

# Nature Post-Nature

A paper in *New Formations* 26 (Spring 2008) 51-64.

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My goal here is to outline a plausible and progressive way to think about nature which takes seriously both non-essentialism, latterly postmodern, and ecocentrism. The result of doing so I call ecopluralism, and I hope it might help to bring about a more sympathetic and informed interest in political ecology on the part of intellectuals generally as well as an intellectually renewed green discourse. *A fortiori*, that would be one which resists both the temptation of an alliance with postmodernism's reactionary opponents and a facile appropriation by a postmodernism according to which nature can be de-/re-constructed, invented and/or produced at will. Some implications of this approach also have significant potential for rethinking both nature and culture. (Given the extent to which those two concepts are, in 'Western' discourse, integrally interdependent, one cannot seriously be rethought without affecting the other.)

## NON/ESSENTIALISM<sup>1</sup>...

Using a broad but not wholly inaccurate brush, much recent discourse<sup>2</sup> falls into two opposing, or apparently opposing, camps. One could be termed *realist* (ontologically speaking) or *objectivist* (epistemologically), and its principal contemporary form is scientific. The other we could call *relativist* or *constructionist* respectively, and its most recent renaissance has obviously been under the banners of postmodernism and post-structuralism. I will not take up precious space here trying to define these positions, which it can be assumed will be broadly familiar to most people reading this. And I will exploit the common conflation of ontology and epistemology in practice (the relationship between 'what is' and 'how we know what is' being very like chicken and egg) to use the latter two terms – objectivist and constructionist – to denote these two discourses in both respects.

This opposition, however, is rightly complicated by noting that even allowing for the existence of subtle and vulgar versions of each, most if not all objectivists and constructionists share some significant common ground, insofar as their dominant mode is essentialist and (what is the same thing) monist, pursuing and propagating a presumptively exhaustive explanation of all significant phenomena. Insofar as this is the case, the fact of that *explanans* being either natural or cultural is of secondary importance.

It seems that both discourses can and frequently do involve what I shall call *monist essentialism*, and the fact that we could also characterise that mode as a grand narrative is a warning not simply to identify nonessentialism with constructionism, even deconstructionism. (The travesty of the latter as a 'method', which can be taught as such, comes to mind.) In *Killing Time*, Paul Feyerabend reflected on the point, when consistently held, that 'there are many ways of thinking and living: 'A pluralism of this kind was once called irrational and expelled from decent society. In the

meantime it has become the fashion. This vogue did not make pluralism better or more humane; it made it trivial and, in the hands of its more learned defenders, scholastic' (p. 164).

The inconsistency of constructionists actually practising essentialism is, of course, relatively glaring, and I am not suggesting a perfect symmetry. Before exploring that difference, however, let us look more closely at what they tend to share.

The chief provenance of monist essentialism is, of course, Christian monotheism, including a large measure of Greek philosophical universalism, whose reincarnation as modern scientific metaphysics substituted material 'laws' for spiritual but left the basic *modus operandi* untouched. It is true that both versions postulate an ontological split between subjective spirit or mind and objective matter – exactly the poles around which constructionists and objectivists respectively have rallied – but these function as 'two vying "monisms"',<sup>3</sup> with both sides promising to eliminate the other pole in its own programme: either the final 'explanation', without any residue, of consciousness by brain physiology (itself putatively reducible to physics via chemistry) or the ultimate deconstruction of physics as 'purely' ideological, i.e., socially and politically determined. In so pursuing such programmes, both sides tacitly conspire to support monist essentialism, with its covertly imperialistic universalising, as a meta-strategy. So, as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro says, the contrast properly drawn is between 'monism and pluralism: multiplicity, not duality, is the paired complement of ... monism'.<sup>4</sup>

The same insight emerges from Viveiros de Castro's apt point about the provenance of the ubiquitous production metaphor. Whether nature is produced (constructed, invented) by culture or culture is produced by nature via 'evolutionary psychology', the indispensable metaphor in both cases inherits its air of authority from that of a sole Creator God. (The appropriate contrasting metaphor, explicated by Viveiros de Castro in his brilliant recent paper, is exchange.)

The same universalising impulse sustained by dualism is evident in the way both naturalists and culturalists assume that a nature/culture distinction is a given, despite the fact that members of hunter-gatherer societies do not subscribe to it and even reject it. As Tim Ingold points out, such accounts present the latter's view as involving a particular social and cultural construction of nature, thereby universalizing the very dualism that is also plainly recognizable as peculiarly 'Western'. He also remarks that on pain of inconsistency, constructionist essentialists must regard not only the concept of nature as cultural but the concept of culture too; but that leads to a disabling infinite regress.<sup>5</sup>

Following these leads, then, we can draw a relatively strong contrast between the mode I have been describing and one which is pluralist and nonessentialist. Names for the latter vary. The author of some of its best accounts, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, retains 'relativism', despite the polemical and populist caricatures that that term has so long attracted; Bruno Latour, equally cogently, argues for 'relationism', and Viveiros de Castro prefers 'perspectivism'.<sup>6</sup> In the context of the contrast I am drawing, however, I shall stand by *relational pluralism*. In any case, this discourse entails an intellectual practice, with ethical and political dimensions, which rejects the goal of universal true knowledge, in the realist sense of 'true', and accepts

contingency – but not thereby arbitrariness or mere subjectiveness – including its own. Being plural, it is relational, and vice versa; and being both, it is perspectival.

In addition to those already cited, it has had able modern exponents, even allowing for their significant differences, from William James, Max Weber and Isaiah Berlin to Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. There is no need to quote these authors here, but even such a highly selective list brings us back to a point made earlier: that my account is not of two perfectly symmetrically vying parties. For the discursive resources for relational pluralism are clearly to be found in, shall we say, intelligent constructionism in a way and to an extent they are not available within objectivism, scientific or otherwise.

### ... AND NATURE

However, objectivists and many constructionists also share something else which from a ‘green’ point of view is unfortunate and even pathological, namely a worldview that locates all agency and value in humanity alone, leaving the rest of nature – whether as the product of ultimately nonanimate items and forces (‘natural’) *or* of cultural and political constraints and imperatives (‘social’) – without agency, subjectivity or independent value or integrity. As such, of course, the natural world can be appropriated for our purposes without any qualms – a kind of *terra nullia* writ large, conveniently undercutting any charges of biological imperialism. (I say ‘our’ meaning human, but in practice, of course, such appropriation is usually even narrower, in the interests of some few humans.)

As an aside, there is a great deal that could be said in this context (but no space to say it here) about animals; basically, for every neo-Cartesian evolutionary theorist whose starting-point is animals as instinctual automata one can find a social constructionist such as Keith Tester, for whom animals’ ‘utter meaninglessness’ as such is disguised by talk of their moral standing.<sup>7</sup> (I am aware that, as Mick Smith points out, ‘these extreme “culturalist” and “naturalist” positions belie the real complexity of the issue since most theoretical paradigms incorporate elements of both.’ But that is the point: such belying is systemic, and it systematically obscures the issue. It is also unrealistic to conclude that “All sides have to recognize something of value in each other’s analyses.”<sup>8</sup> That, of course, is just what good monists will refuse to do.)

Now it can hardly be doubted that the modernist rationalisation of the natural world, its consequent disenchantment, and its subsequent commodification play an integral role in driving the ongoing global ecocrisis. And in this process, the objectivist ideologues of techno-science – together with massed ranks of utilitarian ‘managers’, many armed with Environmental Impact Assessments and cost-benefit analyses – are a far bigger and more intractable part of the problem than any number of constructionist university departments of literature, cultural studies and so on. Nonetheless, members of the latter might want to ask themselves whether they want to add a little intellectual polish to the former programme, effectively acting, in Gary Snyder’s bitter words, as ‘the high end of the “wise use” movement’?<sup>9</sup> At the very least, their modernist view of nature – no less among postmodernists in other respects, such as Richard Rorty – effectively disables any ability to effectively oppose its current exploitation and destruction by those whose values and policies they otherwise abhor.

To make matters worse, those who do recognise and value nature for its own sake, grasping this point, have frequently reacted by returning the favour. Synder, for example, tries to retreat to naïve Johnsonian realism (the stone *is* real; it hurts when I kick it). Even more pathetically, others have tried to make common cause with the very techno-scientists who are leading the programme to domesticate the ‘useful’ wild and destroy the remainder.<sup>10</sup>

The term for the view I have just described is ‘anthropocentrism’. The contrasting concept is ‘ecocentrism’, which locates value and/or agency within nature as such, including (but not limited to) humanity: what David Abram aptly calls a ‘more-than-human world’.<sup>11</sup>

The fundamental point here is that a genuine and consistent relational pluralism does not restrict the network of relations and perspectives that constitute all entities to human ones alone, because to do so would be arbitrary at best. *It is thus necessarily* (that is, within the parameters of this discourse) *ecocentric*. Conversely, recognising the same unbounded and therefore ultimately unmasterable field of more-than-human relations and perspectives, *ecocentrism is ‘necessarily’ pluralist*.

## ANTHROPOCENTRISM

The question of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism is central to this area, so it merits closer consideration. Let us examine the former first. Tim Hayward has put forward a case for replacing this term with ‘human chauvinism’ (specifying human/nonhuman differences in ways that inherently favour the former) and ‘speciesism’ (arbitrary discrimination on the basis of species, drawn on a parallel with racism or sexism).<sup>12</sup>

But Hayward seems to have made the common mistake of inferring that values must be *anthropocentric* – i.e., that what is valued is exclusively human – from the fact that when humans are the valuers (which, not so incidentally, is far from necessarily or always the case), those values are indeed necessarily *anthropogenic*. David Wiggins puts it well: ‘In thinking about ecological things we ought not to pretend (and we do not need to pretend) that we have any alternative, as human beings, but to bring to bear upon ecological questions the human scale of values.... [But] The human scale of values is by no means exclusively a scale of human values.’<sup>13</sup> And since human values can encompass both human and nonhuman ones, with no opprobrium necessarily attaching to the former, ‘anthropocentrism’ can refer solely to a damaging concern for human values to the exclusion of all others.

As for a term to refer to legitimate human interests, I would reluctantly contradict David Ehrenfeld’s seminal work *The Arrogance of Humanism* and suggest, precisely, ‘humanism’. It is true that the word and the philosophy have become a hubristic denial of any limits to human self-aggrandisement, and the worship of technology in its pursuit. To some extent this tendency was evident from the beginning in the Promethean attitude, with instrumental magic as the technology, of Pico della Mirandola. But humanism also has strong roots in Montaigne, and later Voltaire, Bentham and Mill, for whom it implied almost the opposite of its modern meaning: the need to be humane, including but extending beyond humanity, in order to be fully human. Nor did humanism entail a denial of human limits and fallibility; again, quite

the opposite. It is at least possible that in the context of ecocentrism, this original attitude could be recovered.

Regarding Hayward's other criticisms, problems can and do arise from a human concern for humans alone; and 'anthropocentrism' does not necessarily apply, in its usage, to all humans. Its point is to make it possible to criticise whoever cares *only* about other humans. As for making common cause with defenders of social justice, it must be faced that there is in any case no *a priori* coincidence of interests. Not the most sacrosanct social value – democratisation, or community empowerment, or human rights – necessarily entails green rectitude, nor vice versa, and social justice and environmental or (as I would prefer) ecological justice are not precisely the same. It is often the case that they coincide, of course, but any argument that they *necessarily* do so is simply rationalist wishful thinking. (The work of Laclau and Mouffe, already cited, is very much to the point here.) Consequently, any such alliances must be actively created, when and where there is genuine common cause. (And when there isn't, the charge of misanthropy will be the first to fly.)

In short, Andrew Dobson is correct when he points out that Hayward's suggestions leave untouched the fact 'human beings remain the yardstick'. As he adds, 'None of this is to say that speciesism and human chauvinism should not be opposed. They most certainly should, but opposing them will involve working with the concept of anthropocentrism rather than without it.'<sup>14</sup>

## **ECOCENTRISM**

The nature which ecocentric epistemology, axiology and ethics take as central includes, without being limited to, human beings – both in the sense that human beings are ecologically situated 'in' (and literally cannot live without) nature, and in the sense that nature is equally 'in' them. However, it is certainly possible, within that nature, to distinguish between human and nonhuman interest, values, etc. So on the one hand, ecocentrism is not necessarily or fundamentally misanthropic; but on the other, it can certainly contribute to outcomes which are contrary to the interests, as they perceive them, of some human beings in some situations. Indeed, it *must* be able to do so in order to make any difference. Equally, ecocentrism does not restrict 'the wild' to wilderness by excluding humans; but again, it might do so in certain cases (depending, for example, on those humans' activities).

This ecocentrism is pluralist, relational and open-ended. As such, it should be differentiated from its Deep Ecological version – or rather, the variant of Deep Ecology put forward by Arne Naess and George Sessions called 'Ecosophy T' – which tends to hypostatise a unitary Self that includes the human and nonhuman in a way that subsumes both in an unarticulated unity. (See my *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2006, for a more detailed discussion.) Like other essentialising monisms, Ecosophy T depends upon a dualism which in this case often amounts to an inversion of anthropocentrism as 'against' biocentrism, and which incidentally facilitates misanthropy. But it should be noted that this is not true of all versions of Deep Ecology: for example, the Left Bio group (see <http://home.fox.nstn.ca/~greenweb/>).

As Val Plumwood has written, some Deep Ecologists have suggested ‘that once one has realised that one is indistinguishable from the rainforest, its needs would become one’s own. But there is nothing to guarantee this – one could equally well take one’s own needs for its.’<sup>15</sup> And indeed, where there is a strong cultural tradition of not distinguishing between the social and natural worlds, as with Confucianism, putative human self-improvement often ‘cannot’ conflict with what is regarded as good for nature. In any case, as Richard Sylvan remarked, there is good reason to be wary of the idea of self-realisation, with its profoundly anthropocentric pedigree, ‘linked to the modern celebration of the individual human, freed from service to higher demands, and also typically from ecological restraints.’<sup>16</sup>

Ecopluralism, in contrast, suggests a world about which conclusions, connections and alliances in pursuit of resolutions – both substantive and strategic – will always be more-or-less unstable, partial and provisional. Philosophy and activism alike involve, as Ingold puts it (p.42), a view *in* the world, not *of* the world. So although trying to take a view of the world is not ruled out, the result will remain firmly in it. Connections must therefore be made, and decisions taken, on grounds to be argued and established contingently in each case – which is to say, politically – and for which responsibility cannot be shirked in the name of supposed transcendental abstract truth. So ecopluralists, among others, can and should fight their corner without transcendent, universalist or absolutist illusions – and all the more so since ecopluralism is itself meta-ecological: embodied, embedded and interdependent, and thus contingent.

### **INTRINSIC vs INSTRUMENTAL VALUE**

Another key and contested idea in ecological discourse is the intrinsic value of nature. It forms a necessary part of a contrasting pair with that of instrumental or use-value. As Brian Baxter points out, ‘If all we had to operate with was the latter concept, then we would be committed to a vicious infinite regress. We could only ever explain the value of anything as a means to the attainment of something else.... For something to have value as a means to a given end only establishes the value of that thing if the given end is valuable.’<sup>17</sup>

It should not be necessary to spend much time on the idea of instrumental value. Most ecocentrics would agree with John Fowles, writing in his essay on *The Tree*, that ‘We shall never understand nature (or ourselves), and certainly never respect it, until we dissociate the wild from the notion of usability – however innocent or harmless the use’ (pp.43-44). Certainly it is not possible to live without using natural things, animate as well as inanimate, but it does not at all follow that they were made for our use.

Now in ecopluralist terms, there is no intrinsic value ‘out there’ in the objectivist sense; value can have no meaning, or even reality, without a valuer (although not necessarily a human one). But the necessary involvement of valuers in value does not therefore mean it is purely or merely subjective in the sense of being arbitrary, and so requiring some kind of ‘objective’ (usually scientific) support. Nor does it mean that value is ‘not really there’; it really is there, but not in the absolutist and therefore untenable sense, demanded by objectivists, of *only* ‘there’, or else not ‘there’ at all.

The general subject of value pluralism is not our main concern here, but I should mention Herrnstein Smith's axiological relativism, as well as the work of Isaiah Berlin, probably the most influential critic of the idea 'that it is in principle possible to discover a harmonious pattern in which all values are reconciled.' Echoing Max Weber, he has forcefully made the point that moral goods are plural and often ultimately incommensurable: a part of 'the irreducible complexity of life', which makes the attempt to reduce them to one principle, truth or good so dangerous.<sup>18</sup> And insofar as moral or ethical choices are related, as moral goods, to values, value pluralism leads on to moral pluralism. But moral pluralism in an ecological context has already been intelligently discussed by Christopher Stone, Andrew Brennan and Mary Midgley. As the last notes, 'moral pluralism of this kind is neither confused nor dishonest. It is simply a recognition of the complexity of life.'<sup>19</sup> (And compared to tepid rationalist pieties such as, 'Intelligent people of good will should eventually reach agreement if they take the time to thrash out their initial differences', it is also bracingly realistic.<sup>20</sup>)

### THE DISCURSIVE AS MORE-THAN HUMAN

There is a point at stake in this discussion which is as widely misunderstood as it is important. It can be stated succinctly: *language is not discourse*, and the linguistic is but a subset of the discursive. Why does this matter? Because objectivists and constructionists alike, in conflating the two, have generated a distracting pseudo-debate in which both sides continually miss the point. The former use the obvious truth that important aspects of human experience are not captured by language to licence the idea, and thence ideology, that it is possible for us to have access to the world in a way ultimately unmediated by interpretation. The latter rightly point out that no such access is possible; but since they, like their opponents, have identified interpretation with language, they are obliged to defend the equally absurd proposition that language encompasses all meaning. (With his loose talk of '*il n'ya rien hors de la texte*', Derrida actually bears considerable responsibility for encouraging this impasse, along with much subsidiary talk of a 'linguistic turn'.)<sup>21</sup>

Neither position is defensible. As Ernesto Laclau writes, 'the "truth", factual or otherwise, about the being of objects is constituted within a theoretical and discursive context, and the idea of a truth outside all context is simply nonsensical.'<sup>22</sup> But the idea of a non-*linguistic* truth is eminently possible, and necessary; meaningful non-linguistic phenomena are part of everybody's lives. Everything that we become aware of, know, compare or refer to is the result of an ongoing interaction between aspects of a perfectly real world *and* an indispensable experiencer (a part of that world), in the manner already discussed. Discourse thus includes both the linguistic *and* non-linguistic elements of any meaningful social practice or theory. Indeed, it would be better to say that discourse just *is* practice of all kinds, including theories and beliefs: a formulation that would foreground its affinity with (late) Wittgenstein. And far from being a species of idealism, discourse has no existence independent of material life.

Grasping this point is a fundamental prerequisite for relational pluralism. Conversely, failure to do so leaves untouched both the objectivist mystification of unmediated reality and the subjectivist mystification of linguistic imperialism. As I have emphasised, truth is both real *and* discursive – or in Latour's terms (p.6), 'simultaneously real, like nature, [and] narrated, like discourse'. That means there is no

need to take the modernist vow, impossible to fulfill in practice, that nature is extra-discursive. And the alternative is decidedly not confinement to a “prison-house of language”; the door is wide open.

Such an understanding of discourse is equally a prerequisite for ecocentrism; for if discourse is reduced to language, then *ipso facto* all meaning is reserved for humanity alone; since nonhuman nature does not and cannot use words, it is rendered silent, meaningless, and alien. This is, of course, the thoroughly modernist (and indeed Cartesian) view of such authors as Richard Rorty and Andrew Ross.<sup>23</sup> Such a metaphysical commitment goes back at least to Socrates, as approvingly quoted by Plato (in *Phaedrus*, 232d): ‘I’m a lover of learning, and trees and open country won’t teach me anything, whereas men in the town do.’ It resonated powerfully with the religiously licensed anthropocentrism of monotheism, as well as the stress by religions of the Book on the importance of written language, and developments in the seventeenth century gave it a new twist and impetus. But there is no need to trace its genealogy to recognise how dominant this attitude still remains, on the political left as much as the right.

Nature is not ‘mute’. It is eloquent: discursively structured and therefore meaningful throughout, saturated with messages and stories, and without any stuff (energy), so far as we shall ever know, that is unpatterned – all of which includes, but vastly exceeds, both us and our language, the latter itself a subset of our own discursivity. Meanings and values ‘are not “outside” nature, but have always been integral to its constitution.’<sup>24</sup> And human participation is not an optional extra; it is entailed by being alive. In short, an inclusive ecocentrism is impossible to envisage without recognising and appreciating our immersion in this vast and intricate discursivity, the more-than-(but including)-human. (This realisation was the basis of practically all Gregory Bateson’s pioneering work, including his insistence that mind and nature formed a ‘necessary unity’. More recently it has been powerfully restated in ecological-phenomenological terms by Abram, and in ecofeminist terms by Plumwood.)

Once again, then, linguistic constructionists – and *a fortiori* those on the left – should ask themselves whether they want to enact an ecological *trahison des clercs* by engaging in sophisticated justifications of why we not ‘cannot’ hear what the Earth is so fluently telling us, in every mode from whispers to screams, about its (including our) current condition and direction. How convenient for the industrialists, politicians and journalists crying down any crisis!

## **ARTIFICE AND REALITY**

One insight into these issues can be borrowed from Henri Matisse: ‘An artist must recognise, when he is reasoning, that his picture is an artifice; but when he is painting, he should feel that he has copied nature.’ In the joint perversity of most current environmental discourse, the scientific objectivists feel (and try to oblige the rest of us to feel as well) that they are copying nature even while they are reasoning; while the social constructionists are busy trying to recognise (and urging us to do so too) that the picture is an artifice even while they are painting it.

An enterprise such as this paper is, of course, one of reasoning and reflection, according to which our ‘pictures’ of nature are indeed an artifice – not in the sense of a human construction (production, creation) out of entirely passive and dead materials (‘nature’), but arising out of our participation *in* nature: a second-order nature, distinguishable from but dependent upon and ultimately returning to the first. That arising is indeed often experienced as a copying, i.e. an apprehension, more or less correct, of what is ‘really out there’. But the inference that the result therefore actually *is* a copy (let alone only a copy) is unwarranted. On the other hand, the further experience of reasoning about it often results in its recognition as an artifice. But the inference that the first experience is therefore *also* (let alone only) artificial is equally unwarranted. And interestingly, this point seems to hold true on the meta-level too. When I reflect on the issue of cognizing the natural, I recognise that my conclusions are an artifice; but while I’m thinking about it, I also feel that I am closing in on the truth, etc. (‘copying nature’). So I would like to suggest that the proper place of objectivism is actually *phenomenological (subjective)*, while that of constructionism is *analytical or reflective (objective)*.

This idea accords well with the ontological and epistemological implications of ecopluralism. To pick only one example, concerning the question of intrinsic natural value, there is both an ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ dimension in the way just specified. Regarding the former, people’s experience of certain natural items as valuable involves a perception that the value is really ‘out there’: ‘To hold that value only exists in the eye of the beholder (or, alternatively, that judgements of value are not really judgements of fact at all) is to ignore the simple fact that they ascribe qualities which can really be there when their topic is the experience of a subject.’<sup>25</sup> But regarding the subjective, reflection shows that at the same time, without cancelling out the first aspect, such judgement is *also* a construction arising out of our participation, internal to the set of relationships between ourselves and the items: not in terms, to quote Hornburg again (p.3), of “internalizing” or “representing” the environment, but of a relationship between subject and object that recursively constitutes both the knower and the known.’ Thus it is real without entailing realism, and constructed without entailing constructivism.

#### **FOUR DESIDERATA**

Following on from that point, ecopluralism suggests four *desiderata* in the present context. *Reality without realism*. As I have argued, reality can be real – in its proper, experiential, non-scientistic sense – without requiring any concessions to the epistemological imperialism characteristic of modern realist essentialism, including its contribution to modern ecological destructiveness. (This was always the position of Feyerabend.) As Kontos says, ‘The issue is not rationality per se, but a deranged, totalized rationalization.... The mere presence of rationality does not result in disenchantment.’<sup>26</sup> A corollary is that it is perfectly possible, and greatly preferable, to engage in the passionate defence of natural particularities – not an abstract Nature, but such-and-such items – without that in any way committing the defenders to the realist-objectivist ideology complicit in its destruction.

*Reason without rationalism*. This too is implicit in both the ideas and their exemplars as cited above; but here I want to affirm the value and importance –

once shorn of delusions arising from what Bernard Williams called ‘a rationalistic conception of rationality’ – of ‘reasons (plural and heterogeneous)’ as against ‘Reason’. Williams defines as central to that conception the assumption ‘to the effect that two considerations cannot be rationally weighted against each other unless there is a common consideration in terms of which they can be compared. This assumption is at once very powerful and utterly baseless.’<sup>27</sup> Compare François Lyotard: ‘it is never a question of one massive and unique reason – that is nothing but an ideology. On the contrary, it is a question of plural rationalities which are, at the least, respectively theoretical, practical, aesthetic.’<sup>28</sup> (And occasions when a British analytical philosopher and a Continental postmodern philosopher of roughly equal eminence in their spheres agree are sufficiently rare as to merit attention.) As Herrnstein Smith (1997, p.6) pointedly observes, it is not so much that objective evaluative reasoning is necessarily authoritarian as that such reasoning never actually occurs as such.

*Nature without naturalism.* This is a corollary of the preceding point which proceeds by the same logic, adding only a recognition of the extent, perhaps now irreparable, to which ‘naturalism’ has been successfully appropriated by scientific realism. Neil Evernden (p.123) is quite right to say that wilderness is not the issue so much as – or at least, not in quite the same way as – wildness; and that ‘we hide from wildness by making it “natural.”’ Actually, a scientific but nonreductive discourse about nature is not only possible but already exists, in the autopoietic “evolutionary biology” (much of it prefigured by Bateson) of Maturana and Varela. However, it won’t attract any significant funding or publicity (compared to, say, evolutionary psychology), precisely because it *is* nonreductive. Hence its unattractiveness for investors, both financial and ideological, who want ‘objective’ knowledge, and thereby (asymptotically) absolute control: ultimately a mirage, of course, but the damage it can cause in the pursuit thereof is not. Nor, of course, are the short-term profits that it offers for a few.

*Humanity without humanism.* I have already suggested that humanism is, at heart, a perfectly legitimate interest in, and valuing of, the specifically human. The problem, of course, is the bloated techno-humanism, so very far from humane, that now functions as the ideology of modernity. A rescue of the term may or may not be possible now, but in any case, insofar as a genuine and healthy ecocentrism is not intrinsically misanthropic, it is unnecessary to invoke humanism to protect human beings against it.

## **ECOPLURALISM IN PRACTICE**

A difficult but important point that remains to be made is that strictly speaking, ecopluralism is not the opposite of essentialism, in this qualified sense: shorn of its absolutism, it is probably unavoidable, often desirable and perfectly legitimate to ‘essentialise’ – that is, to engage in discourse attributing to certain entities identities that are effectively permanent, stable, etc. – when to do so is contingently and contextually appropriate as a meta-pluralist strategy. As Herrnstein Smith (1988, p.158) puts it, ‘it would be no more logically inconsistent for a nonobjectivist to speak, under some conditions, of fundamental rights and objective facts than for a Hungarian ordering his lunch in Paris to speak French’ – or a ‘relativist’, in appropriate circumstances, to cite scientific evidence. Equally, it is possible to practice pluralism in an absolutist way,

resulting in an essentialist pseudo-pluralism: what Feyerabend, quoted earlier, rightly described as trivial and scholastic, but also evident in dogmatic versions of, *e.g.*, multiculturalism and political correctness. ‘Always to be on the side of ever greater pluralism is not to recognise that, even to the question of pluralism, there is more than one side.’<sup>29</sup>

In other words, what matters as much as the specifiable theory or practice is one’s *relationship* (individually and collectively) with it. That relationship is what I would like to describe, and recommend, as ecopluralist. Of course, there is an infinite regress here; all theories can be held and practised in ways that escape specification by the theories themselves. As Wittgenstein pointed out, any specification of how to apply a rule becomes part of the rule itself, which is then subject to the same exigency. One result is that, to quote one of William Empson’s characteristically throwaway remarks, ‘Of course, to talk like this is to misunderstand the philosophy, but once the philosophy is made a public creed it is sure to be misunderstood in some such way.’ Nonetheless, some understandings can be criticised and others – in this case, a pluralist *praxis* – commended.

The overall movement of ‘Western’ intellectual practice, however, has been in just the opposite direction: rationalisation and bureaucratisation, in Weber’s terms. For example, an influential factor in the ecological crisis is the ongoing intellectual and institutional takeover of philosophy as a whole – including ontology, axiology and ethics – by epistemology, as if it could exhaust those domains. This in turn has paved the way for a further reductive arrogation of epistemology by methodology, culminating in virtual methodolatry. (Note too the parallel and closely related annexation of natural history by biology, and the latter in turn by medical and environmental management.)

This tendency to abstraction is only part – albeit greatly speeded up and intensified, under pressure from the modernist alliance of capital, state and science – of the long ‘Western’ tradition, with its intellectual roots in the success of Plato’s Socrates in exalting *episteme*, or theoretical knowledge, resulting from the application of pure reason to abstract universals, as the paradigm of knowledge and intelligence. Yet the tradition of *episteme* is, *in practice*, not only a deception (including self-deception) but an enormously damaging one. As Hornburg (pp.3,4) points out, ‘the destruction of traditional systems of meaning and the destruction of ecosystems can be seen as two aspects of the same process.... We need to focus on the disembedding, decontextualizing forces that are inherent in modernity, and that are the common denominator of markets, universalizing science and the ecologically alienated individual.... The subjective and the objective dimensions of the environmental crisis are inseparable.’

In general terms, *episteme* involves what William James, a pioneer of modern pluralism, called: ‘vicious abstractionism’: ‘reducing the originally rich phenomenon to the naked suggestions of that name abstractly taken, treating it as a case of “nothing but” that concept, and acting as if all the other characters from out of which the concept is abstracted were expunged...’<sup>30</sup> Such a purported view of the world is integral to its instrumental manipulation and exploitation.

In contrast, as Andrew McLaughlin writes, ‘Recognizing the embeddedness of humanity within nature implies that our knowledge of the whole is necessarily

incomplete.... Recognizing this incompleteness forms a basis for the critique of modern hubris in our relations with nonhuman nature.<sup>31</sup> So the successful management of nature, so to speak, can only be based on the firm understanding, with the accompanying humility, that it is ultimately impossible.

The analytical philosopher David Wiggins (pp. 20,21) has shown this in the case of what he calls ‘commensurabilism’ – the view that environmental decisions, for example, can be settled in an abstract, perhaps even algorithmic way. Space unfortunately restricts me to quoting his closely-reasoned conclusion about such procedures: ‘There is no general recipe, and there cannot be any general recipe.... There is a difficulty of principle in the very idea of a complete decontextualization of the choice of A over B. The subject matter of the practical is not definite in the way that the commensurabilist requires it to be.’

By implication, commensurabilist deliberations themselves also grow out of a shared practical context, but they do so covertly and anti-democratically, with local contextual imperatives largely ignored in favour of those that are relevant to the decision-makers. Those must be smuggled in, in order to preserve the façade of objectivity and universality; open discussion, which threatens to expose the contingency of the whole process, is therefore regarded with fear and contempt. As much such discussion as is unavoidable will be contained within narrow parameters, anthropocentric and usually utilitarian, dictated by the terms of the ‘inquiry’, which also exclude questioning its terms. This is the point at which science, for example – which in a more democratic polity could be a valid and valuable part of the collective conversation – so easily swells to become scientism (as Feyerabend anatomized in work that remains highly relevant).

The irony is that a philosophical and political process which *accepts* the unavoidability of contingency in the pursuit of collective wisdom, arrived at through the fullest possible political participation, turns that condition from a problem into a virtue: the practice of citizenship as forefronted by the tradition of civic republicanism, notably Machiavelli’s *virtù*. That tradition incorporates a moral pluralism which in the latter’s case was a direct influence on that of both Weber and Berlin. It also has some powerful implications for ecocentrism in terms of green citizenship and ecological republicanism.<sup>32</sup>

## ON THEORETICAL PRACTICE

Latour (p.125) is right that ‘what we need to understand is the ordinary dimension: the small causes and their large effects.’ Does such an assertion in the context of an enterprise such as this paper, with its abstract (not to say sweeping) concerns, constitute a self-contradiction? No, because there are a very few people (including the author) for whom ‘the big picture’ is an important part of their particular set of small causes; while at the same time, it is at least a small part of virtually everyone’s local world. The local, provisional, contextual – in short, the contingent – with a subset of the putatively universal, is the only world available to us: just as the natural world is, with the human a subset. And it is more than world enough. As R.W. Hepburn writes, ‘To realize that there is this cooperative interdependence of man and his natural environment checks the extreme of pessimism by showing our earth-rootedness even in our aspirations. There is no wholly-other paradise from which we are excluded; the

only transcendence that can be real to us is an “immanent” one.’<sup>33</sup>

Another fundamental question might be: does one actually extend the rule of *theoria* by using abstract concepts to criticise it? I would say, not necessarily. Certainly the point of all this reasoning is not to introduce a comprehensive new and better monism. But people *will* think about nature, so it is helpful to have available a good way of thinking about it: one that is more open to the experience of it and encouraging of resistance to its destruction. Just as important, however, is to have the right relationship with thinking as such, including an appreciation of its limits. And there are ways of thinking about thinking, too, which encourage such a relationship.

As part of such a project, right thinking can help to clear a space for a different mode which is better able to apprehend and appreciate the intrinsic value of more-than-human nature, or rather wildness (including human). That mode is what Keats defined as negative capability: ‘capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’. And the reason it is required is because it permits a mode that is appropriate for intrinsic value, just as use is for instrumental value: the apprehension of, and participation in, wonderousness. Wonder, even though it has aesthetic and spiritual dimensions, is not a kind of instrumentalism; the latter involves not only a goal but a usage which affects the used but not the user, whereas wonder involves a relational and unbiddable experience.<sup>34</sup> (The attempt to use wonder programmatically turns it into something else, which I have elsewhere defined as ‘glamour’.)<sup>35</sup> And as Andrea Wilson Nightingale shows, ‘ecological *theoria* can be conceived as an activity in which rigorous inquiry is accompanied by reverence and restraint.’<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, thinking itself participates in what immeasurably exceeds it and indeed makes it possible. ‘*Einai gar kai entautha theos*’, as Heraclitus said, inviting unanticipated guests into his kitchen: ‘Even here there are gods.’ So the intellect too has its place, and can be part of a practice that embodies and defends the wild.

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<sup>1</sup> This section has received somewhat more detailed treatment in my paper ‘Rethinking Nature: Towards an Eco-Pluralism’, *Environmental Values*, 12 (2003), 337-60.

<sup>2</sup> I am following the usage of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London, Verso, 1985; 2<sup>nd</sup> edn 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982, p16. Cf. Neil Evernden, *The Social Construction of Nature*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, pp93-96.

<sup>4</sup> Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, ‘Exchanging Perspectives’, *Common Knowledge* 10, 3 (2004), 463-84: 482.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp41-2.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1988, and *Belief and Resistance: Dynamics of Contemporary Intellectual Controversy*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997; Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993; de Castro, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> Keith Tester, *Animals and Society: The Humanity of Animals Rights*, London, Routledge, 1991, p206. (As usual, the work of Mary Midgley on this subject is bracingly sane.)

<sup>8</sup> Mick Smith, *An Ethics of Place. Radical Ecology, Postmodernity, and Social Theory*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2001, pp118, 127.

<sup>9</sup> Gary Snyder, ‘Is Nature Real?’, *Resurgence*, 190 (1998) p32.

- <sup>10</sup> Such as George Sessions, 'Postmodernism, Environmental Justice, and the Demise of the Ecology Movement?', *Wild Duck Review* 5 (1995). For a very good analysis see Mick Smith, op. cit., pp121-25.
- <sup>11</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, New York, Vintage, 1997.
- <sup>12</sup> Tim Hayward, 'Anthropocentrism: A Misunderstood Problem', *Environmental Ethics*, 6, 1 (1997) 49-63. ('Speciesism' was coined by Richard Ryder in 1975, and 'human chauvinism' by Richard and Val Routley in 1979.)
- <sup>13</sup> David Wiggins, 'Nature, Respect for Nature, and the Human Scale of Values', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* XCX (2000) 1-32: pp7-8, 16.
- <sup>14</sup> Dobson, *Green Political Thought*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, London, Routledge, 2000, p57; and v. Eric Katz, 'Against the Inevitability of Anthropocentrism', in Eric Katz, Andrew Light and David Rothenberg (eds.), *Beneath the Surface: Critical Essays in the Philosophy of Deep Ecology*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 2000, pp17-42.
- <sup>15</sup> Val Plumwood, 'Nature, Self and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy and the Critique of Rationalism', in Robert Elliott (ed.), *Environmental Ethics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp155-64: p160; Huey-li Li, 'Some Thoughts on Confucianism and Ecofeminism', in Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Berthrong (eds.), *Confucianism and Ecology*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1998, pp293-311: p. 300.
- <sup>16</sup> Richard Sylvan and David Bennett, *The Greening of Ethics: From Human Chauvinism to Deep-Green Theory*, Cambridge, The White Horse Press, 1994, p154.
- <sup>17</sup> Brian Baxter, *Ecologism: An Introduction*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1999, p56; Dobson, op. cit., makes the same point.
- <sup>18</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969, pp lv, 192. See the excellent discussion by John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, London, HarperCollins, 1995.
- <sup>19</sup> Christopher D. Stone, 'Moral Pluralism and the Course of Environmental Ethics', in Andrew Brennan (ed.), *The Ethics of the Environment*, Aldershot, Dartmouth, 1995, pp511-526; Andrew Brennan, 'Moral Pluralism and the Environment', in Brennan, *ibid.*, pp560-77; Mary Midgley, 'Sustainability and Moral Pluralism', in T.D.J. Chappell (ed.), *The Philosophy of the Environment*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1997, pp89-101: p100.
- <sup>20</sup> J. Baird Callicott, quoted by Andrew Light, 'Callicott and Naess on Pluralism', in Katz, Light and Rothenberg, op. cit., pp125-48: p130.
- <sup>21</sup> But he later corrected this misprision, changing 'text' to 'context': Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, Evanston IL, Northwestern University Press, 1988, p136.
- <sup>22</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, London, Verso, 1991, p105.
- <sup>23</sup> Andrew Ross, *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life: Nature's Debt to Society*, London, Verso, 1994.
- <sup>24</sup> Alf Hornburg, 'Ecological embeddedness and personhood: Have we always been capitalists?' *Anthropology Today* 14, 2 (April 1998) 3-5: p3.
- <sup>25</sup> Timothy L.S. Sprigge, 'Respect for the Non-Human', in Chappell, op. cit., pp117-134: p126.
- <sup>26</sup> Alkis Kontos, 'The World Disenchanted, and the Return of Gods and Demons', in Asher Horowitz and Terry Maley (Eds.), *The Barbarism of Reason: Max Weber and the Twilight of Enlightenment*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1994, pp223-47: 235.
- <sup>27</sup> Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana Press, 1985), pp18, 17; Herrnstein Smith 1997, op. cit., p41.
- <sup>28</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, "An Interview with Jean-François Lyotard", by Willem van Reijen and Dick Veerman, in *Theory, Culture and Society* 5, 2-3 (1988) pp277-309: p279.
- <sup>29</sup> Eric Griffiths, in the *Times Literary Supplement* (28.5.1993).
- <sup>30</sup> James R. O'Shea, 'Sources of Pluralism in William James', in Baghramian and Ingram. Maria Baghramian and Attracta Ingram (eds.), *Pluralism: The Philosophy and Politics of Diversity*, London, Routledge, 2000, pp17-43: p24.
- <sup>31</sup> Andrew McLaughlin, *Regarding Nature: Industrialism and Deep Ecology*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1993, p147. Cf. Bateson op. cit. and Abram op. cit.
- <sup>32</sup> On ecological citizenship see Patrick Curry, 'Redefining Community: Towards an Ecological Republicanism', *Biodiversity and Conservation* 9, 8 (2000) pp1059-71; and Mark J. Smith, *Ecologism: Towards Ecological Citizenship*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1998, ch. 6.
- <sup>33</sup> R.W. Hepburn, *Wonder, and Other Essays*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1984, p182.
- <sup>34</sup> The apt term 'unbiddable' is thanks to Anthony Thorley.
- <sup>35</sup> Patrick Curry, 'Magic vs. Enchantment', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 14, 3 (1999) pp401-12.

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<sup>36</sup> Andrea Wilson Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in its Cultural Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p268.