

ON LIFE, MOVEMENT AND STOPPAGE: AGENCY AND ETHICS IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

Joanna Zylinska, Goldsmiths, University of London, U.K.
Email: <j.zylinska@gold.ac.uk>

See <www.mitpressjournals.org/toc/leon/48/2> for supplemental files associated with this issue.

Abstract

Responding to the current narratives about the impending planetary catastrophe caused by our human activity, this philosophy-cum-art piece develops a more affirmative story about life, death and extinction. Framed as a non-normative ethics for the Anthropocene, it considers the human's expanded obligations towards the bio- and geosphere, while also critically reflecting on the very constitution of this "human".

Keywords: Earth, ethics, extinction, responsibility, story-telling

Life typically becomes an object of reflection when it is seen to be under threat. In particular, we humans have a tendency to engage in thinking about life (instead of just continuing to live it) when being made to confront the prospect of death: be it the death of individuals due to illness, accident or old age; the death of whole ethnic or national groups in wars and other forms of conflict; but also of whole populations, be they human or nonhuman ones. Even though this article concerns itself first and foremost with life – comprehended as both a biological and social phenomenon – it is the narrative about the impending extinction of the human species, which we can also describe as “the *stoppage* of human life”, that provides a context for my argument. In contemporary popular science and mainstream media the problem of extinction is presented as something both inevitable and impending. To cite British scientist Stephen Emmott, the current situation in which we find ourselves can be most adequately described as “an unprecedented planetary emergency” for which the human species is solely responsible [1].

Apocalyptic narratives of this kind are nothing new, in both our history and art history. My aim here is to take some steps toward telling a *different* story about the world and our human existence in and with it when life itself is said to be under a unique threat. I want to ask what kind of life is produced, put in motion but also constrained by the current geopolitics and what kind of agency can regulate its movement. This leads to another question: can we imagine and enact some different, and better, forms of life? I am mindful here of philosopher John Gray's admonition that “the planet does not care about the stories that humans tell themselves; it responds to what humans do, and is changing irreversibly as a result” [2]. Gray is no doubt correct in his skepticism, yet we humans *do* care about the stories we tell ourselves. More importantly, stories have a performative nature: they can enact and not just describe things – even if there are of course limits to what they are capable of enacting. This article is one such story about life and death at both macro and micro scales. It is also an art piece that uses the medium of language, embracing philosophy as a form of reimagining the world to start thinking about the possibility of outlining a viable position on ethics. In other words, I want to ask how we can live a good life at this geo-historical moment that is currently being described as the “Anthropocene” – and about what constitutes this goodness. Proposed by the Dutch chemist Paul Crutzen in 2000, the term “Anthropocene” names a new geological epoch that supposedly follows the Holocene, “the epoch that began at the end of the last ice age, 11,700 years ago, and that – officially, at least – continues to this day” [3]. Our human influence upon the geo- and biosphere via processes such as farming, deforestation, mining and urbanization is said to have been so immense

that it actually merits a new designation in order to address the challenges raised by that influence.

It is not only the term “Anthropocene” that remains contentious though: the very “we” of the argument developed here is also posited as a problem, referring as it does to what philosophy and tradition have designated as “humans” while opening onto a complex and dynamic network of relations in which “we humans” are produced as humans and in which we remain entangled with nonhuman entities. The inspiration for this piece comes from a wedding of ecosex artists Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle, who married Lake Kallavesi in Northern Savonia at the ANTI Contemporary Art Festival in Kuopio, Finland, on September 30, 2012. This human-nonhuman wedding between more than two parties wasn't Stephens and Sprinkle's first: in previous ceremonies they had married the Earth, the Sea, the Snow and the Rocks, thus playfully taking on and enacting Donna Haraway's naturocultural kinship. Stephens and Sprinkle's performance points to a different mode of philosophizing, one that borrows from artistic sensibilities and that produces ideas with things and events rather than *just* with words. This mode of philosophical production is necessarily fragmented: it gives up on any desire to forge systems, ontologies or worlds and makes itself content with minor interventions into material and conceptual unfoldings. It is also embodied and immersed, responding to the call of matter and its various materializations – such as humans, animals, plants, inanimate objects, as well as the relations between them. This mode of work remains suspicious towards any current attempts to (re)turn to ontology, in both its idealist and materialist guises, as a predominant mode of “doing philosophy”. It sees any such attempts for what they are: ways of producing and hence also mastering “the world” and then passing it on (as fact) to others.

The reflections offered here are linked to my previous work on what it means to live a good life at a time when any attempt to define such goodness opens up to a political antagonism between opposing claims but also, more importantly, when the very notion of life is undergoing a radical reformulation, both on a philosophical and biotechnological level. Rather than engage in the work of philosophical critique, I am now primarily concerned with the possibility of developing an affirmative proposal for an ethics that *makes sense* – and that *senses its own making* [4]. This idea of the ethical call of matter expands on my argument from *Bioethics in the Age of New Media* [5], in which I positioned bioethics as an originary philosophy, situated even before ontology. That idea was inspired by the work of Emmanuel Levinas, although I was troubled by the humanist limitations of Levinas' ethics, whereby a primordial responsibility exerted upon me always came from human others. In bioethics as an “ethics of life” the way I understand it, the human self has to respond to an expanded set of obligations that affect her, allow for her differentiation from the world around her, and demand a response that is not just a reaction. While I do recognize, together with other theorists of post-anthropocentric thought, that “it is not all about us”, I also acknowledge the singular human responsibility which is exercised both by philosophical theory (consciously undertaken by few) and philosophical practice (being a more widespread undertaking, even if not always a conscious one).

My method can be loosely described as “critical vitalism”. It involves rethinking and remaking “life” – as both a social construct and a carbon-based construct – and what we can do with it. Taking such life as a (yet) non-valorized, historically specific minimal condition, critical vitalism remains attuned to stop-

pages in life, seeing life as both a becoming and a fracturing process. If, as Tim Ingold claims, “Wherever there is life there is movement” [6], we can perhaps also add that wherever there is movement there also tends to be stoppage (otherwise how would we be able to recognize movement *as movement*?). It is precisely this tension between movement as an enabling force of becoming – a point we can develop not just from Bergson and Deleuze but also from Ingold – and stoppage as an inevitable alteration in the rhythm of life that is of interest to me here. Critical vitalism considers how differences in movement and speed ensue and matter, who they matter to, how matter resists and recoils, and to what effect. In this context, ethics becomes a way of taking responsibility, by the human, for various sorts of thickenings of the universe, across different scales, and of responding to the tangled mesh of everyday connections and relations. This is how human agency can be exercised – although we have to bear in mind that such agency is partly nonhuman, never fully conscious and always “entangled” [7].

Also, agency can only become theorized post-factum, becoming a designation for something happening, after it has happened. Agency is therefore not something humans, animals and other beings or even inanimate entities *have*, the way social scientists have traditionally understood it (be it in their studies of the relationship between structure and agency, or, more recently, under the guise of the Actor-Network Theory). Rather, agency is something that unfolds in the movement of life: it is a set of actions and relations through which something occurs. But there are perhaps good reasons not to give up too early on the notion of agency, even if we do not see it as separate from the multiple processes of the world’s “worlding”. The differentiation between process and entity is always a heuristic, but it can be a useful device for us humans who are involved in the pastime of thinking: it allows us to develop a discourse about what we call the world – and about ourselves in that world. Agency therefore becomes something that the emergent human can mobilize in order to develop a meaningful discourse that matters.

Ethics is the name we have given to this long-established tradition of reflecting on the emergence of customs, morals and values across nature and culture. In other words, even if the difference between the human and other living entities is more of degree than of kind, and even if human agency is just posited rather than actual, designating a reduction of life to causes, effects, actions and objects, ethics is one of the practices in which human singularity – which is not to be confused with human supremacy – manifests itself. It manifests itself particularly strongly in the current geological epoch: this manifestation is what the term Anthropocene stands for. Yet ethics is also arguably a tool through which the Anthropocene can be both apprehended and amended. My own use of the term “Anthropocene” is therefore as an ethical pointer rather than as a scientific descriptor. In other words, the Anthropocene serves for me as a designation of the human obligation towards the geo- and biosphere. Even if the Anthropocene is about “the age of man”, the ethical thinking it calls for is strongly *post*-anthropocentric, as indicated earlier, in the sense that it does not consider the human to be the most important species, nor does it see the world as arranged solely for human use and benefit. The term does, however, entail an appeal to human singularity, coupled with a recognition that we can make a difference to the ongoing dynamic processes taking in the biosphere and the geosphere – of which we are part. An ethics for the Anthropocene is not just an updated form of environmental

ethics: it does not pivot on any coherent notion of an “environment” as an identifiable entity but rather concerns itself with dynamic relations between entities across various scales such as stem cells, dogs, humans, rivers, electricity pylons, computer networks and planets.

The starting premise of this kind of ethical thinking is that we humans are making a difference to the arrangements of “the world”, to its unfolding and speed. (The making of this difference could be termed “soft agency”.) Naturally, *we are not the only or even the most important actors that are making such a difference*. It would be extremely naive and short-sighted to assume that, as it would be to claim that we can affect or control any occurrences within that world – but we are perhaps uniquely placed to turn the making of such difference into an ethical task. Thanks to our human ability to tell stories and to philosophize, we can not only grasp, to some extent, the deep historical stratification of values through an involvement in what Deleuze and Guattari call “a geology of morals” [8] but also work out possibilities for making what we will agree, through deliberation, policy work and conflict resolution, to be *better* differences across various scales. While our participation in the differentiation of matter is ongoing, frequently collective or distributed, and often unconscious, ethics names a situation when those processes of differentiation are accounted for – when they occur as a cognitive-affective effort to re-arrange the solidified moral strata, with a view to producing a more sustainable geo-moral landscape (one that sustains not only *us humans* but also *other beings* as well as *itself*). Ethics is therefore a form of managing the movement of life, performed from within life itself. Even if I remain wary of capital-V values, I adopt one minimal assumption for this ethical project: a conviction that we have a responsibility to engage with life – materially and conceptually – because, as we know from Socrates, “the unexamined life is not worth living”. What counts as the examination of life goes beyond the Socratic method of inquiry instantiated between two parties with a view to eliminating erroneous hypotheses. It also involves physicalist engagement with the matter of life, with its particles and unfoldings. This is why performance artists such as Sprinkle and Stephens, but also so-called “bioartists” like Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr of SymbioticA, who are not scared of getting their hands and minds dirty with the stuff of life, are perhaps better placed than philosophers to enact such an examination of life. Eschewing all forms of didacticism and moralism upfront, artists working with and on life also actively contribute to the *making of ethics*. More often than not, such an endeavor involves running against our conventional understanding of nature and culture, structure and agency, life and death.

References and Notes

*This article is based on a paper presented at the “Agency in Movement” symposium held by SymbioticA on 21 June 2013 at the University of Western Australia, Perth.

1. Stephen Emmott, *Ten Billion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2013); Kindle version (non-pag.).
2. John Gray, “Are We Done for?” *Guardian*, July 6, 2013, p. 6.
3. Elizabeth Kolbert, “Enter the Anthropocene – Age of Man”, *National Geographic*, March 2011.
4. This piece, which offers some initial remarks on ethics in the geological context, is part of a book I am writing titled *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene*.
5. Joanna Zylińska, *Bioethics in the Age of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).
6. Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 72.
7. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
8. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).