

MORALITY OR MORALISM? An Exercise in Sensitization¹

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Ever since Luc Ferry's book on ecological philosophy, no one seems to have been in any doubt, at least in France, that to endow the world's creatures with any ethical dimension can lead only to conceptual absurdities and moral monstrosities.² Questions of morality, it would appear, concern only human beings and their scruples. You can take an interest in nature, ecosystems, climate change, hurricanes or animals, but you 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 this division of tasks between facts and values.³ In revealing the ever closer links between humans and non-humans, science, technology and the ecological crises are forcing us to revise the premature and perhaps rather strange confinement of the moral question to human beings alone. At a time when each of us may suddenly be "seized by scruples"—on boarding a flight, lighting our boiler, driving our car, ordering tropical wood or eating prawns—it seemed to be of some interest to explore the mechanism whereby the list of beings able to place us under a moral obligation is either shortened or lengthened. Our aim, in other words, is an exercise in sensitization and desensitization—in the immunological sense of the terms.

In order to follow our little experiment in sensitization to moral scruple, the reader must agree to suspend any a priori division between beings capable and incapable of obliging us to respond to their call. Instead, he will have to make do with closely following the etymology of the word respondeo: I become responsible by

¹ A first version of this article was prepared for a conference marking forty years of the École des Mines, in September 2007.

² Luc Ferry, The New Ecological Order, trans. Carol Volk, Chicago, Ill.: Chicago University Press, 1995 [1992].

³ See D. Pestre, Introduction aux Science Studies, Paris: La Découverte, 2006; B. Latour, Pandora's Hope. Essays on the Reality of Science Studies, Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1999.

responding, in word or in deed, to the call of someone or something.⁴ If he accepts this game rule, he will think it normal to focus on the extension or, on the contrary, the reduction in the class of beings for whom he feels more or less responsible according to his capacity to understand their call. Clearly one may become sensitive or increasingly insensitive to the call of certain beings, whether human or non-human. It is indeed the most everyday of experiences.

In the schema we have devised for this article, the reader is able to register for himself a number of variations, within two dimensions that we would like to learn to distinguish from each other: the first involves varying the distribution of beings capable of interpellating us, in accordance with the well-known continuum between humans and non-humans; the second involves varying the intensity of the interpellation necessary to produce a response, whatever the type of being under consideration. Through this exercise we shall see that the two dimensions are too often confused with each other, and that a text with a high moral posture in the first sense (because it maintains the distinction between moral subjects and mere objects) may be quite different in the second sense (because it remains utterly insensitive to scruples). This is often the case with the literary genre of “moral reflection”, for which it is decided in advance that the only beings whose call we must answer are human beings, the shattering visage of a person encountered face to face, such as Lévinas never ceased to explore. In this case, to be moral is crucially and definitively not to compromise over the boundary, and hence not to be caught up in the wild imaginings of ecologists who keep opening the question of the range of beings to which we may be led to respond. The exercise proposed here will enable us, on the contrary, to distinguish between moralism (attentive to the first dimension but not the second) and morality (attentive to the second much more than the first). This distinction will somewhat complicate the impression that all ecological thinking should self-evidently be denied the character of moral reflection.

We have placed alongside one another four texts with so many contrasts that they seemed to re-create artificially a little experiment in the closure or openness of moral feeling. Like any such experiment, the choice of such a limited corpus remains somewhat arbitrary.

The first extract (1), written by André Comte-Sponville,⁵ clearly belongs to the genre of “moral reflection”. It has been chosen to enable us to define the relative insensitivity of moralism to morality. This insensitivity is to be understood in contrast to the (more classical) second text (2), by Immanuel Kant.⁶ For, everything that text (1) takes for granted (responsibility consists in responding to ourselves to listen to the moral law within us), can be obtained in Kant’s text only with great difficulty. Next we have chosen a passage from Michel Serres on the myth of Sisyphus (3), which bears reflexively on the the deafness of philosophy to the presence of things—here, the stone that Sisyphus constantly rolls back up the hill.⁷ Lastly, text (4) by the scientist James Lovelock, also reflexive in character, considers how the Gaia metaphor makes it

⁴ See the entry “respondeo” in Félix Gaffiot, Dictionnaire abrégé latin/français, Paris: Hachette, 1936.

⁵ “Sur les droits des animaux”, Esprit, December 1995.

⁶ Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Judgement, trans. James Creed Meredith, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952, § 28.

⁷ Michel Serres, Statues, Paris: François Bourin, 1987, p. 301.

possible to reverse the Kantian solution and to listen again to the call of beings to which moralism taught us to be insensitive.⁸ It is as if these extracts can be arranged, very roughly, along a kind of history of modern feeling during the modernist parenthesis: Kant's text (2) began a process of desensitization to the call of beings whose return is marked by Serres's text (3) and to which Lovelock's (4) marks a resensitization; Comte-Sponville's text (1) serves as a zero point in sensitivity to the moral issues posed by non-humans.

These four extracts, meant to be different in both style and status, outline a series of variations that will allow us in our conclusion to redefine the very concept of axiology (see Figure 1). In fact, the few interferences between these texts that we shall have room to develop here will allow us to define moral sentiment by the revival of scruple and therefore by an extension of the class of beings to which the responsible subject learns to respond; and, conversely, to define immorality by the loss of all scruple and a progressive restriction of the list of beings towards which we feel obliged to respond. The condition for this is that we should ourselves be sensitive, not only to the ideas developed in these passages but also to their textual matter, that is, the expressions, scenarios and actors chosen by each author (the texts are reproduced in an appendix). This distance between ideas and text, long made familiar through semiotics, will enable us to oppose what an author thinks he is saying to the (often very different) way in which he says it. As we shall see, a philosopher may have the impression of writing a text that bears upon a moral subject when the same text, in terms of what he agrees should be done to the beings he has mobilized by his writing, seems to testify, on the contrary, to a certain lack of scruple.

Animals and “animots”: where does the immoralism of moralism come from?

There is some injustice in taking a widely read text of moral philosophy to characterize such an important scenography as moralism. But this extract by Comte-Sponville is a good example of what common sense regards prima facie as 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 say to ourselves that “yes, quite decidedly, a serious moral question is being posed”. The contrast appears between the obvious fact that it 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, that, in other words, it testifies to a relative lack of sensitivity. In relation to the textual matter itself, rather than the author's ideas, sentiments or virtues, what is the source of this contradiction between promised moral reflection and manifest immorality?

It comes from a feature that the form of the text allows us to identify: the animals of which it 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 the slightest opportunity even to miaow. 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. He states, in effect, that his cat is not moral, does not speak, and asks itself only

⁸ James Lovelock, The Revenge of Gaia: Earth's Climate Crisis and the Fate of Humanity, New York: Basic Books, 2006.

“material” questions? This exclusion from the moral sphere may be read in both the argument and the semiotic role given to the characters in the text. His cat, which he takes as an example—or, rather, “on whose back” he reflects—is at no point a player.⁹ 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 is that animal intelligence bears upon facts, not values.” Hence the disagreeable feeling that we have before the author’s lack of hesitation.¹⁰

The exclusion of animals from morality refers us back to their textual treatment: the cats of which Comte-Sponville speaks are things, in the trivial sense of something inanimate and instrumentalized. They strongly resemble Derrida’s “animots”,¹¹ those paper animals that Western philosophy mobilizes to think of itself, not to think and learn with others. The moral question is dismissed here not because the text deals with a problem of law, but because the author does not keep open the question of means and ends. For that hesitation, which may be said to define morality, he substitutes a fixed division of competence in morality between humans and non-humans.

It might be argued that animals cannot appear in the discussion of their rights “since they are objects and not human beings”. But it is that kind of appeal to a self-evident fact which gives the impression of insensitivity (any reader who doubts this should try replacing “Animal” with “Black” or “Woman”). Comte-Sponville takes for granted that which in Kant (as we shall see in a moment) is still a matter for scruple, fear and trembling. It is exactly as if a text’s lack of scruples is closely bound up with the lack of actors in the very texture of the argument. We may formulate the hypothesis that, if a text deals with objects as if they were only objects and does not bother about whether they might not be only objects, it is in this sense immoral.

But then the question arises as to how Comte-Sponville can avoid doubting the division between moral subjects and amoral objects. For, if we look closely at his text, we see that it derives this certainty not from a definition of morality but from a particular theory of science. It is indeed noteworthy that the author refrains from appealing to any positive knowledge whatsoever. He is quite explicit about this: “reality” cannot supply him with anything, since “meaning, value or ideal” comes only through language, which unfortunately comes only to humans and not to animals! As so often, epistemology here controls what philosophy permits itself to think.

We could object that there is another resource, a language of reality, a positive knowledge, which makes it possible for ethnology, biology and the neurosciences to offer a wealth of footholds to open the question that the philosopher thinks he can close. But Comte-Sponville rejects this possibility that anything might be learned from the sciences, for he is seeking “a discourse that does not say what reality is (primary

⁹ This neat expression 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.

¹⁰ Except for a few markers, which are immediately 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.”

¹¹ See Jacques Derrida, *Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008 [1997].

reality, in respect of which even true discourse remains inessential) but rather what it should be.”¹² In other words, the moralism of this text—that is, its lack of scruple regarding the distribution of beings endowed with morality—conceals a quite specific theory that accords to the facts discovered by science an objectivity so total that the sciences no longer have anything to say about values. Science cannot teach us anything, since, in the case of “true discourse”, it veers completely into reality or factuality (“primary reality”) and thus becomes “inessential”; it is from reality that one must escape in order to gain access to “what should be”. The author’s epistemological realism is so strong that the truth of scientific discourse makes it superfluous, thereby testifying to the dangerous links that the most extreme rationalism can form with a certain kind of obscurantism. We must know nothing positive, so that we can in the end philosophize morally . . .¹³

Yet any reading with a little care would have suspended this certainty regarding the beast-like stupidity [*la bêtise*] of animals.¹⁴ The author would surely have been more hesitant if he had had the opportunity to learn, for example, that cats are little studied by scientists because they are unreliable—that is, very receptive to people who take an interest in them—and are therefore not good research objects for the experimental sciences.¹⁵ As Comte-Sponville’s text is no more interested in animal rights than in animals themselves, but only in human duties, he does not take even their suffering as an opportunity to raise new questions, to show a different kind of interest in this cat or other animals, or to doubt his preliminary distribution of moral competences.¹⁶ It would be hard to find a text that is apparently so sensitive to the moral question yet at the same time, for the same reasons, so thoroughly desensitized.

Our main reason for choosing it, however, has to do with the fact that it claims to follow in the footsteps of Kant (no doubt about this: a “set of absolute and unconditional presuppositions” stems as directly from Kant as does the “categorical imperative” of which cats are deprived). But what no longer bothers Comte-Sponville, the silence of animals that he regards as self-evident, is in Kant still the subject of a

¹² 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.

¹³ One thinks here of the contradictory answer that Élisabeth de Fontenay gave to a journalist who accused her work of “philosophical subcontracting” because it mobilized “positive” knowledge. Caught between the violence of this moralistic obscurantism and its evidently aberrant character, she said: “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, ethnology, primatology or the neurosciences.” Interview with Élisabeth de Fontenay on her book *Le silence des bêtes* (Paris: Fayard, 1998), philagora website, 29 May 2001.

¹⁴ Vinciane Despret, *Quand le loup habitera avec l’agneau*, Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2002; Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet (Posthumanities)*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2007.

¹⁵ Vicki Hearne, “What it is about cats”, in *Adam’s Task. Calling Animals by Name*, Pleasantville, NY: Akadine Press, 1986, quoted by D. J. Haraway in *The Companion Species Manifesto*, Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003.

¹⁶ See, for example, Jocelyne Porcher, *Éleveurs et animaux, réinventer le lien*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2002.

painful labour of separation and distancing, and of a struggle against noise.¹⁷ It is this contrast that interests us: Kant is still sensitive to things that leave Comte-Sponville completely cold.

How to become insensitive to the strident appeal of nature?

To grasp the difference between lack of scruple—and therefore moralism—and what remained of scrupulous morality at the time of the very invention of the modern conception of morality, we must agree to pass over Kant’s ponderous style (2) and consider the astonishing scenario he describes. Everything that is accepted in Comte-Sponville is not yet accepted in Kant. For him the problem to be solved is the exact opposite: nature makes noise, it frightens us, it calls out to us with such force that we feel impotent, minute, silent before it. We must learn to become insensitive to its calls.

To become moral in the modern way,¹⁸ it is necessary to shelter from the world and to look at things as a spectacle:¹⁹ the spectacle “is all the more attractive for its fearfulness”. Why is it so important that nature is silent and that the fear it arouses in us is felt only through a muffled sound, as well as a need for protection from a nature that has not yet been mastered? The reason is that this silence is the only means of hearing within us the voice of morality—a voice that bears no relation to the voice of nature. In this famous text, everything hinges on a reversal of dimensional relations: nature outside is immense and noisy; we human subjects are tiny and fearful. Nature’s appeal inside us does not amount to much: we anyway no longer have to “bow down” before it and “this saves humanity in our own person from humiliation”. There is a seesaw effect here: the sense of humanity within us rises when the appeal of nature is lowered (this question of precedence is soon reversed by Lovelock). The astonishing character of this text (for us who read it, of course, at a different moment in ecological history) is that in Kant 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 interest of the text is that, unlike Comte-Sponville’s cat, the storm and the elements that compose it seem thoroughly alive. To use the language of literary analysis, these are not just minor parts but fully fledged characters in their own right. Whereas the cat did nothing, and “one” could wonder whether it was moral to gouge out one of its eyes by relying on a certainty of principles, the rocks in Kant’s text are “bold and overhanging”, and “thunderclouds [are] piled up . . . and borne along with flashes and peals”, with the result that they threaten our sense of superiority so much that they utterly humiliate us. We can see the gap between this game of seesaw and the previous text. In Comte-Sponville the drama has disappeared, because it is evident that nature—reality—can say nothing to us. But here the drama is always present: it is even staged in the most astonishing manner, and “even though as mortal men we have to submit to external violence” humanity within us will be safeguarded.

¹⁷ This is why we can say that the first is a modern philosopher, whereas the second is a modernist. A modernist, let us remember, thinks he is modern, while a modern knows that he has never been modern because he is painfully struggling to become it. On these questions of periodization, see Bruno Latour, We Have Never Been Modern, trans. Catherine Porter, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993.

¹⁸ See note ??????????????????

¹⁹ On the Lucretian effect of the spectacle of suffering, see Hans Blumenberg, Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996.

It is a sublime philosophy of the sublime, to be sure, but one still senses its extreme fragility. What would happen if man disappeared for good? Is it so sure that “humanity would remain”? Kant’s uncertainty can be read in the text, more precisely than in the answer he feels obliged to give to this objection. For, to have to shelter from every call of nature in order to feel the humanity within us might be taken as a weakness: what is a moralist who can hear the call of duty only by burying his head in the sand? Kant replies that “this estimation of ourselves [thereby] loses nothing”. No doubt—but it could lose something, and the historical sequel (which he evidently could not have imagined) shows that he was right to be worried.

For Comte-Sponville, the point was to know whether, although the cat is neither moral nor intelligent and does nothing interesting, there is nevertheless a valid reason for not doing it harm. For Kant, despite the empirical and cognitive richness of the encounter with non-humans, and despite the promise of intellectual joy and mutual admiration in possible meetings, the issue was one of obliging ourselves to give all that up, to turn away, literally, from the temptation, so as not to commit an error of judgement. Kant engaged in a veritable intellectual, even spiritual, exercise of renunciation, in order to change his way of thinking. The huge effort he had to make to desensitize himself stands out in the distance between what he says in his philosophy—nature can no longer humiliate us—and what the same nature does in his text (it calls out in a terrifyingly thunderous and powerful voice). It is this hesitation before the nascent division between facts and values, between amoral objects and moral subjects, rather than any affirmation of the superiority of humans as moral beings, which constitutes the moral dimension of the text.

Comte-Sponville forgot to tell us that, in order to ask a question like his (is it worse to slap a child or to gouge out the eyes of a cat?), it was first necessary to have withdrawn 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 disappears. Lovelock would soon tell us that the glass pane has broken: that is, that the sublime has evaporated, that the relationship of forces has turned around, and that the moral question may today be starting up again exactly where Kant made it begin, only the wrong way round: there is no longer any shelter, the threat has come back, Katrina passed that way . . . Let us now pursue this commitment by extending the moral question of the revival of scruple and the attention paid to beings to which we respond by becoming responsible. For Kant, people had to be deaf (to nature) in order to respond to the voice of humanity within us; for the other two texts, those by Serres and Lovelock, such deafness is the very mark of immorality. By what strange history has this insensitivity today become the token of moral sensitivity?

“There remained the inexplicable mass of rock”²⁰

We have chosen the text by Serres because it focuses reflexively on the difficulty of recognizing the presence of things, of that very thing we are talking about, in moral discussion. As always, Serres draws his most striking concepts from the renewal of an overused myth: everyone knows the myth of Sisyphus, yet no one speaks of the rock! “The myth shows the continual fall of the rock”, and we see only “the guilty, unhappy

²⁰ Franz Kafka, “Prometheus”, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir, in The Complete Stories, New York: Schocken Books, 1971, p. 432.

hero working like a slave”. Everyone “moralizes” on the subject of Sisyphus’s condemnation before a court, to the point where he is made the figure of absurdity, but no one turns his attention to the rock itself that bears down with all its weight in the story and on the shoulders of Sisyphus.

To interpret it as the myth par excellence of the absurdity of the modern human condition would do no more than intensify the moralism. One speaks of lonely humans when it is really a question of things: why, Serres asks, do we never manage to focus on the thing of which the myth itself speaks so explicitly? For, in the end, to say that the rock keeps falling back is to underline that it is the rock that counts, and we fail to understand its role so long as we see only a task absurdly 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. In this way, the reader witnesses what the myth makes Serres do: it compels him to become the eyes and voice of the rock hidden by Sisyphus. If it may be said of this text that it “rises in moral intensity”, this is because Serres cannot be satisfied with seeing the rock as a mere “prop” alongside Sisyphus. He sees the falling stone as active, repulsed but each time returning, but *we* see a lonely man together with a rock that does nothing, that is passively displaced, and that falls all by itself, without a cause. In this meditation on rocks where Serres thinks with them, the philosopher tries to invent ways of making them exist (for us). Despite the general blindness, the rock remains as “a stubborn object lying in front”. He wants to make us sensitive to it.

Serres can involve the rock in morality only by reconsidering the idea of science at the origin of the division between fact and value. Once again it is epistemology that governs the moral question. In the previous two texts, we saw that the voice of facts and the voice of values never intersect with each other. For Serres, however, as all his work shows, they are the harmonics of a single music, a single call. He must therefore reconsider the fork between cause (value) in the legal sense and cause (fact) in the physical sense. In the “absurd” interpretation of the myth, the rock is deprived of its cause because a thing is no longer a thing-cause,²¹ that is, it no longer makes us act, no longer makes us become human. And no one seems to see that the absurdity lies in the fact that it “falls all by itself”! On the other hand, everyone sees Sisyphus begin over and over again, finds interesting the reasons for this repetition and looks for the explanation only “in the head” of Sisyphus. The law of gravity and the weight of things do not count; they are not “real” reasons, real causes. “The cause forgot things, the thing will abandon causes, except for those which are succeeded by simple effects.”

So little does Serres refrain from seeking out the positive sciences when he speaks of morality that he takes up the idea of interference by different causes: the rock of Sisyphus comes within the province of several sciences—physics and geology, among others—and “yet” it does not come under “cold” knowledge (“inessential”

²¹ Etymologically, the thing [la chose] is a matter that collects or gathers together because it is disputed. Y. Thomas, “Res, chose et patrimoine (note sur le rapport sujet-objet en droit romain)”, Archives de philosophie du droit 25, 413–26, 1980.

because “real”, as Comte-Sponville would have it).²² Serres invents a kind of writing that tries to get away from the skewed distribution between scientific cause and human cause; he takes the opposite view from the motto that Kant tried to inflict on himself above all, when he repeated, against his own cognitive appetites, that he must set aside his knowledge in order to experience the sublime.²³ If the rock ultimately has meaning (value), it is not in spite of what the sciences say about it but thanks to the sciences, which teach us that rocks are linked to us in a much more complex history, whose “pragmatogony” is presented in Statues.²⁴

“How to teach ourselves to respond to Gaia?”

If Serres formulated the moral question differently, it was because he reopened the question of the sciences. The two are interlinked, since the fact-value distinction is possible only if one embraces a conception of nature that empties the world of the beings that might make us responsible.²⁵ We know the objection to Serres’s attempted opening: Kant already raised it against any “natural morality”, and it is to be found in all the critiques of so-called deep ecology that accuse it of anthropomorphism; it is that, since humans alone are moral, you anthropomorphize nature by claiming that it calls out and that you have to respond to it.²⁶ For the humanists and moralists, there is no possibility that positive knowledge should involve us in an experience that forces us to re-open the question of the distribution of means and ends.

Yet it is just that other scale of value that we have begun to trace with Serres’s text (3): moral intensity increases with the scruples regarding the distribution of active and passive players, ends and means, things and objects, non-humans and humans, the rock and the one who pushes it. If you change your theory of science, you can become sensitive again to appeals of a quite different kind.

This is why we turn now to a final text, in which a somewhat dissident scientist presents 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 may become—has already become—an “enemy” who might take revenge.

²² 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). This article picks up Christopher Stone’s argument on the legal status of trees in “Should trees have standing?” (Southern California Law Review, 1972), which gives many examples.

²³ “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, p. 122.

²⁴ 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-labourer of knowledge (Statues, p. 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 another: was the rock just an opportunity to praise the hateful ego? The rock falls yet again, invisible. Once more the text finally makes the author do something quite different from what the thinker wanted it to do.

²⁵ On the political consequences of this emptying of nature after Kant, see B. Yack, The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

²⁶ At most this authorizes its aestheticization: see Ferry, The New Ecological Order, op. cit.

Revenge for what? For our moral disengagement with regard to it. Of course, if Lovelock's only aim were to make us hear again the din of volcanoes, hurricanes and vast unchained oceans, all the things that Kant tried to make us forget, he and his naïve anthropomorphism would be immediately seen off. But, without being in any way a philosopher, Lovelock is by no means naïve and in this popular text quite explicitly reflects on the scientific, political and moral reasons he had to invent his fictional character: "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."

Let us remember that Kant's nature, perceived as a spectacle from a protective shelter, was also and above all a fictional character carefully introduced to produce the modern stage-setting. Lovelock knows full well what he is doing when he uses a metaphor. To take us where? To reopen the political and moral question of the mutual relations of size, dependence and responsibilities between humans and that which makes them live, the Earth.

"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'. . . . 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 here summoned to account as correctly as possible for the living character of the Earth: it is "only" a metaphor, because the Earth is not "alive like an animal or a bacterium" (it is only a power to regulate the climate), but it is still a metaphor because this form of life differs from that of animals and is not reducible to a big stone²⁷ or a "spaceship". The issue here is to maintain the suspended negation of metaphor in its unstable equilibrium, lurching over neither to the side of the mere object nor to that of the organism. This hesitation concerning the means-ends relationship to the Earth, which is missing from text (1) but still present in text (2), gives Lovelock's text its moral intensity.

As a set of retroactive effects metaphorically grouped together by the author, the Earth becomes something other than an inert object: it reacts to the changes we make it undergo and, at the same time, "it" is not a person in the sense of an organism.²⁸ In bestowing on it a name, Gaia, the author is not playing at being

²⁷ The big stone of philosophy, which is itself not reducible to those of petrologists. See the final chapter, on dolomite rock, in The Social Construction of What?, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999; and Lorraine Daston, ed., Things that Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science, New York: Zone Books, 2004.

²⁸ The question of the organism as a totality remains open in biology too. See, for example, Evelyn Fox Keller, The Century of the Gene, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000; and especially Jean-Jacques Kupiec and Pierre Sonigo, Ni Dieu ni gène: pour une autre théorie de l'hérédité, Paris: Seuil, 2000.

confused through an inappropriate comparison to a living organism; rather, he is playing anthropomorphism against anthropocentrism,²⁹ as if there were several ways to be given the form of the human.³⁰ The use of metaphor leads us to treat the other as if it were a person, by setting up a “promising misunderstanding”.³¹ The inducement to treat “it” as a person may thus commit us to take an interest in it, to think of “ourselves” in terms of interaction, of reactions. Lovelock makes us sensitive again to the possibility of becoming responsible by responding to the call of beings we thought mute—when in reality they had been made silent.

The mobilization of this stylistic figure produces a disconcerting experience for a modernist and makes it impossible to classify this work that Lovelock addressed to the general public. This is because it “only” involves a metaphor, and because it again opens up the hesitation about the means and ends relationship.³² As soon as you stop hesitating, as soon as you incline a little more to one side or the other, you come out of metaphor. And it is this requirement which makes it interesting that the writing of a text makes the Earth do so many things—it grows old, falls ill, warms up, regulates itself, adapts, resembles a camel, and so on. This “marriage” between scientific data and the resource of metaphor therefore constructs the problem in a different way, by taking fresh pains to revive the question of the ends of nature that was thought to be resolved.

It will be recalled that Kant’s text showed the author conditioning our moral sense to reduce nature’s voices to silence: we would then be morally sensitive only on 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 construct the problem of how life can be divided between human overpopulation and “Gaia’s” survival, it develops questions in which non-humans are once more included. Metaphor here proves to be a means of bringing about the contrast between persistent rejection of “natural” ends of nature—in the sense of a teleological judgement about its intentions—and revived scruple concerning the moral ends of “nature”. These new questions that come both from scientists and from deregulated retroactive effects—the storms, heatwaves and glaciers taking 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 re-emerging for the consequences of what we decide about

²⁹ “Anthropomorphism, and in general the humanization of animals, is a powerful antidote to anthropocentrism and the bad humanism it induces.” Élisabeth de Fontenay, Le silence des bêtes, op. cit., p. 615.

³⁰ Vinciane Despret stresses that one element in the transformation of ethnology 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, Chris Herzfeld, Les grands singes. L’humanité au fond des yeux, Paris: Odile Jacob, 2005.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

³² We should remember that whether facts speak by themselves or through others is a live issue in all the sciences. See, in particular, Bruno Latour, (). Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy (translated by Catherine Porter). Cambridge, Mass : Harvard University Press, 2004.

“the Earth”; we are beginning to be afraid again, to worry lest we be using “Gaia” only as a means, and this leads us to take a different kind of interest, case by case, in all the “causes” that we buy, which are in fact no longer “objects” but things.³³ What consequences 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?³⁴ Scientific practices and moral experimentation are thus intertwined with each other, in ways quite different from their relationship in the bad fact-value distinction, since scientific practices such as geology, biology or physics offer us here a foothold for possible ways of acting. The Earth is no longer seen as a spectacle behind a glass pane, but is once more becoming part of what counts for us. The precedence invented by Kant (nature shrinks so that we may grow) is once again reversed: we became the stronger and nature began to tremble before us; now we tremble again as we find ourselves dependent on nature because it has become dependent on us.³⁵ We can no longer say, “Après moi le déluge! The humanity within us will survive, even if man succumbs to this power.” An unforeseen consequence, the very idea of the sublime seems out of place, almost incongruous: there is no longer a thick pane of glass to transform nature into a spectacle at which we might remind ourselves of our moral dimension.

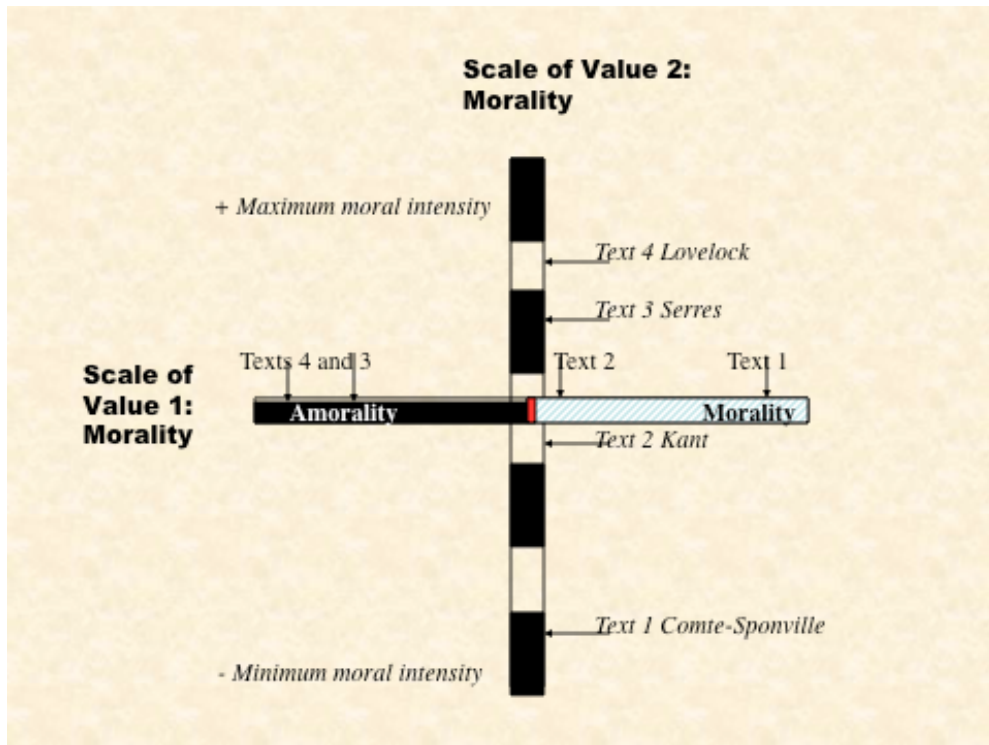
Conclusion: two different axiologies

If our exercise in sensitization has worked for the reader, he or she must have felt, in comparing the above four texts, that a distinction might be introduced between two scales of value—a distinction that we have summarized in Figure 1. The first scale (horizontal) establishes a clear break between subjects and objects. To attribute the qualifier “moral” in this scale of value, it must be possible to prove that facts and values are kept rigorously separate and that morality-bearing subjects are not being “confused” with “mere objects”; only the former are ends and they must never serve as means; only the latter may serve as means and must never be taken as ends. This axiology differs from the second scale (vertical in the figure), which for its part 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 non-human, it matters little) and by the quality of the attention it pays to their appeals (an attempt is made to respond to them, and thereby one becomes responsible for those beings). 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 unknown).

³³ On “matters of concern” as opposed to “matters of fact”, see B. Latour and P. Weibel, eds., Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005.

³⁴ It would be of little use to object that there is more than a high dose of selfishness in those new kind of scruples, since it is precisely the distribution of what pertains to ego and what pertains to alter that is deeply modified here. What does it mean to be selfish when it is the self that is in question?

³⁵ This trembling was the theme of another book by Michel Serres: The Natural Contract, trans. Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson, Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1995 [1990], which Luc Ferry understood so poorly.



INSERT FIGURE 1 (refer to French original)

Figure 1: Summary of the two scales of value, the two axiologies; the first, horizontal scale attempts to mark the gulf between morality and amorality by distributing objects and subjects on either side of a divide; the second, orthogonal scale attempts to track variations in intensity in scruples concerning this distribution of human and non-humans; note that the four texts are located differently on the two scales; note also that Kant's text (3) occupies the centre in both references, which is normal since it invents the modern solution but still hesitates over how to define it.

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It is easy to place our four texts on these two scales. If the first axiology is chosen, the last two texts (3) and (4) are clearly immoral, or at least give proof of scandalous anthropomorphism, or quite simply of inane and ridiculous sentimentality; whereas Comte-Sponville's text (1) is impeccably moral. Interestingly, because Kant still hesitates, his text is not so impeccably moral! But, if the second scale is chosen, Comte-Sponville's text appears to exhibit a terrible lack of scruple and is therefore located almost at the bottom—not quite, because, as we have seen, he does hesitate just a little over the full amorality of dogs and dolphins. Lovelock's text, though not written by a moral philosopher, appears higher on the scale because it hesitates in every possible way over the sensitivity we should feel for the most diverse beings—and because he even hesitates reflexively over the nature of this hesitation. Serres' s text occupies an intermediate position. It will come as no surprise to find that, in this scale of value too, Kant's text occupies the median position, for the same reason as before, since on the one hand it remains pulled by the injunction not to hesitate, no longer to

have any scruple once the actors are non-human subjects, while on the other hand this stacking order still seems debatable or hesitant and, above all, offers the possibility of involvement in quite a different question. It was claimed that these voices had been silenced because they prevented us from hearing the little music of morality within us. But will it not one day be necessary to learn how to listen to them again?

If it is accepted that this figure summarizes the experiment we have just made, two points may be made that are not without interest. First, it is impossible to reopen the moral question without modifying our theory of science. So long as non-humans are taken for the objects that the epistemological tradition has made of them, it will always seem ridiculous to lengthen the list of beings to whose call we should respond and become scrupulous; that will only ever be seen as anthropomorphism. It is no accident that in all cases, even that of Comte-Sponville, the position given to positive knowledge defines the freedom to draw up a list of the beings to be taken into consideration. It is precisely because he is insensitive to positive knowledge about cats that the author is largely insensitive to a revival of the moral question. What a nice revenge of the sciences, which are so often accused of being value-insensitive. To forget them is to be moral (on the horizontal axis), but it is to abandon all moral sense (on the vertical axis).

The second lesson of this exercise, however, strikes us as even more intriguing: the question of ecological morality is always approached as if it were a matter of authorizing or prohibiting an extension of the moral quality to new beings (animals, rivers, glaciers or oceans). But the exact 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 modernism.³⁶ The whole interest of Kant’s text is that it displays the extraordinary difficulty that philosophers must have faced, just a little more than two centuries ago, in immunizing themselves against the contrary evidence of a proliferation of voices. Nothing is more difficult than to silence one’s scruples. What our analysis of the four texts has not taught us, the insistent ecological crises should impress upon our minds: namely, that modernism was only a brief parenthesis. With today’s hindsight, it is the definition it gives of moral philosophy and epistemology that strikes us as so peculiar.

Coetzee wrote that “animals have only their silence left with which to confront us”, and that “generation after generation, heroically, [they] refuse to speak to us”.³⁷ Unlike Comte-Sponville, who thought he knew that there is nothing behind this silence, the silence of which Coetzee speaks is not due to an intrinsic incapacity but is to be understood as the response of animals to our behaviour towards them. We would like to bet that Coetzee’s sentence was written not because it describes something established, nor, contrary to the author’s own statement, because man has ‘won that war definitively’,³⁸ but because something is changing that will make a larger number of humans hear this silence once again —and make them realize that this s silence is *their* problem.

³⁶ See Philippe Descola, “Beyond Nature and Culture”, the Radcliffe-Brown lecture 2005, Proceedings of the British Academy, 2006, pp. 137–55.

³⁷ J. M. Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello, London: Secker & Warburg, 2003, p. 70.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

APPENDIX

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 ask 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 like that, 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 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, they 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? (André Comte-Sponville, *Esprit*, December 1995)

II

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 as 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. (Kant, The Critique of Judgement, § 28)

III

But interpretations of myth, including my own and scholarly calculation, speak only of the scene and the hero (Sisyphus), guilty, unhappy, become a slave-labourer. We never see anything but ourselves; the human word discusses forever crime and punishment.

But the myth, the stubborn myth, sets up the perpetual fall of the rock. It always rolls back down; it has fallen and will fall again. Someone takes it back up, pushes, forces, throws it back, rejects it, defers it, moves it, drives it away. Here it is back: it often returns here too. Yet, however much it returns to the same place, always

identical with itself, no one ever speaks of it. Put anything you like in its place—statue of a god, table or sink—the interpretations will not change. How to shout louder than one realizes 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 that a thing comes back there—and we, narcissuses, speak only of him who clears it away.

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

At last we understand why the myth of Sisyphus expresses so many times the perpetual movement or the eternal return. The scandal or absurdity of an endless resumption always comes from the fact that, where it is performed, there exists an effect without a factual cause. How can this be?

It is because the cause passes entirely over there 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 misdeeds as well as those of past 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 to the law that passes through the jurors' mouth or the court's verdict.

Thus, the Latin language called res (thing)—from which we derive reality—the object of a judicial procedure, or the cause, the lawsuit itself (la cause elle-même), so that for the ancients the accused bore the name reus because the magistrates summoned him to appear. As if the only human reality came from the courts alone. Reality weighs on Sisyphus only through the court that sentences him. Positive law precludes or conceals natural law. The rock falls because the sentence came down.

And yet it moves. Giordano Bruno, Galileo and many others in history forced the passage from causes to things, precisely before and in spite of the courts, against the assemblies. They substituted the law of physics for the rules of the praetor and “the law”. And for the guilty king condemned to hell, a ball that rolls lawfully on a sloping plane. The cause forgot things, the thing will abandon causes, except for those which are succeeded by simple effects.

The myth of Sisyphus, sage or scholar with a reviled name, stages the archaeology of falling bodies. The rock falls all by itself, no one guilty any longer. (Michel Serres, Statues)

IV

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 40⁰ 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 40⁰ C, so it moves its regulation to a more suitable 34⁰ 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. (James Lovelock, The Revenge of Gaia)

¹ The French version of this paper is to be published in *Raisons Politiques*.