

# Grumpy about this dark age of modernity

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## ABSTRACT

In using the term 'dark age' to reflect on the kind of cultural world we find ourselves in at this time, I am invoking analogies with various times and places when old certainties are moving into a state of collapse, but a new culture has not yet emerged to offer moral and social cohesion. Our current moment – when modernity has reached and surpassed its limits – is such a time. In spite of a solid history of insightful analyses of the problems with western conceptions of humanity, and numerous calls for a revisioning of the human, our societies go on as if business as usual were justifiable. The absence of the humanities within wider discourses of ecological degradation, including extinctions, is part of our current problem. I conclude with some thoughts on how the status of flying-foxes in Queensland reveals discursive and physical violence, and offers a glimmer of some solutions. At stake is our struggle to revision ourselves as participatory, complementary members of a wider earth community.

**Key words:** Environmental humanities, Philosophical ecology, Modernity, *Pteropus spp*, Human exceptionalism

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## Preface

My academic training is in anthropology, and I have been learning from Aboriginal people in Australia for over thirty years. One of the things I have been forced to confront is the trauma of ecosystem collapse. We western peoples, mytho-poetic descendants of Adam and Eve, have a memory of such trauma encoded in the story of expulsion from a flourishing and nourishing ecosystem, and the terrors and violence of life in a world of hostility, warfare, slavery, famine, and endless exile. Arguably, we are still struggling to find our way back to the Garden, or to its alternative manifestation as a Promised Land (Merchant 2004; Cherry 1998). But in truth, we have very little idea of how incredibly traumatising it is to the human spirit to experience the collapse of your homeland / ecosystem. The cascading disaster leaves you stranded in a place where all that was beautifully nourishing is slipping painfully away, and much that you loved, and that gave meaning to your life, is being lost.

This is what has been happening to many Indigenous people the world over in the past few hundred years (see, for example, Lear 2006). In North Australia where I have witnessed this, as in so many other parts of the world, the experience is on-going because the damage is on-going. An initial wave of destruction is being overtaken by further cascades and by climate change and other effects of global environmental damage. It seems quite probable that this kind of trauma is what we and our children are all going to face: exactly this experience of real, serious ecosystem collapse.

In the case of Aboriginal Australians and many other Indigenous people, the loss of homeland ecologies entails the loss of connection between past, present and future, because people had lived sustainably for extremely long

periods of time (millennia, in many cases). Ecosystem loss is also the loss of the expectations, based on experience, that the future would in many ways replicate the past. The philosophical ecologies that facilitated sustainability have been the subject of a huge amount of literature, including debates about the meaning of sustainability in Indigenous contexts (see for example Altman and Kerins 2012; Berkes 2012; Rose 2003; Scott 1996). Although I cannot in this paper explore the philosophical ecologies that have enabled people to live sustainably for such long periods of time, I should state at the outset that research by many scholars over a long period of time has pointed to a key difference between contemporary western thought and contemporary indigenous thought. That difference concerns the place and significance of humans in ecological systems. On the western side, we have a binary that puts humans outside and in control; on the indigenous side we see (amongst many peoples) a view that humans are but one species among many in a world of sentience, communication, and obligation. This is one of the great cultural questions of our time: are we humans outside ecological systems, or are we on the inside? Ecologists have their way of responding to this question, and humanities scholars have their ways. A closer and more generous dialogue amongst experts in all fields of science, humanities, and social science will help us address the enormous issues that are now overtaking us.

## This Dark Age<sup>1</sup>

In using the term 'dark age' to reflect on the kind of cultural world we find ourselves in at this time, I am invoking several analogies. The Dark Ages, as is well known, was the period in European history after the

1. I am indebted to Arian Wallach; she used the term 'dark age' in the context of the on-going war against dingoes and other animals, and I have taken it up into a wider analysis.

fall of the Roman Empire. It was a time when the old certainties were gone, but a new culture had not yet emerged to offer moral and social cohesion in Europe. It was a time of relative cultural chaos. As a metaphor, a dark age has come to mean a time when the worst human characteristics rule society, again signalling both chaos and loss of values. In a similar vein, the political philosopher Hannah Arendt spoke of 'dark times' as the times which surround us when the wisdom gleaned from the past becomes an uncertain guide for the future. This is very much our condition today in this unstable time of ever more rapid and often unwelcome change. And yet, we still have to act. The beauty and value of Arendt's work is that she affirms the possibility of moral action in dark times (see Luban 1983). The basis for moral action, she affirms, lies not in adherence to received 'wisdom', since the very fact of living within dark times tells us that the received wisdom is no longer serving us well. Rather, she calls for creative thought, for imaginative thought, for the work of telling new stories that may yet enable us to make of our lives something meaningful and enduring. Today we would add to her prognosis that as humans we are responsible for making something meaningful and enduring for other lives, not just the human.

A broad stream of critical analysis in philosophy and other modes of social and cultural theory have for decades been exposing the workings of modernity. I am using the term 'modernity' to describe the western form of worldview and practice that has been dominant in the past two centuries (roughly). James Scott defines it this way: 'a strong, one might even say muscle-bound version of the self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, the expansion of production, the growing satisfaction of human needs, the mastery of nature (including human nature), and above all, ... rational design' (1998, 4). This stream of analysis demonstrates links between Enlightenment values of reason, and the expanding use of human reason through scientific progress with the aim of 'consolidating the empire of man' over the world of 'mere things' (Plumwood 2009, 120). In keeping with my analogy between the Dark Ages of early Medieval Europe and our current situation, I am arguing that we are living now in the collapse of the 'Empire' of the Enlightenment. The cultural certainties that served modernity so well are in fragments, not least because the world that we have fashioned through our culture-science-technology complex has hit and surpassed its limits. For much of this period, the fanfare of triumphal progress has masked (or sought to mask) the contradictory and often destructive qualities of this powerful complex (Scott 1998). Now, information coming from the earth itself is telling us that all is not well in the house of life, and much is becoming worse. In this dark age of modernity, we live with a sense of escalating ruin, an awareness of destruction, and often with feelings of helplessness. As we find increasingly that the success of modernity is un-making the world live in, we find that we don't know anywhere enough about how to slow ourselves down, how to change ourselves and our way of life.

It has been clear for some time now that the humanities fields are the absent voices in a discourse that needs them

(Fischer *et al.* 2007). Over the last decade or more I have been working to bring the humanities into the discourse concerning the degradation of life on earth, and the possibilities for a different kind of future. My initiatives include developing and teaching an undergraduate unit (ENVG262) at Macquarie University; titled 'Ecological Humanities', the unit is situated in the Faculty of Science and is open to students from all faculties. In 2012 Dr Thom van Dooren and I established a new open-access, on-line, fully refereed journal *Environmental Humanities* with the aim of furthering the possibilities for communication across the sciences and the humanities (Rose *et al.* 2012). There are many ways to argue the case for the need for greater communication, but the most straightforward is to consider the term 'Anthropocene'. It tells us that the biggest problem facing the earth today is humanity, and by implication that if we are to understand the complexities of the problems the earth faces, we must understand the complexities of human culture. The Anthropocene concept offers challenges in both directions across the 'two cultures' of the sciences and the humanities. To the natural sciences, it offers the challenge of engaging with humans in their cultural complexity. To the humanities, it offers the challenge of learning to think about humanity in the context of ecosystems. Increasingly, the two cultures are being pulled back together – through, for example, the ecological and environmental humanities (Rose and Robin 2004).

When we think 'humanity', we should be thinking 'culture'; that is, we should be thinking about how different groups of *Homo sapiens* understand themselves and their environment, and how they articulate the task of leading a meaningful life. There are many big questions within the humanities, not all of which touch directly on ecological or environmental issues. My focus in this paper is on what the philosopher Erazim Kohak calls philosophical ecology. He uses this term to designate 'our conceptions of our place and task in this world' (Kohak 1984, 209).

There is no singular human culture, and I have been fortunate to have lived with and learned from Aboriginal people whose philosophical ecology is vastly different to the culture of western modernity that I will be addressing here (see Rose 2005). It must be said, as well, that the dominant strand of western culture has become so powerful, so global in both its seductions and its destructions, and so hegemonic in its determination to be the only game in town that it generally marginalises, if not outright silences, alternative cultural views. One area of strong critique has been in the field of development, where knowledge brought in under the banner of scientific expertise has marginalised indigenous knowledge, often with disastrous results. Within development critique, analysis shows that negative outcomes arise precisely as a consequence of the pretension that the modern Western view of knowledge is universal and neutral, and thus applicable to all people (Apffel-Marglin and Marglin 1996). The dominance (often termed hegemony) of western knowledge has also been subjected to vigorous critique by those on the receiving end of its practices (see for example, Nandy 2008; Spivak 1988; Scott 1996; Shiva 2007).

The idea that Western humanity has a flawed sense of itself is not exactly a new idea. My concern is with critique focussing on human-environment relations, and a few relatively recent examples will offer a stronger sense of why it is appropriate to be grumpy. In 1949, Aldo Leopold wrote a lovely essay called “The Land Ethic”. Although he was wrong to think that no humans had ever conceived and lived by a land ethic, he was fully correct in his critique of the failure of the modern west to include the nonhuman world within a domain of ethics. He argued for just such an enlarged domain of ethics, stating that: “A land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land community to a plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members and also respect for the community as such” (Leopold 1949, 204). His style is so engaging that it may not be readily apparent that he is calling for something quite subversive: replacing a hierarchy that puts the human at the apex of life on earth with an understanding that would situate the human within a lateral heterarchy of respect and connectivity.

Some 25 years later, the ecologist Paul Shepard offered a similar view concerning the way humans have put themselves to the fore, imagining nature as a sort of meaningless backdrop against which the only drama that really matters, the human drama, gets played out. In 1973 he was expressing his deep concern over the ‘threat to the planet from industrialization or overpopulation’. He noted that ‘sufficient ecological data to guide the redirection of society toward environmental harmony has existed for more than thirty years....’ His conclusion: ‘... in the end, what we are asked to do is to reshape our image of man’ (Shepard 1998 [1973], xxv-xxvi).

At much the same time, the great polymath Gregory Bateson published what was undoubtedly the strongest, most succinct, and most prescient critique:

*If you put God outside and set him vis-à-vis his creation, and if you have the idea that you are created in his image, you will logically and naturally see yourself as outside and against the things around you, and as you arrogate all mind to yourself, you will see the world around you as mindless and therefore not entitled to moral or ethical consideration. The environment will seem yours to exploit. If this is your estimate of your relation to nature, and you have advanced technology, your likelihood of survival will be that of a snowball in hell. (Bateson 1973 [1972], 436)*

Interestingly, Bateson went on to say, “If I’m right, the whole of our thinking about what we are and what other people are has got to be restructured. This is not funny and I do not know how long we have to do it in.” He thought that we had maybe twenty or thirty years (437) before we would really start to see systems collapse under the weight of this combination of a culture that thinks it is outside of nature and can do anything it wants, and the technology actually to carry out whatever wild scheme it might come up with. Now, forty years later, we can see both that he was deeply prescient and that very little has changed.

Finally, fast-forward another thirty years to Australia’s great environmental philosopher, Val Plumwood (1993, 2002). She wrote two major books diagnosing the problems with western concepts of humanity, and the underlying structures of thought which subtend problematic ideas. Her view on the need for change was quite blunt:

*If our species does not survive the ecological crisis, it will probably be due to our failure to imagine and work out new ways to live with the earth. The time of *Homo reflectus*, the self-critical and self-revising one, has surely come. *Homo faber*, the thoughtless tinkerer, is clearly not going to make it. We will go on in a different mode of humanity or not at all. (Plumwood 2007)*

I am grumpy, in sum, over the fact that, in spite of an impressive record of recognition of the fact that our concepts of humanity impede our capacity to live sustainably within Earth’s systems, and in spite of the fact that we need to bring our analysis of culture more fully into the discourse concerning the future of life on earth, not enough is happening. Perhaps all these tough issues end up in the too-hard basket, and perhaps that is exactly the problem. In Plumwood’s terms, we keep tinkering when we should be reflecting deeply and acting differently and more appropriately.

## Culture and Meaning

One of the central tasks of culture is meaning-making, and a lot of meaning is contained within, made through, and shared by means of, stories. In Joan Didion’s great phrase, “We tell ourselves stories in order to live” (Didion 1990, 11). While it is probably fair to say that all intelligent, meaning-making animals live by stories (given a broad definition of the term ‘story’), my focus is on the human species. Stories are at the heart of the human way of being in the world in all our adaptation and mal-adaptation. The stories we tell about modernity are of the utmost and urgent significance: they are now shaping how we make and unmake the future of life on earth (Plumwood 2009).

Since the Enlightenment, Western humanity has been living a story that has been tremendously effective in many ways. This is the story of human progress in the fields of science and technology. It is a story of human mastery over nature. It is based on the idea of a great divide between humans and nature, a divide in which humans take ever greater control and produce ever greater good for ever greater numbers of humans. We owe a great deal of our health, comfort, prosperity, and many other good things of our lives to this story. Acknowledging the benefits achieved by modernity ought not, however, to blind us to its darker aspects. There is excellent analysis of the connections between modernity and social violence. The work of Zygmunt Bauman (1989) among many others, alerts us to the accelerating feedback loops between modernity, violence, and degradation of earth life (Scott 1998; Arendt 1992 [1963]; Everdell 1997; Bauman 2004).

The great analytic advance made by eco-philosophers has been to show that systemic violence in cultural, social, and ecological domains is subtended by a cultural matrix involving a structure of thought that works across domains and organises stories that on the surface appear to be dissimilar. Val Plumwood was brilliant in this analysis. Our story of the success of modernity is structured through a meta-narrative of human triumph over nature. Plumwood analysed “hyperseparation” or “hyper-separated dualism”. The analytic question is: how is difference made meaningful? Everyday discernment of difference involves the capacity to discriminate between two things, recognising that they are different in certain specifiable ways. It is essential to language, essential to human thought, and probably essential to a huge amount of animal cognition as well. In contrast, hyper-separation sets up opposition, hierarchy and domination. Hyper-separation ‘creates a sharp, ontological break or radical discontinuity’ (Plumwood 2002, 101). A hyper-separated dualism involves a pair in which the two parts are deemed to be not only different but oppositionally differently; they are placed in a hierarchy so that one stands over and above the other. Hyperseparation thus takes everyday difference and turns it into a structure of domination. Some of the classic hyper-separated dualisms of modernity are: mind versus (over and above) matter, culture versus (over and above) nature, reason versus (over and above) emotion, civilisation versus (over and above) savagery, and many other familiar and troubling relations of separation and domination all of which tend to reinforce each other. It is worth saying (always) that these are cultural categories; they are not inherent in the life of the earth (Mathews 2005). A particularly powerful hyper-separation is that of mind versus matter. What gets classed as mind, and what gets classed as matter? How are these categories expanded and contracted to suit particular human agendas? Bateson’s words – “if you arrogate all mind to yourself” and “see the world around you as mindless” – speak to the structure that Plumwood later analysed so incisively. Both scholars, of course were dedicated to exposing both the falsity of such dualisms and their devastating effects on the life of earth. Both were clear about the violence involved in, for example, declaring living beings to be mindless machines.

Modernity’s big story, or meta-narrative, of human progress and control rests on a large suite of hyper-separations, all of which work to place western (male) humanity at the apex of a structure of domination and control that is represented as if it were the natural order of things. It also actively stifles alternatives. People such as Aborigines, for example, can be deemed to be ‘backward’ types who have not yet caught up with modern life, but who inevitably will either modernise in the western way, or die out. The counter story – that they lived sustainably for millennia within a wholly different story and a wholly different philosophical ecology – is always in danger of being suppressed, consumed, or denied (Muecke 2004; Rose 2003; Scott 1996).

Increasingly it is becoming clear that these hyper-separations are epistemological errors. One of the most obvious errors is the proposition that humans are separate from and independent of their environments. This error is compounded by the mind/matter dualism that subtends the proposition that ecosystems are simple and mechanistic, and

thus can be engineered for human purposes without creating unanticipated problems. This error subtends the proposition that nature is there to be used by humans, and that humans are somehow exempt from any blowback that occurs. So at the heart of a lot of this structure is human exceptionalism, the idea that humans are above and in control of a passive and mindless world. This is the story we are increasingly coming to understand to be simply ludicrous.

One of the most pervasive, intractable, and destructive hyper-separated dualisms lurks in the problem of self and other. Here, too, the critique does not say that there are no selves and others. The ability to discern between self and non-self (other) is absolutely essential to all life. When self and other are construed in the mode of hyperseparation, the logic of either-or is called into play in a zero-sum logic that asserts that self-interest is achieved in competition with other selves who also only pursue self-interest, and this vision of self versus other fuels our neoliberal economy, fuels huge amounts of politics, and justifies and rationalises many awful deeds in which human interests are put above the interests of everything else on earth (animals, plants, habitats, water, soils, oceans, and so on). And although many of us know that we live in a world of connectivities and therefore in a world of interdependencies, that it really does not make sense to think that there can be a self-interest that could be completely isolated from the interests of others, we are constantly told by politicians, in particular, that we have to choose. Economy versus environment, jobs versus conservation, and so on and on in a discourse that replicates all the errors of hyper-separation and that continues the business-as-usual forms of argument and action that are wrecking the planet. This dualism is as toxic in its structure as it is relentless in its application, and it is incredibly difficult to get out of. It is bound up with all the other dualisms that reinforce each other, and it is tangled up within much that we value in life along with all the destruction.

## Two lessons

The idea that there is a kind of human self-interest that can be detached from the interests of everything else on earth leads into depths of destructive error. In this dark age of modernity, the accumulating consequences of error are becoming ever more evident. The need for replacing hyper-separations with complementarity, mutualism and connectivity is ever more urgent. There are two main lessons we can draw from all the decades in which leading thinkers have been urging a revisioning of humanity. One is that the Anthropocene is clarifying just how deep are the changes required of western culture. The other is that major change is more likely to come about in the face of concrete encounter with necessity. In other words, the events which gave rise to the concept of the Anthropocene have real, material, specifiable effects which humanity increasingly has no choice but to confront. As my colleagues and I wrote recently in the introduction to the new journal *Environmental Humanities*, “At the core of this environmental humanities approach [to knowledge] is a recognition that the whole world, at all scales, is a ‘contact zone’ (Haraway 2008). The deepening environmental and social crises of our time are unfolding in this zone where the nature/culture divide collapses and the possibilities of life and death for everyone are at stake” (Rose *et al.* 2012, 2).

Several recent articles bring out in great clarity the challenge to the humanities that Anthropocene thinking produces (see for example Chakrabarty 2009; Dibley 2012; Mansfield 2008). It is wonderful to see critical theory at work on these big questions. It is also the case, though, that critical theory has been at work on these big issues for decades now. The hope I find in our current moment is that the depth of our entanglement within the earth systems we are damaging so severely may finally become so evident to us that we will no longer be able wish away matters we should be confronting, or bury them beneath the rhetoric of progress and mastery.

An example arises in the research I am now engaged in that looks at the human communities that form around endangered species.<sup>2</sup> One of the case studies concerns flying-foxes along the east coast of Australia. This is not a happy time to be doing this research. As Lunney and Moon wrote recently, Megachiroptera are the focus of a lot of bad press and are otherwise almost invisible (Lunney and Moon 2011). In 2012 the Queensland government reinstated legal shooting of flying foxes. As a legal process, it necessarily involves state oversight, including permits and quotas. According to the report in the *Brisbane Courier Mail*, ‘farmers can apply for permits, [and] they must use 12-gauge shotguns with heavy shot and only on stationary animals rather than those in flight. An annual quota of 10,580 will be set for four species. The kill will be 4000 little reds, 3500 blacks, 1280 grey headed and 1800 spectacled flying foxes.’<sup>3</sup> The announcement was made on Threatened Species Day (September 7), presumably to make sure that everybody got the message of where they stood on matters like animal protection, threatened species, and animal welfare. They had to exempt flying-foxes from their own anti-cruelty legislation in order to be able to do this (Anon 2012). The politics that gain popularity through the deaths of animals indicate a wider issue concerning the political mileage that is gained (in some times and places) from the politics of fear, coupled with the vision of human exceptionalism, and the hyperseparated category “pest”. A “pest” is defined as anything that annoys a human, and the classification casts creatures as management issues rather than as fellow members of the family of life on earth.<sup>4</sup> That is, the category ‘pest’, as it is currently deployed, is a faithful and lethal reiteration of the epistemological errors discussed above in the context of the hyper-separations of modernity.

An aspect of my research that offers a way to move beyond hyperseparated dualisms is the link with zoonotic diseases. An increasing number of these viral diseases are spilling out from wild animals into human populations, and there is global interest in this issue in the scientific community as well as among the general public (see for example, Ryan 1997; Quammen 2012). Whereas the animal host typically is unaffected by the virus, as is

the case with the Hendra virus that has gained public attention in Australia, in other animals, including humans, many of these new diseases are remarkably aggressive. Fears of global pandemics of dreadful diseases are well founded, and human societies are remarkably ill-prepared to understand, anticipate, and cope with these threats to well-being (Calisher *et al.* 2006). These diseases completely undermine the idea that there can be a human self-interest completely detached from the interests of others. Zoonotic diseases show and prove that our interests are bound up in the lives and interests of others.

An astonishing number of emerging viruses are hosted by flying-foxes and other fruit bats. Indeed, according to one source, flying-foxes themselves have become top ‘achievers’: between 1993 and 1997 four new viruses were identified as being hosted by flying foxes, thus giving the Pteropid genus ‘the dubious distinction of hosting the most viruses isolated from a single species in such a short time’ (Bienen 2004). In Australia, the anxiety, not to mention hype, about Hendra virus and Lyssa virus, is public knowledge. Hendra virus, in particular, has been transmitted to horses, and from horses to humans, with lethal impacts on both. According to biosecurity expert Hume Field, there is evidence for ‘an annual spillover event’ of Hendra virus that occurs during the time when flying-foxes are pregnant (reported in *The Australian* (2009); see also (Plowright *et al.* 2008). A key hypothesis is that as stress suppresses the immune system, flying-foxes that experience stress will be more likely to shed more virus. Thus, in a fact sheet put out by Queensland Conservation (Anon n.d.), the advice to the public includes avoiding actions that increase the risk of stress, such as shootings and dispersals. As humans take up ever more space on earth, and as humans and other animals become ever more urbanised, the many unintended stresses of urban life (Plowright *et al.* 2011) may also impact on flying-fox stress levels. Climate change is also adding heat stress to the lives of flying-foxes, and in fact is leading to significant mortality levels (Welbergen *et al.* 2008). The political rhetoric of “us” (humans, Queenslanders?) versus “them” (flying-foxes, greenies, wildlife carers and rehabilitators, others?) makes explicit the violence that lurks beneath the meta-narrative of human exceptionalism.

In contrast, the new One Health Initiative aims to promote ‘co-equal, cross-disciplinary communication and collaboration’ to prevent or contain emerging pandemics (Kaplan *et al.* 2011). It offers an integrated approach to ecosystem health, animal health, and human health, and is giving rise to new collaborations between ecologists, veterinary scientists and public health experts. Humanities perspectives, including the on-going analysis of human-animal relationships (both positive and negative), are notably absent at this time.

2. This ARC grant was awarded to Dr Thom van Dooren and myself; we are pleased to acknowledge ARC funding: DPI10102886; ‘Encounters with Extinction: A multi-sited, multi-species approach to life at the edge of catastrophe in the Asia-Pacific region’. While the main focus of the research is on relations between threatened species and humans, I am not, of courses, excluding any of the four *Pteropus* spp from the research.

3. <http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland-farmers-allowed-to-shoot-flying-foxes-from-today/story-e6freon6-1226466928681>

4. For an official definition of pest as annoyance, and a clear demonstration of the terrors of ‘management’, see the website for the CRC for Invasive Species (<http://www.invasiveanimals.com>). The ‘pest portal’ at [www.feral.org.au](http://www.feral.org.au) is particularly instructive.

## Conclusion

What is needed to break the reinforcing logic of either-or, us versus them, the logic of fear and the logic of human entitlement? I have put the case that we (western humans) should be reflecting deeply and acting appropriately, and I have left open the question of what might constitute appropriate action. I do not want to offer a prescription here, as I believe that we will work out appropriate action interactively with other people and with other species in the contexts of events as they arise to challenge us. There is no single answer. But clearly, appropriate action will consciously seek *not* to replicate the known epistemological errors. Leopold's vision of communities of respect makes a good starting point, but we need a stronger subtending ethic. To return to the flying-foxes for a moment, we can see that underlying much of the hype against flying-foxes is an old, demonstrably untrue, but almost magical mantra that says that humans are entitled to an unencumbered place in the sun. An ugly self-righteous human is displayed in a lot of this discourse as it revolves around the proposition that anything that impinges on humans and their projects, on their comfort, and indeed on their desire to take up *all* the space under the sun, will have to be eliminated. This is one of the great life-and-death issues of our time: who will be tolerated and who will be eliminated, either by design or by negligence.

It goes to the heart of ethics in the contemporary world. As the great French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas put it, to be alive is to be enmeshed in ethics, to have one's place in the sun called into question, to be drawn into responsibility for others.

There are good instrumental reasons for protecting the lives of flying foxes, and their capacity to continue to flourish will undoubtedly benefit not only ourselves but, more widely, the already fragmented and degraded indigenous Australian ecosystems in this time of climate change (Booth *et al.* 2008). Indeed, from a perspective grounded in connectivities, there are good instrumental reasons for protecting the lives of a great many earth creatures. Instrumentalism is limited so long as it has a human-centric focus; it assumes that we matter in ways that from an ecological point of view are slightly insane. Beyond instrumentalism, a humanities perspective tells us that how we manage to share our place in the sun defines who we are. An ecological-humanities perspective goes further. It tells us that who we are is defined not only by us but by all those with whom our lives are entangled. In this era of global ecological change, the whole biosphere is "telling" us just who and what we are. The whole biosphere both measures and mirrors our failure to become members of a thriving earth-community.

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