

New wilderness landscapes as moral criticism
A Nietzschean perspective on our
contemporary fascination with wildness

Martin Drenthen

Radboud University of Nijmegen, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT. In moral debates about human's relationship with nature, one often hears references to nature's wildness. Apparently, postmodern city dwellers seem to be deeply fascinated by wild nature; for them, wildness somehow seems to have strong moral significance. How should we interpret this fascination? Moral meanings of nature come into play as soon as we start articulating our relationship with the world. In this process, we transform the neutrality of space into a meaningful *place*, that is, through interpretation we make mere environment into a meaningful and inhabitable world that we can live in. However, there is something peculiar with experiences of *wild* nature that seems to go beyond this hermeneutical framework. The word 'wilderness' refers to the sphere that lies beyond culture, a part of the world that is not subject to human intervention and that is not (and can never be made) our home. Does this mean that wildness cannot be part of a meaningful world? In this paper, I argue that Nietzsche's account of nature can help elucidate today's fascination with (the value of) wilderness as a place of value beyond the sphere of human intervention. For Nietzsche, wild nature is a realm where moral valuations are out of order. In his work, however, we can discern a paradoxical moral concern with this wildness. Wildness is a critical moral concept that reminds us that our moral world of human meanings and goals ultimately rests on (and refers to) a much grander, all-encompassing natural world. Nietzsche's (paradoxical) concept of wildness acknowledges (and thus appropriates) the value of that which cannot be (but always has to be) morally appropriated. Wild nature confronts us with the limits of human valuing. Wildness as a concept thus introduces the 'beyond' of culture into the cultural arena of values.

KEYWORDS. Environmental ethics, wildness, ecological restoration, Friedrich Nietzsche, pluralism.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of nature is one of the key moral concepts in the environmental debate, although, often, it remains under the surface and hidden

from view. Many arguments in moral debates ultimately refer to a particular account of reality, to a particular way in which the world is interpreted. At certain points, nature still seems to provide us with indications of how to interact with the world around us. The argument, for instance, that we should respect the integrity of ecosystems only makes sense once we adopt a world-view in which the concept of ecosystem is an important principle of order in nature, and in which an intervention disturbing this order can be considered – more or less explicitly – to be an ‘unnatural’ violation of nature. Many environmental ethicists have stressed the need for recognizing the existence of something like ‘nature,’ pace criticisms of constructivist philosophers that ‘nature’ is a social construct and does not exist objectively. The underlying problem is that, today, we are faced with a plethora of moral views of nature, all of which are deeply contingent. We live in a thoroughly pluralistic age.

This pluralism has a profound effect on the way we think about our relation to nature. Often, we seem to agree that our concepts and images of nature are nothing more than the result of processes of interpretation, in which all sorts of cultural and historical influences play a part. Government agencies invest a lot of effort in surveys trying to assess people’s actual conceptions and feeling with regard to their natural environment; they call for meetings with local residents and establish focus groups and shareholder meetings to ensure that the most visions of nature are somehow taken into account.

In short, concepts of nature are taken to be highly context-dependent and subject to change over time. For this reason, it is no longer acceptable among ethicists to refer to something like the ‘natural order of things’ to ground our moral valuations. As participants in a moral debate may look upon nature from completely different perspectives, particular views of nature, as well as the moral arguments that arise from them, cannot be accepted as generally convincing.

Nevertheless, different moral interpretations of nature cannot simply be ignored either. They enable people to relate to nature as a meaningful

place, as a world that makes sense. Moral interpretations transform mere nature into an environment, a home.

Moreover, in everyday life, we easily tend to forget about the contingent character of our particular outlook on nature. Sooner or later, we are bound to commit ourselves to one particular view of nature, to be able to engage ourselves in various forms of interaction with nature (Casey 1993, Smith 2001). Whenever we are confronted with others who challenge our views, we can respond in two different ways. Either we emphasize the strictly personal, subjective character of our moral beliefs, thus avoiding the ethical debate about nature as something we *all* relate to, or we distance ourselves from the debate by adapting (or backing out into) a form of eco-fundamentalism. Because the ethical debate concerning our relationship with nature goes back and forth between these extremes, a real moral debate is hindered and moral questions about our relation to nature often get de-listed from the agenda.

It is against the backdrop of this stalemate that the work of the nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) becomes important for environmental philosophy. Nietzsche not only provides us with a fundamental diagnosis of the moral crisis of our culture but, more interestingly still, in his philosophy a new, albeit paradoxical, form of respect for nature can be discerned. According to Nietzsche, there is a fundamental link between the crisis in contemporary morality and our problematic relationship with nature.

I start this essay with a brief discussion of Nietzsche's diagnosis of today's moral crisis. Next, I will explain some key features of Nietzsche's thinking on nature and morality more generally. From there, I will propose a Nietzschean interpretation of contemporary debates on wilderness preservation.

I do not pretend that my questions are the same as Nietzsche's, but I do believe that Nietzsche's analysis can further our understanding of some fundamentally problematic aspects of our current relationship with nature.

NIETZSCHE'S DIAGNOSIS OF OUR MORAL CRISIS

Our contemporary relationship with nature is deeply ambiguous. We recognize the moral value of nature itself, whereas at the same time we are – or at least *could be* – profoundly aware that all of our images and concepts of nature rely on interpretations that are deeply contingent (Oelschlaeger 1995, introduction). According to Nietzsche, this ambiguity in our relation to nature is a symptom of a more fundamental crisis of our culture: we no longer seem to have commonly accepted criteria that can give us moral orientation, but, at the same time, we do not know how to live our lives without such criteria. This crisis is expressed in the famous words of Nietzsche's madman on the 'Death of God.' We moderns suffer from a total loss of moral orientation, although, most of the time, we do our best to push away this awareness.

The death of God has made modern humans into beings who are unable to commit themselves to any interpretation of nature in particular. We "hybrid Europeans" (BGE, 223) have at our disposal several moralities, articles of faith, tastes in art, and religion handed over to us in history. Modern man suffers from "historic disease"; he is like someone who stands before his pantry, oversees a "warehouse of costumes," but notices that none of these costumes fit him properly, and therefore keeps changing them.¹

It is easy to extrapolate Nietzsche's diagnosis of the crisis of morality to our relation with nature.² Here, too, we know of different tastes and moralities: the romantic longing for oneness with nature, the Christian feeling of being a responsible steward of nature, the enlightenment view of controlling nature, the Arcadian ideal of living harmoniously with nature, et cetera. Collectively, however, we do not seem to be able to really commit ourselves to any particular moral notion of nature. We are left with a modern position in which we use different conceptions and interpretations of nature as we see fit in different contexts.³ But none of these visions of nature can really provide us with any moral foundation.

Nietzsche tries to come to terms with this irretrievable loss of ground, and to find a way of coping with it. In Nietzsche's view, philosophers should be like physicians of a culture: they should analyse cultural phenomena as symptoms of underlying natural physiological processes (in terms of weaknesses and strengths, health and disease), and from this diagnosis come up with a treatment for that culture's illnesses. Accordingly, although his ultimate aim is to affirm life itself, Nietzsche's main focus is diagnostic.

According to Nietzsche, the reason for our moral crisis is that the traditional foundations of morality no longer function. In modern ethics, morality is usually grounded in something other than nature: nature is seen as the object of morality – the raw material that morality acts upon – but morality itself is conceived of as of belonging to a different order: it is the ability to freely relate to one's natural inclinations and take responsibility for one's actions. Kant's ethics, for instance, relies heavily on the distinction between the world of nature, governed by natural laws, and the world of freedom and reason, from which morality arises. Such an opposition between nature and morality is typical of most types of modern ethics.⁴ According to Nietzsche, modern science has shown this underlying "two-world metaphysics" to be obsolete: our so-called morality is just as natural as the rest of us. He criticizes the idea that morality singles out humans from nature, not just because it is false but also because it has become a force that inhibits the flourishing of human nature.⁵ According to Nietzsche, we must learn to bring our self-image into agreement with our understanding of (our place in) nature. Nietzsche even considers it to be a *moral obligation* for philosophers to "translate man into nature" (BGE, 230).

From his earliest work onward, Nietzsche is motivated by a deep distrust of the dominant anthropocentric idea that humans have a special position in the universe because of their morality. He denies that humans are something special: our self-pride rests on a perspectival distortion. In 1873, he writes:

And when it is all over with the human intellect, nothing will have happened. For this intellect has no additional mission which would lead it beyond human life. Rather, it is human, and only its possessor and begetter takes it so solemnly, as though the world's axis turned within it. But if we could communicate with the gnat, we would learn that he likewise flies through the air with the same solemnity, that he feels the flying centre of the universe within himself. There is nothing so reprehensible and unimportant in nature that it would not immediately swell up like a balloon at the slightest puff of this power of knowing ... (TL, 1).

This criticism of the all-too-human, anthropomorphic and moralized view of nature is one of the recurring themes in Nietzsche's work. There is, however, a problem with such a critique. It may be true that humans are nothing but a glimpse within the eternal all-embracing struggle of nature, and that nature is indifferent to human beliefs and aspirations, but if the narrow-mindedness of anthropocentric worldview really were inevitable – as Nietzsche seems to suggest – then there will be no escape from it and Nietzsche's criticism would be futile. Moreover: Nietzsche's own account of things and his critique of morality would be just another futile human voice. Therefore, if Nietzsche's critique of morality is to make sense, he has to be able to somehow transcend the all-too-human. His critique can only be valid if there is something in light of which particular forms of morality can be criticized as distortions. Much of Nietzsche's later philosophy can be seen as an attempt to come up with an account of nature that explains how all aspects of human nature are just elements of an all-embracing nature, but at the same time enables him to criticize the anti-naturalness of morality. Now that our old moral self-understanding is rendered obsolete, we must find a new type of ethics that is more in line with (our understanding of our place in) nature. For that purpose, he develops the concept of will to power.

NIETZSCHE'S TEACHING OF THE WILL TO POWER

Nietzsche seeks to interpret nature in such a way that it is possible to explain all aspects of human existence as aspects of nature in a broader

sense. For that purpose, he introduces the concept of “will to power.”

According to that perspective, all of nature consists of a plurality of competing forces (“wills”) that try to overpower each other: nature is a struggle between commanding and obeying forces. In this struggle, contingent temporary organizations emerge, which are then again being overpowered by other forces, thus constantly shifting the power-balance. These natural forces are not blind, physical forces, but have an “inner side.” All of nature (not just living nature) has a striving towards internalization: all that is, exists not just as a force (i.e., something that works externally on other entities), but also as a will (i.e., with an interior quality), and as interpretation. Having an interior, mental quality is not something exclusively human, but is an aspect of everything that exists in nature. With this pan-psychism, Nietzsche tries to escape from the metaphysical separation between humanity and the rest of nature. Human beings are mere parts of the never-ending struggle of different, competing, interpretations within nature.

The mutual ratio of forces or wills to powers continuously generates hierarchical organizations in nature, but all these organizations are themselves deeply contingent: they are but the temporary result of an ongoing struggle. Therefore, there will always be some ordered structure in nature, but no one single structure is eternal. The hierarchical structures can be found on all levels: from the realm of the physics and physiology, to the realm of culture. Nietzsche’s views on morality, culture, body, and mind are mere elaborations of his cosmological theory of will to power.

In concordance with this view, morality is considered to be merely the naturally occurring contingent organization of different passions and impulses within human nature, both the result of the struggle between these different competing instincts, and an organizing force in that struggle.⁶

Nietzsche distinguishes two aspects of the ‘nature of morality.’ On the one hand, morality is an ‘unnatural’ disciplining interpretation of ‘free nature.’ That is: morality implies a certain organization of the different instincts that restricts the amount of alternative possibilities, it organizes

the plurality of competing wills within each person, forcing them into one particular, unified form, thus suppressing other possible forms.⁷ On the other hand, morality occurs naturally: out of each particular constellation of the wills to power, an organization emerges. This organization *is* morality; morality is thus the result of a particular constellation of wills to power and, at the same time, it is the order-bringing force in human nature.⁸ The different wills to power in us subdue themselves under one strong organizing force; they feed into an organizational form commanded by one governing will to power. Together, these two aspects paint a picture of human nature as mirroring the larger struggle between competing forces in nature. Nature is a struggle of wills to power, competing interpretations, a play of interpreting and being interpreted, and humans are merely part of that struggle.

When people interpret the world, this is yet again another event within nature. Knowing and valuing are both instances of will to power, that is, attempts to appropriate the world – to unify different experiences and perceptions of the world – within a powerful organizing interpretation. Through morality, we maintain a well-ordered image of ourselves at the cost of those aspects of ourselves that do not fit into this order. These passions or urges will be suppressed or reinterpreted as something else. Morality is a tyrannical disciplining of human nature, and it has to be. As soon as our morality is no longer convincing enough to succeed in organizing the plurality of wills in ourselves, then we either acquire a new, more powerful morality, or we lose our internal organization and grow insane.

While morality is a unifying interpretation – and disciplining – of human nature, as such, it also limits the ways in which the world can appear to us. For that reason, Nietzsche criticizes morality not only as a tyrannical disciplining of human nature, but also as a violent reduction of the endless possibilities of interpreting the world. In the same way as our morality interprets our own nature, it also interprets the world around us. We appropriate reality as a whole by overpowering the strange and reducing the unruly to something familiar. In this way, we make the world into

a meaningful place, fit to live in, but, just as with human nature, this comes at a price. Nietzsche criticizes the Stoics, who advocate a life in accordance with the law of nature, because “in truth, the matter is altogether different.” While they pretend “to read the canon of your law in nature,” in fact, they want the opposite: “to impose your morality, your ideal, on nature ...; you demand that she be nature ‘according to the Stoa’” (BGE 9).⁹ Morality implies both a “tyrannical” disciplining of human nature, and an appropriation and reduction of the strange and fundamentally multi-interpretable nature around us.

Nietzsche, so it seems, thus gives a ‘metaphysical’ account of nature as something ‘bodily’ underlying our moral interpretations. In this (quasi-) ontology, reality is presented as a struggle between different interpreting wills to power.¹⁰ But Nietzsche is aware of the self-referential aspects of his philosophy. He acknowledges that even his own quasi-naturalistic account of reality is just one possible interpretation amongst others.¹¹

Some have concluded from this that Nietzsche’s philosophy is ultimately self-defeating: by admitting that his ontology is merely an interpretation, Nietzsche’s philosophy would undermine itself and would eventually be nothing more than poetry. On close examination, however, it turns out that his position is rather sophisticated. In those passages where Nietzsche most clearly articulates his theory of will to power, we find that Nietzsche presents his theory of will to power not as a final truth about reality, but as an interpretation itself, albeit a special one.¹² The teaching of the will to power provides us with an interpretation of the world that enables us to see the world as consisting of different interpretations. This interpretation of reality can acknowledge its own perspectival character without undermining its purport; its persuasiveness is not diminished by acknowledging its perspectival character, but, on the contrary, even confirmed. As Wolfgang Müller-Lauter (1993) has convincingly shown, the ontological and the perspectival aspect of Nietzsche’s theory demand and confirm each other, the result being a kind of self-referential philosophy that is in constant flux: the statement that the world exists of perspectives

forces us to the conclusion that this statement must be a perspective itself, but this putting in perspective implies a confirmation rather than a negation of the original statement, although this can never be a final truth about the world, because the world is a struggle of interpretation, etc.¹³

Nietzsche's reasoning is an example of a so-called hermeneutic circle: it presupposes the existence of what it wants to reveal. This means that the statement that everything is will to power cannot be meant as a hypothesis about the world that could be tested and proven true or false, but, instead, is meant as an interpretation that opens a new perspective on things. The teaching of will to power enables us to see reality as a struggle of interpretations, and, at the same time, is part of that struggle. The Nietzschean perspective enables us to gain freedom from the dominant perspective, without enforcing upon us a new 'true' vision of nature.

All this renders Nietzsche's philosophy of nature strange and highly paradoxical, but not nonsensical. It enables us to criticize dogmatic forms of naturalism that refer to 'real' nature (thus concealing the interpretative act that precedes such concepts of nature) and to criticize any particular identification of nature as a tyrannical *seizure of power*.

NATURE AND MORALITY

So far, I have highlighted only the two descriptive elements of Nietzsche's account of the agonal character of nature: morality is the natural occurring tyranny over nature, and as such part of the all-embracing natural struggle between all things. Together these two aspects constitute Nietzsche's 'anti-metaphysical metaphysics' of will to power. Will to power is a paradoxical formula which says that only interpretations matter to people, but on the other hand provides an account of reality that reflects this insight.

But, as noted earlier, the concept of nature also has a *normative* function in Nietzsche's philosophy, notably in his critique of morality. In many instances, Nietzsche states that we should "naturalize" mankind.¹⁴ How

are we to understand such a plea? How can Nietzsche's own moral statement be binding, when one has to admit that each interpretation of nature — and therefore Nietzsche's own interpretation of nature as will to power as well — is a contingent seizure of power?

Nietzsche's philosophy revolves around the tension between two ideas. One is that of a 'true' (interpretation of) nature that can function as a critical counterbalance against anti-natural and tyrannical metaphysical (and moral) interpretations of nature. It is from this angle that Nietzsche criticizes the anti-naturalness of morality, and wants to free nature from the restrictions of our contingent (self-)interpretations. The other is the insight that even this concept of 'pure' nature itself inevitably implies yet another interpretative appropriation. The tension between these antagonistic aspects of nature – between (what I would like to call) '*wildness*' and '*seizure of power*' – gives Nietzsche's philosophy of nature a strange dynamic that eventually enables him to use the concept of nature normatively.

Even though Nietzsche pleads for a naturalization of humanity, in his final analysis we cannot know nature as it is in itself. If we could, human beings would indeed have a privileged position in reality, a thought that Nietzsche consistently criticizes. For this reason, Nietzsche goes to some lengths to prevent identifying the nature that is being corrupted by the 'seizure of power' of morality. Each time Nietzsche criticizes a particular concept of nature as a tyrannical moral interpretation, he does so from the point of view of an opposed interpretation. But never does he give a 'true' interpretation of nature. If each interpretation rests on a seizure of power, claiming truth would be naive. Instead, Nietzsche's interpretation of nature as will to power is an interpretation that shows that our world is composed of interpretations. Nonetheless, in confronting each particular concept of nature with an opposed concept, Nietzsche is motivated by something that transcends mere interpretation. This reality could again be labelled 'nature,' although we have to bear in mind not to 'metaphy-size' this concept.¹⁵

As a key concept in Nietzsche's critique of morality, 'nature' functions as a counterpoint for *any* moral interpretation of nature. Nietzsche not only criticizes the dominant anthropocentric, all-too-human, moral interpretations of nature, but *all interpretations* for being an appropriation of nature. At the same time he urges us to better interpret what nature 'really is.' According to Nietzsche, we cannot get rid of 'nature.' Although we are inevitably trying to master nature (nature around us *and* our own nature), we remain aware that the world (and our own body) is not of our making; in us the will to power is always already at work, and, conversely, the world around us already has a particular constellation of meanings and interrelations. We find ourselves already 'in context'; we live in a bodily world that is already there.

Many poets and philosophers have articulated this sense of 'otherness' of nature, and have tried to show that it provokes a sense of awe. For Nietzsche, too, nature is more than just a formal 'surplus' or 'leftover' of each interpretation: he characterizes nature with positive attributes such as "excess," "abundance," "creativity," "greatness," "forcefulness," "independence," and "necessity." He exhorts us, though, to be cautious in using such positive attributions, as they can be nothing more than attempts to articulate the moral meaning nature has *for us*.

Elsewhere (Drenthen 1999 and 2003), I have labelled this Nietzschean sense of nature the 'otherness of nature.' However, this choice of words was not meant to imply that excessive nature for Nietzsche has any 'positive' – say: Levinasian – meaning. Roughly speaking, for Levinas, the Other is itself the source out of which moral meaning emanates, as it were. In contrast, for Nietzsche, the strangeness of nature is rather 'subversive.' For Nietzsche, nature in itself does not have any meaning whatsoever. Without interpretation, there would be no meaning. But then again: we live in an already interpreted world. The 'richness' of 'wild' nature that Nietzsche presupposes and that escapes from each particular interpretation comes to the fore only if and when there is a plurality of competing, already existing, interpretations of nature, that mutually criticize

and ‘force open’ each other. The wild abundance of meaning in nature is the sum of all actual and possible interpretations, something beyond each particular interpretation, but still requiring the realm of interpretation as such.

This sense of ‘otherness of nature’ serves as a self-critical criterion against “the ridiculous immodesty” of humanity towards nature. At the same time, each attempt to articulate this ‘supermoral’ meaning of nature can eventually only rest on a another – albeit ‘stronger’ and more inclusive – human appropriation.¹⁶ Nietzsche makes clear that “*Our new ‘infinite’*” does not provide us with an unequivocal, ‘godly’ moral measure:

Whether existence without interpretation, without ‘sense,’ does not become ‘nonsense,’ whether, on the other hand, all existence is not essentially actively engaged in *interpretation* – that cannot be decided even by the most industrious and most scrupulously conscientious analysis and self-examination of the intellect: for in the course of this analysis the human intellect cannot avoid seeing itself in its own perspectives, and *only* in these. We cannot look around our own corner: it is a hopeless curiosity that wants to know what other kinds of intellects and perspectives there *might* be ... But I should think that today we are at least far from the ridiculous immodesty that would be involved in decreeing from our corner that perspectives are *permitted* only from this corner. Rather has the world become ‘infinite’ for us all over again: inasmuch as we cannot reject the possibility that *it may include infinite interpretations*. Once more we are seized by a great shudder – but who would feel inclined immediately to deify again after the old manner *this* monster of an unknown world? And to worship the unknown henceforth as ‘*the Unknown One*’? Alas, too many *ungodly* possibilities of interpretation are included in the unknown, too much devilry, stupidity, and foolishness of interpretation – even our own human, all too human folly itself, which we know (GS 374).

I conclude that in Nietzsche’s normative use of the concept of nature, nature means *that which*, in the end, *cannot be but at the same time always has to be ‘grasped.’* The fact that nature does not have a moral measure in itself *evokes* a meaning of nature that precedes and transcends our moral

activity. One could say that in an absolute sense nature is something strange and different. But at the same time the notion of this nature functions as a criterion of human self-criticism, that is: it functions within a human interpretative framework.

NATURE AS CHAOS

Underneath Nietzsche's critique of morality lies a particular experience of nature: nature as chaos. For Nietzsche, each apparent order in nature is but a moment within the struggle of forces that are constantly trying to interpret and overpower each other. Nature is in an absolute sense without measure, a-moral, and indifferent. Nietzsche states that "the general character of the world ... is to all eternity chaos; not by the absence of necessity, but in the sense of the absence of order, structure, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever else our aesthetic humanities are called" (GS 109). Nietzsche's stance on nature as chaos should be understood as an *epistemological* rather than an ontological statement: it expresses that the order we experience in reality exists only because of our own ordering and structuring activity.

Nature as chaos is a typical contemporary experience; it is a symptom of a culture that has become utterly reflective and self-aware, mirroring the awareness that all our interpretations are, to a large extent, contingent. Now that man "stands before man as he stands before the rest of nature" (BGE 230) and has naturalized his self-image, he has become aware that his interpretations of nature rest on violent acts of appropriation, and are deeply contingent. The experience of 'nature as chaos' refers to that which precedes our ordering acts of appropriation; it refers to the moment of resistance that is overpowered. By affirming nature as chaos, Nietzsche tries to re-affirm the value of that which cannot be properly appropriated — he appreciates, as it were, the 'failure' of each seizure of power. At the same time, he recognizes that we cannot do otherwise — morality is as

much part of nature as it is violent. Indeed, it is the ability to order (their) nature that makes (some) people stand out. Order lies at the base of everything truly worthwhile in our culture. The seizure of power is as necessary as its failure is inevitable.

Nevertheless, ‘nature as chaos’ expresses an understanding of the value of ‘wild’ nature beyond our moral frameworks. It refers to nature as something that *cannot be* appropriated, that is unutterable and unknowable, but that nonetheless *has to be* recognized as something meaningful. The experience of nature as chaos requests an understanding of nature in which we can let nature be, motivated by the awareness that the indifferent dynamics of all-encompassing nature have a beauty and dignity that lie beyond human measure (although, in the end, even this statement is all-too-human).

Nietzsche’s emphasis on nature as chaos also can be seen as a corrective to each environmental hermeneutics. From a hermeneutical perspective, moral meanings exist only within the realm of cultural interpretations. Meaningful (moral) experiences have to be actively appropriated to be able to articulate their exact meaning. Moral meanings of nature come into play as soon as we start articulating our relationship with the world. In this process, we transform the neutrality of space into a meaningful *place*, that is, through interpretation we make mere *Umwelt* (environment) into a *Welt*, that is: into a meaningful and inhabitable world that we can live in, to use a phrase of Paul Ricoeur.¹⁷ Nietzsche points out that each interpretation of the world is also an appropriation that comes with a price. Interpretations open up a world, but imply integration in a complex web of references. Experiences of *wild* nature seem to go beyond this hermeneutical framework. The word ‘wilderness’ refers to the sphere that lies beyond culture, a part of the world that is not subject to human intervention and that is not (and can never be made) our home. Although we can define wilderness as that which is not culture, this formal definition does not signify the *meaning* of wildness. Wildness as a moral concept plays a role *within* culture. The meaning of wildness, however, ultimately

remains transcendent; the concept of wildness is merely an attempt to ‘capture’ the meaning of that which presents itself to us as somehow morally meaningful. Nevertheless, the notion of wildness as a critical border concept enables us to distinguish between appropriations in which nature is being *reduced* to a particular interpretation, and those interpretations that acknowledge something beyond.

The chaos of nature reminds us of the limitations of each particular moral worldview. Nature as chaos faces us with the task of acknowledging that we inevitably appropriate nature as soon as we try to express its moral meaning. As such, Nietzsche’s concept of nature as chaos is reminiscent of the idea of wildness as it is used by some contemporary environmental ethicists. But before I turn to the significance of Nietzsche’s analysis for contemporary debates on nature, let me first comment on some fragments in which Nietzsche seems to contemplate our contemporary dealings with wild nature.

NIETZSCHE’S VIEWS ON WILDERNESS EXPERIENCES

Throughout his work, Nietzsche appears to comment on our contemporary relation to nature. Taking on the role of physician of our culture, Nietzsche gives a diagnosis of the underlying state of our culture of which our relation with nature is symptomatic. One particular interesting fragment is from *Human All-too-Human*, in which Nietzsche states that “we like to be out in nature so much because it has no opinion about us.”¹⁸ Nietzsche’s characterization of the modern love of nature can be interpreted in two distinct ways: as a symptom of the crisis of morality, or as an attempt to deal with this crisis. In the first sense, one could interpret this fragment as a critique of modern man’s inability to make commitments, and his fear of being morally judged, his inability to acquire a strong taste of his own. In this reading, the love for free nature is not something to be very proud of.¹⁹

However, this fragment also allows for a second, more interesting interpretation. In this second reading, this fragment reflects an exemplary possibility for contemporary humans. The fact that ‘we’ love nature because it has no opinion of us, in this reading, could mean that we have come to value it as a place of indifference, a place where we can ‘rest from morality,’ so to speak. Let me work out this idea a bit further.

The awareness that all of our moral frameworks are deeply contingent, and that the ‘true’ meaning of nature lies *beyond* each attempt to appropriate nature within our frameworks, could possibly lead us to an appreciation of nature as a place where moral valuations are ‘out of order,’ out of place. From such a view, one could somehow value the unruly ‘remainder’ that escapes each ‘successful’ moral interpretation of nature. Interpreted in this way, the (post)modern appreciation of the indifference of nature is an attempt to value the otherness of nature, while simultaneously acknowledging that we are unable to reflect the ‘true’ value of nature adequately.

According to Nietzsche, however, this love for the indifference of nature is not just something to repose in; it also causes a feeling of unrest and unease:

The neutrality of great nature (in the mountain, the sea, the wood and the desert) pleases, but only for a short while: after that we get impatient. ‘Do these things really want to tell us nothing? Do we not exist for them?’ There raises a feeling of *crimen laesae majestatis humanae* [a crime against human dignity] (HH-WS, 205).

At first sight, we may love nature in all its indifference toward all of our conventions, because it gives us a chance to put things in perspective and lets us experience freedom from all kinds of societal and moral conventions. On second thought, however, this neutral nature will cause a feeling of unease, because it leaves us empty-handed. Eventually, the great, overwhelming, but morally ‘neutral’ phenomena of nature will make us painfully realize that those things that are dear to us do not matter in the

bigger picture. Ultimately, we will feel offended by the indifference of nature.

At this point, a comparison may be helpful between Nietzsche's account of the experience of wildness and Kant's notion of the sublime. According to Kant, we experience wild nature with a mixture of pleasure and pain: at first, wilderness causes fear and aversion, because of the transgression of aesthetic and moral standards. On second thought, we realize that we can only experience this fear because we possess the idea of infinity within ourselves. This causes the feeling of pleasure – we feel ourselves to be something higher than mere nature. We experience the sublime in confronting wild nature, but the sublime itself rests in ourselves. In this respect, sublime nature is just a means to our end. In contrast, for Nietzsche, the experience of 'wild' nature does not lend itself to such a triumphant reversal. To him, the experience of wild nature simply leads to a questioning of human dignity. For that reason, we cannot but face wild nature in an act of appropriation; to feel at home in nature, we have to interpret. Where the Romantics sought harmony in nature and valued 'pure' nature as a cure for a modern culture that had lost its standards, Nietzsche is deeply aware that, *although* 'wild' nature serves as a critical moment with regard to morality, *in morals* we have to appropriate this wildness. 'Pure nature' is not our place: we need an interpreted, meaningful world to feel at home.²⁰

So maybe there is yet another possible reading of the fragment on our love of great nature. The love of 'nature that has no opinion of us' may also be the love for a place where *we* do not have to have an opinion. We can appreciate nature, but we do not have to judge nature. Nature is a realm beyond good and evil. As a place where moral judgements are out of place, it can also be a place in which morality itself, that cornerstone of anthropocentrism, can be put in perspective. Wildness, then, poses a limit to our judgements: in the wild, our judgements are out of place; here we have to restrict our inclination to appropriate the world morally. But again we end up in a paradox, because whatever limit is being put on our morality: it will always be a *moral* limit.

Thus, from a Nietzschean perspective, environmental ethics itself appears to be a paradoxical undertaking (Drenthen 1999): on the one hand, it is interested in nature in so far as it transcends human seizures of power (wildness as a critical concept); on the other hand, it is restricted in its ability to model this interest on anything else than yet another interpretative appropriation. We can only articulate the moral significance of nature ‘itself’ by interpretation, but this inevitably implies a moment of appropriation.

Nietzsche’s concept of wild nature, although itself an interpretation of nature, functions as a critical concept that radically limits our inclination to domesticate nature in reducing her to any particular moral interpretation (via ethics and otherwise) by reminding us that there is something other whose meaning must be, but at the same time can never fully be, interpreted.

In the end, Nietzsche’s account of our contemporary relation to nature is deeply paradoxical. Nietzsche commits himself to a notion of wild nature that lies beyond each interpretation. But he is aware that the only way to remind us of this wildness is by using yet another appropriative interpretation – and thus by repeating that which he wants to put in question. The ‘wildness’ of nature – though the key positive element in Nietzsche’s critique of morality – is mainly a critical border concept, which points to a limit to our valuing.²¹

At the same time, wild nature makes up the context in which we live and value. Wildness is not just the object of interpretation, but also the primal ‘substratum’ of reality that is always present in the act of interpretation.²²

Nietzschean wildness serves as a criterion that enables one to distinguish between appropriations in which nature is being *reduced* to a particular interpretation, and those that acknowledge the problematic nature of such a reduction. Nietzsche’s wildness does not provide univocal ethical norms, but allows us to evaluate different moralities: *interpretations of nature should be judged by the degree to which they – through a particular interpretation –*

succeed in acknowledging that which lies beyond interpretation (and that which works in the act of interpreting).

A NIETZSCHEAN DIAGNOSIS OF OUR CURRENT FASCINATION WITH WILDNESS

Nietzsche's thinking seems to provide us with a philosophy in which we can both acknowledge that there are many possible interpretations of nature – which seems to be the only viable position in our pluralistic times – and still hold firmly on to the idea that 'nature itself' is still an important moral concept: one that provides us with a criterion with which to criticize the "ridiculous immodesty" of human chauvinism towards nature.

But we should be cautious not to appropriate Nietzsche's philosophy too quickly. For instance: Nietzsche's philosophy seems to be far more radical a form of pluralism than our contemporary 'anything goes' pluralism with regards to nature. At the same time, Nietzsche is far too much of a perspectivist to allow for naïve moral references to nature in any objectivist or 'primal' sense, as we witness today in debates about the 'value of real nature.' Therefore, Nietzsche should lead us to rethink our contemporary dealings with nature critically. Maybe, his paradoxical thinking could provide us with a new and challenging interpretation of our current feelings and fascinations with wildness.

Our current age seems to be deeply fascinated with wildness. Even though wilderness in the sense of pristine, untouched nature is declining ever more, the concept of wildness remains one of the most prominent concepts within the environmental debate. The most notable place where one can witness normative references to wildness in our time is in the debate about ecological restoration.

Today, many people are interested in protecting and reconstructing wild natural areas because of their ecological function, or because they

contain genetic diversity – a resource for future developments. However, these utilitarian arguments are incapable of articulating the full scope of the moral reasons why modern people are interested in ‘wild nature,’ ‘real nature’ and so on. In philosophical debates on ecological restoration (Elliot 1997, Oelschlaeger 1991, Turner 1996, Willers 1999, Higgs 2003), one regularly hears references to ‘wild’ or ‘real nature’ (as opposed to ‘fake’ nature). In the Netherlands, these debates have been especially interesting because the Dutch landscape has been intensively altered by humans in the course of history. As a result, it consists mostly of cultural and semi-natural landscapes, and hardly any untouched wilderness is left anymore (with the Wadden Sea as a possible exception). In the last three decades, there have been several successful attempts to re-create ecosystems (notably wetlands) on former agricultural land by allowing natural processes such as river flooding to take place again.²³ According to many people, this has led to several new, ecologically rich and aesthetically interesting places. In the debate about the pros and cons of these ecological restoration projects, many people still refer to these places with concepts like ‘wilderness’ and ‘real nature.’ It is obvious that these people do not refer to pristine, untouched nature. What, then, does wilderness mean in these moral debates? I believe that these references primarily serve a *moral* purpose and that Nietzsche’s notion of wildness can help us clarify its meaning.

Some argue that our current fascination with wild nature, and the current appeal of the ‘wilderness icon,’ are merely the contingent outcome of a cultural and socio-historic development, e.g., the fact that ever more people live in cities.²⁴ Although I acknowledge that historical, cultural, and socio-economic inquiry can help put our current understanding of nature in context, I believe that environmental philosophers should also try understanding our current wilderness desire from within, as it were.

If Nietzsche’s diagnosis of the crisis of morality is right, then our present situation is unprecedented in at least some sense. We live in a postmodern age. We all know that our thoughts and images about the world and ourselves are deeply influenced by our historical cultural

background. We are aware (at least occasionally) of the relativity of our own cultural and moral conventions. This awareness has changed our outlook on nature once and for all. Even though in every day life we – consciously or not – fall back on one of many myths about nature, we realize that there exist many different accounts of nature. This confronts us (or at least it should) with the question ‘what is nature?’ more forcefully than ever before.

This awareness of the relativity of the different conceptions and images of nature makes it difficult to commit oneself to one particular interpretation of nature. We cannot, contrary to what some environmental ethicists argue, simply ‘choose’ one particular moral image of nature, commit ourselves to the practices that stem from it (as if one could ‘choose’ to conceive of nature in a ecocentric way and henceforth be an ecocentrist) and decide to confront those who hold a different view (for instance, those who tend to look at nature as merely a resource for economic purposes). This view rests on a wrong conception of what it means to adopt a concept of nature. The problem is that, in the end, we all cling to different concepts of nature on different occasions. We conceive of nature differently when we drive a car or when we go on a hike. Apparently we have a whole repertory of images of nature at our disposal, all of which are thoroughly contingent, that is to say: all of which have something accidental that renders them unfit as images of ‘nature as it is.’

This postmodern awareness of the contingency of all of our images of nature, I believe, can explain our current fascination with wildness. We postmoderns are deeply aware of the contingency of all these appropriations of nature; there seems to be no account of nature that is not mediated by contingent cultural schemata. At the same time, we have difficulty committing ourselves to any particular cultural interpretation: like Nietzsche’s ‘hybrid European’ we stand before our wardrobes unable to choose what to wear. We, too, hope to gain a sense of freedom in this constant changing of costumes; we modern nature pluralists do not want to tie ourselves down to any one particular notion of ‘nature.’ And yet,

we postmodern nature lovers long for some meaning in nature that lies beyond all this plurality of images: we long for a beyond of culture. This, I believe, is why we speak of ‘wildness’ in so many contemporary moral debates: the concept is meant to refer to that which precedes our cultural interpretations, images, and myths. We know that we can only encounter nature from within a cultural framework, but we desire – on the rebound, so to speak – something that is not dependent on our interpretations. We would like to relate to something ‘real,’ something already there, something bigger than us that precedes and exceeds our interpreting appropriations. Wilderness in this postmodern sense does not refer to an objective wilderness as pristine or primal nature, but it is primarily a relative moral concept. We desire wilderness as something radically other; it fascinates us because it is beyond our grasp.

With Nietzsche, one can interpret this postmodern longing for the wild in two different ways: both as a symptom of and as a more or less adequate answer to the moral crisis of nihilism.

The first, most pessimistic reading could prove to be the most likely.²⁵ In that case, one could say that the postmodern longing for wildness ‘from the rebound’ is just another symptom of today’s moral crisis. The postmodern wilderness lovers merely suffer from their inability to commit themselves to any particular interpretation of nature. Postmodern humanity is too relativist and constructivist to allow itself to be disciplined by any moral tradition that interprets nature in moral terms; it lacks the will and strength to really commit itself to any to any ‘culture of nature,’ such as the Arcadian tradition, or the Christian stewardship ethos. If postmoderns expect that nature somehow will reveal its moral meaning beyond interpretation ‘spontaneously,’ then their longing for the wild will inevitably lead to disillusionment. True, each particular moral interpretation only articulates certain possible meanings and excludes others, but without interpretation there can exist no moral meaning at all. The attempt to leave behind interpretation as such can therefore never be an answer to the moral crisis. In that case, the postmodern longing for ‘that

which is not yet interpreted' can eventually only lead to a further disenchantment of nature, and to a decrease in sensitivity towards those moral meanings that all kind of traditional moral traditions of nature have articulated before. If the longing for the wild signifies an inability to acknowledge those moral meanings of nature that have been handed over by us in history, then it is merely a symptom of the ever increasing moral indifference towards nature and there is not much to be won.

But it might well be possible to interpret the contemporary fascination for wild nature differently as well: not as a symptom of disease, but as a first sign of a 'new health,' that is: as a newly emerging answer to our problematic relation to nature. In such an interpretation, the new fascination for wildness emerges from an increased sense of unease with the modern attitude towards nature, in which all of our efforts are directed at dominating and domesticating nature. In this reading, post-modern humanity is longing for a new and deeper relation to nature determined by a deeper, more radical ethic. The present longing for wildness could then be interpreted as a newly emerging answer to today's moral crisis – as an attempt to convert a mere feeling of unease into a new 'super'-morality of nature. Seen from this perspective, the longing for wildness can even be seen as a sign of a growing sensitivity towards the meaning of nature, an emerging new 'wildness ethic,' if you like.

In this interpretation, the postmodern wilderness ethic is aimed at acknowledging that which 'transcends' each particular moral interpretation, but somehow shows itself through that interpretation. If the post-modern longing for the wild emerges out of dissatisfaction with the poor-ness of existing interpretations, and a desire to 'free' nature from moralizing and reductionist frameworks, then the new wilderness ethic will seek a way to deal with the existing traditions and articulations of nature more creatively.

According to Nietzsche, the possibility of an overabundance of meaning in a 'new infinite' can only emerge out of the creative competition

(ἀγῶν) between the many different moral interpretations of nature, that correct, criticize, undermine, and enhance each other. The new wilderness ethic therefore does not seek to exclude existing moral interpretations of nature or, conversely, impoverish the moral debate by stipulating a ‘moral truth.’ On the contrary, the new wilderness ethics will try to enrich the moral debate on nature by creatively adding new, refreshing, and maybe controversial and subversive new meanings and interpretations, and mobilize existing ones, and thus put into perspective the all-too-human (too well-ordered, too domesticated, and overly anthropomorphized) picture of the world.

THE PARADOX OF ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION

If my reading of the postmodern longing for the wild makes any sense, then our present moral situation is strange and paradoxical. We value wildness, precisely because it *does not* suit our moral order. Nature appeals to us, not because its moral meaning fits a particular moral framework, but because it breaches our moral framework. What interests us is this unruliness in nature, that which cannot be appropriated and interpreted. However, this appealing nature means something to us, and therefore demands that we articulate what it means to us, make it part of our world – appropriate its meaning. That which appeals to us has to be interpreted to make it our own, but through this appropriation we lose the otherness that appealed to us. We long for wild nature, but in modelling this desire, we risk losing the object of our desire, because it exists precisely in resisting appropriation.

This paradox can also be recognized in different practices of ecological restoration. Some restorationists, for example, claim to recreate nature that resembles primal nature as it once existed in that place, although they are fully aware that the result of all our efforts can never be anything but a fake copy, a reconstruction of a doubtful original.²⁶

I suggest reinterpreting these ‘new wildernesses’ as cultural monuments: postmodern reminders that nature precedes and exceeds our imagery of nature. These are places where we can still meet the amoral and unruly, where people can get in touch with something that is not of their making. Ecologist Wouter Helmer (who, as director of the Ark Foundation, manages many Dutch ecological restoration projects) once used the phrase “insane oasis” to designate these places of ‘new nature’ as places of freedom, where one can put in perspective the ‘sanity’ of our everyday moral conventions (Helmer 1996). This use of words seems to express a very similar idea as the Nietzschean wilderness as a border-concept: reminding us that there is something beyond our moral frameworks. The paradox remains, however, that these places are themselves the result of another moral interpretation, another interpretative framework, albeit a strange, paradoxical, and somewhat ironical one. These places can never be anything but reminders of a limit; they simultaneously reflect our inability to commit ourselves to any morally binding interpretation of nature and our attempt to gain a deeper understanding of nature.²⁷

Another Dutch conservationist, Thomas van Slobbe, has experimented with this paradox more explicitly. In the Netherlands, a country where every patch of land is allocated in governmental zoning plans, he tried to create ‘an empty space’ outside the human order (Van Slobbe & De Geus 2003a, 2003b). Van Slobbe claims to have committed ‘the perfect crime’: in an unknown nature reserve, undetectable to passing hikers, he placed a circular hedge around a piece of land, thus ‘expropriating’ a piece of nature from the human sphere. After he thus created the ‘empty place,’ he walked away, never looked back, never returned. Thus he created a place that cannot be experienced, that cannot be valued, that cannot be made subject to human plans and endeavours. It is just what it is, ‘an empty place’ outside the human sphere. The only way to represent such a place would be to make ‘a hole in the map,’ if only that would not again reveal the location and make the empty place again part of the

human world. The paradox is, of course, that by creating this ‘empty place’ – a place outside culture – wildness is introduced into culture again. The empty place is a real place in a real location (at least, that is what we are supposed to believe), but at the same time it functions as a symbol of wildness, as a moral reminder of human finitude in a land dominated by culture.²⁸

Just like Nietzsche, these different thinkers try to think of wildness not as the opposite of culture, but as a moral meaning within culture. They introduce the ‘beyond’ of culture into the cultural arena of moral values.

CLOSING REMARKS

We are interested in nature that is beyond our control, and are fascinated by the limitations of our power. Deeply aware of the contingency of all interpretations of nature, we (morally) value wildness as that which does not fit in our moral order, and wild places as places where moral valuing is out of place. The paradox is that these attempts to acknowledge the otherness of nature presuppose another interpretation of nature, albeit one that is more aware of the problematic nature of each interpretative appropriation.

I do not know if my interpretation of the new wilderness areas is indeed the most feasible one. It is easy to argue why these places are less postmodern than I have argued. It is inevitable that we somehow have to appropriate the meaning of wildness, and thus have to learn to deal with all kinds of paradoxes that we will get ourselves entangled in.

However, there are also signs that many managers of the ‘new wilderness’ reserves are not at all interested in enduring the tension between the idea of wildness and their own need to control and encapsulate wildness. There is indeed some reason to be sceptical about the promise of a moral self-criticism at work in these landscapes. The need of people to feel at

home in a landscape seems to be stronger than the postmodern awareness that we are rootless in a fundamental way and prevents people from actively and creatively rooting themselves.

Dutch poet and novelist Willem van Toorn, a strong defender of the traditional Dutch river landscape against the idea of constructing nature, considers the new so-called wildernesses not as a symptom of a more humble self-critical attitude towards nature, but on the contrary, as a continuation of the idea that humans can redesign nature at will. If there is some truth in this, it would render these projects to be the opposite as what I have been arguing. The drive of people to appropriate the landscape is something that one cannot set aside that easily. According to Van Toorn,

the type of nature that nature builders aspire does not have anything to tell to humans – that is why these newly created nature areas have to be provided with information pavilions, signposting, treasure hunts along tree species and ponds with half domesticated otter; humans as strangers, as a visitor in his own landscape (Van Toorn 1998, 77).

If this observation is accurate, I would have to change my promising interpretation of the new wildernesses as emerging from a new wilderness ethic. As far as these new wildernesses are turned into places that fit the human needs – that make us feel at home, provide us with nice recreational areas, biodiversity reserves and the like – then the new wilderness reserves are just another means of affirming the human power over nature; if these new wilderness reserves are indeed constructed to fit seamlessly into the all-too-human world, they become the opposite of what wildness in a Nietzschean sense would be.

For now, the conclusion should be that today's fascination with wilderness can be interpreted both ways: as a symptom of the moral crisis, and as an emergence of a new sensitivity for the excess of meanings in nature that invites us to go beyond our own preconceived moral standards. Perhaps it is still to be decided which it will be.²⁹

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BGE = Beyond Good and Evil

GS = Gay Science

HH = Human All Too Human

HH-WS = Human All Too Human – The Wanderer and his Shadow

KSA = Kritische Studienausgabe

UM-HL = Untimely Meditations; On the Use and Abuse of History for Life

TL = On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense

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NOTES

1. *Beyond Good and Evil*, 223: "Notice too the moments of despair because 'nothing suits' us—. It is in vain we parade ourselves as romantic or classical or Christian or Florentine or baroque or 'national,' in *moribus et artibus* [in morals and arts]": it does not 'clothe us.'

2. In this paper, the term ‘nature’ mostly refers to nature around us, what is commonly known as our ‘natural environment.’ In contrast, in Nietzsche’s work, the term ‘nature’ usually refers to human nature and nonhuman nature alike; Nietzsche does not explicitly discriminate between our own nature and the rest of nature.

3. Sometimes, the debate then shifts to the question what kind of nature ‘we would like to have.’ Any deeply rooted concept of nature that could serve as a foundation for making such a choice, however, seems to have disappeared from view.

4. Although in utilitarianism the moral good is identified with a particular natural state (happiness as a ‘non-moral good’), moral calculus itself – the core of utilitarian reasoning – is not taken as a part of human nature. In contrast, in classical (virtue) ethics there is less opposition between (human) nature and morality: the morally good is interpreted as the reasonable essence of (human) nature. For this view, however, the problem is how to distinguish moral from amoral aspects of nature.

5. Nietzsche’s critique of anthropocentrism and his plea for a “reanimation of man” is not, as Michael Zimmerman (2005) rightly points out, motivated by “biospheric egalitarian” arguments. His concern is rather about the health and destiny of humankind. Even so, one can point to countless parallels between Nietzsche’s anti-anthropocentrism and that of radical environmentalism (Hallmann 1991, Parkes 1998, 2005).

6. In this respect, there is a clear parallel between Nietzsche’s thought and ancient Greek moral philosophy. Greek virtue ethics also considers morality as a particular organization of one’s own natural impulses. The main difference from Nietzsche, however, is that the Greeks believed in providence, the idea that the ‘true’ moral good somehow mirrors the ‘essence’ of human nature. In contrast, Nietzsche denies the existence of such a moral essence in nature: morality is the force that organizes and disciplines our own nature in a particular way, but is itself the contingent result of earlier ‘power relations.’

7. *Beyond Good and Evil*, 188: “Every morality is ... a piece of tyranny against ‘nature’ The essential and invaluable element in every morality is that it is a protracted constraint.”

8. Nietzsche takes morality to be “a decided and decisive testimony” of “in what order the deepest impulses of [one’s] nature stand to each other” (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 6). In fact, he equates morality with this organization of impulses. The unifying power of morality does not come from a higher order of being. The moral order is nothing but the net result of the constituent wills being organized. The resulting unity “is only unity as organization and combination” (KSA 12, 2[87]).

9. Evidently, Nietzsche does not do justice to the ‘real’ Stoics. In fact, there are very strong parallels between Nietzsche’s moral philosophy and stoic ethics. According to Paul van Tongeren, Nietzsche tries to adjust the stoic ideal to a modern, a-moral, conception of nature: “Nietzsche seems ... to search for a meaning of the stoic ideal of homologia [living in accordance with nature] in the framework of an ontology of struggle” (Van Tongeren 2002, 17).

10. Indeed, many influential scholars – Martin Heidegger amongst others – interpret the teaching of the will to power in this way. It is certainly possible to interpret Nietzsche’s theory of will to power as an ontology (Mittasch 1952, Moles 1990). It would render Nietzsches project metaphysical – a last guise of traditional thinking about the true nature of reality. Such a reading would find confirmation in Nietzsche’s statement that the concept of will to power provides the physical concept of force with an “inner side” (KSA 11, 35[68]) or that the will to power is the

world “viewed from the inside” (BGE 36). However, such a metaphysical interpretation of the will to power is very doubtful, because it neglects the self-referential aspects of Nietzsche’s philosophy: if reality is indeed a constant flow of competing forces, how could such a fixed, final truth about the world exist in such a world? That is why Nietzsche explicitly presents his theory as an interpretation (amongst other, competing interpretations).

11. BGE, 22: “Supposing that this also is only interpretation – and you will be eager enough to make this objection – well so much the better.” Statements like these lead some scholars (e.g., Schönherr 1989) to conclude that the main focus of Nietzsche’s teachings of will to power is to criticize totalitarian ideologies. However, anti-metaphysical interpretations like these remain one-sided, because they pass over how Nietzsche too presents his own theory as a truth claim, for instance by flirting with scientific interpretations of nature. A purely negative interpretation of the will to power thus fails to do justice to the presumption with which Nietzsche presents his account of nature: “as my proposition has it” (BGE 36).

12. This is seen most clearly in the published work, where Nietzsche mentions the will to power only a few times, notably in BGE 22.

13. See also Van Tongeren 1989, p. 174-177.

14. E.g., GS 109: “When will we complete our de-deification of nature? When may we begin to ‘naturalize’ humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?”

15. Seen from this perspective, Nietzsche’s emphasis on nature as chaos primarily serves the goal of providing an alternative for the several moral, all-too-human interpretations of nature that dominate our present worldview. Nietzsche mostly criticizes moralistic all-too-human views of nature and replaces them with images on ‘wild’ and indifferent nature because the criticized conceptions of nature are still more dominant in our present culture and more explicitly anthropomorphic and moralistic than the proposed alternative views. The view of wild nature as indifferent chaos is – as it were – the outward projection of he who has liberated himself from the bounds of any particular moral order.

16. For this reason, I really consider it to be a huge misunderstanding when Glenn Delière suggests that I am arguing for a relationship with nature in which we throw away all existing meanings and interpretations of nature.

17. Ricoeur is quoted in Van Tongeren 1994, 62: “The explanation offered by hermeneutics is directed towards being at home in the world. Ricoeur writes, ‘To understand a text is at the same time to light up our own situation or, if you will, to interpolate among the predicates of our own situation all the significations that make a *Welt* [world] of our *Umwelt* [environment].’ In hermeneutical ethics, moral experience interprets itself (for example, by interpreting texts). It does this to reach, through the appropriation of meaning, a morally meaningful and inhabitable world.”

18. HH-I, 508. In the original German text, Nietzsche speaks of “*grosse Natur*,” that is, big or grand nature.

19. See note 25 below.

20. See my paper “How to appropriate wildness appropriately” (Drenthen 2006).

21. Wilderness as a critical border concept functions as a human reminder of the limitations of the human capacity to depict or mirror the world itself. Eric Katz argues that such a ‘dualistic’ awareness of the difference between humans and nature is a “first necessary step to understanding the moral limits of human action in the natural world” (Katz 2002).

22. For this reason, I do not agree with Richard Kover that my account of the human-nature relationship is fundamentally dualistic (except in the specific sense mentioned in the previous footnote). I *do* admit, however, that – in general – I tend to underexpose both man's relation with his own bodily existence, and the active role (human) nature is playing in the act of interpretation (*natura naturans*), and therefore suggest a too 'formalized' view of nonhuman nature as merely the 'passive' object of interpretation (*natura naturata*).

23. One of the most commonly used methods is to make breaches in the riverbanks, so that rivers can recreate floodplains with their highly dynamic ecological features. It goes without saying that all this takes place within carefully defined confines.

24. E.g., Schouten 2005.

25. I grant to some of my critics, such as Deliège and Kowalski, that in earlier papers, I have not given proper attention to this more pessimistic reading. However, if this is the case, one can wonder if there is any point in ethicists merely reemphasizing moral statements about nature. In that case, still environmental ethics has to address the problems of today's moral crisis one way or another.

26. See Elliott 1997.

27. Surprisingly many restorationists, Helmer included, appear to be aware of these paradoxes.

28. Needless to say, Van Slobbe never intended to silence other moral interpretations, but, on the contrary, liven up the moral debate about our relation with nature by providing us with a new, subversive view of what a morally adequate relation with nature would entail.

29. This paper is a greatly revised version of a paper published earlier in *Environmental Values* 14(2005): 317-337. For the revisions, I'm deeply indebted to my fellow speakers at the 'Feral Fascination' symposium at the Institute of Philosophy in Leuven, on May 8, 2007: Glenn Deliège, Wim Bollen, Richard Kover and Ulrich Melle. Their papers can be found elsewhere in this journal. I am aware that I have not been able to answer all of these problems satisfactory, but I hope at least to have furthered our debate. I also wish to thank Bart Pattyn for his constructive remarks.