

Kant and the Environment

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Introduction*

In philosophy, Kantian or not, the environment is commonly thought of as one of many applied topics—and thus not particularly important or difficult to do. Once the real philosophy is done, this logic goes, then those with less philosophical skill can do the easy job of applying it to such topics as the environment. This lack of attention to, appreciation of, and, ultimately, scholarly humility regarding the environment in so-called “Western,”¹ including Kantian, practical philosophy is both puzzling and disturbing. One reason it is puzzling is simply that doing environmental philosophy well is very difficult, so why do so many think it is easy? For example, doing it brilliantly as a Kantian requires mastery of Kant’s system of philosophy, such as the three critiques and how they work together as a whole as well as his writings on legal-political philosophy, anthropology, (natural) history, and geography. Along the way, one must also identify and correct Kant’s mistakes and take his ideas beyond where he did, such as by developing them so that they can be used in the 21st century. Doing this well is, in other words, an extremely complex endeavor that one would reasonably expect to be accompanied with admiration and respect in our philosophical practice, not belittlement.

The lack of sufficient philosophical attention to and appreciation of the importance of the environment by the strongest, most influential forces in the philosophical profession is also disturbing. After all, if we do not correct our ways based on a solid, improved understanding of the Earth, we have no good reasons to think biological life on this planet can or will continue much longer. From modernity² onward, the human destruction of our biological environment and of biological life is simply too great; our current ways are not sustainable. Seen in this light, philosophy’s lack of recognition of the importance of the environment is, to borrow from Kant, folly: foolishness woven with a streak of malice. Exploring reasons why and how philosophy lost its way regarding the environment, as well as the question of how to envision better ideals within a Kantian framework, is the topic of Part 1 below. I set the stage by drawing on relevant ideas from the work of Hannah Arendt before turning to Kantian scholarship and Kant’s practical philosophy explicitly. Part 2 pushes the analysis further by proposing that, contrary to what many think, modern environmental disasters and modern oppression are not independent phenomena; they are, rather, interrelated. Hence, not only has modernity driven the destruction of the environment (biological life and natural earthly phenomena), but it has also resulted in the subjection of any group of people whose way of life is existentially deeply influenced by, appreciative of, or admiring of earthly being to new levels of suffering, the worst of which

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¹ I’m not comfortable with the term “Western” philosophy, but I also don’t have a better term to capture the canonical philosophical tradition that, loosely, can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy via Europe. For a Kantian discussion of some of the difficulties with this term, see Lucy Allais’s (2016) “Problematizing Western philosophy as one part of Africanising the curriculum,” *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 35(4): 537-545.

² Hence, from, roughly, the 1600s onwards.

are best described as totalizing living death.³ To bring the existential suffering, especially of oppressed people, attendant to modern environmental destruction into the purview of Kantian philosophy, I propose we revisit and redeploy Kant's account of depravity.

1. Philosophers' Common Lack of Appreciation of Earthy Life—Philosophers' Folly?

Hannah Arendt gives us extremely useful tools to appreciate why it is so easy for philosophers—Kantian or not—to fail to appreciate the value and importance of the environment, a lack of appreciation that has risen to new levels in modernity, spreading and cementing itself as a key aspect of modern culture. Hence, I start (section 1.1) by sketching and illustrating some of Arendt's related proposals before (section 1.2) showing how her views can be seen as deeply compatible with some of Kant's ideas even though much historical Kant scholarship resists this reading. I finish this part (section 1.3) by showing how we can engage and develop Kant's philosophy in a way that can move us forward on these topics.

1.1 Arendt on Philosophy's Contemplative Temptations and Modernity

The activity of (Western analytic)⁴ philosophy, Arendt convincingly argues, comes with the temptation to value contemplation (the reflective life of the mind) above all other human activity, resulting in the devaluation of, or at least the inability to genuinely value and take pleasure in, other aspects of earthly life.⁵ Simplified, her reasoning goes like this: once (analytic) philosophy develops in a historical society, natural religions or myth-based natural philosophy quickly lose their hold on philosophers' minds since these systems of thought are not (as) well suited to exploring philosophical questions that require they be answered with such singularities as *one* reality or *one* being. For example, the myths involving the Greek Gods and Goddesses are intuitively quite apt for explaining powerful (and sometimes uncontrollable) human emotions and nature's seemingly inexplicable ways. They can answer such questions as, why would person X risk everything because they were sexually or affectionally attracted to (or rejected by) Y; why was the harvest so bad this year; and why are the skies stormy and thundery? The (religious) myths are not (as) useful, however, for explaining the philosophical distinction between what exists (being) and what only appears to exist (non-being). Philosophical accounts that appeal to some version of form and matter simply yield more powerful explanations of these phenomena. Hence, it is not accidental that as soon as philosophy started as a practice in ancient Greece, the notion of one ultimate being—and, correspondingly, one God—quickly became a prominent orienting principle for it.

Important too, Arendt continues, because contemplation enables us to draw these interesting and plausible philosophical distinctions between being and non-being, and because philosophical contemplation is inherently reflective and deeply satisfying, doing

³ Although it falls outside the focus of this paper, like Arendt, I believe that the role of the state in facilitating or undertaking this subjection is important. For more on this, see my (2021) "Kant and Arendt on Barbaric and Totalitarian Evil," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. cxxi (2): 221-248.

⁴ Though I do believe this temptation is integral to doing philosophy as such, for the purposes of this paper, we could write "analytic Western philosophy" here and every place I use the term (contemplative) philosophy in this Arendtian way—and I believe Arendt would be fine with this alteration. Hence, this paper can be seen as one way of merging so-called "analytic" and "continental" philosophy just as it can be seen as merging "analytic" philosophy with myth-based natural philosophy. As I hope becomes obvious below, more complete philosophical theories need to encompass all components and continuously engage with the questions of how the various bits fit together in one coherent whole.

⁵ Arendt, Hannah (1958/1998). *The Human Condition*, 2nd edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press). For more on my interpretation of this aspect of Arendt, see (2021). "Towards a Kantian Theory of Philosophical Education and Human Wisdom—with the help of Arendt," *Journal of the Philosophy of Education*, special edition on *Kant on Education and Improvement: Themes and Problems*, eds. Bakhurst, D. and Sticker, M. 55(6): 1081-1096.

philosophy comes with the temptation to devalue or lose our appreciation of earthly life. Correspondingly, Arendt interestingly suggests, philosophy is an activity that is both deeply exciting and involves a small death; the more involved and excited we become while doing it, the more we lose the sense of both the “I” and of being earthly, embodied, social creatures. Hence, it is tempting for philosophers to think that the activity of contemplation is better than other human activities and that the life of the philosopher is higher (in the sense of better) than that of others. Moreover, since these activities strive to use our rational cognitive powers to uncover truth—what there is, what is right to do (truly good), and what is beautiful—they are internally related to being as such. And, so, whether we read about Socrates’s trial or his allegory of the cave or book 10 of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, we find the idea that pursuing the rational life of the mind—the contemplative life of the philosopher—is to raise ourselves above being enslaved by our social embodiment. Earthly life enslaves us; rational life frees us.

Let me illustrate this point also from another direction. Historically, slaves, and often women—as Simone de Beauvoir emphasizes in *The Second Sex*⁶—have been coerced to focus all their energy on reproductive activities and denied access to productive (creative) activities. Their activities are, in other words, characteristically aimed at sustaining human life rather than exercising the creativity or cognitive powers that distinguish human beings from other animals. Moreover, if we are coerced (whether by other human beings or our life conditions) to focus all our energy on maintaining ourselves or others in these ways—what Arendt calls “labor”—then we feel enslaved by our biology. Doing *only* this kind of activity is experienced as deeply, existentially frustrating for us. The other kinds of human activity—for Arendt, “work” (creating objects that last through time and create a world, like roads and houses), “action” (the political or public leadership constitutive of creating societies with histories), and “contemplation” (philosophy as aiming at uncovering and understanding the eternal principles of being)—are not experienced as enslaving because they all involve our agency in creative and imaginative ways. And those who love doing philosophy easily experience their favorite activity as the best of these activities. Doing philosophy does not make one feel enslaved, it does not involve physical wear and tear, and it does not involve having to convince large crowds. In addition, philosophy’s pleasures do not track the fleeting pleasures of earthly life; they are more stable, longer-lasting rational pleasures internally linked with our intellectual needs and with (questions concerning) eternal being. In other words, it is not so strange that philosophers are easily drawn to rank the various kinds of pleasures, activities, and lives into a hierarchy with philosophy reigning at the top—like Plato or Aristotle do with their accounts of the different kinds of souls or J. S. Mill does with lower and higher pleasures—and to be arrogant or condescending toward pleasures, activities, and lives that are ineliminably intertwined with our earthly lifeform.

Arendt’s critique of Western philosophy is part of an encompassing diagnosis of modernity. She identifies Christianity as both being influenced by this philosophical ideal of disembodied freedom and as further cementing it culturally and preparing the way for modernity to take it to new levels. Prominent versions of Christianity present the highest good in terms of an afterlife not realizable on earth.⁷ Human life is a test and a trial—which centrally involves resisting the animalistic, sexual temptations of the “flesh”—and the

⁶ Beauvoir, Simone de (1949/2011). *The Second Sex*, C. Borde and S. Malovany-Chevallier (transl.). New York: Vintage books.

⁷ This is obviously not to say that these are the only ways Christianity has been interpreted. It is only to say that these are the prominent ways, including the ways constitutive of the major, powerful Christian religious institutions. To mention just one element that Arendt emphasizes, at the center of Christianity’s stories is a focus on what she calls “natality,” understood as the miracle of and hope that comes with each new human life (cf. the centrality of the story of baby Jesus) (Arendt 1958/1998: 247). This story quickly gets lost in the most prominent interpretations and institutionalizations of Christianity.

reward for passing the test is admittance of the soul into Heaven. Much secular modernity absorbs this influence, including, as we see below, in various philosophical conceptions of the highest good and the sage. In addition, Arendt continues, (early) modern Western philosophy enabled both revolutionary developments in science—to the extent of harnessing the nuclear powers of the universe for human activity on the planet and developing the ability to leave planet Earth and travel to other planets—and for human life through the conceptualization of individual rights to freedom. Human beings at the center of this revolutionary modern activity—including at powerful institutions of learning, politics, law, business, religion, or culture—were easily tempted to think that all premodern ways of life and all things biological and earthly were, at most, immature, less developed, or (temporarily) limited ways of being. Fortunately, or so the line of reasoning went, humankind (as a species) was finally in the process of conquering and overcoming the limits of life on planet Earth. So, if ancient Western philosophers and their friends were dismissive and arrogant with regard to any possible truth and wisdom in ancient religion and myth-based philosophy (with their focus on earthly life), modern scholars and culture took these attitudes to a new level altogether. The idea that we could one day finally leave this planet or at least not be earthbound any longer, a widespread mindset, Arendt proposes, revealed itself in the relief very many felt at the success of Sputnik leaving the earth and orbiting in space.

1.2 Patterns in Kant Scholarship when Viewed through Arendt's Lenses

If we now turn to Kant scholarship, we see this philosophical temptation and modern type of attitude reflected in several ways. To start, we see it in which of Kant's works has received the most emphasis in terms of scholarship and prestige. It is uncontroversial to say that the 1st *Critique*—*Critique of Pure Reason*—which focuses on metaphysics and aspires to explain modern science—has received the most attention. A close second is 2nd *Critique* (*Critique of Practical Reason*) and its metaethical predecessor *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. The 1st *Critique* discussions tend to focus on Kant's arguments about transcendental idealism, from transcendental unity of apperception (the "I") to a priori intuitions (space and time) and the a priori categories of understanding. The 2nd *Critique*/*Groundwork* discussions tend to focus on Kant's ideas of universalizing maxims and being motivated by practical reason (why and what it means to say that the Moral Law is experienced by us as a Categorical Imperative, as an "ought"). Hence, both discussions centrally track non-earthly or rational features of ourselves, namely features of our minds that point toward the universe ("the moral law within" and the "starry heavens above") rather than to planet Earth. The least prestige and attention are paid to the third of Kant's Critiques—*Critique of Judgment*—which focuses on biological earthly life (teleology) and aesthetics. It is the critique that has the least scholarly presentations and publications attached to its name, and it is the one that is taught the least at educational institutions.

The above is not to deny that things have improved significantly in the last three decades. Kantians have started to pay more attention not only to the 3rd *Critique* but also to Kant's many other works, such as his legal-political philosophy, history, anthropology, religion, and moral psychology. However, these explorations are, it seems fair to say, still dominated by discussions of freedom, and much less attention and appreciation are given to these works' engagement with earthly life, including animality (human or not). This also means that it is still the case that most students of philosophy and non-Kantian scholars today do not know that Kant has a theory of human nature of the kind they are familiar with from reading, for example, Plato or Aristotle. Probably too, most Kantians cannot tell you, offhand, exactly what identify basic elements of Kant's theory of human nature, let alone the (emerging) interpretations of it. Moreover, the most influential interpretations of Kant's account are still in line with the Western devaluing of earthly, including animalistic, life. On these approaches, humans' distinctly earthly aspects are commonly described as concerning

mere 'heteronomy' rather than 'autonomy' (self-governance as enabled by our practical reason). Relatedly, the interpretations that focus on Kant's religion tend to explore his thoughts on Christianity (with God's grace receiving much attention), the sage (who is seen as the closest humans can get to be like an angel), and an interpretation of the highest good where the afterlife features centrally. Nonetheless, contemporary scholars who put the most interpretive and philosophical emphasis on our rational features—which is most consistent with the historically prominent interpretations—tend, in my view, to be more open-minded and interested in discussions by Kantians who think differently and in new ways about Kant's texts and the Kantian philosophical position.⁸ There has been and is, I find, real change taking place in Kantian philosophical practice here, a change we should build on as we seek to develop Kantian theories of the environment.

I agree, then, with the central components in Arendt's analysis of the temptations of philosophy and the culture of modernity as outlined above, and I am one of the Kantians who think that Kantian philosophical practice needs to continue to develop as it has done in the last three decades. Broadening Kantian philosophical practice in terms of focus and scholarship is important not only to facilitate richer discussions but also so that Kantians can contribute more fully and usefully to philosophical discussions regarding the environment. Having said that and despite having let Arendt help us see ourselves—as Kantians and moderns—in an instructive corrective light, let me also emphasize that it does not take much argument to realize that the super-reflective way of approaching philosophy and life is fundamentally misguided. After all, these types of attitudes and these kinds of priorities are inconsistent with common, important experiences and judgments.

To give some easy examples, those who both love (Kantian) philosophy *and* have had the following, relevant experiences easily affirm such statements as: there is nothing more valuable or amazing about human life than experiencing a beloved take our hand; being around new-born animal life is extraordinary; being struck by any of the stunning natural phenomena of this planet—from insects to birds to sea creatures to mammals, from flowers blooming to waterfalls, storms, and sunrises—is incredible. Even if a philosopher who loves nothing but (Kantian) philosophy cannot be moved in these ways, this does not mean that these experiences are not deeply valuable or that the (pure) philosopher's way is better or higher than any other way. Saying that the philosopher's way is above all others is, to use Kant-inspired language, to universalize a contingent, that is, to universalize someone's favorite way, the way they find existentially most meaningful. This modern, philosophical attitude is, in other words, probably better described as another instantiation of what Kant sees as characteristic of Western history, namely embarrassing human folly:

If one now asks whether the human species... is to be regarded as a good or bad race, then I must confess that there is not much to boast about in it. Nevertheless, anyone who takes a look at human behaviour not only in ancient history but also in recent history will often be tempted to take the part of *Timon* the misanthropist in his judgment; but far more often, and more to the point, that of *Momus*, and find foolishness rather than malice the most characteristic mark of our species. But ... foolishness combined with a lineament of malice (which is then called folly) is not to be underestimated in the moral physiognomy of our species..." (A 7: 332f).⁹

⁸ For two illustrations of this point, see how Jonelle DeWitt and Melissa Merritt—two Kantians who defend rationalist interpretations of Kant—engage with interpretations like mine in: DeWitt (2021) review of my *Sex, Love, and Gender* in *SGIR Review*, 2021, Vol. 4(1-2): 68-77 and Merritt (2021) "Kant and Stoic Affections" in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 51 (5):329-350 (2021).

⁹ Throughout this text, all of Kant's works are referenced by means of the standard Prussian Academy Pagination as well as the following abbreviations: 'A' for *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*; 'GW' for *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*; 'MM' for *The Metaphysics of Morals*; 'R' for *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 'CPrR' for *Critique of Practical Reason*, and TP is 'On the common saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice'. 'R' appears in Kant (1996b) *Religion and Rational Theology*, transl. and ed. by Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni. New York: Cambridge University Press), 'A' in Kant (2007) *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* in *Anthropology, History, and Education*, ed. by

Western history, including Western (Kantian) philosophy's typical arrogance regarding earthly wonders, animate life, and vulnerabilities, is at best folly. The fact that we certainly find quite a lot of it also in Kant's own writings does not undermine this point. For example, the prominent, non-earthly interpretations of Kant are possible interpretations of his texts; they do not come out of nowhere. In addition, Kant's devaluation and dehumanization of certain social groups—whether based on gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, etc.—are typically undertaken by appeal to their alleged lack of the intellectual capacities that are constitutive of this kind of philosophical or scholarly mindset. I do not deny any of this, and I do not engage the related interpretative discussions here. Rather, as I show below, other ideas and writings of Kant's are not like this, and they are useful as we seek to envision how to develop his practical philosophy as part of a philosophical theory of the environment. And it is to this task I now turn, though my scholarly limitations require me to focus on Kant's practical philosophy, on how his objective principles of virtue and right can fruitfully make space for valuable, yet distinctly earthly aspects of our lives.

1.3 (Re)Thinking the Environment with Kant's Practical Philosophy

Kant's account of human nature is constituted by his account of the predisposition to good in human nature and the propensity to evil. Focusing first on the predisposition, it is constituted by three sub-predispositions, namely to "animality" (as a "*living being*"), to "humanity" (as a "*rational being*"), and to "personality" (as a "*responsible being*") (R 6: 26). In short, animality is constituted by our natural, yet (reflexive) conscious drives to self-preservation, sex, and affectionate love; humanity is to have a (reflective) social sense of self and to set ends of one's own; and, finally, personality involves being able to act (self-reflectively) as motivated by one's practical reason (the "ought"). Importantly too Kant thinks that we have a vital force that can be seen as having two parts, namely a "natural" and a "moral" part (CPrR 5: 162/MM 6: 400). The first two predispositions, to animality and to humanity, are internally linked to the natural vital force (and, so, to admiration and beauty), while personality is internally linked to the moral vital force (and, so, to awe and the sublime). Finally, when we develop these aspects of us well, we feel strong and harmonious (vitality alive in a stable way), while when we do it poorly, we feel conflicted, anxious, obsessive, etc.¹⁰

The Kantian story in the previous paragraph is compatible with most interpretations, so let me now show how one can explicate this basic structure such that one ends up with different types of philosophical accounts of human nature, which in turn will matter for how we interpret Kant on the environment. Starting with the interpretations that attribute little, if any value to the environment, one can simply start by emphasizing "human" in the phrase "the original predisposition to good in human nature." One can then proceed to argue that because human beings have reason, our animality is radically different from—bears absolutely no resemblance to—the animality of non-humans. The next step may be to argue that only the moral vital force is internally linked with the sublime *and* that animality (self-preservation, sex drive, and basic, affectionate community) and humanity (social sense of self and setting ends of our own) is only instrumentally valuable, namely insofar as they enable personality. One can continue this line of interpretation by arguing that our aim should be to realize pure personality as far as possible, which is to live as a

Robert B. Loudon and Günter Zöller, transl. by Mary Gregor, Paul Guyer, Robert B. Loudon, Holly Wilson, Allen W. Wood, Günter Zöller, and Arnulf Zweig. New York: Cambridge University Press), while the rest appear in Kant (1996a), *Practical Philosophy*, transl. and ed. by Mary J. Gregor. New York: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰ For more on all of this and the below, see my (2020) *Sex, Love, and Gender: A Kantian Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) and the discussion in Varden (2021) "Response to Lockhart, Hay, and DeWitt" *SGIR Review*, 2021, Vol. 4(1-2): 78-100.

sage. The sage, in turn, is someone who has perfected their moral character and, consequently, does what is right *because* it is right and experiences doing so as joyful.

This account can, in turn, be coherently combined with a conception of the highest good and grace, according to which God is needed to forgive us for the very many ways in which we are unable to live as the sage.¹¹ After all, not only do we experience morality (the moral law) as an ought—as a Categorical Imperative—but we also have a propensity to evil, and consequently, we will inevitably do bad things. Sometimes, we will know what is right but not do it (“frailty”), we are also likely to have unreliable patterns of motivation (“impurity”), and we can get tempted to destroy what is good (the moral law) in the name of doing good (“depravity”) (R 6: 29-33). Hence, we need God’s grace to go on and not give up, to keep trying to improve. The resulting Kantian philosophical position is deeply moralized and leaves no space for valuing the environment (understood in the broad sense of all things inherently earthly) as such. There is also a strict hierarchy of the predispositions—personality above humanity above animality—and animality and humanity are only valuable insofar as they enable the ultimate value, purely rational or moral valuing; personality as personated in the sage. The same reasoning can then be seen as holding true for all non-animalistic earthly beings, such as trees, rivers, and landscapes. If these are to be valued at all beyond being instrumentally useful to us, it is because God is revealed or present through them in experiences of the beautiful or the sublime, something, again, our distinctive reflective cognitive powers (not our animalistic aspects) enable. (More on this below.) Consequently too, such approaches can maintain that insofar as history (the human species) is progressing, we are realizing this pure kind of moral valuing in our species; we are all becoming more sage-like. In sum, then, on these approaches, all accommodations of the environment are justifiable insofar as they are morally permissible and prudentially useful to us, or insofar as they enable moral valuing, or insofar as they open up stunning aesthetic experiences that reveal or bring us closer to God.

The Kant interpretation and resulting Kantian position sketched in the previous paragraph is, as indicated earlier, plausible and consistent with much of Kant’s text. An alternative interpretation and philosophical position is also plausible, however, and since my aim here is not interpretive, but philosophical, let me quickly sketch how this (or my type of) position would differ on the points identified above.¹² To start, this position begins by emphasizing that although our cognitive capacities—including our capacity for practical reason—sets us apart from other animals, we share the predisposition to animality with them. The main difference between non-human and human animals is that we humans not only develop animality primarily through associative thought like non-human animals but also through conceptual and aesthetic-teleological thought as reflectively self-conscious beings. Second, this position contends that Kant and certainly the more convincing Kantian positions view us humans as sharing our social sense of self with at least some other animals, such as, to use Kant’s favorite example, elephants.¹³ Moreover, although animality and humanity (as understood above) are contingent (earth-bound), they are valuable, and the aim of humans is not to overcome or rid ourselves of them but to become fully integrated, flourishing, embodied, social, rational, responsible beings. Our aim is not, in other words, to rid ourselves of our earthly aspects but to transform and develop them by our aesthetic-teleological, associative, and conceptual cognitive powers into an integrated, dynamically evolving whole.

¹¹ To see this, see, again, the works by DeWitt and Merritt cited above.

¹² Hence, for more on my current understanding of all of this, see my *Sex, Love, and Gender*.

¹³ For more on Kant and elephants, see Patrick Kain (2010) “Duties Regarding Animals,” in *Kant’s Metaphysics of Morals: A Critical Guide*, ed. L. Denis, Cambridge University Press, pp. 210-233. Kain does not use Kant’s predisposition to good to develop his account, while I do. For more on this, see my article in John Callahan and Lucy Allais (2020) *Kant on Animals*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Correspondingly, a fundamental aim is to bring what Kant calls our “natural” and “moral” vital forces into union—just as the highest good is understood as bringing happiness and morality into union (MM 6: 401). Correspondingly too, moral character is to bring into union one’s natural character (and temperament) and one’s moral character; the aim is not to rid oneself of either (A 7: 285). Insofar as we succeed, we feel vitally alive and able to morally own what we are all about; harmonious as who we are. In addition, although the sage is a moral ideal also on this position—we do recognize such (typically deeply religious) people as morally good—it is not the human ideal we all ought to pursue. After all, this kind of life does not suit all—just like the philosopher’s life is not suitable for all—and it involves a much less fully developed earthly presence and being. Consequently, there is also no hierarchy of the predispositions—to animality, humanity, and personality—in the sense sketched above. Instead, the aim is to develop all aspects of oneself into a unified human being—with different layers and streams of emotional complexity throughout—that is true to who one is in the corresponding, basic phenomenological regards. Again, some are drawn to the life of the sage, some to the scholarly life, some to a life of sports, some to art, some to farming, etc.

In addition, there is space on this philosophical position to distinguish between a type of gratitude that tracks that we have predispositions to animality and humanity that are good (that we can fundamentally trust our deepest distinctions between pleasures and pains) from a type of gratitude that tracks our personality (that we are able to be morally responsible for our actions). Hence, when I go through difficult times, heal old emotional wounds, or hold onto my moral self in conditions of extreme hardship (or when I accompany someone through the same), it is possible to distinguish between what we may call “natural grace”—experienced with regard to the fact that my predisposition to animality and humanity is good—and “moral grace”—which tracks that my predisposition to personality is good. On this type of philosophical position, there is also much philosophical space for arguing that some types of valuing point toward one unified being in the universe, which is internally related to our experiences of awe and the sublime: God. In addition, however, and now I am moving more clearly beyond Kant’s own texts, there is philosophical space for pointing out how other kinds of valuing—internally linked with experiences of admiration, beauty, and the naturally sublime—point to unified beings on planet Earth and the Earth as a unified being. These latter unities, in turn, can be usefully engaged by means of natural religions or myth-based natural philosophy, whether they appeal to one Earthly Spirit, to several earthly spirits (such as the spirit of a mountain or a mighty river), to many gods and goddesses, or to a mix of these. (More on this shortly.)

With both (the “moralized” and the “embodied”¹⁴) Kantian readings on hand, let us revisit Kant’s (in)famous passage on the starry heavens above and the moral law within:

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me*. I do not need to search for them and merely conjecture them as though they were veiled in obscurity or in the transcendent region beyond my horizon; I see them before me and connect them immediately with the consciousness of my existence. The first begins from the place I occupy in the external world of sense and extends the connection in which I stand into an unbounded magnitude with worlds upon worlds and systems upon systems, and moreover into the unbounded times of their periodic motion, their beginning and their duration. The second begins from my invisible self, my personality, and presents me in a world which has true infinity but which can be

¹⁴ We could call my approach “naturalized” or “phenomenological,” but these concepts bear connotations that would be wrong here, which is why I avoid them. For example, either description could not capture how my position makes the predisposition to good (which has components that are a priori) subjectively receptive to one’s natural vital force.

discovered only by the understanding, and I cognize that my connection with that world (and thereby with all those visible worlds as well) is not merely contingent, as in the first case, but universal and necessary. The first view of a countless multitude of worlds annihilates, as it were, my importance as an *animal creature*, which after it has been for a short time provided with [a natural] vital force (one knows not how) must give back to the planet (a mere speck in the universe) the matter from which it came. The second, on the contrary, infinitely raises my worth as an *intelligence* by my personality, in which the moral law reveals to me a life independent of animality and even of the whole sensible world, at least so far as this may be inferred from the purposive determination of my existence by this law, a determination not restricted to the conditions and boundaries of this life but reaching into the infinite (CPrR 5: 162).

Again, we see that both readings sketched above are possible here. On the “moralized” approach, we can read this as a devaluation of our animality and as saying that it is our personality that carries true value—and that it does so because it can only be explained philosophically by describing it as form rather than matter, or (us as) a thing in itself. We are a kind of animal that cannot only choose (in ways ultimately determined by our sensibilities), but who can choose in responsible ways—and, so, that must be the “point” of our being, what we are all about. The rest is contingent and not, ultimately, important or beyond instrumentally valuable; insofar as the contingent is valuable, it is because of its internal connection to the sublime (my personality, the infinite, my intelligence, the necessary and universal, etc.).

On the alternative, “embodied” Kantian position, we agree that our animate aspects are contingent and that we give our natural vital force back to the planet when we die. We also agree that some aspects of the experiences of the naturally sublime (the starry heavens) and the moral law point to the unity of the universe, etc. However—and this is where this alternate (“embodied”) Kantian position differs from the more traditionally prominent (“moralized”) one—we then emphasize that the earthly world is incredible (though we do not know how it is possible that we have this amazing animalistic vital force) and deeply admirable. On this approach, we slow down and give importance to “the place I occupy in the external world of sense” as well as “the connection in which I stand into an unbounded magnitude with worlds upon worlds and systems upon systems” with their “unbounded times of their periodic motion, their beginning and their duration.” From here, in my view, we can then develop Kant’s position so that it can capture proper valuations and descriptions of natural phenomena here on planet Earth as well as for important features of natural religions, myth-based natural philosophy, and spirituality.

For example, those who have had the great experience of climbing a mountain and are comfortable with technical philosophical language can easily affirm that each mountain has its own spirit (or if one is not comfortable with this language, one can say, for example, “its own distinctive feel”) and that climbing it, taking it all in on the top, and the feeling once one has walked down again involve the naturally, earthly sublime. Importantly too, climbing the mountain, at its best, enables one to feel completely present and, with a deep sense of being, at home in the world. It seems difficult, in my view, to make sense of this experience unless we think of it as phenomenologically bringing our natural and our moral vital forces into close union, and where the union gives phenomenological precedence to the naturally sublime. In fact, it strikes me as plausible to say that this distinguishes an experience like climbing a mountain (sailing across a sea, traveling through a desert, etc.) from gazing at the starry heavens. The main difference concerns the way in which climbing the mountain involves a bodily engagement with it and that it is this engagement that opens up the experience of the connection with it and the world. That is to say, the process of climbing or working one’s way up the mountain is, in my view, constitutive of enabling this phenomenological process to take place, a process that is also supportive of one’s moral

efforts once back in the world. To use Kant's wording, phenomenologically, this activity is experienced as deeply valuable in itself *and* it makes it easier for us to do what is right, to fulfil "the laws of a metaphysics of morals" (MM 6: 217) as it enables us to get things in proportion again. Moreover, although the experience at the top of the mountain does push us toward feeling the overwhelming vastness, the incredibleness, of it all, phenomenologically, it also affirms my space in it, my life as a part of the whole. Correspondingly, we need philosophical ideas with which we can make sense of this, which, again pushes me back to the need, first, for a distinction between the earthly and the universal sublime and, second, the philosophical ideas to capture that distinction.

Notice too that on this alternate Kantian approach, it is because we have a moral vital force (as enabled by our reflective cognitive powers) that there is nothing wrong with being a philosopher or a sage. Similarly, however, there is nothing wrong with living a life that is deeply in tune with the Earth's and animalistic forces in the ways, for example, a shaman does. Importantly, both the life of the sage and the life of the shaman are possible, valuable ways because their ways of living provide help and support to those whose lives, challenges, and ways of living are such that leaning on religious people (so understood) is very valuable. The only mistake—whether a philosopher, a sage, or a shaman—is to universalize the contingent in the sense that one takes any one of these (philosophically contemplative, deeply religious, or deeply earthly) ways of living as being *the only* or *the best* way to live, that their way is also better than those of the other two, let alone of those who live more immersed earthly lives. Moreover, for most people, including philosophers, deeply moral people, and religious people, the richest human life is the immersed earthly life, which at its fullest involves developing each predisposition and both vital forces richly in an integrated, dynamically evolving whole. This type of life is the distinctly *human* ideal. However, as emphasized above, the purely contemplative life ("the philosopher"), the purely moral life ("the sage"), or the purely spiritual life ("the shaman") are each fully recognizable as deeply valuable from the human, ideal perspective (so understood). And, again, vice versa. In addition, philosophical reflection ultimately leads to the questions of how to view earthly life and the rest of the universe as in union. Philosophy also reveals dramatic limits on what we can know about this union, and philosophical reflection on this, not unrelatedly (because we cannot understand this by bringing it under concepts), intimately concerns experiences and engagements with the beautiful and the sublime. In my view, engaging this complexity also involves explaining how we are moved from being struck by stunning (natural or human made) phenomena to deep admiration for planet Earth (and other worlds and systems) to awe of the universe as one being. And back again.

Important too, on the alternate Kantian approach I am advancing here, is the fact that we do not have direct duties other than to other rational beings we can encounter in space-time—so far, only human beings—but we do have indirect duties toward them. Correspondingly, we do not have direct but only indirect moral duties toward our own animality or humanity (as understood above) since how I feel in these regards is not something I can control directly. For example, if I feel very scared (self-preservation) when climbing a mountain, I cannot simply will my fear away, but I can and should relate responsibly with regard to my fear. Alternatively, if I feel easily embarrassed socially (social sense of self), I cannot simply will my embarrassment away, but I can and should learn to manage this side of myself. Moreover, with regard to both my fear and my embarrassment, I should work on finding ways of making them less prevalent through various kinds of activities aimed at increasing my emotional ease around objects that scare me or my comfort level in social situations that easily embarrass me. Hence, though I cannot simply *will* to feel differently or *will* to make my body feel in specific ways, because I do recognize the ought, I can always *not* do something (insofar as I can be held responsible for my actions at all); I can always stop (which is why the perfect duties are duties not to).

In the ways indicated above, I have indirect moral duties with regard to my own animality and humanity, which is also what I have toward the non-animalistic environment.¹⁵ I hold myself (directly) responsible for how I act with regard to non-human animals, flowers, landscapes, rivers, and mountains, which is why Kant says we have indirect, not direct, moral duties with regard to non-human animals and earthly beings.¹⁶ We ultimately should only hold ourselves responsible for acting well in these regards (and not the non-human animals or the mountains, the rivers, etc.), which is enabled by our personality. Furthermore, on the Kantian account of human nature I defended above, our aim is not only to make sure we appropriately care here, but to learn to feel and be around other animals and non-animate earthly beings in emotionally rich ways, whether this richness is to be understood as an immersed human life or (also) as an earthly spiritual or (also) a moral religious leader (the sage). Related to the last point, on this position, historical progress is not co-extensive with increased, purely moral being—everyone living as sages—but by flourishing, responsible human life being complemented also by earthly and religious spiritual leaders. Finally, in such a world, being responsible means that we set the framework in such a way that it is respectful of each human being having dignity, and then, within this moral framework, earthly life and being is promoted and lived as richly as possible.

To bring some of this back to Arendt, in my view, an advantage of my alternate Kantian approach is that it can make sense of why some philosophical questions and related human experiences require postulating one non-Earthly God (as monotheistic religions do). It can also take into account how others do not and appear to be better captured through a postulate of one Great Spirit¹⁷ or of many co-existing spirits in planet Earth (as various natural religions and myth-based natural philosophy do). We do not have to choose between them, though it seems productive to regard either starting point (one non-Earthly God or one/several Earthly Spirits) as having something to learn from the other and that a more complete philosophical account requires both components, including an account of their union. Hence, if we start by being struck by the starry heavens or the moral law, we are philosophically drawn to the question of the unity of it all. However, we could not arrive at this question of unity without already having or having had these experiences in a world, in our world; that's where this (and related) philosophical reflection(s) starts. Moreover, if philosophical contemplation starts in a society with a natural religion or myth-based natural philosophy, the challenge is to maintain the wisdom contained in this practice also when viewed as part of the whole (the universe)—and this is one thing philosophical contemplation should strive to work out. To put the point more broadly, philosophical contemplation in the Western analytic sense can complement and enrich philosophical contemplation as found in natural religious or myth-based philosophical traditions. And vice versa.

Alternatively, if we assume the starting point of super-reflective modern philosophers—as, say, trained in analytic philosophy at Western universities—the problem is not only that this tradition does not give these thinkers the tools they need to understand these earthly aspects of us. They also do not thereby have first-personal access to what natural religions, myth-based natural philosophy, or human practices closely attuned to the Earth's biological being hold crucial insights into. In fact, it is important to realize that if such scholarly training is all someone has, then they are at a distance from and disadvantage

¹⁵ For an entrance into and overview over much of this literature, see Allais and Callahan (eds.) (2020).

¹⁶ That Kant also regards these moral duties indirect is uncontroversial. However, notice that I do not yet have an account of the nature of earthly beings like mountains, rivers, forests, etc. I don't think their unified striving can be explained by appeal to animalistic self-reflexive consciousness, obviously, but I also don't know how to capture their type(s) of being.

¹⁷ I'm leaning on Chief Seattle's "Oration" here ("Oration" is published in Seattle Sunday Star on Oct. 29, 1887. For an online version of this text, see: <http://www.spicedcider.com/seattle.html>).

with regard to these experiences. They do not know the experiences first-personally in any rich way, which makes it more difficult for them to arrive at sufficiently complex theories. Hence, if they want to fully understand these experiences and arrive at better theories, then they must either spend much time listening to those who do have them, *or* they must start developing them within themselves. In addition, they need to listen to natural religions or myth-based natural philosophy and learn from the tools developed in these traditions. Only then can they arrive at more complete and wiser theories. A good sign that they have lost their way in these regards is that they try to get rid of or belittle the other, whether this involves belittling natural religions, myth-based natural philosophy, or cultural practices more attuned to earthly forces.¹⁸ Or to put the point in Kantianese, at the heart of this philosophical challenge is not only the question of how to understand the unity of Kant's three critiques but also how to develop this philosophical understanding together with insights found not there but in anthropology, natural geography, history, religion, etc. In turn, each philosopher will then need not only to figure out to what extent Kant's writings have inherited these problems of an alienated human ideal, but also to develop this account in tune with their natural temperament, their deep-seated phenomenological patterns, and individuality—with an appreciation and discernment of the differences, similarities, and interconnections between each element.¹⁹

Let me finish this part of the paper by very briefly engaging with Kant's legal-political philosophy and indicating how this argument has fewer, let alone (by now) unfamiliar, moving parts.²⁰ In (super)short, on this approach, distinguishing between arguments of right—arguments that ultimately are grounded in each person's right to freedom—and other moral and normative arguments (whether of politics, history, first-personal ethics, religion, or happiness) is central. Learning to reason well in a free society, therefore, centrally involves learning to distinguish between my personal, ethical, and religious ways of understanding a phenomenon and how to analyze it from the legal point of view. The public authority is the means through which citizens govern themselves through public reason and their public institutions with the fundamental aim of sustaining the state as a rightful condition in perpetuity. Moreover, the public, legal framework is set by arguments of each person's right to freedom in that the state's uses of coercion must be consistent with it. Finally, within the legal framework of public reasoning—and now the argument becomes very similar to the one above and we are moving from law or legal

¹⁸ To point out the obvious: the corresponding mistake from those who do not know Western philosophy is revealed in thinking there is nothing to learn there beyond what not to do—a type of mistake commonly found also in a great deal of postmodern philosophy. On the approach I'm developing here, scholarly arrogance and belittling of others is not only a problem in the Western analytic tradition; it's a temptation facing all who are deeply involved in scholarly and religious activities.

¹⁹ See the related discussions on the 3rd *Critique* and the sublime. I believe my philosophical position here is most consistent with the type of position defended by Katerina Deligiorgi (2014) in "The Pleasures of Contra-Purposiveness: Kant, the Sublime, and Being Human" (*Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 72(1): 25-35, though see also Emily Brady (2013) in *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature*, New York: Cambridge University Press. For an alternative interpretation, see Rachel Zuckert "Awe or Envy: Herder Contra Kant on the Sublime" (*Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 61(3): 217-232). In short, the philosophical position I find most convincing can do some of what Zuckert, but not Brady and Deligiorgi, thinks it is necessary to move beyond Kant to be able to do. As emphasized above, I am not taking a stand on these interpretive questions as I am primarily after the best Kantian position. I do find the position I'm developing to bear important similarities (albeit also dissimilarities) to Friedrich Schiller's work on the sublime in "On the Sublime" and "Concerning the Sublime," in *Essays*, eds. Hinderer and Dahlstrom, Continuum, 1993.

²⁰ This engagement is very brief in part because of considerations of space and in part because the ideas below are compatible with many existing interpretations of Kant's Doctrine of Right. For an overview over the (emerging) interpretive traditions, see my (forthcoming a) paper on "Kant and Property" (in A. Gomes and A. Stephenson (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Kant*, Oxford: Oxford University Press). If you'd like to see more detail regarding how I develop the so-called liberal republican approach with regard to three other "applied" topics, see my *Sex, Love, and Gender*.

concerns (“Recht”) to justice or politics (“Gerecht”)—we must accommodate contingent human concerns (concerns Kant calls concerns of “moral anthropology”²¹ and “the principle of politics”²²) by making sure that our institutions are fit for human beings in general as well as in the particular, historical circumstances we find ourselves.

To illustrate core elements of this approach with regard to the environment, the starting point is that insofar as the state needs to use legal means to protect the environment, it can do so. For example, the state may use tort (private law) to remedy environmental damage done by one person to another’s land. In addition, it can use public law to address criminal environmental damage or to establish environmental laws as necessary to ensure habitable conditions for present or future populations—and now we are moving towards the sphere of politics (“accommodating moral anthropology” and the “principle of politics”). Correspondingly, notice that it follows from the above account of human nature that we, human beings, characteristically need access to nature and biologically healthy food to stay well. One crucial component of the state’s public laws is, therefore, to secure this. In addition, the state uses political means—policies and public initiatives—to sustain or create a healthy environment for its people in perpetuity. After all, many people need access to nature (for recreation, for religious purposes, etc.) and all people need access to biologically healthy food daily to care well for themselves. Insofar as securing this requires lawgiving or public policies, the public authority (the state) facilitates this by ensuring that there are public parks, legislating how food is produced, providing information about how the food is prepared, and creating public information and educational policies regarding the importance of healthy food, and so on. When the public authority does this, however, it does not thereby legislate or politicize first-personal ethics or religion. For example, I may find that the vegan way of being in the world is the most compatible with my deep existential needs for how to engage biological and earthly living beings, but I do not thereby think that my religious-ethical decisions here should be the way in which the courts or the politicians should analyze these complexities. On such religious, existential questions concerning which biological beings we eat—whether or not to live as, for example, an omnivore, a pescatarian, a vegetarian, or a vegan—we differ fundamentally. And these differences are for each of us to own and the law and politicians should not take a stand on them. Rather, the legal-political (public) authority makes space and protects our differences here.

Another crucial component in this Kantian environmental approach stems from the challenges our troubled historical inheritances pose in these regards. For example, imagine that the citizens of a state inherit a lot of toxic waste due to a lack of knowledge or proper lawgiving in the past. In this case, they need to find public ways of financing, for example, related environmental restoration projects. This consists of the obvious work involved in doing so but also, as needed, increased research on the topics in question. Financing this can

²¹ In the “Introduction to the Metaphysics of Morals,” Kant argues that “The counterpart of a metaphysics of morals, the other member of the division of practical philosophy as a whole, would be moral anthropology, which, however, would deal only with the subjective conditions in human nature that hinder people or help them in *fulfilling* the laws of a metaphysics of morals” (MM 6: 217).

²² Kant argues: “in order to progress from a *metaphysics* of right (which abstracts from all conditions of experience) to a principle of *politics* (which applies these concepts to cases of experience) and, by means of this, to the solution of a problem of politics in keeping with the universal principle of right, a philosopher will give 1) an *axiom* that is an apodictically certain proposition that issues immediately from the definition of external right (consistency of the *freedom* of each with the freedom of everyone in accordance with a universal law); 2) a *postulate* (of external public *law*, as the united will of all in accordance with the principle of *equality*, without which there would be no freedom of everyone); 3) a *problem* of how it is to be arranged that in a society, however large, harmony in accordance with the principles of freedom and equality is maintained (namely by means of a representative system); this will then be a principle of *politics*, the arrangement and organization of which will contain decrees, drawn from experiential cognition of human beings, that have in view only the mechanism for administering right and how this can be managed appropriately. Right must never be accommodated to politics, but politics must always be accommodated to right.” (SRL 8: 429, cf. TP 8: 277ff.)

be done through taxation, fees for using or building on (public) land, and so on. Exactly what is the best way—how to arrange this pragmatically—is a question that is best left to the public leaders of each country and as supported by a public dialogue that gives important, authoritative voice to the best knowledge of (including of those living on the land) and research on the relevant topics. Also, anyone who is vested in various ways with public authority—from schoolteachers to political leaders to judges and lawyers to academics—is not legally required to be personally committed to and supportive of the values they seek to uphold in virtue of being entrusted with such public authority. However, they are legally required and entrusted to act within the framework set by the laws and policies constitutive of their public authority or offices. Moreover, insofar as we develop good public cultures, the public leaders strive to uphold the integrity of their offices and the citizens are active in that they hold those entrusted with public authority accountable for what they do and they promote and admire only those leaders who are deeply committed to values of freedom, our shared humanity, our fellow earthly creatures, and our earthly existence in general. And insofar as the public leaders are wise, they take all of this into account as they strive to facilitate a transformation of the bad inheritance as part of striving for a better future

These ways in which the state can and should use law and politics to protect the environment are justified by appeal to the state's ability to function and maintain itself as, exactly, a public authority through time, by upholding legality (“Recht”) and justice (“Gerecht”).²³ More generally, the above arguments show central ways in which we can develop Kant's arguments about law, ethics (virtue), justice, religion, history, and human nature in ways that are deeply compatible with making ample space for concerns of the environment. This approach importantly never lets the contingent take the place of the universal in that the ideals envision the universal principles of practical reason (virtue and right) as setting the framework within which the contingent is given space. The position envisions ways of making space for and valuing the contingent in constructive ways; sustaining, developing, and transforming ourselves and our public spheres, which are viewed as dynamic, ongoing projects. Hence, one reason why Kant's moral philosophy has not been developed in these directions is probably a general lack of study of and engagement with Kant's writings beyond the 1st and 2nd *Critiques* for almost 200 years, but also, relatedly, that these topics were considered “merely” applied by the most influential forces in our philosophical practice. Regardless, given the resources actually available in the Kantian philosophical system, it is surely folly that we have not yet done better, and it is important that we rectify this with collective effort in the Kantian tradition moving forward. Or maybe folly is too mild a concept given the challenge at hand? This is what I will argue in the next section.

2. Environmental Destruction and Oppression—Two Cases of Modern Depravity?

When we consider the extreme destruction of the earth in the modern period, both traditional (Kantian) philosophical folly and even my alternative Kantian account seem unable to capture the gravity of the problem we are inheriting. The devastation of modernity—past and present—is simply too great and the problems appear deeper, more severe.²⁴ Oppression always has been internally linked with biological, embodied, earthly

²³ How many of these philosophical moves one can make depends a little on which kind of philosophical position one attributes to Kant's Doctrine of Right, whether the structure of his position is, for example, libertarian, legal positivist, participatory democratic, or liberal republican. For more on this complexity, see my *Sex, Love, and Gender* as well as “Kant and Property.”

²⁴ I'm still thinking about the question of why things became so much worse in modernity (as this cannot be explained merely by appeal to philosophy's folly). Arendt has her interpretation of this fact—she points to the emergence of phenomena like capitalism, nation states, and bureaucracies—but I don't find her account fully

(“reproductive”) features of us humans. It is therefore not an accident, I argue, that as we humans brutalized and destroyed the environment in our distinctly modern ways, we also exercised a new kind and level of brutality and destruction against dehumanized, oppressed groups. And because these two problems are closely intertwined both historically and as a matter of moral psychology, overcoming the one requires overcoming the other.²⁵ And as we seek to do this, I argue, developing Kant’s account of depravity—the worst of evils—is very useful.

Modernity did not only produce enormous destruction of our earthly home; it also witnessed extreme horrors and suffering inflicted by “enlightened” Western nations(states) on other nations(states) and peoples in other parts of the world as well as on segments of their own populations. In the pre-modern period, the Western philosophical tradition’s lowering of our earthly, including animalistic, features, was used more broadly in societies in the following way: oppressed groups were associated with their animality so as to allegedly justify the use of coercion or violence to make them focus all their energy on reproductive tasks. The connection between the reproductive and economic self-interest of the privileged and the dehumanization of oppressed groups is quite obvious here. Men oppressed women and privileged elites oppressed people they made (through violence or coercion) into their servants, slaves, etc. to benefit from their reproductive labor. Premodern systems of oppression had brutal elements, especially against those who resisted, but they were also fairly stable, sustainable wholes through time.

Once we enter modernity, this picture changes significantly. To start, modern European colonizers’ treatment of other peoples was plainly at a different level of brutality, one that cannot be explained by appeal to a notion of integration into a sustainable whole or with reference to reproductive labor. Their horrendous killing and torturous treatment of, for example, African peoples (both in Africa and as part of the Transatlantic slave trade) and of Indigenous peoples in the Americas is plainly on a different level of merciless cruelty than anything seen in earlier historical periods (or war or empire-building). In addition, the torture exercised as part of Black Antebellum slavery or against Jews, LGBTQIA²⁶ people, disabled persons, and the Roma people by Nazi Germany (including in their concentration camps) registered historically new levels of inhuman horror. Moreover, whether through (mental) health facilities (where women who enjoyed their sexuality and LGTI persons were “treated” for being who they are) or through the education system (for Indigenous children), modern states facilitated or organized continuous brutality and torture on vulnerable populations at extreme and historically unprecedented levels. Again, much of this brutality cannot be easily justified by simple appeal to such rational self-interest as reproductive or economic benefit. All these systems—concentration camps, (mental) “health” facilities, “education” systems—were expensive systems to operate, and they were established and continued to be run also when minimal economic prudence cautioned otherwise. Finally, there was simply nothing sustainable about these systems in the way servant or premodern slave systems could be seen as sustainable through time; they were

convincing, though I cannot yet identify why I don’t nor am I in a position to make my own proposal here. Hence, also this question must wait a while longer before I try to take it on.

²⁵ I don’t focus on the topic of environmental disasters here, but one may develop this account in this direction. For example, central here can be to point out how environmental disasters tend to reveal oppression by hitting oppressed groups radically differently than privileged groups. In addition, we can also emphasize that internal to the public management of these disasters, there is often public shaming of the oppressed groups in how the public procedures are set up and how it is covered by the media. For an entrance into much of this literature, see the relevant articles in the 2022 special edition “Decolonizing Disasters” of *Disasters*:

[https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/toc/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1467-7717.decolonising-disaster-studies](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/toc/10.1111/(ISSN)1467-7717.decolonising-disaster-studies). See the related work of Jordan Pascoe for a Kantian who also does excellent work on disasters (even if not in Kantianese).

²⁶ The acronym LGBTQIA stands for: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual.

systems of deep destabilization and destruction of the individuals and cultures subjected to them.²⁷

When we look at these horrific modern systems of oppression, it is also important to emphasize that they were permitted, legally facilitated, or directly organized by states, whose fundamental and proclaimed legal and political commitments were the French Revolution's tricolour: freedom, equality, and fraternity. Groups who were brutalized in these ways were furthermore often identified "scientifically"—science "showed" that there was something inherently wrong with some social group—or by appeal to an alleged lack of immaturity regarding some groups' intellectual capacities. Importantly too, the groups that appear particularly prone to violation were people whose ways of life were either obviously tied to or involved a vulnerability or deep appreciation of the value of planet Earth: LGTI people, for example, risk social condemnation and severe criminal punishment for living as who they are; disabled persons, like LGTI persons, have a heightened awareness of and attention to the importance of their social embodiment; Indigenous peoples around the globe are distinguished from their European oppressors by being much more appreciative and cautious of the Earth's various natural powers; only people with a uterus can get pregnant and late stages of pregnancy typically makes one more physically vulnerable; and the Jewish religion has a focus on this earthly life rather than an afterlife ("Heaven").

More generally, in my view, it is plausible to argue that modern, Western nation-states targeted not only these oppressed groups' freedom but also their animality (as understood above) and their existential tie to or appreciation of Earthly life—and they did so by subjecting them to constant threats of violence that in their worst instantiations may be described as conditions of living death. The more extreme the violence was, the more it targeted each animalistic drive (self-preservation, sex drive, and basic community) and the natural vital force. In addition, because these animalistic drives are only self-reflexively conscious drives and not enabled by our capacity for setting ends of our own and practical reason, attacks on them easily have (had) the effect of associating any act of spontaneity with danger in the minds of those subjected to them. In addition, oppressed peoples have been socially violated through various acts of public humiliation, acts that subjected them to the indignities and malicious whims of dominant and privileged groups. Because we humans have a social sense of self and because our fundamental moral sense is one of dignity, these acts of public humiliation typically have (had) devastating emotional consequences. In these ways, in the modern period, the Western world waged a war on animality and natural spontaneity in general, and in relation to oppressed groups specifically. We are everywhere still living with the consequences of this war and in many ways and places it is an ongoing war.

Above we saw that Kant thinks that our propensity to evil comes in three forms—or what he calls degrees—namely frailty, impurity, and depravity. My suggestion here is that depravity is particularly useful to capture the extreme levels of brutality we have and still do witness in modern times. Let me explain. Depravity, on Kant's account, is self-deceptively to destroy morality in the name of morality. Kant also argues that developing animality and humanity well is to further personality, that is, morality. As we also saw above, we can understand this in one of two ways. On the one hand, it can mean that as we develop our animality and humanity in the human way, they become either only instrumentally useful to living as a sage or they (also) enable occasions of experiencing stunning aesthetic beauty, experiences that require the postulate of God to be understood philosophically. On this account, the more we are like a sage—as we should be—the less anything earthly truly upsets or disturbs us. We are emotionally beyond reach by earthly

²⁷ See, for example, Arendt's (1958, 445) comments on this with regard to Nazi-Germany. See also Frederick Douglass's (*The Portable Frederick Douglass*, Penguin Classics, 2016) surprise when he saw how much more economically well off people were in the north than in the south of the US.

means. This, in my view, is not a very useful philosophical approach to capture the ways in which modern evil reached new levels.

My alternative reading of the (distinctive) human ideal, on the other hand, does better. On this approach, animality and humanity lead us to morality in the sense that developing them responsibly as the distinctive persons (individuals) we are is to bring our natural and moral vital forces into a close, harmonious (albeit never perfect) union. We experience instances of 'frailty,' remember, when we on occasion do bad things, and we experience 'impurity' when we do some things that are bad for us in a patterned way. But the more we are able to develop our animality, humanity, and personality—by associative, aesthetic, teleological, and conceptual means and in line with both our natural and moral vital forces—into a dynamically evolving whole, the better, for then our pleasures and pains are not inherently in conflict. Depravity, in contrast, is to destroy morality in the name of upholding it in that it involves using moralized language to attack all that is precious in the name of protecting it. Hence, it is impossible to experience a harmonious union when we act badly in these ways.²⁸ When we humans strive to do wrong and to harm other humans in depraved ways, it is therefore no accident that we attack their earthly selves, including their animality, social sense of self, and ability to set ends of their own (rationality). Attacking fellow humans in this way can have the effect that they no longer experience the world as good—that the predisposition to good feels as if it cannot be trusted after all—and that all instances of something pleasant can become associated also with extreme pain and suffering. Moreover, because these orientations are not enabled by practical reason as such, they are not easy to control cognitively and the effects of violation can take generations to overcome.²⁹ And, of course, it also does deep damage to those perpetuating the damage; inheriting so-called "privileged" associations is to inherit something that is damaging not only to others but also to oneself—and it is genuinely difficult to get rid of (as it is maintained by self-deception). In these ways, Kant's notion of depravity is extremely useful as we seek to understand not only the traditional philosophical folly but also modern violations of the environment and social and political oppression. The traditional philosophical folly, at its worst, we saw above, can be seen as universalizing a contingent and self-deceptively identifying some groups with their earthly features so as to make them into one's reproductive or economic means (wives, servants, slaves). In contrast, modern depravity involves an effort to destroy all earthly being in the name of morality and the means to do so is an all-out war on all beings and lifeforms that reveal a close connection to, appreciation for, or entail wisdom regarding earthly life. All that is good becomes a means to destroy the good in the name of the morally good.

Conclusion

In closing, notice that simply realizing the mistakes that followed from optimistic and alienating philosophical or modern assumptions is insufficient to overcome them; indeed, even if we are emotionally tempted to think that we should simply "burn it all down" and go back to how things were before philosophy or modernity, including before modern science and human rights to freedom, this is obviously not a justifiable choice. After all, it is not as if there is nothing genuinely valuable about modernity; we have no good reasons to think doing better is easy. To give a quick example, the countries who followed Marx's assumption that universities and rights to freedom were simply steppingstones to true emancipation are not doing any better with regard to protecting the environment, including

²⁸ I find Lucy Allais's (2016) paper "Kant's Racism" (*Philosophical Papers*, 45(1-2): 1–36) extremely useful to get the way in which our minds are not coherent when we act badly.

²⁹ For more on this complexity, see (forthcoming b). "A Kantian Account of Trauma," for special ed. of *Kantian Review* entitled "Radicalizing Kant." Guest editor: Charles Mills.

by protecting their relatedly, historically vulnerable populations.³⁰ Neither have these countries avoided the dangers of fascism. As Arendt emphasizes, totalitarian fascism arose in both liberal countries (Hitler) and Marxist countries (Stalin)—and, indeed, fascist political forces have been and still are active in both superpowers on the planet today (Marxist China and liberal USA). Hence, the challenge is not simply solved by getting rid of the “freedom,” sticking only with “equality” and “fraternity,” and thinking that political leaders should decide what is “permissible” scholarly thought and activities. In both types of regimes, modern badness typically uses “science” (appeals to what is “natural”), but it is justified in the name of morality (freedom or equality or fraternity) and it is linked to a totalizing view of human beings as capable of raising themselves above a mere “earthly” being. And both types of political regimes—Marxist and Liberal—are doing great damage to the environment in all the ways outlined above and none of them are living up to their duties as public leaders. On the other hand, as Indigenous philosophers quickly emphasize, it is a naïve mistake to romanticize Indigenous ways of life, including natural religions or myth-based natural philosophy. All known human ways of life and cultures have their serious problems and limitations, as do all types of philosophy. Our shared inheritance is more difficult to handle and transform into better ways than this. All I have tried to show here is that this is not impossible, that there is reasonable hope for us to do better, and that Kantian philosophy can be(come) a good interlocutor as we strive for better theories of the environment.

³⁰ Marx, Karl (1843). “On the Jewish Question,” in *Early Writings*, transl. Livingstone R. and Benton G., *Penguin Classics*, 1992, pp. 211-242. In my view, Kant (in his “Doctrine of Right”) also shows us why Marx’s is wrong to think that rights are only instrumentally necessary for justice. For more on this, see my (forthcoming a).