Ecological thoughts: Schopenhauer, JM Coetzee and who we are in the world

Laurence Wright

Let us assume that each of us shares an ideal. For the sake of argument, we can be specific about it. Let’s say we want to fashion some kind of high-tech Green utopia, where a greatly reduced community of humans lives in sustainable balance with the rest of the biosphere. This particular notion, developed from John Gray (2002), may well be incoherent – but never mind. Any of several other social-ecological ideals would do. In this paper I want to offer some thoughts, provoked by reading J.M. Coetzee (1940-) and Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), first about what would help to make that ideal possible, what might enable it; and secondly why it is implausible that any such ideal might actually come to pass.

In Coetzee’s The Lives of Animals (1999), the fictional novelist Elizabeth Costello delivers two rather unexpected guest lectures at ‘Appleton College’, one on “The Philosophers and the Animals”, the other on “The Poets and the Animals.” The two talks, and the discussion and circumstances surrounding them, were later incorporated into Coetzee’s extended and more fully novelized work, Elizabeth Costello (2003), a somewhat odd ragout of a book, the artistic success of which may be qualified, but which nonetheless contains much stimulating argument. In the second lecture, Costello dwells on the contrast between Ted Hughes’ two poems about a caged jaguar, and one by Rilke about a caged panther. Hughes is writing against Rilke”, she tells us, though she doesn’t actually quote Rilke’s poem, which is a pity. In it, his gaze “misted with tiredness”, the panther’s physically powerful being and sensibility is utterly curbed and thwarted by the presence of the cage bars, which seem to multiply immeasurably as an almost infinite cognitive and therefore spiritual confinement. “He feels as though a thousand bars existed/ and no more world beyond them than before.” Only rarely does “The pupil’s noiseless shutter” – the eyelid – lift, allowing an image from beyond to penetrate:
Then an image will indart, 
down through the limbs’ intensive stillness flutter, 
and ends its being in the heart.⁴

She describes Rilke’s panther as “the vital embodiment of the kind of force that is released in an atomic explosion”. With this is contrasted Hughes’s jaguar. According to Elizabeth Costello:

The jaguar’s vision, unlike the panther’s, is not blunted. On the contrary, his eyes drill through the darkness of space. The cage has no reality to him, he is elsewhere. He is elsewhere because his consciousness is kinetic rather than abstract: the thrust of his muscles moves him through a space quite different in nature from the three-dimensional box of Newton – a circular space that returns upon itself.⁵

The energy of the jaguar comes from within, surging through and beyond the supposed barriers of the cage as if they simply were not there. The poet understands the animal as continuing to live to the dimensions of a prior world undiminished by captivity, the world of a reality beyond the senses, perhaps an Einsteinian universe. By way of contrast the panther’s cage, more than a merely physical enclosure, is for him also a mental and spiritual confinement in which he is a cognitive as well as a bodily prisoner, abjectly awaiting release from without. Costello continues, “Hughes is feeling his way towards a different kind of being-in-the-world, one which is not entirely foreign to us, since the experience before the cage seems to belong to dream experience, experience held in the collective unconscious”. Then, significantly, she says, “In these poems we know the jaguar not from the way he seems but from the way he moves. The body is as the body moves, or as the currents of life move within it. The poems ask us to imagine our way into that way of moving, to inhabit that body”.⁶

What is this “different kind of being-in-the-world” and where does it come from? Perhaps rather obviously, it seems to me in outline a retreat from, or fundamental modification of, Enlightenment modes of understanding the world and humanity’s place in it, a shift away from reliance upon that particular form of cognition. At the same time the move perhaps inadvertently joins the mainstream of western
philosophy to modes of eastern thought which have been cherished for a very long time.

The comparison of Rilke and Hughes represents a contrast between a neo-Kantian epistemology, exemplified by Rilke, and the particular post-Kantian epistemology espoused by Schopenhauer, and borrowed by Hughes. The contrast was prepared for in the earlier lecture on “The Philosophers and the Animals” in which Elizabeth Costello asserts “there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves in to the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination”. We might certainly be justified in asking Why not? The so-called Kantian revolution had proposed and defended radically new and compelling limits for what can and cannot be known by human beings. Kant confined knowledge to the sphere of actual or possible experience, to the empirical and conceptual deliverances of human sensibility and its mental and technological extensions, including abstract mathematical extrapolation. Whatever we know, we can know only according to our physiological and mental make-up as human beings. That there are other forms of sensibility (as in other life forms, like panthers and jaguars, for instance) we cannot doubt, but on this view we cannot know their worlds or feel their feelings, except through reasoned and unverifiable conceptual analogy. We cannot know what it is to be a jaguar. Similarly, that there is a reality beyond the reach of our own perceptual and conceptual apparatus we cannot doubt. But whatever its nature, this reality must remain permanently inaccessible. We can never know things-in-themselves. Like Rilke’s panther, humanity is permanently housed in a cage constituted by its perceptual apparatus, blinded by the bars of its physiological inheritance, and waiting for contingent and unpredictable moments where some insight from that inaccessible realm beyond the confines of our human-ness slips past our senses and penetrates the heart – in other words, it waits for some form of revelation or theophany.
Schopenhauer, while reverencing Kant as the greatest philosopher since Plato, was not satisfied with this. Specifically, he was unhappy with the implication that humans are permanently trapped in a cognitive simulacrum, rather like Plato’s prisoners confined to watching the shadows on the cave wall. As his way out, Schopenhauer seized on the major philosophical equivocation of the Kantian revolution, a flaw so patent that subsequent generations have marveled that so astute a thinker could ever have made it, and deduced from it a metaphysic that not only entails a rapprochement between modern western philosophy (up to Schopenhauer) and eastern tradition, but also holds out the possibility of conciliating the so-called animist thought-ways of Africa, something to which those who live here in Africa should be more alert than they currently are.

The epistemological flaw seized upon by Schopenhauer is well illustrated in Rilke’s poem. The panther’s whole being is conditioned by his state of imprisonment, and yet, paradoxically, sometimes he opens his pupils and a cognitive transaction occurs which originates beyond the prison bars. In other words, occasionally the veil is lifted and the absolute confinement of our perceptual inheritance gives way to transcendent insight. We become ‘seers’. This cognitive escape-hatch, wistfully adhered to by the romantic poets and fundamental to modes of Eastern and African thought, corresponds to the contradictory Kantian assertion that our perceptions are caused by noumena of which they are the appearance, when all the while the deeper implication of the Kantian revolution should be that noumena are ultimately unknowable because permanently shrouded by the deliverances of human sensibility. We know phenomena only as mediated by our own forms of perception and intellection, and so phenomena are all we know. The sympathetic imagination is still our sympathetic imagination.

This ambivalence in Kant’s treatment of the noumenal, his presumption that discrete noumena are the causes of our perceptions, when on his own assumptions this is precisely something we can never know, is utterly disabling
from a philosophical standpoint. Our cognitive powers are hosted by the brain (so we believe), our visions and illuminations as much a function of our mental anatomy as our perceptions and feelings. Accepting this carries a further implication. If our apprehensions of a thoroughly differentiated world are indeed caused by things-in-themselves, as Kant had supposed, then the noumenal must itself consist of multiple ‘things-in-themselves’. This would be deeply problematic on Kant’s own grounds, for multiplicity can be experienced only in relation to conceptions of space and time, and these Kant had shown to be subject-bound forms of sensibility and reflection. It follows ineluctably that differentiation is itself confined to the world of experience; and there can be no ‘things-in-themselves’ independently of experience, as Kant had oddly assumed. The unknowable reality beyond all possibility of experience must be undifferentiated.

According to Schopenhauer, the phenomenal world we experience through our cognitive and sensory apparatus, including panthers and jaguars (and ourselves), is our particular ‘take’ on an undifferentiated reality which in itself is beyond our apprehension. Schopenhauer struggled to find a name for it. He called it ‘will’ (Wille), but could just as well have settled on ‘force’ (Kraft) or ‘energy’. His terminological problem, after all, was to name something that is beyond human apprehension. (If, at this point, the feeble image that surfaces in our minds is some kind of comic-book representation of the ‘big bang’ in one small arena of the multiverse, and the unknowable nothing/everything/enigma that informs that ongoing event, we might be forgiven.) Schopenhauer’s metaphysic, achieved in the classical idiom of western philosophy, postulates an undifferentiated, immaterial, timeless, space-less, cognitively inaccessible noumenon which presents itself to our variant perceptual constitutions as this differentiated phenomenal world of material objects, processes and events (including each of us) in space and time. The vision is to an extent congruent with that found in Vedic and Buddhist literature, something which impressed Schopenhauer enormously when he uncovered the parallels. According to Schopenhauer – and here comes the major implication for our collective project
of a sustainable, modestly-populated, high-tech Green future – the undifferentiatedness of the noumenal is crucial to understanding the basis of morality.

In the phenomenal world we exist as separate embodied individuals, as gendered humans and animals – not to mention mollusks, plants, rock formations and so forth. This is the empirical world we all know, and the world studied by science. But noumenally, in the ultimate ground of our being, it is impossible that we should be differentiated. In relation to this ultimate origin, we are one; differentiation cannot apply. It follows that if we hurt another being, in this special sense we hurt ourselves. This, for Schopenhauer, is the ultimate explanation of compassion, altruism, disinterested concern for other beings – of those ethical behaviors which would make no sense were we actually the utterly separate beings our senses proclaim us to be. (One might question the epistemology here and still find the description telling in terms of moral awareness.)

For our ordinary powers of cognition, this awareness seems mystical. Schopenhauer avers that its basis is in fact mundane, and as ordinary as seeing or hearing. Through our senses we are aware of each other as discrete phenomenal beings and therefore as objects of knowledge. But – and this is crucial – we also experience ourselves from the inside, immediately. This latter experience is not one of knowledge (that belongs to the world of cognition, of representation and the senses) but of pure physiological will. Emotions and feelings are modifications of the will, of the body experienced from inside. It is through this unknowable experience of our own inner existence as embodied will that we are able to empathize with other human beings; with other animals, other life forms, and other material formations. And so Elizabeth Costello can write, “By bodying forth the jaguar, Hughes shows us that we too can embody animals – by the process of poetic invention that mingles breath and sense in a way no one has explained and no one ever will. [Actually Schopenhauer tried to, more than 150 years ago!] He shows us how to bring the living body into being within
ourselves. When we read the jaguar poem, when we recollect it afterwards in tranquility, we are for a brief while the jaguar. He ripples within us, he takes over our body, he is us”. Indeed, Hughes is on record admitting that Schopenhauer is the only philosopher he had ever really read.

Schopenhauer maintains firmly that this basis of moral insight, which gives rise to the possibility of ethical behavior, “just because it is not abstract [in other words, because it does not belong to the world as representation], cannot be communicated, but must dawn on each of us. It therefore finds its real and adequate expression not in words, but simply and solely in deeds, in conduct, in the course of a man’s [or woman’s] life”. We recognize here that Schopenhauer is not arguing that those who behave morally do so because they have read Schopenhauer, or because through exploring some belief system they have achieved an appropriate understanding of the theoretical basis of morality. He tells us that “Virtue does indeed result from knowledge, but not from abstract knowledge communicable through words. If this were so, virtue could be taught, and by expressing here in the abstract its real nature and the knowledge at its foundation, we should have ethically improved everyone who comprehended this. But this is by no means the case. On the contrary, we are as little able to produce a virtuous person by ethical discourses or sermons as all the systems of aesthetics from Aristotle’s downwards have ever been able to produce a poet”.

The mere existence of this possibility, the notion that compassion may not be simply an idle, rootless sentiment and rather more like an immediate, ontologically-based response to realities beyond the grasp of our cognitive apparatus, might well be cause for some degree of ethical optimism in regard to our putative high-tech Green ideal. In Schopenhauer’s moral framework, compassion is seen practically in justice and philanthropy or, to put it another way, justice and philanthropy are the moral expression of compassion. Justice stems from unwillingness to see others harmed; philanthropy from the practical effort to see them prosper. As two sides of the same coin, justice and
philanthropy demand the recognition of what George Eliot called “an equivalent centre of self”\textsuperscript{16} in others, and a willingness to fight for and protect that other self with the same vigour one would bestow on matters of immediate self-interest. In similar vein, Shelley could write: “A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own”.\textsuperscript{17} But with both Eliot and Shelley the question arises, Who is the ‘other’? Which other ‘selves’ matter, and what about the pains and pleasures of species other than our own? Schopenhauer, in contrast, not only subordinates the moral imagination to mundane facts of embodied experience which we share with all creatures, he extends the scope of moral responsiveness and responsibility infinitely beyond the human self and the human species. For him, the ‘golden rule’ means at the very least a tempering of egoism in the service of others; other people, yes, but also other life forms, other inanimate entities. The New Testament question, ‘Who is thy neighbour?’ receives here a radical and disturbingly comprehensive answer.

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This leads me to the less happy part of my argument, namely some of the reasons why humanity is unlikely to respond to or act firmly in accordance with the perennial ground of moral insight to which Schopenhauer has drawn our attention. Once we have been alerted to, or become intellectually aware of, that non-cognitive part of ourselves which we experience as will, we find that it is persistent, unrelenting, sometimes capricious, and utterly insatiable. This realization is something of a constant in wisdom literature the world over, but if we confine ourselves to western literature we can think, for example, of St Augustine’s struggle to incorporate the complexly resistant power of the will in his account of his conversion to Christianity in the \textit{Confessions} (Book VIII),\textsuperscript{18} or Thomas Hobbes evocation in \textit{Leviathan} of mankind’s “restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death”,\textsuperscript{19} or Saul Bellow’s Henderson “the Rain King”, hounded by that incessant, monotonous chant, “\textit{I want, I want, I want}”.\textsuperscript{20} One could cite John Donne, ‘When thou hast done, thou hast not done,/For I
have more\(^{21}\) and add the refrain from Yeats’ poem ‘What then?’ sang Plato’s ghost, ‘What then?’\(^{22}\). According to Schopenhauer, there is no satisfying rest, no completion, no lasting fulfillment for the human ego, because willing springs from an ingrained, insatiable sense of want or deficiency. Instead of the mere urge for self-preservation, the humble biological maintenance of the individual, we are lumbered with an inordinate blind drive whose aim is the perpetuation of the species; and the more sophisticated we are as people the more strangely this force imbues the higher and more abstract mental modes that humanity has evolved. The result is often egoism of the grossest kind. Yet, without catering to this drive in some way, without tending the ego, we lapse into boredom, anomy or self-destruction. Kant thought we had to accept that we are free, morally autonomous agents, because we couldn’t otherwise make sense of our moral experience. Schopenhauer says no, experience tells us that our mental life, including our intellects, our aesthetic sensibilities, our moral proclivities and compulsions, is an extension of our embodied animal drives, which are in turn the individualised expression or incarnation of what Dylan Thomas expressed in the thought that “The force that through the green fuse drives the flower/ Drives my green age”, a formulation otherwise recognizable as Schopenhauer’s noumenal ‘will’\(^{23}\). In the phenomenal form of ‘instinct’, the noumenal will betrays us into serving the needs of the species under the delusion that these needs are really our own individual desires. To offer some crass examples, the entire sex industry (of which the glamour, fashion, lifestyle and advertising sectors are often ghostly, sublimated extensions), not to mention much of our ordinary social and sexual behavior, rests on our willingness to lend ourselves to impersonal representations of sexuality divorced from the inner being of specific individuals. We so easily betray our individuality. Schopenhauer tells us, “The delusive ecstasy that seizes a man at the sight of a woman whose beauty is suited to him, and pictures to him a union with her as the highest good, is just the sense of the species”\(^{24}\). That is one reason why many feminists are so outraged by pornography and others just laugh it off or actively enjoy it. General sexual attractiveness is disturbingly unrelated to individuality. In Disgrace, J.M. Coetzee
has his protagonist, David Lurie, articulate this arbitrary species attraction
(arbitrary, that is, in relation to human individuality) in his attempted seduction of
a gauche student, Melanie Isaacs, who happens to take his fancy:

‘Stay. Spend the night with me.’

Across the rim of the cup she regards him steadily. ‘Why?’

‘Because you ought to.’

‘Why ought I to.’

‘Why?’ Because a woman’s beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it.’

Here is the staple assumption of sexualized social behaviour clearly expressed, an assumption which in this instance ultimates in the all-but-rape of Melanie Isaacs. Rape, indeed, could be understood as the darkest expression of this species drive brutally disregarding the individual’s very existence. Schopenhauer writes brilliantly about the *sturm und drang* surrounding sexuality, from young people who attempt relationships which make species sense (the lust factor) but not individual or social sense (the heroes and heroines of romance are often applauded for favouring the species over society’s claims), to the proponents of arranged marriages who urge the importance of social and financial compatibility over temporary sexual infatuation, thereby sponsoring the genre of romantic tragedy. The noumenal will itself doesn’t care either way. In our own time, Schopenhauer would have read Dawkins’s book, *The Selfish Gene* (1976) and said, ‘I told you so!’ When one considers that he predates the entire modern literature on evolution (from Darwin on), psychology (Freud and Adler) and cosmology (from Einstein to Penrose and Hawking), Schopenhauer’s philosophical acumen is remarkable.

But does anything that has been said so far jeopardize the potential of our putative high-tech Green utopia? Just because we are ‘will-filled’ egoists, is there any necessary reason why we should not respond to the promptings of compassion, which according to Schopenhauer is the main driver of our
propensity for ethical action? I think there is, and so did Schopenhauer. To be
open to the promptings of compassion requires that we, quite literally, ‘feel with’
those in distress, be they people, animals, plant species, threatened geomorphic
formations, or whatever; that we experience the import of the golden rule not
merely notionally or intellectually but through the intelligence of our inner
embodied being, our ganglia. Exercising such a proclivity entails that we temper
the demands of the ego, meaning that we in some measure turn against the raw
compulsions of the embodied will, and – if we are impelled to extremes – step by
step immolate the ego. This is the path of renunciation. Most religions and
meditative practices insist on some form of asceticism or restraint as a
preliminary to understanding or enlightenment, which is why Nietzsche was so
incensed by them.26 Few human beings take this path, except when compelled to
by suffering and circumstance. The ego’s careless demands generally win out in
some substantial measure, with the full force of our evolutionary inheritance
behind them.

Sociologists will tell us that late capitalism is merely one form of social
arrangement, conceptually replaceable by healthier forms of social organization –
and that the failure of these healthier forms to appear is just a temporary
derangement of political will. Just so, but not, I fear, temporary. Late capitalism is
the virtually unimpeded human ego running rampant over the planet, its impact
magnified immeasurably by growing technological capacity. How surely, swiftly
and serenely was the puritan discipline of South Africa’s democratic revolution
eroded by rampant greed and corruption – sometimes seen in those very people
who had earlier preached the virtues of restraint in the service of our common
civility. While certainly such moral turpitude can be analysed in relation to history
and political theory, its existence is no mere political or social aberration but
further evidence that human beings rarely escape the chthonic maelstrom of
what we call ‘nature’ for any length of time. That tempering of the ego through
cultural training and ethical reflection, which is crucial to the practice of
compassion, can only be realized person by person, newly in each generation.
The full ambiguous force of the noumenal will seeks expression in every new individual. A background of deprivation only heightens its urgency.

Faced with the enticing attractions of the capitalist *smorgasbord*, it is hardly a wonder that the demands of the untempered ego regularly triumph over the requirements of compassion, expressed as justice and philanthropy. Long after the insistent hurdle of mere survival has been surmounted, the insatiable ego, as the phenomenal expression of noumenal energy, continues its impossible search for fulfillment through wealth accumulation, conspicuous consumption, over-achievement, rampant hedonism, status-seeking and so on. Capitalism unleashes and magnifies this raw energy, which is why it consistently outperforms (in terms of sheer economic growth) any other more morally salubrious system of economic development. It is also why the effort to capture and redirect the energies of capitalism through taxation, or through the enforced substitution of socially desirable objectives for the profit motive, tends to weaken the economic engine and divert it towards less morally-encumbered environments.

The ecological battle for hearts and minds is hampered by the kinds of creature we are. We need egos to survive. We even need them to strategize and work for an ecologically sustainable future. The question we should ponder, all of us, is where the threshold lies between legitimate comfort and selfish greed. Do we actually need lives of luxury and excess? Moralists down the ages tell us such lives are wasteful, dangerous and ultimately unsatisfying. There are more worthwhile goals. Nevertheless, how many can turn down the opportunity for a second home, a new gas-guzzling 4x4, or a R1500 watch when a R300 one will do the job? No more can the super-rich resist a house on each of four continents, private jets and helicopters, or bizarre weddings catering for 800 of their closest friends. Excess always resides further up the chain. “O, reason not the need!” cries King Lear (2.2.438). Puritan restraint is so easy – for the poor.
Would a dominant Green movement be any different? Yes, it could be, but the attainment of such dominance would require a widespread shift in human motivation greater than any we have seen to date. That humans are necessarily will-filled egoists is testified to indirectly by those major world religions or thought-ways – Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism – which insist that what they call creation is so awful that it must be saved or redeemed or transcended, and most such belief systems concur in urging that the unsatisfactory state of affairs on the planet is somehow endemically humanity’s fault. We shouldn’t be the way we are. They assail us resolutely with calls for repentance, for various kinds of mental and behavioural re-engineering which over time, as we have seen, are often relatively ineffectual. Humans en mass seem not to be capable of the profound changes contemplated by religious and philosophical faiths, any more than other animals would be. We are not free to be other than we are. Freedom belongs only to the morally ambiguous, even perverse, noumenal will which is continuously manifesting itself in the world we see about us. But perhaps even here there is some hope. We are individually capable of renouncing. We can with great difficulty learn to give up some of our egoistic impulsions in favour of a more generous social and ecological outlook; but we cannot radically change those impulsions and very few people even attempt this. That is why, for those who cannot renounce their violated selfhood, forgiveness is such a difficult decision. And why, for so many, ecological sanity is always tomorrow’s problem. Humans the world over are necessarily a certain way, and it would indeed be remarkable if those with Green blood were, to the last man and woman, any different. For this reason – our individual and collective reluctance to renounce our egoistic desires – the enduring attainment of civility of a quality and coherence sufficient to address the demands of our current ecological imperatives seems to me most unlikely, and I regret this.

One alternative is to take the Al Gore route, as seen in his film An Inconvenient Truth, and try to scare people with the facts. When humans are sufficiently convinced that our current ecological profligacy is not only unsustainable but
lethal, perhaps the primitive energies of the ego can be hitched to the environmental agenda and progress could be faster. Note that this is not a *moral* way forward. It does not attempt to persuade egoistic ‘panthers’ to become ecologically-committed ‘jaguars’. It is an attempt to rationally educate the ego as to dangers facing its own survival and that of its progeny. Could this work? The effort depends on the capacity of the state and civil authority to curb or divert the short-term interests of the profit-seeking individual in favour of the longer term interests of society. Because such a strategy involves external authority, both persuasion and power, its results will be mixed. How long will it take? How long is the interval between crisis and catastrophe? When nature finally speaks out loud, the results are likely to so outweigh any possible human response that the paltry reaction of terrified humanity will be laughable in comparison.

I would obviously prefer to see us undertake a collective revision of our life-goals under the felt impulse of compassion. The outlook for this agenda, as I have indicated, is not good, but compassion need not be some kind of Pollyanna alternative to scare tactics. It seems to me that the grounds for compassion should be, and actually already are, linked to Schopenhauer’s famous assertion that this is, in fact, the worst of all possible worlds. What he means by this rather ominous statement is not that we are incapable of imagining worlds, any number of worlds, better than this one. The puniest ethical thinker is capable of coming up with an imaginary society where some of our discontents disappear. No, what Schopenhauer means is that our world is such that were it to get any worse, its existence would be impossible. This should probably be a founding insight for any movement promoting sustained ecological reform. He writes:

> Now this world is arranged as it had to be if it were to be capable of continuing with great difficulty to exist. Consequently, since a worse world could not continue to exist, it is absolutely impossible; and so this world itself is the worst of all possible worlds.²⁷

As evidence for this ecological precariousness, he cites the implicit destructive threat seen in the irrational relations of planetary motion, and the awesome
forces held at bay by the firm crust of the planet. He instances the numerous plagues which carry off millions of people, such as cholera, yellow fever, and the black death, admittedly attributing them to “insignificant alterations of the atmosphere”. The science may be wrong, but the insight is valid. “A very moderate increase of heat,” he tells us, “would dry up all rivers and springs” (actually, as we know only too well, it will do a great deal more than that). He cites the precarious existence of animal life in the wild; and when it comes to humans, he affirms, “Powerful as are the weapons of understanding and reason possessed by the human race, nine-tenths of mankind live in constant conflict with want, always balancing themselves with difficulty and effort on the brink of destruction”.

Our scientific understanding and means of intervention have improved immensely since Schopenhauer wrote, but is the real situation any different today? The devastation of HIV/AIDS shows that our animal drives (the phenomenal manifestation of Schopenhauer’s undifferentiated noumenal will) are in all too many instances stronger than ethical, educational or prudential constraints. In South Africa, according to one calculation, 800 people die every day of AIDS, while 1000 more are infected.

But cosmic precariousness and environmental fragility, even human ethical deficiency, are not the sole defining features which lead Schopenhauer to characterise this as the worst of all possible worlds. We need in addition to invoke his sense of horror – that same horror which Conrad caught from reading Schopenhauer and embodied in his novella Heart of Darkness (1892).

I’ll give you two examples, one concerning animals and the other humans:

Junghuhn relates that in Java he saw an immense field entirely covered with skeletons, and took it to be a battle-field. However, they were nothing but the skeletons of large turtles, five feet long, three feet broad, and of equal height. These turtles come this way from the sea, in order to lay their eggs, and are then seized by wild dogs (Canis rutilans); with their united strength, these dogs lay them on their backs, tear open their lower armour, the small scales of the belly, and devour them alive. But then a tiger often pounces on the dogs. [And, we might add, after that humans come along and shoot out the tigers or destroy their habitat. LW] Now all this misery is repeated thousands and thousands of times, year in year
out. For this, then, are these turtles born. For what offence must they suffer this agony? What is the point of this whole scene of horror? The only answer is that the will-to-live thus objectifies itself.\textsuperscript{32}

And then we come to humans, who, while intellectually endowed, exist in a continuum with the rest of the predatory animal realm:

The world is a battle ground of tormented and agonized beings who continue to exist only by each devouring the other. Therefore, every beast of prey in it is the living grave of thousands of others, and its self-maintenance is a chain of torturing deaths. Then in this world the capacity to feel pain increases with knowledge, and therefore reaches its highest degree in man - - -.\textsuperscript{33}

Notice the phrase, “devouring the other”. Humans devour the other through physical ingestion of food; they also devour ‘the other’ intellectually and morally. This is the understanding that torments Elizabeth Costello. The pastoral world of humanity, including the humanist vision, rests on a substrate of unimaginable horror. Well before Richard Dawkins started talking about the gene machine, Schopenhauer had understood that the meanings our intellects and imaginations construct from experience are only incidentally necessary to the physical forces that shape us. They are indeed imaginings, useful delusions – as Conrad might see it – that mask the terms of our participation in the cosmic process. Only compassion seems real enough to engender authentic response.

My provisional conclusion follows. Scientific and technological progress is significant and ongoing. Humans, cumulatively and on the whole, make no more sustained moral progress than do eland or chameleons. Gains by individuals and groups in one generation are often sunk by their successors and compatriots. Thinkers like John Gray, to name only one, are committed to the idea that because we are incapable of steady, collective moral progress, ‘nature’ will, sooner or later, reject us (human beings, that is), but that evolutionary processes will continue regardless, working away on whatever mess we leave behind.\textsuperscript{34} If that assumption is true, then our exemplary project of a high-tech Green utopia is a non-starter.
My own view is that even though humans generally may be incapable of curbing their desires sufficiently to ease the burden on the planet, a great many individuals are. In them, the rampant ego submits to a fuller sense of realism. Even here, we need to be certain that renunciation does not consist in an abandoning of ethical responsibility, a feckless retreat from the planetary crisis. David Lurie, again in Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace* (the work is roughly contemporaneous with *The Lives of Animals*), is forced by experience and biology at the conclusion of his story into a strange withdrawal from the world. He plucks at the strings of his daughter’s banjo in the dog yard of the animal haven, his imagination filled with the musical harmonies of his imaginary intercourse with the shade of Byron’s great love, Teresa Guicciolli. Physiological aging and hurtful experience have pushed him into acting out a form of Schopenhauerian renunciation, and he takes refuge in the musical imagination, wherein Schopenhauer locates the truest understanding of the world’s meanings. Lurie at last learns to cherish the simple biological ‘other’, in the form of dogs, but at the same time withdraws his sympathy, his compassion, from the intellectual and emotional surplus that is manifested in humans – unless dogs are Coetzee’s arrogant metonym for humans with affect but no intellect! David Lurie is really rather a useless human being. Having lost faith in his students’ ability to learn from literature, he does much that harms and little that helps. We can at least do better than that. We might, perhaps, come to cherish a fragile balance between egoism and asceticism (something like the ‘golden mean’ commended by Aristotle) which will allow a measure of joy and fellow feeling into our experience, a felt empathy with our environment, its jaguars and its panthers, and some moral commitment that gives us the disciplined strength and will to cope with at least some of the contingent ecological crises that threaten the well-being of our habitat. When we come to accept that this is indeed, intrinsically, the worst of possible worlds – that is, when we come to live conscientiously within its ecological parameters – we might also learn to rejoice in it as if it were the best, and then make it a little better.
It could well be that people would be happier if human lives were more fully devoted to securing the ecological welfare of others, be they human, animal or more simply natural ‘others’, than they currently are. This conjecture rests on more than an uncertain trust in ethical reciprocity or self interest. It is rooted in the supposition that compassion has a universal ontological basis, as Schopenhauer surmised. In other words, the compassion we exercise in caring for ‘others’ must necessarily be experienced by ourselves. The social insignia of compassion is friendliness, according to Schopenhauer, closeness and intimacy; whereas those of egoism are remoteness, distancing, separation. Compassion is thus more primitive than gender, race or class, which are substantially social constructs. And the ameliorative forces of justice and philanthropy which, as has been suggested, are the social expression of compassion, remain the twin powers and principles we rely on to keep the world live-able. For the ecological agenda to make real progress, we would have to see powerful people and social agencies turning away from the ecological insanity which threatens us all, and for this to happen people on the ground need to embrace voluntary renunciation, on the understanding that this is not self-sacrifice, but a different and more satisfying way of being in the world.

Postscript

*It is helpful to come clean when broad philosophical reflection is precipitated by local circumstance: the effort often clarifies questions that are more than tangential. I recall writing this essay in a mood of disillusionment occasioned by the accumulating evidence of official corruption and dereliction of duty in post-apartheid South Africa. The details are ultimately immaterial, but let me name some of them: the morally compromised arms deal and subsequent government cover-up, ‘Oilgate’, profligate expenditure in corporate and governmental entertainment budgets, rampant nepotism, implicit South African support for the Mugabe regime, the AIDS debacle, tardiness in settling land redistribution issues, corruption and attendant quality-failure in low-cost housing delivery, the inability of national and provincial departments of education to substantially improve the*
dismal quality of education offered in some 80% of South African schools, failure to address the growing energy needs of the country appropriately, and so on. The list became a metonymic substitute for the larger, inter-related issue of whether humanity is capable of rising to the broad ecological challenges it faces. On the post-1994 South African evidence, despite the golden opportunity offered by a courageous political settlement, humanity’s chances would be modest at best.

Why should a catalogue of moral debauchery by others, one which affects me only indirectly, weigh on my spirits? I am temperamentally an optimist. I am cheered when things go right, when the justice system works, when people behave decently, even heroically; when social security grants are paid, rights are respected, cupboards are painted and roads are mended. The resort to Schopenhauer, most pessimistic of philosophers, was deliberate. His work, complemented by aspects of J.M. Coetzee’s writing, suggests rather convincingly why general moral regeneration is endemically unlikely, but not impossible. I question the epistemology, but value his suggestion of a distinctively human way in which people can achieve greater moral substance, one which makes sense of the prescriptions of religion and social ideology without indulging in romantic illusions. I tend to approach philosophy as a form of deep imagining, and Schopenhauer’s speculative grasp of the primitive sources of morality offers a plausible imaginative account of why the ethical behaviour of others impacts on my own sense of well-being, and vice versa.

Schopenhauer is probably correct that, while mores can be taught, morality itself is ultimately an existential phenomenon and must be discovered. The fate of the planet rests on that question which hums on in the very stuff of things, insistently but intelligibly: Who is my neighbour?

Institute for the Study of English in Africa
Rhodes University
NOTES


8. Elizabeth Costello: “Even Kant does not pursue, with regard to animals, the implications of his intuition that reason may be not the being of the universe but on the contrary the being of the human brain” (Coetzee, 2003, 67). On such Kantian grounds, apprehending ‘the brain’ is itself a deeply compromised move: “When we imagine a real brain, we imagine that its imagined qualities resemble its real qualities - - - - Without resemblance, the real brain and its real neurons are *unimaginable*. We only imagined that we could imagine the real brain because of our earlier immersion in naïve realism: when we thought that we directly saw the things themselves and when we were brought up to believe that we inhabited real space and that the primary qualities of this space were objective physical qualities. All of this has to be given up - - - -” (Gamez 2007, 81-82).

9. First and last, it is crucial to recognize that transcendental idealism does not deny the validity of ordinary experience, or science’s theoretical and descriptive hypotheses. Johnsonian table-kicking, like all other attempts at refutation through appeals to common sense, utterly mistakes the Kantian/Schopenhauerian position. Such appeals reify epistemology as ontology. Yes, the world appears to us to be a certain way, and we have the experiences we have. These include the remarkable capacity of science and mathematics to describe and even predict, probabilistically, the behaviour of the noumenal world, with surprising accuracy. But this is still just our changing epistemological exploration. We experience reality as we experience it, and have absolutely no means of knowing what or how it actually is – unless, of course, we believe in visions and revelation.

10. The exposition of Kantian/Schopenhauerian epistemology here is adapted from a forthcoming book chapter, “David Lurie’s learning and the meaning of J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace,*” to be published in *Austerities: Essays on J.M.*


26. "This sole morality which has hitherto been taught, the morality of unselfing, betrays a will to the end, it *denies* the very foundations of life" ("Why I am a destiny", *Ecce Homo*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), 132.


29. These figures were publicized by The St Raphael HIV/Aids Centre in Grahamstown, South Africa.


31. Franz Wilhelm Junghuhn (1809-1864), the German botanist and anthropological pioneer, was the author of *Die Topographischen und Naturwissenschaftlichen Reisen durch Java* (1845), from which Schopenhauer quotes.


34. See Gray (2002), 151.

WORKS CITED


Our salvations are all of the imagination, our realities those of the grave.