The Simian Redemption

Bridging the divide between humanity and nature

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The simian redemption

> "You don't know nothing, but you don't need to know. The wisdom's in the trees, not the glass windows". – Jack Johnson[1]

A lot of theories have surfaced in the relatively new millennium concerning the human species' relationship to the planet it calls home. Historically, the mechanized view on nature advocated in the 17th century Scientific Revolution is criticized by ecological movements as alienating humanity from its origins. With the advent of the clock for example, man started measuring time according to its own inventions, exempting the sun of this function. Likewise, the clock became a metaphor for the machinery of nature, and "God" became a passive clockmaker who wound his invention at the point of creation only to let it tick towards unknown eternities by itself. Thus began the burgeoning dominance of Western scientific modernity, with its instrumentalist view on nature's processes and resources, on a scale earlier civilizations never envisioned.[2]

Throughout this assignment I reflect on humanity's separation from nature, using several different disciplines: evolutionary theory, history, phenomenology, Gaia theory, animism and biochemistry. The assignment as a whole addresses how recent ecological discoveries and disruptions might alter modern humanity's felt relationship with the rest of the biosphere, as simian mammals *of* the planet, rather than gods *on* Earth.

First I shed light on some evolutionary aspects of the human species. For this I draw in large part on Mark Rowland's reflections on the simian animal in *The philosopher and the wolf*. Secondly, I construct a historically modern context, highlighting the main causes of today's civilizational degradation of both mental and physical ecology. Next, I reflect on deep green and alternative methods for reconnecting our modern-day simian animal with nature, focusing on sensory phenomenology and humanity's co-dependence with the biosphere as a whole. Lastly I summarize by weaving the three parts together and conclude with a planetary orientation.

The ultimate predator

"Take your stinking paws off me you damn dirty ape!"[3]

The nature of the exclusively simian intelligence seems to be based in scheming and lying, with hierarchies arranged according to the individual's capacity to outmaneuver one's neighbors in social games of power. This sort of intelligence developed in accordance with the need to deceive others before one was deceived, an arms-race of manipulation. Understanding, intellect and creativity came later as a result of this. Mark Rowlands make these conclusions in light of Frans de Waal's study of chimpanzee group dynamic in *Chimpanzee politics*[4], where intricate games are played for alpha dominion of the group. One of the situations goes as follows: Luit flashes his erect penis to a female chimp, with his back to Nikkie, the official alpha. As Nikkie gets to his feet, Luit takes a few casual steps away from the female, keeping track of Nikkie while maintaining both erection and cover. As Nikkie picks up a heavy stone and moves in, Luit looks down at his penis, which is slowly losing its erection, then walks towards Nikkie "in an

[1] Jack Johnson, *Breakdown,* In between dreams album (2005)
[2] Steven Shapin, *Den vitenskapelige revolusjonen* (1996), p. 37, 38, 39
[3] Rise of the planet of the apes (2011): http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1318514/quotes
[4] Mark Rowlands, *The philosopher and the wolf (*2008), p. 67

impressive demonstration of just what a ballsy chimp he is" only to sniff the stone and leave Nikkie alone with the female.[5]

Compared to other species, sex plays a dominant role in the simian mind. For instance, alpha wolves have sex once or twice a year, and the pleasure experienced is a direct consequence of the drive to reproduce. The ape on the other hand has inverted this relationship, where reproduction is an occasional and often inconvenient result of the hunt for pleasure. Thus, deception forms instinctual patterns of behavior for apes in much of their social life. Aristotelian, Cartesian and Freudian understanding of human thought divide basic desires and rational intellect, with the latter elevating humans from the rest of nature. Rowlands bridges the divide in claiming that "rationality is, in part, a consequence of our drive to acquire pleasure".[6]

However, the greater the deceptions, still greater the risks. The sort of malicious prosecution Nikkie had in mind for Luit's potential scheme is not found in other animals. Whereas other animals may fight and even kill each other, it is crimes of passion, not calculated punishment in cold blood. Nikkie's stone proves premeditated intention, the difference between manslaughter and murder in a modern day court of law. Luit's deception worked where simple submission would have cost him his life. Aforethought malice is indeed an endemic feature of simian character.[7]

Landscape designers and realtors understand intuitively that potential buyers want to have a high view of open terrain, preferably close by water in some shape or form. This is exclusively aesthetic — not practical — but buyers will pay what they can afford to live like this. In other words, people pay more to live in environments that imitate the ones our species developed in through millions of years in Africa, where social status was decided by the height of one's tree-branch and subsequent view.[8]

It's easy to romanticize prehistoric and indigenous people, given their apparent harmonic lifestyles with nature. Often with animistic reverence for nature, and a courage few civilized humans can hope to embody, they are nostalgically viewed as our common ancestry, a remnant of humanity's instinctive relationship to the flora and fauna of the Earth. However, it is important to nuance the perspective. About 13.000 years ago an explosion of extinctions occurred in North America. By the beginning of the Holocene epoch, still going strong today, nearly 40 species had disappeared. Small fur-bearing creatures seem untouched, but the megafauna had taken a massive toll. Giant armadillos, short-faced bears nearly double the size of today's grizzlies, huge beavers, dire-wolves, mammoths, American varieties of camels, the saber-toothed tiger, etc. All gone. Paleoecologist Paul Martin theorize that the great migrations of humans correlate with these extinctions. The theory, which was dubbed *Blitzkrieg*, contends that the megafauna didn't have any reason to fear the newly arrived humans as predators. The human pioneers had by then learned to make spears and other weapons out of wood and stones, and could simply surround the various packs of megafauna without alarming them for fight or flight.[9]

That primitive humans hunted big game for more food is a given, but the systematic annihilation of all these mythic-sounding species can make one think of Agent Smith's infamous quote from *The Matrix*:

[5] Rowlands, *The philosopher and the wolf*, p. 73, 74
[6] Rowlands, *The philosopher and the wolf*, p. 76
[7] Rowlands, *The philosopher and the wolf*, p. 77, 78
[8] Edward O. Wilson, *Morgenbladet*: http://morgenbladet.no/ideer/2012/om_kunstenes_opprinnelse#.U0Ues3Y4Xcs
[9] Alan Weisman, *The world without us* (2007), p. 69, 72

> Every mammal on this planet instinctively develops a natural equilibrium with the surrounding environment, but you humans do not. You move to an area and you multiply and multiply until every natural resource is consumed and the only way you can survive is to spread to another area. There is another organism on this planet that follows the same pattern. Do you know what it is? A virus.[10]

As Martin concludes: "I can't imagine a more appropriate setting to describe what amounts to genocide. (…) They were all exterminated, simply because it could be done."[11]

These examples are not meant to be misanthropic or advocate any sort of biological determinism, where humans are imprisoned in manipulative and genocidal behavioral patterns. They are meant to remind us of our species' behavioral tendencies, be it within civilization or out in the "wild". Given that humans share 98 % genes with modern day chimps[12], such examples may mirror the fact that humans are mammalian primates, and often act accordingly. Embarrassed by our simian cousins, we strive to put greater distance between us and them by building up our rational arrogance.

Anthropocentrism is instinctive to most modern people, whose logic lie in the fact that every species prioritize its own kind. However, if humanity indeed is the supreme species of the planet, it cannot per definition reflect upon itself in the same tribalist manner as other species. The truly mature thing to do is acknowledge and respect our heritage, not to live in denial. Only then can we ever hope to become the magnanimous species we so desperately imagine ourselves to be.

The ecology of modernity

"It's useless to wait. For a breakthrough, for revolution, the nuclear apocalypse or a social movement. To go on waiting is madness. The catastrophe is not coming, it is here. We are already situated within the collapse of a civilization. It is within this reality that we must choose sides."[13]

Modernity's intellectual and political paradigm is highly influenced by respectively Renè Descartes and Thomas Hobbes. Descartes was a pioneer of the aforementioned Scientific Revolution, and is most famous for theorizing the mechanization of nature and the duality of mind and body. Like Aristotle before him, Descartes claimed that non-human animals were comparable to programmed machines, and empathy for such creatures was consequently seen as redundant. What set humans above the rest of the biosphere for Descartes was our rational minds, which exists in an elevated dimension to that of nature.[14]

> In the political sphere, Hobbes claimed that all of civilization was the result of a social contract made between humans fed up with living in the chaos of nature, where life was defined by constant war and lawlessness. In the natural state, human lives were "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short".[15]

[10] The Matrix (1999): http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0133093/quotes
[11] Weisman, *The world without us*, p. 82
[12] Jared Diamond, *The third chimpanzee (*1992), p. 23
[13] The Invisible committee, *The coming insurrection* (2009), p. 96
[14] David Abram, *The spell of the sensuous* (1996), p. 48
[15] Rowlands, *The philosopher and the wolf,* p. 121

Modern political thought is thus founded on the notion that civilization is humanity's escape from the vicious wild of nature, and our development of society is a way of climbing the tree to safety.

However, as Rowland states with humanity's obsession with power in mind, contracts are made with those who can either help or hurt you, people with agendas. According to Hobbes, primitive humans exchanged parts of their freedom for the security of a Leviathan's law and order, a deliberate sacrifice for anticipated gain. A classically simian loophole in the contract is thus revealed: not to sell one's freedom, but to make others believe you have, because image is everything.[16] Hobbes believed that "men are in incessant struggle for power over others"[17], but his theoretical contract never put a stop to it – the game just took on an unprecedented level of sophistication. "Wildness or civilization: which is really red in tooth and claw?"[18]

> Today, the human species has taken it upon itself to consume as much of the planet's resources as it possibly can – and in a hurry. The devoted disciples of market liberalism remain in denial of ecological realities on a finite planet – metaphorically climbing the hierarchical tree trunk in a race for a better view and favor with a fictional alpha Leviathan.[19]

And in the process, there are terrifyingly many innocent victims.

Half the planet's cultivable soil and forests are destroyed. The former degraded at a rate of 25 million acres a year, and the latter vanishing at a rate of 130 square miles annually.[20] The Amazon rainforest loses the size of a football field every two seconds[21], and only 20 percent of its accompanying *cerrado* savannahs are still intact after decades of degradation by unsustainable monocultural food production.[22] Humans use 50% of the biosphere's fresh water, 80 % of which goes to agriculture[23]- who in turn pollute rivers with dangerous fertilizers and use pesticides which kill off millions of ecologically essential bees.[24] In addition, farmers, manufacturers, supermarkets and consumers in the West discard up to half of their food, enough to feed the world's hungry at least three times over.[25] Agricultural production thus boasts responsibility for nearly one tenth of the West's greenhouse gas emissions growing food that will never be eaten![26]

25 % of coral reefs, atolls and cays are ruined, and half the remaining ones are in danger beyond recovery within the next 30 years.[27] Between 2006 and 2012 China and India built 800 new coal-fired power plants[28], while CO2 levels in the atmosphere are at its highest in 440.000 years. Earth's ozone layer was formed over 3.5 billion years, and the human caused hole in it hit

[16] Rowlands, *The philosopher and the wolf,* p. 120–126
[17] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*(1651, Penguin Classics translation 1985), p. 183
[18] Rowlands, *The philosopher and the wolf*, p. 124 — 126
[19] Patrick Curry, *Ecological Ethics (*2011), p. 21
[20] Curry, *Ecological Ethics,* p. 18, 19
[21] Nasjonal Digital Læringsarena: http://ndla.no/nb/node/25468
[22] http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/apr/11/meat-industry-food
[23] Curry, *Ecological Ethics,* p. 17, 18
[24] LeMonde diplomatique *Miljøatlas* (2009), p. 16
[25] Al Jazeera English: http://www.aljazeera.com/video/europe/2013/04/20134631924285553.html
[26] Tristram Stuart, *Waste* (2009), Back cover
[27] Curry, *Ecological Ethics*, p. 17, 18
[28] Fareed Zakaria, *The post-American world (*2008), p. 31

a record of four square km in 2006.[29] From 1970–2003 researchers saw a 31% terrestrial decline in biodiversity. 12 % of bird species and 25 % mammalians will be gone at this rate in 30 years. 200 species are extinct every day, giving humanity the Medal of Honor for singlehandedly — directly and indirectly[30] — causing the sixth greatest extinction in Earth's history.[31]

> In addition to the irreversible degradation of Earth's physical ecology, humanity's mental ecology is being polluted and strained by consumer-targeted marketing. Ubiquities commercialism haunts both urban and rural humans, stimulating homogenized thinking.[32]

Each of the human brain's 100 billion or so neurons can make between 1.000 and 10.000 synaptic connections with each other, which result in incomprehensibly complex patterns of behavior.[33] It seems our subconscious minds make most of our decisions, and our perplexed simian consciousness then spends time justifying them, a fact the marketing gurus knows well. In the US alone they have over 90 neuro-marketing consultancies.[34] "[Psychology is] a science wherein the psyche has itself been reified into an 'object'".[35]

In 2004 marketing companies worldwide spent more than $200 billion on advertising. That adds up to about 3.500 sales-shots at our conscious and sub-conscious attention every day, one for every 15 seconds of our waking lives.[36] Often erotically aggressive and aimed at creating material needs, critics claim it's an industry with one overriding message: we do not yet have all we need to be satisfied. Humanity's simian instincts are still programmed to fear scarcity and gather information – clear winners in the game of evolution – but ultimately made more sense in the trees and Neolithic villages than in modern day megamalls.[37]

The sensuous connection

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."[38]

Of course, anthropocentric ethics didn't begin at the dawn of modernity, but is a fundamental aspect of civilization as we know it through written history. The focus of ethics should concern holistic entities, which can be seen as various complementary "wholes". A tree is an entity comprised of unnumbered smaller component "wholes", just as a forest is made up of trees.[39] An ecosystem is always inter-dependent with larger versions of the same dynamics, and so in this

[29] LeMonde diplomatique *Miljøatlas*, p. 50

[30] Everything is direct when the planetary biosphere is seen as a whole in itself, which I will return to in «Planetary consciousness».

[31] Curry, *Ecological Ethics*, p. 16, Derrick Jensen, *Deep Green Resistance (2011),* p. 21

[32] Adbusters, *Whole Brain Catalog (*2010), p. 15, 16

[33] Adbusters, *Whole Brain Catalog*, p. 5

[34] John Naish, *Enough* (2009), p. 20, 21

[35] Abram, *The spell of the sensuous*, p. 35

[36] John Naish, *Enough*, p. 15, 19

[37] John Naish, *Enough*, p. 3, 8, 10

[38] Henry David Thoreau. (n.d.). BrainyQuote.com. Retrieved April 1, 2014, from BrainyQuote.com Web site: http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/h/henrydavid107665.html

[39] For more on «wholes» I recommend Arthur Koestler's «The roots of coincidence»

sense you might call the biosphere as a whole one big ecosystem. "The whole Ecosphere is even more significant and consequential [than its human part]: more inclusive, more complex, more integrated, more creative, more beautiful, more mysterious, and older than time."[40] This is the position of deep-green ecocentric parts of today's ecological movements, which is elaborated on in this chapter.[41]

> Ecocentric perspectives reject assumptions based on the idea that some or all natural beings have independent moral status.[42]

The interconnectedness of the biosphere makes separation between hunter and prey irrelevant within the biospheric equilibrium. In opposition to Cartesian dualism, Hobbesian fear-laden sense of security and Aristotelian logic, which are based on the law of identity and contradiction, ecocentrism is founded on paradoxical logic. Common to Eastern Taoism and Zen-Buddhism, paradoxical logic "assumes that A and non-A do not exclude each other."[43] Conventional modern minds often perceive the grand nature of dynamic polarity – life/death, up/down, active/passive, plus/minus – not as a game *of* black and white, but "instead, we play the game of black *versus* white".[44]

> David Abram uses phenomenology as a method to reconnect humans with their forgotten origins. By dismissing Cartesian duality, he guides the rationally confused human back into its holistic animal body, focusing on its sentient means of entering into relation with nature. Through the perspective of our animal selves, the entire material world itself seems to come alive.[45]

Recognizing that whatever we may sense in the woods reciprocally senses us back, creates an understanding for intersubjective phenomena. For Abram, the boundaries of a living body are open and indeterminate, "more like membranes than barriers". By enabling the use of mirror-neurons and associative empathy, phenomena are thus shared with other centers of experience.[46]

Unlike conventional modern scientific methods, Abram calls for explanations of the world not from the *outside*, but *within* it. To reiterate my starting point: to be *of* the planet, not *on* it. The trees are the lungs of the earth, breathing in carbon dioxide while breathing out oxygen, in direct polarity to humans. "Oxygen gets you high"[47], and meditation is in its essence a matter of filling the body with oxygen. Thusly, the biosphere doesn't just describe the surface of Earth, but includes the whole atmosphere – a "whole" Abram has coined "Eairth". This term includes the air we breathe and trees produce in the concept of our home planet.[48] Within this perspective, it would not be odd to say that humans exist *within* the Earth, or to view birds as swimming in an invisible ocean of air.

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[40] Curry, *Ecological Ethics*, p. 57
[41] Curry, *Ecological Ethics*, p. 54, 94
[42] Curry, *Ecological Ethics*, p. 93
[43] Erich Fromm, *The art of loving* (1995), p. 57
[44] Alan Watts, *The Book (*1989), p. 35 (my emphasis)
[45] Abram, *The spell of the sensuous*, p. 65
[46] Abram, *The spell of the sensuous*, p. 37,46
[47] Tyler Durden in *Fight Club (*1999): http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0137523/quotes
[48] Abram, *The spell of the sensuous*, p. 46, 47

The body's actions are never wholly determinate, since it continually adjusts itself to a terrain that is constantly on the move.[49] Existence is a participation in the activity of the world, and by lending the impressive force of human imagination to things, the nature of life reveals itself more fully. In such a light, there is no wonder why indigenous peoples all over the world often have an animistic reverence for trees, rivers or the Earth as a whole – what ecocentric people now might call the "Gaia-hypothesis".[50] The followers of this hypothetical superorganism are not intent on making everything global, but recognizes that all locals are globally connected.[51] As Abram suggest: "We might as well say that we are organs of this world".[52]

> The very last footnote in *The Spell of the Sensuous* seems to imply that animism never left humanity, it just metamorphosed into viewing alphabetic letters and logos as the new symbols of deity. Rather than a rational account of animism, Abram thus posits an animistic account of rationality.[53]

Following this line of thought, the grand ideology of modernity is seen as an animistic religion, with devoted disciples waiting in line for days and hours for the next generation of passively consumable technology. Techno-science is now integral to both industry and government, which are becoming ever closer. In the global North, it has now become so powerful and dogmatic as to constitute, in effect, a secular religion with its own powerful and democratically unaccountable elite.[54] As Erich Fromm articulates it: "Man projects his own powers and skills into the things he makes, and thus in an alienated fashion worships his prowess, his possessions."[55]

Planetary consciousness (summary)

"To survive some say we need to heed indigenous people. Perhaps what we also need is to be indigenous, people: Do we belong to planet Earth or an alien invasion? A decision that might decide our human fate – good evening."[56]

In lieu of the many different examples in this paper, I will now summarize and clarify the different perspectives. First, we were confronted with the fact that humans are a mammalian species, with some character-traits that may be hard to swallow. Secondly, the philosophical, scientific and political rationale of modernity, still going strong today, are revealed as the tenets of humanity's separation from nature. The ecological consequences of this are then laid bare. These two chapters are meant to produce both humility for the evolutionary aspect, and the rage and/or grief of a struggling planet.

> The third chapter sought to produce hope and love. In light of the devastation articulated in chapter two, deep-green perspectives have an "urgency matched only by the extent it is ignored."[57]

[49] Abram, *The spell of the sensuous*, p. 49
[50] Abram, *The spell of the sensuous*, p. 58
[51] Michiel Schwartz, *Sustainism,* p. 46
[52] Abram, *The spell of the sensuous*, p. 68
[53] Abram, *The spell of the sensuous*, p. 303
[54] Curry, *Ecological Ethics*, p. 24
[55] Fromm, *The art of loving*, p. 50
[56] Rap News, *War on terra, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RM3W5XBrVEA*
[57] Curry, *Ecological Ethics*, p. 94

By combining sensuous love with the horror of modernity and humility of evolution, we climb the tree to get a better view of the situation. Thus we can start to orient ourselves in the natural and mental landscape that is our lives, analyze what sort of epoch we are alive within, and consequently what role we are going to play in it.

> The term "planetary consciousness" can be understood in two ways. One is the perspective of sensuous orientation, acknowledging oneself as a species on a planet rotating on its axis; not settling for seeing a banana-shaped moon, but envisioning its three-dimensionality when it reflects the set sun. The other is the perspective of the planet as a superorganism, an all-encompassing Ecosphere capable of reacting to stimuli; a living entity full of cells that can themselves decide whether to be healing or cancerous.

As mentioned earlier, we may be embarrassed by our distant chimp cousins. But whenever we become aware of such thoughts, we should immediately flip the board: maybe they are embarrassed by us? Basic psychology suggests that humans project its own flaws onto others. Maybe our rationally arrogant distance from our origins in reality is arrogant rationality?

In closing, I will quote an animistic technique for connecting to the phenomenal field (the druids of ancient Britain called the tree spirits *dryads)*: "A powerful technique, if the *dryad* allows it, involves breathing in as the *dryad* breathes out and vice-versa, forming a mutual energetic exchange."[58]

[58] Danu Forest, *Nature spirits*, p. 30. The author is a Celtic shaman.

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