

Re-Thinking Nature: Towards an Eco-Pluralism¹

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The purpose of this paper is to argue the case for a pluralist ecocentrism and an ecocentric pluralism. I am principally concerned here with what we know and believe (the epistemic), but not in a way that assumes it can cleanly be separated from what actually is (the ontic); what is may determine what we know about it, but since it only acquires existence for us (let alone meaning) insofar as it is known, that knowing is itself, for all intents and purposes, ontically determining.² Nor do I think the epistemic is without an irreducible normative dimension, which introduces unavoidable value (axic), ethical and political considerations.

Of course, it is easy to overemphasize the importance of the epistemic, and a common philosophical *déformation professionnelle* to do so. But people will think about nature, both individually and collectively; and as part of their practices in and interactions with it, the way they do so has significant effects. Given that these are either more and less destructive, the project of encouraging a relatively sane, healthy and hopeful way to think about nature is a limited but valuable one.

My chief concern and reason for writing is the present condition of nonhuman nature on Earth. Allowing for differences of context, Orwell's observation is truer than ever: "The actual outlook is very dark, and any serious thought should start out from that fact."³ The ecological crisis is already serious, and getting worse; and the overwhelming evidence to that effect, on nearly all fronts and measures,⁴ coexists with a startling degree of denial. (A recent book on 'rethinking green politics' starts out by denying that there is one.)

I first consider the disturbing agreement of objectivist realists and subjectivist constructionists on nature as lifeless, passive and manipulable. I then try to define a better way of construing nature, starting with suggestions by three authors (Herrnstein Smith, Latour and Ingold) which I call *relational pluralism*, as distinct from *monist essentialism*. Such pluralism is, I argue, integral to the ecocentrism missing from the positions of both realists and constructionists, and ecocentrism is integral to it in turn: hence, *ecopluralism*. After reviewing representative voices from the environmental literature (realists, constructionists and scientific humanists), I turn to the implications of ecopluralism for the questions of instrumental *vs.* intrinsic value and anthropocentrism *vs.* ecocentrism. (Incidentally, my discussion of authors, whether those I criticise or praise, is necessarily relative to the issues at hand, and therefore not intended to be exhaustive.)

I then discuss two aspects of ecopluralism as indispensable for its proper understanding: the metapluralism implied by *metis* (as distinct from *phronesis* and *episteme*), and the nature of discourse (as distinct from language). Finally, I suggest the proper roles of objectivism and subjectivism, before briefly considering how contemporary environmental philosophy could benefit from an ecopluralist approach to reality, reason, nature and humanity.

1.

To begin with, let me point out something about each of two major and apparently contrasting approaches to nature. First, there is the clear complicity of objectivism, realism and rationalism – culminating, potentially and often actually, in scientism – in the ecological crisis. Such approaches are united in maintaining and propagating the idea of the “environment” (a word that already does a lot of work marginalizing nonhuman nature) as essentially a mere setting for the human drama, most of which comprises a set of passive resources for the advancement of human interests, with the latter being the most, or even only, ethically considerable kind. This anthropocentric utilitarianism blends seamlessly with an even more impoverished and impoverishing economics, enshrining individualistic self-interest-maximisers.⁵ Now such ideas are abstract, but their effects – proceeding largely through the principal institutionalised forms of modernity: corporate capital, the nation-state, and modern science and technology⁶ – are anything but. One example is the current drive to patent life-forms and their component parts, natural as well as genetically engineered: driven by investment with a view to returns, protected by states through organisations like the WTO, and accomplished through scientific technology. A view of nonhuman nature as appropriate for and amenable to this sort of programme is insufficient, in itself, to enable its realisation; but it is integral, and arguably necessary, for the attempt. Such a view involves rejecting notions of nature as itself a possible locus of value, insight, meaning or wisdom. In the usefully blunt words of R.H. Peters, “We must concentrate on prediction alone if we wish to reap the benefits of science. We thus quantify and generalize, we depersonalize the world in order to dominate. The price is worth paying.”⁷ Let us call such advocates *realists* or *objectivists*.

Neil Evernden, in *The Natural Alien*, terms the ideology of this school “resourcism”: “a kind of modern religion which casts all of creation into categories of utility” to humans, whereby there is literally nothing in the natural (and human) world which cannot be “transformed into a resource...”⁸ By implication, a defensible, rigorous and non-misanthropic ecocentrism is needed as part of the mitigation, let alone resolution, of the ecological crisis. One might think, then, that environmentalists and ecologists (both political and scientific) would be at the forefront of opposing anthropocentric resourcism and developing an ecocentric alternative. Not so, however; “environmentalists”, drawing upon scientific ecology, are now increasingly often arrayed against the theory and practice of ecocentrism. One recent example: drawing upon a book by Norman Moss, significantly entitled *Managing the Planet*, Fred Pearce maintains that humans have the right to impose their moral values on the rest of nature, or “tame” it, and a “near-duty” to use biotechnology to do so.⁹ But this is perhaps intellectual froth compared to the ubiquitous so-called environmental impact assessment (EIA), which rules out of court any considerations other than the impact on human interests - themselves often narrowly construed as economic – and *a fortiori* any discussion of values and priorities in relation to those interests. No wonder John Livingstone has described them as “a grandiloquent fraud, a hoax and a con... [which] anoints and blesses the process of ‘development’.”¹⁰ True, there is a precautionary and preservationist wing of environmental “modernizers”, which however doesn’t alter the fundamental values and attitudes concerned, or more than slightly slow the overall impetus.¹¹ “Management”, usually “scientific”, of

“resources”, and in human interests – although, of course, actually in a small minority of even those – remains the nigh-well universal cry.

This situation confirms the correctness of Evernden’s early perception of the “fatal weakness” of the ecology movement (as well as suspicions about why his work has not received more attention): “The basic attitude towards the non-human has not even been challenged in the rush to embrace utilitarian conservation. By basing all arguments on enlightened self-interest the environmentalists have ensured their own failure whenever self-interest can be perceived as lying elsewhere.... The industrialist and the environmentalist are brothers under the skin; they differ merely as to the best use the natural world ought to be put to.”¹²

2.

The second understanding of nature involves a family of approaches commonly held (by both its proponents and opponents) to take the opposite view in relation to the first: social constructivism, cultural relativism, and poststructuralism and/or postmodernism. This general approach has had a big impact in environmental philosophy, along with other areas of the academy, as is reflected in the plethora of titles along the lines of *The (Re)(De)Construction of Nature*, *The (Re)Invention of Nature*, *The (Re)Creation of Nature*, *The (Re)Interpretation of Nature* and so on, sometimes with qualifiers like *Social* and *Cultural*. Its recent popular statements include Simon Schama’s *Landscape and Memory* (1995) and William Cronon’s collection, *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (1995). Both are full of *aperçus* of which the following, respectively, will serve as examples:

Even the landscapes that we suppose to be most free of our culture may turn out, on closer inspection, to be its product.... At the very least, it seems right to acknowledge that it is our shaping perspective that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape.¹³

[Nature] is a profoundly human construction.... [Wilderness] is quite profoundly a human creation...it is a product of that civilization, and can hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which it is made.¹⁴

There is an academic “postmodern” top end of this market, of course, but underneath the febrile neologisms the understanding of nature here remains strikingly modernist.¹⁵ Ludmilla Jordanova’s formulation may be disingenuous – an imperative intervention disguised as a neutral description – but it is admirably concise and overt: “‘Man’ never left centre stage, nature *never has been, and never will be*, recognized as autonomous.”¹⁶ The nonhuman natural world is a *tabula rasa*, whether mere inert matter or a dynamic but meaningless chaos, upon which human beings struggle to write, read and erase each other’s social, cultural and political concerns. So I shall call the members of this school *constructionists* or *subjectivists*.

Now it is true that constructionists have made some real and hard-won gains *vis-à-vis* the tyranny of modern mainstream scientism. They are summed up in one of the late Paul Feyerabend’s parting shots: “The objection that [a] scenario is ‘real,’ and that we must adapt to it no matter what, has no weight, for it is not the only one: there are many ways of thinking and living.” But anyone tempted to concur with postmodern complacency should pay close attention to his next words: “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.”¹⁷

The error here has both a substantive and a strategic dimension. The first boils down to this: trying to oppose objectivism by privileging its subjectivist opposite is either stupid or dishonest, when merely inverting the schema actually preserves the dualism, *including* the objectivist pole, and all that it entails. And one of the things so entailed is the anthropocentrism I have noted. Now I don’t want to suggest that cultural resourcists are in the same political camp, or nearly as dangerous (because not nearly as powerful), as the material and corporate resourcists who are, currently and for the foreseeable future, the principal enemy. In contrast to the latter, very few deconstructive cyborgs have been spotted actually out razing old-growth forests. Nonetheless, the remarkable thing about the second approach is that in all essentials, it involves the very same idea and value of nature as the first. Both views subscribe to the humanist and/or modernist arrogation of all value, meaning and agency. And both firmly exclude a nature which, *in itself*, is to any significant degree active and autonomous, has any interests, is possessed of any kind of subjectivity, is a site of non-use or ‘intrinsic’ value, or has any ethical significance or considerability. In short, both schools are at best non- and at most anti-ecocentric. (Here I could also mention, as a special case, the work of those authors who try to combine the naturalism of the first school with the politics of the second; I will return to this group.)¹⁸

Strategically, the degree and coherence of this overlap strongly suggests that the adherents of the second approach are engaged, however unwittingly or unwillingly, in tacit collusion with the first – or at the least, making their activities harder to criticize and resist, whether intellectually, morally or politically. Seen in this light, the cultural resourcism of constructivism has all the makings of a disturbing *trahison des clercs*. It is next of kin to the resourcism of industrial developers, under the common aegis of anthropocentric and modernist humanism, and encourages, as I have said, the same instrumental and utilitarian attitude towards nature. It undermines the positive contribution the academy could make to resolving the ecological crisis, and reduces still further any room for an ecological politics worthy of the name. Just as resource-based ecologists have ensured their own failure by rendering nature vulnerable whenever human self-interest can be perceived as lying elsewhere, so cultural studies resourcists, I suggest, implicitly licence the reactionary (de)construction of nature by the more powerful mainstream interests they often claim to oppose.

3.

The situation just described gives rise to the following questions: why do professional intellectuals find nonhuman nature so hard to deal with – or rather, to be frank, tend to come so badly unstuck as to end up, in Gary Snyder’s apt words, as “the high end of the ‘wise use’ movement”?¹⁹ And, more important, what is a better way of going about things?

Regarding my first question, it is tempting to conclude of the constructionists: how convenient, and flattering, for them. Poor old nature: *sans* meaning and value until they are graciously conferred by an enlightened humanity, led by the department of literature/cultural studies/philosophy. But we should recall that the classic realist strategy is to disguise particular and interested claims as disinterested, universal and objective ones, on behalf of God, Truth, or indeed Nature. (De)constructionists have

therefore understandably adopted the opposite strategy, proclaiming that the world, including humanity, and truths about them, are not discovered but made; and that since that is so, those truths – and ultimately, that world – can be unmade and remade better. Perhaps that is why, at least in part, whatever professional intellectuals of this persuasion touch tends to disappear: not only nature but literature, childhood, the past: all magicked by the appropriate theoretical version of this belief into a blank screen for “our” concerns, fears, hopes and neuroses.

What leads them on, then, is the promise of a better world: certainly no bad thing, in itself. But in the words of James Thurber, “You might as well fall flat on your face as lean over too far backward.” It is all very well to offer hope to the oppressed by maintaining that “we” made, and make, nature or reality or truth, so we can un-make and re-make it. But how much longer can we ignore the corollary: that if we can deconstruct their “Nature”, then so too can they (literally) deconstruct ours? Do we really want to agree that nature is nothing more or other than something that can be made over at will by the most powerful groups with an interest in and the means of doing so? The result of this voluntarism run wild is that constructionism now functions, to a depressing extent, as academic window-dressing for consumer capitalism, a free-rider on the trillion-dollar project to sell us all, in Bill Gates’s words, “a new, mediated way of life”. (And of nothing is this truer than Donna Haraway’s pseudo-critical celebration of the glamour of hypermodern technology.)

Note too the extent to which, as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro points out, the metaphors of construction, production and invention, so beloved of these so-called postmodernists, are thoroughly modernist – not least in the way they mirror the monotheistic metaphor of creation whose progeny they ultimately are.²⁰ Hence they participate in the same logic of monism, even as many profess pluralism. It seems that one of Derrida’s *aperçus*, at any rate (and ironically, one stated with unaccustomed clarity) has gone largely ignored: “All that [“quite simply everything”] is political, but it is not only political.”²¹

Turning to my second question above – what is a better way? – we could sharpen it up by asking, is there some way to protect the hard-won gains of relativism or pluralism while also acknowledging nature’s intrinsic value, reality and agency? In which case, it would have to be a way which doesn’t involve attempting *either* to return to naïve realism, etc. (in order to save nature from idealist relativists), *or* to push through vulgar constructivism (in order to save humans from scientific materialists).

Taking these options in turn, Snyder’s suggested remedy – “take these dubious professors out for a walk, show them a bit of the passing ecosystem show, and maybe get them to help clean up a creek” – is indeed tempting, and might help. But it strongly smacks of Dr Johnson’s answer to Berkeleian idealism; and kicking a stone, as a philosophical refutation, fails. (Both pain and stone could exist in, even only in, the mind of God.) It is also highly counter-productive as a strategy. Take another example; in response to Keith Tester’s characteristically constructionist suggestion that discourse about animals (such as that of animal rights) is “not concerned with animals at all...on the contrary, the idea says rather more about society and humans”, Ted Benton understandably ripostes that if “a fish is only a fish if it is classified as one, perhaps, if we were to impose the socially produced category of fish upon the viper its bite would lose its venom?”²² In other words, there is a “real” animal, which is sufficient to refute Tester’s arrogant sophistry. But that is a mistake, again both substantively and strategically: the former because the correct answer to Benton’s question (as Viveiros de Castro suggests) is, “No, it wouldn’t, but some fish would

become poisonous”,²³ and the latter because even the most sophisticated scientism draws its strength from just such ultimately simplistic realism. Advocates of the so-called scientific management of the planet are only too delighted to add a little more academic *caché* to their portfolio of the kind exemplified (for example) by Soulé and Lease’s academic stone-kicking in *Reinventing Nature? Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction* (1995).²⁴

The second alternative – trying to push through the current constructionist programme – is equally unattractive, not only because of its contempt for nature, which such a project would simply worsen and cement into place, but because it is doomed anyway; as the pole of a reciprocally dependent dualism, the cultural envelope can never be pushed far enough to fully encompass (in its advocates’ eyes) its evil biological twin, any more than the reverse is possible. Constructionism is therefore badly placed to take on evolutionary psychology (*né* sociobiology), which so urgently needs doing. The new social Darwinians like no-one more than an opponent who can only dogmatically insist on the preeminence of “environment”. It keeps the whole debate going, with its absurd assumption that nature/nurture constitutes a fundamental dichotomy, and thus guarantees them continuing purchase and publicity. And by the same token, as I have already mentioned, inverting and thus confirming the dualism leaves objectivism essentially undisturbed.

Of course, there is some truth in both the realist and the constructionist positions. The real problem stems not from their differences but what they share. In addition to their anthropocentrism, both views subscribe to the closely related modern metaphysic – initially Cartesian-Galilean-Baconian, but with deep Greek and Judaeo-Christian roots – of (ontically) mind vs. matter, and (epistemically and axically) subject vs. object. They simply occupy different poles of this dualism and then attempt to reduce its opposite, thus constituting, in effect, “two vying ‘monisms’”.²⁵ Scientism struggles to reduce all that is human to a scientifically naturalised nature (pretending that no other kind of nature is possible); humanism, as concisely stated by Barthes, tries to “always remember to reverse the terms of this very old imposture...to establish Nature itself as historical.”²⁶ But both attempts not only confirm the shared underlying assumption of an ontological split (albeit one each promises to overcome), they also covertly back each other up in attempted monism as a meta-strategy, in all its essentializing and imperialistic universalism. That is what perverts the truth of each view, by refusing to recognise its own limits. It amounts, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith puts it, to “intellectual/political totalitarianism (the effort to identify the presumptively universally compelling Truth and Way and to compel it universally)...”²⁷

As a result, not only does the constructionist critique of realism ultimately fail. It also simultaneously permits nonhuman nature a real life only on the condition, and to the extent, that it is a strictly human one (i.e., cultural, social, political), while abandoning it to the not-so-tender mercies of the biological managerialists when and where its culturalist programme reaches its inevitable limits. From an ecocentric point of view, the result is a kind of double betrayal.

I should also add that there is a “spiritual” version of subjectivism, often self-positioned in opposition to scientific naturalism, which however escapes none of the above analysis. As Bahro remarked, “It makes no great difference whether we are ‘materialistic’ or ‘idealistic’ monists - that is, people who are convinced of the unity of the world.”²⁸ Although he was anticipated by Gregory Bateson, David Abram has more recently incisively pointed out that both the abstract objectivity of scientism and the subjectivity privileged by New Age discourse “perpetuate the distinction between human ‘subjects’ and natural ‘objects,’ and hence neither threatens the common

conception of sensible nature as a purely passive dimension suitable for human manipulation and use. While both of these views are unstable, each bolsters the other; by bouncing from one to the other – from scientific determinism to spiritual idealism and back again – contemporary discourse easily avoids the possibility that both... the perceiver and the perceived are interdependent and in some sense even reversible aspects of a common animate nature...”²⁹

4.

What better alternative – more promising, hopeful and yes, with due respect for context, truer – am I suggesting? The resources for an answer are certainly there in the work of Feyerabend, especially in *Farewell to Reason* (1987) and his posthumous autobiography *Killing Time* (1995). But the clearest and most systematic exposition I know is that of Barbara Herrnstein Smith in her two books, *Contingencies of Value* (1988) and *Belief and Resistance* (1997). Not that systematicity has any inherent virtue – what has? – but it does make it harder for the arguments to be dismissed without bothering to think about or even read them, which remains Feyerabend’s usual fate. (Of course, William Burroughs’s approach also has a certain undeniable appeal: “Subjective, objective – what’s the difference?”)

It is always dangerous trying to encapsulate a rich and subtle argument, but I shall try. In relation to value (axiology) and knowledge (epistemology) respectively, Smith makes the case for reclaiming relativism, in which value and truth are not the objective properties of entities, but changing functions of consequential interactions among multiple and never exhaustively delineable variables: not subjective (a matter of personal taste or desire: although that counts too), but *contingent*. The result is “a conceptualization of the world as continuously changing, irreducibly various, and multiply configurable”, yielding – in keeping with “our irreducible scrappiness” – only “local resolutions and provisional stabilities”.³⁰

The point is not that objectivism and realism are wrong, or even necessarily authoritarian (although they certainly can be, in the attempt); it is that such reasoning *never occurs*.³¹ There is “no particular single dimension or global parameter”;³² no “general, all-purpose epistemic methods are available: no touchstones of truth, no automatic refutations of error, no ready-made exposures of deception.”³³ And if analysis is not then transcendental, universal or unconditioned, “it must be restricted, partial, and local, which is not to say, it must be heavily emphasized, ‘subjective’ in the usual limited objectivist senses of the latter, or ‘privatized’ or ‘individualistic’ in their current polemical senses.”³⁴

In particular, the classical objections to relativism, so understood – the Egalitarian Fallacy (‘then all theories must be equally valid’), the Anything Goes Fallacy (‘then any belief or practice becomes acceptable’), the Self-Contradiction Fallacy (‘in arguing this truth the relativist contradicts him- or herself’), the Quietism Fallacy (‘then why do anything?’), not to mention the Nazi Death-Camps Fallacy (‘that is where this sort of thing ends up’) – all result from realist/objectivist assumptions about the meanings of the terms being used (including the assumption that no other meanings are possible) which beg the question at issue.³⁵ That is, they assume that an uninterpreted objectivity is available, either in practice or just in principle, which then supposedly renders all the relativists’s arguments either “merely” contingent (*ie.* arbitrary) or “merely” subjective (*ie.* a function of purely personal preference, political power, etc.). Pressed, realist critics will invariably try to fall back on so-called universal conditions, or intersubjective agreement, or

experimental replication, or even (when desperate) something called “obvious common sense”, as if these can accomplish anything without further specification to the point of “mere” contingency. *Ceteris paribus* (“other things being equal”) might as well be a magical incantation. Such faith is touching, but less than philosophically impressive.

5.

Smith’s work is very usefully complemented by that of two others, to which I shall now briefly turn. The first is Bruno Latour’s in *We Were Never Modern* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Press, 1993). By way of a bridge, however, I would point out that the implications of her relativism apply equally to instances of cultural (or social, psychological or spiritual) absolutism, of the kind already discussed, as to the biological or materialist kind. Given that “relativism” is also the name sometimes used to describe the former approach, which I have characterised as cultural and/or social constructionism (and some of whose proponents actually subscribe to the fallacies just enumerated), there is room for considerable confusion here, which I shall address in a moment.

Latour’s term for the approach of the cultural/social essentialisers is “absolute relativism”, which he contrasts critically with a “relative relativism”, or “relationism”, which corresponds closely to Smith’s position. The former, he points out, never relativize anything but cultures, leaving nature to be universalized by hard science. Thus absolute relativism agrees with “its enemy brother rationalism” that “the reference to some absolute yardstick is essential.”³⁶ As a result, “all the subtle pathways leading continuously from circumstances to universals have been broken off by the epistemologists, and we have found ourselves with pitiful contingencies on one side and necessary Laws on the other – without, of course, being able to conceptualise their relations.”³⁷ As Neil Evernden points out – and his analysis in *The Social Creation of Nature* (1992) strongly complements that of Latour – “For the humanist concept of ‘Human’ to exist, we must first invent Nature: our freedom rests on the bondage of Nature to the ‘Laws’ which we prescribe.”³⁸

This situation is the outcome of what Latour brilliantly delineates as the modern constitution, with its three guarantees: 1st: “even though we construct Nature, Nature is as if we did not construct it. 2nd: even though we do not construct Society, Society is as if we did construct it. 3rd: Nature and Society must remain absolutely distinct.”³⁹ And these guarantees, including the last boundary, are strictly policed; indeed, a great deal of what we call “education” goes into their maintenance. Not surprisingly, a contract that is at once imperialistically parochial and dogmatically arbitrary requires considerable institutionalised enforcement to naturalise.

Relationism, by contrast, is all about relations: practices, instruments, documents and translations. This focus only becomes possible with the realisation that “the very notion of culture is an artifact created by bracketing Nature off. Cultures...do not exist, any more than Nature does. There are only natures-cultures, and these offer the only possible basis for comparison.”⁴⁰ Nature-cultures, subject-objects, local-globals – these are the appropriate *focii* of analysis. And they are constituted by networks, which themselves “are simultaneously real, like nature; narrated, like discourse; and collective, like society.”⁴¹ Not an essence, then, nor even poles, but a process: one which is all of these things, and which *produces* both humans and nonhumans (as well as divinities). That last distinction is therefore neither fundamental nor foundational.⁴²

6.

The third author I want to bring in here is the anthropologist Tim Ingold. He too points out that to be consistent, not only “must the concept of nature be regarded as a cultural construct, but so also must that of culture.”⁴³ But that leads to an infinite regress. Furthermore, the givenness of the nature/culture distinction is assumed by both scientists and humanists, even though it is markedly absent (even rejected) by hunter-gather societies. “Anthropological accounts, however, typically present this view as entailing a particular social and cultural construction of nature, thereby reproducing the very dichotomy that, in other contexts, is recognized as peculiar to the Western tradition.”⁴⁴

Recalling Latour’s “modern constitution”, it is an axiom of this contingent and peculiar view, so confidently universalised, that personhood is a state of being not open to nonhuman animals. While humans “are both persons and organisms, animals are all organism.” That is the condition for tolerating the moral/biological conflation of ‘humanity’, and for conducting enquiries into the animality of human beings while ruling out any into the humanity of nonhuman animals.⁴⁵ To quote Evernden’s parallel analysis again, “There can be no exceptions: Nature is the realm of necessity, and there is no room for self-willed beings with purposes of their own.”⁴⁶

Ingold therefore suggests that instead, we “follow the lead of hunter-gatherers in taking the human condition to be that of a being immersed from the start, like other creatures, in an active, practical and perceptual engagement with constituents of the dwelt-in world.... apprehending the world is not a matter of construction but of engagement, not of building but of dwelling, not of making a view *of* the world but of taking up a view *in* it.”⁴⁷ It further follows that personhood “is open equally to human and non-human animal (and even non-animal) kinds,” since they share a common ontological status, “by virtue of their mutual involvement, as undivided centres of action and awareness, within a continuous life process.” (Again, this is very close to Smith’s account.) “In this process,” he continues, “the relations that human beings have with one another form just one part of the total field of relations embracing all living things. There can, then, be no radical break between social and ecological relations; rather, the former constitute a *subset* of the latter.”⁴⁸ Interestingly, this conclusion resonates with that arrived at by (to my mind) the most incisive ecocentric philosopher to date, the late Richard Sylvan: “the ecological community forms the ethical community”.⁴⁹

7.

At this point, let us pause for reflection. I have argued that realism/ objectivism is both false (in terms of the relevant debates) and, more to the point, unhelpful at best and highly destructive at worst in its effects in the larger world. I have also pointed out that in both its assumptions and its procedures, subjectivism, the former’s apparent adversary, often colludes with it. But the basic point is that since it is fundamentally shared by constructionists, the appropriate way to describe that mode cannot be as ‘realism’ or ‘objectivism’. I would therefore like to reconstrue the fundamental problem as *essentialist monism*, understanding the latter term to include the dualisms that often comprise it. What I mean by this is a world-view (including an epistemology) which views universally true knowledge – supposedly licenced by the objects of its inquiry, which are considered to have ultimately stable or permanent ‘natures’ – as an achievable goal, even if only in principle. It is then obliged to maintain this fiction, in practice, through contingent supplementations which, since they are theoretically and

ideologically illicit, cannot be recognized and discussed without the danger of heresy.⁵⁰ It is, in Kenneth Burke's apt phrase, "rotten with perfection."⁵¹

It is a secondary consideration whether the "laws" laid down are material, social, or spiritual. The *modus operandi* is the same in all cases, and indeed is clearly traceable from its Christian monotheistic and Greek philosophical roots to its modernist-humanist heir, with universal scientific truth standing in for the one God, and reason for revelation (still subject to authorisation, of course) as its sole licit guarantor. As Weber perceived, its foundational premise is the *belief* that there is a single reference point whereby "one can, in principle, master all things by calculation".⁵² Such monism is necessarily also universalist, since if there is only one such principle it must, by definition, apply everywhere without exception. Of course, to ensure that the one truth – which is not self-evident – is 'correctly' perceived and promulgated, a priesthood of approved interpreters is also required...and so on. As Laclau and Mouffe say, this point is decisive: there can be no radical and plural democracy, as opposed to authoritarian absolutism (whether overt or covert), "without renouncing the discourse of the universal and its assumption of a privileged point of access to 'the truth', which can be reached only by a limited number of subjects."⁵³

This mode is also profoundly implicated in the ecological crisis, insofar as it chiefly facilitates the disenchantment of the world – a practical prerequisite to its desecration, commodification, marketing and sale. It is also almost impossible to subscribe to a monist universalism without ultimately rejecting limits (since it is, by definition, without any) – another key element of anti-ecological modernity. Yet note that ecological fundamentalism, by merely replacing the one true and universal God, or secular Truth, with a mystical Nature (even Gaia), would leave the logic untouched, thereby itself becoming the enemy of what it wants to save. Monist essentialist discourse as such is *tendentially* anti-ecological, regardless of the content of its privileged signifier.

Since both realism and constructionism are varieties of essentialism, the contrary needs a term. In ways already discussed, dualism commonly functions as a tacit part of essentialist monism, which it tacitly supports by providing what the latter aims to absorb, and thus a *raison d'être*. So the relevant conceptual pair, as Viveiros de Castro says, is "monism and pluralism: multiplicity, not duality, is the paired complement of...monism".⁵⁴ There is no ideal name for this idea. Viveiros himself suggests "perspectivism." Smith has bravely stuck with "relativism", but the tide of misunderstanding (not helped, as I have said, by some of its apparent advocates) continues to run strong.⁵⁵ As the editors of a recent collection put it, "The spectre of relativism haunts pluralism..."⁵⁶ That the spectre is a gross and vulgar caricature is neither here nor there.⁵⁷ That is undoubtedly why Latour chose instead "relationism", but establishing a neologism is also a lengthy and risky prospect. Another alternative, "non-essentialism", is purely negative. That may well be a virtue, of course, but I would like to chance my arm on a positive term nonetheless, namely *relational pluralism*.

The ontic dimension of this world-view may be summed up as contingency (of which necessity is a special limiting case), which analytically entails plurality, which in turn entails relations.⁵⁸ In Louis MacNeice's words – and those of a good poet are apt to be as least as accurate as any – "World is crazier and more of it than we think,/ Incurably plural".⁵⁹ The epistemology accordingly recognises the relatively local, temporary, incomplete and provisional nature of all knowledge (which is not, however, therefore impossible or illusory), and indeed of everything *qua* thing, of whatever kind.

Conversely, in this view there is no need to establish “the truth” in the usual objectivist sense, as distinct from a rhetorical-pragmatic consensus (but not in the same sense, *ie.* “merely”: as if any other kind were in practice possible). A “universe that is a hundred percent relational...[is] one in which there would be no distinctions between primary and secondary qualities of substances, or between ‘brute facts’ and ‘institutional facts’...”⁶⁰

Such pluralism breaks with the monist metaphysic embodied in the modern constitution which arrogates agency, intelligence and value to humanity alone, and instead locates it (so to speak) in the unbounded network of interactions – the “more-than-human”⁶¹ – of which humanity is but a part, however distinctive: “uniquely human without any sense of special privilege”.⁶² *It is therefore ‘necessarily’ ecocentric.* (Necessarily, that is, within the terms of the limited and contingent discourse that constitutes it.) The alternative is a pseudo-pluralism that arbitrarily limits itself to the human, and imposes an absolutist monism on the rest of nature. By exactly the same token – that unbounded and therefore ultimately unboundable network (for want of a better single word) – ecocentrism, properly so-called, *is ‘necessarily’ pluralist.* The alternative is a pathological ecocentrism which either includes humanity in nature but effectively eliminates it in a collectivist subordination that reproduces the logic of monist essentialism – or else excludes it from nature, thus reinforcing the dualism of the modernist dead-end.

To some extent, this double conclusion follows directly from work I have already discussed, and I have simply drawn it. So rather than reiterate that work beyond the extent I already have, I will devote the rest of what follows to aspects that seem important but have not (so far as I know) already been explored. But I would like to acknowledge that ecocentric pluralism is not the only positive or promising way around; or to put the matter another way, it is itself “multiply configurable”, with a family resemblance surviving the resulting differences of emphasis. Together with the authors I have mentioned above, it resonates strongly with the deep-green ethics of Richard Sylvan,⁶³ the pioneering work of Gregory Bateson and its further development by Maturana and Varela;⁶⁴ the emphasis on situated and embodied “barefoot” epistemology by ecofeminists such as Ariel Salleh and Val Plumwood,⁶⁵ and in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, as brilliantly articulated by Abram;⁶⁶ and the importance, recently rediscovered (by intellectuals), of local knowledge.⁶⁷ David Wiggins has recently employed analytical philosophy to good effect in this connection.⁶⁸ Although their potential green dimension has not yet been developed, to my knowledge, there are also clear connections with the pragmatism and pluralism of William James;⁶⁹ the post-critical philosophy inspired by Michael Polanyi’s concept of “tacit knowledge”;⁷⁰ and the “forms of life” of the later Wittgenstein.⁷¹ And I would like to mention that the oldest and almost certainly most sophisticated critique of essentialism of all – not excepting that of Derrida, with which there is a significant and tantalising overlap⁷² – is that of the 2nd/3rd century philosopher Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna, based on the concepts of *anatman* (nonself), *sunyata* (emptiness) and *pratitya samutpada* (co-dependent origination). Obviously, I have neither space nor, very often, competence to follow up these encouraging connections here.

What is less encouraging is the dire state of much specifically environmental discourse today. Before proceeding to the unexplored aspects of eco-pluralism just mentioned, a brief review of the current alternatives which dominate the literature today might be salutary.

8.

Let us take the influential recent work of William Cronon as an instance of the constructionist school. His starting-point is a radical split between nature and culture. Token acknowledgement of the reality of the former is soon swept away by his assertion of “the universal nature of nature”.⁷³ The other side of this conveniently blank screen is that culture, by contrast – and therefore professional cultural expertise – is all-determining. Ironically, this is a parochial cultural assumption; in Amerindian cosmology, as Viveiros de Castro has shown, culture is the universal given that assumes particular natural forms.⁷⁴ And as Anna Peterson, like Ingold, points out, “Claims about the social construction of nature rely, ultimately... on a self-contradictory assumption that culture is both a human invention and the basis from which everything else is brought into being.”⁷⁵

Cronon thus reproduces precisely what he is ostensibly criticising: “the dangerous dualism that sets human beings outside of nature”.⁷⁶ That outcome follows from his chosen strategy, which is not to encompass human-nature interactions, within the larger meta-natural ambit, in a way that would reveal how these two mutually constitute and change each other beyond any hope of self-sufficient purity, but rather to absorb and thus eliminate the natural pole altogether. And I mean *eliminate* the natural – in the sense of what Evernden calls “the wild”,⁷⁷ which is Cronon’s real target – initially as anything that should, or indeed can, be considered, but even as an experience; and ultimately, as a reality. It seems that in Cronon’s ideal world there would be no wilderness: not in his rhetorical definition of places where there are or have been no people, but in the sense correctly proposed by David Wiggins: “not as that which is free of all trace of our interventions... but as that which has not been entirely instrumentalized by human artifice, and as something to be cherished... in ways that outrun all considerations of profit.”⁷⁸ This ideal is perfectly clear: Cronon writes that in “its flight from history, in its siren-song of escape... wilderness poses a serious threat to responsible environmentalism”. And since his constructionism subsumes wilderness as a natural place under wilderness as a cultural construct, the way is open to view the former as the problem. It is therefore unsurprising to find him adding a pitch for the “management” of ecosystems that would, if successful, eliminate the last vestiges of the wild – *per impossibile*, but not incapable of doing great harm in the attempt.⁷⁹

I am also strongly reminded of a shrewd remark that most critics of “escapism”

are confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter. Just so a Party-spokesman might have labelled departure from the misery of the Führer’s or any other Reich and even criticism of it as treachery. In the same way these critics, to make confusion worse, and so to bring into contempt their opponents, stick their label of scorn not only onto desertion but on to real escape, and what are often its companions, disgust, anger, condemnation, and revolt...⁸⁰

It seems to me that such modernist fervour does indeed supply the animus with which many constructionists attempt, gross inconsistency notwithstanding, “to identify the presumptively universal truth and compell it universally” (and Smith’s percipient words bear repeating): that nature “is”, for everyone, everywhere and all time, strictly an invention, artefact or construction. So, like Kenneth Anderson, I too do not see

“why committed radical ecologists should accept being roped back into the coral of modernist progressivism.... [seeking] in the end to draw radical ecology into the ‘conversation’ of bureaucracy and managerialism, from which, once drawn in, it will go nowhere that ‘progress’ does not approve it should go.”⁸¹

There are, of course, other less egregiously anti-ecocentric modernists in the same general camp. One is Bryan G. Norton; but even he falls into an unnecessary and damaging gulf between “objective” and “subjective” value in nature. He rightly wants to avoid the realist essentialism associated with the former, but thinks that in order to do so we must reject ecocentrism – wrongly, if the former’s colonisation of nature is rejected. He sees the unavoidable role of experience in realising value, but thinks that it must be supported by “objective” empirical verification – wrongly, if experience is not devalued, as in the realist fantasy of “objective knowledge”, as “merely” subjective.⁸² And he rejects the concept of intrinsic value in nature as monist – wrongly again, if ecocentrism is, as I have argued, pluralist. Norton’s pluralism is laudable, then, but his unnecessary anthropocentrism subverts it.⁸³

9.

If this side of the debate is dispiriting, the realists are arguably still more so. There is no better example than Holmes Rolston III and his defence of “Nature for Real”, who answers his own question, “Is Nature a Social Construct?” with a resounding “no”. But what he really means is, is nature *only* a social construct? And it is perfectly possible (indeed, important) to answer that question in the negative without drawing the conclusion that nature is therefore real in the objectivist and *a fortiori* scientific sense.

Rolston’s work is littered with language which begs the principal question at hand, and concepts which simply assume as foundational, without any argument, a Cartesian objective/subjective divide, and the priority of the former pole. “Trees are not *really* green after we have learned about electromagnetic radiation and the optics of our eyes.... There is a realm *out there*, labelled nature... Cupitt is right that there is ‘no “pure” and extra-historical access to nature’; but does it follow that nothing in our ‘...representations of nature’ represents what is *actually there* in ‘*Nature itself*?’⁸⁴

It seems that Rolston has failed to grasp the point that since what is “really there” can only ever be apprehended through the results of interacting with it (whether or not these interactions are technologically enhanced), representations can only ever be compared to other representations; or that representations would certainly be impossible without nature, but it does not necessarily follow that they are representations *of* nature. Nothing daunted, Rolston proceeds to decree that as a result of accumulated sifting and testing, “we in the West”, enlightened as we are, have scientific concepts about nature which “are true, or at least truer to the world, than the concepts they have replaced.”⁸⁵ Flourishing a vulgar and circular Darwinianism – survival entails fitness and fitness entails survival – he concludes that we (but exactly who?) have successfully coped (this may just be premature) “because words *copy* enough of a world that lies *on the other side of language* for us to survive and flourish.”⁸⁶ At the risk of belabouring the obvious, words cannot “copy” worlds, and we can never reach the other side of language, or rather – and this is a vital distinction, to which I shall return – discourse; at least, not knowingly. The Earth is at once both utterly real *and* unavoidably a “web we have spun”: real, narrated and collective, as Latour puts it.⁸⁷ As it happens, I thoroughly applaud Rolston’s ecocentrism; but monist realism is not the way to go about furthering that cause.

Another monist-realist is J. Baird Callicott. He is more subtle, pointing out that nature can be valued for itself but not in itself, and calling for a theory of non-instrumental value in nature that is “neither subjectivist nor objectivist”.⁸⁸ In practice, however, this goal is sacrificed to yet another realist attempt to occupy and eliminate lived experience. Assuming that experienced value is “merely” subjective – as if “objective” value, to which the latter is implicitly compared, were ever actually possible – Callicott has decided that it must be grounded and justified by scientific naturalism. He thus falls back into the same scientism as Rolston: “scientific foundations are universally endorsed” (far from true, even in “the West” – and even *if* true, no bridge to “the truth”); reality can “corroborate our representation of it” (as if recourse to another representation, and the resulting infinite regress, could somehow be bypassed); and that old self-serving chestnut that “the institution of science is self-correcting” (even if granted, self-correcting in relation to what?).⁸⁹

“Reality” here an empty signifier which assumes what is to be shown, and whose value can never be cashed in in the way Callicott intends (ie., “objectively” and “scientifically” rather than rhetorically and strategically). It is also the emblem *par excellence* of science at its most aggressively modernist and imperialist: precisely what Feyerabend described as “the attempt to enforce a universal truth (a universal way of finding truth) [which] has led to disasters in the social domain” – to say nothing of the ecological – and to empty formalisms combined with never-to-be-fulfilled promises in the natural sciences.”⁹⁰ That Callicott determinedly advocates science as “epistemologically privileged” in the course of an otherwise excellent survey of non-scientific perceptions, conceptions and valuations of the natural world is extraordinary. Fortunately, it is open to pluralists to avail themselves of his valuable findings without accepting the prejudice that frames them.⁹¹

10.

Before concluding this survey, we must briefly consider the case of scientific humanists like Tim Hayward, Kate Soper and John O’Neill, who combine ideology of scientific naturalism with the “left” cultural politics of constructionism. Avowedly adherents of “the anthropocentric principle of enlightened self-interest”,⁹² one of their principal aims (to quote Hayward) “is to identify the ecological values that are implied by or are consistent with human interests”⁹³ – a project, in other words, that in the case of any conflicts between human and nonhuman interests would *automatically* award the palm to the former. And as strict subscribers to the modern constitution, like good constructionists, they arrogate subjectivity, agency and meaning to human subjectivity alone; but the resulting denatured “nature”, redefined as “global resources” for solely human ends, is then turned over to scientific realists for its “rational management”. This manoeuvre enables them to enlist in both camps of the debate.

Scientific humanists also attack those who perversely hold to the kind of experience of nature that most resistant to such a programme (and I quote O’Neill) for their “anti-scientific, mythologized and personalized picture of the natural world”.⁹⁴ But such scientism is not merely question-begging in assuming that nature is exhausted by what natural science defines it as; in its contempt for all qualitative, sensuous and spiritual experience of nature as merely “secondary” in the Galilean sense (no coincidence),⁹⁵ it plays directly into hands of those whose programme involves the further privatisation and manipulation of humanity and nonhuman nature alike. And in relation to the latter, I would just remind the reader that humanity already appropriated almost half of the planet’s photosynthetic energy, re-ordered and

impoverished a massive amount of its land surface, and is currently driving forward a mass extinction of other species. In this context, a determination to cut ecologism to fit human interests and demands amounts to saying something like this: “Come come, be realistic. The ruling species will have its way, so rather than make unreasonable demands let us ask how we may soften the blow.” In short, by combining monist essentialism with anthropocentrism in ecological guise, the scientific humanists promulgate a particularly insidious form of “modernisation”. Not surprisingly, perhaps, most of the scientific humanists’ political provenance is broadly Marxist; but it seems fair to ask that with enemies of neo-liberal globalisation like this, what need has the latter of friends?

11.

The upshot of the preceding review of the literature is this: to the extent that the purpose of so-called environmental philosophy is to promote thinking about nonhuman nature – especially as part of acting towards it – in ways that understand it, respect its integrity, value its presence and protect its future, then much of that philosophy is in a rather sorry state. Obviously there are exceptions, some of whom I have mentioned and drawn upon. I hope that in my discussion so far, both exegetical and (insofar as possible) original, the positive potential of ecopluralism, in contrast, will already be evident. I shall therefore briefly draw out some of those implications, before turning to aspects of ecopluralism that may not be so obvious, and which therefore need spelling out in more detail. But it should now be clear that the absolutist essentialism of both objectivist realists like Rolston or Callicott and subjectivist constructionists like Cronon, as well as the humanist hybrids, is both untenable and destructive; likewise the dualist metaphysic (mind/matter, culture/nature, inner/outer, etc.) they also share. Theirs is a phony war, and a costly distraction from the real and urgent issues.

Regarding the vexed question of the *intrinsic value* of or in nature, Brian Baxter is right that this concept is needed as “part of a contrasting pair with that of ‘*instrumental value*’ . 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....At no point would we ever have succeeded in establishing the value of anything. 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.”⁹⁶ As for why we need the distinction, I know no better summary than that of John Fowles: “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.”⁹⁷

I don’t think it is necessary to spend much time on the idea of instrumental value. Certainly it is not possible to live without using natural things, but it does not follow that they were made for our use. This is not a difficult point; at age five my daughter, for example, had no trouble with the propositions that “the only reason for making a buzzing noise...is because you’re a bee”, and “the only reason for being a bee...is making honey.” But to the next suggestion, that “the only reason for making honey is so as *I* can eat it”, she immediately responded, “That’s not true!” Yet as Evernden points out, “Rather than challenge the astonishing assumption that only utility to industrialized society can justify the existence of anything on the planet, he [the ecologist] tries to invent uses for everything.... And, naturally, such subterfuges ultimately fail, because some clients are not white and some creatures are not

‘economic.’ Over the long-term the only defence that can conceivably succeed in the face of this prejudice is one based on the intrinsic worth of life, of living beings...”⁹⁸

Now in ecopluralist terms there can be no intrinsic value “out there” in the objectivist sense (e.g. Rolston’s) – that is, in the sense that value can have any meaning or even, in effect, reality, without a valuer (although not necessarily a human one). But the necessary involvement of valuers for value to become real does not mean it is purely or merely subjective in the subjectivist sense (e.g. Callicott’s) – that is, in the sense of arbitrary, therefore trivial and/or noncompelling, and so requiring some kind of objective (read: scientific) support. Contrariwise (against, e.g., Norton), the involvement of valuers does not mean that value is “not really there”; it is really there, but not in the absolutist (and therefore untenable) sense, demanded by realists, of *only* ‘there’, or else not ‘there’ at all. In short, once this situation has been grasped, it seems to me that the term intrinsic value can be retained, in accord with Baxter’s point, without the need for substitutes like “inherent” value.

The general subject of value pluralism links up directly with Smith’s axiological relativism, mentioned above; but it cannot really be discussed without reference to Isaiah Berlin, the most influential critic of the idea “that it is in principle possible [and desirable] to discover a harmonious pattern in which all values are reconciled.” Echoing 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.⁹⁹ And insofar as moral or ethical choices are related, as moral goods, to values (and although they are analytically distinguishable, I do not see how they can long be kept apart), value pluralism leads on to moral pluralism.

The point is not only that different considerations can apply in different cases, but that each case can properly be viewed in different ways. Connections must then 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.¹⁰⁰ In Smith’s words, “since the contingency of all value cannot be evaded, whoever does the urging cannot ultimately suppress, or evade taking responsibility for, the particularity of the perspective from which he does so.”¹⁰¹

But the ethical/moral dimension of ecopluralism, while integral to it, is not my main concern here; and its main outlines should be apparent from my discussion of the epistemic (and ontic) pluralism with which it is so closely cognate. In addition, 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. The idea that reductive simplicity here is particularly rational or ‘scientific’ is mere confusion.”¹⁰² 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.¹⁰³

12.

Much ink has also been spilt on the related question of *anthropocentrism* and *ecocentrism*. These terms constitute another linked pair, needed to refer respectively to meaning or value (the context is usually, although not necessarily, axiological and, by implication, ethical) that is confined to a strictly human locus, and that which is

located in nature. But the latter begs a vital question: does (and/or should) that nature include humanity?

Let us examine “anthropocentrism” first. Tim Hayward has put forward a complex and subtle case for replacing it 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).¹⁰⁴ His arguments for eliminating “anthropocentrism” include the following: (1) humans remain the valuers, hence “the impossibility of giving meaningful moral consideration to cases which bear no similarity to any aspect of human cases”; (2) “the problems the term is used to highlight do not arise out of a concern of humans with humans, but from a *lack* of concern for *non*-humans”; (3) it is a mistake “to criticize humanity in general for practices of specific groups of humans”, because it forestalls making common cause with defenders of social justice, and opens ecologists to the charge of misanthropy; and (4) it fails “to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate human interests”¹⁰⁵

But Hayward has, I think, fallen into an all-too-common trap by mistakenly inferring that values must be, as he seems to imply, anthropocentric – ie., 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.¹⁰⁶ 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.”¹⁰⁷ That means Hayward’s fourth point also falls: since the human scale of values can legitimately encompass human and nonhuman ones, with no opprobrium necessarily attaching to the former, “anthropocentrism” refers by definition solely to illegitimate human interests, ie. a concern for human values to the exclusion of all others (especially in situations where such concern is consequential).

As for a term to refer to legitimate human interests, I am reluctantly obliged to contradict one of the premisses of David Ehrenfeld’s superb analysis, so much of which otherwise accords with mine here, and suggest “humanism”.¹⁰⁸ It is true that the word and the philosophy have become, as he argues, a hubristic and solipcistic 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 distinctly Promethean proclamation, 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 referred (*inter alia*) to almost the opposite of its modern meaning: the need to be humane, beyond the bounds of the merely human. Conversely, those who are inhumane become less than 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, and should, be recovered; and practically speaking, what other term is there for a healthy concern for humans?

Returning to “anthropocentrism”, it is also misleading to suggest, as Andrew Dobson does (among others), that there is a strong and a weak meaning, and that the latter is “an unavoidable feature of the human condition.”¹⁰⁹ Anthropogenic values, or Wiggins’s human scale of values, are indeed unavoidable for humans (does anyone deny this?); but anthropocentric or exclusively human values are not. Thus we arrive at the same conclusion: there is only one proper sense of “anthropocentrism”, the one which makes it a necessary opposite to “ecocentrism” in the same way as “intrinsic

value” is to “instrumental value”, and linked by the fact that an anthropocentric attitude to nonhuman nature will necessarily be instrumental.

Against Hayward’s second and third points, problems can and do arise from a human concern for humans alone; and the term does not necessarily apply, in its usage, to all humans. Its point is to be able 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 no *a priori* coincidence of interests. Not the most sacrosanct social value – democratisation, say, or community empowerment, or human rights – necessarily entails green rectitude, and social justice and environmental or (as I would prefer) ecological justice are, by definition, 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.¹¹⁰ Consider workers’ interests in continued or renewed industrial production as against its ecological consequences, for example. And it should certainly be admitted that concern for nonhuman nature alone can result in wrong and unnecessary harm to human interests, too. 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 among the first to fly.

But the strongest reason to retain “anthropocentrism” is that given by Dobson when, seconding Val Plumwood’s affirmation that “the concept of anthropocentrism is fundamental to the Green critique”, he points out that Hayward’s suggestions (perhaps by intention) leave untouched the fact “human beings remain the yardstick”. And as he adds, “A sympathetic moral disposition is not best generated by the relational logic of similarities and differences, but by the openness and generosity implicit in taking on ‘centrism’ – in this case, anthropocentrism. 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.”¹¹¹

Turning to “ecocentrism”, I hope it is clear from the foregoing discussion that the nature which ecocentric epistemology, axiology and ethics take as central *includes*, but 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 to which the “eco” refers, to distinguish between human and nonhuman interest, values, etc. So on the one hand, virtually by definition, ecocentrism is not necessarily or fundamentally misanthropic; but on the other, it can certainly result (so to speak) in outcomes that are contrary to the interests, as they perceive them, of some human beings in some situations. Equally, ecocentrism does not restrict “the wild” to wilderness by excluding humans; although again, it might do so in certain cases.

This ecocentrism is pluralist, relational and open-ended. As such, it should be differentiated from its Deep Ecological version, which tends to hypostatise a unitary Self that includes both the human and nonhuman in a way that subsumes both (or in some versions, the human in the natural) in an unarticulated unity.¹¹² As Ken Jones writes, “Humankind does have a unique responsibility for the wellbeing of other creatures and the whole ecosystem, yet is at the same time a dependent and integral part of that system”, and what is needed is “to accept wholeheartedly the being separate *and* yet wholly at one with all phenomena.... But usually out of root fear we cleave either to being one with the lords of creation or just to merging gratefully with the Council of All Beings.”¹¹³ As a result, the biocentrism of deep ecology often amounts to simply an inversion of anthropocentrism, which accepts the problematic division of ontic labour in question, and incidentally facilitates misanthropy.¹¹⁴

As Plumwood has pointed out, 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.”¹¹⁵ And indeed, where there is a strong cultural tradition of identifying the social and natural worlds, as with Confucianism, that seems to be exactly what happens: human self-improvement *cannot* conflict with what is regarded as nature.¹¹⁶ In any case, there is good reason, as Sylvan remarked, 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.”¹¹⁷

More broadly, Deep Ecology subscribes to a monist essentialism whose destructive effects (when institutionalised) it tries to oppose; or, at best, it advocates its Spinozean version, a close cousin thereof. Thus it is not surprising to find some of its adherents indulging in the fantasies of final or permanent, and if necessary apocalyptic, solutions – in this case, genuinely misanthropic – that always haunt monism. No more attractive, however, is an “essentialism of the fragments” – the absolute relativism of permanent revolution, involving endless unconnectable (and therefore meaningless) chaos, as sought by some versions of anarchism.

Relational pluralism is meant to provide a middle way: not a synthesis or balance between these collectivism and atomism, but a distinctive alternative to both. Connections, articulations and alliances in pursuit of resolutions are thus vital, but they will also always be more-or-less unstable, partial and provisional. Philosophy and activism alike involve, as Ingold puts it, a view *in* the world, not *of* the world. (So although the former doesn’t rule out trying to take a view of the world, all such views will remain in it.) Indeed, ecopluralism is itself ecological: embodied, embedded and interdependent, and thus inherently contingent. That, as Smith says, is all we can ever be, or do. So ecopluralists can at least fight their corner without transcendent, universalist or absolutist illusions.

13.

The question may be asked as to whether certain discourses, despite being unable to specify their own correct use, can nonetheless be regarded as more resistant to a descent into such illusions, and more promising vis-à-vis what I have called an ecopluralist alternative. Provided they are not held to be inherently or invariably so, but strictly in relation to specific historico-social “conjunctures”, I believe the answer is, yes. But I shall turn instead to a related point which is as widely ignored or misunderstood as it is important in its consequences. It can be stated succinctly: *language is not discourse*, and the linguistic is but a *subset* of the discursive.

Why does this matter? Because realist-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 bootstrapping access is possible; but since they, like their opponents, have identified interpretation with language, they are obliged to defend the equally absurd proposition, which the realists have seen through, that language encompasses all meaning. (With his influentially loose talk of “il n’ya rien hors de la texte”, Derrida actually bears considerable responsibility for encouraging this impasse, notwithstanding his subsequent assertion that he actually meant “context”.)¹¹⁸

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.”¹¹⁹ But the idea of a non-linguistic truth is eminently possible, and highly necessary; non-linguistic phenomena are part of everybody’s lives. There is no necessary conflict here. 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 (actually another part of that world), in just the manner already discussed. Discourse thus includes *both the linguistic and non-linguistic elements* of any meaningful social practice or theory, and whatever it participates in or to which it contributes. Indeed, but for the jejune question, “What about theory?” 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.¹²⁰ Far from being a species of idealism, it 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 been at pains to emphasise, truth is both real *and* discursive – indeed, it is only real for us *if* it is discursive. That means there is no need to take the vow, impossible to fulfill in practice, that nature is extra-discursive.¹²¹ And the alternative is decidedly not confinement to a “prison-house of language”, to quote a neo-Marxist mandarin (and one of the most over-rated authors in this debate); the door is open.

Discourse is equally a prerequisite for ecocentrism or ecologism, however. That may seem an unduly strong claim, but if discourse is conflated with and thereby 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 fundamentally alien.¹²² Such a metaphysical commitment goes back at least to Socrates, as approvingly quoted by Plato: “I’m a lover of learning, and trees and open country won’t teach me anything, whereas men in the town do.”¹²³ This view resonated powerfully with the religiously licensed and delimited anthropocentric emphasis of monotheism, as well as the stress by religions of the Book on the importance of written language.¹²⁴ Developments in the seventeenth century gave it a new twist and impetus, resulting in the ongoing modern search for scientific certainty.¹²⁵ But there is no need to trace the outlines of its genealogy to recognise how dominant this attitude remains today, on the left as much as the right of its political formation.¹²⁶ In Murray Bookchin’s characteristically patronising words, for example, it is “the responsibility of the most conscious life-form - humanity - to be the ‘voice’ of a mute nature” – whereupon the whole self-servingly anthropocentric and utilitarian crypto-religion falls into place. Bookchin’s teleological evolutionary stewardship – a kind of intelligent species’ burden – fits seamlessly with the current disastrous pretensions of genetic engineering; it is the point where neo-Marxist and scientific realisms coincide as the purest, and most damaging, modernist fantasy.¹²⁷

Nature is 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 language – itself a subset of our own discursivity. Meanings and values “are not ‘outside’ nature, but have always been integral to its constitution.”¹²⁸ And an inclusive ecocentrism is impossible to envisage without recognising and appreciating our immersion in this discursive sea, the more-than-(but including)-human.¹²⁹

14.

Another important point that remains to be made about ecopluralism is that strictly speaking, it 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 that is contingently and contextually appropriate as a meta-pluralist strategy. As Smith 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”, under some conditions, 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.”¹³⁰

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 unavoidable infinite regress here; all theories can be held and practised in ways that escape specification by the theories themselves. One consequence, as William Empson remarked, is that “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.”¹³¹ 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. Understandably, however, that rarely stops attempts at such specification, my own included.

A closely related consideration is as follows. Contributing to the ecological and other related crises is the ongoing intellectual and institutional takeover of philosophy as a whole – including ontology, axiology and ethics – by epistemology: as if the significance of the ontic, axic and ethical could be exhausted the epistemic, and the last in turn by the epistemological (knowledge about knowing). 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 (memorably delineated by Weber) 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. Perhaps it was the evident shortcomings of this model for encompassing experience which led Aristotle to add the concept of *phronesis*, or practical intelligence, associated with empiricism and concrete particulars; but the latter has remained a poor relation in the Western epistemological family. Yet insofar as Smith, Feyerabend and the others I have drawn on are right, the tradition of *episteme* is, *in practice*, an enormous deception (especially self-deception) and, in its modern instantiation, an enormously damaging one. As Alf Hornburg 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.”¹³²

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...” adding that “[our] conceptual knowledge is forever inadequate to the fullness of the reality to be known...”¹³³ As we have already seen, a purported view *of* the world, as distinct from a view *in* it, is integral to its instrumental manipulation, always for purposive reasons that are additional but for that very reason cannot be admitted, lest they jeopardise its supposed objectivity and completeness.

In contrast, as Andrew McLaughlin points out – spelling out a point made earlier by Bateson, and subsequently by Abram – “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.”¹³⁴ So the successful management of nature, so to speak, can only be based on the firm understanding, and the humility that generates, that it is ultimately impossible.

Wiggins has shown this in the case of what he calls commensurabilism – the view that, for example, the alternatives of (A) letting a species of animal survive or thrive and (B) undertaking or else intensifying or development to the point of eliminating it can be decided in an abstract, perhaps even algorithmic way. Such an assumption, and the procedures based on it, are massively employed in countries where we like to think that “rational consideration of all the factors” gives the natural environment a fighting chance unavailable in places where naked self-interest and greed dominate. Yet as Wiggins points out, “There is no general recipe, and there cannot be any general recipe, for translating the choice of A over B in context C into a choice of (A,X) over (B,Y), where X and Y are further values imported by C. 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.” Hence policy grows best not out of cost-benefit analysis, for example, but from “our contextually situated processes of shared deliberations, in deliberations not so much theoretically scrutinized as actively engaged in.”¹³⁵

By implication, commensurabilist deliberations themselves also grow out “shared deliberations” where the context C is considered; but they do so covertly, indeed dishonestly, and anti-democratically, with local contextual considerations 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 epistemological and political propriety, so open discussion, which threatens to expose the contingency of the whole process, is regarded with fear and contempt; such discussion as is unavoidable will be contained within narrow parameters, without exception deeply anthropocentric, dictated by the terms of the “inquiry”, which 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, aggrandising the entire process, ruling out discussion of its own contingency, and obscuring the deeply interested (sectarian) nature of its

anthropocentric and utilitarian assumptions.¹³⁶

The irony is that a philosophical and political process which *accepts* the unavailability 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 *virtu*. That tradition incorporates a moral pluralism that in the latter's case was a direct influence on that of both Weber and Berlin. It also has some powerful implications for ecologism and ecocentrism.¹³⁷

There is no space to pursue those here, but I do want to briefly continue in the direction suggested by *phronesis* as an implicit critique of *episteme*, taking a lead from two things: the dirty and devious nature of the contemporary war on nature on the ground – which applies not only to those prosecuting it but also, by implication, those opposing them – and Machiavelli himself, as the political theorist *par excellence* who tried to take into account just that existential reality while retaining his republican ideals. Add the readiness to hand of basic human greed, hate and stupidity (with their effects now magnified a thousandfold by advanced technology), and the lack of scruples on the part of powerful entrenched interests (principally commercial and fiscal), and without wishing to disparage the importance of *phronesis*, it becomes very difficult to believe that practical intelligence alone will suffice to extricate us from the dire situation in which we now find ourselves.¹³⁸ Is there a lesson here for an engaged ecopluralism?

15.

I think so. For it seems there is a third mode of intelligence and action: a relatively universal one, long and deeply embedded in cultures as diverse and unrelated as the Greek and Chinese, but obscured (from the dominant epistemic point of view) by having rarely been explicitly formulated. Detienne and Vernant, together with Lisa Raphals, have defined it as *metis*, or *cunning wisdom*: a morally ambiguous mode premised on the understanding “that both reality and language cannot be understood (or manipulated) in straightforward ‘rational’ terms but must be approached by subtlety, indirection, and even cunning.” Its world is “a realm of shifting particulars” – the resonances of which with contingency and pluralism are plain – which can only be negotiated by being correspondingly multiple, mobile and polyvalent.¹³⁹ Its classical exemplars are (in their different but related ways) Odysseus and Penelope, but Machiavelli wrote in the same spirit. There are remarkably precise parallels in Chinese culture as *zhi*, especially as adumbrated in Taoist apprehensions of the natural order, including but exceeding the social order, as the basis for genuine morality and genuine knowledge; and in the Buddhist concept of *upaya*, or skillful means. Significantly, the latter not only allows for but encourages the development a “compassionate and truly humane (as opposed to merely human) use of [one's] cunning intelligence.”¹⁴⁰ Certainly *metis* needs compassion; but compassion without wisdom is equally hopeless.

I would like to suggest, then, that *metis* stands in the same general relation to *phronesis* as the latter does to *episteme*. Socratic-Platonic abstract knowledge and its development by Aristotle as *tekhne* emphasised measurement, universal applicability, teachability and a concern with explanation to others. This is the tradition that modern science, beginning signally in the seventeenth century, so successfully appropriated and extended, culminating in a universalist ideology that obscures the irreducible contingency of even its “successful” instances (for example: the leap from a

mathematical prediction confirmed empirically to “truth”). Yet significantly, as Raphals points out, those four qualities are precisely what *metis* eludes.¹⁴¹ Even, indeed qualitatively, more than *phronesis*, metic intelligence resonates with both a recognition of an embodied, embedded and contingent world, including ourselves, of the kind already discussed, and with the corresponding ecopluralism I have been advocating. Equally relevant, to both individual conduct and (as its centrality to civic republicanism shows) collective social and political practice, *metis* also entails precisely the meta-pluralism, in terms of a strategic relationship with pluralism itself and essentialism as its contrary, that is, however unavoidably imperfect, the best available defence against yet another descent into dogmatism, absolutism and thence barbarism.

Thus, to return to the specifically ecological terrain, Andrew Brennan rightly adduces that “The challenge of non-anthropocentric ethics to the western, human-centered tradition need not be described as an attempt to supplant one set of principles...with some new overarching set that embrace not only human concerns but also the interests, whatever they are, of other natural things...”¹⁴²

16.

One way of summarising the issues so far is to borrow an insight 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 current environmental discourse, the realist-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 constructionist-subjectivists 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, perhaps, distinguishable from but dependent upon and ultimately returning to the first. That arising is indeed often experienced as a copying, ie. 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* artificial (let alone only artificial) is equally unwarranted. And interestingly, this point seems to hold true on the meta-level too. When I reason about/ reflect on the issue of cognizing the natural, I rightly recognise that my conclusions are an artifice; but while I’m thinking about it, I also rightly 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 ontic and epistemic 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.”¹⁴³

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 of “‘internalizing’ or ‘representing’ the environment, but of a relationship between subject and object that recursively constitutes both the knower and the known.”¹⁴⁴ Thus it is real without entailing realism, and constructed without entailing constructivism.

17.

Following on from that point, ecopluralism makes possible 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.”¹⁴⁵ A corollary is that it is perfectly possible, and greatly preferable, to engage in the passionate defense 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 wonderfully called “a rationalistic conception of rationality” – of “reasons (plural and heterogeneous)” as against “Reason”.¹⁴⁶ (Of course, Smith’s still more fundamental point is that the former are all we ever actually have.) 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.”¹⁴⁷ And 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.” The inability to think this way “is a sort of identitarianism which forms a pair with a totalitarianism of reason, and which, I think, is simultaneously erroneous and dangerous.”¹⁴⁸

Nature without naturalism. This is a corollary of the preceding point, which proceeds by the same logic, adding only the necessary recognition of the extent, perhaps irreparable, to which “naturalism” has been successfully appropriated by scientific realism. Evernden 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.’”¹⁴⁹ Actually, a scientific but nonreductive discourse about nature is not only possible but already exists, in the autopoietic “evolutionary biology” of Maturana and Varela.¹⁵⁰ However, it won’t attract any significant funding or publicity (compared to, say, “evolutionary psychology”), precisely because it *is* nonreductive.¹⁵¹ 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 Promethean techno-humanism, so very far from humane, that now functions as the ideology of modernity.¹⁵² 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.

22.

Latour is right: “what we need to understand is the ordinary dimension: the small causes and their large effects.”¹⁵³ 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.”¹⁵⁴

A related and potentially more serious question might be: does one actually encourage 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 as I pointed out the outset, 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 resistant to complicity in 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 nonhuman 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”.¹⁵⁵ And the reason it is required is because it permits the kind of apprehension that is appropriate for intrinsic value, just as use is for instrumental value, namely wonder: the apprehension of, and participation in, wonderousness.¹⁵⁶ 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 an instrumentally useless experience. (The attempt to use wonder programmatically turns it into something else, which I have elsewhere defined as glamour.)¹⁵⁷

But equally, thinking itself, properly understood, participates in what immeasurably exceeds it, and what indeed makes it possible. “Einai gar kai entautha theos”, as Heraclitus said, inviting unanticipated guests into his kitchen: “Even here there are gods.” The intellect too can be part of a practice, and even one in itself, that embodies and defends the wild.

23.

By way of a postscript, it might help to clarify my argument to supply some examples of its implications for ‘environmental’ policy. With respect to the contributions of population, consumption and development to the present human impact on the natural world, I hope it is clear that notwithstanding the enormous strategic and political difficulties involved, in ecopluralist terms all three are not only ecologically unsustainable but ethically indictable. But there are more ambiguous cases which ecopluralism could help resolve. With some misgivings, then, arising from a lack of space for proper consideration and thus the possibility of fresh misunderstandings, let me just mention two. The first concerns *the protection of wilderness*. We now know that in North America as well as in Europe, if not nearly on the same scale (itself still a controversial question in the former case), there is very little natural habitat that has been entirely unaffected by human intervention. In the light of the above discussion, however, it does not follow, even in principle, that ‘anything goes’; nor that all human impact is equally and necessarily justified.¹⁵⁸ The central consideration should be that of protecting the integrity of place: specifically, places where local nonhuman identity, intelligence and agency retain perceptible priority over human, and especially over human-induced changes in the service of modernity (i.e., capital-state-science). The reason for the latter stipulation should be evident: unlike other interactions such as sustainable subsistence, recreational, aesthetic or spiritual – although these too cannot be altogether unconstrained – the modernist programme is specifically (and technologically) dedicated to exploiting nonhuman nature *without* any of the limits maintained by customs of respect, let alone reverence; so if given its head, vis-à-vis development, little or no such integrity will survive.¹⁵⁹

My second example concerns the issue of *aboriginal hunting*. As I see it, there can be no objection from an ecopluralist point of view to human beings hunting in order to live (as distinct from gourmandism, and so-called sport) – especially when, as is almost universally the case, hunting takes place in ways crucially influenced by ecologically-orientated understandings and practices.¹⁶⁰ Although the latter do not guarantee ecological probity, as aboriginal-caused extinctions of megafauna testify, they have sufficed to make the thousands of years of co-existence of humanity and flora and fauna a paragon of sustainability, compared with the three hundred or so years since their serious destruction began. Accordingly, the introduction of a capitalist motive into this situation changes it radically. A profit motive will, as it must, tend to the destruction not only of as many animals as possible, up to and including whole species, but of the spiritual and ritual discourses that tend to prevent that from happening. Where aboriginal hunting has become commercial, therefore – often under a figleaf of cultural claims, quite disingenuous inasmuch as modern commercialism obviously has no place in indigenous traditions – it should be opposed without compromise.

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NOTES

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² A brief explanation of my terminology: I say ‘epistemic’ rather than ‘epistemological’, and so forth, because my subject is human knowing (cognising, theorising, communicating), not the secondary philosophical orrery of ‘the justification of true beliefs’, etc.

³ *The Partisan Review*, July-Aug. 1947.

⁴ See, e.g., UNEP, *Global Outlook 2000* (London: Earthscan 1999).

⁵ Midgley 1997: 95.

⁶ Ekins 1992.

⁷ Peters 1980: 194. Some of Peters’s colleagues might feel it unwise to admit there *is* a price, of course.

⁸ Evernden 1985: 23.

⁹ *Times Higher Education Supplement* (2.3.01): 25.

¹⁰ Livingstone 1981: 33. See also Orton 2000.

¹¹ E.g. the recent work of Gregg Easterbrook, Richard North, Daniel Botkin and Stephen Budiansky.

¹² Evernden 1985:10; cf. Ehrenfeld 1976.

¹³ Schama 1995: 9-10.

¹⁴ Cronon 1995: 25, 69.

¹⁵ For a good analysis of the difficult relations between ecology and postmodern cultural studies, see Drinkwater 1996. V. also Briggs 2001.

¹⁶ Jordanova 1987. (She is actually taking Keith Thomas, in his *Man and the Natural World* (1983) to task for being insufficiently anthropocentric.)

¹⁷ Feyerabend 1995: 164.

¹⁸ E.g. Kate Soper, Tim Hayward, John O’Neill and possibly John Barry.

¹⁹ Synder 1998.

²⁰ Viveiros de Castro 1998.

²¹ Derrida 1988: 136. Cf. “everything may be political, but politics isn’t everything”: Mala Singh, quoted by Michael Lambek, quoted to me by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (personal communication).

²² Tester 1991: 16 (I have deleted the disingenuously tentative padding); Benton 1993: 65-6; this discussion is taken from from Fudge 2000.

²³ Viveiros de Castro (personal communication).

²⁴ With the striking exception of Hayles’s fine paper therein.

²⁵ Evernden 1992: 95, citing Jonas 1982: 16; cf. Latour 1991.

²⁶ Quoted in Evernden 1992: 27; it would be possible to quote de Man, for example, to the same exact effect.

²⁷ B.H. Smith 1988:179.

²⁸ Bahro 1994: 72.

²⁹ Bateson, 1979; Abram 1996: 67.

³⁰ B.H. Smith 1988: 151, 148.

³¹ B.H. Smith 1997: 6.

³² B.H. Smith 1988: 175.

³³ B.H. Smith 1997: 32.

³⁴ B.H. Smith 1988: 175.

³⁵ See B.H. Smith 1997, ch.5.

³⁶ Latour 1993: 113.

³⁷ Latour 1993: 119.

³⁸ Evernden 1992: 60.

³⁹ Latour 1993: 22; cf. Latour 1999.

⁴⁰ Latour 1993: 104.

⁴¹ Latour 1993: 6.

⁴² Cf. the brilliant paper by de Castro.

⁴³ Ingold 1996: 120-21.

⁴⁴ Ellen and Fukui 1996: 8 (paraphrasing Ingold).

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- ⁴⁵ Ingold 1996: 130-31.
- ⁴⁶ Evernden 1992: 56.
- ⁴⁷ Ingold 1996:121.
- ⁴⁸ Ingold 1996: 131, 150; my italics.
- ⁴⁹ Sylvan and Bennett 1994: 191.
- ⁵⁰ My analysis draws on Laclau and Mouffe 1985.
- ⁵¹ Simons and Melia 1989: 263. (With thanks to Laurence Coupe for this quotation.)
- ⁵² Weber 1991: 139; cf. Kontos 1994.
- ⁵³ Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 191-92.
- ⁵⁴ Viveiros de Castro 1998.
- ⁵⁵ Cf. perhaps Stanley Fish, as quoted in *The New Yorker* (11.6.01) p. 71: "I keep saying the same thing and getting misunderstood in the same way."
- ⁵⁶ Baghramian and Ingram 2000.
- ⁵⁷ Something that realists can only explain by recourse to delusion, fraud, etc., but that a relativist sees as a normal and ineliminable aspect of the nature of discourse (which can, however, be contested in specific cases).
- ⁵⁸ Again, v. Laclau and Mouffe 1985, especially Chapter 4. "Plurality is not the phenomenon to be explained, but the starting point of the analysis" (p.140).
- ⁵⁹ McNeice 1966: 30.
- ⁶⁰ Viveiros de Castro 1998 (referring to Searle 1995).
- ⁶¹ Abram 1996.
- ⁶² Snyder 1990: 68.
- ⁶³ Sylvan and Bennet 1994.
- ⁶⁴ Bateson 1972, 1979; Maturana and Varela 1980, 1987; and v. Capra 1996.
- ⁶⁵ E.g. Salleh 1997, Plumwood 1993.
- ⁶⁶ Abram 1997.
- ⁶⁷ Scott 1998.
- ⁶⁸ Wiggins 1998.
- ⁶⁹ V. O'Shea 2000.
- ⁷⁰ Polanyi 1958, and (e.g.) Scarborough 1994.
- ⁷¹ Wittgenstein 1958. (Not "language-games", a misleading term which is too frequently misunderstood.)
- ⁷² V. Magliola 1984.
- ⁷³ Cronon 1995: 35.
- ⁷⁴ Viveiros de Castro 1988.
- ⁷⁵ Peterson 1999: 354.
- ⁷⁶ Cronon 1995: 81.
- ⁷⁷ Evernden 1992, who also rightly locates the wild "in" as well as "outside" human beings. Cf. Drinkwater 1996.
- ⁷⁸ Wiggins 2000: 10.
- ⁷⁹ Cronon 1995: 81.
- ⁸⁰ Tolkien 1988: 56.
- ⁸¹ Anderson 1995.
- ⁸² Norton 1991; and v. McQuillan 1998 and Preston 1998.
- ⁸³ For a good discussion, see Minter 2001.
- ⁸⁴ Rolston 1997: 38, 42, 50; my italics.
- ⁸⁵ Rolston 1997: 42.
- ⁸⁶ Rolston 1997: 58; my italics.
- ⁸⁷ Rolston 1997: 58.
- ⁸⁸ Callicott 1985: 367.
- ⁸⁹ Callicott 1997: 189, 176.
- ⁹⁰ Feyerabend 1987: 61.
- ⁹¹ Callicott 1994; and v. the discussion in *Worldviews* 1:2 (1997).
- ⁹² Hayward 1994: 71.
- ⁹³ Hayward 1998: 16.
- ⁹⁴ Quoted in Soper 1995: 276.
- ⁹⁵ Cf. Abram 1996.
- ⁹⁶ Baxter 1999: 56; my italics; Dobson 2000 makes the same point.
- ⁹⁷ Fowles n.d.: 43-44.

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- ⁹⁸ Evernden 1985: 12-13.
- ⁹⁹ Berlin 1969: lv, 192; v. also Gray 1995.
- ¹⁰⁰ V. Brennan 1992, and Laclau and Mouffe 1985.
- ¹⁰¹ B.H. Smith 1988: 160.
- ¹⁰² Stone 1988, Brennan 1992 and Midgley 1997: 100.
- ¹⁰³ Callicott, quoted by Light 2000: 130.
- ¹⁰⁴ Hayward 1997; “speciesism” was coined by Ryder 1975, and “human chauvinism” by the Routleys 1979.
- ¹⁰⁵ Hayward 1997: 56, 58, 59; italics in the original.
- ¹⁰⁶ Another example of such confusion is O’Riordan 1981: 11: “Man’s conscious actions are anthropocentric by definition.”
- ¹⁰⁷ Wiggins 2000: 7-8, 16.
- ¹⁰⁸ Ehrenfeld 1981.
- ¹⁰⁹ Dobson 2000: 52.
- ¹¹⁰ V. Laclau and Mouffe 1985.
- ¹¹¹ Dobson 2000: 57; and v. Katz 2000.
- ¹¹² See Curtin 1994 for a very interesting discussion (although questions attach to some of the translations of Dogen that Curtin replies upon).
- ¹¹³ Jones 1993: 97.
- ¹¹⁴ This is decidedly not true of a promising new variant of Deep Ecology which is emerging from the Left Bio group; see <http://home.fox.nstn.ca/~greenweb/>.
- ¹¹⁵ Plumwood 1995: 160.
- ¹¹⁶ Li 1998: 300.
- ¹¹⁷ Sylvan and Bennett 1994: 154.
- ¹¹⁸ Derrida 1988.
- ¹¹⁹ Laclau 1990: 105. Cf. Bateson 1972, 1979: e.g. 61.
- ¹²⁰ V. Mouffe 2000: 60-79.
- ¹²¹ Soper 1995:8 – speaking for most participants on the political left in this debate.
- ¹²² For an excellent expression of this, see Oates 1989.
- ¹²³ Plato 1982: sec. 232d.
- ¹²⁴ V. Abram 1996.
- ¹²⁵ V. Toulmin 1990, 2001.
- ¹²⁶ See Bahro 1994.
- ¹²⁷ Bookchin 1990: 44; cf. Eckersley 1989 for a good discussion. On Marxist communism as the acme of the modernist programme to the time of its collapse, see Bauman 1992.
- ¹²⁸ Hornburg 1998: 3; cf. Bateson 1979.
- ¹²⁹ 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 phenomenological terms by Abram 1996.
- ¹³⁰ Eric Griffiths, in the *Times Literary Supplement* (28.5.1993).
- ¹³¹ Empson 1935: 22; it is characteristic of Empson that the implications of this observation far exceed its offhand form.
- ¹³² Hornburg 1998: 3,4.
- ¹³³ O’Shea 2000: 24, 25.
- ¹³⁴ McLaughlin 1993: 147; Bateson 1972, Abram 1996.
- ¹³⁵ Wiggins 2000: 20, 21; v. also Wiggins 1998, Polanyi 1958, and Scarborough 1994.
- ¹³⁶ V. Feyerabend 1987.
- ¹³⁷ On ecological citizenship see Curry 2000, Barry 1999: ch. 7, and M.J. Smith 1998: ch. 6.
- ¹³⁸ It is a pity that Scott’s (1998) otherwise excellent analysis conflated *phronesis* and *metis*.
- ¹³⁹ Detienne and Vernant 1978, and Raphals 1992: 5, 227, 123.
- ¹⁴⁰ Raphals 1992: 180.
- ¹⁴¹ Raphals 1992: 227.
- ¹⁴² Brennan 1992: 30.
- ¹⁴³ Sprigge 1997: 126.
- ¹⁴⁴ Hornburg 1998: 3 (after Maturana and Varela).
- ¹⁴⁵ Kontos 1994: 235.
- ¹⁴⁶ Williams 1985: 18; B.H. Smith 1997: 41.
- ¹⁴⁷ Williams 1985: 17.

¹⁴⁸ Lyotard 1988. (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 commend attention.)

¹⁴⁹ Evernden 1992: 123.

¹⁵⁰ E.g., Maturana and Varela 1980, 1987; and v. Capra 1997, Smith 1997 ch. 3. Much of this work was prefigured in Bateson 1973, 1979.

¹⁵¹ V. Scott 1998: 340.

¹⁵² Ehrenfeld 1981.

¹⁵³ Latour 1991: 125.

¹⁵⁴ Hepburn 1984: 182.

¹⁵⁵ Letter to G. & T. Keats, 13.1.1818.

¹⁵⁶ V. Hepburn 1984 and Baxter 1999.

¹⁵⁷ Curry 1999.

¹⁵⁸ For a good discussion of the pernicious recent revisionism regarding aboriginal impact on North American ecology, and its not-so-hidden agenda, see Deloria 2000.

¹⁵⁹ V. Scott 1998: 94.

¹⁶⁰ V., e.g., Anderson 1996.