Perfection and Disaster

> The tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again. In their eternal calm he finds himself.
> Emerson, "Nature"

What's the sense in talking about moral or political perfectionism in a world facing cataclysmic environmental collapse? At what kind of *perfection* might one aim in a world fundamentally out of balance: a world of mass extinction and dwindling biodiversity, collapsing ecosystems, super-sized droughts and storms, extreme heat waves, rising and rapidly warming and acidifying oceans and seas, massive displaced populations, increasingly limited access to clean water and adequate food, spreading pandemic disease, and the economic collapse and political chaos that such cascading disasters will bring in their wake?[1] There are, I know, good reasons to think such questions misguided. Perfectionism isn't about becoming *perfect*, or living a perfect life--it's about perfect*ing* oneself, realizing one's capacities and talents as much as possible, finding one's voice, becoming what or who one is.[2] This general project would seem to

[1] I assume that these will be the result of our failure to meet the Paris climate accord goals and avoid not just two degrees of warming by the end of the century but three or four. I take this failure to be overdetermined: the worse the crisis becomes, the less able we shall be to address it. Even if it is not too late now to avoid disaster by any means short of completely stilling our carbon-based economy, the need to devote limited financial resources to immediate problems (e.g., flooding cities) and growing numbers of climate refugees will together exacerbate the current tendency towards the formation of reactionary governments least likely to address long-term problems. For good accounts of the latter—of what we have prepared for ourselves, largely within our own lifetimes--see Wallace-Wells 2019: cf. Ripple 2019 and Read and Alexander 2019. As Read notes, Wallace-Wells seems unable to face up to the implications of his own discussion. See in this regard his plainly false inference, "If humans are responsible for the problem, they must be capable of undoing it." Read and Alexander 2019, 86 and Wallace-Wells 2019, 220.

[2] I follow Stanley Cavell's practice of using the term *perfectionism* to name a set of exemplars, and not a set of stable criteria that might together make up a definition. Cavell 1990, 4. In this essay, those exemplars include Cavell, Emerson, Dewey, Aristotle, More, Thoreau, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Lucretius, Hegel, Marx, and Marcus Aurelius. I focus on Emerson and Cavell and, more generally, modern Romantic

be as intelligible and attractive in a collapsing world as it is in a stable or "developing" one, for at least a few reasons. However incomplete one's self-realization might be, it is an inherent good that brings other important goods in its wake, including the ability to help others in dark times and to endure such times oneself, to turn them to maximum advantage. And we are hardly the only ones to live through dark times. The disaster for aboriginal Americans that was the arrival of Europeans in number on these shores, the sacking of Rome by the Goths, the Black Death of 14th century Europe—such crises surely occasioned deep hopelessness in many, a sense of the closing of the future. Even today, for those who live outside (or underneath) the islands of prosperity that dot the industrial and post-industrial world, life is quite different than it looks in most of our seminars—certainly my own. It is with good reason that Stanley Cavell speaks of Emersonian Perfectionism as assuming "good enough" justice (Cavell 1990, 3.). But that assumption, I think, must be taken as applying to the hopes of one's fullest achievement, or to the apportionment of one's efforts, and not to the perfectionist demand as such. It is not as if the need to achieve one's own voice only becomes real when one's bank account reaches a certain level—as if only the characters in Woody Allen films were faced with perfectionist demands. Indeed, the perfectionist Hellenistic philosophies that Pierre Hadot has so illuminated for us are driven in large part by a sense of the world's deeply *in*hospitable nature: peace or *ataraxia* was so hard to come by that achieving it became a life's work, around which philosophical communities could form. Finally, however grim our prospects may be, perfectionism's appeal as an ethical account--partial or otherwise[3]-

perfectionism, which emphasizes our ties to one another and the healing and the transformative experience of nature in a manner that earlier perfectionists did not.

[3] Cavell sees perfectionism "not [as] a competing theory of the moral life, but something like a dimension or tradition of the moral life that spans the course of Western thought and concerns what used to be called

-retains its advantages. In particular, it does not require us to posit or demonstrate a freestanding authority such as natural or divine law to introduce moral force into our world; we need little more to get started than the thought that we are not yet what or who we really are--that the real is not yet the actual—and that we desire that this were otherwise.[4] Given the current state of reality, one might think that this at least offers some room for hope.

But one might still feel—*I* still feel—that the question I have raised retains its troubling force. Perfectionism, after all, is not just about self-realization, it is about *eudaimonia*, happiness, human flourishing, leading *a good life*. If the aspiration to realize one's capacities as fully as possible is equally intelligible regardless of the circumstances, the aspiration to flourish or enjoy any kind of good life is not. Consider Tadeusz Borowski's semi-autobiographical depiction of life in the camps of Auschwitz and Dachau in "This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentleman." There is something truly obscene about speaking of *flourishing* or being happy *in any way* in such a world, with its

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the state of one's soul." Cavell 1990, 2. In his classic study, *Perfectionism*, Thomas Hurka defends what he calls pure perfectionism, but repeatedly alludes to the possibility of incorporating perfectionist claims into a "pluralist morality." Hurka 1993, 6.

[4] Moral theories that rely upon "objective" goods struggle as religious belief recedes from the center of public life and societies become increasingly pluralistic. Perfectionism avoids this problem by focusing upon self-realization: the good life is one in which the agent develops her talents and abilities and achieves a desirable character that manifests itself concretely in practice. Here the subjective does not submit to the objective, but rather transforms itself. For some perfectionists, that desired character is a stable ensemble of talents and drives that can in principle be fully achieved. In Plato's *Republic*, the ideal is the healthy person, the constitution of whose *psyche* is in accordance with nature; in such a person, reason or "the human being within" governs desire with the aid of fighting spirit—a tripartite hierarchy that is reflected in the *polis* that has the proper *politeia* or constitution. Plato 1968, 444d and 589a. In Aristotle, the good life for which the *polis* exists is one that allows for the realization of our nature, including the virtues or excellences of thought and of character and, more fundamentally, the ability to reason in speech. In principle, we might "reach our complete perfection" in such things. Aristotle 1995, 10 and Aristotle 1985, 34. In contrast, for Dewey, perfection is found in a process, not a terminus: "not perfection as a final goal, but the ever-enduring process of perfecting, maturing, refining is the aim in living." Dewey 1920, 177. Here the character one develops is first and foremost one capable of future growth. Likewise, the agent of Cavell's Emersonian Perfectionism is always on the way, perpetually open to further crises and conversions. I take the contrast between the real and the actual from Hegel, whose ethical thought is essentially perfectionist. See Wood 1990. I discuss Cavell's Emersonian Perfectionism in the fifth chapter of Norris 2017.

senseless cruelty and interminable forced compromises and betrayals of self and other.[5] It might well have been impossible for an ancient perfectionist like Aristotle to imagine such horror, but the thought that we are deeply vulnerable to fortune would hardly be news to him. As Jonathan Lear notes, "for the ancient Greeks, . . . if one were deprived of the opportunity to live well, nothing could compensate for that. They were thus obsessed by the notion of fate or chance" (Lear 1988, 153). Aristotle himself remarks, "life includes many reversals of fortune, good and bad, and the most prosperous person may fall into terrible disaster in old age, as the Trojan stories tell us about Priam; but if someone has suffered these sorts of misfortunes and come to a miserable end, no one counts him happy" (Aristotle 1985, 23).

Our own disastrous misfortune is less the result of luck or chance than it is the product of a long series of decisions driven, for the most part, by the desire for easy living and profitable short-term capital investment, with the occasional insane five-year plan thrown in for good measure.[6] But it is no less fatal for all that. The bad luck our children had to be born *our* children, in the world we have wrought for them, is plainly much worse than our own; and that of their children and grandchildren will be much, much worse—so much worse that, except for the wealthiest and most sheltered among them, it is almost too painful to contemplate. And, even for those lucky few, the sheer callousness and disregard to the suffering of thousands that will be required to get through the day will be a horrible misfortune that may well make any recognizable

[5] Borowski's account of the death camps differs from the more famous account of Primo Levi in the intensity of his self-disgust for the degradations that were forced upon him—in this case his unsparing portrait of the way the members of "Canada," the labor gang that stripped incoming inhabitants of their goods, genuinely enjoyed the food and luxuries they stole. As the narrator grimly notes, "our Canada . . . smells not of maple forests but of French perfume." Borowski 1976, 30.

[6] As many have noted, capitalism's need for economic *growth* is intimately tied to our reliance on carbon driven technology. Some speculate that the latter is in fact the enabling condition of modern capitalism. Cf. Latour 2018.

human flourishing quite impossible. The awful contortions we currently make, turning the page on reports of yet another mass disaster, or sitting in the car with our children at the stoplight on the freeway offramp while a homeless person begs outside the window, may ultimately pale by comparison.[7] At some point fairly soon, our own suffering and our necessary blindness to the suffering of others may well make it impossible for us to speak of aspiring in any sense to moral perfection—though, of course, one will still be able to be kinder, more (or less) thoughtful, increasingly courageous, and so on.[8]

I take this to follow from the nature of moral perfectionism's aspiration, its concern with one's life and character *as a whole*. Cavell rightly contrasts perfectionism and its focus on "the state of one's soul" with both deontological and teleological moral theories (Cavell 1990, 2). Though they need not, such theories can limit themselves to the consideration of discrete acts: fulfilling one's duty to tell the truth, or assiduously working over the course of the day towards the end of the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Perfectionism cannot compartmentalize acts in this way, as it always addresses the person as a whole: who am *I*? how can I find and speak in *my* own voice? how can I find *my* way? how can I redeem and fully live *my life*? In the terms of Dewey's great 1893 essay, "Self-Realization as the Moral Ideal," perfectionism resists *abstraction* in thought and deed as much as it does vice or sloth (Dewey 1893, 656-7).[9]

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[7] Such comparisons may themselves already bespeak a loss of moral compass—one driven for the most part not by subjective depravity, but objective horror. Nathaniel West's 1933 anti-Dostoyevskian novella, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, is a brilliant exploration of the impossibility in modern society of choosing between moral compromise and a decent sensitivity to the suffering of others.

[8] The reference to Aristotle may suggest that I go too far here. Aristotle wrote of achieving perfection in the context of a slave society; and most human societies have been slave societies. Surely the two are not incompatible? But this ignores the fact that we know that slavery is wrong. Could we wish to unlearn this, or for our descendants to do so? I myself find this quite impossible. Indeed, this is part of what I mean when I say that I know that slavery is wrong.

[9] Dewey uses the same example that we shall see Emerson use, that of the seeing eye, though his use of it is slightly different.

Perfectionism in its concern for growth insists upon the *concrete*. I have argued elsewhere that one of the things that makes perfectionism politically significant in our time is that it confronts a neoliberal ideology of abstraction, one that demands that we think not of *our* satisfaction, but of the satisfactions of *our desires*: does the regulated state of the "free market" offer the best prospect for the realization of your desire for apples or oranges, or i-phones or insurance? The answer that is pressed upon us is, of course, the market (Norris 2019). But, as Thomas More noted 500 years ago in the eminently perfectionist text, *Utopia*, the good life "according to nature" is not one in which *our desires* are satisfied, but in which *we* are satisfied. Of what the Utopians describe as "false pleasures," Raphael Hythloday remarks, "They often please the senses, and in this way are like pleasure, but that does not alter their basic nature" (More 2011, 60 and 64). To be truly natural, they must satisfy not just the senses, but *the person*—the person of varied senses, who carries various and frequently conflicting desires, needs, hopes, and fears, whose life is temporally and socially extended, and who can aspire to not just satisfaction, but "health" (More 2011, 64). The recognition of nature, including one's own, goes well beyond the measuring of desires in the quantified terms of the market.

This appeal to nature is hardly peculiar to Utopia, and it is central to the most truly important modern and contemporary perfectionist writings. As soon as Thomas Hurka, the leading contemporary scholar of perfectionism, completes his 1993 study of that name, he turns to the problem of climate change, arguing that perfectionism extends moral claims to non-human nature and supports strong "environment-centered" arguments for the care of such nature (Hurka 1993a and Hurka 1993b, 32). And, as

Russell Goodman and others have demonstrated, natural experience and natural beauty play a crucial role in the perfectionism of the Romantics and the American Transcendentalists. In his great early essay, "Nature," Emerson echoes the point just made about abstraction and concretion: "To speak truly," he writes, "few adult people can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other." He goes on to recount in a famous passage what such love feels like. "Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the point of fear" (Emerson 2003, 38). Burke and Kant would name this the experience of the sublime, though both would be surprised that such a setting could inspire it. Is such an experience possible standing beside a lake or sea in which one once swam with pleasure, but that is now clogged with toxic algae, unsafe to enter, its shore littered with stinking dead fish? Could this too be a "tranquil landscape" of a sort? One might be tempted to answer, "yes." After all, the woods of which Emerson writes, the common he crosses, were not untouched by human hands. The original old growth forest was probably long gone before Thoreau built his cabin on Emerson's land at Walden Pond. If what was there in its place can nevertheless be nature, why not the algae-filled lake? But this seems to miss the fact that the loving experience of nature—truly seeing the sun—requires *outward* as well as inward senses. It matters *what* we see, not just that there is something there that we might name *nature*, or *world*.[10] "In the woods," Emerson writes, "we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing

[10] "Nature satisfies by its loveliness." Emerson 2003, 43.

can befall me in life,--no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair" (Emerson 2003, 38-9). How can one receive such a blessing if one can no longer go into the woods because they are gone, victims of drought and fire, themselves having suffered a calamity that we have prepared for them?

The beauty and sublimity of nature, the delight it gives Emerson's eyes, is crucial to the transformative quality of its experience; as is its stability, the fact that, until very recently, it has changed at a much slower rate than an individual person does, such that we can *return* to it, and, in it, "return to reason and faith." To appreciate this, we might contrast Emerson's account of the feeling of invulnerability that his own return gives him to Wittgenstein's account, in his early "Lecture on Ethics," of the experience "of feeling *absolutely safe*" (Wittgenstein 1993, 41). The similarities between the two are plain enough; but so are the differences: for Emerson, the feeling of utter safety is found *in the woods*; for Wittgenstein, who explicitly contrasts the experience he discusses with "the sensation of taking a walk on a fine summer's day," it is experienced anywhere and nowhere at all (Wittgenstein 1993, 41). Like the experience of wonder at the very existence of the world, of which it is a kind of "synonym," Wittgenstein's experience of absolute safety expresses an "absolute," not a relative judgment, one that lacks what he describes as a "*natural* meaning," pointing as it does to the "miraculous"—or, in the terms of the *Tractatus*, the mystical (Wittgenstein 1993, 38, 39, 40, and 43 and Wittgenstein 1982, 6.521). It is an affirmation of existence as such, one that Wittgenstein himself elsewhere compares to Heidegger's guiding thought, and to important moments in Kierkegaard (Waismann 1967, 68-9).[11] But to affirm *existence* is not to affirm

[11] This is true of aesthetics as well, as, according to the *Tractatus*, "aesthetics and ethics are one." Wittgenstein 1982, 6.421. Given Wittgenstein's admiration for Augustine, whom he cites more than

nature.[12] This is connected with the fact that the "Lecture on Ethics" does not advance a perfectionist account of the good.[13] No doubt, this is complicated. Thoreau, who plainly does embrace a perfectionist account of the good, writes in *Walden*, "Any prospect of awakening or coming to life makes indifferent all times and places. The place where that may occur is always the same, and indescribably pleasant to all our senses" (Thoreau 1983, 179).[14] I do not take this to imply that Thoreau's perfectionism does not *really* involve the experience of natural splendor—as if he went to Walden Pond only to get away from the distractions of town life, only to live deliberately, and not to live well—I take it to indicate that Thoreau's views are articulated, and that they require joints if they

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anyone else in the *Philosophical Investigations*, it is possible that his reflections here are influenced by Augustine's argument in the *Confessions* that fear and evil are both evidence of the nihilistic human break from God: "being God, God created good creatures. . . . Then where and whence is evil? How did it creep in? What is its root and what is its seed? Or does it not have any being? Why should we fear and avoid what has no being? If our fear is vain, it is certain that fear itself is evil, and that the heart is groundlessly disturbed and tortured. . . . Yet we still fear. Thus either it is evil which we fear or our fear which is evil." Augustine 1992, 115-6. In the terms of Wittgenstein's "Lecture," the judgment that there is anything to fear is a *relative* one. It is *absolutely* the case that there is nothing to fear. The condition of creation is a minor, indeed, an irrelevant matter. What is crucial not how it is but *that* it exists. To appreciate this, however, requires that one *miraculously* cease think as one does—as a sinful creature whose will turns away from its proper object and whose judgments are for that reason relative.

[12] Emerson reports that our experience of nature can give us the feeling that, "as it were, for the first time *we exist*." He does not report that we are for the first time *aware* of existing. Emerson 2003, 69. Likewise, Wittgenstein reports feeling that he is absolutely safe, while Emerson reports feeling that though he may not be safe from harm, nature will *repair* anything but the loss of his eyes.

[13] Piergiorgio Donatelli has suggested to me that this is mistaken, and that the *Tractatus* is perfectionist in its focus on ethics. It is true that Ludwig Ficker reports Wittgenstein saying that "The book's point is an ethical one," and that this is confirmed by Paul Engelmann. Englemann 1967, 143 and 97. It is, however, also true that there is no indication in the *Tractatus* or the "Lecture" of the kind of character one ought to develop nor by which virtues that character is distinguished. There is not, in other words, a substantive conception of human perfection, however provisional or instrumental, at which a particular set of actions or habituations might aim. In this context it is helpful to consider Lucretius, the second book of whose *On the Nature of Things* begins by depicting the philosopher's situation in terms that anticipate the lines we have been discussing from Emerson and Wittgenstein: "What joy it is, when out at sea the stormwinds are lashing the waters, to gaze from the shore at the heavy stress some other man is enduring! Not that anyone's afflictions are in themselves a source of delight; but to realize from what troubles you yourself are free indeed." Lucretius 1951, 60. For Lucretius this peace is produced by practices that include the detailed consideration of the contrast between our fantasies regarding matters like sex and love and death and the realities of our situation. Donatelli might respond by referring to Hadot's characterization of Lucretius' project: "philosophy consists in knowing how to seek pleasure in a reasonable way. In fact, this means seeking the only genuine pleasure: the pure pleasure of existing." Hadot 2002, 115. But this pleasure requires more than existence: it also requires moderate desires and their moderate satisfaction.

[14] For a good account of Thoreau's "virtue ethics" of "environmental flourishing," see Cafaro 2006.

are to come together as they do. The beauty of nature may help us to awaken to our lives and ourselves, as our awakening may help us to appreciate nature's splendor. But the two are nonetheless distinct. To think otherwise would be, if we return to Emerson, to render one's "outer sense" a moment of one's "inner sense," to make nature a manifestation of one's inner, spiritual harmony. This is a reversal of the more common failing, but it is not the response to it for which Emerson calls. On such an account, the lake one enjoyed as a child that is now clogged with toxic algae is, when seen through the outer eyes of a weary man, fundamentally changed, even destroyed—but, seen as Emerson's child sees it, its essence remains, though the external details or accidents differ, and it offers the same inner warmth and joy. While this plainly has little to do with the responses of actual children, it is a noble, even mystical idea. I can imagine aspiring to it, though I do not. But who could wish for such a thing for one's children, or anyone else's? To be enlightened in a wretched, ugly, and poisonous world is surely better than remaining benighted. But this offers no hope of being *at home* there: there is no hope for finding the "concrete whole" of which we are parts, as our senses and desires are parts of us. There is not yet the *health* which we have seen Utopians seek.

I take Emerson to be exemplary in this regard, but he is hardly alone. The importance of the sensual delight and harmony of nature to Thoreau's thought is plain enough in the title he gives his magnum opus, a book that is rich in detailed, loving investigation of Walden Pond and the woods around it. Nietzsche, the other great lover of Emerson, is equally forthright about the crucial role in the development of his thought played by the alpine village Sils Maria and his daily hikes in the mountains around it. In *Ecce Homo*, the book with the quintessential subtitle, *How One Becomes What One Is*,

Nietzsche sets his reception of his thought of thoughts quite precisely in one of those hikes: "the basic conception of [*Zarathustra*], the idea of the eternal return, the highest formula of affirmation that can possibly be attained, belongs in August of the year 1881. It was jotted down on a piece of paper with the inscription, '6,000 feet beyond man and time.' I was that day walking through the woods beside the lake of Silvaplana. I stopped beside a mighty pyramidal block of stone which reared itself up not far from Surlei. It was there that this idea came to me" (Nietzsche 1989, 295).[15] Zarathustra, of course, preaches from the start, "*remain faithful to the earth*," and his companions on his own mountain are two wild animals (Nietzsche 2006, 6). In his lectures on Nietzsche, Heidegger may break with his illustrious predecessor more that he lets on, but he follows him closely in insisting on maintaining a living connection with nature, in his case in the relatively wild German mountains of the Schwarzwald. And when, in his late *Was Heißt Denken*, the Heideggerian text most celebrated by Cavell for its contributions to perfectionism, Heidegger speaks of the "uncanny" fact "that we must first leap onto the soil on which we really stand," the soil he has in mind is that in which a blooming tree "presents itself," "in all its radiance and fragrance" (Heidegger 1954, 41 and 42). This leap is necessary, he argues, in part because our metaphysical and technological domination of nature has produced only "the decay, the destruction, the imminent annihilation of the world" (Heidegger 1954, 29).[16] In words of Nietzsche's that Heidegger cites again and again, "The wasteland grows," *die Wüste wächst*. Any hope

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[15] I have cited Julian Young's more felicitous translation. The phrase "thought of thoughts" is, I believe, his. Young 2010, 318. Cf. Nietzsche 1989, 256: "these small things—nutrition, place, climate, recreation, the whole casuistry of selfishness—are inconceivably more important than everything one has taken to be important so far."

[16] Heidegger is here citing common claims that he finds superficial. He does not, however, deny that they are accurate as far as they go.

of halting this requires that we heed the call to *think* as we have not thus far, "and, as thinking beings, be those who we are."—"*daß wir denken und so als Denkende diejenigen sind, die wir sind*" (Heidegger 2002, 125). This in turn the entails the *letting be* of the tree: "the thing that matters first and foremost, and finally, is not to drop the tree in bloom, but for once let it stand where it stands. Why do we say 'finally'? Because to this day, thought has never let the tree stand where it stands" (Heidegger 1954, 44).

Might thought let the toxic algae stand where it stands, and in so doing allow the thinker to be who she is? In a way, it seems it must: the toxic algae, too, is a revelation of Being; but, in another way, that seems quite impossible. In part this reflects the difference between Wittgenstein's existence and Emerson's nature, a difference that Heidegger often elides. And in part it reflects the difference between, on the one hand, acknowledging the full sweep of our lives and our activity, including the latter's effects, and, on the other, gratefully receiving something quite different or *other*, something that is not the product of our wills or deeds. I cannot "let stand" the violence I am presently inflicting on the natural world, or on the people with whom I share that world. In the terms of Heidegger's essay on technology, the Rhine cannot at one and the same time be the river celebrated by Hölderlin's hymn of that name and what Heidegger complains "it is now, namely a water power supplier." The "monstrousness" that he says reigns in the latter quite effaces the former (Heidegger, 1977, 16).[17]

I noted above Utopia's concern with the health of the person, a concern I said

[17] For a good account of these matters that relates them to the rise of modern forestry and the corresponding growth of our "nihilistic" inability to appreciate the "useless" but decisive role of "the forest as sanctuary," see Harrison 1992, 123-4; see as well his discussions of Nietzsche and *Zarathustra* on 38-46 and of Heidegger and the provinces on 239 and 246. Perhaps because of his fidelity to Nietzsche and Heidegger, Harrison never mentions the quite similar account of *die Nützlichkeit* in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, a book his own repeatedly echoes.

theories of abstraction such as neoliberalism systematically obscure. How healthy are we today, and how healthy are we likely to become? I myself experience a regular low-level anxiety. Whatever else I might feel, I am aware of a slight depression, of dread at the thought of what is happening and of what is coming. When I read, as I did recently, that, in my lifetime, North America has lost a quarter of its birds, I feel a horrible mix of sorrow, confusion, and panic. I know I am not alone in this. It would be wrong, of course, to attribute all such feelings or the inclination to them to the environmental crisis. It is increasingly obvious that Donald Trump is bad for many people's health, physically as well as spiritually, and the same is no doubt true of Erdoğan and Boris Johnson and the rest of the authoritarian populists. At the same time, all of us have our own private troubles. But the point remains; and the point applies to more than the individual. One of the great attractions of perfectionism is its insistence that the community is every bit as concrete as the individual, and that any worthy individualism must be one that recognizes our deep bonds to and with one another. And our communities are equally unhealthy. Indeed, one feature of the pain this brings me and, I assume, others concerns the communal nature of this crisis. On the one hand, I feel deeply responsible for this. When I look at my young daughters, when I hear them happily planning for their own families, I cannot help but feel that *I* have helped fashion this disaster, that I and my generation have seen fit to leave them and their children such a world and such prospects.[18] But, on the

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[18] Ingerid Straume frames this well by discussing climate crisis in the context of Hannah Arendt's claim, "Anyone who refuses to assume joint responsibility for the world should not have children and must not be allowed to take part in educating them." Straume rightly asks, "how can educators represent, in a responsible and authoritative manner, a life-form—globalized, resource-intensive capitalism—whose basic functions are depleting its own support systems?" Straume 2019, 2, citing Arendt 2006, 186. Straume recommends a more politicized education than that favored by Arendt, one that engages the young with the problems we face. "Hope," she writes, "is nurtured by community; thus knowing about the vast array of organizations working to improve the future of the planet and all who live on it, including organizations initiated by children [such as Greta Thunberg], could be both empowering and comforting." She betrays

other hand, I cannot imagine what I might do to mitigate their suffering and their loss. I can't imagine how the small sacrifices I make and might yet make—eating less meat, driving and flying less, getting an electric car, going solar, etc.—I can't imagine how any of this will do any real good, as necessary as it may be. Some might take this as evidence that my sense of responsibility is misplaced, but I do not. I take it as part of the aporetic quality of our condition. Our communities prove themselves to be real in the effects they leave on our world; and, at the same time, they prove themselves to be unreal in their disconnection from the control of those who make them up. I think this is what Marx (himself a perfectionist) has in mind in his discussion of our alienation from our species being, our *Gattungswesen*--a discussion that ties our alienation from *nature* to our inability to make our collective transformation of it and of ourselves a conscious *work in concert*.[19] A worldwide communist revolution that might adequately address our crisis is, however, not forthcoming. There is no such hope for us.

The environmental catastrophe is often compared to the threat of nuclear war that for some reason provoked more acute anxiety fifty or sixty years ago than it does today. In each case we are confronted with our power to destroy not just ourselves, but our world as a whole, life on this planet as we know it. There are, however, significant differences between the two cases. In that of nuclear war, we are confronted with the possibility of a fairly discrete event, one that would take days or even hours to occur.

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some doubt about this, however, when she writes in her conclusion, "perhaps this is the best that educators of today can do: not to abandon hope, although we ourselves may not have it." Straume 2019, 8 and 10.

[19] "Man is a species being, not only because in practice and in theory he adopts the species as his object (his own as well as those of other things), but—and this is only another way of expressing it—but also because he treats himself as the actual, living species; because he treats himself as a *universal* and therefore a free being (*Wesen*). . . . Man *lives* on nature (*Natur*)—means that nature is his *body*, with which he must remain in continuous intercourse if he is not to die. . . . In estranging man from (1) nature, and (2) himself, his own active functions, his life-activity, estranged labor estranges the *species* from man. It turns for him the life of the species into a means of individual life." Marx 1978, 75 and Marx 1968, 156. Kriss and O'Hagan 2017 develop a similar thought. On Marx's perfectionism, see Hurka 1993a.

One might hope that that event would *not* occur in those days or hours—as it has not, at least up to the point. In the case of the environment, in contrast, we are confronted not with a possible discrete event, but with a future history that will go on and on, in years and decades during which those who follow us will suffer immensely. The light will not suddenly go off, it will dim and dim and dim, as the room becomes more and more oppressive, filthy, crowded, and dangerous. And we know this will happen: it *is* happening. We cannot hope that Ronald Reagan will be sufficiently distracted, or that his better angels will prevail, or that a catastrophic mistake won't be made, as it would have in 1983 but for the quick thinking of the Soviet Air Defenseman Stanlislav Petrov. Our political economy will continue to discourage long-term commitments that are not narrowly self-interested; and whatever changes we manage to make to mitigate or slow this catastrophe will not succeed in warding it off. As we go forward, we will have to live with *this* future; it is in fact part of our present. And, of course, the future is the special concern of modern perfectionists like Emerson, Dewey, and Cavell, as it is the scene of the growth and development and discovery upon which they focus. My duty can be done today, as our pleasure might be maximized; but I and we can grow only as we move into the future that dawns before us—a future that makes room for such growth.[20]

[20] In his fascinating 2012 Berkeley Tanner Lectures, *Death and the Afterlife*, Samuel Scheffler argues that the survival of people after one's own death (what he terms *the collective afterlife*) matters much more to us than we commonly recognize, as it is the condition of our caring for and valuing many of the things we most value. Scheffler does not focus on perfectionism or climate change; and though he writes that the afterlife must be one of societies that are "thriving," "healthy," "just and orderly," and "flourishing," his arguments focus on a more generic survival, and the criteria that determine acceptable survival are not laid out—perhaps because they could not be, in principle. Scheffler 2016, 59, 63, 70, 78. In his lone reference to climate, Scheffler writes, "The reasons we have for attending to the interests of future generation are often conceptualized as obligations of justice. . . . This . . . reinforces our tendency to think that the salient features of our relations to future generations are our power over them and their dependence on us. . . . But the considerations I have been advancing suggest that . . . what is salient is not their dependence on us but our dependence on them. . . . [R]ather than being a source of burdensome obligations, [it] provides us instead with welcome opportunities, for to the extent that the collective afterlife matters more to us than the personal afterlife, it is a stroke of good fortune that it is also more under our control. There are actually

In his widely celebrated book, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*, Roy Scranton recommends that we embrace the bleakness of our future, a future he compares to death. Citing Plato, Cicero, and others in the west and the east who have proposed philosophy as a preparation for death, Scranton reminds us that "each day [is] the death of what came before," that our solar system itself is mortal, and that our capitalistic, carbon-driven civilization has already exhausted its possibilities and is, in a sense, "already dead" (Scranton 2015, 21, 91, 27, 112, 42, and 23). Scranton summarizes the argument of his book as the claim that "humanity can survive and adapt to the new world of the Anthropocene if we accept human limits and transience as fundamental truths, and work to nurture the variety and richness of our collective cultural heritage. Learning to die as an individual means letting go of our predispositions and fear. Learning to die as a civilization means letting go of this particular way of life and its ideas of identity, freedom, success, and progress" (Scranton 2015, 24). Towards the end of the book the picture looks rather grimmer: "the practice of learning to die," Scranton writes, "is the practice of learning to let go. Learning to die means letting go of the ego, the idea of the self, the future, certainty, attachment, the pursuit of pleasure, permanence, and stability. Learning to let go of salvation. Learning to let go of hope" (Scranton 2015, 92). Letting go of *hope* and *the self* is a lot more difficult than letting go of *progress* and our current sad conception of *success*. And, the title of his book notwithstanding, Scranton does not really let go of hope: in the chapter entitled "A New Enlightenment," he writes, "*Humanity can survive* the demise of fossil-fuel civilization and it can survive whatever despotism or barbarism will arise in its ruins. We may even be able to survive

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things we can do to promote the survival and flourishing of humanity after our death." Scheffler 2016, 78. Its optimism aside, this seems to me to be quite right.

in a greenhouse world" (Scranton 2015, 108-9, emphasis added; cf. 116). If we *face* death, and accept what Scranton says we must, we will survive, we won't actually *die*. But who is this *we*? It is not the thousands who will in fact die for lack of water or food, or in the wars that will be fought over them, or in the punishing heatwaves that will scorch the Indian subcontinent and, it seems, Europe. It is, rather, the species, *humanity*. So learning to die requires identifying oneself with humanity, which will not die. And it requires identifying humanity in turn with a moment in the unfolding of a world empty of will or intent, one Scranton describes with gusto. At the close of his final chapter, "Coming Home," Scranton writes that the only "practical question remaining" us is whether "we, existing as we are" will be the light that continues to shine from long dead stars in a world we can never fully know (Scranton 2015, 117). It is unclear to me how this is a *practical* question. Scranton's recommendation seems to center wholly on a *theoretical* perspective that concerns not what we will do, but how we will *understand ourselv*es. And precisely because it has so little to do with practice, this perspective seems to be impossible to adopt, at least for any length of time.[21]

[21] One might counter here that Scranton is pointing to a quite different alternative, an acceptance of the tragic nature of our situation and our fate. But if this is to mean more than simply facing grim facts, the appeal to tragedy has to involve more than the fact that ours will not be a comedic happy ending. In *Forests*, Harrison gives a good, Nietzschean gloss on the distinction between pagan tragedy and Christian comedy. Ancient tragedy was, he writes, "a reminder that every founding law is also a fatal transgression—a transgression of some other law. Such is the essence of polytheism: a plurality of laws laying equal claim to legitimacy, often in strife with each other. In the Judeo-Christian doctrine, however, the law of a single, universal God holds sway over the totality of creation. As a result this law has only its own shadow to fear. The Christian revolution in the West puts an end to tragedy as the highest form of wisdom, for Christianity (like Platonism) promises a happy ending. You have only to choose it, by turning to the light of God. In its insistence that the happy or sorrowful outcome (damnation or salvation) depends upon free will and no longer upon a fatal order of necessity (against which the tragic hero was powerless), Christianity effectively destroys the ideological basis of tragedy." Harrison 1992, 64. On this account, our drama is not a tragedy, but a botched comedy: as individual agents we experience the damnation our collective free actions are producing as necessity, one that we cannot escape by appealing to another law. It is unclear if Harrison himself believes tragedy is an option for us. The subtitle of his book is *The Shadow of Civilization*; the title of the chapter on the rise of Christianity is "Shadows of Law." As he writes on 63, "The shadow of law is not opposed to law but follows it around like its other self, or its guilty conscience." The same would seem to be true of the forests our civilization is destroying. I am not sure that Harrison

Scranton is not himself a perfectionist, as far as I can tell. But immediately after the passage quoted above about letting go of hope, he cites the writings of Marcus Aurelius as exemplary of the enlightened ethic of resignation that he recommends, an ethic which plainly echoes stoical themes (Scranton 2015, 92-3). The classical Stoics are of course perfectionists. But, quite unlike Emerson, or Dewey, or Cavell, they do not dwell upon the future; the present is the wise man's concern. Nor do they dwell upon nature: one hardly needs the woods to return to reason: one can accept one's place within the cosmos when on the rack.[22] Perhaps this is the mode of perfectionism that remains to us. But this would be a considerable achievement, given the metaphysical baggage that Stoicism brings with it. For the Stoics, ethics, logic, and physics are three mutually imbricated branches of a single philosophical system, none of which is fully intelligible or practicable in isolation from the others (Sellars 2006, 31-54). Who among us today could make such a claim?[23] The idea that, our planetary life and death notwithstanding, the cosmos is one with which we can identify pushes very hard upon the logical aspect of

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accepts this—the final words of his book, other than the brief Epilogue, are "the forest remains." Harrison 1992, 243. He does, however, acknowledge what is at stake—in particular, the foundational role of nature ("Where else but in nature do we learn to overcome nature and thereby become our humanity?") and "the links between forests in the figurative and the literal senses." Harrison 1992, 231 and 87; cf. 201 and 247.

[22] Though Stoic rigorism may be deceptive. Note in this regard the appeal to natural harmony in Epictetus' argument in favor of divine providence (the rational nature of the whole and its parts): "do you not think that things on earth feel the influence of what is in the heavens? . . . Else how could it come about so regularly, as if by god's express command, that when he tells plants to flower, and to bud, they bud, and to bear fruit, they bear it, and to bring their fruit to ripeness, it ripens; and when again, he tells them to shed their fruit and drop their leaves and, gathered in upon themselves, remain at peace and take their rest, they remain at peace and take their rest?" Epictetus 1995, 36. The regularity, order and self-gathering peace that Epictetus takes as evidence of the fact that the universe is a cosmos is now being lost, or at best displaced to a level at which the human eye will only be able to perceive it in the most abstract and formal manner. This of course only makes it less likely that the Stoics offer a perfectionist way of being at home in the world we have made.

[23] Even the most fanatical Hegelians do not believe the Hegelian account of natural science is a precondition for the proper understanding of the other parts of the system. Indeed, almost none take that account at all seriously. This is not to say that stoical insights cannot be taken piecemeal. Adam Smith is exemplary here; but his stoicism, partial as it is, is cushioned and conditioned by his faith in providence, as is in turn exemplified by his doctrine of the invisible hand of the market. If the environmental collapse we have wrought teaches us nothing else, it should be the essential falsity of such a doctrine. On the influence of the Stoics upon Emerson and Thoreau, see Richardson 1995, 232f. and Richardson 1986, 104f.

the Stoical teaching. "Disregard your experience and the reports of those less fortunate than you," it proclaims, "the world remains your home." That is Scranton's desperate hope, as the title of his final chapter announces. That such a hope can be sustained is, however, quite unlikely.

Does this mean that we should abandon hope, or accept that it is impossible? Anyone attracted to Cavell's Emersonian Perfectionism would assume not, as a central feature of that perfectionism is the thought that hope is always to be found, but that it can be found only where we least expect it: in despair. Just as Luther—whom the early Cavell cites so often—argues that the New Testament's promises of the New Man can be received only by one who has been taught to "know himself" and accordingly to "despair of his own ability" to uphold the commandments of the Old Testament, so hope for Cavell's Emerson is a conversion of our despair (Luther 1961, 57). Is no such turning possible for us? If it is a hope that the environmental catastrophe might be averted, and balance and stability restored to a natural world that unfolds freely, in its own time, it would is plain that there is not. But, one might observe, Cavell does not write of hope in this sense: what is in question in his writings is not whether some event will occur in the world, but whether one can find one's way in that world. The question is, one might say, subjective rather than objective. And it concerns precisely the kind of unhealthy depression from which I have said that I myself suffer: "it is precisely despair," Cavell writes, "that was the climate in which Emerson felt he wrote and which his writing was meant to withstand and disperse. He calls this mood 'secret melancholy'" (Cavell 2003b, 172). But even if this is right, it only reinforces the worry that the turn to Cavell may not help us here. Because my depression and despair are not just expressions of my not

knowing my way or not being awake to myself and my world. Quite the opposite: I know all too well what my world is like, and where it and I are going. The problem is not just in me, but in the world.

Moreover, I do not think it quite right to say that Cavell's perfectionism focuses on the subjective. That overlooks the crucial role in it of our *acknowledgment* of the world, and the role of *mood* in that acknowledgment. For Cavell, the world is to be acknowledged or received, and it is received in one's mood, a mood that, he says "is not tractable by the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity."[24] "Moods," he writes, "must be taken as having at least as sound a role in advising us of reality as sense experience has; that [of] coloring the world." *My world* is mooded, as the object in it is colored, or heavy, or sweet.[25] Granted that at any moment one can be of many moods, how can the mood of a world in decline such as ours not be a world of sorrow, guilt, and despair? If perfectionism calls us outside of what Emerson terms our partiality and recalls us to our ties to all others whom our actions touch; if our inner eyes see only in concert with our outer eyes; if we can be at home, and return to reason and faith, only in a natural world whose temporal frame is slower and more measured than our own--if these things are so, how can our world's despair be converted into hope? For what might it or we hope?

[24] "The succession of moods is not tractable by the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity Kant proposes for experience. . . . The fact that we are taken over by this succession, this onwardness, means that you can think of it as at once a succession of moods (inner matters) and a succession of things (outer manners). This very evanescence of the world proves its existence to me; it is what vanishes from me. I guess this is not realism exactly; but it is not solipsism either." Cavell 2003a, 13.

[25] "The idea is roughly that moods must be taken as having at least as sound a role in advising us of reality as sense experience has; that, for example, coloring the world, attributing to it the qualities 'mean' or 'magnanimous' may be no less objective or subjective than coloring an apple, attributing to it the colors red or green. Or perhaps we should say: sense experience is to objects what moods are to the world." Cavell 2003a, 11. I discuss this further in Norris forthcoming. See in this context Cavell's discussion of nature in *The Senses of Walden* (Cavell 1981), 43-4.

One thing for which we might hope is that those who follow us will not suffer as severely from the conditions we are creating as we fear they will—that they will either not notice the changes, or will evaluate them from a perspective so much different from our own that their disastrous quality will fade or even be lost. Environmentalists have identified "shifting baseline syndrome" as an important factor in our collective failure to respond to environmental losses and degradations. This syndrome occurs "when conditions of the natural environment gradually degrade over time, yet people (e.g., local citizens, natural resource users, policy makers) falsely perceive less change because they are not aware of, or fail to recall accurately, what the natural environment was like in the past" (Soga and Gaston 2018, 224). People might do this because they do not know or regularly experience the environment in question--perhaps because they cannot afford to travel outside urban areas, perhaps because they prefer a digital, virtual life.[26] They might also do this because their personal history does not encompass enough of the environment's history for them to take in how it is changing. In a careful quantitative study of fishing communities along the Yangtze River, Samuel Turvey and his co-workers found that significant numbers of the younger members of the communities failed to recognize and had even *never heard of* the freshwater dolphin, the baiji, that swam the river in number until very recently but is now either extinct or very close to it (Turvey 2010, 785). The baseline that determines expectations has shifted for younger fishers and the tragedy of the baiji is simply not there for them, any more than the baiji is. Similar studies have found that communities experience as unproblematic the loss of fish

[26] Masashi Soga and Kevin Gaston refer to the growing loss of human-nature interaction as the "extinction of experience." Soga and Gaston 2016. They rightly note that the rise in "belief- rather than evidence-based environmental policy making raise[s] the possibility that SBS could even accelerate in an age of increasing data availability." Soga and Gaston 2018, 224.

populations, growing pollution, and other forms of environmental degradation (Soga and Gaston 2018). For environmentalists, this is deeply problematic, as it encourages complacency and makes it harder to address such degradation. But from our perspective, this might be a blessing in disguise. If people can forget, in a single generation, something as striking and culturally significant as the world's only freshwater dolphin, surely they can forget particular patterns of weather, or forests, or beaches?

One might object, however, that this does not really change anything: we are still leaving those who follow us a ruined world. If millions are forced to free flooded cities or plains, or die in the new superstorms, it is cold comfort if they believe that they is how people have always lived, or that this is how people who seem *real* have always lived—tales of the prelapsarian ages having the feel of myths or children's stories to them. But even setting this aside, there is the further point that shifting baseline syndrome is in large part a function of the difference between human time and environmental time: the young fishers take the river as they find it, without the magical baiji, and hence don't notice its loss. But as the pace of environmental collapse increases, this will be less and less likely. Already a middle-aged person like myself can remember quite different times, and see the changes as they happen.[27] While many may be able to tune this out and focus on their i-phones, millions will not. They will suffer real catastrophes, and they may well know that these catastrophes are the legacy we left them.

Here, too, however, one might see a blessing in disguise. Although many proclaim that we have moved into a new geological era, the Anthropocene, in which no part of the natural world is left free of human determination, the cascading effects of

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[27] In Santa Barbara, where I grew up and where I now live, the number and general intensity of forest fires has simply exploded, and one can read the history of the last four fires or so in the scars on and variegated foliage of the mountains above the city.

human activity so far exceed our ability to predict or control them that they take on a life of their own. To appreciate this can bring one solace, of a sort: the otherness of nature is still there, only now not in the forest glade, but in the superstorm, or the massive forest fire. Nature is again a *wilderness*. While celebrating this requires a fairly cold-blooded view on the suffering and early death of innumerable people, it is not, I think, a point that can be dismissed out of hand. The question remains, though, what the implications of this will be for a conception of moral life like that of modern perfectionism in which one goes to nature to experience a wilderness that awakens our senses and awakens us to "faith and reason," that allows for multiple and wildly varied species, that provides the ground not just for individual self-realization but for wider circles of the good, those of culture, society, and future generations.

It would seem that any perfectionism fit for us and our children must be one that abandons at least some part of the Romantic amalgam to which I have referred here. But which? What aspect of our partiality or abstraction must we simply accept, and how might we do so without undermining those aspects that remain? If we are not simply to retreat into an ethic of contemplation, the most obvious candidates would seem to be, first, the thought that nature is a stable home to which we can return; and, second, the thought that we are bound to one another, including those who follow us. I have discussed the importance of the former to Nietzsche; and those of us who work in Cavell's wake have emphasized the importance of the latter to the early Nietzsche of the *Untimely Meditations*. But there is, of course, another Nietzsche who discards both, for whom nature is will to power and our first task is to harden our hearts to the thought of mass misery, to the prospect of an apocalyptic future in which castes reemerge and untold

multitudes are sacrificed (Nietzsche 2001, 208). This, too, is said to be a future in which one might become what one is. But is the embrace of such thoughts a turning of despair, or simply a higher form of it?

It may be objected at this point that I am relying upon too crude an understanding of what hope involves, at least the kind of hope we need now. A hopeful attitude is easily mistaken for a confident one, as if the person with hope were not so much open to an unknown future as she is assured of a probable one. Hobbes, for instance, defines *hope* as "*Appetite* with an opinion of obtaining" (Hobbes 1968, 123). It is not hard to see how this definition obscures the phenomenon of hope altogether. But if hope is not confidence, neither is it blind faith in miracles. Hope relates to the possible, not the impossible; and it relates to it in a concrete, practical manner.[28] Just as there is a distinction between merely wishing for something to happen and willing it, a difference that is manifest in the activity of the one who wills (e.g., gets up from the couch to get the juice from the fridge), so there is a difference between wanting something very badly and hoping for it. Hope is a matter of how one moves into the future, not merely of how one contemplates that future. It is just here that my failure to appreciate the nature or potential of hope might be said emerge. I have proposed that perfectionism confronts a crisis in the climate catastrophe because its way of experiencing nature and other people is threatened—as if these were the grounds of the perfectionist hope in the future, its openness to it. But, to return to the Cavellian thought that hope is a turning of despair, could it not be that it is just when those grounds are slipping away that hope emerges in

[28] This is not true of Kierkegaard's Abraham, who is confident that "by virtue of the absurd" he "would be blessed [not] in a future life but that he would be blessed here in the world. God would give him a new Isaac, could restore to life the one sacrificed." Abraham's faith "makes this impossibility possible." Kierkegaard 1983, 46, 44.

its most fundamental form? This is the possibility that Jonathan Lear explores in his book *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*.[29]

Lear's book addresses the crisis faced by the Crow people and their leader Plenty Coups when they were forced onto a reservation and the practices that defined them as a people (counting coups in intertribal war, hunting the buffalo) were no longer possible. On Lear's account, this amounted to more than loss of possible activities—one cannot hunt buffalo when there are no buffalo to hunt—but to the kind of "loss of concepts" that Cora Diamond has analyzed from a Wittgensteinian perspective (Diamond 1988). "Concepts get their lives through the lives we are able to live with them. If nothing any longer can count as dancing a Sun Dance or planting a coup-stick, then the tribe has lost the concepts Sun Dance and coup-stick" (Lear 2006, 37-8).[30] Given the pivotal role played in Crow culture by the concepts of dancing a Sun Dance or planting a coup-stick, losing those concepts entailed a much wider loss of meaningful action (Lear 2006, 39-41). Because their world of war and hunting and freedom on the plains contained all of the possibilities open to subjects like them, there was in fact no way of going forward as a Crow that would not be experienced as shameful (Lear 2006, 25, 42-3, and 89). Indeed, not just virtuous action, but action and subjectivity as such were lost:

> not only can I no longer plant a coup-stick, but nothing could count as my intending to do so. . . . [O]nly in the context of a vibrant tribal life can I have any of the mental states that are salient and important to me. The

[29] One might say that Lear (who often follows Cavell's tracks), turns to the Cavellian conception of the internal relation between hope and despair noted above while knocking away the Emersonian assumptions that make it manageable.

[30] This is surely slightly overstated, ignoring as it does the fact emphasized by Cavell that feigning an experience deploys the concept of that experience. Cf. Norris 2017, 88. That said, one can feign an experience in the absence of that experience for only so long; and a life of feigning is a distinct form of life.

situation is even worse: these are the mental states that help to constitute me as a Crow subject. Insofar as I am a Crow subject there is nothing left for me to do; and there is nothing left for me to deliberate about, intend, or plan for. Insofar as I am a Crow subject, I have ceased to be. All that's left is a ghostlike existence that stands witness to the death of he subject. Such a witness might well say something enigmatic like "After this, nothing happened." (Lear 2006, 49-50; cf. 32 and 43)[31]

This is what Plenty Coups reportedly said at the end of his life (Lear 2006, 2). And yet he forged a way forward for his people, (Lear 2006, 51). Plenty Coups was in effect able to find a possible way to be a Crow when all possibilities had been closed (Lear 2006, 25 and 89). Lear emphasizes the paradoxical quality of this, comparing it to the teleological suspension of the ethical performed by Abraham in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (Lear 2006, 92). As Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son in the faith that God would miraculously (absurdly) give him back, so Plenty Coups committed himself "to the idea that while we Crow must abandon the goods associated with our way of life. . . [*w*]*e shall get the good back*, though at the moment we have no more than a glimmer of what this might mean" (Lear 2006, 94). And that commitment in fact made it possible for Plenty Coups to be an effective and brave leader of his people in their moment of greatest crisis.

Significantly, Lear's account of this is perfectionist in structure. He relies upon Aristotle throughout (analyzing the teleological suspension of the ethical as an act of courage in a "thin" rather than a "thick" sense"), and he is clear that the goal for the Crow

[31] Compare MacIntyre on the idea that "the concept of an intelligible action is a more fundamental concept than that of an action as such." MacIntyre 1985, 205.

is *living well* and *flourishing* (Lear 2006, 108f., 123, 55, and 57). Might this serve as a model for how we might envision a perfectionism adequate to climate catastrophe? There are reasons to hesitate here. Most obvious is the fact that Plenty Coups relied upon a visionary dream and tribal interpretation of it (Lear 2006, 66-82 and 135). As far as I know, we have neither. Moreover, Lear's account is not without its problems. He equivocates between the strong claim--noted above--that the Crow faced a situation in which they *could not* deliberate, intend, or plan, and a weaker claim in which they (or at least Plenty Coups) *could* deliberate, intend, and plan in a *thin* sense (Lear 2006, 65 and 95). He writes both that "the Crow had to be willing to give up *almost everything* they understand about the good life" and that the Crow as they moved forward with their lives were "somehow transcending their own subjectivity" (Lear 2006, 92 and 96, emphasis mine). This ambivalence is reflected in his analysis of the words on which his book as a whole is focused, "After this, nothing happened." If Plenty Coups was as successful as Lear suggests, something *did* happen—just not something that Plenty Coups would have recognized as a happening years earlier, when he was a young man. But then Plenty Coups' words cannot be taken as literally as Lear wishes to take them; if they are, they announce Plenty Coups' failure, not his triumph. Conversely, if Plenty Coups really is comparable to Kierkegaard's Abraham, and his actions really do demonstrate the justification of his faith that "*we shall get the good back*, though at the moment we have no more than a glimmer of what this might mean," it turns out that the good is not tied to concepts and practices in the manner that Lear argues they are.[32]

If forced to choose here, I would argue that we should opt for the

[32] All this aside from the difference, noted in note 28 above, between hope and Kierkegaard's faith in the absurd.

Wittgenstein/Diamond/Hegel alternative, and not that of faith, the absurd, and transcendent subjectivity and transcendent good. For the fact is evident that we at least shall *not* get the good back. We are killing our Isaac, and the Lord will not return him to us. What implications does this have for our attempts to understand and conduct our lives by perfectionist lights? When I first presented this paper, a sympathetic colleague took me to be arguing for the irrelevance of perfectionism. But this is not my aim. Not only do I feel far too confused by these questions to be so categorical, but I remain convinced that perfectionism is the best way to understand the good life of human flourishing—that is, the best way to understand ourselves. If a transcendent perfectionism like Lear's is unavailable to us, this does not imply that perfectionist claims have in general lost their validity. It means only that the catastrophe facing us is not merely an environmental one, but a spiritual one as well.[33]

Andrew Norris

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