

Corrosive Consciousness, Part I

How One Might Profane Green Platonism

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[Editors' Note: This is a selection from a failed debate with Kevin Tucker intended to be published in issue #2 of *Black & Green Review*. KT rejected this because he desired the debate to be constrained to the question of egoism (pro or con) and the author desired to make a broader case. We will publish the rest of this argument, the positive case for egoism, in *Black Seed* #5.]

“The primal war is a spiritual war. It began as the spirit of wildness was buried [...].”

- Kevin Tucker, “Egocide”

“To be sure, to speak of spirit and the good as Plato did meant standing truth on her head and denying perspective itself, the basic condition of all life”

- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*

The history of Western philosophy can be divided, very crudely but nonetheless meaningfully, into two broad strands depending on assumptions, or lack thereof, about lived experience. One tendency - calling itself in various incarnations Realism, Christianity, scientific materialism, and so forth - begins not from the real of our lived experience but instead with a presupposition about what the world is really like, positing something greater, deeper, or truer than what we feel. It follows from a presupposition like this one that our lived experience is only a pale reflection or echo of what is seen as the fundamental truth. This speculative, reifying mode “finds its origin in Platonic philosophy and has been dominant from the very beginning.”

I will call this mode of thinking, broad and varied as it is, Platonism for the purpose of this essay, as I think its roots are meaningful and highlight its tendency towards reification and morality.

The second tendency - a perpetual minority that has been called or has called itself perspectivism, egoism, existentialism, nihilism, and other names - considers phenomenality, lived experience, to be prior to and to take precedence over any such reifying speculation. Knowledge and value come from phenomenality, are felt in the flesh, and are always instrumental and provisional rather than aiming at an imagined ultimate, objective reality disembodied from moment-to-moment existence. I will in this part of the essay analyze Anarcho-Primitivism from this perspective; in part two, I will argue that this second tendency is an essentially anarchist mode of thinking.

Exiting the Madhouse: Moving Toward a Truly Critical Theory

“Man, your head is haunted [...] I regard those persons who cling to the Higher... almost the whole world of men, as veritable fools, fools in a madhouse.”

- Max Stirner, *The Ego And Its Own*

The madhouse is civilization and the fools are those who, not only in their actions, thinking, and language; but also, unfortunately, in their critical theory, spend a great deal of their activity reproducing it every day.

History is rife with examples of critical theory that purport to liberate humans (and, rarely, nonhumans) from domination, exploitation, and alienation. Nearly all of them, however, criticize “particular forms of enslavement merely in order to substitute other forms of enslavement”.

In order to be consistently and thoroughly liberatory, then, a critical theory cannot simply effectively critique one aspect of civilization or a particular manifestation of it, nor can it stop at critiquing every aspect and manifestation of all extant and historical civilizations.

Instead, thoroughgoing critical theory must effectively critique all possible forms of domination, exploitation, and alienation - it must provide a moment-to-moment practice of critique that allows for perpetual yet always provisional analysis leading to potentially immediate action. In doing so, it allows one to be critical not only of present civilizations, but also possible future iterations of domination and exploitation, the reemergence of alienated lifeways and modes of thought, and the inadequacies of present and future partial liberation theories.

Anarcho-Primitivism (AP) - in spite of contributing importantly to the anti-civilization critique - fails in this regard because it does not break free of the speculative Platonic tendency, that essentially civilized mode of thinking. AP therefore seeks totalizing truths that render the world absolutely knowable, recapitulating an ideology of control and measurement; draws sacred moral lines where they do not exist in the biosphere; posits objective and transcendental values and entities, reifying aspects of our phenomenality; and succumbs to the same dualistic logic that has characterized classical anarchism. I will examine only a few specific instances of these issues here, due to constraints of scope: the vagaries of domestication, the mystification and sacralization of wildness, and the Manichaeism that motivates and unites both.

The Vagaries of Domestication

It is seductive to talk of domestication in anarchist theory: it applies ideas of domination we have already come to understand in a new dimension. The idea that our present crisis is caused by dominating Nature - or burying the spirit of wildness, as you prefer - implies, when it is not already explicitly stated, that we might exit this nightmare by simply learning how to stop dominating and somehow negating those who refuse to stop. It is thus a recapitulation of egalitarian tendencies of thought that consider liberation to be tantamount to the elimination of power. It is easy to talk to anarchists about power; for many, it is already a placeholder for bad. Indeed, Tucker, at the 2014 Philadelphia Anarchist Bookfair, summarized anarchist theory as the search to identify and eliminate power; green anarchy's contribution, he continued, has been identifying that power with agriculture, with domestication - it is a pleasingly elegant, readily comprehensible critique that implies the familiar Manichaean theme.

To effectively avoid doing something, one needs to know clearly what it is; but when it comes to defining domestication, APs have been vague, tending toward moralistic, quasi-religious, and maudlin language. John Zerzan has defined it at his most sober as "the attempt to bring free dimensions under control for self-serving purposes" and elsewhere, with metaphysical adventurousness, as "a cosmic change" - sacred lines are being crossed, one is to understand. Kevin Tucker has been more erratic, either clearly defining or vaguely gesturing at domestication in a wide variety of ways:

- Though Kevin at times appears very conscious of the accusations of religiosity that have fallen on AP, he nonetheless endorses Chellis Glendinning by saying "the original trauma of domestication is a deep wound". Here, domestication is perhaps our Fall.

- Elsewhere, he seems to agree with Zerzan’s “cosmic change”, describing it as relating to metaphysical erasure or transformation: “Domestication is the destruction of the soul.” or “Domesticated plants and animals replace wildness.”
- Domestication also seems at times to be naturalized, synonymous with socialization, as when “Our submission to the system is our domestication”, described as “the internalized system: the cop, missionary, politician, economist, and worker in our heads”.
- Most mundanely, Kevin often refers to dependency, perceived dependency, and control to characterize domestication.

How is domestication so many different things? If it is, then is it actually a useful term? At times, domestication is even contradictory things, as when “Our own self domestication has not changed who we are[!]” - so it does not seem to create or prescribe different metaphysical categories, after all - or “domestication is not some monolithic and irreversible event in the past, but a constant reality that we recreate daily through our own lives” - and so it is therefore not an original trauma or Fall, which is a decidedly singular event.

Domestication, then, as Kevin deploys it, is a margarine-word, a word “whose function is to circulate, not to mean”. It is used less to convey information than to indicate the user holds a certain moral position. This residue gleams clearly in certain moments, as when Kevin writes: “The one message that I hope people can learn from the history of domestication is that humans, like any other animal, aren’t meant to control the world around it [sic] and dictate its relationships.” There are things we must not do, and one of them is to control the world around us; but the phrase “control the world” is as vague as “domestication”.

We co-create one another’s worlds: my phenomenality is inseparable from myself—it constitutes me—and I am therefore a multifarious being composed of every other being that I encounter. Intimacy and symbiosis are co-creation, meaning that creatures are continually shaping one another. But this cocreation is not a lack of control or a surrender of power, it is a simultaneous competition and cooperation of powers. Do we not all control each other’s worlds, as we are the constituents of one another’s worlds? Where does symbiosis end and domestication begin?

I have written elsewhere in greater length and depth that power, control and interdependence as well as more one-sided dependence are rampant among nonhumans: orchids sexually deceive their pollinators, parasitic barnacles castrate their hosts and hijack their reproductive organs, and leafcutter ants engage in quasi-agriculture. Through co-evolution and symbiosis, species are constantly shaping and influencing each other.

I thus cannot take seriously the idea that power, control and dependency are what problematize inter-organismal relationships. A Foucauldian analysis of power, normally understood in terms of inter-human relationships, seems equally applicable to ecology: exertions of power characterize all interactions and are inescapable - indeed, Stirner and Nietzsche seem to have understood beings as iterations of force and the act of being alive as consisting of exertions of power, the cessations of which is one’s death. Rather than run from power, control, and dependency, drawing nonsensical, life-denying barriers around them; we might instead acknowledge and seek to understand our power over other organisms, how we are shaping them and they us. It is not that “everything is bad, but that everything is more dangerous”, and we may thus move toward a “hyper—and pessimistic” awareness of what our power means and how it can be more life-affirming.

Other takes on ecology contrast with Kevin's moralistic one - that seeks, Platonically, to carve nature into joints, the good and the bad - and refuse this dualism. Permaculturist Bill Mollison famously argued that everything gardens, that is, every organisms exerts power to create a favorable environment for itself: the bacterium *Lactobacillus*, for one, shits lactic acid that favors itself and its conspecifics but inhibits the growth of many competing molds and bacteria—this act is power, this act is an effort “to control the world [...] and dictate its relationships.” Former Animal Liberation Front member Rod Coronado spoke in an interview conducted by Tucker of being inspired by the way predators exert a domineering presence. Nietzsche saw life as continually overcoming itself, always surging forth in new forms. When I envision the ichneumon wasp injecting its eggs and mutualistic viruses into a host, seizing control of its body, I am moved similarly to see a kind of ecstatic and violent act of life overcoming itself.

I of course agree with Tucker that there is a horrific dimension to many of our human-nonhuman relationships; certainly, he is getting at something important. To tease out what this horror is more empirically and less morally, we might paraphrase permaculturist Toby Hemenway's definition of agriculture: the process by which ecosystems are annihilated and turned into human beings and their domesticates, resulting in an economic surplus that encourages the creation of rulers to oversee it, slaves to harvest it, bureaucrats to measure it, guards to protect it, and an ideology to rationalize the whole disgusting process. And there our focus is revealed: it is not the hazy act of domestication, inveigled as it is with co-evolution and symbiosis and fraught with vague and moralistic condemnations like dependence and control; rather, it is the social and ecological relationships that emerge from certain forms of power exertion that are problematic. The recent anarchist interest in M. Kat Anderson's *Tending the Wild* and the likes of permaculturists like Hemenway, Mollison, and Fukuoka seems to be a healthy recognition of the fact that high levels of human-nonhuman co-creation, control, coevolution, and interdependence are not only inescapable but also not necessarily undesirable, as they need not engender the massive biotic denuding, exploitation, and alienation that characterize civilization.

The Elusive and Sacred Wilderness

“When we learn to open ourselves to wildness [...] the organic anarchy of our beings will flow.”

“That spirit is what connects an individual to the [...] wildness around them.”

“wildness that flows between living beings”

- Kevin Tucker, *For Wildness And Anarchy*

“Constantly regard the universe as one living being, having one substance and one soul [...] and how all things act with one movement; and how all things are the cooperating causes of all things that exist”

- Marcus Aurelius, Stoic Emperor of Rome

As a foil to domestication, Tucker frequently evokes “wildness”, which exhibits the same slippery qualities of seeming to define decidedly different things. With possible self-transparency and hesitation, Tucker often deploys the word with a vanguard and rearguard of qualifiers and negative descriptions. Nevertheless, the positive descriptions or gestures shift freely between vastly different ontological realms. As above with domestication, I briefly explore a few here:

- Sometimes, wildness seems to refer to a feral, unsocialized state or act: “we fear the wildness we are born into [...] such a savage, primal state”.
- Though Tucker expresses an allergy to “new age oneness”, he nonetheless also seems to be positing some kind of universalizing force or essential connective substance as when he refers to “that spirit is what connects an individual to the [...] wildness around them.” and “wildness that flows between living beings” - at times, it is even composed of divisible units, “pieces of wildness”.
- And though Tucker agrees with me that “There is no ‘Nature’, alone and isolated outside of our grasp”, he does not shy away at times from describing wildness as some elusive, essential substance of the world, perhaps independent of any given being as when there is “a war against looming wildness”, one fought against “the state of wildness”, being lost as “there isn’t enough wildness left [...] wildness is running thin”.

Wildness, then is anything from a propositional attitude to a quintessence of life that is definitively out there, capable of being tapped into or destroyed. I have had occasion on Free Radical Radio to point out that, at his most metaphysically adventurous, Tucker sounds like nothing quite so much as the Classical Stoics, quoted in the epigram, who believed in, among many other things, living well by aligning oneself with Nature. I have noted in those same episodes how Nietzsche so effectively ridiculed this notion:

“You desire to LIVE ‘according to Nature’? [which is] boundlessly extravagant, boundlessly indifferent, without purpose or consideration, without pity or justice, at once fruitful and barren and uncertain [...] how COULD you live in accordance with such indifference? [...] Is not living valuing, preferring, being unjust, being limited, endeavouring to be different? [...] In reality, however, it is quite otherwise with you: while you pretend to read with rapture the canon of your law in Nature [...] In your pride you wish to dictate your morals and ideals to Nature, to Nature herself, and to incorporate them therein [...].”

The idea of living according to some abstracted idea of life, biology, or Nature—be it Stoicism, biocentrism (Tucker’s other preferred term), universal love, or wildness—places one in a peculiar ethical paradox. One wants not to be anthropocentric or in line with The Culture, opposed as these are to Nature, and so one attempts to give oneself over to the way of Life or the Universe. But Life is not actually a coherent, consistent entity that always strives toward the Good, in spite of Tucker’s assertion that Nature plays the part of protagonist: though at times its acts are “unpredictable and chaotic”, we can count on its consistency as “The only thing they will do for sure is catalyze the life cycles of all living things.”

In contrast to Tucker’s Platonic portrayal of it, the biosphere is a complex of biota and abiota that are not only often beautiful, rich, stable, and fertile; but also often indifferently destructive and contradictory. Cyanobacteria, the first photosynthetic organism, may have wiped out most life on Earth 2.3 billion years ago by filling the world with atmospheric oxygen, then toxic to most organisms, and went on to create a 300 million year ice age during which even the ocean surface may have been slush. Paleontologist Peter Ward, noting that several similarly apocalyptic events have happened, has put forth the Medea Hypothesis, suggesting that multicellular life is

essentially self-destructive and therefore periodically annihilates itself. When philosophers talk about aligning themselves with Nature or Life, they pretend that cyanobacterial nigh-omnicide does not exist; they focus instead on the interconnectedness of trees and mycorrhizal fungi.

The effort to cease being anthropocentric, then, ends up merely recapitulating anthropocentrism by picking and choosing the aspects of the nonhuman world that humans want to emulate. And why should we be afraid of this evaluation, as Nietzsche said, for is the act of living not one of moment-to-moment evaluation? APs, like all Platonists, seem to fear that a lack of objective, transcendental value would entail either a total devaluation of the world or else a complete arbitrariness about what has value — if we do not enshrine Nature, wildness, Life, or something as the Good, and especially if we show that Nature et al. sometimes do pointless and destructive things, then it follows for them, that there would be no good reason we should not just continue to monotonously and immiseratingly denude the biosphere. But this conclusion does not necessarily follow.

The cyanobacterial annihilation of most life was one articulation of life's possibilities, just as the present civilized annihilation of much of the organic is another — as a unique, evaluating being, I am fully prepared to say, unhesitatingly, that I prefer certain assemblages to others. Such an act could be called anthropocentric in its refusal to defer to some imagined, unified will or objective value of biocentrism or Nature; but I would call it simply a unique, entirely perspectival and personal evaluation, as it defers to neither an imagined totality of nature nor to any variation of humanism.

The Persistence of Manichaeism

“the primal war: the refusal and resistance to domestication wherever and whenever it has imposed itself on life and the world.”

- Kevin Tucker, “Agents of Change: Primal War and the Collapse of Global Civilization”

Both wildness and domestication, then, seem to be vague predicates referring more or less ambiguously to Platonic Forms. Domestication gestures at a certain social and ecological relationship, but suggests that an exertion of power is the primary problem. Wildness refers to some will of or essential rightness of Nature. Domestication and wildness, then, refer primarily to moral categories, diametrically opposed, and AP insistence on using them has the function of framing the world as a cosmic battlefield between essentially opposed forces.

In this way, Tucker has not departed categorically from classical anarchists, in that he frames the struggle of anarchism in a Manichaean schema that sees wildness, nature, and humanity in a moral-cosmological struggle with domestication, civilization, and the capitalist state. It is replete with a Rapture event, the Collapse, that replaces Revolution; and a resentment aimed at “the domesticators”, who are our nouveaux-bourgeoisie. Tucker, in spite of significantly different particulars, is thus in the basic logic of his thinking in alignment with Bakunin, who understood anarchism as the struggle of natural authority against artificial authority, the former not being oppressive because its laws “are not extrinsic in relation to us, they are inherent in us, they constitute our nature, our whole being physically, intellectually and morally.”

We are thus left with a decidedly submissive logic predicated on an externalized value, defined both in submission to an abstract Platonic authority, nature or wildness, as well as through

resentiment toward the domesticators and civilization; we have the same self-diminution with respect to Good and Evil. This leaves one with the same deference to reification that has characterized all of civilization, precipitated its creation, and crippled the majority of critical theories waged against it.

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