

Ecocentric Discourses: Problems and Future Prospects for Nature Advocacy

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I propose to explore and take stock of the troubled evolution of certain discourses in Western environmental philosophy that seek to defend biological diversity. Variously referred to as ecocentric or biocentric, these discourses have been in the forefront of mounting a critique of anthropocentrism or human chauvinism, philosophically defending the intrinsic value of nature and politically defending the setting aside of large tracts of habitat along with other policy changes to ensure the flourishing of nonhuman species. Although there is considerable variety among the philosophical and ethical discourses that can be broadly described as ecocentric, they all share the conviction that the Western philosophical tradition has elevated and celebrated humanity at the expense of nonhuman nature and that this has helped to sanction the domination of nature. The quest has been to find a new moral vocabulary that includes nonhuman species in the circle of moral considerability, that acknowledges ecological interdependence, and that seeks new policies and laws that provide more concerted protection for nonhuman species and ecosystems.

KEY WORDS

ecocentrism
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nonanthropocentrism

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nature advocacy



Introduction

In this essay, I propose to explore and take stock of the troubled evolution of certain discourses in Western environmental philosophy that seek to defend biological diversity. Various referred to as ecocentric or biocentric, these discourses have been in the forefront of mounting a critique of anthropocentrism or human chauvinism, philosophically defending the intrinsic value of nature and politically defending the setting aside of large tracts of habitat along with other policy changes to ensure the flourishing of nonhuman species.² Although there is considerable variety among the philosophical and ethical discourses that can be broadly described as ecocentric, they all share the conviction that the Western philosophical tradition has elevated and celebrated humanity at the expense of nonhuman nature and that this has helped to sanction the domination of nature. The quest has been to find a new moral vocabulary that includes nonhuman species in the circle of moral considerability, that acknowledges ecological interdependence, and that seeks new policies and laws that provide more concerted protection for nonhuman species and ecosystems.

However, notwithstanding over two decades of development, ecocentric discourses remain controversial and they have generated a range of critical responses from philosophers and cultural critics, some of whom are skeptical of, and others sympathetic to, the ecocentric project. Some of these skeptical counter-discourses have sought to reinstate humanism as the foundation of environmental ethics. Others have accused ecocentric theorists of being misanthropic or fascist.³

More sympathetic critics have taken issue with the idea of intrinsic value as an objective property of non-human life forms. Yet subjectivist accounts of intrinsic value have been deemed unsatisfactory by many nonanthropocentric theorists for denying nonhuman agency and reducing nonhuman species to mere passive recipients of human valuation.⁴ In the wake of these critiques and divisions, many believe it is necessary to abandon, transcend or at least destabilize what now seem fraught and old-fashioned distinctions between intrinsic and instrumental value, anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, culture and nature. Some have rejected the instrumental/intrinsic value distinction as a dead-end, such as Anthony Weston in "Beyond Intrinsic Value," while others have replaced intrinsic values with a continuum of instrumental to noninstrumental values, noting that we must be open to a variety of in-between positions, such as Lori Gruen in "Refocusing Environmental Ethics." Still others have sought to widen the scope of instrumental value, such as Bryan Norton in "Epistemology and Environmental Values," or have rejected the anthropocentric/ecocentric distinction as unhelpful, such as John Barry in *Rethinking Green Politics*. Indeed, it appears that the God-like task of assessing precisely which bits of nature ought to be designated intrinsically valuable has itself emerged as an arrogant and foolhardy exercise.

More generally, ecofeminists, environmental justice advocates, postcolonialists and post-structuralists have drawn attention to the role of class, race, gender, power and language in the social construction of nature—moves that have seen, for example, the deconstruction of the concept of wilderness as an expression of Western, patriarchal, neo-romantic and/or middle-class longings.⁵ More recently, environmental pragmatists have criticized certain nonanthropocentric theories (most notably, those of J. Baird Callicott, Laura Westra and Holmes Rolston III)⁶ for being monistic, dogmatic and therefore incapable of dealing with environmental pluralism.⁷ For pragmatists, environmental problems ought to be solved democratically by the people affected, not by armchair environmental philosophers who expect policy makers simply to apply their environmental ethical theories in a formulaic

fashion. From this pragmatist perspective, what we urgently need is not *applied* philosophy but rather *practical* philosophy—the coming together of a community of inquirers to discuss and resolve practical environmental problems, drawing on local cultural resources.⁸

Much of the first wave of green political theorists (such as Andrew Dobson in *Green Political Thought*, Andrew McLaughlin in *Regarding Nature* and this author in *Environmentalism and Political Theory*) had strenuously defended the critique of anthropocentrism and sought to emphasise this as a distinctive and new feature of political thought *vis-à-vis* so-called “mainstream” political theories. However, a number of “second wave” green political theorists (such as Tim Hayward and John Barry) are now inclined to reject the anthropocentric/ecocentric distinction as unhelpful and have sought instead to emphasize the humanist credentials of green politics and redirect attention towards questions of human ecological stewardship, ecological virtue and what might be the legitimate use (or illegitimate abuse) of natural resources and ecosystems.⁹ This second wave of green political theory has also sought to engage more directly with debates in mainstream political theory, focusing on fruitful points of convergence among environmental and social concerns, and particularly democratic theory.¹⁰

In all, the mounting and multi-faceted critique of the nonanthropocentric project and the increasing interest among environmental pragmatists and green political theorists generally in questions of democratic theory and practice have served to sideline nonanthropocentric philosophical discourses as merely one set of discourses among many. More pointedly, these critiques suggest that nonanthropocentric discourses are not especially helpful to consensus building in a multicultural world.

In this paper, I reflect on the future viability of the nonanthropocentric project of liberating nature by exploring what might be rescued in the wake of the various epistemological, ethical and political critiques of past efforts to bring nonhuman species into Kant’s “kingdom of ends,” I do not seek to provide a systematic overview of the debate between various nonanthropocentric theorists

and their more numerous critics. Rather my concern is to draw selectively on some of these debates in order to explore the *methods* that have been enlisted by nonanthropocentric theorists (and their critics) to argue their case. More importantly, my strategy is to suggest that we focus on nature advocacy as a *democratic* task, and to link it (structurally and historically) with the social and environmental justice movements. If one accepts that environmental conflicts should be resolved by democratic means (and here one must side with environmental pluralists rather than monists), then focusing on the democratic task of nature advocacy, and taking stock of the procedures, protocols, rhetorical devices and analogical methods of persuasion that have been enlisted by leading environmental philosophers and activists, would seem to be a fruitful line of inquiry. Such a focus not only redirects attention to the role of advocacy in a democracy (a focus that restores the democratic credentials of ecocentric discourses which now seem so impugned), but also sensitizes nature advocates to the possibilities and limitations of some of the arguments that have thus far been deployed.

In modern times, it generally goes without saying that we humans already belong to Kant's "kingdom of ends," that we all possess "inherent dignity" and (for liberals and more radical emancipatory theorists) the right to self-determination or self-realisation. The task for nonanthropocentric theorists has typically been how to open the moral door to nonhuman species *by analogy with the human case*. I shall argue that herein lies a conundrum: that the attempt to use the human case as a reference point invariably leads to invidious comparisons between the human and the nonhuman in ways that demean nonhumans (and sometimes humans as well). However, I shall also argue that ultimately this is a problem that cannot be entirely avoided if we humans are to communicate with each other in ways that seek to enlist and extend reasonably established moral norms in order to stretch conventional moral horizons. Philosophers who have taken "the linguistic turn" (such as Richard Rorty in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*) have also emphasized the role of metaphor in moral progress, and the rhetorical nature of social reality. Efforts to persuade others

typically requires beginning from some common or familiar understanding and then reasoning from the common and familiar and to the less common and less familiar. In what follows, I explore the pitfalls and critical possibilities associated with this method of argument and suggest that critical political ecology provides a less problematic basis for navigating these issues than traditional liberal moral or political philosophy.¹¹ Although both are traceable to the Enlightenment quest for autonomy, liberalism has become complacent while critical theory has continued to question the protocols of political dialogue and political representation and the boundaries of the moral and political community in space and time.

Back to the Beginning

Many of the early philosophical discourses concerned to “liberate” all or some parts of nonhuman nature took the following form. While recognizing that non-human species are important resources for sustaining human livelihoods, the idea that nonhuman species should be considered valuable *only* as resources was rejected as one-dimensional, degrading of both human and nonhuman nature, and likely to sanction the accelerated extinction rates for redundant, “useless” or inconvenient species. If species had no use or benefit to humankind, or if technological substitutes could be found for the services provided by a particular species of plant or animal, then it would be “no great mischief” if that species were to vanish from the earth (with apologies to Alistair McCleod’s novel by the same name). As Neil Evernden has put it in his discussion of “The Environmentalists’s Dilemma,” resources are, after all, mere “indices of utility to industrial society” (10).

For all its problems, the intuitive appeal of the notion of intrinsic value in nonhuman species was one way of saying that nonhuman species, like human species, matter—that they are worthy, they have their own forms of agency, and they are valuable above and beyond their use value to humans. Enlisting the notion of intrinsic value was also a means by which to expose and challenge what David Ehrenfeld

has called “the arrogance of humanism” or what many environmental philosophers call human chauvinism—the idea that humans are the crown of creation, the culmination of evolution, the only morally considerable beings entitled to a permanent place in the sun as if the sole purpose of the rest of nature was to serve humanity.

For some nonanthropocentric theorists, if the welfare of nonhuman species was to be taken seriously and the destruction of their habitat considered a grave matter that should be nonnegotiable (or at least much less negotiable than it currently is), then it also seemed necessary to defend an objectivist theory of intrinsic value that transcended the preferences and aesthetic tastes of humans.¹² After all, if human rights claims—based on the inherent dignity of the person—could trump competing arguments based on social utility, then so should the moral rights of nonhuman species trump utilitarian arguments for development. This was merely a case of rounding out the (liberal) revolution.

While the logic of the early argumentative strategy seemed straightforward enough, the task of articulating a theory of intrinsic value and defending an alternative biocentric or ecocentric philosophy has been anything but straightforward. Indeed, J. Baird Callicott in “Intrinsic Value, Quantum Theory and Environmental Ethics” has described this problem as the “central and most recalcitrant problem for environmental ethics” (257). For example, environmental philosophers divided over what the relevant properties of intrinsic value should be—was it sentience, aliveness, “the subject of a life,” autopoiesis? If environmental ethics was to have policy relevance, these matters had to be resolved in a practical, parsimonious and persuasive way. And the choice was not insignificant: it would determine how much of nonhuman nature would be included in the circle of moral and legal protection, and—more importantly—what character that protection would take.

Many of the early efforts to extend moral considerability to nonhuman species attempted to build up a larger, transhuman moral order through the extension of widely accepted, basic principles that underpin distinctly human emancipatory movements, most notably

Kantian and utilitarian moral philosophy. In this sense, nonanthropocentric environmental ethics remained profoundly indebted to anthropocentric ethics, as Anthony Weston has astutely observed ("Before Environmental Ethics," 139). Nonetheless, for Weston, "... the project of going beyond anthropocentrism still looks wild, incautious, intellectually overexcited" (143). He attributes this to the fact that this radical environmental philosophical project is still in its "originary phase"—a phase of uncertainty and experimentation, with no secure foothold in dominant cultural understandings in the West. Indeed, Weston concedes that a great deal of exploration and metaphor is required in the early stages of the development of new values ("Beyond Intrinsic Value" 147). Yet he also perceptively notes that the success of these explorations depends to a large extent "in the way they open up the possibility of new connections, not in the way they settle or 'close' any questions" ("Before Environmental Ethics" 150). Weston's observations provide a good entry point for exploring both the discursive possibilities and problems associated with drawing analogies between the human and the nonhuman.

Some of the most influential of the early efforts to extend moral considerability to nonhuman species involved the radical extension of *individualist* liberal moral philosophy to the environment. This form of moral extensionism—which finds its classical expression in Peter Singer's book *Animal Liberation* and Christopher Stone's legal essay "Should Trees Have Standing?"—has since become part of the standard repertoire of those wishing to impugn human chauvinism. The argument runs as follows. An animal or "natural entity" need not be a fully competent moral *agent* (equipped with Kantian powers of moral reasoning) in order to be recognised as a worthy moral *subject*, that is, as a being that is entitled to moral consideration. This is because, in the human domain, there are plenty of examples of individuals who do not possess any or full moral agency but who nonetheless deserve our respect and attentive care (infants, intellectually handicapped persons, the senile). We recognise these persons as morally considerable because they are ends-in-themselves and/or because they are beings capable of suffering or otherwise being harmed, even though they

cannot necessarily return recognition in the way that fully competent moral agents can. However, once we accept that morally incompetent humans are nonetheless morally considerable, then this argument maintains that there is no good reason for not accepting nonhuman others as morally considerable on the grounds that they too are ends-in-themselves or otherwise capable of suffering or being harmed. According to this line of argument, our failure to extend moral considerability to nonhuman species is symptomatic of speciesism or human chauvinism—an unwarranted prejudice against nonhuman others *just because they are not human*.

Now this strategy of progressive moral extensionism has been employed to defend quite different moral frameworks. Singer has used this form of reasoning to argue that not just humans but all *sentient* creatures (i.e., those with the capacity to suffer) ought to be treated as morally considerable in the sense of having their particular interests considered in the policy process. Whereas Singer's argument draws upon *moral* analogies and anomalies, Stone's argument rests upon *legal* analogies and anomalies. According to Stone, given that the Anglo-American legal system grants various sorts of rights to nonhuman entities (churches, corporations, ships, municipalities), there is no good reason for not extending legal rights to natural entities as well, such as mountains and rivers, to be enforced by human legal guardians when they can be shown to be harmed. While Stone's discussion mainly focusses on legal devices for protecting wild nature, an incipient ecocentric moral argument is nonetheless discernible in his discussion. For Stone, then, the creative and rhetorical possibilities in the rights discourse are far from exhausted.

Second Thoughts

John Rodman was the first to warn of the dangers associated with the attempt to build up a larger, transhuman moral order through the extension of basic moral principles that underpin distinctly human emancipatory movements. As early as 1975, in his lengthy review of Singer's and Stone's work entitled "The Liberation of Nature?" he

singled out for attention what he called "The Method of Argument from Human Analogy and Anomaly" (87). Now the point of Rodman's critique was to show that, while Stone's and Singer's argumentative strategy is appealing, it unwittingly conveys a double message. On the one hand, it invites us to travel beyond the familiar by recognising the moral status of some or all members of the nonhuman world—essentially because there is no good reason not to, and to avoid inconsistency in our moral reasoning and behaviour. On the other hand, Rodman argues that this same process of morally elevating nonhuman others by analogy with *anomalous* human cases is degrading and patronising since it relegates nonhuman others "to the status of inferior human beings, species anomalies . . . moral half-breeds having rights without obligations" (94). In the case of Singer's argument for animal liberation, Rodman suggests that what we have is "not a revolution in ethics but something analogous to the Reform Bill of 1832, when the British aristocracy extended selected rights to the upper middle classes" (91). While Rodman accepts that we should not ignore suffering, he insists that it ought not to be the pivotal criteria in framing our moral relations with nonhuman (or indeed human) others. It is, after all, conceivable that humans may, through selective breeding and genetic engineering, produce domesticated animals that are no longer capable of suffering, thereby robbing animal liberationists of their grounds of objection to factory farming, vivisection and other cruel practices. By Rodman's lights, the real force of Singer's critique of factory farming stems not merely from the suffering it causes, but from an objection to our treatment of living organisms as machines, because, as he puts it ". . . we react indignantly to the spectacle of external mechanical conditions being imposed upon natural entities that have their own internal structures, needs, and potentialities" (100). For Rodman, what is missing from these early attempts to argue for the moral considerability of nonhumans is any effort to regard such beings as "having their own existence, their own character and potentialities, their own forms of excellence, their own integrity, their own grandeur . . ." (94).

Rodman is careful to enlist a vocabulary that is not so obviously

modeled on the human case, but can nonetheless encompass humans. Thus, humans, birds, bees, trees and micro-organisms all still have something in common, but these commonalities are formulated at a highly abstract level that tries to avoid reasoning *from* the human case by finding points of connection across all living beings. Yet to suggest that all beings have their own character, needs and potentiality can still be seen as betraying an underlying (liberal?) commitment to autonomy.¹³

Nonetheless, Rodman's early critique has been echoed with increasing sophistication by a growing line of critical political ecologists (which includes postcolonialists and ecofeminists) who are sympathetic with the ecocentric project but sensitive to the problem of invidious comparison. Writing ten years later, for example, Neil Evernden argued that it is a fatal flaw for environmentalists to try to squeeze some of their moral constituency (say apes and some other mammals) into the human prototype, reckoning that saving some is better than saving none ("The Environmentalists's Dilemma" 10). Conforming to the requirements and modes of rationality of the dominant culture has rarely served the interests of diverse minority cultures. Identifying only with those nonhuman others who are like us (e.g., mammals) is even less likely to permit the flourishing of diverse nonhuman species.

Given that there are limits in the human capacity for *sympathetic* identification with nonhuman species that bear no resemblance to ourselves, we need to question whether this kind of identification is an appropriate basis upon which to ground respect for nonhuman others. Indeed, Brian Luke (in "Solidarity Across Diversity") reminds us that the whole point of the contemporary debate about respecting difference (whether cultural or biological) is that the other does not have to be like us before we accord it any recognition and respect. If, as Tzvetan Todorov asks in exploring the relationship between self and other in *The Conquest of America*, loving the other means projecting ourselves or own ideals onto the other, then does the other really need our love? (168). Indigenous peoples certainly did not need the love of Christian missionaries. Bears and lions do not need the love of circus audiences

and many wild creatures could probably do without the love of ecotourists.

More recently, Val Plumwood has shown in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* how we must remain sensitive to the many ways in which the dualisms of self/other and human/nonhuman “create a web of incorporations and exclusions” (143). Webs of inclusion and exclusion typically operate by the more powerful group excluding those who lack something that is possessed and deemed by the more powerful group to be the measure of worth (such as reason, civilization, moral agency, or language). According to Plumwood, this “master consciousness” recognises the other “only to the extent that it is assimilated to the self, or incorporated into the self and its system of desires and needs: only as colonised by the self. The master consciousness cannot tolerate unassimilated otherness” (52). Plumwood’s notion of “unassimilated otherness” attempts to break more decisively with any human analogies. Nonetheless, her argument is still indebted to, and builds upon, postliberal emancipatory thought—most notably ecofeminism and post-colonialism.

One of the most difficult problems with any project of moral extensionism is that there are numerous and obvious points at which the analogy with humans, with human autonomy and with human emancipatory struggles breaks down. For example, nonhuman species are not, so far as we know, rational moral agents capable of citizenship. They cannot return moral recognition, at least not in the way that humans can return recognition. They cannot organise or mobilise politically and, with the possible exception of certain mammals, they cannot communicate with us with the degree of precision to enable humans to understand and formulate their needs, interests, and strivings with any confidence and certainty.

Despite these obvious differences, it is extremely difficult and probably impossible to avoid all resort to human reference points and human analogies if *human* advocates for the concerted protection of biological diversity are to communicate with, and enlist the understanding and support of, *other humans*. Indeed, it is precisely the communicative power of analogies that explains why many of the

pioneering critics of human speciesism and anthropocentrism (such as Singer, Regan and the Routleys) began with the human case, employing (after Rodman) the “progressive extension model of ethics” (97). The point, after all, is to *persuade* other humans to re-interpret how we should collectively understand, and interact with, the rest of nature. One way of understanding the troubled history of this debate, then, is as a history of not entirely successful experiments with different vocabularies and analogies that are intended to *open up* new ways of thinking about, imagining, inhabiting and interacting with the rest of nature.

I believe these experiments ought to continue. And at the current juncture, critical political ecology—which encompasses ecofeminist and postcolonial thought—provides a more promising basis from which to explore both continuities and differences between humans and other species, between human autonomy and nonhuman agency, and what solidarity and nondomination might mean between humans and other humans, and between humans and nonhuman species.

Whereas deep ecologists, such as Arne Naess and Warwick Fox, had sought to cultivate human solidarity with nonhuman nature by inviting us to expand our identification with the world around us, to consider the rest of nature part as of our expanded Self,¹⁴ ecofeminists, postcolonialists and difference theorists have placed more emphasis on the need to acknowledge difference rather than sameness or unity. The deep ecology idea that we can spontaneously act to defend nonhuman interests that are harmed or compromised, as if they are our own interests (being part of our larger Self), is an idea that is—for many ecofeminists—based on a fusion or rejection of difference. As Val Plumwood has argued:

Although we may (as relational selves) assume the overarching interests of the other’s general wellbeing and react to that as bound up with our own, it is crucial to our being able to defend that well-being that we retain a clear sense of the other as distinct beings with different, perhaps entirely different, interests from ours. (“Deep Ecology, Deep Pockets and Deep Problems” 63)

She goes on to argue that acknowledging such difference is also necessary if we are to avoid the colonising dynamic that seeks to assimilate the other into the coloniser's own version of self. Yet at the same time, in Western traditions in particular, we also need to acknowledge continuities and commonalities with the rest of nature in order to undermine the idea that the "truly human" is somehow outside nature, the body and the biological world (64).

In much traditional Western ethics, philosophy and political theory, it has been common to begin by asking "what does it mean to be human?" and to identify those features that distinguish humans from the rest of nature, such as sophisticated tool making, moral reasoning, language, (usually Judaeo-Christian) spirituality, and civilization. From these features were built ethical and political ideas that promoted whatever traits were selected as "human-defining." However, beginning in this way often meant that, if we are to be fully human, we must *promote* these uniquely human characteristics and thereby widen the existential gulf between humans and the rest of nature. To the extent to which we enlist these traits as the basis for progressive moral extensionism, then it becomes the basis of oppression for those humans who lack such characteristics (women, non-Europeans, other species).

Framing the problem in terms of exclusionary dualisms (of self/other and human/nonhuman) provides a different way of highlighting the common logic between various forms of oppression and intolerance of difference, whether patriarchy, imperialism, racism or human chauvinism. Whether such intolerance is directed towards human or nonhuman others, James Sterba has pointed out that there seems to be no non-question begging standpoint from which to justify the claim that the traits of those with the power to define and assert their superiority are more valuable than the traits of those who lack such power ("Reconciling Anthropocentric and Nonanthropocentric Environmental Ethics" (230). While there are countless ways by which we might distinguish humans from nonhumans species, there are also countless ways in which particular nonhuman species may be distinguished from both humans and other nonhuman species. To insist that only uniquely human traits should serve as the criteria of moral

considerability is nothing if not self-serving.

Following Plumwood, the challenge, then, is to recognize continuity, interdependence and some commonality in order to avoid hyper-separation between humans and the rest of nature, on the one hand, while also acknowledging the many areas of incommensurability, on the other. However, in the West at least, in view of the degree of hyper-separation I would suggest that the best place to start is the broadest level of commonality (say the biological and ecological embeddedness of all life-forms, the common need for sustenance and security). From this basic commonality, and bearing in mind interdependence, we can then move to recognize the differences that need to be taken into account in order to enable, as far as possible, *mutual* flourishing.

From Liberalism to Critical Political Ecology

Despite the increased sensitivity to invidious comparison by the new generation of critical theorists, they still remain ecocentric in the sense that they still pursue the idea of respect for nonhuman others. And although the argument is now couched in terms of a broader, and less human-centered notion of autonomy or nondomination, it still has roots in the Enlightenment ideals of autonomy and critique. Looking back, perhaps the first wave of ecocentric political theorists (myself included) had conflated what is *distinctive* about green political thought with what is the more *fundamental or animating idea*, from which new and different applications emerge. What is groundbreaking and distinctive about ecocentric political thought is not the principle of autonomy/nondomination per se, but rather the *radical extension* of this familiar idea to a new domain—nonhuman nature. This radical extension necessarily depends for its success on acceptance of the more basic principle of autonomy that emerged and has been fashioned and refashioned in the context of ongoing human emancipatory political and ideological struggles in a range of different social and political domains. During this process, the principle of autonomy has been subjected to a range of immanent critiques that have enabled it to

outgrow its somewhat cramped, liberal origins. For example, classical liberals such as John Locke understood autonomy as something that was possessed by atomistic individuals as a natural right. Individuals were posited as socially and ecologically detached, an understanding that reduced both human and the nonhuman others to a set of constraints against which, or as instrumental means through which, individual self-realisation is achieved. However, for broadly critical political ecologists, autonomy is a relational concept, something that is constituted by, and dependent upon, social structures and social meanings. Social and ecological communities are not constraints on individual autonomy but rather preconditions for human and nonhuman agency. In this sense, critical political ecologists have sought to adjust autonomy to a world of more complex and intense economic, technological and ecological interdependence while also seeking to continue and extend the emancipatory project to human and nonhuman others.

If we take the metaphor of the tree, we might think of critical theory as the root and trunk, and critical political ecology as one of the more recent branches in this ongoing political development. Such a metaphor directs attention to the historical continuity between different social emancipatory struggles (represented by other branches of the tree) and the radical ecology movement's quest for the liberation of nature. The metaphor also helps us to appreciate the distinctive lines of development in these respective struggles, which cannot be collapsed into each other despite their common root, and which also have the potential to grow apart *or* intertwine in complementary ways over time.

Characterising the underlying animating principle of critical political ecology in these more generic (and more familiar) terms not only connects it with the normative orientation and method of immanent critique of this broader tradition of critical theory. It also connects it more directly with practical human emancipatory struggles (while acknowledging the potential conflicts that may arise from historical branching). Such a characterisation has obvious political/strategic advantages. In particular, recognising the continuity in the struggle to emancipate both human and nonhuman nature

provides the best reply to those critics who continue to misrepresent ecocentric approaches as only concerned to rescue nature *at the expense of* humanity, as if ecocentric approaches were indifferent or even hostile to human flourishing. The anthropocentric/ecocentric and instrumental/intrinsic value distinctions were never intended to drive a wedge between human and nonhuman interests. On the contrary, the concern has always been to reconcile or mutually accommodate these interests within a more encompassing framework. Yet it has been widely interpreted by critics as creating such a wedge, conveying the misleading impression of a necessary conflict and a zero sum game between the interests and needs of the human and nonhuman worlds.

The anthropocentric/ecocentric dichotomy has also proved troublesome in the way it has been taken to convey the (misleading) impression that the primary culprit for the ecological crisis is an arrogant, blanket humanity pitted against a defenseless nonhuman nature. Such a framing (whether advanced mischievously or innocently) is clearly problematic in obscuring the fact that not all humans are equally responsible for, or equally troubled or affected by, environmental destruction. Indeed, a central insight of critical political ecology (particularly ecofeminism) is that the domination of nature is a complex phenomenon that has been managed and mediated by privileged social classes and impersonal social and economic systems that have systematically brought benefits to some humans at the expense of others. The result is that certain privileged social classes, social groups and nations have achieved what Mary Mellor has called a "parasitical transcendence" from human and nonhuman communities (*Feminism and Ecology* 190). In effect, a minority of the human race has been able to deny ecological and social responsibility and transcend biological embodiment and ecological limits (i.e., achieve greater physical resources, more time and more space) *only at the expense of others*, that is, by exploiting, excluding, marginalising and depriving human *and* nonhuman others. Val Plumwood has encapsulated this problem in the idea of remoteness (*Environmental Culture* 72–80). That is, privileged social classes have been able to remain remote (spatially, temporarily, epistemologically and

technologically) from most of the ecological consequences of their decisions in ways that perpetuates ecological irrationality and environmental injustice.

Critical political ecology, and the environmental justice movement generally, have been in the vanguard of pointing to the historical and ideological connections between the domination of nonhuman nature and the domination of subaltern social groups—most notably women, workers and indigenous peoples. While a closer inspection of critical political ecology clearly reveals that the anthropocentric/ecocentric distinction and the critique upon which it rests need not function in the blunt way in which critics have suggested, a reframing of the fundamental principle of critical political ecology as respect for differently situated others, reinterpreted in an ecological context, might also assist in foreclosing such misreadings.

Ultimately, critical political ecology seeks to locate and incorporate the demand for social and environmental justice (understood here in a distributive sense to include a fair distribution of the benefits and risks of social cooperation and the minimization of those risks in relation to an expanded moral community) in the broader context of the demand for dialogic or communicative justice (understood as a fair/free communicative context in which wealth and risk production and distribution decisions takes place in ways that are reflectively acceptable by differently situated others or their representatives in the case of nonhuman species and future generations). Expressed in these terms, critical political ecology is not merely compatible with democracy—it seeks the radicalization of democracy. As we shall see, this also provides the best reply to the environmental pragmatists' anti-foundationalist critique of ecocentrism.

The Anti-Foundationalist Turn

Alongside the deepened sensitivity about the problem of invidious comparison is a general tendency to shy away from the difficult (and sometimes faintly comical) attempt to draw a clear line

between morally considerable beings, and morally inconsiderable ones—a task that had preoccupied objectivist nonanthropocentric applied ethicists. Whereas modernists such as Peter Singer once boldly drew the line between a shrimp and an oyster (the former were sentient and possessed interests that mattered, the latter were not sentient and therefore did not need to be considered in the moral calculus unless they were useful to sentient creatures), most critical and postmodern theorist have declined to embark upon such an exercise. Alternatively, they have preferred to employ looser metaphors and a vocabulary that accepts shadings and gradations in moral valuation, along with different cultural orientations and practices that are appropriate to different environments (e.g., why shouldn't Eskimos be allowed to eat whale meat?). Indeed, environmental monism, objectivist intrinsic value theories and abstract and universalist environmental philosophies have all been seriously challenged by the general anti-foundationalist movement in the social sciences and humanities, which has underscored the partial and situated nature of human knowledge and cultural understanding.

It is noteworthy that among those few critical post-structuralists who are still concerned to speak about nonhuman nature other than as passive, meaningless and valueless material, awaiting inscription and valuation by human subjects, the use of analogies and metaphors has been unavoidable. For example, Jim Cheney has suggested in "Postmodern Environmental Ethics" that if we are to acknowledge the agency of nature, then we must think of it as a "conversational partner."¹⁵ Postmodern feminists such as Donna Haraway have sought to emphasize the agency of nonhuman nature by drawing on Native American wisdom; nature may be understood as Coyote, or trickster, because it confounds our attempts to pin it down in terms of any neat set of dualisms, such as nature/culture. Similarly, her notion of humans as "cyborgs" seeks to destabilize the dualisms of natural/unnatural and animal/machine.¹⁶

This search for a non-dualist vocabulary from which to rethink cultural-ecological relations and develop a multicultural ecology¹⁷ has been a necessary and important one, but the relativisation of

environmental values that has necessarily accompanied this new direction of inquiry has also fundamentally changed the task of environmental philosophy. Whereas the early nonanthropocentric philosophers were strong advocates for the preservation of nature, aligned themselves with the wilderness and species preservation movement and trenchantly attacked capitalist development, consumerism and mass tourism, anti-foundationalist environmental philosophers have been primarily concerned to deconstruct meanings and dethrone what might be called conventional nonanthropocentric theory. The political motivations and implications of these critiques have not always been clearly discernible and they have attracted strong rejoinders from more conventional theorists (so-called "naïve realists") who have sought to reassert their scientific, philosophical and political project of saving nature, particularly Big Wilderness.¹⁸

Among those anti-foundationalists who remain concerned about environmental problems, the focus has shifted from substantive policy intervention to questions of philosophical method and democratic process. Environmental pragmatists, in particular, have argued that environmental problems must be solved by means of inclusive democratic deliberation that is practically focused, and respectful of the plurality of environmental values in particular communities. For Andrew Light and Eric Katz, environmental pragmatism primarily offers a method of inquiry based on the American pragmatist tradition, rather than a substantive environmental philosophy.¹⁹ Since environmental problem solving should be undertaken by the affected stakeholders, the role of the environmental philosopher is simply one of defending and assisting with the search for the optimal communicative conditions in which deliberation, creative conflict resolution, adaptive management and social learning can take place. In this process, pragmatists argue that deep-seated cultural, philosophical and religious differences can be held in check or deftly side-stepped by pragmatic necessity, without resort to arguments about intrinsic values. As Ben Minteer has pointed out, the American pragmatist John Dewey rejected the idea that any entity should be considered an end-in-itself, since such a notion tended to insulate the entity as independent and

somehow above cultural criticism and preclude the need for democratic deliberation. Dewey thus introduces a situational, pluralist ethic that judges all arguments and moral claims to the degree to which they can assist in solving the problem at hand. This also directs attention to the real world of practice and policy making.²⁰

Although pragmatism, as a method of environmental inquiry, has many advantages, particularly in deeply conflictual situations, it has three significant limitations from the point of view of critical political ecology.²¹ The first is that its single-minded, narrow focus on practical problem-solving and conflict resolution runs the risk of facilitating decisions that are too accommodating of the existing constellation of social forces that drive environmental degradation. In short, it is insufficiently *critical* from the point of view of oppressed or marginal social groups (not to mention nonhuman species).

The second problem is that it is too instrumentalist in the way it seeks to foreclose non-instrumental dialogue or deep religious, philosophical or cultural engagement about fundamental differences, or noninstrumental encounters with the nonhuman world. Instead it narrows attention to how a particular community of stakeholders should *use* nature, based only on practical experience and experimentation. In this respect, democratic engagement is understood in purely functional terms.²² Yet for critical theorists, particularly descendants of the Frankfurt School, keeping the dialogue alive for its own sake is ultimately more important than solving practical problems, especially if mutual understanding is to be enhanced. After all, it is difficult simultaneously to listen and be genuinely open to the other while also engaging in instrumental calculations of one's environmental claims in relation to others. Ironically, such openness to others is likely to be increased the more the pressure to make practical decisions is reduced.

Finally, although deliberation is more conducive to the protection of environmental public goods than bargaining or the mere aggregation of preferences, there is nothing especially environmental about this method of inquiry. Although purportedly anti-foundational, it ultimately comes to rest on liberal humanist moral foundations, based

on respect for individuals. In this sense, critical political ecologists could argue that environmental pragmatism is not pluralist enough in the way in that its moral foundations and methods do not provide any systematic inclusion of the interests of nonhuman others. At best, it permits nonhuman nature advocacy in those circumstances where self-appointed advocates happen to be present among the community of stakeholders. Even in these circumstances, self-appointed nature advocates must be able to convince others that protecting the environment is more *instrumentally* valuable than using it. In this sense, environmental pragmatism may be seen as restricting the further pluralisation of values and the widening of the terms of political contestation.

While environmental pragmatism has good democratic credentials (particularly vis-à-vis the particular non-anthropocentric monistic theories it has criticized), at best these credentials seem to work at the level of environmental mediation and conflict reconciliation, not environmental *advocacy*. This applies especially in relation to advocacy on behalf of parties or interests who cannot represent themselves (nonhuman species or future generations) but sometimes also to marginalized and oppressed social groups who are excluded from, but may be affected by, policy decisions.

Of course, *both* mediation and advocacy are vital to a healthy democracy. However, they play different roles and often operate at different stages of political opinion and will formation. The role of the nature advocate or environmental justice advocate is less about conflict resolution and much more about shifting horizons and changing social structures. It is also about criticizing the existing constellation of social forces and political values that cause harm, or otherwise exclude or marginalize, the constituency they seek to represent. The advocate's role in this context is necessarily that of a relentless critic of the status quo, one who seeks to argue a case and, where necessary, contest received wisdom. The point is not to accommodate to existing values and practices but rather to challenge, inspire, cajole and persuade others to think and act differently. Whereas pragmatists are interested in practical environmental problem solving and conflict resolution,

advocates sometimes deliberately generate conflict by disrupting conventional understandings and practices, including democratic protocols, in order to challenge those social forces that are seen to stand in the way of, in this case, the protection of nonhuman species. The democratic tasks of advocacy and mediation are quite different, then, and often in tension. Sometimes this tension can be productively managed, sometimes not, but it cannot, and ought not, be eliminated if a democracy is to permit social transformation (rather than merely incremental change).

Conclusion: Reinvigorating Nature Advocacy

For those supportive of both ecocentrism *and* democracy, most of the effort in recent years has gone into exploring what a green or ecological democracy might mean in theory and practice. The key concerns have been how we might refashion democratic institutions in ways that give nonhuman others (and future generations) some kind of proxy political representation, some kind of opportunity to have their interests considered in the policy and legislative process in more systematic ways. This entails searching for appropriate procedural rules and new forms of political participation and representation.

But such a democracy requires not just institutions but also creative and substantive *argument*, as well as rhetoric, story-telling, theatre, satire and other political performances, that will actually persuade others of the importance and appropriateness of respecting and protecting nonhuman nature. Green democratic procedures do not themselves guarantee particular outcomes, win arguments or move audiences—they merely enable greener dialogue. Surprisingly, this argumentative dimension of the challenge has been given much less attention by environmental philosophers and green political theorists preoccupied with democratic innovation.²³ Yet, as Michael Bruner and Max Oelschlaeger remind us, those who succeed in defining the terms of the debate also determine, in large measure, the outcome (“Rhetoric, Environmentalism, and Environmental Ethics” 391). Anti-environmentalists have been especially skilled at framing

environmental problems in terms of slogans and overdrawn oppositions (such as "people versus pandas," "jobs versus the environment") in ways that generate resentment towards environmental concerns among lay publics. Bruner and Oelschlaeger suggest that this demands a *critical rhetoric* from nature advocates (one that exposes the constrained terms of debate and the role of power), a *persuasive rhetoric* that evokes the sentiments, and an *architectonic rhetoric* that offers new ecological narratives that open up new ways of approaching ecological problems (395).

In this essay I have sketched some of the ways these arguments have been formulated, and drawn out some of the problems and possibilities. In many ways, the task today is much more perilous than it was twenty years ago, given the global dimensions of so many ecological problems, and the need for nature advocates to communicate across class, gender and cultural boundaries in the transnational public sphere. Indeed, in view of the critiques traversed above, the challenges now facing the nature advocate in our global community could be seen as positively intimidating and may be framed as follows: how to find and develop a mode of argument that encapsulates the idea of respect for nonhuman nature for its own sake; that does not privilege self-serving human attributes over non-human ones; that does not see nature as some passive substance to be acted on or valued by humans but rather recognizes some form of agency in nature; that goes beyond a mere instrumental valuation of nature's services; that is not narrowly confined to particular cultures (e.g., Western) and linguistic (e.g., English) communities; but can speak across, and appeal to, a wide variety of human cultures (and languages); that is not misanthropic and can recognize the needs of human communities to sustain their livelihoods from ecosystems.

While most cultures and societies recognize human dependence on nature, not all cultures necessarily embrace human emancipatory politics, let alone the idea of emancipating nonhuman nature. It is therefore always easier to fall back on the vocabulary of prudence rather than morality precisely because this language is more likely to reach across more cultures than arguments to do with

nonanthropocentrism and intrinsic values. And these less controversial arguments can sometimes achieve the same outcome, as Bryan Norton has long maintained in his so-called "convergence hypothesis" in *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists*.

However, anthropocentric, instrumental arguments do not *always* lead to the same outcome and it is for this reason that nature advocates cannot afford to surrender to the easier argumentative route if they are to remain nature advocates. It is under these circumstances that the demands of environmental justice appear to conflict with environmental pragmatism. However, the response to this problem is not to forsake democracy for environmental justice but rather to *radicalize* democracy in order to achieve environmental justice.

For all the problems associated with moral extensionism, it nonetheless remains useful because of its communicative power, so I will end with the analogy of human rights. In another context, Simon Chesterman points out, "It is a curious irony of human rights in late modernity that even as the political commitment to them has grown, philosophical commitment has waned" ("Human Rights as Subjectivity" 97). Human rights have outgrown their liberal origins and are now supported by a plurality of philosophical, religious and cultural perspectives. So if a cross-cultural consensus in support of human rights can grow in the absence of a single philosophical foundation, then it seems to me reasonable to anticipate and foster a cross-cultural consensus in support of something like the moral standing of nonhuman species. But whether this will eventuate will partly depend on the persuasive power of nature advocates.

NOTES

¹ Thanks to Peter Christoff for helpful feedback on this paper.

² I include under the broad rubric of ecocentric or biocentric discourses nonanthropocentric intrinsic value theory, deep ecology, transpersonal ecology, Leopold's land ethic, ecofeminism and critical post-structural investigations of the nature/culture divide.

³ An example of the former is provided by Tony Lynch and David Wells,

"Non-anthropocentrism? A Killing Objection" and an example of the latter is Murray Bookchin's *Re-enchanting Humanity*.

⁴ See, for example, Bryan Norton's "Democracy and Environmentalism: Foundations and Justifications in Environmental Policy," For an ecocentric critique of subjectivist approaches, see J. Baird Callicott, "Rolston on Intrinsic Value: A Deconstruction."

⁵ See, for example, Jane Bennett and William Chaloupka (eds.) *In the Nature of Things* and William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature."

⁶ See, for example, J. Baird Callicott, "The Conceptual Foundations of the Land Ethic"; Laura Westra, *Living in Integrity*; and Holmes Rolston III, *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World* and *Philosophy Gone Wild: Essays in Environmental Ethics*.

⁷ See, for example, Bryan Norton, "Why I am Not a Nonanthropocentrist: Callicott and the Failure of Monistic Inherentism"; Andrew Light and Eric Katz (eds.) *Environmental Pragmatism*; and the essays by Norton, Minter and Bowersox in Ben A. Minter and Bob Pepperman Taylor (eds.) *Democracy and the Claims of Nature: Critical Perspectives for a New Century*.

⁸ Bryan Norton, "Integration or Reduction: Two Approaches to Environmental Values" 108.

⁹ Indeed, Tim Hayward has recently argued in *Political Theory and Ecological Values* that this distinction now functions as an obstacle to dialogue (5-6) while John Barry maintains in *Rethinking Green Politics* that it is "a false and damaging dichotomy" (13).

¹⁰ In addition to the work of Tim Hayward and John Barry, see also Kate Soper, *What is Nature?*; Douglas Torgerson, *The Promise of Green Politics*; and David Schlosberg, *Environmental Justice and the New Pluralism*. On democracy and the environment, see William M. Lafferty and James Meadowcroft (eds), *Democracy and the Environment*; Brian Doherty and Marius de Geus (eds.) *Democracy and Green Political Thought*; and Robyn Eckersley, *The Green State*.

¹¹ Critical political ecology may be understood as a distinctive green branch of critical theory that draws on the classical Frankfurt School insights into the links between the domination of human and nonhuman nature, while

also building on more recent, kindred developments in radical environmental philosophy and politics (including ecofeminism, postcolonialism and the environmental justice movement).

¹² Tom Regan, "The Nature and Possibility of an Environmental Ethic."

¹³ This is consistent with Rodman's interest in the work of liberals such as J.S. Mill and T.H. Green.

¹⁴ Arne Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary"; "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World," and Warwick Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology*.

¹⁵ See also Christopher J. Preston, "Conversing with Nature in a Postmodern Epistemological Framework," Modernists such as John S. Dryzek (in "Green Reason: Communicative Ethics for the Biosphere") have also enlisted the idea of nature as a communicative partner.

¹⁶ Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges" and *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*.

¹⁷ See Adrian Ivakhiv, "Toward a Multicultural Ecology."

¹⁸ For example, Michael Soule and Gary Lease (eds.) *Reinventing Nature?*

¹⁹ Andrew Light and Eric Katz (eds.) *Environmental Pragmatism*. Note, however, that some pragmatists, such as Bryan Norton, have defended environmental pragmatism as a substantive philosophy in the sense that they maintain it is consistent with principles of sustainability. Norton, "Integration or Reduction" (122–23).

²⁰ Ben Minteer, "Intrinsic Value for Pragmatists?"

²¹ A more developed critique can be found in Robyn Eckersley, "Environmental Pragmatism, Ecocentrism, and Deliberative Democracy."

²² This is not to argue that pragmatists deny non-instrumental human valuations of nature; only that they steer inquiry and policy making towards practical problem-solving regarding the *use* of nature.

²³ Two exceptions are Michael Bruner and Max Oelschlaeger, "Rhetoric, Environmentalism, and Environmental Ethics," and Torgerson, *The Promise of Green Politics*.

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