

## **REDEFINING COMMUNITY: TOWARDS AN ECOLOGICAL REPUBLICANISM**

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### **Introduction**

The aim of my paper is to clear the way for a definition of community which meets the conceptual demands of both human community, as understood by the social sciences (with some assistance from the humanities), and natural community, as defined by at least some ecologists. It is certainly defensible as a *desideratum*. With important exceptions, communities as studied by ecologists frequently exclude human beings as members thereof (as distinct from the impact of humans on them); and despite some tentative initiatives (eg. Catton and Dunlap, 1980), community as defined by social scientists still very rarely includes an ecological dimension. Arguably both are thereby impoverished. Given the controversies surrounding the idea of community in both disciplines, however, I do not expect to arrive here a definitive conclusion.

I start by discussing the idea of human community as construed in current social science, before turning for additional insights to a third and older tradition, namely Florentine civic republicanism. I then turn to ecological definitions of community, the dominant one of which I am obliged to criticise before finding in a relatively heterodox school some promising common ground for an integrated approach. In trying to flesh that out – particularly in relation to an ecological republicanism - various normative and prescriptive considerations also emerge.

### **Community in Social Science**

According to a recently-published dictionary of sociology, “The term community is one of the most elusive and vague in sociology” (Abercrombie et al., 1994:47). Another authoritative reference-book concurs: “One of the most vague and elusive concepts in social science, community continues to defy precise definition.” The author continues that

At a minimum, community usually denotes a group of people within a bounded area who interact within shared institutions, and who possess a common sense of interdependence and being. However, collections of individuals living or interacting within the same territory do not in themselves constitute communities – particularly if those individuals do not perceive themselves as such. What binds

a community is not its structure but a state of mind; a *feeling* of community. This subjective dimension renders community problematic as a tool for sociological analysis because the boundaries of any self-identifying group, from the insiders' perspective, are usually fluid and intangible rather than fixed and finite (Outhwaite and Bottomore, 1993:98, emphasis in original; cf. Williams, 1983:75-76).

However, it would be an unnecessary concession to positivism to conclude that the concept should therefore be rejected; indeed, its very vernacular ubiquity is one guarantee of its importance. One solution is a more anthropological approach, which avoids having to define community as a particular social structure through emphasizing its symbolic dimension: that is, the way communities constitute themselves through a system of values and codes that are defined in contrast and/or opposition to other perceived communities. However, we should ask whether (for example) those who only know each other, or even just know of each other, through the internet, regardless of how strongly they feel or imagine themselves to be a community, do in fact constitute one without rendering the concept dangerously vacuous and/or idealistic (that is, disembodied) – as distinct from, let us say, a network.

So in attempting to arrive at a minimal definition of human community, let us start with the requirement of **(1)** a *social* connection such that members impact upon each other in ways that affect their material or embodied behavior; and let us add **(2)** an *experiential* connection to the others involved: an awareness of other members of the community. These two requirements mean that community will very often entail a shared geographical space, but does not absolutely require it. They also imply that the experience of community can include an entirely imaginary dimension, provided it has behavioral or material effects. Taken together, they point to a *sine qua non* of relations between the members of a community that affect their behavior, *and* which relations include a cognitive dimension (however different members' apprehensions of each other may be). Furthermore, since whatever is shared as a result of this process is what enables the community to exist as such, its value to that community cannot be neutral; it is a good. But it is not a universal or indefinitely extendable good; given the nature of social formations, and arguably meaning itself, they unavoidably involve collective self-definition against what are perceived to be other communities that do not share the same good(s) – a process which can assume either benign or destructive forms.

### **Community in Civic Republican Discourse**

So far, perhaps, so good. But at this point I would like to turn to another concept, or rather tradition of concepts, that I feel may be able to throw an additional and helpful light on the subject. This tradition has recently re-emerged from relative obscurity: in ethical philosophy as virtue ethics (Statman, 1997) and in political philosophy (Sandel, 1996; Pettit, 1997). (Communitarianism, whose star has risen at the same time, is closely related; but I shall borrow a barb from Harold Macmillan to maintain, without the space to argue the point, that what is good about it is not new, and what is new about it is not good.) I shall concentrate here on the ideas of the person generally acknowledged to have

articulated the most influential version of civic republicanism, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) (see Skinner, 1981; and for a basic introduction, Curry, 1995). An outstanding figure even in the illustrious company of other great Renaissance Florentines, his radical (and frequently misunderstood) position in *The Prince* and especially the *Discourses* centres on three main ideas: *the common good*, which is best served by the practices of *citizenship*, and both of which, end and means alike, can be summed up as *virtù*.

The common good is both that which is needful to all for each person to live, within the existential limits of life itself, a fully human life; and that which can only be generated, in effect, by all together. It is thus a shared social good which, however, directly affects and is affected by each individual participating in the community. This common good is thus neither a collective, collectivist or socialist phenomenon, which can successfully be imposed, with or without cooperation; nor is it individualistic in the way of liberal contractarian “rights” philosophy. The ideal implicit in this version of the common good is self-rulership. It has recently been construed by Pettit (1997:51-79) as “freedom from non-domination”, that is, freedom from interference on an arbitrary basis (but not from any controls or limits whatsoever). This indeed is what Machiavelli insisted most people want: not to rule, but the security that is associated with freedom from unaccountable rule. But for civic republicans like Machiavelli, where there are conflicts between public duties and private virtue, the latter must give way, or else both decline together.

Maintaining such freedom depends crucially on the practices of active citizenship, in whose absence a community’s degeneration and takeover, whether from within or without, is inevitable. Those practices include participation in the rich and intricate networks sometimes summarised as “civil” or “civic” society, but also in so-called politics proper, whether local, regional or national: in short, in whatever affects the lives of citizens. Such citizenship tends to be both inclusive – the more such people are included, the stronger the polity concerned – and dynamic. (Political passivity is thus abhorred.) All this is what Machiavelli summed up as *virtù*: both the practices that encourage the qualities of citizenship, and the qualities that enable those practices, without which the common good, either as reality nor ideal, cannot flourish or indeed long survive. In the Machiavellian view, any community which values either aggressive private enterprise or passive personal salvation more than public service is well underway to disaster. What kind of disaster? The kind summed up both as to means and end, and thus the opposite in all respects of *virtù*, as “corruption”. For Machiavelli, the chief agent of corruption, apart from being militarily subjugated by external force, is the pursuit of power for its (and their) own sake by individuals and factions at the expense of the common good.

From even this brief analysis, I think it our working definition of human community would benefit significantly from the addition of a third stipulation: **(3)** communities are only maintained by certain *practices*, in default or corruption of which they disintegrate – a point to which I shall return.

## Community in Ecology

I would now like to try to discover whether the concept of ecological or natural community offers significant common ground with what we have developed so far. However, there are serious problems in doing so. One is that there seems to be no single, universally accepted such concept within scientific ecology. A second is that in so far as there is a dominant or mainstream concept, it seems to me to be singularly thin and unsatisfactory, even in ecology's own terms. I shall therefore be obliged to engage in some critique before arriving at an ecological understanding of community that is sufficiently rich to be of use.

As a starting point, let us turn to a recent standard textbook by Begon, Harper and Townsend (1996). The authors state the need for two approaches: one dealing with the attributes of individual organisms and the other with those of the population or community as a whole; however, as can be confirmed by the amount of attention each receives, this is only a variation within a whole already decisively skewed in favour of the organism. This is reflected in their decidedly attenuated definition of community: "an assemblage of species populations which occur together in time and space" (1996:591). Given that the point of ecology - as distinct from (say) biology - is surely its attention to the interrelationships among, and interdependence of, individuals, it seems fair to ask what is ecological about this formulation. As it hardly seems to be able to do justice to communities of non-human animals, *a fortiori* it is no more promising when it comes to including humans, even when the subject is landscape ecology (*e.g.* Forman and Godron, 1986). True, Begon *et al.* admit that "No ecological system, whether individual, population or community, can be studied in isolation from the environment in which it exists" (1996:591-92). But the environment for organisms is here is not integral in the sense of being constitutive; it remains essentially a background for the primary item of interest, the organism, and one which can even apparently be ignored, since "One way to characterize community is simply to count or list the species that are present" (1996:593).

I find equally unconvincing (and indeed, worrying) the authors' analogy between ecology and the study of watches and clocks, in which it is all very well to recognize patterns and hierarchies, "But to understand how they work, they must be taken to pieces, studied and put back together again. We will have understood the nature of natural communities when we have taken them to pieces and *know* how to recreate them" (1996:590, emphasis in original). Unlike clocks, ecosystems - at least, those of any consequence and consequently real interest - are open systems, which therefore cannot be studied without impacting upon and thus changing the object of study; the attempt to recreate them in (or as if they were in) a laboratory is simply to accelerate such impact to the point where what made the original subject worth studying as an open system, and the emergent properties that result, have disappeared altogether. Of course, it may be argued (as does, *e.g.*, Simberloff, 1980:3-39 and 79-93) that apparently emergent properties are actually epiphenomenal; but a clockwork model prejudices and forecloses just such a debate. Furthermore, ecosystems are of such complexity and subtlety that the sentiment just quoted surely represents an unwarranted triumph of the science-as-engineering, combined with pious but hubristic hope, which smacks of what one biologist has aptly termed "the arrogance of humanism" (Ehrenfeld, 1978).

Such an approach to ecology is understandable, in terms, for example, of the practical necessity to simplify (in order to methodologically operationalise) its subject-matter, in order in turn to produce empirically acceptable and replicable results according

to widely-held canons of what constitutes scientific method, and thus obtain institutionalized support, recognition and funding; and in this process, a certain ideology of science also comes into play. Golley's "ecological" analysis of these processes is acute. Such an institutionalised ideology itself easily becomes involved in ecological destructiveness, through its complicity with the illusion that certain human beings know enough (or soon will, or even simply can) successfully to "manage" the global commons - almost entirely in certain of our own interests, of course (*eg.* Botkin, 1992; Budiansky, 1995). Against that view, I would like to assert the value and indeed necessity of an ecological concept of community that retains sufficient humility to include, as Golley (1993:166) puts it, "intuitive thinking, traditional wisdom and practice, and careful tinkering", as well as - or rather, combined with - scientific rigour. (For an example, see Naveh and Lieberman, 1994.)

To that end, I find the apparently heterodox position of Rowe (1997), building upon the work of Odum (1983), more promising. He argues that the standard focus on organisms, populations of organisms, and communities of populations is both atomistic (in putting the primary emphasis on organisms and aggregates thereof) and reductive (in largely limiting attention to their input and output of trophic energy) in a way that betrays the larger promise if not point of ecology, which is precisely its holism. But he also points out that unlike both organ and organism "below" them and place-specific ecosystem "above", neither community nor population "is a fully functional (metabolic) entity; neither exhibits articulated structure, physiology nor autopoiesis." Here, however, it seems to me that Rowe, ironically, risks siding with the reductionism of Simberloff (1980) against the holism of Levins and Lewontin (1980) in their debate over ecological community. An ecosystem is not metabolic in precisely the same way as an organism; and a community is certainly not independent of metabolism. Furthermore, communities do exhibit a kind of autopoiesis in their attempts to maintain their identity through time and across changes. So against Rowe (on this point), I want to argue that by analogy with the concept of human community, that of ecological community too is still both useful and salvageable - provided that it is re-constructed in ecosystemic (rather than additive and taxonomic) terms, which include, attend to and indeed value the biotic and abiotic components of air, land and water that in Rowe's (1997:148) words "comprise every creature's evolutionary source and supportive matrix". Of course, that matrix is not unidirectionally determining; it is affected in turn by organisms, individually and collectively. Nonetheless, its importance - not merely as a passive background of "environment" but as what ultimately constitutes as well as enables organisms - seems undeniable.

### **Community Redefined**

However, if this ecological holism is to be nonreductionist, it must (in accord with Rowe but unlike Begon *et al.*) also acknowledge and include the perspectives of a community's members - its nodes, so to speak, as well as its relationships. At this point, let us recall the three criteria already formulated for human communities above, and ask whether they can accommodate an ecological construal. Clearly, the *first* demand - a connection between members of a community which entails material effects on one another - is met. Indeed,

since the matrix is held in common by, and affects, all, it is virtually built into the concept of ecological community. There is also no inherent anthropocentric bias: “I am part of the squirrel’s environment, as it is part of mine” (McLaughlin 1993:154), and that applies to all the other community’s members.

The *second* requirement, however, seems considerably more problematic. To begin with, we must admit that short of pantheism (or rather panpsychism), the abiotic ‘members’ of an ecological community can have no awareness *as it is usually thought of*. This is actually a grave concession, since it appears that sentient beings alone qualify for such membership. The position so far is perfectly acceptable, however, as a guarantee against a holism that unacceptably attempts actually to exclude individual organisms. Furthermore, it still permits considerable progress in reinstating a nonreductionist holism. Let us therefore start by assume heuristically that there is also an irreducible “experiential” dimension, in the same or parallel manner as with humans. Begon *et al.* (1996:589) nod in this direction when they admit that “We impose an anthropocentric process of selection in deciding what will be regarded as a community.” Their admonition that “It is vitally important to be aware that the categories erected may lack any relevance to the lives of the individual organisms within the communities”, however, is the last time it appears in the entire book; in practice, clearly, it may be forgotten. But I have already criticized their approach as (so to speak) anti-ecological. So let us hypothesize that anything called an ecological community should indeed include and respect the experience of the organisms concerned – including, but not limited to, humans – of integral elements of what we could defensibly call their community, however tacit and inarticulate that awareness might be.

An immediate objection might be that only human beings are able to decide such a thing. But there is a chronic tendency (not unrelated to our species chauvinism) to underestimate the degree of sentience among non-human animals; it can be reasonably inferred from their behavior that the overwhelming majority of the latter are aware, in a meaningful sense of the term, to at least some degree of those with whom they share ecosystemic space and time. It need not be a second-order awareness, of course: that is, an awareness of being aware (Bateson, 1972). As Ingold puts it, humans are, indeed, just like other animals “by virtue of their mutual involvement, as undivided centres of action and awareness, within a continuous life process. In this process, 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*” (1996:150; my emphasis). It is also indefensible to conflate linguistic ability with sentience – often as a way to preserve the special status of humanity - since there are neither logical nor empirical grounds for assuming that the latter depends on the former. Information is the currency of sentience, and is furthermore indispensable for any cybernetic (open) system, such as ecosystems. And information too is by no means restricted to linguistics, being rather, as Bateson put it, “any difference that makes a difference in some later event” (1972:381; cf. Capra 1996:265-6). As such, it can be conveyed (for example) chemically.

However, a gap would still seem to remain unclosed, in relation to my proposed second stipulation for a comprehensive definition of community, between human and non-human animals on the one hand and ecosystems on the other. But that depends (as I mentioned earlier) on the definition of “awareness”. As a corollary of the passage just

quoted, Ingold rightly points out that a creature's "action in the world is, at the same time, a process of attending to it." (1996:135). And that this is true of any living "creature". According to Bateson (1979), mind and nature are "a necessary unity", in which mental processes are the essence of life. And in the highly convergent Santiago theory, independently developed by Humberto Maturana together with Francisco Varela, the fundamental point is that, to quote the former, "Living systems are cognitive systems, and living as a process is a process of cognition. This statement is valid for all organisms, with and without a nervous system." (Capra 1996:97). As spelled out by Maturana and Varela (but not Bateson), "cognition" here does not depend on information and/or representation as thought of in traditional realist (and implicitly anthropocentric) epistemology, scientific or otherwise (see Smith, 1997). What is of the essence is something that is true of all organisms, namely cognitive interaction - and perhaps paradigmatically, symbiosis (Margulis, 1999) - with a co-evolving environment.

It remains true that this understanding still cannot bring the nonliving elements of ecosystems into line with my second proposed criterion. But those who think this failure (if such it is) withholds the status of community from ecosystems should first ask themselves, is a biotic community possible, or even imaginable, without its abiotic elements? The answer is clearly, no. The very distinction between living and nonliving, in ecological terms, is a purely analytical one. I think it follows that as Brennan (1995:210) has said, the opposition between statistical (stochastic) and biological - by which Simberloff (1980), moving rather in the opposite direction from this paper, tries to reduce the latter to the former - is also mistaken.

In sum, there would seem to be a promising area of common ground between the human and natural concepts of community. In both cases, community involves what is shared by its members in a way that includes both an "inner" cognitive dimension and an "outer" structural dimension. It is time to turn to the *third* stipulation regarding the practices that maintain communities - the least obvious one, perhaps, but potentially also the most interesting in its implications. First, however, one common objection to an integrated concept of community must be met.

### **Passmore's Challenge**

In the field of environmental ethics, the best-known attempt to turn humanity "from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it" was, of course, that of Leopold (1966:220). Passmore responded that

Ecologically, no doubt, men form a community with plants, animals, soils, in the sense that a particular life-cycle will involve all four of them. But if it is essential to a community that the members of it have common interests and recognize mutual obligations then men, plants, animals and soil do not form a community... In the only sense in which belonging to a community generates ethical obligation, they do not belong to the same community (1980:116).

This mixture of social contract theory and liberal individualism is a dominant position in mainstream philosophy (academic and otherwise), so it must be addressed. Specifically,

the “if” imports an assumption – that members of a moral community must also be moral agents – which is indefensible, as Midgley (1995) has made clear. Given that those who are candidates for non-contractual duties include children, the senile, the temporarily and the permanently insane, defectives, embryos, human and otherwise, sentient animals, non-sentient animals, plants, artefacts, including art, inanimate objects, groups of all kinds, ecosystems, landscapes and places, countries, the biosphere and oneself, “As far as sheer numbers go, this is no small minority of the beings with whom we have to deal. We are a small minority of them.” It follows that “Duties need not be quasi-contractual relations between symmetrical pairs of rational human agents.... To speak of duties to things in the inanimate and comprehensive sectors of my list is not necessarily to personify them superstitiously... It expresses merely that there are suitable and unsuitable ways of behaving in given situations” (1995:97). In other words, Passmore’s is *not* the only sense in which belonging to a community generates ethical obligation; and relieved of the “Reciprocity Assumption”, the way is clear to realise, as Sylvan and Bennett argue, that “*the ecological community forms the ethical community*” (1994:78,91; my emphasis).

### **Ecological Republicanism**

It is fascinating to the extent to which the perspective derived from civic republicanism is amenable to an ecological interpretation and expansion. In so far as the common good of any human community is utterly dependent – not only ultimately but in many ways immediately – upon ecosystemic integrity (both biotic and abiotic), that integrity must surely assume pride of place in its definition. And it is only maintained by practices and duties of active “citizenship”, whose larger goal is the health not only of the human public sphere but of the natural world which encloses, sustains and constitutes it. *Civic virtù is thus a subset of ecological virtù.*

Furthermore, since the “environment” (or matrix) is an irreducibly common good, then as Pettit (1997:135-138) points out, the agencies of its harm are prime examples of unaccountable and unacceptable domination. By the same token, the ever-increasing damage inflicted upon the world’s ecosystems for private profit, and which epitomises unsustainability, is a perfect instance of corruption. In addition, the very definition of Machiavellian *virtù* may be described as already implicitly ecological, for the *virtù* of each citizen is not in any relevant way a merely private or self-sufficient state; rather it depends crucially for its effectiveness on that of his or her fellow-citizens. They either work together to maintain the health of the whole community, or fall singly. Certainly, human beings, as is the case in so much of their development, must learn to act as good citizens, while non-human animals already try to act so (within their species limitations) in less conscious ways. But it is easy to overestimate the extent to which human learning is conscious (and the extent to which animal learning is not). Still more to the point, both sets of behaviors, in different but overlapping ways, actually involve doing something that is, at its core, the same: acting in such a way that the relevant community might survive and flourish.

Similarly, natural communities (and the natural aspects of social ones) are surely just as enabling but exacting for their human citizens as are “purely” human ones; in fact they are a prerequisite for the latter – something that technology can displace and

disguise, but not infinitely or completely. So while differences obviously remain, a sharp distinction between the “social” practices of civic virtue by humans and the “natural” practices of ecological virtue on the part of cats, trees, foxes, earthworms, micro-organisms and so on immediately becomes less viable, let alone foundational, in this formulation. (And all the more so since it does not depend on a liberal or socialist concept of rights, and therefore the qualifications of rights-bearers as so-called rational agents, *etc.*) Finally, regarding the security of non-domination – the freedom to realise one’s own potential, without arbitrary interference although subject to unavoidable limitations and exigencies – is this really an interest restricted to human beings, or indeed even to creatures with sentience?

I would like to emphasize that I am not arguing for either an opposition between ecological community (as more important) and human (as less), or for their integration in such a way that the latter becomes completely subsumed by the former. There are powerful reasons, both intellectual and pragmatic, for avoiding both such attempts. I am aware that human community is a special phenomenon, with special characteristics, within the larger ambit of the ecological. But the two do indeed share profound common ground, which can be summarized in the two criteria already discussed, plus the point that communities are only maintained by certain practices, in default of which they disintegrate. The result resembles what Latour (1993:96) calls “nature-cultures”, in so far as it transgresses the ancient and heavily-policed boundary between the two. That is just its virtue, because the ultimate goal here is to redefine “ecological” in a way that includes the human. And since this enterprise is not susceptible to a purely technical resolution, it also requires making room for Golley’s above-mentioned intuition, wisdom and cautionary practice.

One of the above-mentioned special characteristics of human communities is the extent to which they are determined by the need, as well as the ability, to learn the practices of citizenship. (Even this, however, is a matter of degree rather than a radical break, at least from other intelligent and social species.) That need, so visible in the world today, implies but extends well beyond a project of “civic environmentalism”, which essentially adds the environment to a wish-list of social *desiderata* (Teles, 1997). What is really required is an *ecological republicanism*, in which the natural world, without “determining” specific outcomes, would once again provide the context of human political, social and ethical deliberation. In this context, (for example) nature conservation would be “what we do as members of a community of life to maintain and encourage the continued diversity of plants, animals and their habitats that make up that community. This means everywhere, the whole space we occupy with nature” (Evans, 1992). The whole reckless commercial and technological spree currently attempting to transform life into “Life, plc” for profit would become much harder to justify (although not necessarily, in parts and within limits). And above all, pious official lip-service about putting environmental considerations at the heart of public policy and planning would become more of a reality in practice, requiring that “reasons be given for interfering with the environment, rather than reasons for not doing so” (Sylvan and Bennett, 1994:147). (Of course, what is really needed are ecological values; but genuine environmental audits would at least be a start!)

If this sounds unduly idealistic, I should add that ecological *virtù* does not invoke the kind of extended sense of self extolled by some “deep” or “transpersonal” ecologists, something which lends itself all too well to the unholy alliance of privatised spirituality

and global capitalism evident in much New Ageism. Rather it involves an extended sense of embodied relationships, in lived communities and specific places - a link which recognising and revaluing the natural dimension would strengthen (see Clifford and King, 1996; Plumwood, 1998). In keeping with its inherent pluralism, beings' shared interest in (republican) freedom does not require obliterating an appreciation of profound differences; as Butler (1986:95) wrote, "It is as neighbours, full of ineradicable prejudices, that we must learn to love each other, and not as fortuitously 'separated brethren'."

By the same token, *virtù* is ecological in a related sense: the unsentimental pragmatism which follows from its value-pluralism, and which recognises that irrespective of a "right" to do so, threatened communities will try to defend themselves against what they perceive as threats to their survival. As Oldfield (1990:8) notes, in the frank and gritty spirit of civic republicanism, "Citizenship is exclusive: it is not a person's humanity that one is responding to, it is the fact that he or she is a fellow citizen, or a stranger.... This does not entail an aggressive posture towards strangers. It simply means that to remain a citizen one cannot always treat everyone as a human being" - or, in this context, fellow-being. This raises the question of whether the ecosphere (or, less accurately, biosphere) could be said to exist as a meta-community: a republic of life. I would suggest that such a thing could only licitly be posited if and only if it fulfilled our three criteria - subjective, objective and practical - on the part of *all* beings. It is difficult, although perhaps not impossible, to imagine such a thing. Could human beings really identify themselves as members of such an entity? I have already noted that human communities tend to constitute themselves partly through defining themselves against others who are perceived to be, in some non-trivial way, different. But this too doesn't rule out the possibility of realizing one's status as a citizen of the ecosphere, in the three-fold way suggested, as against (say) a cosmic absence of, or even hostility to, life. The real problem, perhaps, is that the more complex the organism, the more communities it is a member of, so that any human being who is really just a member of one is highly untypical: almost certainly a prisoner, either of four walls or of the mind. And there is no guarantee whatsoever that these multiple memberships won't sometime conflict; or that when they do, resolution by appeal to a "higher" one is an option (see Stone, 1988). In the light of these considerations, Brennan (1995:193) seems overly sanguine in holding that "we can extend the notion of community without much difficulty to embrace the entire terrestrial biosphere."

Be that as it may, ecological republicanism in the form I have suggested does not envisage a single pyramidal structure, offering perpetual conflict resolution by reference to the central principle of Life, but rather an effectively unbounded network of communities, irreducibly complex, inherently contingent and ultimately mysterious. It is vital that the common human good must give way to that of all life - including, but no longer restricted to, human life. But like the older humanist idea, it can only be a guiding ideal, a regulatory principle, an effectively foundational value amid all the conflicting demands of this sublunary world. Does that make it worthless? Only if we continue to entertain dangerous dreams of perfection and a final solution, whether scientific, religious or natural; otherwise, quite the contrary.

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