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“Das eigentliche Problem vom Menschen”: Debt, (Ac)Countability, and the Financialization of Wildlife Conservation

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ABSTRACT

In 2019, a new strategy in wildlife conservation was announced: so-called “rhino impact bonds,” designed to support the conservation of African black rhinos, with the ultimate aim of establishing a global “conservation debt market.” This essay takes this development in the financialization of wildlife conservation as an object lesson in the mutual imbrication of guilt, debt, and the (non)human in the age of the Anthropocene. To this end, it traces a theoretical trajectory that explicitly frames the figure of “Man” in terms of *Schuld*, starting with Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*. The essay takes Nietzsche’s “sovereign individual” to refer not to the human species as a whole but rather a specific “genre” of the human, namely what Sylvia Wynter calls *homo oeconomicus*. In “overrepresenting” himself as the paradigmatic human, this figure has established capital accumulation as the goal of all human life. From here, the essay turns to Walter Benjamin’s characterization of capitalism as a religion whose ultimate aim is not salvation but universal debt/guilt, and finally to Adorno’s account of nature conservation as domination. The rhino bonds represent the logical consequence of this trajectory, namely the expansion of the principle of universal debt to the entire natural world.

KEYWORDS

Anthropocene; debt; neoliberalism; Nietzsche; rhino bonds

In the summer of 2019, the Zoological Society of London (ZSL), working in partnership with other charities such as the WWF, as well as a number of banks and investment firms, announced plans for a new funding instrument for wildlife conservation: so-called “rhino impact bonds,” designed to support efforts to protect the critically endangered African Black Rhino (*Diceros bicornis*).¹ The \$50 million bond is tied to pre-defined target metrics, promising a return on investment only if those targets are met, i.e., if rhino numbers have increased by the end of the bond period of five years.

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¹John Aglionby, “‘Rhino Bond’ Breaks New Ground in Conservation Finance,” *FT.com*, July 16, 2019, accessed January 7, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/2f8bf9e6-a790-11e9-984c-fac8325aaa04>.

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At that point, investors will be paid back, “plus or minus a percentage relative to conservation outcome,” by the funding bodies behind the scheme.²

Once the most numerous of the world’s rhino species, Black Rhino populations declined dramatically in the latter half of the twentieth century, from roughly 100,000 in 1960 to just over 2,000 in 1995, as a result of trophy hunting and especially poaching.³ Since then, numbers have increased to around 5,500, thanks to intensive conservation efforts, but rhinos remain under constant threat from poachers, owing to the skyrocketing demand for rhino horn which is used in Traditional Chinese Medicine.⁴ The rhinos’ problems are thus largely economic, and the rhino bond represents an attempt to use those same market forces to protect the species.

Initial interest in the bonds has reportedly been “off the charts,”⁵ and the hope is to “scale up” the funding model to create a “conservation debt market” for other endangered species and habitats.⁶ Thus the rhino bond initiative shows how the ongoing financialization of wildlife conservation tends toward the universalization of the debt form. As such, the rhino bonds may be taken as an object lesson in the mutual imbrication of guilt, debt, humans and nonhumans in the age of the Anthropocene.

In what follows, I propose to read the development of the global conservation debt market together with what is without doubt the *locus classicus* for thinking about the problem of the human in terms of guilt and debt, namely Friedrich Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), specifically the second essay, which begins with the proposition that “the real problem of Man [*das eigentliche Problem vom Menschen*]” consists in his self-production as an animal that is “allowed to make promises.”⁷ The figure of the promise seeks to impose order on the future, to make it predictable [*berechenbar*], which in turn renders the human calculable and indebted to his past and future selves. In my analysis, I will focus on the dual principles of fungibility and indebtedness as they relate to Nietzsche’s definition of the “sovereign individual,” a contradictory and much-disputed figure within Nietzsche scholarship. While some critics have sought to read this individual as a positive quasi-Kantian ideal of freedom and autonomy, I argue that he is better understood as analogous to what Sylvia Wynter terms *homo*

²Oliver Withers, Chris Gordon, Andrea Egan, Penny Stock, and Midori Paxton, “Results for Rhinos: Using Innovative Financing to Achieve Conservation Outcomes,” *UNDP Ecosystems & Biodiversity*, March 2, 2018, accessed January 7, 2021, <https://undp-biodiversity.exposure.co/results-for-rhinos>. The Project is funded by the Global Environment Facility, the UK Government’s IWT [Illegal Wildlife Trade] Challenge Fund, United for Wildlife (UfW), and The Zoological Society of London (ZSL).

³Richard Emslie, “*Diceros Bicornis*,” *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2020*, doi:10.2305/IUCN.UK.2020-1.RLTS.T6557A152728945.en.

⁴See, for example, Annette Hübschle, “Fluid Interfaces between Flows of Rhino Horn,” *Global Crime* 18, no. 3 (2017): 198–217, doi:10.1080/17440572.2017.1345680; and Richard Ellis, *Tiger Bone and Rhino Horn: The Destruction of Wildlife for Traditional Chinese Medicine* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2005), 90–98. On the public response to the escalating rhino poaching crisis in Southern Africa, see Bram Büscher, *The Truth about Nature: Environmentalism in the Era of Post-truth Politics and Platform Capitalism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 146–166.

⁵Oliver Withers, head of conservation finance for ZSL, qtd. in John Aglionby, “How Conservation Investment Could Be a Lifeline for Endangered Species,” *FT.com*, November 24, 2019, accessed January 7, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/6089710e-0b72-11ea-bb52-34c8d9dc6d84>.

⁶Anthony Sguazzin, “Rhinos Come to the Bond Market, and Other Species May Follow,” *Bloomberg.com*, July 17, 2019, accessed January 7, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-07-17/rhinos-come-to-the-bond-market-other-species-may-follow>.

⁷Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 35. Translation slightly modified; italics in original. For the original, see Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse/Zur Genealogie der Moral*, vol. 5 of *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe* [KSA], ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter/Munich: dtv, 1999), 291. All further citations from this text will follow the format GM II:1 (35/291).

oeconomicus, the rational, self-interested, bourgeois model of the individual, which has successfully instituted itself as the paradigm of the human as such, “understood as a purely biological mechanism that is subordinated to a teleological economic script” that projects “accumulation in the name of (economic) freedom [...] as the indispensable, empirical, and metaphysical source of all human life.”⁸ Thus, the freedom of the guilt-ridden sovereign individual is the freedom of free-market capitalism.

Tracing a trajectory from Nietzsche’s sovereign individual to the emergence of rhino impact bonds, in the second half of the essay I turn briefly to Walter Benjamin’s 1921 fragment, “Capitalism as Religion,” in which he describes Nietzsche as one of the high priests of the cult of capitalism, understood as “a cult that creates guilt, not atonement”⁹ and whose ultimate aim is thus not universal salvation but universal *Schuld*. The Rhino Impact Investment project, as a harbinger of the global “conservation debt market,” may be regarded as a continuation or even culmination of this process, which began with the “paradoxical” task of breeding an animal that is allowed to make promises. As one of the architects behind the “rhino bonds” explains, rhinos were chosen as a flagship species for this project because they are “countable, critically endangered and charismatic.”¹⁰ The emphasis on countability is rooted in a managerial approach to nature as an exhaustible resource: A necessary precondition for the creation of a global debt market to save the natural world is that the species inhabiting that world be made “countable,” which is to say quantifiable, measurable, and, in this sense, *berechenbar* like Nietzsche’s promising animal. The rhino bonds initiative can thus be seen as an attempt to breed *another* animal that is able to make promises, namely the capitalist promise of universal debt/guilt.

1. From dawn to dusk

Before turning to Nietzsche and the rhino bonds, however, I will first ruminate on the term Anthropocene and how it both reveals and obscures structures of guilt and responsibility for climate change and mass extinction. In §26 of *Daybreak* (1881), Nietzsche describes morality as a form of social camouflage, a survival mechanism whereby individuals learn to adapt to their surroundings, altering their form and behavior, the better to evade their pursuers and outwit their prey. Just as other animals dissimulate and mimic in order to survive, Nietzsche writes, so too “the individual conceals himself behind the universality of the generic term ‘man’” in order to avoid detection.¹¹ This idea is worth bearing in mind when approaching the concept of the Anthropocene: What is the tactical advantage of naming a new geological epoch after

⁸Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe of Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 10.

⁹Walter Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion,” trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 288; cf. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1991), vol. 6, 100.

¹⁰Glen Jeffries, finance manager at Conservation Capital, qtd. in Sguazzin, “Rhinos Come to the Bond Market.” Emphasis added.

¹¹Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Dawn of Day*, trans. J.M. Kennedy (London: Allen & Unwin, 1911), 32–33; cf. KSA 3: 36: “So verbirgt sich der einzelne unter der Allgemeinschaft des Begriffes ‘Mensch’.”

“the generic term ‘man’”? What forms of mimicry and dissimulation does this concept entail? Who is the predator and who is the prey in this analogy?

As the debate on the Anthropocene rages on, one of the most intractable problems concerns the nature and identity of the Anthropos after whom this new epoch is named.¹² While there can be no doubt that humans have exerted and continue to exert a disproportionate and above all negative influence on the planet, it remains a matter of dispute who can or should be held responsible for the deleterious effects of human activities on the world around us. The most common criticism of the term “Anthropocene” is that it implies a singular, universal “humanity,” and in so doing obscures the massively unequal distribution of responsibility for and vulnerability to the effects of climate change and species extinction—inequalities that tend to map onto existing geographic, socioeconomic, and racial lines which are themselves tied to deep and complex histories of violence and exploitation, histories that are rendered invisible or irrelevant when the entire species is held accountable.¹³ In this way, the real culprits—namely a relatively small cadre of corporations and oil companies, or, slightly more broadly, consumers living in overdeveloped, mostly Western, fossil fueled economies—are able to blend into a generalized “humanity,” newly rebranded as a global geological agent, whose guilt is both singular and universal but also irreducible to any single individual. If everyone is guilty, no one is.¹⁴

In an effort to counteract such obfuscation, critics of the Anthropocene have proposed a seemingly unending series of alternative concepts, from “Capitalocene” (Moore), “Plantationocene” (Tsing), and “Chthulucene” (Haraway), to the “Eurocene” (Grove), the “Necrocene” (McBrien), the “Naufragocene” (Mentz), and so forth.¹⁵ Each of these terms represents an attempt to reframe the current ecological condition in historical, political, and socioeconomic terms, in a way that resists the homogenization and universalism of the capital-A Anthropocene. Loath as I am to join the terminological free-for-all, I nevertheless feel compelled to point out that all of these terms—even those that are not guilty of combining a Latin root with a Greek suffix, and must therefore

¹²For a recent survey, see *Der Anthropos im Anthropozän. Die Wiederkehr des Menschen im Moment seiner vermeintlich endgültigen Verabschiedung*, ed. Hannes Bajohr (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020).

¹³See, for instance, Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History, and Us*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2013); and Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), esp. 23–64.

¹⁴By the same token, regarding the question of collective German guilt for the Holocaust, Hannah Arendt writes that “the cry ‘We are all guilty’ that at first hearing sounded so very noble and tempting has actually only served to exculpate to a considerable degree those who actually were guilty.” She goes on to say that insofar as “solidarity is a necessary condition” for feelings such as compassion, “the cry ‘We are all guilty’ is actually a declaration of solidarity with the wrongdoers.” See Hannah Arendt, “Collective Responsibility,” in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2003), 147–48.

¹⁵See Jason W. Moore, ed. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland, Calif.: PM Books, 2016); Donna J. Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” *Environmental Humanities* 6 (2015): 159–65; Jaius Victor Grove, *Savage Ecology: War and Geopolitics at the End of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Justin McBrien, “Accumulating Extinction: Planetary Catastrophism in the Necrocene,” in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?*, 116–137; Steve Mentz, *Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization, 1550–1719* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015). Taking this terminological proliferation as the defining characteristic of the age, Mentz has since semi-ironically proposed the term “Neologismcene”; see Mentz, *Break Up the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 57–64.

sound jarring to anyone in the habit of thinking with their ears¹⁶—are, like “Anthropocene,” morphologically incoherent. The suffix *-cene* derives from *καινός* meaning “new” or “recent,” and the geological epochs are named according to their proximity to the “recent” or contemporary period, which, in Charles Lyell’s original definition, refers to all “that which has elapsed since the earth has been tenanted by man.”¹⁷ The term “Anthropocene” (human-recent) is thus not only nonsensical but tautological. Preceding this “human epoch,”¹⁸ we have such epochs as the *Miocene* (less recent), *Pliocene* (more recent), and *Pleistocene* (most recent). “Pleistos” (*πλεῖστος*) is already the superlative form of “polys” (*πολύς*), meaning “much” or “very.” The term *Holocene* (from *όλος*, whole, entire), which was added in 1885, thus designates a temporality even more recent than the *most recent* past, i.e., the present. Much like *Neuzeit*, then, the term does not really admit of the possibility of a period that might come *after* it, and as Dana Luciano observes, “the decision to bring this epoch [the Holocene] to an end would mark the present as a peculiar time, *after the recent*, a time out of time in more than one sense.”¹⁹

At this point, however, one should note that the etymological incongruity of the “Anthropocene” and its rivals is already prefigured in Lyell’s original sequence, which begins not, as one might expect, with the “Hekistocene” (from *ἥκιστος*, least), but rather with the *Eocene* (from *ἠώς*, dawn), referring to “the first commencement, or dawn, of the existing state of the animate creation,”²⁰ following the last mass extinction event that brought the Cretaceous period to an end. By this logic, then, surely the most appropriate term for the current epoch, in which that “existing state” seems to be coming to an end, would be *Hesperocene*, from *ἑσπέρα*, meaning “evening” and, by extension, that part of the horizon where the sun sets, i.e., “the West.” Personally, I find this to be a rather elegant and poetic solution, not least because it allows for the possibility of a new dawn to come, after the age of “Man.” And while it is true that naming the epoch after “the West” may potentially invite teleological, Spenglerian narratives of the *Untergang des Abendlandes* and the End of History and so forth, as a term, “Hesperocene” does nevertheless have the dual advantage of being no more etymologically nonsensical than any of the other proposed alternatives, while also encapsulating the problematic of Western imperialism and hence the historical, political, and economic dynamics at the heart of the “Capitalocene,” the “Plantationocene,” and the “Eurocene.” In this way, it also allows the signature event of “1492” to function as the starting point for the current ecological crisis. As Luciano notes, with reference to the work of Sylvia Wynter, the 1492 event marks “the beginning of the global dissemination

¹⁶I am alluding, of course, to Adorno’s remarks on the word *Kulturkritik*, which offended his delicate sensibilities not just because it is a barbarism (“like ‘automobile’”), but also and above all because it names a “flagrant contradiction”: the cultural critic, in adopting a critical position vis-à-vis society, speaks as though he were not himself part of that society, and yet “he is necessarily of the same essence as that to which he fancies himself superior.” The same might be said of the Anthropocene and the debate surrounding it, where, likewise, “even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter.” See Theodor W. Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shiery Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 19, 34; cf. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann et al. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2003), vol. 10.1: 11, 30.

¹⁷Charles Lyell, *Principles of Geology*, vol. 3 (London: John Murray, 1833), 52.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Dana Luciano, “The Inhuman Anthropocene,” *Avidly*, March 22, 2015, accessed January 7, 2021, <http://avidly.lareviewofbooks.org/2015/03/22/the-inhuman-anthropocene/>; italics in original.

²⁰Lyell, *Principles of Geology*, vol. 3, 55; original emphasis.

of a specifically Western idea of humanism that posits itself as universal but endlessly defers the truly universal distribution of the benefits it confers, one that legitimates and covers over the violence, racial, colonial and otherwise, done in its name.”²¹ This perpetually deferred promise of universal humanity is itself a facet of the “eigentliche Problem vom Menschen,” which is to say of the genealogy of the indebted, promising animal that calls itself “Man.”

As it turns out, then, the “Hesperocene,” like all of the other proposed alternatives to the term inevitably returns to the perennial problem of “Man” and his position within the Earth System. Luciano argues that the “liveliness of the discussion” surrounding the Anthropocene concept reflects its “explanatory promise: it is a debate over what kind of story can and should be told about human impact on the planet.”²² Each of these proposed terms presents such a “promise” in the form of an etiology—from the Greek αἰτία, meaning “guilt,” “responsibility,” and ultimately “cause.” As a relational concept, αἰτία identifies the root cause of one event or phenomenon in another, prior event or phenomenon to which the former is *due* or *owed*. The language of causality, like that of morality, is always also the language of debt,²³ and the proliferation of rival terms reflects the difficulty (and the promise) of tracing the ecological crisis back to a single source. And for the moment, the crux of that debate remains the *Anthropos*. Thus, even though, like Nietzsche, we may be “tired of *man*,”²⁴ we are not *done* with him. Let us therefore turn to Nietzsche and his etiology of that problematic promising animal.

2. The problem of “Man”

The second essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, entitled “Guilt, Bad Conscience, and Related Matters,” begins as follows:

To breed an animal that is *allowed to make promises*—isn’t this precisely the paradoxical task nature has set for herself with regard to Man? Isn’t this the true problem of Man?²⁵

The phrase “das eigentliche Problem vom Menschen” presents certain insurmountable problems for the translator. Most modern English translations of this text render *Mensch* as “humankind” or, worse, “human beings.”²⁶ As will become clear, however, I would like to propose that the promising, guilt-ridden animal whose etiology Nietzsche is sketching here does not refer to the species as a whole, but is in fact “Man” with a capital “M.” That is to say, to borrow a phrase from Sylvia Wynter, a particular “genre” of the human, originating in post-medieval Europe, which, owing to various concrete historical, economic, and cultural factors, has succeeded in “overrepresenting” itself as

²¹Luciano, “Inhuman Anthropocene”; cf. Sylvia Wynter, “1492: A New World View,” in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, ed. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 5–57.

²²Luciano, “Inhuman Anthropocene.”

²³See, for example, Morris B. Storer, “Toward a Theory of Moral Debt: Prolegomena to Chreology. Part 1: The Idea of Moral Debt in the Common Understanding,” *Inquiry* 14 (1971): 358–59, doi:10.1080/00201747108601639.

²⁴Nietzsche, GM I:12 (24/278).

²⁵Nietzsche, GM II:1 (35/291).

²⁶Carol Diethe, trans. *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 35: “Is it not the real problem of humankind?”; Adrian Del Caro, trans., *Beyond Good and Evil/On the Genealogy of Morality*, vol. 8 of *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Alan D. Schrift and Duncan Large (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 246: “Is it not the genuine problem of human beings?”

the generic, universal “human” as such.²⁷ As Wynter argues, “all our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggles over the environment, global warming, severe climate change, the sharply unequal distribution of the earth[’s] resources [. . .] are all differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle.”²⁸ In other words, the self-overrepresentation of European, rational Man as the archetype of the Human can be interpreted as the “real” or “true” [*das eigentliche*, also: the proper, authentic, ownmost] problem of the Anthropocene. The word “eigentlich” comes from “eigen,” cognate with the English “own,” which is in turn the historical past participle of the verb to “owe.” To own, then, is to owe; property is a form of debt. “Das *eigentliche* Problem” thus also concerns the question of what is “proper” to Man, what distinguishes him from other animals, namely a particular mode of speaking (*versprechen*), which takes the form of an obligation and places the human within a horizon of culpability. If the Anthropocene is a referendum on the problem of “Man,” it is also a referendum on the state of this debt.

The “problem” of Man in Nietzsche’s account is essentially twofold. On the one hand, Man is a problematic animal because his is a *historical* mode of being, which is to say one that is governed by the faculty of memory. As Nietzsche had already argued in his second *Untimely Meditation*, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” (1874), this faculty of memory is ultimately unnatural and antithetical to life. For Nietzsche, animal life is defined by its relation to the here and now and unfolds in an eternal present; humans, by contrast—and especially nineteenth-century German humans—cultivate an unhealthy and obsessive relationship to the ever-accumulating historical past, which weighs them down and holds them back.²⁹ Man’s historical mode of being, his compulsion to preserve the past, goes hand in hand with his prerogative to make promises, which renders him indebted to both the past and the future, and prevents him from living in the present.

Thus, on the other hand, Man’s status as a promising animal becomes a problem for Man himself, who is forever tethered to the historical past to an unhealthy, self-destructive degree. On Nietzsche’s account this paradoxical and unnatural hypertrophy of the mnemonic faculty is rooted in the desire for retribution: In addition to being an animal that makes promises, Man is also an animal that *bears grudges* and wants those who harm him to pay for their transgressions. For Nietzsche, the relationship between creditor and debtor is “the oldest and most primitive relationship among persons, and the origin of all feelings of guilt [*Schuld*] and personal responsibility.”³⁰ This relationship, which, as Nietzsche argues, undergirds and indeed gives rise to the very category of morality, depends on an assumption of *fungibility*. In the first instance, this assumption of fungibility applies to harm: the punishment suits the crime, the retribution can repay the debt incurred, i.e., the harm inflicted. In principle, as a relation of equivalence, this ought to be a zero-sum proposition (an eye for an eye). But there is, as Nietzsche says,

²⁷See Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337, doi:10.1353/ncr.2004.0015.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 260–61.

²⁹See Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 61; KSA 1: 249.

³⁰GM II:8 (45/305–306).

an additional, surplus value attached to the punishment for a prior transgression, which comes in the form of pleasure, specifically the pleasure in cruelty. The aggrieved party derives pleasure from inflicting pain on the criminal, and this economy of cruelty extends to onlookers, which explains the “festive” dimension of public executions, and so forth.³¹ Once such public displays of cruelty fall out of favor, however, coming to be seen as barbaric or pre-modern and hence incompatible with the superior values of Western civilization, the delight in cruelty instead turns inward, giving rise to the guilty conscience that afflicts modern Man. After all, there is a certain kind of enjoyment to be had in making oneself feel bad. Psychoanalysis has had plenty to say on that subject, but we might also relate it more generally to the peculiar mixture of self-accusation and inflated self-regard that often accompanies stories of how “Man” has now become a geological force capable of destroying, or indeed, saving the planet. Nietzsche himself appears to prefigure this Anthropocene narrative: the emergence of bad conscience through the internalization of cruelty gives rise to “the greatest and most uncanny of sicknesses [. . .], one from which man has not recovered to this day, the suffering of man *from man*, from *himself*.”³² At the same time, the arrival on the scene of this uncanny and self-afflicted promising animal, Nietzsche quickly adds, marked the arrival of “something so new, deep, unheard of, enigmatic, contradictory, and full of future [. . .] that the face of the earth [*der Aspekt der Erde*] was thereby essentially changed.”³³ “Man” has thus always been a geological agent.

Crucially, Nietzsche’s definition of Man as the promising animal hinges on the modal verb *dürfen*, to be permitted or allowed. Making promises, then, is not so much an *ability* or *capacity* as a *privilege*—or even, in a certain sense, an *obligation*—which is tied to certain preconditions: In order to have *permission* to make a promise, you must first agree to face some consequences if you break that promise, and since you want to avoid any such negative consequences, you set about making yourself reliable, responsible, conscientious, trustworthy—which is to say credit-worthy, able to honor your debt. This is a long, slow, and above all painful process of (self-)mutilation and (self-)abnegation, at the end of which stands a figure whom Nietzsche ironically dubs the “sovereign individual.” This individual, whose word is his bond, is truly *permitted* to make promises only by virtue of having been successfully bred to be “necessary, uniform, like among like, regular, and accordingly predictable [*berechenbar*].”³⁴ Only by remaining always the same, i.e., by stifling the dynamic mutability that defines life, can the sovereign individual guarantee that he will be the same tomorrow as he was yesterday. This steadfast regularity has earned him the “extraordinary privilege of *responsibility*,” and now that he is truly “free” (Nietzsche’s scare quotes) to make promises, this sovereign individual begins to consider himself superior to all those who are different or fail to meet his “standard of value.”

This being who has become free, who is really *permitted* to promise, this lord of the *free* will, this sovereign—how could he not know what superiority he thus has over all else that is not permitted to promise and vouch for itself, how much trust, how much fear, how

³¹GM II:6 (41–42/302).

³²GM II:16 (57/323): “das Leiden des Menschen *am Menschen*, *an sich*.”

³³*Ibid.*; translation modified.

³⁴GM II:2 (36/292).

much reverence he awakens—he “*earns*” all three—and how this mastery over himself also necessarily brings with it mastery over circumstances, over nature and all lesser-willed and more unreliable creatures?³⁵

This passage has been the object of intense dispute among Nietzsche scholars in recent years, between those who prefer to take the hyperbolic description of this sovereign individual’s freedom and autonomy at face value, reading it as a positive, quasi-Kantian ideal worth striving for, or even as a manifestation of a higher state of (über-)humanity,³⁶ versus those who read the passage ironically, as an articulation or indeed a caricature of a specifically modern, Enlightenment ideal of morality, bourgeois respectability, and self-discipline, which is precisely the object of Nietzsche’s *critique*, not his admiration.³⁷ A full reconstruction of the debate is beyond the scope of this essay, but, as I have been arguing, there are compelling reasons to favor the latter interpretation. Quite apart from the fact that Nietzsche never mentions the “sovereign individual” again in his writings and couches all of his supposedly positive and superior qualities (“freedom,” “autonomy,” etc.) in scare quotes and/or *Sperrdruck*, this figure of constancy and moral superiority, whose primary characteristic is that he is considered conscientious and responsible enough to make promises, is a far cry from the ruthless, predatory aristocrats Nietzsche otherwise favors, whose promises aren’t worth a damn since they have no fear of the consequences if they break them.³⁸

In the first essay of the *Genealogy*, immediately after having complained of being “tired of *man*,” Nietzsche had ascribed the origin of the belief in *free will* to the “vengeful cunning” of the weak and downtrodden, who, in their *ressentiment* against the strong and powerful, have devised a way to make it seem as though their weakness is “a voluntary achievement, something willed,” a sign of moral superiority, “a *merit* [*Verdienst*],” and that the strong must therefore also be “*free* to be weak,” and to choose not to commit acts of violence. In this way, the “man of *ressentiment*” gives himself “the right to hold the bird of prey *accountable* for being a bird of prey.”³⁹ To Nietzsche, this is “cleverness of the lowest order,” no different from the rudimentary cunning of insects that “play dead” in order to avoid detection, and hence the invention of the concept of “free will” is merely yet another manifestation of the kind of self-serving mimicry to which, in *Daybreak*, he had attributed the development of morality in the first place. Thus, when in the second essay Nietzsche so emphatically characterizes this sovereign individual as the “lord of the *free will*,” who “*earns*’ [*verdient*’ also: *merits* or

³⁵GM II:2 (36–37/293–94); emphases in original.

³⁶E.g. Tom Bailey, “Nietzsche the Kantian?” in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, ed. Ken Gemes and John Richardson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 134–159, esp. 149–53; Paul S. Loeb, “Finding the *Übermensch* in Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morality*,” in *Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morals: Critical Essays*, ed. Christa Davis Acampora (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 163–176.

³⁷See Christa Davis Acampora, “On Sovereignty and Overhumanity: Why It Matters How We Read Nietzsche’s *Genealogy* II:2,” in *ibid.*, 147–161; Brian Leiter, “Who Is the ‘Sovereign Individual’? Nietzsche on Freedom,” in *Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morality: A Critical Guide*, ed. Simon May (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 101–119; Matthew Rukgaber, “The ‘Sovereign Individual’ and the ‘Ascetic Ideal’: On a Perennial Misreading of the Second Essay of Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality*,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 43, no. 2 (2012): 213–239, doi:10.5325/jnietstud.43.2.0213; and, most recently, Marco Brusotti, “Die Autonomie des ‘soveränen Individuums’ in Nietzsche’s *Genealogie der Moral*,” *Nietzsche-Studien* 48, no. 1 (2019): 26–48, doi:10.1515/nietzstu-2019-0003.

³⁸Cf. Andreas Urs Sommer, *Kommentar zu Nietzsches Zur Genealogie der Moral* [*Nietzsche-Kommentar* 5/2] (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), 234–235.

³⁹Nietzsche, GM I:13 (25–26/278–281): “das Recht, dem Raubvogel es zuzurechnen, Raubvogel zu sein . . .”

deserves]” the trust, fear, and respect of his fellow men, particularly those who cannot properly promise and thus “vouch” for themselves [*für sich selbst gut sagen*], it is difficult to read this as anything other than an explicit reference to this earlier passage and an indictment of the sovereign individual as none other than the man of *ressentiment* who has succeeded in hiding behind the generic term “man” and thus internalizing and universalizing his “standard of value.”

Moreover, the position of the latter passage within the overall trajectory of the essay indicates that the emergence of the sovereign individual marks the culmination of a largely prehistoric process which has already been completed. As such, as Christa Davis Acampora has convincingly shown, the sovereign individual represents the *current* state of humanity, not some future ideal. “This is not to say,” she adds, “that we are all *already* sovereign individuals but rather that the concept of humanity that we presently hold is one that takes sovereign individuality as a real and desirable possibility for us to endeavor to achieve.”⁴⁰ Andreas Urs Sommer notes that one of the major vexations arising from this passage is that it seems as though the permission to make promises is a privilege afforded only to a small elite, whereas in the preceding section it had been presented as a social *necessity* that all humans be conditioned to become the sorts of animals who can “be responsible for their own future, which is to say, who can incur debts today which they will repay at a later date. Accordingly,” he continues, “*all* appropriately socialized members of the species ought to be sovereign individuals—not just a select few.”⁴¹ Yet this seeming inconsistency can be resolved if, as I propose, one regards this ideal of individual sovereignty not as a universal and ontologically given characteristic of the species as a whole, but rather as a specific sociogenetic “genre” of the human, which, in “overrepresenting” itself, lays claim to the status of being “truly human” in order to justify its violent disdain for those deemed *less* than fully human.

In his monumental history of *Debt*, David Graeber describes the entire premise of Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morality*, with primordial creditors excising pounds of flesh as payment from their debtors and so forth,⁴² as “insane,” which is to say: completely divorced from any historical or anthropological evidence of the origin of either morality or commerce. But this, he continues, is in fact most likely “the entire point,” as Nietzsche’s rhetorical strategy is to take the dominant bourgeois assumptions about human nature, namely that “we are rational calculating machines, that commercial self-interest comes before society,” and “driving them to a place where they can only shock a bourgeois audience.”⁴³ In other words, it makes little difference whether Nietzsche is being ironic or not: the ideals and assumptions embodied by this sovereign individual—responsible, calculating, predictable, self-conscious, etc., who “honors those who are like him” and spurns or chastises all others—are those of the bourgeois, liberal humanist subject, the Western, rational, responsible and self-disciplined *homo oeconomicus*, the very *telos* and hero of human history, for whom life itself is nothing but a series of economic transactions, and the world as a whole appears as an enormous ledger of credits and debts. Behold: the *Anthropos* in the Anthropocene, the generalized, universal

⁴⁰Acampora, “On Sovereignty and Overhumanity,” 161, fn. 26.

⁴¹Sommer, *Nietzsche-Kommentar*, 234; my translation.

⁴²See Nietzsche, GM II:5 (40/299).

⁴³David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2011), 78–79.

human subject, who, as Sylvia Wynter writes, cannot conceive of “an Other to what it calls human,” who cannot, that is, entertain the notion that there might be “other modes of being human,” and instead understands those non-Western, non-sovereign, subaltern humans only in terms of “the *lack* of the West’s ontologically absolute self-description.”⁴⁴ This falling short of Man’s “standard of value” is then itself coded as a form of debt or guilt, something to be redeemed and made uniform, like among like, regular, *berechenbar*, and so forth. The “standard of value” is thus first and foremost a mechanism for determining exchange value, and as such hinges upon the fungibility not just of goods and services but of bodies and identities. This, in turn, has implications for our understanding of the “sovereign individual” as well, who, in having completely internalized the promissory logic of (ac)countability, considers himself superior to all others, all those whose “freedom” is not guaranteed, but in thinking himself free fails to understand that the logic by which he has attained his position is that of universal fungibility.⁴⁵

3. A matter of life and debt

Even within his “ontologically absolute self-description,” Man is both “free” and himself fundamentally an indebted creature, incapable of repaying the debt of his existence and hence in need of redemption. Thus, in Nietzsche’s account, the emergence of Christianity, whose “stroke of genius” consisted in having God sacrifice *himself* for our sins—“the creditor sacrificing himself for his debtor, [...] out of love for his debtor”⁴⁶—may have offered a temporary respite from the crushing weight of this debt, but served ultimately only to multiply the debt exponentially, rendering it even greater, universal, impossible to overcome. Commenting on Nietzsche’s philosophy in a 1921 fragment entitled “Capitalism as Religion,” Walter Benjamin argues that this universalization of *Schuld* is the defining feature of Capitalism, which should accordingly be seen not as merely a secularization of Protestant morality but rather as a religious phenomenon in its own right, but one that aims not at absolution or redemption but rather at producing and maximizing guilt/debt: “A vast sense of guilt that is unable to find relief seizes on the cult, not to atone for this guilt but to make it universal [...] so as once and for all to include God in the system of guilt.”⁴⁷ In this system, there can be no hope of redemption, since there is nothing outside it; God is not so much dead as included in the fate of Mankind. Its only hope is for a global state of total despair, and as such, to quote Giorgio Agamben’s pithy summary of Benjamin’s fragment, “[p]recisely because it strives with all its might not toward redemption but toward guilt, not toward hope but toward despair, capitalism as religion does not aim at the transformation of the world but at its destruction.”⁴⁸

⁴⁴Wynter, “Unsettling,” 281–282.

⁴⁵For a lucid account of the relationship between fungibility and the development of “genres” of the human in the context of neoliberalism, see Shannon Winnubst, “The Many Lives of Fungibility: Anti-Blackness in Neoliberal Times,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 29.1 (2020): 102–112.

⁴⁶GM II:21 (63/331).

⁴⁷Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion,” 288–89; *Gesammelte Schriften* 6:100–101.

⁴⁸Giorgio Agamben, “In Praise of Profanation,” in *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 80. On the relationship between Benjamin’s fragment and Agamben’s theory of biopolitics, see Elettra Stimilli, *Debt and Guilt: A Political Philosophy*, trans. Stefania Porcelli (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), ch. 4: “The Religion of Debt.”

In light of this somber verdict, the promise of a global “conservation debt market” as a means of saving the natural world must take on a sinister aspect. The transformation of the actual reproduction of bodies (“Maximizing black rhino population growth rates”⁴⁹) into a by-product of the universal debt economy is actually merely the logical conclusion of the universalizing and self-valorizing drive of the debt form itself. As Melinda Cooper argues in her book *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era*, the contemporary debt form distinguishes itself from earlier stages in the development of capitalism not in terms of its underlying logic but rather in terms of the level of production at which it operates: “What is at stake in the accumulation of capital today is the regeneration of the biosphere—that is, the limits of the earth itself.” Thus, what she calls the “delirium” of the debt form “enables capital to reproduce itself in a realm of *pure promise*, in excess of the earth’s actual limits.”⁵⁰ Here we encounter the final life-negating paradox of breeding a creature permitted to make promises: the future of life itself becomes contingent upon the infinite deferral of the debt.

This is the logical consequence of Nietzsche’s conception of social life as a series of economic transactions, in which individual sovereignty means being able to give one’s word and “uphold it even against accidents, even ‘against fate.’”⁵¹ Nietzsche’s sovereign individual thus emerges as the prototype of the neoliberal subject.⁵² The implication of this worldview, as Joseph Vogl puts it, is that “all events and relationships in the world around us can be assigned a market value,” and that the “market can safeguard every possible future with securities, options, and derivatives and so reinstate a kind of earthly Providence.”⁵³ In a society governed by the ideal of individual sovereignty as the ability to make and keep promises in the face of an uncertain future, the dual imperatives of the present become conservation and accumulation—or, indeed, “accumulation by conservation”⁵⁴—in preparation for the looming disaster.

In *Minima Moralia*, Theodor Adorno links this drive to conservation and/by accumulation to the establishment of modern zoological gardens, which, he observes, “are laid out on the pattern of Noah’s Ark, for since their inception the bourgeois class has been waiting for the flood.”⁵⁵ But if the caged specimens and mating pairs of the nineteenth-century zoo still served as signifiers for the wild, pristine regions of the natural world, beyond the reach of civilization, by the time Adorno is writing, this opposition no longer holds: “nature” exists only on our terms, preserved within culture as a sort of simulacrum: “The more purely nature is preserved and transplanted by civilization, the more implacably it is dominated. We can now afford to encompass ever larger natural units, and leave them apparently intact within our grasp.”⁵⁶ It is important to note that the

⁴⁹Withers et al., “Results for Rhinos.”

⁵⁰Melinda Cooper, *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 30–31; emphasis added.

⁵¹Nietzsche, GM II:2 (37/294).

⁵²Maurizio Lazzarato makes this connection explicitly in his book *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2012).

⁵³Joseph Vogl, *The Specter of Capital*, trans. Joachim Redner and Robert Savage (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 79.

⁵⁴See Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher, “Accumulation by Conservation,” *New Political Economy* 20:2 (2015): 273–298.

⁵⁵Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 115; cf. *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4: 130–131.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*; cf. Louise Green, *Fragments from the History of Loss: The Nature Industry and the Postcolony* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020).

creation of these enclosed spaces where wild nature remains “within our grasp,” such as the Tsavo National Park in Kenya, one of the chief sites of the Rhino Impact Investment Project’s conservation efforts, has historically entailed the large-scale displacement and dispossession of local Indigenous peoples,⁵⁷ in order to cater to “colonial and mostly white anxieties and hopes for a ‘pure’ and ‘pristine’ Africa.”⁵⁸

Despite appearances to the contrary, Western nature conservation has arguably always been aligned with and even integral to capitalist development and exploitation.⁵⁹ Yet it is only over the past three decades, in tandem with the neoliberalization of Western societies and markets, that this relationship has become part of the mainstream discourse on conservation and capitalism, and that the commodification of life itself has explicitly come to be seen and “promoted as the solution to, rather than the cause of, environmental problems.”⁶⁰ Impact Bonds are so called because they promise a dual return on investment, namely in the form not only of financial profit but also of measurable social and environmental *impact*. Thus, in the case of the Rhino Impact Bonds, investors are enticed by the dual promise of financial returns and a positive impact on the world. Yet, there is in theory nothing preventing those same investors, or others, from betting *against* the success of the rhino conservation projects, and thus profiting either way. As environmental anthropologist Sian Sullivan notes, “impact investing is framed increasingly as desirable as an ‘innovative’ source of financing for social, development and environmental concerns normally funded through public spending, because of declines in public funding.”⁶¹ In other words, as the leading edge of nature financialization and commodification, impact investing represents a wholesale transfer of responsibility for social and environmental infrastructure and development from the public to the private sector.⁶²

This development has been facilitated by, and in turn contributes to, the redefinition of nature as a provider of “ecosystem services” whose value can be measured in financial terms. Perhaps the first major step in this direction came in 1997 when ecological economist Robert Costanza and colleagues published a paper in the journal *Nature*, in which they estimated the total value of the ecosystem services and natural capital of the global biosphere at US\$16–54 trillion (10^{12}) per year, as compared to the US\$18 trillion

⁵⁷Cf. Dan Brockington, Rosaleen Duffy, and Jim Igoe, *Nature Unbound: Conservation, Capitalism and the Future of Protected Areas* (London: Earthscan, 2008), 113–130.

⁵⁸Bram Büscher and Maano Ramutsindela, “Green Violence: Rhino Poaching and the War to Save Southern Africa’s Peace Parks,” *African Affairs* 115, no. 458 (2016), 21, doi:10.1093/afraf/adv058.

⁵⁹For a good overview see Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher, *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature beyond the Anthropocene* (London: Verso, 2020), 14–24.

⁶⁰Jamie Lorimer, *Wildlife in the Anthropocene: Conservation after Nature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 142; cf. Claire Jean Kim, *Dangerous Crossings: Race, Species, and Nature in a Multicultural Age* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), ch. 5.

⁶¹Sian Sullivan, “Bonding Nature(s)? Funds, Financiers and Values at the Impact Investing Edge in Environmental Conservation,” in *Valuing Development, Environment and Conservation: Creating Values that Matter*, ed. Sarah Bracking, Aurora Fredriksen, Sian Sullivan, and Philip Woodhouse (London: Routledge, 2018), 102–103.

⁶²This is very clear in the case of the Rhino Bonds, since although it is private investors who put up the initial capital by buying the bonds, ultimately, assuming the five-year rhino population growth target is met, they will be paid back with interest by international governments, which is to say by taxpayers. This aspect of the funding structure is practically never discussed in the official literature, which tends to use vague terms such as “outcome-payers,” but it was explicitly raised in an interview with Glen Jeffries and Oliver Withers on NPR; see Cardiff Garcia and Stacey Vanek Smith, “Rhino Bonds,” July 23, 2019, in *The Indicator from Planet Money*, produced by Darius Rafieyan, National Public Radio, podcast, 9:51, <https://www.npr.org/2019/07/23/744612775/rhino-bonds>.

combined GDP of all nations on earth.⁶³ The point for Costanza was to draw attention to the systematic exclusion or misrepresentation of environmental factors in economic policy decisions, and to give nature a “seat at the table,” as it were, when such decisions are made by providing an objective measure of value against which to assess the cost/benefit of economic development. Since then, this redefinition of the natural world as an ecosystem service provider has rapidly given rise to “an optimistic embrace of the financial returns that might accrue if this ‘value’ of environmental externalities could be priced and traded.”⁶⁴ That is to say, even if the redefinition of ecosystems and environmental processes as “services” may ensure their visibility and *legibility* within a global system that reads everything in financial terms, at the same time, this also serves only to reconfirm the neoliberal assumption that every aspect of life must obey the laws of the market and be subject to cost/benefit analysis, and, in the words of Kathleen McAfee, “offers to nature the opportunity to earn its own right to survive in a world market economy.”⁶⁵

Through this process, the entire natural world becomes “a sort of global abstract ledger,” in which everything is subject to universal fungibility, as in the case of carbon emissions trading, whereby “carbon production as one thing (e.g., industrial emissions) in one location, to be ‘offset’ against its storage in another, qualitatively different thing (e.g., tropical forests) in another location.”⁶⁶ Perhaps the most striking recent example of this is a study published in the IMF-run journal *Finance & Development* in December 2019, entitled “Nature’s Solution to Climate Change,” which opens with the claim that “when it comes to saving the planet, one whale is worth thousands of trees.” The authors calculate that the average whale “sequesters 33 tons of CO₂” whereas a tree “absorbs only up to 48 pounds of CO₂ a year.” The problem, as the authors put it, is that whales are a “textbook public good,” and hence victims of “the tragedy of the commons”: “no individual who benefits from them is sufficiently motivated to pay their fair share to support them.” The best way to save the whales, and to save the planet, therefore, is to privatize them: “Exactly how much should we be willing to spend on protecting the whales? We estimate that, if whales were allowed to return to their pre-whaling numbers—capturing 1.7 billion tons of CO₂ annually—it would be worth about \$13 a person a year to subsidize these whales’ CO₂ sequestration efforts.”⁶⁷ Having figured out how much these whales are “worth,” the only challenge is to determine how to distribute the financial burden of paying these whales for their “ecosystem services” so that they may save the planet on our behalf. To their credit, the authors also stress that in order for this to work, institutions and governments must “exert their influence to bring about *a new mindset*—an approach that recognizes and implements a holistic approach toward human survival, which involves living within the bounds of the natural

⁶³See Robert Costanza, Ralph d’Arge, Rudolf de Groot et al., “The Value of the World’s Ecosystem Services and Natural Capital,” *Nature* 387 (1997): 253–260, doi:10.1038/387253a0.

⁶⁴Sian Sullivan, “Banking Nature? The Spectacular Financialisation of Environmental Conservation,” *Antipode* 45, no. 1 (2013), 201, doi:10.1111/j.1467-8330.2012.00989.x.

⁶⁵Kathleen McAfee, “Selling Nature to Save It? Biodiversity and Green Developmentalism,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 17, no. 2 (1999), 134, doi:10.1068/d170133.

⁶⁶Sullivan, “Banking Nature?,” 201–202.

⁶⁷Ralph Chami, Thomas Cosimano, Connel Fullenkamp, and Sena Oztosun, “Nature’s Solution to Climate Change,” *Finance & Development* 56, no. 4 (December 2019): 34, accessed January 7, 2021. <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2019/12/pdf/natures-solution-to-climate-change-chami.pdf>.

world.”⁶⁸ Nevertheless, this plan to save the whales is entirely utilitarian—essentially a form of farming—which derives the whales’ “right to survive” from the value *to humans* of their ecosystem services, and moreover pits them against the rainforest in a sort of carbon sequestration death match.

Where does this leave the rhinos? What services (economic or ecological) do they provide, apart from attracting tourists and trophy-hunters? Why should we care what happens to them? If the rhinos’ economic value is limited to their horns, their conservation value appears to be largely affective. In his recent book *Climate: A New Story*, New Age environmentalist Charles Eisenstein quotes an email he received from a law student who is terribly upset about the fate of the now-functionally extinct Northern White Rhino (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*): “I don’t cry very often,” she writes, “But this week I cried twice. For the rhinos. It breaks my heart that they’re going extinct. [...] I read some articles about the last, aging, white rhinos in zoos around the world and I fall to pieces. How can we have failed so badly?” She goes on to mention a classmate of hers who believes in climate change and is dedicated to environmental action, but who also thinks that we should “only keep the animals we need to survive.”⁶⁹ This may be an extreme example, of course, but the question remains: Why save the rhinos? And why does their plight move her to tears? What is the affective investment in the future of the rhino? The grief she feels for the rhinos implicates “us” in their fate; this too might be read, somewhat uncharitably, as an example of the individual including themselves within the generic term “man” in order to make themselves feel better for feeling bad. After all, her sorrow at the fate of the rhinos sets her apart from her classmate’s callous, anthropocentric utilitarianism.

There is, however, another reason why the rhinoceros in particular may elicit a feeling of Hesperocenic mourning and melancholia. In the aforementioned aphorism from *Minima Moralia*, entitled “Mammoth,” Adorno comments on the recent discovery of a particularly well-preserved dinosaur fossil in Utah, millions of years younger than other specimens, suggesting that this individual had somehow outlived its conspecifics. Adorno is leery of the public fascination with the idea of monstrous, “primeval animals” that might still be alive—like the Loch Ness monster—or “only extinct for a few million years.” This “desire for the presence of the most ancient,” he writes, “is a hope that animal creation might survive the wrong that man has done it, if not man himself, and give rise to a better species, one that does finally manage to do so [*der es endlich gelingt*; viz. to survive man himself].”⁷⁰ This desire is thus also linked to the fear and fantasy of a posthuman future, of a world without “us.” A recurring theme in discussions of rhinoceroses is the almost compulsive insistence on how “ancient” and “prehistoric” they are.⁷¹ Indeed, the earliest rhinos originated in the Eocene, some fifty million years ago, so there is a certain poetic logic to their becoming emblematic of the sixth mass

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 38.

⁶⁹Charles Eisenstein, *Climate: A New Story* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2018), ch. 7.

⁷⁰Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 115; translation modified; *GS* 4: 130.

⁷¹See, for example, EAZA chairman Leobert de Boer’s Foreword to the 2005/6 *Save the Rhinos* campaign booklet: “rhinos are ancient and perhaps archaic species extending back millions of years in geological time. Nonetheless – archaic as they may be – those African and Asian species of rhino that have survived until present times are amazingly vital and impressive creatures” (London: Save the Rhinos, 2005), 6, http://www.rhinosourcecenter.com/pdf_files/117/1175860939.pdf, accessed January 7, 2021. For numerous other examples, see Kelly Enright, *Rhinoceros* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 11–28.

extinction in the Hesperocene: they've survived for this long, but they couldn't survive "us." In this regard, perhaps we might return to Nietzsche's phrase, "das eigentliche Problem vom Menschen," and venture a third interpretation of this enigmatic "von." In addition to being a problem *regarding* the human animal and a problem afflicting individual human beings, we might take it to mean that *for* Man, the problem consists in breeding *another* animal that can make promises. In this case, the effort to establish a global debt market for the purpose of maximizing rhino reproduction rates could be seen as a last-ditch attempt to bring about the "global state of total despair" which is the secret hope of Capitalism as religion. A hope that by achieving a state of universal *Schuld*, we might find redemption in the form of a better species, one that finally manages to outlive "Man."

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