano Bruno, Galileo, and many other historic figures enforced the passage from causes to things, before and in spite of the courts, and against the legislatures. They substituted the law of physics for the rules and legislation of the praetor. And for the guilty king condemned to hell, a ball that rolls lawfully down a sloping plane. The cause thus would forget things and the thing would abandon causes, except for those that are succeeded by simple effects.

The myth of Sisyphus, that sage or scholar with his reviled name, stages the archaeology of falling bodies. The rock falls all by itself, no one guilty any longer.

Text 4: James Lovelock, The Revenge of Gaia: Earth's Climate Crisis and the Fate of Humanity

You will notice that I am continuing to use the metaphor of “the living Earth” for Gaia; but do not assume that I am thinking of the Earth as alive in a sentient way, or even alive like an animal or a bacterium. I think it is time we enlarged the somewhat dogmatic and limited definition of life as something that reproduces and corrects the errors of reproduction by natural selection among the progeny.

I have found it useful to imagine the Earth as like an animal, perhaps because my first experience of serious science was in physiology. It has never been more than metaphor—an *aide pensée*, no more serious than the thoughts of a sailor who refers to his ship as “she.” Until recently no specific animal came into

my mind, but always something large, like an elephant or a whale. Recently, on becoming aware of global heating, I have thought of the Earth more as a camel. Camels, unlike most animals, regulate their body temperatures at two different but stable states. During daytime in the desert, when it is unbearably hot, camels regulate close to 40°C , a close enough match to the air temperature to avoid having to cool by sweating precious water. At night the desert is cold, and even cold enough for frost; the camel would seriously lose heat if it tried to stay at 40°C , so it moves its regulation to a more suitable 34°C , which is warm enough. Gaia, like the camel, has several stable states so that it can accommodate to the changing internal and external environment. Most of the time things stay steady; as they were over the few thousand years before about 1900. When the forcing is too strong, either to the hot or the cold, Gaia, as a camel would, moves to a new stable state that is easier to maintain. She is about to move now.

Metaphor is important because to deal with, understand, and even ameliorate the fix we are now in over global change requires us to know the true nature of the Earth and imagine it as the largest living thing in the solar system, not something inanimate like that disreputable contraption “spaceship Earth.” Until this change of heart and mind happens we will not instinctively sense that we live on a live planet that can respond to the changes we make, either by cancelling the changes or by cancelling us. Unless we see the Earth as a planet that behaves as if it were alive, at least to the extent of regulating its climate and chemistry, we will lack the will to change our way of life and to understand that we have made it our greatest enemy.