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Writing a Different Ending to the “World War” Pitting Humanity Against the Biosphere in Michel Serres and Jacques Derrida’s Philosophy

Keith Moser

Abstract

Although Michel Serres and Jacques Derrida espouse radically different approaches to engaging in philosophical inquiry overall, they both describe our present rapport with the rest of the cosmos as a “world war” that must be ended at all costs. Serres and Derrida posit that the story of this perpetual state of warfare against the Web of Life has deep historical, philosophical, and ideological roots. Specifically, they problematize two of the most pervasive and lethal social constructs, the Genesis myth and the *bêtemachine* theory, which continue to breed complacency and ignorance.

I. Introduction

This study explores the *ecocidal* ramifications of the ecological “world war” pitting humanity against the remainder of the biosphere outlined by Michel Serres and Jacques Derrida. Clearly influenced by Serres’s environmentally engaged essays beginning with *Le Contrat Naturel*, Derrida decries the “war without mercy” epitomizing our current unsustainable relationship with the universe in his late philosophy (*The Animal* 102). In *The Animal That Therefore I Am* and *The Beast and the Sovereign* series, Derrida reinforces Serres’s bold philosophical claim that our mistreatment of the planet is emblematic of an overt declaration of war against all other life forms. Despite the fact that several passages of Derrida’s posthumous thought are reminiscent of Serres’s concept of the *guerre mondiale*, this subject has been relatively ignored in academic circles.¹ This present investigation attempts to begin to fill this research gap and to encourage other scholars from numerous disciplines to contribute to the conversation. As this exploration will demonstrate, both thinkers issue a stern reminder that our collective fate is inextricably linked to all of the other imperiled threads in the Web of Life upon which our continued existence depends in the Anthropocene.

II. The Ideological Origins of the Ecological “World War”

In an effort to understand how we have arrived at this crucial tipping point from an ecological standpoint, Serres (re-)appropriates the common expression “world war.” In the opening pages of *La Guerre mondiale* in which he refines many of the theories that he has been developing for decades, Serres laments the human toll of the two deadly conflicts that scarred much of Western civilization during the first half of the twentieth century. As an ardent pacifist with a “deep aversion to violence” who “refused to carry the sword when he has inducted into the *Académie Française*,” Serres denounces all of the crimes against humanity that transpired during this tumultuous time period (Moser 66). Nonetheless, he provocatively theorizes that the environmental disaster is the most myopic and lethal type of systematic violence that has ever been unleashed against any living entity. Given that there is only one planet that meets all of the necessary conditions for sustaining life as we know it, Serres posits that our conflictual relationship with the hand that feeds is the ultimate form of aggression that could lead to the demise of all sentient and non-sentient beings on this planet. As Stéphanie Posthumus notes, Serres’s theory of a world war is a reflection of “the urgency of the planetary situation”² (88). In simple terms, Serres’s reworking of the linguistic label of a “world war” is a theoretical framework for comprehending the historical, ideological, and philosophical roots of our current unsustainable rapport with the remainder of the cosmos in addition to envisioning a more viable roadmap for the future.

According to Serres, the environmental predicament in which we find ourselves on a global scale has been taking shape for centuries in Western civilization. In this vein, the unconventional philosopher who mingles philosophy, literature, theology, history, and science reexamines the pervasive kinds of anthropocentric discourses that would eventually place us on a collision course with oblivion once our technology caught up to our imagination. Starting with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, Serres explains that our “unprecedented power” in the shape of modern inventions would enable human society to exercise a considerable amount of control over the rest of the biosphere (Paulson 121). Our propensity for innovation would allow our species to impose its will upon “our old enemy” on a catastrophic level that our ancestors could have never even imagined possible (Walls 114). As Serres reveals, “Here we are faced with a problem caused by a civilization that has now been in place for more than a century [...] Monopolized by science and by all the technologies associated with property rights, human reason conquered external nature in a combat that has lasted since prehistory, but that sped up relentlessly with the industrial revolution” (*The Natural Contract* 30, 35). In these passages, Serres maintains that we declared war against all other-than-human

entities eons ago in the Western world. In comparison to the rudimentary technological advances of our predecessors, contemporary *Homo sapiens* now possess the capability of exterminating our adversary (i.e., the earth) entirely. It is in this sense in which Serres's palpable anxiety concerning "The war against the World³ that must be suspended at all costs" should be understood (Serres, *La Guerre mondiale* 120). As a philosopher of science, Serres is astutely aware of the types of ingenuity that have vastly improved the quality of life for millions of people around the planet including the birth of modern medicine. However, he also realizes that in a brave new world dominated by human technology powerful enough to eradicate the whole biosphere, each new invention or discovery must be accompanied by ethical reflection designed to keep our impulses in check.

Owing to a lack of critical thought that serves to combat the deleterious effects of our unfettered aggression, Serres concludes that the war we have been waging against the earth for countless millennia has reached epic proportions, thereby jeopardizing our own existence. In his operational definition of what he explicitly refers to as a world war that concretizes this wrenching plea for dialogue and concrete action, Serres asserts, "This is a book about a concrete utopia, if I dare to say it. It defines [...] this unavoidable protection against the violence that I fittingly call the world war, the only one worthy of this name, the one that humanity has been waging against the World since our emergence, which we have to take care of legally and fairly [...] I am handing over here the instruction manual for the evacuation station" (*La Guerre mondiale* 21-22). Unless we are able to "master our mastery," or exercise some semblance of restraint through moral contemplation, Serres contends that we will continue to write an apocalyptic ending to the human saga (Rameaux 199). On an interconnected and interdependent planet, Serres insists that it is imperative for global society to (re-)discover "a modality [of life] that will not turn deadly" (Yates 205, my insertion). Even if the "parasitic chain" cannot be avoided altogether in a universe that requires all organisms to take something from the earth for the sake of sustenance, this unfortunate reality does not mean that we have to devastate the only host that is suitable for human life (Yates 205). In this regard, numerous researchers such as Julian Yates, Steve Brown, Brian O'Keeffe, and Roy Boyne highlight the evident connection between Serres's multifaceted metaphor of a parasite and his concept of the *guerre mondiale*. From a biological angle, "[P]arasitism is just a fact of symbiotic-life," but Serres persuasively argues that irresponsible parasitism equates to a mortal struggle with a predictable outcome (O'Keeffe 10).

In an attempt to foster the sort of meaningful dialogue that he deems necessary for ending the havoc that we continually wreak upon the cosmos, Serres identifies two forms of faulty homocentric logic that

lie at the heart of our unending aggression. For Serres, the ubiquitous influence of the Genesis myth and the notion of Cartesian mastery are partially to blame for our unwillingness and inability to protect the biosphere from our rapacious appetite for consumption and desire to control every parcel of matter around us. In spite of the fact that a large body of nearly irrefutable evidence from the hard sciences has discredited these interrelated explanations of the world and our place in it, Serres explains that these delusions of anthropocentric ontological grandeur continue to linger. Taking aim at these unfounded chimeras that undergird the ethical basis, or the moral justification, for the permanent state of warfare that we obstinately pursue, Serres bemoans, "But no, we don't fight directly against the World, since we have inherited it as a divine right from him: Genesis says this. Plants, animals, land, the sea and the ocean, this is what God the creator has given to Man, master and possessor of the World, a passive landscape that nourishes our sense of competition. Descartes promotes the same mastery, no longer as a divine right, but as something quasi-natural" (*La Guerre Mondiale* 127). In this scathing critique of the mainstream interpretation of the Genesis myth, Serres deconstructs the idea that we have been given "the biblical imperative to control everything that lives" (Estok 206). Furthermore, he affirms that the Cartesian ideal of mastery predicated upon wishful thinking as opposed to rigorous philosophical inquiry has solidified this mentality that has created a sharp ontological gap between *Homo sapiens* and other creatures.

In his highly influential *The Arrogance of Humanism*, the biologist and environmental ethicist David Ehrenfeld challenges the standard reading of the Genesis narrative in the Judeo-Christian tradition that suggests humans have been preordained by God himself to play the role of master of the universe. Arguing that the Judeo-Christian worldview is more nuanced than it initially appears, Ehrenfeld underscores the importance of the "Noah principle" as a lesson in environmental stewardship (207). Regardless, the notion that we have been bequeathed the divine right to "exercise dominion" over the cosmos still permeates Western society (Thweatt-Bates 122). In the eyes of many people, the Christian cosmogonic myth supports the view that the appropriate relationship between our species and the other organisms that call this planet home is one of mastery and subjugation. In *Le Mal propre*, Serres once again associates the Genesis myth with the widespread belief that "we are the masters and the possessors" (29). Condemning this attitude as a "grandiose" fantasy, Serres demonstrates that "humans think they are the rulers" because of this supposed divine mandate (*La Guerre mondiale* 137). Allegedly conceived in God's image and placed in a position of authority over the remainder of creation, humans are in essence above reproach. This kind

of magical thinking, which unequivocally implies that we can exploit the earth however we wish without suffering any adverse consequences, has removed all other life forms from the realm of "moral consideration" as inferior beings (Preece 46). Serres exposes the deplorable acts of ecological violence that this sort of flawed logic justifies in an age of tremendous uncertainty in which the visible effects of climate change are becoming harder to ignore. As the controversial French philosopher Michel Onfray outlines in the chapter of *Cosmos* entitled "Epiphany of the Judeo-Christian Animal," remnants of Christianity like the Genesis myth that are rarely examined critically still persist in our imagination, even in secular societies (235-250).⁴ If we are to find a way to overcome the anthropogenic crisis, concealed and distorted by the intertwined principles of human sovereignty and Cartesian mastery, Serres maintains that these illusions must be uprooted at their source.

For those who are familiar with Serres's diverse *œuvre*, harsh criticisms of Descartes are nothing new. In *L'Interférence*, Serres declares that the concept of a human-centered universe destined to be ruled by mankind only makes sense from the pen of a philosopher who writes "by closing his eyes and plugging his ears" (149). In his analysis of Serres's *Eloge de la philosophie en langue française*, Pierre Saint-Amand reveals that much of the unconventional philosopher's approach "consists of calling Descartes to task and shaking the foundations of his method" (101). Saint-Amand's assessment of Serres's many objections to the basic tenets of Cartesian thought sheds light on the philosopher's rejection of the ideal of Cartesian mastery. Given his lack of "respect for things," Serres hypothesizes that some of Descartes's theories run counter to any form of meticulous observation or empirical evidence (Saint-Amand 108). According to Serres, anthropocentric, existential hierarchies only make sense to someone who is utterly disconnected from the indiscriminate ecological forces that tossed everything into existence starting with a big bang including *Homo sapiens*.

In his reflections about the historical, philosophical, and ideological origins of the environmental crisis in *The Animal That Therefore I am* and *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida also undermines different kinds of homocentric discourses that lend support to the doctrine of human exceptionalism. In fact, both thinkers reach strikingly similar conclusions regarding the gravity of the current situation and how various types of bad thinking would eventually forge an unsustainable path fraught with peril. First of all, Derrida concurs with Serres's appraisal that human society has now entered into a perpetual state of warfare with the biosphere. Not only have we declared a "war without mercy" against the cosmos, but Derrida also agrees with the world's eminent scientists that this conflict is a "war to the death" (*The Animal* 102, 26). For Derrida, there is no truce

in sight for the “infinite violence” that we continually inflict upon the planet based upon our present trajectory and absence of “engagement with human exceptionalism” (Derrida, *The Animal* 89; Kirby 62).

Nevertheless, David Wood importantly underscores one major difference between Derrida and other leading French environmental thinkers, including Serres. Whereas Serres posits that the world war has led to the dawn of the Anthropocene (*Temps des crises* 36), inspired by the findings of researchers like Paul Crutzen, Eugene Stoermer, Mark Williams, John Burks, Will Steffen, and Jan Zalasiewicz, Derrida rejects the term Anthropocene on philosophical grounds (Wood 320). In the first seminar of *The Animal That Therefore I am*, Derrida explains that the word Anthropocene is problematic, because it suggests a definitive schism as opposed to an ongoing process. As Derrida muses, “The figure of a turning point implies a rupture, or an instantaneous mutation [...] I shall therefore not be speaking of a historical turning point to name a transformation in progress” (*The Animal* 24). Despite his misgivings about the term itself, Derrida does not attempt to conceal his disquieting ecological fears related to our conflictual relationship with the rest of the biotic community of life. Compelling the reader to take the discoveries of modern science seriously, regardless of the terminology that one prefers, Derrida proclaims, “However one names or interprets this alteration, no one could deny that it has been accelerating, intensifying, no longer knowing where it is going, for about two centuries, at an incalculable rate and level” (*The Animal* 24-25). To Derrida’s many allies and detractors, the bold nature of this statement is somewhat surprising from a philosopher who often strives for “an avoidance of affirmation” (Spitzer 80). Even for a thinker who has described his own philosophy as “a constant source of [...] re-problematicization” that deconstructs many of our preconceived notions, encouraging us to take nothing for granted, evidence for human-induced climate change is simply overwhelming (Ben-Naftali 2000). Additionally, this declaration illustrates that Derrida agrees with Serres’s position that the *guerre mondiale* began in earnest with the technological advances of the Industrial Revolution.

Moreover, Derrida discusses the hegemonic role of the “awful tale of Genesis” in the perpetuation of the current *ecocidal* conflict at great length in his posthumous essays (*The Animal* 18). Several researchers like Andrea Hurst, Linda Williams, Matthew Congdon, Michael Naas, and Louise Westling highlight Derrida’s conviction that the Genesis myth represents a fundamental cornerstone of the anthropocentric ideology validating the “boundless wrong that we inflict on animals” in the face of dire warnings from scientists (Derrida, *The Animal* 89). In this vein, Linda Williams observes that Derrida traces the roots of “this contemporary trauma” to “the

twenty-first-century prevalence of the legacy of Genesis" (23, 24). Even if Western civilization is theoretically much more secular than it used to be, Derrida demonstrates that "the Genesis account of human/animal relations" still reigns supreme in our collective imagination that bears the heavy stamp of Judeo-Christian values (Westling 199). Certain vestiges of the dominant Christian ecological perspective have yet to be scrutinized for their deep anthropocentric bias, including the Genesis myth. Instead of "[l]eaving this violence unchallenged," Derrida confronts the negative impact of this influence directly (Baumeister 66).

In reference to "the story of man's dominion over animals in Genesis" that he tries to undercut with a heavy dose of scientific realism (Naas 237), Derrida contends, "If one believes what is called the *first* narrative [...] it is in the so-called first version that the husbandman [...] immediately receives the order to subject the animals to him. In order to obey he is required to mark his ascendancy, his domination over them, indeed, his power to tame them" (*The Animal* 15). Similar to Serres, Derrida questions the notion that God has given our species the inalienable right to exercise complete control over the universe. This deep-seated idea has created a "sharp-edged hierarchical opposition" between "human" and "animal" that remains largely uncontested (Hurst 123). Given that this "binary discourse of species that puts man in the center and at the top" is "one of the harshest when it comes to ethical thinking," Derrida attempts to counterpoint the limitations of this kind of oppositional thinking with a more nuanced discussion of the similarities and differences between humans and other animals (Kleinhaus 2, 1-2).

Interrogating the homogeneous, catchall category of the "animal" that the Genesis myth is in part responsible for creating and propagating, Derrida rather playfully tries to "call Noah to help ensure that no one gets left off the ark" (*The Animal* 34). In place of the human-animal binary that Judeo-Christianity helped to weave into the cultural fabric of Western civilization, Derrida proposes the neologism *animot*. As Dominique Garnier outlines, Derrida transcends "the seduction of cheap verbal play" with this comical word that should be taken seriously (27). The term *animot* is more than an invented word; it is a biocentric outlook on life that could be described as a counter-hegemonic narrative. In response to the Genesis myth that divides "humans" and "animals" in a simplistic, reductionistic fashion, Derrida offers this alternative view that takes into account the extreme biodiversity that is indicative of life on this planet:

I would like to have the plural animals heard in the singular. There is no Animal in the general singular, separated from man by a single, indivisible limit. We have to envisage the existence of 'living creatures,' whose plurality cannot be assembled within the single figure of an

animality that is simply opposed to humanity [...] The confusion of all nonhuman living creatures within the general and common category of the animal is not simply a sin against rigorous thinking, vigilance, lucidity, or empirical authority, it is also a crime. (*The Animal* 47-48)

The “crime” to which Derrida refers in this passage is not merely a philosophical transgression, but it is also a literal act of aggression that must be condemned. Derrida takes advantage of a neologism to uncover the violence that is inherent within the human-animal dichotomy. This form of binary logic has resulted in an *us versus them* mentality that has relegated all other organisms to the status of a homogenous enemy that must be vanquished by human society. The pervasiveness of the Genesis myth is a serious problem, because it creates a Manichean struggle opposing “humans” who believe that God is on their side against other-than-human entities that are pivotal to their very survival. Furthermore, this imaginary ontological rift is an ideological obstacle standing in the way of the type of ethical reflection that is necessary for ending the world war before it is too late.

In the lecture “But as for me, who am I?” from *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida theorizes that Cartesian philosophy strengthened this purely conceptual schism between “humans” and “animals.” Specifically, Derrida dissects Descartes’s “notorious bêtemachine theory” that places only *Homo sapiens* into the category of exceptional machines who also possess the capacity for rational thought (Batra 156). The Cartesian idea “that nonhuman animals are like machines; do not have thoughts, reason or souls like human animals; and thus, cannot be categorized with animals, and, as a result do not experience pain or certain other feelings” is one of the main reasons why there is such little resistance to the *guerre mondiale* (Voelpel 1). In a passage that recalls Serres’s aforementioned link between Judeo-Christian ideology and Cartesian dualities, Derrida avers, “I think that Cartesianism belongs, beneath its mechanistic indifference, to the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition of a war against the animal, of a sacrificial war that is as old as Genesis [...] No ethical or sentimental nobility must be allowed to conceal from us that violence” (*The Animal* 101). Derrida’s deconstructive method for rethinking the quotidian acts of cosmic aggression that define contemporary human societies’ endeavors to strip away anthropocentric abstractions lying at the core of the separation between “humans” and “animals” that allow this “sacrificial war” to continue unabated. The supposition that all other species are robotic automatons that operate according to “the fixity of a coding” explains why many people are indifferent to images of other-than-human suffering that now inundate our plethora of screens (Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign* 116). The precarious ontological status of all other beings, owing to this

"reduction to the 'animal machine,'" has left other organisms to occupy a sort of moral no man's land (Bruns 416). In the prevailing anthropocentric dialogic space in Western civilization, there is little reason for anyone to feel compassion for the other-than-human victims of our *guerre mondiale*.⁵ The hegemonic discourse about other-than-human automatons through the propagation of the Genesis myth reinforced by Cartesian binaries is so thoroughly ingrained in us from birth that it is easy to forget that the classification itself of the "animal" is a homocentric, social construct. Both Serres and Derrida maintain that the war will forever rage until this artificial concept is replaced with a more scientifically accurate understanding of our connection to the so-called "world of things."

III. The Conception of a Peace Treaty with the Imperiled Earth

In an effort to establish more harmonious relations with the imperiled earth, Serres and Derrida promote a decentered form of ecological humanism that extends to all of the creatures that inhabit the biosphere. Confessing that one of the evident aims of his philosophical project is to develop a "type of de-centered thought"⁶ that re-centers dominant environmental discourse, Serres declares, "For a while now, philosophy has needed to come down from the sky to the earth [...] The time has now arrived in which philosophy has to descend from the subject to the world of things, from the Cartesian ego into flowers and wax, wax and flames, that are engaging in a strange dialogue with each other" (*L'Interférence* 144, 97). Incessantly reminding the reader of the physical laws that bind us to the earth from whence we came, Serres tries to heal our fractured sense of ecological self by reconnecting us to our cosmic roots from which we have become displaced. Numerous scholars such as Maria Assad, Ian Tucker, and David Webb note that Serresian (post-)humanism often takes the shape of philosophical materialism. Focusing on "the primary materiality of the human condition," Serres presents a "purely materialistic point of view" that forces us to reconsider our planetary *Dasein* (Tucker 150; Assad 219).

Articulating his position that the whole universe is comprised of a single substance (i.e., matter) that temporarily adopts a given modality before it resurfaces in another form, Serres argues, "In spite of how high he has risen in the saddle, every Matterhorn⁷ knows all too well that he is made up of the same dust as a molehill. We all come from the same earth, from the same mother, from the same universal matter" (*L'Incandescent* 203). In *La Traduction*, Serres also indicates that there are no "exceptions" to rudimentary material realities that must be acknowledged as a starting point for ecological contemplation. In a section of the essay in which he delivers a proverbial *coup de grâce* to the outdated notions of human

ontological sovereignty and Cartesian mastery, Serres affirms, “Whether we like it or not, it’s matter that gives the orders: the best government in the world can only give what it has. It sometimes happens that it cannot contain water pockets. And, the rainy season can come late” (*La Traduction* 257). The basic lessons in ecology that Serres highlights including the laws of ecology and the laws of thermodynamics are a catalyst for philosophical and ethical reflection. The doctrine of philosophical materialism is a powerful reminder that if the earth dies, we perish along with it. If we damage the greater self-regulating, autopoietic entity to which everything belongs too badly through our unconstrained aggression, the giver of all life will be unable to sustain the cycles upon which our existence depends.

In *Le Contrat naturel* and subsequent essays, Serres hypothesizes that the only viable path forward is to conceive and implement a peace treaty with the earth in order to escape “collective death” (*The Natural Contract* 39). Given the severity of the world war that we are waging, Serres insists that Rousseau’s social contract is no longer sufficient. As William Paulson explains, “To the social contract must be added a natural contract: a renewed foundation, both ethical and theoretical, for collective life” (119). Unless we can “make a new pact with our old enemy” that transcends geopolitical borders, Serres envisions an impending eco-apocalypse that is on the horizon (Walls 114). Demonstrating that the stakes of embracing a former adversary have never been greater, Serres asserts, “Suddenly, the natural Contract⁸ will operate like a peace treaty which will once again end this second war, the only one that we can say is truly a world war [...] Peace with the world compels us to make peace with men. We will only be saved from the apocalypse if and when humans from all countries unite across borders in order to embrace the world as our only partner” (*Le Mal propre* 84-85). Only by “ending the ‘objective war’ against nature” can we save ourselves and the planet in the process (Krell 4).

In their analyses of all of the nuances of Serres’s theory of the natural contract, Jonathan Krell and Stéphanie Posthumus probe the legal implications of this concept. Krell and Posthumus reveal that it is not by chance that Serres chooses the word “contract” to describe this new rapport with the biosphere. In both French and English, the term “contract” refers to a legally binding agreement between two parties. The standard usage of this terminology and a close reading of *Le Contrat naturel* support Krell’s conclusion that “Legal dignity, then, is what Serres aspires to confer upon nature” (4). However, Posthumus points out that the sort of legal standing for which Serres seems to advocate poses many pragmatic challenges in terms of implementation. As Posthumus underscores, “How can nature that has neither hands nor arms sign a legal agreement with humanity?” (91). Even if we accept the premise that the realization of a peace treaty

between *Homo sapiens* and the remainder of the cosmos is the only way to avert the ecological calamity upon us, Posthumus's question identifies a roadblock that must be addressed.

In Serres's defense, the philosopher further problematizes his concept of a natural contract in his later essays such as *Rameaux* (2004), *Temps des crises* (2009), and *Biogée* (2010). Although he still steadfastly maintains that a contractual agreement representing a different way of being and living in the world is no longer an option, he encourages the reader to reflect upon the question of who has the right to speak for other-than-human organisms. Proposing one solution to this dilemma, Serres opines, "who is going to talk in the name of Biogea? Those who know her and have dedicated their lives to her [...] I am therefore asking the question again: who will speak for Biogea? Scientists. I am not asking them to take over [...] but that they speak in the name of things, for things themselves, in the name of WAFEL" (*Temps des crises* 58-59). In a recent conversation with the journalist Michel Polacco, Serres reiterates his call for the creation of a new international organization called WAFEL: "I am imagining [...] a new international institution that I call WAFEL which will truly take care of water, air, fire, the earth, and the living. This is missing badly" (Polacco 19). According to Serres, a team of the world's most eminent scientists who have dedicated much of their lives to exploring the effects of climate change are the people who are the most qualified to speak on behalf of the biosphere. Nonetheless, Serres recognizes that "potential conflicts of interest" must be minimized to the greatest extent possible, if we are to endow anyone with the moral and legal authority to represent the universe (Moser 99). In spite of their limitations, the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Climate Agreement (COP 21) embody the WAFEL ideal espoused by Serres. Given that Syria and Nicaragua recently signed the *accord de Paris*, the United States is now the only country that does not recognize the existence of the *guerre mondiale* vividly portrayed by Serres (Ballesteros n.p.). Evidently, many scientists are concerned that this latest contractual pledge is not enough to curtail the systemic violence that modern human civilization entails, but the COP 21 reflects the conviction that a peace treaty is indeed our best chance for survival.

Even though Derrida's decentered humanism is also quite critical of mainstream philosophical "discourse that is apparently so resistant to materialism, to vitalism, to empiricism," he leaves many of the legal issues raised by Serres and other biocentric thinkers unexamined (Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign* 270). In *The Animal That Therefore I am* seminars, Derrida essentially apologizes to his students for not having ample time to ponder the judicial rights of other-than-human animals. As Derrida admits, "For want of time I cannot tackle here the immense question of

whether we can recognize the rights of subjects that are exempted from or incapable of duties. It is generally thought not, except in some exceptional cases. Such a possibility is not excluded in the history of the law, but it is a thorny problem" (*The Animal* 88). In his brief historical overview of the legal status of other life forms in Western society, the legal scholar and founder of the Nonhuman Rights Project, Steven M. Wise, also explains that the idea of other-than-human personhood is a contentious subject in judicial circles. Noting how difficult it usually is to convince most judges that other organisms have the same legal standing as *Homo sapiens*, Wise wonders, "What arguments might persuade a common law appellate court that a nonhuman animal plaintiff is a legal person, that is, a being with the capacity for possessing any legal right?" (1281). Wise has spent much of his career advocating for an extension of legal personhood to other creatures, especially other primates, yet even he realizes that this issue is challenging on multiple levels.⁹

In addition to wanting to direct his attention to other related ethical problems within the limited amount of time allotted for his environmentally engaged lectures, Derrida seems to be skeptical that this debate could ever be winnable for animal rights activists. In this context, Derrida discusses the "minority, weak, marginal voices, little assured of their discourse, of their right to discourse and of the enactment of their discourse within the law, as a declaration of rights-in order to protest, in order to appeal [...] to what is still presented in such a problematic way as animal rights" (*The Animal* 26-27). Since Derrida validates the legitimacy of the theory proposed by many animal rights theorists that the horrors of industrial farming are comparable to a type of genocide, Paola Cavalieri is initially befuddled at the "conservatism in his conclusions" (108). Based on the passages above and other sections of *The Animal That Therefore I am* and *The Beast and the Sovereign*, however, it appears that Derrida is unsure if such a radical paradigm shift on an institutional level is realistic at the present moment. Hence, Derrida mostly ignores the possibility of ending the world war through legal channels in favor of the promotion of a post-human ethics of compassion that breaks down moral barriers between *Homo sapiens* and other species.

For Derrida, a peace treaty with the cosmos involves the gesture of granting other beings access to the ethical community as "fellows" with whom we share this planet. Due to the ontological divide associated with the human-animal binary, Derrida contends that we are able to justify the most heinous types of aggression against what he terms the cosmic "wholly other" (*The Animal* 11). As Derrida theorizes, "The worst, the cruelest, the most human violence has been unleashed against living beings, beasts [...] who precisely were not accorded the dignity of being fellows"

(*The Beast and the Sovereign* vol. 1 108). Reinforcing his position that many people believe that anything is permissible in their relations with entities that find themselves outside of moral considerability, Derrida proclaims, "I am surreptitiously extending the similar, the fellow, to all forms of life, to all species. All animals qua living beings are my fellows" (*The Beast and the Sovereign* vol. 1 109). Derrida explains that ethical reflection related to forms of anthropogenic violence that characterize modern life can only occur when the moral agency of other-than-human animals is recognized.

This "cross-species sympathy [...] (that) invites us to a wider and deeper engagement with the world" highlights the "fundamental and inescapable truth" of other-than-human suffering (Nash 58-65, my insertion; White 107). Appealing to scientific logic, Derrida painstakingly deconstructs the erroneous notion that other species are incapable of experiencing physical or cerebral anguish at all. Derrida illustrates that the question of suffering is essential to mobilizing the kind of resistance that could result in a less conflictual rapport with the biosphere. Many individuals do not feel any sense of compassion for the other-than-human casualties of the *guerre mondiale* that endlessly ravages the earth, despite the "ever-growing consensus within the scientific community that we have entered into a sixth mass extinction," because they perceive other organisms to be mindless automatons (Wagler 78). As Rod Preece affirms, "If the animal is truly a living machine [...] on what basis may we respect the animal in a manner different from the bizarre idea of respecting a machine in and for itself? How may we treat the animal 'machine' as an end in itself, as an object of moral consideration, when we treat a machine—a watch, say, or a locomotive—entirely as a means to an end" (46). Exposing the ideological underpinnings of the underdeveloped concept of "human" and "animal" based upon mechanistic, dichotomous thinking that prevents us from mourning the other-than-human victims of the world war, Derrida reveals,

Here we have a character, a man, and this man is a man who having learned, fictitiously, to manufacture impeccable automatons, would conclude [...] by means of a judgement, that the animals are [...] for their part automatons, automatons of flesh and blood. And why is this so? Because they *resemble* automatons that *resemble* humans. And this conclusion, let us never forget, follows from a judgement [...] it is an inferred judgement [...] This judgement is at the same time a judicative proposition and a verdict, a sentence [*arrêt*] concerning where the animal stops, the limit at which it comes to a halt, must stop or be arrested. (*The Animal* 83)

In this assessment of the fantastical category of the animal-machine, Derrida suggests that our "cognitive structures" including the human-animal split must first evolve in order for our legal system to transform from

an ecolinguistic perspective (Stibbe 6). Derrida implies that the general public may not yet be ready for a natural contract, but it soon will be in the coming years. In this sense, the urgent task of contemporary thinkers is to prepare the philosophical groundwork for rethinking the antiquated mental and judicial structures that we have inherited from the world of yesterday before the anthropogenic crisis.

As Nathan Snaza outlines in his essay "The Place of Animals in Politics: The Difficulty of Derrida's 'Political' Legacy," Derrida seems to promulgate a methodical approach for bringing our outmoded philosophical and legal paradigms back into line with contemporary scientific erudition that will require time and patience. Summarizing Derrida's stance related to the recognition of other-than-human subjects as legal persons, Snaza asserts, "For Derrida it is too simple to seek the insertion of animals into an already-existing framework of legal 'rights'" (182). In an interview, Derrida explains, "However much sympathy I may have for a declaration of animal rights that would protect them from human violence, I don't think this is a good solution. Rather, I believe in a slow and progressive approach. It is necessary to do what one can, today, to limit this violence, and it is in this sense that deconstruction is engaged" (qtd. in Snaza 181-182). In these epitextual comments, Derrida argues that deconstruction has an important role to play in the (re-)establishment of a peace treaty between *Homo sapiens* and the rest of the cosmos that will preserve the sanctity of "the wholly other, more other than any other, which they call an animal" (*The Animal* 11). Nevertheless, Derrida insists that the first step to a more sustainable future is to take "this grand mechanistic [...] tradition back to the drawing board" along with its aforementioned "judicative proposition[s]" (*The Animal* 76, 83). The sweeping legal changes that would pave the way for other-than-human personhood will only come to fruition when we begin to conceive the universe and our place in it in a more biocentric light. Derrida maintains that the ideological battle against anthropocentric binary logic that is grounded in artificial concepts like "human" and "animal" that are divorced from concrete reality must first be won by (re-)reproblematizing the essence of everything including what constitutes the human condition. By the philosopher's own admission, this sort of intellectual and social transformation does not happen overnight. Given that many scientists have already sounded the alarm, it is debatable whether or not we have enough time for this process to unfold before the *guerre mondiale* annihilates too many branches from the severely compromised tree of life.

IV. Conclusion

Serres and Derrida's philosophy demonstrates that human civilization is currently waging the most destructive and total form of war possible. Both thinkers theorize that the story of this perpetual state of warfare against the Web of Life has deep historical, philosophical, and ideological roots. Specifically, Serres and Derrida utilize a deconstructive method for calling into question two of the most pervasive and lethal social constructs, the Genesis myth and the *bêtemachine* theory, which continue to breed complacency and ignorance. Although Serres and Derrida compel us to end this ongoing conflict with a sense of urgency, Derrida is more reticent to propose legal solutions than Serres. Regardless, they both adamantly affirm that global society must find a way to end this unfettered, cosmic aggression once and for all. Without an ethics of compassion for the other-than-human population that translates into a more ecocentric lifestyle, this conflict could one day prove to be our last. If we keep taking solace in our anthropocentric abstractions and pyrrhic victories that have enabled us to modify much of the planet through technological advances, Serres and Derrida remind us that the costliest defeat is what awaits all of the human and other-than-human casualties of our unending hubris.

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Notes

1. With the notable exception of essays written by Roy Boyne, Ming-Qua Ma, and Thom Van Dooren, the common threads and fundamental differences between Serres and Derrida have yet to be probed in a systematic fashion. Moreover, none of these analyses directly addresses Derrida's reflections related to the ecological world war waged by *Homo sapiens* against the cosmos.
2. All translations my own unless otherwise indicated.
3. Serres often capitalizes this word in numerous texts.
4. Whereas Michel Onfray hardly misses an opportunity to voice his derision for Christianity, as evidenced in the aptly named title selected for the English translation of his most famous essay, *Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*, Serres appears to respect the contributions of several Christian thinkers including St. Francis of Assisi. For instance, Serres even refers to St. Francis as "*mon seul maître vénéré*" in *Musique* (58).
5. This point will be addressed soon in a more systematic fashion.
6. In the original, Serres employs the expression "*type de pensée dé-centrée*."
7. This word is capitalized in the original.
8. This word is capitalized in the original.
9. Two important exceptions include a New Zealand ruling from 2012 that recognized the Whanganui River as a legal person (Lui) in addition to a decision from the Manhattan Supreme Court Justice Barbara Jaffe who concluded in April 2015 that two chimpanzees were people (Schneider).

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