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Book Review

Henk Manschot, **Nietzsche and the Earth. Biography, Ecology, Politics**. Bloomsbury, 2021, 200 pp.

Pablo Muruzabal Lamberti[1]

"Die Erde[…] hat eine Haut; und diese Haut hat Krankheiten. Eine dieser Krankheiten heisst zum Beispiel 'Mensch.' [The earth(…) has a skin; and this skin has diseases. One of these diseases for example is called 'human being.']" (Z II "Von grossen Ereignissen") As Prof. em. Henk Manschot notes in his book *Nietzsche and the Earth. Biography, Ecology, Politics*, there is reason to suspect that Nietzsche was already aware of the fact that there was something wrong in the relationship between human beings and the earth, well before climate scientists warned of the potential dangers ahead.

Nietzsche and the Earth is a slightly modified translation of Manschot's 2016 book *Blijf de aarde trouw. Pleidooi voor een nietzscheaanse terrasofie* ('Remain faithful to the earth. Plea for a Nietzschean terrasophy'). The first part of the Dutch title is in reference to Zarathustra's appeal to a crowd of bystanders in Z I "Zarathustra's Prologue" §3; the subtitle introduces the term terrasophy, which I discuss below. According to Manschot, the appeal to remain faithful to the earth summarises Nietzsche's entire philosophical life project, which, he argues, consists of a threefold mission. Firstly, Nietzsche is interested in pursuing a way of life that brings him in closer contact to nature. Secondly, he wants to develop a philosophy in which the earth, not mankind, takes centre stage. Finally, Nietzsche sees it as his task to become increasingly critical towards modern culture and humanistic values, which catapulted mankind to the focus of interest in all domains of life.

Manschot's argument is as follows: from the Enlightenment onwards, humanity exchanged the cosmos for the autonomous individual, which in turn "freed" itself from the cosmos as an existential guide (71–74). For ancient schools of thought, by contrast, the firmament of the sun, the moon and the stars presented an eternal, unchanging and completed order, of which life on earth was only a part. Both Epicureanism and Stoicism teach their practitioners to consider the interlinked cosmos as a guide through which to live one's life. Living philosophically was living in line with Nature.

Nietzsche never ceases to seek guidance from antiquity, especially from the great poets and tragedians, though he doesn't fully affirm any one in particular. For example, although he was attracted to Stoicism and firmly believed in the need to harden oneself in relation to one's desires and needs – an attitude which would fit well into the Stoic approach to life – he took a different cosmological perspective as his starting point. According to

[1] Pablo Muruzabal Lamberti, Department of Philosophy, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands.
E-mail: pablolamberti@protonmail.com

Manschot, Nietzsche's cosmology – fragmentary though it may be – starts out rather from personal experiences and a wide variety of affects such as admiration, anger, suffering, melancholy, and joy. Consequently, Manschot refers to it as an "experiential cosmology" (36). In addition, Nietzsche diverges from the ancient representation of the cosmos as an unchanging order, and instead adopts a view of the cosmos as a dynamic and entropic chaos – "a perpetual jumble of forces and movements, which clash and battle" (94). And yet he clearly does not go along with the modern idea of the earth as a soulless, celestial body, but rediscovers the earth as a kind of living entity, from which his "free spirit" is born (xiii). He longs for a certain ascetic practice, modelled after ancient philosophical exercises, with the aim of strengthening the one who practises it, "eine Gymnastik des Willens; eine Entbehrung und eingelegte Fastenzeiten jeder Art, auch im Geistigsten [a gymnastics of the will; an austerity and time set aside for fasts of every kind, even in the most intellectual matters]." (NF-1887, 9[93] — Herbst 1887)

The ancient idea that Nature is a principle that can guide us in our daily lives, always remains a key aspect of Nietzsche's thinking. However, the meaning of Nature for Nietzsche becomes more particularly focused on the earth, instead of the ancient universal Logos or the gods. Manschot's thesis hinges on the view that *Also sprach Zarathustra* is the work in which Nietzsche expresses his cosmology and vision of the earth – not in aphorisms, but in a kind of cryptic play. Although it is very challenging to summarise this work, or to distil a definitive meaning from it, according to Manschot, Nietzsche is advocating a way of life that brings one in closer contact to nature. In tandem with his attempt to persuade others to this way of life, Nietzsche endeavours to develop a new philosophy which places the earth, not human beings, at the centre.

His own biography speaks to this: after leaving Basel, Nietzsche set himself up to live more as a participant of life in nature, surrounded by plants, animals, mountains, and the sea. These developments in his personal life simultaneously imply a fierce critique of modern culture, which places "man as the measure of all things" at the centre of life. Anthropocentric cosmology had become hostile towards nature and made human beings lock themselves in concrete cities, detaching themselves from their natural origins (36). In Nietzsche's words, modern culture "degenerates" human beings (Z I "Von der schenkenden Tugend") and "rationalises" them in the worst sense of the word. Both qualifications are extensions of each other: the more modern we human beings become, the further distanced we are from nature (xi). "Degeneration" is the English translation of "Entartung," which has unfortunate Nazi connotations today, but literally it comes from the German *aus der Art schlagen*, which Manschot interprets as "disconnected," in this case from the earth. By using this term, Nietzsche seems to want to convey that if we modern human beings want to "ground" ourselves again, we should reassess the meaning of a "grounded" human life (xii).

Based on Nietzschean cosmology and related principles found in *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, Manschot proposes a "terrasophy" for our time. What follows is a brief description of its contents.

Nietzschean terrasophy

According to Manschot, Nietzsche's cosmic view "opens up a perspective that lifts human beings above their personal and local boundaries and connects them with planetary life as

a whole" (35). This explains why he refers to Nietzsche's cosmology as "terrasophy," which represents a particular kind of knowledge of the earth in which science and practical wisdom come together. As Manschot himself writes: "I define terrasophy as a new direction in philosophical cosmology that makes the relationship between humans and the earth the central concern of our twenty-first-century understanding of ourselves" (75).

It is clear that "terra" refers to the earth, but "sophia" has always been a more ambiguous term in the history of philosophy. As philosopher and historian Pierre Hadot elucidates, the terms "philosophos" and "philosophein" imply the pursuit of wisdom. However, in Homeric Greece, there was no definitive philosophical understanding of wisdom. When attempting to define "sophia" in modern times, scholars often vacillate between the concepts of knowledge and wisdom. Was a wise person someone well-versed in diverse experiences, well-travelled, and broadly educated? Or was wisdom more about navigating life skilfully and finding happiness? According to Hadot, these two ideas are not mutually exclusive: ultimately, genuine wisdom encompasses practical knowledge, and true practical knowledge involves understanding how to act for the greater good.[2] Although Manschot does not provide much additional elaboration, the "'-sophy' in terrasophy points to a new type of earthly wisdom in which knowledge and intelligence, life skills and scientific insights are interconnected" (76). This brings us to the aspect of terrasophy that is concerned with transcending the self, or self-overcoming.

According to Sue Prideaux, Nietzsche embarked on a life under the banner of self-overcoming (*Selbstüberwindung*) at the early age of eleven. It would become a major theme in many of his works, but especially in *Also sprach Zarathustra*, where the teaching of the *Übermensch* is that humans are beings that need to overcome themselves. Zarathustra calls upon modern humans to view themselves as "transitional beings," or rather as "a bridge and not a purpose [*eine Brücke und kein Zweck*]" (Z I "Zarathustra's Prologue" §4). The bridge is meant to provide a crossing to the so-called *Übermensch*, which is a "becoming": "a continual, ongoing process, which mobilizes and draws upon all human capacities and desires but never makes them immutable" (130).

As his focus on experiences demonstrates, which includes "the need" to suffer, Nietzsche is looking for a certain kind of "spirituality" that takes the body as its guide. It is instructive to understand here the distinction Nietzsche draws between *Körper* and *Leib*, and what bearing this distinction has on the concept of the self which one is trying to transcend in the terrasophic endeavour. Body, in the sense of *Körper*, is understood as the kind of detached object one would typically encounter in medical or biological contexts. *Leib*, on the other hand, refers to the lived (i.e., experienced) and living body which serves as a certain "guide" (*Leitfaden des Leibes*). This idea of guidance becomes crucial in relation to the possibilities for interacting with nature, which is symbolised by food (diet) and gardening. In the process of digestion and gardening, the body "incorporates" nature through nutrition and an outdoor lifestyle.

When Nietzsche writes about food and diet, it can be understood as both edible and mental nutrition. The latter refers to all sorts of knowledge, ideas, impressions, and affects, often fired at us, or imposed upon our bodies. Having to process large amounts of information prevents one from "digesting" things well, which in turn weakens one's ability

[2] Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, translated by Michael Chase. Belknap Press, 2004, pp. 17–18.

to digest things in general. Nietzsche refers to a "metabolic process" and advises his readers to become more conscious of what they "ingest," both materially and mentally. What we should base our diets on are vital criteria such as strength (what makes me stronger?) and health (what increases my vitality?). Nietzsche turns to animals for guidance on these points, such as the cattle and their art of rumination (Z I "Von den Lehrstühlen der Tugend"). We only need to look at cows chewing and re-chewing their food to realise what we need to do ourselves: slow down and take the time to ruminate and digest what we consume (27).

The activity of gardening is another closely related way of "incorporating" and fostering an active relationship with the earth. Although it requires hard physical labour, the garden is a place in which humans can cultivate their connection with the earth through the production of food. Not only can a garden serve to produce food for the body, but Nietzsche also draws attention to the fact that the body is built out of the same materials as the earth itself (27–30). Much like gardens, humans can also be seen as plots of uncultivated land that need to be worked to produce fruits.

The notion of terrasophy thus calls for activities aimed at reconnecting with the earth, with the planet as orientation. In Manschot's words:

> The planetary orientation [Nietzsche] fosters is both pragmatic and aesthetic, both hedonistic and spiritual. It does not amount to a blueprint for what we need to do, rather it evokes the image of a beckoning perspective that opens up new horizons as people venture further along this road to the future. (72).

The first step to reconnect with the earth is for modern human beings to reground by slowing down and seeking direct experiences with nature. Central to Nietzsche's quest for self-overcoming is the need to experiment, and as the act of experimentation suggests, there is not one way of doing it correctly. In addition, experimenting presupposes an attitude of not (yet) knowing and, therefore, of wanting to discover. This attitude could explain why he referred to his own interaction with the earth as an experiment (36–38). It is also in line with Nietzsche's recommendation and ambition not to indulge in any kind of moralising. He does not present a new morality but encourages us to develop a new sensitivity through sensory and aesthetic experiences. In the case of the latter, as any Nietzsche reader will know, these refer primarily to music-induced ones. Manschot focuses more on sense experiences in general. He argues that one of the "skills" needed for this sensitivity to develop is to listen attentively. By listening carefully, with the patience of a ruminating cow, we can explore something in nature that affects us, determine "how it touches us, and […] repose in nature without an aim or direction, merging with the landscape, developing empathy for animals and plants, becoming sensitive to sun, wind, rain and silence, and their effects on our behaviour and moods." (82)

Reconnecting with the earth

In his book, Manschot embarks on a compelling journey into Nietzsche's philosophy, focusing in particular on the latter's ecological and existential perspectives. In so doing, he skilfully elucidates Nietzsche's call to reconnect with the earth and challenges the anthropocentric worldview that has dominated modern culture. By delving into Nietzsche's writings, particularly *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Manschot uncovers a profound

reverence for nature and a critique of humanistic values that place mankind at the centre of existence. He adeptly navigates Nietzsche's call for self-overcoming, advocating for a transformative engagement with nature through sensory experiences, embodied experimentation, and a deepened sensitivity to the planet's needs. Taken together, these aspects make Nietzsche's work, and his implicit cosmology of interconnectedness in particular, more relevant than ever for addressing the ecological crisis philosophically.

And yet, while Manschot's exploration is enlightening and thought-provoking, some aspects remain open for further exploration. His discussion of indigenous perspectives and bio-regionalism, for example, could benefit from clearer articulation of their relevance to contemporary urbanised life. Additionally, while he raises urgent questions about the relationship between local communities and the global ecosystem, a more concrete roadmap for addressing these challenges could enhance the practical implications of his insights. Elsewhere, he advocates for "a powerful bottom-up movement that makes local communities, their interests and initiatives, an influential part of the process"' (122), but by resorting to such terminology as 'above' and 'below,' he falls prey to a kind of dualism that appears dissonant in a philosophy of interconnectedness, which one would expect to transcend all hierarchies.

On the whole, *Nietzsche and the Earth* is an illuminating, important and brave attempt at framing and interpreting Nietzsche's arguably most enigmatic work. It offers a rich and nuanced interpretation of Nietzsche's ecological perspectives, inviting readers to reconsider their relationship to the planet and to envision a more harmonious coexistence with nature. This and more renders it a valuable contribution to both Nietzsche scholarship and ecological discourse, making it deserving of further attention and engagement.