Future culture

Realism, humanism and the politics of nature

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All of those working in the broad field of environmental studies (and I here include, among others, philosophers, geographers, political ecologists, sociologists, cultural historians and critics) are likely to agree on two points: first that the term 'nature', which has been so central to their various debates, has lost its all-purpose conceptual status, and can no longer be bandied around as it once was. This does not mean that it has ceased to be used. Indeed, it still regularly recurs in ecological laments and admonitions (it is 'nature', after all, that we are being told is being lost, damaged, polluted and eroded; and it is nature that we are enjoined to respect, protect and conserve). But it is readily acknowledged now that this is no more than a kind of shorthand: a convenient, but fairly gestural, concept of eco-political argument whose meaning is increasingly contested. This bears on the second point of presumed agreement, namely that we can, very broadly speaking, divide between two main parties to this contest over the nature of nature: the realists, on the one hand, and the constructivists, on the other. Since this distinction is now fairly familiar in its general outline, I shall not here elaborate in any detail upon it. But a few specifications might be added at this point.

One is the importance, as I see it, of drawing some distinction between what may be termed *ontological* and *normative* emphases of the divide. From an ontological point of view, the main difference is between those who insist on the independent reality of a natural domain or mode of being, and those who argue that there is no 'nature' in this sense, and that everything we refer to as natural is in one way or another a construct of human culture. Realists, of course, come in different forms, some more discriminating than others. They include deep ecologists explaining at length about the intrinsic value of the Grand Canyon as well as those no-nonsense environmentalists who rest content with rubbishing the idea that it is language that has a hole in its ozone layer. The more discriminating will insist – as, for example, I and Ted Benton have at some length in our writing on environmental issues – on the importance of differentiating between 'deep' and 'surface' natures: between that which is the condition of all human modifications and the perceptible domain of 'nature' that is the outcome of these modifications (whether this be wilderness, cultivated landscape, flora, fauna, the body, etc.).[1] Only the more critical, too, will make clear that there is nothing that can be thought or talked about as 'nature', whether deep structures or surface environments, other than in human talk and thought, while insisting nonetheless that the talk and thought (whether scientific, poetical, eco-political, or whatever) can, and often does, refer to entities or processes conceived as existing independently of their representation, and in some cases as also unaffected by that representation.

Constructivism, too, comes in somewhat differing forms depending on whether the stress is placed on the conceptual dependency of the idea of 'nature' as a conventional and inherently revisable binary counter to that of 'culture', on the social construction of knowledge, or on the human hand in the physical making of much that is loosely referred to by environmentalists as 'natural'. These senses are obviously not exclusive of each other, and are indeed often run together, although the first is more associated with Derridean or Foucauldian-influenced gender studies and cultural criticism, and the last two more emphasized in the argument of philosophers of science, cultural geographers, sociologists and political ecologists.[2]

The hidden real

In What *is Nature?* I suggested that where the realist position (at any rate in its more naive forms) was, normatively speaking, 'nature-endorsing' – in other words, tended to invoke and applaud 'nature' as a domain of intrinsic value, truth or authenticity – the

constructivist position was ‘nature-sceptical’: it was wary of the social and sexual policing functions of the appeal to naturality, and sought to expose its misleadingly anthropocentric and anthropomorphic conceptual projections.[3] I still think this is a reasonable point to make about the respective normative stances of the two main ontological positions – but only speaking very broadly; and in distinguishing between the ontological and the normative aspects I would mark the fact that there is no direct correspondence between realists and nature-endorsers, on the one hand, and constructivists and nature-sceptics, on the other.

Take, for example, the growing field of ecologically sensitive cultural criticism now known as ‘ecocriticism’, where much of the writing divides between two types of approach, both concerned in differing ways with the understanding or representation of non-human nature.[4] In the one – the more ecocentric and nature-endorsing approach – literary and other texts are viewed as sources of revelation about the intrinsic value of nature or the importance of restoring human unity with it. This is associated with various calls to give ‘voice’ to nature; or to promote works which ‘privilege’ nature over humanity or register its ‘otherness’. It is also aligned with what might be termed redemptive Heideggerian readings of texts for what they have to tell us about our human ‘alienation’ or loss of ‘authentic’ relations with nature and the conditions of their possible restitution.

The other approach is instantiated in the deconstructive-sceptical type of exercise which emphasizes the role of culture in the creation of what we term ‘nature’, and seeks to expose dubiously Romantic, or anthropomorphizing, or ideologically distorting, cultural constructions and representations of nature. These two approaches are clearly in many respects antithetical: writers endorsing the ‘truth’ or ‘value’ of nature, or recalling us to a lost unity with it, are engaged in something rather different from those exposing the cultural construction of that ‘truth’ or the partial, and historically relative, quality of human feelings for the natural environment. Nevertheless both approaches may be said to share a concern with clarifying our conceptions of the non-human world, or correcting misapprehensions about human relations to it. In the more nature-endorsing mode, the appeal to the establishment of ‘authentic dwelling’ or more ‘truthful’ relations to nature is made fairly explicit. But the exposure of misleading cultural representations of ‘nature’ is also implicitly recommending an alternative and improved cognition – a mode of understanding that will avoid instrumental or anthropomorphizing appropriations – and is thus far also operating with a notion of ‘truth’ or ‘authenticity’.[5] Whether, then, the advice is to ‘return’ to nature – to get ‘closer’ to it, to ‘dwell authentically’, and so forth – or to be wary of our own too appropriative representations of that ‘closeness’ or ‘authenticity’, in both cases the ecocritical task is presented as matter of correcting our views about nature or exploring texts as guides to a better appreciation of its independence.

One might also note in this connection the equivocations of the constructivist positions defended in social theory, wherein one frequently discerns a suppressed reference to a more realist conception of nature. Take, for example, Donna Haraway’s position as exemplified in the opening pages of *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*:

> neither our personal bodies nor our social bodies may be seen as natural, in the sense of existing outside the self-creating process called human labour. What we experience and theorise as nature and as culture are transformed by our work. All we touch and therefore know, including our organic and social bodies, is made possible for us through labour.[6]

This appears, on the one hand, to recognize a concept of the ‘natural’ as that which has not yet been ‘humanized’ or worked up through human labour, while on the other hand denying that we could have knowledge of it. But while we might agree that everything by which we are surrounded (everything ‘touchable’) is ‘cultural construction’ in the sense of being a product of labour, it is equally important to acknowledge nature in the

realist sense of causal powers and processes enabling and limiting the cultural work; and to accept that even if it is not 'touchable' it is nonetheless an object of scientific knowledge – of the kind of knowledge, for example, that is continually in use whether in the creation of machines, computer systems or genetic engineering. The emphasis throughout Haraway's argument on the construction or reinvention of nature leaves it unclear how far she would agree to the existence of a 'nature' which is not the cultural effect of productive interaction but the prior condition of any such interaction.[7]

Steven Vogel's position in his recent *Against Nature* is similarly ambiguous. Vogel professes to be a constructivist, and indeed tells us in explanation that 'to say that nature is "constructed" is … simply a way of saying that an appeal to nature is always nothing other than an appeal to *us* and to our own discursive processes of justification.' 'Since "nature" is a social category,' he writes, 'the "natural" world and the social one are not distinguishable.'[8] Within a paragraph, however, he also refers to a seemingly quite independent 'nature' or 'nature in itself', writing that 'nothing in my argument suggests that humans may not discursively determine that natural entities, or nature itself, possess value'; the plain implication seems to be that there *is* indeed a distinction to be made between the 'natural' and the 'social'.

Or again, there seems equivocation in Jane Howarth's criticism of what she sees, in a review of *What is Nature?*, as my overreliance on science in my account of the independent reality of nature. Howarth writes that, 'it may be true that one cannot be constructivist about nature, but one can be constructivist about science and hence about nature as science presents it.' Now if this means, to put it in the vocabulary of Critical Realism, that science is fallible, that there can be rival transcendental arguments to explain natural powers and structures, then this seems quite consistent with my own position, and no criticism of it. But if it means something more like 'realist nature can be equally well-represented in any and every theoretical construction', then it is indeed at odds with my own realism; but then it is also, surely, at odds with Howarth's own claim that one cannot be constructivist about nature – for that is surely precisely what *is* being claimed if we interpret her argument to mean realist nature has no say in determining which theories most adequately represent it: that the social construction of knowledge can be said to be knowledge while remaining wholly unconstrained by the qualities of that of which it is said to be knowledge.[9]

These examples suggest that such coherence as these positions have is sustained ultimately only through some covert gesture to that out of which the construction is constructed – to an aspect of bodily existence or selfhood or reality that is viewed as determinant upon, and not merely the creation of, the social forces and institutions and discourses which are mediating the form of its existence. A realist concept of nature is in this sense a suppressed or repressed ontological presupposition of much that passes for 'constructivism', and although there are constructivists, like Steven Vogel, who insist on the human production of everything termed 'natural' in order to get us to take full responsibility for it,[10] constructivists are, normatively speaking, very often covert nature-endorsers. (And ultimately even Vogel may be said to be, in the sense that in demanding more responsibility for our 'constructions' he implies that something is currently going ecologically awry – in other words, that these are not in line with what 'nature' proposes.)

Two dogmas of ecologism

One can, however, be a realist about nature while both agreeing with the nature-sceptics about the made-over or constructed nature of surface 'nature' and agreeing to the need to reject the discursive violence done in the name of nature, exposing the oppressive naturalizations of social hierarchies, ethnic differences and sexual norms. This, indeed, is my own position, which I would describe as both *realist* and *humanist*. It is realist, as already indicated, in the sense that it recognizes the contrast between the independent 'nature' that is presupposed as the permanent ground of all human activity and environmental change (the 'realist' concept of nature), and the 'nature' through which we refer to the historically changing and culturally transformed environment (the 'lay' or 'surface' concept of nature, the nature of immediate human experience and aesthetic response). It is *humanist*, on the other hand, in the sense that it is opposed to that form of naturalism which wants to emphasize how similarly (rather than differentially) placed we are to other animals in respect of our 'essential' needs and ecological dependencies, and seeks to ground ecological policy in that recognition.

On the basis of this position, I charge the constructivists, for their part, with being too ready to deny or disregard *realist* nature. A conception of nature as the permanent ground of environmental action is indispensable to the coherence of constructivist ecological discourse about the 'culturality' or the 'changing face

of nature' conceived as surface environment, reliant as this is on a distinction between the causal powers operant at a deep level and the historicity of their consequence, whether these are naturally precipitated (the earthquake, volcanic eruption) or humanly engineered (the ancient barrow or nuclear bunker). At the same time, I am also critical of that form of realism which presents 'nature' as an independent domain of intrinsic value which has been necessarily and progressively depreciated as a consequence of the intrusive and corrupting activities of the human species. One set of objections to this approach is pretty obvious, and can be stated briefly: namely, that it obscures the fact that much of the 'nature' which we are called upon to preserve or conserve (most obviously the so-called 'natural' landscape, including much thought of as 'wilderness') takes the physical form it does only in virtue of centuries of human activity, and is, in an important sense, a 'cultural construct'. It overlooks, too, the extent to which our conceptions of the aesthetic attractions and value of the natural world have themselves been shaped in the course of our interaction with it, and have therefore to be viewed as, at least in part, reactive responses to its effects. Nature itself only begins to figure as a positive and redemptive power, and to be valued in its sublime and untamed aspects, at the point where human mastery over its forces is extensive enough for aesthetic exaltation in wilderness to replace blind animal terror. The romanticization of nature is in this sense a manifestation of the same human powers over nature whose destructive effects it laments.[11] If, then, we are to give proper due both to the actual making of the environment and to the contemporary tailoring of surface 'nature' to modern needs and perceptions, we must inevitably recognize the conceptual difficulty of simply counterposing nature and culture as if they were two clearly distinguishable and exclusive domains. Much that Greens loosely refer to as 'natural' is indeed a product of culture, both in a physical sense and in the sense that perceptions of its beauties and value are culturally shaped.

Of course, those who insist on the intrinsic value of nature may well agree to the human hand in the making of much that loosely counts as nature, while yet insisting that human cultures, especially the industrialized societies of the West, have been far too dominated by an instrumental conception of the value of the non-human, and that it is only by arousing or restoring respect for the worth of nature as a locus of intrinsic value and end in itself that these societies can be encouraged to abandon their ecologically abusive policies.

Even this, however, is open to challenge. We can surely question what connection there is, if any, between changes in ecological policy and the development of respect for the intrinsic value of nature, and whether the latter is – as is so frequently claimed – a precondition of improved practice. One may find, that is, ecological writers taking quite contrary positions on the issue of the intrinsic value of nature while arguing for very similar environmental policies. Andrew Collier, for example, in *Being and Worth*, draws on aspects of the thought of St Augustine and Spinoza to argue that 'being as being is good', and that everything which exists strives to remain in that condition, and to that degree possesses intrinsic value, and has a corresponding claim on our love.[12] Collier approvingly quotes Augustine's claim (in *City of God*, book XII, ch. 5) that 'all nature's substances are good, because they exist and therefore have their own mode and kind of being, and, in their fashion, a peace and harmony among themselves.' Evil, it follows, is in some sense unreal: not being, but privation or lack of being, and is, according to Collier's Spinozist reading of Augustine, due to cognitive error, or failure of understanding of the being of the entity towards which the evil is being done. Thus it is argued, for example, that the more we know about non-human nature, both living and abiotic, the more we are likely to respect and love it, and that cruelty or vandalism towards other creatures or forms of being is largely a matter of cognitive deficiency rather than moral depravity.

Two points might be made here. First, I suspect that Collier is inclined to overstate the role of cognitive knowledge, whether of animal ethnology, or of the physical, chemical and biological properties of nature, in arriving at the forms of appreciation we do have of non-human nature. It is certainly true that the knowledge we gain of other creatures influences our feelings about them, but it is equally true that our feelings inform our theories and are always at work in our acceptance or rejection of them. (As Bolingbroke pointed out in response to Descartes' hypotheses about the machine-like nature of animals, 'The plain man would persist in thinking there was a difference between the town bull and the parish clock.') We would have to acknowledge, moreover, that very often, as in the case of life-forms causing disease, more knowledge leads not to more love but simply to more efficient elimination.

But the second, and perhaps more important, point is that since Collier accepts not only Augustine's doctrine on the goodness of being, but also agrees with him in seeing beings and their worth as hier-

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archically ranked, with human beings at the top of the scale, and the least conspicuous and sentient beings at the bottom, not a great deal seems to be at stake here when it comes to possible changes in our actual policies towards nature. Irrespective of whether or not we accept the Augustinian line on the intrinsic value of all being (the claim, that is, that 'being as being is good'), most of us will respect the being of human beings more than that of tigers, and that of tigers more than that of snails, and that of snails more than that of viruses, and so on. What is more, most of our current dealings with non-human beings and entities are already based on observing a hierarchy of worth of this kind, and we readily justify the destruction of all sorts of forms of existence by reference to their rankings. Admittedly, Collier, in effect, accepts this:

> It should be clear from the fact that non-human and even non-living entities are good in the sense that I am using the word, that this sense is not the same as moral goodness. It could be called a pre-moral good in that morality is based on it. Morality presupposes ontological good and consists in loving it in due order, and – very largely – in fighting off threats to ontological good. Morality is for the most part the negation of the negation of ontological good. But moral good and evil may lead to an ordering of our sympathies which is not the same as ontological ordering. For instance, I think it follows from this conception of the good that to take pleasure in killing an animal is very morally bad. In the light of this, consider the anti fox-hunting slogan, 'Which animal in a red coat has your sympathy?' In one sense, of course the fox does: if it is within one's power to do so, one should enable it to escape. Yet if you have to choose between giving essential help to a seriously injured fox or to a seriously injured fox-hunter, you should without hesitation do the latter. This also follows from the ontological ordering of goods.[13]

Collier also readily admits that there are many other, and rather thornier, problems about the prioritization of entities in the ontological order, and would insist that he is concerned only with the general plausibility of the Augustinian ethic, and not with deriving detailed moral prescriptions from it.

Yet one must question how far the plausibility of any theory of intrinsic value can, in fact, be divorced from consideration of what moral guidance it can provide without it becoming philosophically redundant. In making this point, my concern is not to defend a less 'anthropocentric' approach than Collier's to non-human being. I am not, for example, inclined to dispute the rightness of sacrificing bacterial or viral life forms to the health of human beings. My point, rather, is that when it comes to our policies on the treatment of human illness very little, if anything, hangs on whether we think the being of any bacteria

or viruses that may be causing an illness has some intrinsic value, or not. In either event we seek to destroy it, and have little problem in justifying our procedure. So although Collier clearly thinks that adopting the Augustinian line on the intrinsic value of non-human being will issue in more sensitive attitudes to animals and the natural environment, my sense is that our moral behaviour towards other beings is less determined by such ontological commitments than he supposes.

It is interesting, moreover, to note that Tim Hayward in his recent *Political Theory and Ecological Values* arrives at a position very close to that of Collier regarding the importance of human respect and care for other creatures, but does so on the basis of rejecting any account in terms of the intrinsic value of non-human nature as a mistaken 'dogma of ecologism'. For Hayward, by contrast, the motives for looking after the abiotic environment can be derived from enlightened self-interest, and 'the claim that beings other than humans are morally considerable can be stated and defended in its own terms, without any reference to intrinsic value.'[14] Hayward, in fact, takes what seems to be an even stronger line than Collier's on our duties towards other living beings, arguing that humans not only have an interest in promoting ecological values, but a moral obligation to give 'wholehearted respect' (i.e. an active respect which includes care) to non-human beings. But the grounds for this obligation lie not in the intrinsic value of either humans or non-humans, but rather in the fact (as Hayward seeks to persuade us) that there is no reason to have more reverence for human 'rational nature' than for any other aspect of nature.

Yet this, too, is a difficult position to accept, in part because it must meet all the usual objections concerning the non-reciprocal nature of the imputed obligations: can we be morally obliged to respect and care for the bodily integrity of those who have no such respect for us or other species in nature? But it is problematic in part, too, because in undermining the normal basis of our hierarchical ranking of species it leaves us with even less specific moral guidance on the issue of prioritization of species than does the position adopted by Collier. How much care should we show, and to what beings, and for how long? Hayward seems to imply that 'wholehearted respect' is due to all beings that can be viewed as having interests or a 'good' of their own. Yet since this could be theoretically construed to include all biotic entities, both animal and vegetable, it is clear that, in practice, there must be limits on the creatures or beings of nature towards whom human beings might be said to have special duties of care, and what can set these if not our intuitions and knowledge about the degree of approximation of other species to the forms of sentience, cognition and rationality we associate with our own?

In the end, then, sympathetic as I am to both Collier's and Hayward's attempts to enhance human respect and care for non-human being, in neither case (though for differing reasons) does it seem that any very concrete proposals can be adduced from their respective ontological positions, either on the forms this care should take, or on the discriminations to be made in respect of its recipients. In this sense, as suggested earlier, I am yet to be convinced that what matters when it comes to practical policies on animal welfare and environmental preservation is whether we believe, as Collier does, in the intrinsic goodness of nature, or whether we dismiss, as does Hayward, all claims about intrinsic value as ecological dogma.

Distinctively human

One important implication of all this is that it is a mistake to view ecological politics as a matter of having the 'right' attitudes to the 'otherness' of nature. Indeed, when conceived in the only form in which it can be said to be fully independent and non-artefactual, nature is nature in my *realist* sense of causal power and process, and cannot in itself supply us with our ecological policies.[15] To recognize the independent reality of nature as deep structure and process is at the same time to accept how few normative implications for human environmental action follow from that recognition. It is also to accept that we should not pretend to a unity or communality with non-human nature that could be had only by denying or overlooking our more specifically human needs, concerns and qualities. We (or, at any rate, some Western intellectuals) may suffer at times from what might be called the 'envy of immanence' – by which I mean the desire to be like plant and animal life, immersed in nature rather than consciously confronting and representing it. (This is the wish, as Rilke puts it, to be admitted to the 'Open', becoming one of the 'great accustomed' who are by nature 'benumbed' and live only in their 'dim delight'[16] – and it is a wish or envy which also finds powerful expression in the poetry of Wordsworth, Edward Thomas, and a number of others. But in the final analysis very few of us would opt for immanence even if it were possible and we were offered the choice, and certainly neither Heidegger nor Rilke nor Wordsworth nor Thomas showed any real interest in

renouncing their aspirations to philosophical or poetic trans-cendence.)

I want instead to argue that our current ecological situation is to be illuminated primarily not by reference to the intrinsic value of non-human nature, nor by recalling us to our affinities with other living creatures, but by consideration of the fraught nature of our own – distinctively human – condition as beings who are both on a continuum with and, in an important sense, disconnected from the rest of animality. Human beings, like other animals, are members of a biological species and dependent on environmental resources for the supply of all our material needs, but at the same time unlike them in the urge we have to engage in a more than immanent and reproductive existence – to fulfil ourselves through dynamic and constantly innovative forms of cultural transcendence.

This position diverges from the sort of 'naturalism', defended by Benton, which views the distinction between humans and other animals as a matter of degree rather than of kind. It repudiates, as well, Benton's suggestion that the 'humanist' emphasis on human difference licences an instrumental and destructive use of nature as mere means to human ends, whereas the emphasis on human communality and continuity with other species encourages a more proper respect and preservative instinct.[17] My objections to Benton's form of naturalism relate essentially to two of his claims: first, that the needs which are held in common with other animals are best analysed as being specifically human ways of doing what other animals also do; and second, that even where the needs seem entirely particular to human beings (what he terms 'self-realization' needs), they are best viewed as derived from attributes or requirements common to both humans and non-humans. Our human cognitive, aesthetic and normative capacities and needs are thus to be regarded, as Benton puts it, as 'in some sense consequential upon those needs which are common to natural beings, or upon the species-specific ways in which those common needs are met.'[18] Against these claims I have objected that the putative distinction between two types of need is inherently problematic, and that the specific modes in which human beings gratify the needs (for nourishment, sex, etc.) that they share with other creatures cannot be understood without invoking precisely those more spiritual needs of 'self-realization' which are said to be 'in some sense' emergent or derivable from them. In other words, what distinguishes the specifically human mode of gratification of needs held in common with other creatures is the aesthetic and symbolic dimension itself, and one must question whether a non-reductive naturalism of the kind defended by Benton can fully respect this differentiation without falling into circularity.[19]

My humanist insistence on the specificity of human ways of doing things (and my corresponding resistance to basing ecological policy on our affinities with other animals) also leads me to reject poststructuralist invitations, such as Haraway extends, to blur the conceptual distinctions not only between the inorganic and the human but also between the human and the animal. 'Nothing', she argues, 'convincingly settles the separation of human and animal'; 'many feminists affirm the pleasure of connection of human and other living beings'; 'movements for animal rights are not irrational denials of human uniqueness, but clearsighted recognition of this connectedness'.[20] Yet just as the refusal to blur the machine–body boundary is, for example, of critical conceptual importance to the condemnation of torture, so one may argue is the refusal to blur the human–animal divide to the respect which Haraway

and other postmodernists clearly want us to accord to the distinctive pleasures and pains of human love and sexuality. It is ultimately quite difficult to read Haraway without sensing a persistent equivocation on these issues, since even as we are asked to collapse our conceptual discriminations between the human, the animal and the inorganic, she is also arguing morally in ways that presuppose their continued observation.[21] Take, for example, the questions Haraway has recently posed about our human responses to such transgenic creations as OncoMouse. A trademarked biotic entity, genetically designed for the study and prevention of breast cancer, OncoMouse is, as Haraway puts it, a reconfiguring of 'biological knowledge, laboratory practise, property law, economic fortunes and collective and personal hopes and fears', and as such poses deep and difficult questions of kinship: how are natural kinds to be identified in the late-twentieth-century realm of aliens and transpecifics? What kinds of crosses and offspring count as legitimate and illegitimate, to whom and at what cost? 'Who', asks Haraway, 'are my familiars, my siblings, and what kind of liveable world are we trying to build?'[22] Now, these are indeed burning issues, but that we see them as such, and agonize about the moral dilemmas they pose, is precisely because we still observe our organic–inorganic, human–animal conceptual divisions. The irony of Haraway's invitation to blur them is that if we were truly to do so we would no longer recognize the force of the moral problems she poses for us. A world bereft of these distinctions is a world bereft of the grounding conditions for moral, political and scientific critique. Is *that*, we may ask, a truly 'liveable' world?

Against naturalism: future culture

There is a further reason not to assimilate human modes of being too closely to those of non-human animals, having a direct bearing on the question of political practice; that is, a naturalism of that kind seems to encourage too static and fixed a conception of our forms of flourishing. I have recognized that human beings are similarly placed to other animals in respect of certain basic needs of survival, and that in this sense we need to work with a universalist and (minimally) essentialist conception of human nature. But, as I also earlier suggested, they are very unlike other biological species in respect of their capacity consciously to monitor their impact on the environment and to rethink forms of production and consumption in the light of ecological constraints. This malleability or underdetermination in respect of human pleasure and fulfilment needs to be emphasized as a potential asset of ecological adjustment. For us, unlike other creatures, living in ways which place less stress on nature involves rethinking our conditions of flourishing and forms of transcendence: it means uncoupling the dynamic of human pleasures and modes of self-fulfilment from its current reliance – at least in the affluent nations – on intense global exploitation, both social and environmental. How do we reconcile the ecological – and egalitarian – need for a more cyclical and reproductive (if you like, speaking loosely, more 'natural' or 'immanent') use of resources with the more distinctively human – and individualist – needs for continuous cultural innovation, enhanced gratification and self-expression? Can we find ways of living rich, fulfilling, complex, non-repetitive lives without social injustice and without too much damage to 'nature'? The problem here is not how better to 'respect' or get 'back to nature' (in the sense of reverting to tradition, simplicity and immanence) but how to advance to a more assertively human and ecologically benign form of future (that is, how to proceed beyond the limiting and ecologically unsustainable forms of transcendence currently furnished by modernity).

This perspective problematizes any form of naturalism that appears to presuppose that our needs and forms of flourishing are naturally fixed and objectively knowable in much the way they are for other creatures. These naturalisms would seem to imply that ecological harmony could be achieved or restored only by discriminating, on the basis of this knowledge, between true and false needs, and pursuing the former while discarding the latter. But unless true needs are simply being analytically defined in terms of those that prove ecologically viable, there is no more reason to suppose that only those deemed to be 'true' needs will be endlessly accommodated by the provisioning of 'nature' than there is to view all current 'needs' or forms of flourishing that are ecologically destructive or unsustainable as inherently 'false'. Any globally responsible adjustment to ecological scarcities will require those living in affluent societies both to restrict or altogether sacrifice some current sources of gratification, and to be imaginative and undogmatic in their attitudes to what they can enjoy: to open themselves to the possibilities of an alternative hedonism and to modes of living and self-fulfilment rather different from those associated with prevalent Western assumptions about flourishing. But adjustment of this kind should be viewed not so much as the eradication of 'false' needs as the exploration of new pleasures.

John O'Neill has suggested that in pressing this case, I am being overly determinist in my conception of what counts as a naturalist position on flourishing. A naturalist position, he points out, is consistent with allowing that particular needs (he cites the example of our need for relations with others) can be met in a wide variety of differing ways. But I think he is missing the point here, since the question I am raising through the concept of flourishing is precisely about how we should go about the satisfaction of such abstract needs under current ecological conditions.

Transport needs are a good example. Few will dispute that human beings have a need for mobility – to move about from one place to another. But how fast and in what mode? Contemporary conceptions of flourishing in affluent cultures view this, for example, as conditional upon at least the motor car, and increasingly upon the access to air flight, too. In other words, we think of ourselves as flourishing in respect of our need for mobility and communication very much in terms of the availability of modes of transport of a speed and flexibility unknown to previous generations. Indeed, this is so much so that most people speak of their 'need' for their car, and many others of their need to fly. But if these are indeed needs, or at any rate forms of consumption essential to flourishing, they are also needs/forms of flourishing that are highly problematic ecologically and upon which nature may well not prove able to deliver even for another century let alone indefinitely. In this sense, even as we are satisfying our abstract need for relations with others, for mobility, for shelter, for nourishment, and so on, with a particular set of satisfiers so essential to current well-being that they appear themselves as needed items of consumption, we have also – for ecological reasons – to be pondering on possible alternatives to these satisfiers. Despite O'Neill's claim to the contrary, naturalism *is* too thin and non-committal if – as in his argument, and I think in Benton's too – it is happy simply to point to its own indeterminacy. Naturalism of this kind may pre-empt the charge of being deterministic by refusing to specify which satisfiers are actually naturally 'needed' and simply claiming instead that it is theoretically compatible with a wide variety of modes of consumption. But if it does so, it cannot at the same time claim any privileged status over humanism as the theoretical grounding for a socially just and non-exploitative ecological politics.

Notes

1. See my *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1995; Ted Benton, 'Marxism and Natural Limits', *New Left Review* 178, November–December, 1989, pp. 51–86; Ted Benton, 'Ecology, Socialism and the Mastery of Nature: A Reply to Reiner Grundmann', *New Left Review* 194, July–August 1992, pp. 55–74. See also Ted Benton, *Natural Relations*, Verso, London, 1993. These arguments have been influenced by the critical realism developed in Roy Bhaskar's work. See *A Realist Theory of Science*, Harvester Press, Hassocks, 1978; *The Possibility of Naturalism*, Harvester Press, Brighton, 1979; *Reclaiming Reality*, Verso, London, 1980; *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*, Verso, London, 1993.
2. One might note here such works as Neil Evernden's *The Social Creation of Nature*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1992, which is founded on the claim that prior to the invention of the term 'nature' there was no such thing as nature; or Phil Macnaughten and John Urry's *Contested Natures*, Sage, London, 1998, which argues (p. 15) that 'there is no singular nature as such, only natures', and that these are 'historically, geographically and socially constituted'; or Steven Vogel's claim in his *Against Nature,* SUNY Press, New York, 1996, that since 'nature' is a social category 'the "natural" world and the social one are not distinguishable' (p. 7). I would also include within the constructivist camp the neo-antiromanticism of Donna Haraway's cyborg feminism and those who would have us view cybernetics as signalling the final collapse of any meaningful natural–artifical distinction. For some further examples of the anti-realist position, and some helpful discussion on this, see John O'Neill, 'Nature, Culture, Politics', in Wolfgang Reidel, ed., *Narratives of Nature*, Verlag die Blaue Eule, Essen, 1999, pp. 35–8.
3. See *What is Nature?*, esp. 'Introduction'.
4. For some recent examples of both these perspectives, see the collection of essays in Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells, eds, *Writing the Environment*, Zed Books, London and New York, 1998. Heidegger is an important influence on the former line of ecocriticism, and quite frequently invoked by critics of the more nature-endorsing disposition.
5. As instances of this kind of critical exposure of our discourses on 'nature' one might cite Alex Wilson's *The Culture of Nature*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992; the critical engagement with children's literature by Karin Lesnik Oberstein; or Karla Armbruster's piece on television nature documentaries – the last two in Kerridge and Sammells, eds, *Writing the Environment*. In her critique of the constructivism at work in television nature programmes, for example, Armbruster writes, 'Bridging the gap between culture and nature by this kind of excessive (and culturally normative) anthropomorphism ignores the diverse ways in which nonhuman nature is different from humanity. Such strategies are another form of human dominance over the nonhuman: by accepting the absorption of animals, plants and even eco-systems into the sphere of human culture, we participate in the colonizing move of turning what was other into the same, with no respect for its difference from us' (ibid., p. 231).
6. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, Free Association Books and Routledge, London and New York, 1991, p. 10.
7. In her influential argument for a 'cyborg feminism', Haraway invites us to revel in the end of nature, or at any rate in the end of the idea of nature as promise

of ultimate unification or redemption. ('The cyborg', she writes, 'is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness.… The cyborg skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense', ibid., pp. 150–51.) Yet despite these claims that the cyborg is resistent to any identification with nature, cyborgs are still approved for having what is called a 'natural feel' for a united front politics, and cyborg 'sex' is still recommended to us in terms of a naturalistic vocabulary of 'intimacy' and bodily couplings (p. 151).

8. Vogel, *Against Nature*, p. 10.
9. Jane Howarth, review of *What is Nature?* in *Environmental Values*, vol. 7, no. 3, August 1998, p. 361.
10. Vogel, *Against Nature*, p. 10; and see also Vogel's reply to his critics in *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, vol. 9(3), no. 35, September 1998, pp. 39–40.
11. I do not intend to suggest here that the eighteenth-century theorists of the 'natural sublime' were themselves conscious of these underlying conditions of their aesthetic interest in the remote, wild and terrifying aspects of nature. For the 'master' theorist, Kant, an appreciation of the sublime is potentially available to us all, and its pleasure to be analysed in terms of the way it recalls us to a sense of the superiority of the powers of human reason over anything encountered phenomenally. My point is that the emergence of the vogue for the sublime comes in the wake of a progressive domestication of the environment. In the United States, the Hudson River School draws on sublime imagery in the early nineteenth century, but remains a minority taste, opposed to the dominant Concordian sympathies. See Jay Appleton, *Experience of Landscape*, John Wiley, London, 1975, pp. 40 f; compare Leo Marx's emphasis on the 'garden' image of the American pastoral ideal, *The Machine in the Garden*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1964, pp. 36–44, 75–88.
12. Andrew Collier, *Being and Worth*, Routledge, London and New York, 1999.
13. Ibid., p. 77.
14. Tim Hayward, *Political Theory and Ecological Values*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 21.
15. See Benton, 'Ecology, Socialism and the Mastery of Nature', pp. 55–74, esp. pp. 58–9.
16. Or, in Heidegger's terminology, it is the wish not to have 'to go with the venture as one that is represented'. See 'What Are Poets For?', in *Language, Poetry, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadler, Harper & Row, New York, 1971, p. 110 (Heidegger himself discusses Rilke and Hölderlin in this context).
17. See Benton, *Natural Relations*, pp. 54–7; 'Humanism = Speciesism? Marx on Humans and Animals', *Radical Philosophy* 50, Autumn 1988.
18. Benton, *Natural Relations*, p. 56.
19. See *What is Nature?*, pp. 160–70, for a fuller discussion.
20. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, pp. 151–2. These are claims which require more qualification and sceptical appraisal than Haraway accords them – a neglect that is all the more strange given her clear understanding of the risks of sociobiological reductionism. One might note, too, that it is difficult to see how this part of her argument avoids the Romantic-redemptive framework of thinking about nature which she professes to want to avoid. The standard move of the animal liberationists is to *oppose* the body to the machine, the organic and suffering flesh to the indifference and alienation of biotechnology and agribusiness. Where, then, does this leave a cyborg politics? And how can this approval for the natural connectedness of all animal species be reconciled with the anti-naturalism of her (wildly indiscriminate) attack on the 'racism' of those who appeal to the idea of a 'natural' species in their objections to genetic engineering? (see *Modest_Witness@Second _Millennium. FemaleMan©_Meets_OncoMouse™*, Routledge, London, 1991, pp. 60–62).
21. In this sense one of her critics, Jill Marsden ('Virtual Sexes and Feminist Futures: the Philosophy of Cyberfeminism', *Radical Philosophy* 78, July/August 1996, pp. 8–15) is quite right to complain about the confusion in Haraway's demand for responsibility: 'In insisting', Marsden writes, 'on "political accountability" and ethical obligation, Haraway struggles to rescue "A Cyborg Manifesto" from the charge of technological determinism, but in so doing weakens the case for understanding technological revolution and biological evolution as symbiotic' (p. 14). But while for Marsden all this represents a refusal to face the full trauma of dismantling the biological order, and a cowardly reversion to humanist values, it figures for me as reluctant and confused testimony to Haraway's understanding of the self-defeating quality of cybernetic anti-humanism.
22. See her discussion in *Modest_Witness@Second_ Millennium*, pp. 51–5.