

Freedom & Flourishing in a Posthumanist Age: More-Than-Human Being in Revolt

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INTRODUCTION

With the advent of the “posthumanist age” – a historical moment defined, in part, by anthropogenic ruination of ecosystems writ on a planetary scale – the question of what it means to be *human* has become increasingly entangled with questions of ontology, ecology, and justice. It remains to be seen, however, if the already contentious term “posthumanism” offers anything beyond hawking a more state-of-the-art and self-reflexive stage of humanism. We share in the proposition that any genuinely posthumanist project must challenge the historical lineage of human-centrism, including the dogma that humans exist as individual, bounded entities and autonomous subjects set against an otherwise objective and non-agential “environment.” Specifically, we want to suggest that posthumanist pedagogy recognizes multispecies perspectivism – including our anthropomorphic limitations – as well as the co-constitutionality of being in a more-than-human world. Such a posthumanist turn in existentialist thought would offer novel possibilities to respond in ethically appropriate ways (relative to the “Western” historical trajectory) to the ecological destructiveness of our age. With this project in mind we offer a response to the ecological crisis aided by insights from French-Algerian philosopher, Nobel Prize-winning writer, and anarchic freedom-fighter Albert Camus. We approach this project from an environmental education perspective as it is our chosen field, but more importantly, because we believe transforming culture will invariably entail a pedagogical dimension.

SAYING YES TO LIFE

Camus died at 46 in a car crash, yet before this tragic accident he produced an impressive body of work that continues to engage, provoke, and challenge Western thought. His is a powerful voice for justice coupled with a life lived as political radical. Camus tended to write novels and philosophical essays in tandem and we employ one of these pairings in order to frame this article, namely, *The Plague*, a story of how a small town responds to a hopeless and unmanageable outbreak, and *The Rebel*, a philosophical essay exploring historical revolutions in order to employ “man in revolt” as a point of departure for deducing the value of existence. Both works (published in 1947 and 1951, respectively) are profound inquiries into the possibilities of being in response to seemingly insurmountable challenges.¹ Camus is particularly perspicacious in this regard as he seeks to explore how one might respond to immediate problems at hand, but also how we might work collectively to realign cultural configurations such that the same problems do not simply rebrand and repeat.

A central concern lies at the heart of all of Camus’s diverse artistic expressions and philosophical inquiries: “there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.”² At first blush this may appear a typically cynical position for an “existentialist,” and too nihilistic for the purposes of environmental education where typically “hope is an imperative.”³ But Camus, in his own provocative way, is posing a question of profound import as to the nature of the good life; one that parallels classic Platonic inquiries, but in the terms of a secular twentieth-century theorist. For Camus, we are always free to choose suicide, to exercise *radical freedom*, and thus he seeks to inquire why, on this day or the next, do each of us, decide to continue to live and what can we deduce from this choice? In other words, why say yes to life and what does this choice say about what we value in life and how a life ought to be lived? It is this combination of *negation*, saying no to suicide, and *exaltation*, saying yes to living, that informs Camus’s vision of the rebel and, we suggest, might inform environmental educators – faced with negating the ecocidal aspects of human-centrism within the dominant culture while exalting the radical freedom,

to which, for Sartre, we are all condemned⁴ – to explore the possibilities of more-than-human being in a posthumanist age.

In *The Rebel*, Camus sets out to understand his time, and specifically the foremost crime that defined it: the systematic extermination of 70 million people. He examines the seemingly acceptable logic of this genocide, seeks to rescind that reasoning, and takes up the challenge to address how it could occur: “on the day when crime dons the apparel of innocence—through a curious transposition peculiar to our times—it is innocence that is called upon to justify itself.”⁵ The question of suicide is indispensable for Camus because an understanding of the implications of its negation allows a point of departure from which to proclaim the illegitimacy of, murder and genocide. Suicide is the starting point because its daily negation reaffirms the value of life; if we recognize that there is something good in living, something worth saying yes to, then the same must hold for others: “from the moment that life is recognized as good, it becomes good for all men. Murder cannot be made coherent when suicide is not considered coherent.”⁶

In thinking about the defining character and crimes of the so-called posthumanist age, we are compelled to address ecocide and if – bearing in mind this *if* is for rhetorical effect, the scientific evidence is conclusive⁷ – we are in the midst of an ecological crisis of catastrophic proportions, the question of suicide remains indispensable. Confronting our individual choice to negate suicide propels us towards recognition of the value of life for others, and presumably in a posthumanist age, for all living beings (and the “inanimate” processes that sustain life). Thus the central concern of this article is what can be drawn from Camus to inform a post-anthropocentric rebellion against ecological injustice informed by a recognition of what it means, as a species,⁸ to say yes to life in a more-than-human world?

REVOLUTION & REBELLION

In *The Rebel*, Camus traces the metaphysics and history of “man in revolt” in the Western tradition in order to make an important distinction be-

tween revolution and rebellion. While he acknowledges the significance of each insurrectionary instance and figure in advancing revolutionary thought, he is primarily concerned with why revolutions have never been overly successful in terms of lasting liberatory transformation. For Camus there are several reasons, two of which are important here. First, revolutions tend to be concerned with the destruction and annihilation of an entire system or way of being and therefore lack, in a nihilistic sense, an efficacious alternative vision that can be sustained beyond the initial storm and fervor of insurrection. Second, revolutionaries tend to neglect the resilience and, in a sense, necessity of the historical-material conditions and habits out of which any transformation must emerge. Humans are situated beings, they exist within cultural configurations that provide meaning-making tools, ontological structures, and axiological frameworks, that make it possible to function, but also make it difficult to shift orientations at will. For Camus, not only does revolution usually begin with absolute negation, say of an entire class or cultural institution, but also it attempts to respond, assuming that humans can leap, at will, directly from one way of being to another with little in the way of intermediary structures other than a faith-like belief in “the revolution.” For Camus, this *absolute flexibility* is an inherently flawed presumption and arising out of neglect for the cultural-material resilience and habits of present formations. We suggest that this neglect is a failure to recognize the significance of the pedagogical dimensions of cultural change projects.

Rebellion, on the other hand, involves an understanding that transformation entails both negation of pre-existing structures and exaltation of cultural configurations, myths, and institutions that recognize the value of life. As with suicide, Camus suggests that rebellion “starts with a negative supported by an affirmative.”⁹ Transformation, in the sense of rebellion, does not entail the total overthrow of history or metaphysics per se, but proceeds as an evolving, simultaneous, and paradoxical project of negation and exaltation: “it is the rejection of one part of existence in the name of another part, which it exalts.”¹⁰ In this sense, the rejection of suicide and the will to rebel are both grounded in the reaffirmation of life and freedom for the self vis-à-vis the other. The challenge then becomes choosing what calls for negation and what calls for exaltation

in a given historical moment of rebellion. As Camus points out, rebellion is a process with a distant goal, what he calls unity, but it must honor that those engaged in the process of change are not likely to leap from here to unity in a single bound: “we can act only in terms of our own time, among the people who surround us.”¹¹ In recognizing the facticity of our social imagination, both the creative urge for total revolution and the horizon of what is possible together, Camus returns to what he calls dignity and beauty. “But the affirmation of a limit, a dignity, and a beauty common to all men [sic] only entails the necessity of extending this value to embrace everything and everyone and of advancing toward unity without denying the origins of rebellion.”¹² These origins emanate from the sense that, in spite of the impossible situation into which we are thrown, the absurdity of it all, the basis of maintaining our own dignity, beauty, and freedom lie in embracing those same values in everyone and everything.

For Camus, the tragedy of revolutions throughout history, political or artistic, is that most have resulted in short bursts of freedom as what-is is negated utterly, but – and herein lies the tragedy of total negation – eventually a reiteration of the status quo returns that is not substantially different from pre-revolutionary conditions. These relapses are predicated on the fact that there was little to exalt and thus little upon which to build. In response to wanton negation, Camus wants to posit the rebel. The rebel enacts rebellion as paradox, negating the aspects of the culture deemed most unjust and “suicidal,” while actively exalting those “life-affirming” aspects within the horizon of the possible.

With respect to the ecological crisis, the posthumanist age demands that we radically reconsider what aspects of the culture remain “suicidal” and which are to be exalted in a more-than-human world. Take, for example, the following sentiment by Peter Hay: “We are called the anti-folk. Anti – this, that, everything. But we are not. We are for, not against. For a tangible, physical place. For the riotous, loving dance of life. For the beauty that will settle anew upon the island when the present horrors pass.”¹³

Hay responds here to the way the dominant culture tends to frame the environmental movement as “anti-everything,” thus illegitimizing them as dreamers, nihilists, or utopians (characteristics Camus might define as “revolu-

tionaries” in the negative sense). Hay claims environmentalists are not *only* in the business of negation, and names place, life, and beauty as things environmental thinkers are in fact exalting. For Camus it is this combination of negation, the active naming of those things that one wants rid of in the current system, and exaltation, the active naming of those things that are of value, significance, and importance that differentiates conventional revolutionaries from the rebels. In other words, rebellion entails a more complex, self-reflexive, creative, and educational process that honors and seeks to recognize the value of each individual, understand transformation as a shared endeavor, and view transformation as a process already in play with the first act of saying *no*. In this case, the first no reaffirms our individual existence, but also provides a means to potentially deduce which aspects of the larger culture are contributing to ecocide. But this negation must be coupled simultaneously, as Hay does, with that which we exalt.

At this point, following Camus’s suggestions, it behooves us to locate an initial negation and exaltation that might propel revolt in a more-than-human world. In accordance with the posthumanist turn beyond anthropocentrism, the following discussion regarding freedom and dignity will pertain not only to human individuals but all beings and, by extension, the processes that sustain life on this planet.¹⁴

Recognizing more-than-human being in a time of ecological crisis necessarily entails rebelling against the colonizing and imperialistic aspects of the dominant culture that have resulted in mass extinction and threaten ecocide. Lessons that we draw from Camus in this respect are: 1) not seeking absolute negation, i.e. Western culture is not entirely ruinous; 2) the need to bear in mind this work is going to be enacted by *real* human beings immersed in the real places, material conditions and habits of their lives; 3) this work needs to be done with a view to the value of all living beings and exalting those aspects of our co-existence that ought to be - with a nod to Val Plumwood¹⁵ - actively foregrounded; and 4) we must endeavor to make the need for negation/exaltation thinkable and workable within the horizon of what is possible. We have a clear first step in the process, negation, saying no to suicide, and some indicators from Hay of possible exaltations, place, life, and beauty, but these seem both

potentially generic and difficult to enact. As environmental educators, naming the crisis for what it is – suicide by ecocide – and using that as impetus might be an important first pebble into the pond. Yet it appears we need something more graspable and workable if we are really going to take this project forward, and it is here that we would like to turn back to Camus's idea of freedom.

FROM FREEDOM TO FLOURISHING

Although our impetus for seeking exaltation emerges from the challenges to freedom in our own time, Camus offers provocations to assist. Quite early in Camus's 1949 play *The Just* we hear a character make the claim that freedom is not an individual achievement, prerogative, even reality, but that it is connected to and contingent upon others. Sartre distills the sentiment: "I am not free unless others are as well."¹⁶ Interconnection with the other - all the way down, as it were - is important to our discussion in two ways. The first is that individual freedom is contingent upon the freedom of others who recognize one as something other than an object.¹⁷ To be a subject in an isolated world of deterministic laws, habitual modes of being, and emptied of other subjects who recognize and share this ability is akin to creating art with no audience or contributing to a dialogue no one hears. The presence of another is not, however, just about having a passive audience as soundboard, but being recognized by and implicated in the processes of collective agency and freedom. For if I recognize an other as being free, and my own freedom is predicated upon this recognition, then I have a responsibility to weigh my decisions, actions, and way(s) of life in light of their perspectives and possibilities of being, just as their actions impact my own possibilities in potentially limiting or expanding ways.

The second way in which the other is necessary for a flourishing kind of freedom is its coupling with responsibility, such that freedom becomes the ability to choose to act and not act, be and not be, and that every being has the same opportunity and range of possibility. By extension, if I am not free in a world of automated objects, so too am I not free if I am the only one able to engage in a full range of possibility in a world of limited others. For what does

it mean if I alone am the one who can create what I am? Or if in the process of self-becoming I have made it impossible for others to do the same? Or if only a small portion of living beings, the portion privileged with subjecthood for instance, can exercise it? For Camus this second point is clearly positioned within a social justice conversation and yet his project in a posthumanist age begs the question: what if in exalting the possibility of freedom for all we include the communities, beings, and life-granting processes of a more-than human world?

The exaltation we propose, then, is one of mutually dignified flourishing that takes seriously being in a more-than-human world. This is a reorientation to freedom for all, but it makes clear that a flourishing freedom in our time is one that comes coupled with responsibility to oneself, to others, and to the ecology of the whole (i.e., the particular agential beings and materiality that comprise ecosystems). The addition of dignity reminds us that this project of rebellion is about living and letting live in order to co-constitute the freedom of being, and that in losing this ability we risk losing an implicit dignity, the ability to self-create and be recognized as such beyond simply existing for others as *resources*.

The negation we propose, while admittedly less developed in this article, is nevertheless clearly implied: individualistic anthropocentrism as manifest at the level of the individual human as well as that of the species (i.e., human exceptionalism) that undergirds Western cultural institutions. This builds upon the message of interconnection and the idea that one is never free, self-becoming, or in rebellion alone or strictly for oneself. Confronting this hierarchical anthropocentric bias may be unsettling in its implications, but for the reader willing to recognize the ontological significance of the other-than-human and that the world co-exists because it is comprised of myriad unique individuals doing and being what they are, the negation of suicide is the negation of anthropocentrism and, by extension, the exaltation of a flourishing and freedom. We propose that the role of environmental education ought to be one of actively undoing everything that places the human at the centre, while extending the idea of interconnection, dignity, and increasing possibility for all.

IN SEARCH OF THE REBEL TEACHER

In the final section of this article we turn to Camus's novel *The Plague* to explore some possibilities for responding to an impossible situation: the absurdity of teaching in a time of ecological crisis. In his novel, a plague has descended upon an unsuspecting town, people are dying, and there appears to be little that can be done. And yet, Camus introduces us to a variety of characters, each embodying a kind of archetypal response to this overwhelming crisis. Most commentators suggest Camus is commenting on French resistance to Nazi occupation, but we suggest that the characters might also map today onto the challenges of ecological crisis, climate change, and ecocide in generative ways. There are, for instance, those who try to obfuscate and under-sell the challenge, those who straightforwardly deny the reality of the situation, those who cynically profit by manipulating fears, those who resign themselves, those who try to escape, those who anticipate the solution arriving from elsewhere, and finally those who respond in ways that might be considered rebellious, even though they are quite understated. It is to them, and to the main character, Dr. Rieux, that we turn in order to think through some of the characteristics of the environmental educator who enacts the rebellious paradox of negation and exaltation.

Teacher as Witness

The narrator's identity in the *The Plague* remains hidden for much of the novel and when Dr. Rieux does reveal himself it is only with resolve to "compile this chronicle, so that he should not be one of those who hold their peace but should bear witness in favour of those plague-stricken people; so that some memorial of the injustice and outrage done them might endure."¹⁸ Earlier in the novel Rieux, having seen the dying rats and the growing number of sick patients, is called into a meeting with several doctors, politicians, and leaders of the community. The point of the meeting is to discuss strategy in response to the challenges being faced. Rieux first bears witness here, despite another doctor who wants to temper the diagnosis and several politicians who want to downplay

the challenge and limit financial support, by having the courage to name the plague as a plague and by insisting the city respond in an appropriate manner (e.g. closing its gates, setting up a quarantine system, isolating the sick, etc.).

And so one of the first acts of rebellion for Rieux was to speak an uncompromising truth despite the impossibility of the situation and the response required of people. Sadly, others are unwilling to respond, but Rieux continues to name the plague for what it is, gathers allies, and begins doing the work he is called to do in such dire circumstances. Intriguingly for environmental educators, Rieux is simply doing what is “right” in accordance to his medical protocols for a plague scenario and the Hippocratic oath. What might a parallel commitment look like for educators in a time of ecological crisis? By naming the environmental challenge and enacting the negations and exaltations proposed above we may begin to form the basis upon which the actions of any educator can be judged and determined with respect to the relative flourishing and freedom of the more-than-human world. An educator may, for example, reflect upon whether the curricular activities he or she has chosen acknowledge and respond to the environmental crisis in terms of honoring the dignity of life and working towards a flourishing world for living beings. Or, for example, how he or she responds to instances of anthropocentrism, hyper-individualism, and the backgrounding of other-than-humans in the structure of the educational experience and the discourses employed by students.

Teacher as Artist

Throughout the novel Rieux is pushed by the situation to find creative solutions to challenges as they arise. One of the clearest examples is making sense of the involvement of unexpected allies. He knows that he needs people to organize into teams to gather, transport, and care for the sick, and he locates a previously quiet, ignored, and somewhat odd fellow to take the lead in this challenging role. In doing so Rieux undermines the way this person has been *situated* by the community and allows him to flourish in unexpected ways. For Camus, rebellion is an evolving process comprised of creative acts, often un-

expected, that move individuals and communities in unexpected ways. Camus clearly wants to focus on the act not the status of the artist; in other words, the point is to get a system for dealing with the ill, not about how brilliant Rieux is at managing human resources. For Camus this is a call to be in the world, in all of its beauty, horror, and complexity, with all of its denizens, and to assist, even if seemingly futile, in creating a shared mutual flourishing. In this Camus looks to Proust, whom he admired greatly, and how Proust as rebel artist exalted life, its particularities, its uniqueness, and its sensualities by decentering the dominant metanarrative of his time, the image in which all else was created and that undergirded all other stories: God. The point for today's environmental educator is that while that particular metanarrative has fallen into some disrepute, the root metaphor has simply been rebranded and reiterated in the form of human exceptionalism. In the Anthropocene, human is the measure of all things and it is this problem, a profoundly hubristic faith in mankind, which the posthumanist teacher as artist must rebel against.

How might educators creatively decenter this metanarrative and exalt more-than-human flourishing? The environmental educator might ask: how is my teaching practice informed by experiences with local other-than-humans? How am I considering and creating learning environments that demonstrate that *human* is not the centre of existence? Or, how might assessment and evaluation look if we consider mutual flourishing and push individualism into the background?

Teacher as Rebel

Throughout *The Plague* there are many opportunities for Rieux to prioritize himself and choose to escape, give up, or work to benefit himself in different ways, and yet he does not. He is a humble, yet effective rebel, working alongside others in response to overwhelming odds. It is clear as the novel progresses that although the odds seem slim, the only way we are to be free is for everyone to find, in their own ways, something to do in response. There is a shared foundation that supports this work and that acts as a kind of lens

for the city and for each individual and it is this core that we hope this article has moved us a step closer to naming. We suggest that it might be through bearing witness and negating ecocidal suicide as a result of our individualistic anthropocentrism, while at the same time allowing all to exercise their freedom through exalting mutual dignified flourishing, that we can as living beings find the meaning of freedom.

1 Camus wrote *The Myth of Sisyphus* five years earlier.

2 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. J. O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 3.

3 David Orr, *Hope is an Imperative* (London: Island Press, 2010).

4 See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans. D. Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

5 Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. A. Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 4.

6 Camus, *The Rebel*, 6.

7 See, for example, Clive Hamilton, *Requiem for a Species: Why We Resist the Truth About Climate Change* (Washington: Earthscan, 2010); Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014); John Foster, *After Sustainability: Denial, Hope, Retrieval* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

8 Clearly there are cultures and peoples within the category “human” that are more and less responsible for the destruction wrought globally. This article is directed at those peoples who have taken, and continue to take, a “colonizing” position towards the more-than-human world.

9 Camus, *The Rebel*, 251.

10 Camus, *The Rebel*, 251.

11 Camus, *The Rebel*, 4.

12 Camus, *The Rebel*, 251.

13 Peter Hay, in Matthew Newton and Peter Hay, *The Forests* (Mathew Newton: Hobart, 2007), np.

14 Note: This attempts to amend David Abram’s concept of the more-than-

human to include the particularities and individualities of said members, hence the pluralized form.

15 See Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

16 Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, x.

17 Care must be taken here not to reinscribe subject/object duality, both to remove human exceptionalism and maintain existentialist integrity.

18 Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. S. Gilbert (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960), 251.