

DISCUSSION PAPERS

Before Environmental Ethics

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Contemporary nonanthropocentric environmental ethics is profoundly shaped by the very anthropocentrism that it tries to transcend. New values only slowly struggle free of old contexts. Recognizing this struggle, however, opens a space for—indeed, necessitates—alternative models for contemporary environmental ethics. Rather than trying to unify or fine-tune our theories, we require more pluralistic and exploratory methods. We cannot reach theoretical finality; we can only co-evolve an ethic with transformed practices.

I. INTRODUCTION

To think “ecologically,” in a broad sense, is to think in terms of the evolution of an interlinked system over time rather than in terms of separate and one-way causal interactions. It is a general habit of mind. Ideas, for example, not just ecosystems, can be viewed in this way. Ethical ideas, in particular, are deeply interwoven with and dependent upon multiple contexts: other prevailing ideas and values, cultural institutions and practices, a vast range of experiences, and natural settings as well. An enormous body of work, stretching from history through the “sociology of knowledge” and back into philosophy, now supports this point.¹

It is curious that environmental ethics has not yet viewed itself in this way. Or perhaps not so curious, for the results are unsettling. Some theories, in particular, claim to have transcended anthropocentrism in thought. Yet these theories arise within a world that is profoundly and beguilingly anthropocentrized.² From an “ecological” point of view, transcending this context so easily seems improbable. In part two this paper, I argue that even the best nonanthropocentric theories in contemporary environmental ethics are still profoundly shaped by and indebted to the anthropocentrism that they officially oppose.

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¹ Some landmarks of this body of work come into view in the later discussion. For a general overview of work on ethical ideas in particular from this perspective, see Maria Ossowska, *Social Determinants of Moral Ideas* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1970).

² I distinguish *anthropocentrism* as a philosophical position, issuing in an ethic, from the practices and institutions in which that ethic is embodied, which I call “anthropocentrized.”

I do not mean that anthropocentrism is inevitable, or even that nonanthropocentric speculation has no place in current thinking. Rather, as I argue in part three, the aim of my critique is to bring into focus the slow process of culturally constituting and consolidating values that underlies philosophical ethics as we know it. My purpose is to broaden our conception of the nature and tasks of ethics, so that we can begin to recognize the “ecology,” so to speak, of environmental ethics itself, and thus begin to recognize the true conditions under which anthropocentrism might be overcome.

One implication is that we must rethink the practice of environmental ethics. In part four, I ask how ethics should comport itself at early stages of the process of constituting and consolidating new values. I then apply the conclusions directly to environmental ethics. In particular, the co-evolution of values with cultural institutions, practices, and experience emerges as an appropriately “ecological” alternative to the project of somehow trying to leapfrog the entire culture in thought. In part five, finally, I offer one model of a co-evolutionary approach to environmental philosophy: what I call “enabling environmental practice.”

II. CONTEMPORARY NONANTHROPOCENTRISM

I begin by arguing that contemporary nonanthropocentric environmental ethics remains deeply dependent upon the thoroughly anthropocentric setting in which it arises. Elsewhere I develop this argument in detail.³ Here there is only room to sketch some highlights.

For a first example, consider the very phrasing of the question that most contemporary environmental philosophers take as basic: whether “we” should open the gates of moral considerability to “other” animals (sometimes just: “animals”), and/or to such things as rivers and mountains. The opening line of Paul Taylor’s *Respect for Nature*, for example, invokes such a model. Environmental ethics, Taylor writes, “is concerned with the moral relations that hold between humans and the natural world.”⁴

Taylor’s phrasing of “the” question may seem neutral and unexceptionable. Actually, however, it is not neutral at all. The called-for arguments address humans universally and exclusively on behalf of “the natural world.” Environmental ethics, therefore, is invited to begin by *positing*, not by questioning, a sharp divide that “we” must somehow cross, taking that “we” unproblematically to denote all humans. To invoke such a divide, however, is already to take one ethical position among others. For one thing, it is largely peculiar to modern Western cultures. Historically, when humans said “we,” they hardly ever meant to include all other humans. Moreover, they often meant to include some individuals of other species. Mary Midgley emphasizes that almost all of the ancient life patterns were

³ See Anthony Weston, “Non-Anthropocentrism in a Thoroughly Anthropocentric World,” *The Trumpeter* 8, no. 3 (1991): 108-12.

⁴ Paul Taylor, *Respect for Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 3.

“mixed communities,” involving humans and an enormous variety of other creatures, from dogs (with whom, she says, we have a “symbiotic” relationship) to reindeer, weasels, elephants, shags, horses, and pigs.⁵ One’s identifications and loyalties lay not with the extended human species, but with a local and concretely realized network of relationships involving many different species.

Taylor might respond that his question is at least *our* question: the urbanized, modern, Westerner’s question. So it is. But it is precisely this recognition of cultural relativity that is crucial. “The” very question that frames contemporary environmental ethics appears to presuppose a particular cultural and historical situation—which is not the only human possibility, and which may itself be the problem. Cross-species identifications, or a more variegated sense of “the natural world,” fit in awkwardly, or not at all.

Consider a second example. A defining feature of almost all recent nonanthropocentrism is some appeal to “intrinsic values” in nature. Once again, however, this kind of appeal is actually no more neutral or timelessly relevant than an appeal to all, and only to, humans on behalf of the rest of the world. Intrinsic values in nature are so urgently sought at precisely the moment that the *instrumentalization* of the world—at least according to a certain sociological tradition⁶—has reached a fever pitch. It is because we now perceive nature as thoroughly reduced to a set of “means” to human ends that an insistence on nature as an “end in itself” seems the only possible response. We may even be right. Still, under other cultural conditions, unthreatened by such a relentless reduction of everything to “mere means,” it at least might not seem so *obvious* that we must aspire to a kind of healing that salvages a few non-traditional sorts of ends while consigning everything else to mere resourcehood. Instead, we might challenge the underlying means-ends divide itself, turning toward a more pragmatic sense of the interconnectedness of all of our values.⁷

Also, unthreatened in this way, we might not be tempted to metaphysical turns in defense of the values we cherish. Jim Cheney has suggested that the turn to metaphysics in some varieties of contemporary environmental ethics represents, like the ancient Stoics’ turn to metaphysics, a desperate self-defense rather than a revelation of a genuine nonanthropocentrism. Cheney charges in particular that a certain kind of radical environmentalism, which he dubs “Ecosophy S,” has been tempted into a “neo-Stoic” philosophy—an identification with nature on the level

⁵ Mary Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983), p. 118. See also Arne Naess, “Self-Realization in Mixed Communities of Humans, Bears, Sheep, and Wolves,” *Inquiry* 22 (1979): 231-41.

⁶ A tradition beginning with Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Scribner’s, 1958) and *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. G. Roth and C. Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), and carried into the present in different ways by, e.g., Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World* (Cornell University Press, 1981) and Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (University of Chicago Press, 1984).

⁷ For an argument in defense of this point, see Anthony Weston, “Beyond Intrinsic Value: Pragmatism in Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics* 7 (1985): 321-39.

of the universe as a whole—because neo-Stoicism offers a way to identify with nature without actually giving up control. In this way, abstract arguments become a kind of philosophical substitute for “real encounter” with nature.⁸

Cheney argues that Ecosophy S reflects a profoundly contemporary psychological dynamic. I want to suggest that it also reflects the diminished character of the world in which we live. The experiences for which Ecosophy S is trying to speak are inevitably marginalized in a thoroughly anthropocentrized culture. They are simply not accessible to most people or even understandable to many. Although wild experience may actually *be* the starting point for Ecosophy S, there are only a few, ritualized, and hackneyed ways to actually speak for it in a culture that does not share it. Thus—again, under present circumstances—environmental ethics may be literally driven to abstraction.

Once again it may even be true that abstraction is *our* only option. Nonetheless, in a different world, truly beyond anthropocentrism, we might hope for a much less abstract way of speaking of and for wild experience—for enough sharing of at least the glimmers of wild experience that we can speak of it directly, even perhaps invoking a kind of love. But such a change, once again, would leave contemporary nonanthropocentric environmental ethics—whether neo-Stoic or just theoretical—far behind.

As a third and final example, consider the apparently simple matter of what sorts of criticism are generally regarded as “responsible” and what sorts of alternatives are generally regarded as “realistic.” The contemporary anthropocentrized world, which is, in fact, the product of an immense project of world reconstruction that has reached a frenzy in the modern age, has become simply the taken-for-granted reference point for what is “real,” for what must be accepted by any responsible criticism. The absolute pervasiveness of internal combustion engines, for example, is utterly new, confined to the last century and mostly to the last generation. By now very few Westerners ever get out of earshot of internal combustion engines for more than a few hours at a time. The environmental consequences are staggering, the long-term effects of constant noise on “mental health” are clearly worrisome, and so on. Yet, this technology has so thoroughly embedded itself in our lives that even mild proposals to restrict internal combustion engines seem impossibly radical. This suddenly transmuted world, the stuff of science fiction only fifty years ago, now just as suddenly defines the very limits of imagination. When we think of “alternatives,” all we can imagine are car pools and buses.

Something similar occurs in philosophical contexts. Many of our philosophical colleagues have developed a careful, neutral, critical style as a point of pride. But in actual practice this style is only careful, neutral, critical in certain directions. It is not possible to suggest anything *different*, for the project of going beyond anthropocentrism still looks wild, incautious, intellectually overexcited. Anthro-

⁸ Jim Cheney, “The Neo-Stoicism of Radical Environmentalism,” *Environmental Ethics* 11 (1989): 293-325.

pocentrism itself, however, is almost never scrutinized in the same way. Apparently, it just forms part of the “neutral” background: it seems to be no more than what the careful, critical thinker can *presuppose*. Thus, it is the slow excavation and the logical “refutation” of anthropocentrism that, perforce, occupy our time—rather than, for one example, a much less encumbered, more imaginative exploration of other possibilities, less fearful of the disapproval of the guardians of Reason, or, for another example, a psychological exploration of anthropocentrism itself, taking it to be more like a kind of lovelessness or blindness than a serious philosophical position. Anthropocentrism still fills the screen, still dominates our energies. It delimits what is “realistic” because in many ways it determines what “reality” itself is.

III. ETHICS IN SOCIAL CONTEXT

The conclusion of the argument so far might only seem to be that we need better nonanthropocentrisms: theories that rethink Taylor’s basic question, theories that are not so easily seduced by intrinsic values, and so on. Although such theories would be useful changes, the argument just offered also points toward a much more fundamental conclusion, one upon which very large questions of method depend. If the most rigorous and sustained attempts to transcend anthropocentrism still end up in its orbit, profoundly shaped by the thought and practices of the anthropocentrized culture within which they arise, then we may begin to wonder whether the project of transcending culture in ethical thought is, in fact, workable *at all*. Perhaps ethics requires a very different self-conception.

Here, moreover, is a surprising fact: ethics generally *has* a very different self-conception. Most “mainstream” ethical philosophers now readily acknowledge that the values they attempt to systematize are indeed deeply embedded in and co-evolved with social institutions and practices. John Rawls, for example, who at earlier moments appeared to be the very incarnation of the philosophical drive toward what he himself called an “Archimedean point” beyond culture, now explicitly justifies his theory only by reference to its “congruence with our deeper understanding of ourselves and our aspirations, and our realization that, given our history and the traditions embedded in our public life, it is the most reasonable doctrine for us.” For *us*, culture answers “our” questions. “We are not,” he says, “trying to find a conception of justice suitable for all societies regardless of their social or historical circumstances.” Instead, the theory “is intended simply as a useful basis of agreement in our society.”⁹ The same conclusion is also the burden, of course, of an enormous body of criticism supposing Rawls to be making a less culturally dependent claim. Rawls, thus, does not transcend his social context at all. His theory is, rather, in a Nietzschean phrase, a particularly scholarly way of

⁹ John Rawls, “Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory,” *Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1980): 318; and “Justice as Fairness: Political, not Metaphysical,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14 (1985): 228.

expressing an already established set of values. That contemporary nonanthropocentric environmental ethics does not transcend *its* social context, therefore, becomes much less surprising. At least it is in good company.

Similarly, John Arras, in an article surveying Jonsen and Toulmin's revival of casuistry, as well as the Rawls-Walzer debate, remarks almost in passing that all of these philosophers agree that "there is no escape from the task of interpreting the meanings embedded in our social practices, institutions, and history."¹⁰ Michael Walzer argues for a plurality of justice values rooted in the varied "cultural meanings" of different goods.¹¹ Alasdair MacIntyre makes the rootedness of values in "traditions" and "practice" central to his reconception of ethics.¹² Charles Taylor localizes the appeal to rights within philosophical, theological, and even aesthetic movements in the modern West.¹³ Sabina Lovibond updates Wittgensteinian "form of life" ethics along sociologically informed "expressivist" lines.¹⁴

It may seem shocking that the "Archimedean" aspirations for ethics have been abandoned with so little fanfare. From the point of view of what we might call the "theology of ethics," it probably is. Day to day, however, and within the familiar ethics of persons, justice, and rights practiced by most of the philosophers just cited, it is less surprising. Operating within a culture in which certain basic values are acknowledged, at least verbally, by nearly everyone, there is little practical need to raise the question of the ultimate origins or warrants of values. Because the issue remains metaphilosophical and marginal to what are supposed to be the more systematic tasks of ethics, we can acquiesce in a convenient division of labor with the social sciences, ceding to them most of the historical and cultural questions about the evolution of values, while keeping the project of systematizing and applying values for our own. "Scholarly forms of expression" of those values—or at least systematic forms of expression, "rules to live by"—are then precisely what we want.

It now seems entirely natural, for example, to view persons as "centers of autonomous choice and valuation," in Taylor's words, "giving direction to their lives on the basis of their own values," having a sense of identity over time, and so on. It also seems natural to point to this "belief system" to ground respect for persons, as Taylor also points out. He does *not* ask how such a belief system came into being and managed to rearrange human lives around itself. He does not *need* to ask. But we need at least to remember that these are real and complex questions. It is only such processes, finally running their courses, that make possible the

¹⁰ John Arras, "The Revival of Casuistry in Bioethics," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 16 (1991): 44.

¹¹ Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

¹² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

¹³ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

¹⁴ Sabina Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

consensus behind the contemporary values in the first place. Weber traces our belief system about persons, in part, to Calvinist notions about the inscrutability of fate, paradoxically leading to an outwardly calculating possessiveness coupled with rigid “inner asceticism,” both self-preoccupied in a fundamentally new way. In addition, he traces it to the development of a system of increasingly impersonal commercial transactions that disabled and disconnected older, more communal ties between people.¹⁵ The cultural relativity of the notion of persons is highlighted, meanwhile, by its derivation from the Greek dramatic “personae,” perhaps the first emergence of the idea of a unique and irreplaceable individual. A tribal African or Native American would never think of him or herself in this way.¹⁶

It may be objected that to stress the interdependence of ethical ideas with cultural institutions, practices, and experience simply reduces ethical ideas to epiphenomena of such factors. However, the actual result is quite different. The flaw lies with the objection’s crude (indeed, truly “vulgar,” as in “vulgar Marxist”) model of causation. Simple, mechanical, one-way linkages between clearly demarcated “causes” and “effects” do not characterize cultural phenomena (or, for that matter, *any* phenomena). Thus, the question is emphatically *not* whether ethical ideas are “cause” or “effect” in cultural systems, as if the only alternative to being purely a cause is to be purely an effect. Causation in complex, interdependent, and evolving systems with multiple feedback loops—that is, an “ecological” conception of causation—is a far better model.¹⁷

One implication of such a model, moreover, is that fundamental change (at least constructive, non-catastrophic change) is likely to be slow. Practices, habits, institutions, arts, and ideas all must evolve in some coordinated way. Even the physical structure of the world changes. Individualism and its associated idea of privacy, for example, developed alongside a revolution in home and furniture design.¹⁸ Thus, it may not even be that visionary ethical ideas (or anything else visionary, e.g., revolutionary architecture) are impossible at any given cultural stage, but rather that such ideas simply cannot be recognized or understood, given

¹⁵ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism and Economy and Society*.

¹⁶ For classic examples of selves in other keys, see Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) and Colin Turnbull, *The Forest People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961).

¹⁷ Unavoidable here is the Kantian objection that ethical values actually offer “reasons” rather than anything in the merely “causal” universe. My dogmatic response is that, despite its patina of logical necessity, this insistence on seceding from the phenomenal world actually derives from the same misconception of “causal” stories criticized in the text. Let me add, however, that, in my view, the idea that one can somehow understand and systematize ethical values in ignorance of their origins and social dynamics also partakes of the spectacular overconfidence in philosophical reason implicitly criticized in this paper as a whole. For some support on this point, see Kai Nielsen, “On Transforming the Teaching of Moral Philosophy,” *APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy*, November 1987, pp. 3-7.

¹⁸ Witold Rybczynski, *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (New York: Viking, 1986).

all of the practices, experiences, etc. alongside of which they have to be placed, and given the fact that they cannot be immediately applied in ways that will contribute to their development and improvement.¹⁹ To use Darwinian metaphor, all manner of “mutations” may be produced at any evolutionary stage, but conditions will be favorable for only a few of them to be “selected” and passed on.²⁰

It may also be objected that any such view is hopelessly “relativistic.” Although the term *relativism* now seems to be confused and ambiguous, there is at least one genuine concern here: if values are thoroughly relativized to culture, rational criticism of values may become impossible. In fact, however, rational criticism remains entirely possible—only its “standpoint” is internal to the culture it challenges, rather than (as in the Archimedean image) external to it. Much of what we tend to regard as radical social criticism reinvokes old, even central, values of a culture rather than requiring us to somehow transcend the culture in thought. Weber, for example, reread Luther’s conception of the individual’s relation to God as an extension of the already old and even revered monastic ideal to society at large. Likewise, the challenges of the 1960s in the U.S. arguably appealed not to new values but to some of the oldest and most deeply embedded values of our culture. The Students for Democratic Society’s “Port Huron Statement” persistently speaks in biblical language; the Black Panthers invoked the Declaration of Independence; the Civil Rights Movement was firmly grounded in Christianity. In his 1981 encyclical “*Laborem Exercens*,” Pope John Paul II appealed to Genesis to ground a stunning critique of work in industrial societies reminiscent of the early Marx.²¹

In general, those who worry about the implications of social-scientific “relativism” for the rationality of ethics should be reassured by Richard Bernstein’s delineation of a kind of rationality “beyond objectivism and relativism,” a much more pragmatic and processual model of reason built upon the historical and

¹⁹ I don’t mean to deny that rapid change (both cultural and biological) occasionally does occur, perhaps precipitated by unpredictable but radical events. Drastic global warming or a Chernobly-type accident outside of Washington, D.C. might well precipitate a drastic change in our environmental practices. Still, even in moments of crisis we can only respond using the tools that we then have. From deep within our anthropocentrized world it remains hard to see how we can respond without resorting either to some kind of “enlightened” anthropocentrism or to a reflex rejection of it, still on anthropocentrism’s own terms. Thus, when I speak of “fundamental” change, I mean change in the entire system of values, beliefs, practices, and social institutions—not just in immediate practices forced upon us by various emergencies.

²⁰ For this way of putting the matter, I am indebted to Rom Harre.

²¹ In general, the possibility of invoking dissonant strands in a complex culture is part of the reason that radical social criticism is possible in the first place. Cf. Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics*; Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987); and Anthony Weston, *Toward Better Problems: New Perspectives on Abortion, Animal Rights, the Environment, and Justice* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 167-74.

social embeddedness and evolution of ideas.²² Those who worry that “relative” values will be less serious than values that can claim absolute allegiance might be reassured by the argument that it is precisely the profound embeddedness of our ethical ideas within their cultural contexts that marks their seriousness. For *us*, of course. Nevertheless, that is whom we speak of and to.

Although these last remarks are very sketchy, they at least serve to suggest that a sociological or “evolutionary” view of values is not somehow the death knell of ethics. Instead, such a view seems to be almost an enabling condition of modern philosophical ethics. At the same time, however, “mainstream” ethics does not need to be, and certainly *has* not been, explicit on this point. The actual origins of values are seldom mentioned at all, and the usual labels—for example, Lovibond’s “expressivism” and even MacIntyre’s “traditions”—only indirectly suggest any social-scientific provenance. But it is time to be more explicit. As I argue below, large issues outside the “mainstream” may depend upon it.

IV. THE PRACTICE OF ETHICS AT ORIGINARY STAGES

In order to begin to draw some of the necessary conclusions from this “evolutionary” view of values, let us turn our attention to the appropriate compartment for ethics at what we might call the “originary stages” of the development of values: stages at which new values are only beginning to be constituted and consolidated. In the case of the ethics of persons, for example, we must try to place ourselves back in the time when respect for persons, and persons themselves, were far less secure—not fixed, secure, or “natural” as they now seem, but rather strange, forced, truncated, the way they must have seemed to, say, Calvin’s contemporaries. How then should—how *could*—a proto-ethics of persons proceed in such a situation?

First, such early stages in the development of a new set of values require a great deal of exploration and metaphor. Only later do the new ethical notions harden into analytic categories. For example, although the concept of the “rights” of persons now may be invoked with a fair degree of rigor, throughout most of its history it played a much more open-ended role, encouraging the treatment of whole new classes of people as rights holders—slaves, foreigners, propertyless persons, women—in ways previously unheard of, and in ways that, literally speaking, were misuses of the concept. (Consider “barbarian rights.” The very concept of *barbarian* seems to preclude one of them being one of “us,” i.e., Greeks, i.e., rights holders.) This malleable rhetoric of rights also in part *created* “rights holders.” Persuading someone that he or she has a right to something, for example, or persuading a whole class or group that their rights have been violated, dramatically changes his, her, or their behavior, and ultimately reconstructs his,

²² Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

her, or their belief systems and experiences. Even now the creative and rhetorical possibilities of the concept of rights have not been exhausted. It is possible to read the sweeping and inclusive notion of rights in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights in this light, for instance, rather than dismissing it as conceptually confused, as do legalistic thinkers.²³

Moreover, the process of co-evolving values and practices at originary stages is seldom a smooth process of progressively filling in and instantiating earlier outlines. Instead, we see a variety of fairly incompatible outlines coupled with a wide range of proto-practices, even social experiments of various sorts, all contributing to a kind of cultural working through of a new set of possibilities. The process *seems* smooth in retrospect only because the values and practices that ultimately win out rewrite the history of the others so that the less successful practices and experiments are obscured—much as successful scientific paradigms, according to Kuhn, rewrite their own pasts so that in retrospect their evolution seems much smoother, more necessary, and more univocal than they actually were. Great moments in the canonical history of rights, for example, include the Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of the Rights of Man, capitalism's institutionalization of rights to property and wealth, and now the persistent defense of a non-positivistic notion of rights for international export. *Not* included are the utopian socialists' many experimental communities, which often explicitly embraced (what *became*) non-standard, even anti-capitalistic notions of rights, such sustained and massive struggles as the labor movement's organization around working persons' rights, and the various modern attempts by most social democracies to institutionalize rights to health care.

A long period of experimentation and uncertainty, thus, ought to be expected and even welcomed in the originary stages of any new ethics. Again, as I suggested above, even the most familiar aspects of personhood co-evolved with a particular, complex, and even wildly improbable set of ideas and practices. Protestantism contributed not just a theology, and not just Calvin's peculiar and (if Weber is right) peculiarly world-historical "inner-world asceticism," but also such seem-

²³ While Hugo Bedau (in "International Human Rights," in Tom Regan and Donald VanDeveer, eds., *And Justice Toward All: New Essays in Philosophy and Public Policy* [Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982]) calls the declaration "the triumphant product of several centuries of political, legal, and moral inquiry into . . . 'the dignity and worth of the human person'" (p. 298), he goes on to assert that "It is . . . doubtful whether the General Assembly that proclaimed the UN Declaration understood what a human right is," since in the document rights are often stated loosely and in many different modalities. Ideals, purposes, and aspirations are run together with rights. At the same time, moreover, the declaration allows considerations of general welfare to limit rights, which seems to undercut their function as protectors of individuals against such rationales (p. 302n). In opposition to Bedau's position, however, I am suggesting that the General Assembly understood what rights are very well. Rights language is a broad-based moral language with multiple purposes and constituencies: in some contexts a counterweight to the typically self-serving utilitarian rhetoric of the powers that be; in others, a provocation to think seriously about even such often-mocked ideas as a right to a paid vacation, etc.

ingly simple projects as an accessible Bible in the vernacular. Imagine the extraordinary impact of being about to read the holy text oneself after centuries of only the most mediated access. Imagine the extraordinary self-preoccupation created by having to choose for the first time between rival versions of the same revelation, with not only one's eternal soul in the balance, but often one's earthly life as well. Only against such a background of practice did it become possible to begin to experience oneself as an individual, separate from others, beholden to inner voices and "one's own values," "giving direction to one's life" oneself, as Taylor puts it, and bearing the responsibility for one's choices.

Since we now look at the evolution of the values of persons mostly from the far side, it is easy to miss the fundamental contingency of those values and their dependence upon practices, institutions, and experiences that were for their time genuinely uncertain and exploratory. Today we are too used to that easy division of labor that leaves ethics only the systematic tasks of "expressing" a set of values that is already established, and abandons the originary questions to the social sciences. As a result, ethics is incapacitated when it comes to dealing with values that are *now* entering the originary stage. Even when it is out of its depth, we continue to imagine that systematic ethics, such as the ethics of the person, is the only kind of ethics there is. We continue to regard the contingency, open-endedness, and uncertainty of "new" values as an objection to them, ruling them out of ethical court entirely, or else as a kind of embarrassment to be quickly papered over with an ethical theory.

This discussion has direct application to environmental ethics. First and fundamentally, if environmental ethics is indeed at an originary stage, we can have only the barest sense of what ethics for a culture truly beyond anthropocentrism would actually look like. The Renaissance and the Reformation did not simply actualize some preexisting or easily anticipated notion of persons, but rather played a part in the larger *co-evolution* of respect for persons. What would emerge could only be imagined in advance in the dimmest of ways, or not imagined at all. Similarly, we are only now embarking on an attempt to move beyond anthropocentrism, and we simply cannot predict in advance where even another century of moral change will take us.

Indeed, when anthropocentrism is finally cut down to size, there is no reason to think that what we will have or need in its place will be something called *nonanthropocentrism* at all—as if that characterization would even begin to be useful in a culture in which anthropocentrism had actually been transcended. Indeed, it may not even be any kind of "centrism" whatsoever, i.e., some form of hierarchically structured ethics. It is already clear that hierarchy is by no means the only option.²⁴

²⁴ See, for example, Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*; and Karen Warren, "The Power and Promise of Ecofeminism," *Environmental Ethics* 12 (1990): 125-46.

Second and correlatively, at this stage, exploration and metaphor are crucial to environmental ethics. Only later can we harden originary notions into precise analytic categories. Any attempt to appropriate the moral force of rights language for (much of) the trans-human world, for example, ought to be expected from the start to be *imprecise*, literally confused. (Consider “animal rights.” The very concept of *animal* seems to preclude one of them being one of “us,” i.e., persons, i.e., rights holders.) It need not be meant as a description of prevailing practice; rather, it should be read as an attempt to *change* the prevailing practice. Christopher Stone’s book *Should Trees Have Standing? Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects*, for example, makes a revisionist proposal about legal arrangements; it does not offer an analysis of the existing concept of rights.²⁵

Something similar should be understood when we are invited to conceive not only animals or trees as rights holders, but also the land as a community and the planet as a person. All such arguments should be understood to be rhetorical, in a non-pejorative, pragmatic sense: they are suggestive and open-ended sorts of challenges, even proposals for Deweyan kinds of social reconstruction, rather than attempts to demonstrate particular conclusions on the basis of premises that are supposed to already be accepted.²⁶ The force of these arguments lies in the way they open up the possibility of new connections, not in the way they settle or “close” any questions. Their work is more creative than summative, more prospective than retrospective. Their chief function is to provoke, to loosen up the language, and correspondingly our thinking, to fire the imagination: to *open* questions, not to settle them.

The founders of environmental ethics were explorers along these lines. Here I want, in particular, to reclaim Aldo Leopold from the theorists. Bryan Norton reminds us, for example, that Leopold’s widely cited appeal to the “integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community” occurs in the midst of a discussion of purely economic constructions of the land. It is best read, Norton says, as a kind of counterbalance and challenge to the excesses of pure commercialism, rather than as a criterion for moral action all by itself. Similarly, John Rodman has argued that Leopold’s work should be read as an environmental ethic *in process*, complicating the anthropocentric picture more or less from within, rather than as a kind of proto-system, simplifying and unifying an entirely new picture, that can

²⁵ Christopher Stone, *Should Trees Have Standing? Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects* (Los Altos: William Kaufmann, 1974). G. E. Varner, in “Do Species Have Standing?” *Environmental Ethics* 9 (1987): 57-72, points out that the creation of new legal rights—as, for example, in the Endangered Species Act—helps expand what W. D. Lamont calls our “stock of ethical ideas—the mental capital, so to speak, with which [one] begins the business of living.” There is no reason that the law must merely reflect “growth” that has already occurred, as opposed to motivating some growth itself.

²⁶ See Chaim Perelman, *The Realm of Rhetoric* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982) and C. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969) for an account of rhetoric that resists the usual Platonic disparagement.

be progressively refined in the way that utilitarian and deontological theories have been refined over the last century.²⁷ Leopold insists, after all, that

the land ethic [is] a *product of social evolution*. . . . Only the most superficial student of history supposes that Moses “wrote” the Decalogue; it evolved in the mind [and surely also in the practices!] of the thinking community, and Moses wrote a tentative summary of it. . . . I say “tentative” because evolution never stops.²⁸

It might be better to regard Leopold not as purveying a general ethical theory at all, but rather as simply *opening* some questions, unsettling some assumptions, and prying the window open just far enough to lead, in time, to much wilder and certainly more diverse suggestions or “criteria.”

Third and more generally, as I put it above, the process of evolving values and practices at originary stages is seldom a smooth process of progressively filling in and instantiating earlier outlines. At the originary stage we should instead expect a variety of fairly incompatible outlines coupled with a wide range of proto-practices, even social experiments of various sorts, all contributing to a kind of cultural working-through of a new set of possibilities. In environmental ethics, we arrive at exactly the opposite view from that of J. Baird Callicott, for example, who insists that we attempt to formulate, right now, a complete, unified, even “closed” (his term) theory of environmental ethics. Callicott even argues that contemporary environmental ethics should not tolerate more than one basic type of value, insisting on a “univocal” environmental ethic.²⁹ In fact, however, as I argued above, originary stages are the worst possible times at which to demand that we all speak with one voice. Once a set of values is culturally consolidated, it may well be possible, perhaps even necessary, to reduce them to some kind of consistency. But environmental values are unlikely to be in such a position for a very long time. The necessary period of ferment, cultural experimentation, and thus *multi*-vocality is only *beginning*. Although Callicott is right, we might say, about the demands of systematic ethical theory at later cultural stages, he is wrong—indeed, wildly wrong—about what stage environmental values have actually reached.

²⁷ Bryan G. Norton, “Conservation and Preservation: A Conceptual Rehabilitation,” *Environmental Ethics* 8 (1986): 195-220; John Rodman “Four Forms of Ecological Consciousness Reconsidered,” in Donald Scherer and Thomas Attig, eds., *Ethics and the Environment* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1983): 89-92. Remember also that Leopold insists that ethics are “products of social evolution” and that “nothing so important as an ethic is ever ‘written’”— which again suggests that we ought to rethink the usual reading of Leopold as an environmental-ethical theorist with a grand criterion for ethical action.

²⁸ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 225.

²⁹ J. Baird Callicott, “The Case against Moral Pluralism,” *Environmental Ethics* 12 (1990): 99-124.

V. ENABLING ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICE

Space for some analogues to the familiar theories does remain in the alternative environmental ethics envisioned here. I have argued that although they are unreliable guides to the ethical future, they might well be viewed as another kind of ethical experiment or proposal rather like, for example, the work of the utopian socialists. However unrealistic, they may, nonetheless, play a historical and transitional role, highlighting new possibilities, inspiring reconstructive experiments, even perhaps eventually provoking environmental ethics' equivalent of a Marx.

It should be clear, though, that the kind of constructive activity suggested by the argument offered here goes far beyond the familiar theories as well. Rather than systematizing environmental values, the overall project at this stage should be to begin *co-evolving* those values with practices and institutions that make them even *unsystematically* possible. It is this point that I now want to develop by offering one specific example of such a co-evolutionary practice. It is by no means the only example. Indeed, the best thing that could be hoped, in my view, is the emergence of many others. But it is *one* example, and it may be a good example to help clarify how such approaches might look, and thus to clear the way for more.

A central part of the challenge is to create the social, psychological, and phenomenological preconditions—the conceptual, experiential, or even quite literal “space”—for new or stronger environmental values to evolve. Because such creation will “enable” these values, I call such a practical project *enabling environmental practice*.

Consider the attempt to create actual, physical spaces for the emergence of trans-human experience, *places* within which some return to the experience of and immersion in natural settings is possible. Suppose that certain places are set aside as quiet zones, places where automobile engines, lawnmowers, and low-flying airplanes are not allowed, and yet places where people will live. On one level, the aim is modest: simply to make it possible to hear the birds, the winds, and the silence once again. If bright outside lights were also banned, one could see the stars at night and feel the slow pulsations of the light over the seasons. A little creative zoning, in short, could make space for increasingly divergent styles of living on the land—for example, experiments in recycling and energy self-sufficiency, Midgleyan mixed communities of humans and other species, serious “re-inhabitation” (though perhaps with more emphasis on place and community than upon the individual re-inhabiters), the “ecosteries” that have been proposed on the model of monasteries, and other possibilities not yet even imagined.³⁰

Such a project is not utopian. If we unplugged a few outdoor lights and rerouted

³⁰ On “ecosteries,” see Alan Drengson, “The Ecostery Foundation of North America: Statement of Philosophy,” *The Trumpeter* 7, no. 1 (1990): 12-16. On “re-inhabitation,” a good starting point is Peter Berg, “What is Bioregionalism?” *The Trumpeter* 8, no. 1 (1991): 6-12.

some roads, we could easily have a first approximation in some parts of the country right now. In gardening, for example, we already experience some semblance of mixed communities. Such practices as beekeeping, moreover, already provide a model for a symbiotic relation with the "biotic community." It is not hard to work out policies to protect and extend such practices.

Enabling environmental practice is, of course, a *practice*. Being a practice, however, does not mean that it is not also philosophical. Theory and practice interpenetrate here. In the abstract, for example, the concept of "natural settings," just invoked, has been acrimoniously debated, and the best-known positions are unfortunately more or less the extremes. Social ecologists insist that no environment is ever purely natural, that human beings have already remade the entire world, and that the challenge is really to get the process under socially progressive and politically inclusive control. Some deep ecologists, by contrast, argue that only wilderness is the "real world."³¹ Both views have something to offer. Nevertheless, it may be that only from within the context of a new practice, even so simple a practice as the attempt to create "quiet places," will we finally achieve the necessary distance to take what we can from the purely philosophical debate, and also to go beyond it toward a better set of questions and answers.

Both views, for example, unjustly discount "encounter." On the one hand, nonanthropocentrism should not become anti-anthropocentrism: the aim should not be to push humans out of the picture entirely, but rather to open up the possibility of reciprocity *between* humans and the rest of nature. Nevertheless, reciprocity does require a space that is not wholly permeated by humans either. What we need to explore are possible realms of *interaction*. Neither the wilderness nor the city (as we know it) are "the real world," if we must talk in such terms. We might take as the most "real" places the places where humans and other creatures, honored in their wildness and potential reciprocity, can come together, perhaps warily, but at least openly.

The work of Wendell Berry is paradigmatic of this kind of philosophical engagement. Berry writes, for example, of "the phenomenon of edge or margin, that we know to be one of the powerful attractions of a diversified landscape, both to wildlife and to humans." These margins are places where domesticity and wildness meet. Mowing his small hayfield with a team of horses, Berry encounters a hawk who lands close to him, watching carefully but without fear. The hawk comes, he writes,

because of the conjunction of the small pasture and its wooded borders, of open hunting ground and the security of trees. . . . The human eye itself seems drawn to such margins, hungering for the difference made in the countryside by a hedgy

³¹ See, for instance, Dave Foreman, "Reinhabitation, Biocentrism, and Self-Defense," *Earth First!*, 1 August 1987; Murray Bookchin, "Which Way for the US Greens?" *New Politics* 2 (Winter 1989): 71-83; and Bill Devall, "Deep Ecology and its Critics," *Earth First!*, 22 December 1987.

fencerow, a stream, or a grove of trees. These margins are biologically rich, the meeting of two kinds of habitat. . . .³²

The hawk would not have come, he says, if the field had been larger, or if there had been no trees, or if he had been plowing with a tractor. Interaction is a fragile thing, and we need to pay careful attention to its preconditions. As Berry shows, attending to interaction is a deeply philosophical and phenomenological project as well as a practical one—but, nonetheless, it always revolves around and refers back to practice. Without actually maintaining a farm, he would know very little of what he knows, and the hawk would not—*could* not—have come to him.

Margins are, of course, only one example. They can't be the whole story. Many creatures avoid them. It is for this reason that the spotted owl's survival depends on large tracts of old-growth forest. Nonetheless, they are still *part* of the story—a part given particularly short shrift, it seems, by all sides in the current debate.

It is not possible in a short article to develop the kind of philosophy of “practice” that would be necessary to work out these points fully. However, I can at least note two opposite pitfalls in speaking of practice. First, it is not as if we come to this practice already knowing what values we will find or exemplify there. Too often the notion of practice in contemporary philosophy has degenerated into “application,” i.e., of prior principles or theories. At best, it might provide an opportunity for feedback from practice to principle or theory. I mean something more radical here. Practice is the opening of the “space” for interaction, for the reemergence of a larger world. It is a kind of exploration. We do not know in advance what we will find. Berry had to *learn*, for example, about margins. Gary Snyder and others propose Buddhist terms to describe the necessary attitude, a kind of mindfulness, attentiveness. Tom Birch calls it the “primary sense” of the notion of “consideration.”³³

On the other hand, this sort of open-ended practice does not mean reducing our own activity to zero, as in some form of quietism. I do not mean that we simply “open, and it will come.” There is not likely to be any single and simple set of values that somehow emerges once we merely get out of the way. Berry's view is that a more open-ended and respectful relation to nature requires constant and

³² Wendell Berry, “Getting Along with Nature,” in *Home Economics* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), p. 13.

³³ Gary Snyder, “Good, Wild, Sacred,” in *The Practice of the Wild* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990); Tom Birch, “Universal Consideration,” paper presented at the International Society for Environmental Ethics, American Philosophical Association, 27 December 1990; Jim Cheney, “Eco-Feminism and Deep Ecology,” *Environmental Ethics* 9 (1987): 115-45. Snyder also speaks of “grace” as the primary “practice of the wild”; Doug Peacock, *The Grizzly Years* (New York: Holt, Henry, and Co., 1990), insists upon “interspecific tact”; Berry writes of an “etiquette” of nature; and Birch of “generosity of spirit” and “considerateness.” All of these terms have their home in a discourse of manners and personal bearing, rather than moral discourse as usually conceived by ethical philosophers. We are not speaking of some universal categorical obligation, but rather of something much closer to us, bound up with who we are and how we immediately bear ourselves in the world—though not necessarily any more “optional” for all that.

creative *activity*—in his case, constant presence in nature, constant interaction with his own animals, maintenance of a place that maximizes margins. Others will, of course, choose other ways. The crucial thing is that humans must neither monopolize the picture entirely nor absent ourselves from it completely, but rather try to live in interaction, to create a space for genuine encounter as part of our ongoing reconstruction of our own lives and practices. What will come of such encounters, what will emerge from such sustained interactions, we cannot yet say.

No doubt it will be argued that Berry is necessarily an exception, that small unmechanized farms are utterly anachronistic, and that any real maintenance of margins or space for encounter is unrealistic in mass society. Perhaps. But these automatically accepted commonplaces are also open to argumentation and experiment. Christopher Alexander and his colleagues, in *A Pattern Language* and elsewhere, for example, make clear how profoundly even the simplest architectural features of houses, streets, and cities structure our experience of nature—and that they can be consciously redesigned to change those experiences. Windows on two sides of a room make it possible for natural light to suffice for daytime illumination. If buildings are built on those parts of the land that are in the worst condition, not the best, we thereby leave the most healthy and beautiful parts alone, while improving the worst parts. On a variety of grounds, Alexander and his colleagues argue for the presence of both still and moving water throughout the city, for extensive common land—“accessible green,” sacred sites, and burial grounds within the city—and so on. If we build mindfully, they argue, maintaining and even expanding margins is not only possible, but easy, even with high human population densities.³⁴

VI. CONCLUSION

In the last section, I offered only the barest sketch of enabling environmental practice: a few examples, not even a general typology. To attempt a more systematic typology of its possible forms at this point seems to me premature, partly because ethics has hitherto paid so little attention to the cultural constitution of values that we have no such typology, and partly because the originary stage of environmental values is barely underway.

Moreover, enabling environmental practice is itself only one example of the broader range of philosophical activities invited by what I call the co-evolutionary view of values. I have not denied that even theories of rights, for instance, have a place in environmental ethics. However, it is not the only “place” there is, and rights themselves, at least when invoked beyond the sphere of persons, must be understood (so I argue) in a much more metaphorical and exploratory sense than usual. This point has also been made by many others, of course, but usually with

³⁴ Christopher Alexander, et al., *A Pattern Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). On windows, see secs. 239, 159, and 107; on “site repair,” sec. 104; on water in the city, secs. 25, 64, and 71; on “accessible green,” secs. 51 and 60; and on “holy ground,” secs. 24, 66, and 70.

the intention of ruling rights talk out of environmental ethics altogether. A pluralistic project is far more tolerant and inclusive. Indeed, it is surely an advantage of the sort of umbrella conception of environmental ethics I am suggesting here that nearly all of the current approaches may find a place in it.

Because enabling environmental practice is closest to my own heart, I have to struggle with my own temptation to make it the whole story. It is not. Given the prevailing attitudes, however, we need to continue to insist that it is *part* of the story. Of course, we might still have to argue at length about whether and to what degree enabling environmental practice is “philosophical” or “ethical.” My own view, along pragmatic lines, is that it is both, deeply and essentially. Indeed, for Dewey the sustained practice of social reconstruction—experimental, improvisatory, and pluralistic—is the most central ethical practice of all. But that is an argument for another time. It is, nevertheless, one of the most central tasks that now calls to us.