On *Planet Earth* and Being in Nature

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David Attenborough reserves a certain mournful tone for narrating death in the natural world. In the *Jungles* episode of BBC's epic documentary series *Planet Earth*, we hear that voice, interspersed with the rich, crackling sound of splintering wood, as we see a massive rain forest tree collapse under its own weight after centuries of growth. Just as the tree's last branches fall out of view through the canopy, Attenborough, in his reassuringly authentic British accent, opines: "the death of a forest giant is always saddening, but it has to happen if the forest is to remain healthy."[1] After the surrounding trees spring back into place, we descend to the rain forest floor, and enter a realm whose usual gloom has been suddenly washed away by the new hole in its leafy ceiling. Here we can see, with the help of *Planet Earth's* signature time-lapse cinematography, how the flood of light that now reaches the forest floor triggers a race to the top by the unbelievable variety of plant life struggling to collect that valuable light. The narration explains how each species has its own strategy for besting its competitors. Vines climb up neighboring trees, sacrificing structural strength for rapid vertical growth. Broad-leaved pioneers such as macarangas are the clear winners at this early stage; their huge leaves provide them with enough energy to grow up to eight meters in a single year. But "the ultimate winners are the tortoises, the slow and steady hardwoods," which will continue striving for their places in the light-drenched canopy for centuries to come.[2]

The series' unmatched capacity to bring the natural world to life, as it were, has made it both the premier wildlife documentary of its day and the most enjoyable toy for twenty-first century stoned college students. Time-lapse photography and stunning footage of impossibly rare animals transport us, as viewers, into virgin territory, a territory that operates according to its own natural laws, thus far spared from human interference. While the show's inventive cinematography animates the natural world, Attenborough is able to give meaning to natural processes by articulating the concealed, organic logic that organizes life. Sped up, slowed down, zoomed in, or seen from above, *Planet Earth* explains nature's apparent randomness by casting the world's plants and animals as players in an epic struggle for survival. The planet's breathtaking beauty – along with its inhabitants' sometimes-bizarre bodies and behaviors – is the integrated result of countless relations between harsh climates, scarce resources, and living things competing to exist. But if this is the narrative of the natural world, does it accurately reflect an already existent reality? What artifacts can we find of this production of meaning about the world? Is there a difference between Nature and the natural world? And most importantly, where do we – as viewers, as humans, as people – fit into this story?

As one can see from the "*Planet Earth* Diaries" at the end of each episode, finding beautiful scenery is not enough to make a compelling wildlife series. The *Planet Earth* team struggled at each shoot to find innovative ways of animating worlds whose dynamism is not always clear on the standard time scale of human thought. As we enter the rain forest "hot house," Attenborough notes that the jungle seems "virtually lifeless"[3] despite the cacophony of insect, bird, frog, and monkey calls. In this episode, the obvious challenge is bringing the trees themselves to life. The team accomplishes this feat with breathtaking tracking shots that lift us from the darkness of the forest floor to the blazing light of the canopy. This one continuous motion not only shows the different worlds at each height but also portrays the forest environment as a living growing entity itself. Just as time-lapse cinematography

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[1] Jungles, 5:45
[2] Jungles, 9:15
[3] *Jungles* ___

shrinks an entire temperate growing season into a minute in order to show the spectacular vernal burst of life, the camera's ascent through the rain forest evokes the hardwoods' centuries-long climb to the sun.

Of course, it is easy to accuse *Planet Earth* of relying too heavily on anthropomorphism as a narrative technique. From pole to pole, Attenborough introduces us to (images of) animals whose thoughts seem strikingly logical and sometimes even emotional. But watching *Planet Earth* again, this time with unusually lucid attention to the storytelling, it seems to me that the content of what I will broadly call "anthropomorphism" does intellectual work beyond merely setting up characters and a plot. Beyond constructing beings worthy of viewers' empathy, this narrative technique presents animals and plants as creatures possessing the power of intentionality. The organization of *Planet Earth's* tightly structured world, ordered by the natural equivalent of rational self-interest, is starkly different from the overwhelming feeling one has when actually standing in the middle of a rain forest. Attenborough parses the real world's infinite complexity and glosses its fundamental randomness of organic life with the intertwined logics of the local flora and fauna. To be fair, the series never exactly portrays this purposefulness as conscious, but it is certainly an important and pervasive tendency in Attenborough's narration. Indeed, it may be this distinction between intention and consciousness that makes simple accusations of over-anthropomorphizing seem to be beside the point.

In order to understand this issue of intentionality, we should return to *Jungles* and revisit the new clearing in the rain forest. After descending from the action in the now-ruptured canopy, the camera tightens on the leaf litter, which covers the forest floor. Normally, Attenborough tells us, little of the sun's energy reaches these depths, so now "the thirst for light triggers a race for a place in the sun."[4] The leaves, which each fill about a quarter of the screen, are pushed aside by seedlings madly bursting forth from the concealed soil. Thanks to the time-lapse cinematography, the young plants grow at an astounding rate. They move so quickly, in fact, that their unfurling leaves look like the weakly gesturing limbs of a newborn until they begin to shoot upward out of the frame.

Because one of the themes of this story of the rain forest is its unbelievable diversity, Attenborough shows us several plants with different strategies for securing a scarce position to collect valuable light. The climbers are surely the most interesting competitors; the authoritative British voice assures us that their "strategy looks chaotic, but there's method in their madness."[5] Sped up, we can witness how "their growing tips circle like lassoes, searching on anchors for their spindly stems."[6] From this temporal perspective, it's true: the growing tips do not look like mindless masses of sugar whose winding heliotropic growth is controlled by auxins. Instead, they appear to be plants intentionally employing a particular growth strategy that maximizes vertical reach while minimizing energy investment. This is confirmed when Attenborough shows us the climbers' forethought: "they put coils in their tendrils so that if their support moves, they will stretch and not snap."[7]

Certainly, Attenborough's narration is well served by this tactic. Explaining the ostensible reasons for certain plants' unique growth and their comparative advantages over competitors in the jungle clearing turns this natural scene into a story with characters who win or lose depending on the viability of their natural abilities. Certainly, this is far more

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[4] *Jungles* 6:10
[5] *Jungles* 7:40
[6] *Jungles* 7:45
[7] *Jungles* 7:50

compelling for the lay viewer than an explanation of how the underlying biology. As a popular nature documentary, the *Planet Earth* team must have continually struggled with the challenge of making these stories gripping; surely the latter strategy would be quite a buzz killer for the stoned college student crowd, the series' most devoted followers. So my criticism of this narrative strategy is not (intended to be) pointless fault finding but rather an exploration of its effects.

By virtue of its task, i.e. depicting the beauty and complexity of the natural world, it is easy to lose sight of the role of storytelling in *Planet Earth*. As a product of a rigorous naturalism, it is easy to interpret the moments of action in the series as parts of plot lines already existing in the world, rather than as elements of a story told about the world. The narration seeks to fade into invisibility, leaving only Nature. But this Nature that Attenborough presents is an assemblage of characters and settings, conflicts and dénouements that work together to keep viewers enraptured. Its construction is the challenge facing any nature documentarian and the *Planet Earth* team does this more effectively than anyone before them. The series is, in equal measures, a work of art and science, a provisional distinction that converges with the deployment of intentionality as a narrative strategy. Intentionality is not part of any specimen or fossil collected in the wild. It is manifest neither in the rain forest plants said to be striving for the light nor the parasitic cortisept fungi said to work as checks to maintain balance among insect species. Instead, it is a way of making sense of the natural world by connecting organisms to one another with dramatic links of cause and effect.

In its technical use, as a central tenet of continental ontology, "intentionality" is a frustratingly elusive term. Franz Brentano, who invented the term in the late nineteenth century, positioned it as a property that necessarily connected "mental phenomena" to the their intentional objects. Later, Edmund Husserl argued that this relationship is a constitutive element of thought itself: "to have sense, or 'to intend to' something, is the fundamental characteristic of all consciousness."[8] Similarly, the father of French existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, thought of intentionality as coextensive with consciousness.[9] But since consciousness itself is not really at issue here (I don't think David Attenborough is *really* attributing strategic consciousness to the polar bear mother during the *Ice Worlds* episode), these definitions are not particularly helpful.

Instead, we should consider Martin Heidegger's efforts to theorize Being, which he identified with the fundamental entity *Dasein,* in *Being and Time,* one of the more imposing and impenetrable tomes in modern philosophy (so please, pardon my language). Eschewing the technical term "intentionality," which had already been firmly pegged to conscious thought, Heidegger works with the twin concepts of *care* and *concern* to denote the intentionality of Being. Heidegger writes that care, "as a primordial structural totality, lies 'before' every factical 'attitude' and 'situation' of *Dasein*."[10] This means that care can be

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[8] Edmund Husserl, "*The Noetic and Noematic Structure of Consciousness*" in *The Essential Husserl* ed. Donn Welton (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 1999), p. 90

[9] "Consciousness is a being such that in its being, its being is in question in so far as this being implies a being other than itself." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), p.801.

[10] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Fransisco: Harper Collins, 1962), p. 238

described as a Being's fundamental orientation towards the world. Ontologically, care is at the root of both *willing* and *wishing*; indeed, "in the phenomenon of willing, the underlying totality of care shows through."[11]

To what extent does this Heideggerian model of Being as care reflect the existence of the natural world as told by *Planet Earth*? Throughout the series, the emphasis on organisms' strategies for survival creates a sense that they possess, or at least spontaneously enact, a will to live and multiply. Obviously, this drama plays itself out differently in each biome, but the general theme of organisms as engaged in unceasing competition is relatively constant. And this message of competition is important, for Attenborough explains how mutual competition is the motor of evolution and the source of nature's astounding diversity of life. But this language, this notion of individual will and competition, is not unique to *Planet Earth*. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* displays a similar understanding of the natural world as a place where organisms are constantly striving to live:

> In looking at Nature, it is most necessary… never to forget that every single organic being around us may be said to be striving to the utmost to increase in numbers; that each lives by a struggle at some period of its life; that heavy destruction inevitably falls either on the young or the old, during each generation or at recurrent intervals. Lighten any check, mitigate the destruction ever so little, and the number of the species will almost instantaneously increase to any amount.[12]

Throughout Darwin's text there is a continual oscillation between his theories of Nature and scenes of survival from the natural world itself. He certainly wasn't the first naturalist who tried to bring the vastness of the colonial world back home to England already arrayed in helpful categories, but *On the Origin of Species* betrays Darwin's acute awareness of the importance of storytelling to his work. His project was one of sense *making,* not one of sense *finding*. His claim is not, "animals are striving to increase in numbers" but that everything "around us *may be said* to be striving to the utmost." The text does not read like a dispassionate treatise on the way the world *is*. Instead, Darwin is suggesting that we *may* construct a narrative to explain a world in which we stand at the center. Without undoing Copernicus' labor, which removed man from his privileged position at the center of the universe, *On the Origin of Species* presents a story of the world as we grasp it. Whether or not this acknowledgement of his explanations as a possibility was a scientist's hedge against accusations of blasphemy is not important; what does matter is the attention Darwin gives to the problem of narrative, a difficulty seldom considered in scientific writing.

Again, I doubt that "anthropomorphism" sufficiently accounts for the way in which organisms are assigned a willing disposition. Neither *Planet Earth* nor Darwin asserts or even implies that this will to live and multiply is contained in some kind of consciousness or a particularly mindful relation to the world. Instead, might we say that these classics of British naturalism consider these diverse survival strategies to be spontaneous orientations towards the world? For both texts, is not this intrinsic will to live positioned *before* any particular circumstance, environment, or competition? Can we not, then, assign this continuous striving for existence to be a fundamental aspect of Being in this version of the natural

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[11] Ibid. p. 239

[12] Charles Darwin, *On the Origins of Species*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000), p. 66.

world? That is: could an active struggle for existence be at the root of this naturalist conception of life itself?

Indeed, this fundamental will to survive is important to Heidegger as well. He argues that "the *urge* 'to live'" is something fundamental to *Dasein*; it "is something 'towards' which one is impelled, and it brings the impulsion along with it of its own accord. It is 'towards this at any price'."[13] Now, we can understand (or at least attempt to comprehend) how *Dasein* is not merely a person or an animal but a fundamental unit of Being. While it is true that each animal or plant could be said to "prefer" life over death, this is not how we see the logic of natural existence. When an enterprising fox is able to steal some goslings from the edge of a humongous colony of migratory birds Attenborough does not bemoan the apparent loss of life as he does when lions kill a solitary elephant. This is precisely the regular "price" that the flock must pay to survive and multiply. We might even say that it is not even a loss of life, since the story of the geese takes the entire flock as the unit of life or Being with a common *urge* to live. And since this *urge* is "rooted ontologically in care," we might also say that this flock has a common intentionality, a common Being.

Returning to Darwin might be helpful here. Recall that he is speaking about neither plants nor animals in the quotation above; his concern is not even generalized to organisms. Instead, Darwin is describing the struggle for existence that dominates the life of every "organic being." I think we should take this distinction seriously. There is something in these narratives of the natural world that abstracts struggle from one defined by physical distinctions to a more philosophical level, which plays with conventional understandings of life. I read Darwin's "organic being" as a unit of life with a size that varies depending on climate, terrain, and energy availability from a solitary arctic wolf to a thousands-strong herd of wildebeest. This unit is not given in the world itself but is, instead, an artifact of a particular understanding of it; the "organic being" is a figure born from Darwin's attempts to tell a story about the world.

This fundamental *urge* to live should neither be forgotten nor left in theoretical isolation, for it "seeks to crowd out other possibilities" in the constant struggle for its own existence.[14] Whether tracking the life of an individual tree or a flock of millions of geese, the natural world is a domain of unceasing competition in "ever-increasing circles of complexity."[15] This competition is the integrated total of countless Beings' *urges* and intentions, and in this naturalist conception of the world it is a ubiquitous and powerful force. Attenborough does not mince words: "in the jungle there is competition for everything."[16]

Just as the rain forest clearing's apparent lawlessness becomes comprehensible when sped up, we can recognize organisms' continuous evolutions in the balanced state of nature. In this narrative, the illusion of static balance is ensured by natural competition, which couples together organisms in a complex web of coevolving relations. We might say that natural competition is both the motor of evolution ("generations of choosy female [birds of

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[13] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 240.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, p. 73.
[16] *Jungles* 35:05

paradise] have driven the evolution of males' remarkable displays"[17]) and simultaneously its regulator (when insect populations grow, "parasites stop any one group of animal getting the upper hand"[18]). This power is presented as nearly omnipotent in Nature. These texts credit it with producing both the natural world's unmatched beauty and organic systems whose complexity and efficiency would be the envy of the best engineer.

For both Darwin and Attenborough, the dynamic of competition serves to balance the natural world and provide space for all of its Beings and their competing intentions. Though these struggles between Beings are unceasing, "in the long-run the forces are so nicely balanced, that the face of nature remains uniform for long periods of time."[19] But in fact, it is merely the face of nature that remains unchanged. In the rain forest, which we have seen has both high productivity and unceasing conflict, "competition for resources ensures that no one species dominates the jungle."[20] Reading further, however, we see that the apparent stasis of Darwin's "state of nature" is actually a dynamic equilibrium, shaped and maintained by the competition between Beings' struggles to survive. It is not that everything stays the same in the unspoiled natural landscape; it only appears this way on our familiar time scale.

For a narrative to be meaningful, it helps to have a traceable set of reasons for what happens. In *Planet Earth*, the recurring narrative of organic balance is powered, or explained, by intentionality. Attenborough's presentation of Nature's dynamic equilibrium as the spontaneous result of organic beings who compete according to their non-conscious self interests recalls the logic of traditional economics, which credits the invisible hand of the market for this balancing act. The identity of these processes, these mechanisms for maintaining the world as it is and optimizing participants' experiences, offers an opportunity to see more deeply into each and understand how widely relied upon this notion of self-regulation is.

The idea that both free markets and unspoiled ecosystems are able to remain in productive balance seems to be the result of a belief that competition has the innate ability to order complex systems. International deregulation efforts, which have left "natural market forces" in charge of the global economy, speak to the strength of people's faith in the idea of self-regulation. But this invisible hand is more than the basis for a particular economic theory. Just like the dialectic – Hegel's idealist, self-generating process of reason through contradiction – this mechanism of competitive self-regulation is a deep philosophical belief in the way the world progresses. Insofar as naturalists, led by Darwin and narrated by *Planet Earth*, have used this idea as an overarching explanation for how Nature functions, it seems just as organic as the rain forest trees struggling for sunlight.

This ideological contact between the ecological and the economic might allow us to finally situate ourselves, humanity, in *Planet Earth's* storytelling. We occupy a complicated position in the narrative. It is striking that Attenborough rarely mentions humanity and we only see people when the cameras descend through labyrinthine caves deep into the planet. Yet at the end of several episodes, Attenborough warns viewers of these environments' precarious positions. The appeal is most dire at the end of *Jungles:* "Rain forest diversity has come at a cost. It has made them the most finely balanced ecosystems in the world, only too easily upset and destroyed by that other great ape, the chimpanzee's closest relative,

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[17] *Jungles* 4:00
[18] *Jungles* 29:45
[19] Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, p. 73.
[20] *Jungles* 47:30

ourselves."[21] Only a few minutes after viewers have seen their own humanity in the mirror of a marauding band of territory-hungry chimpanzees, this language is striking. It positions humanity not as an alien force superimposed on an independently existing natural world but as a part of the same precariously balance system. The argument is so affective because it refuses to plead. Instead it suggests that we reconsider the boundaries we draw between systems we hope to keep in balance. Rather than seeing economics and ecology as two fundamentally separate, permanently walled-off disciplines this attitude takes them as parallel projects working on different problems. Instead of defining the jungle as the wild and unthinkable state of nature, this naturalist approach seeks to fuse man's understanding of himself with the complexities of Nature in order to ensure that *Planet Earth* never becomes a stunning monument to irrecoverable beauty.

[21] *Jungles* 48:00