

Multicentrism: A Manifesto

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The familiar “centrism” in environmental ethics aim to make ethics progressively more inclusive by expanding a single circle of moral consideration I propose a radically different kind of geometry. Multicentrism envisions a world of irreducibly diverse and multiple centers of being and value—not one single circle, of whatever size or growth rate, but many circles, partly overlapping, each with its own center. Moral consideration necessarily becomes plural and ongoing, and moral action takes place within an open-ended context of negotiation and covenant. Much critical and constructive work, both in environmental ethics proper and in many related fields, is already multicentric in spirit. It needs to be drawn together into an explicit, alternative environmental-ethical “platform.”

I. A QUESTION OF GEOMETRY

Environmental ethics is often framed in geometrical terms. We are invited to ask how big the circle of moral consideration can or should get and where to draw the line between what counts and what doesn't. Historically, according to this view, ethics began by stretching the circle of the self first to include some other humans (family, community, etc.) and then, eventually, to a “universal” view on which all humans count. The familiar extensionist argument insists that we cannot justly draw the line at the boundary of the human species either. Why should the species border be any more impenetrable, truly any more natural, than the boundaries of human clan or nation? Other animals present themselves—first only some, then arguably all. The “expanding circle,” as Peter Singer famously called it,¹ keeps pushing outward: to all living things next, including plants and trees, which may not be conscious subjects but are surely self-organized and responsive systems. Then to the land—the community of life. Farther still and we have to consider the rivers, mountains, the air as well, and perhaps even the Earth as a whole.

This familiar geometry I call “concentric.” Each new circle of moral consideration is supposed to enclose the previous circles neatly, evenly, and totally, all the way back to the single original center, just like the concentric ripples from a single stone dropped into a still pond.

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¹ Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1981).

Concentrism is a natural and indeed generous way of framing environmental ethics. Yet it cannot be said to be the only possible approach. Even in purely geometrical terms, there is an obvious alternative: a *multicentered* vision according to which more-than-human others enter the moral realm on their own terms, rather than by expansion from a single center—a vision according to which there are *diverse* centers, shifting and overlapping but still each with its own irreducible and distinctive starting-point. For a multicentered ethic, then, the growth of moral sensitivity and consideration does not proceed through an expanding series of concentric realms, each neatly assimilating or incorporating the previous stage within a larger and more inclusive whole. No; instead we discover a world of separate though mutually implicated centers. Moral growth consists in experiencing more and more deeply the texture of multiplicity in the world, not in tracing the wider and wider circles set off from one single center.

Such a multicentric vision reflects our experience of the *difference* of more-than-human others, without, on the other hand, wholly denying commonality either. Real experience is just not so unicentric—not out here with the bugs and the lightning, the mountains and the stars, and maybe not even with each other. Moreover, even the barest sketch of a multicentered vision quickly reminds us of many themes that have occupied certain rich lines of alternative environmental philosophizing for years: of feminist and phenomenological critiques of the sameness-versus-difference construction of so many “Others,” both human and other-than-human; of the possibility of a relational and dialogical environmental ethic intimated both by these postmodern kinds of philosophizing as well as by certain premodern or indigenous thoughtlines; and of certain other suggestive but as yet unassimilated concepts in the field, such as “universal consideration,” environmental “etiquette,” and the first sketches of a possible “communicative ethics for the biosphere.”

Many hands already do this work. My aim is not to add another specific piece to it here. I am concerned instead with its overall visibility as a *shared program fundamentally alternative to the prevailing paradigm*. Of necessity, it does not fit readily into the the prevailing model of what a theory in environmental ethics must look like. All the same, this work, considered together, has a coherent and compelling direction of its own. Something bigger and more dramatic is afoot than a mere set of offbeat complaints. In this essay, I propose that the theme of a multicentered ethic represents a new paradigm or unifying “platform” in environmental philosophy, and I offer a provisional sketch to that end.

II. CONCENTRISM CHALLENGED

On the concentric vision, each previous circle, each previous set of moral consideranda and each previous moral stage, is wholly nested within the next. We are invited to see the claims of the self in the context of, and as an instance

of, the claims of humans as such. We are invited to see the claims of humans in the context of, and as an instance of, the claims of animals as such; and so on. This expansiveness has long been a source both of deep-rooted objections—distinctiveness is threatened, say the critics; “there is nothing special about *X* (me, humans, animals, etc.) anymore” —but for the very same reason it is a point of pride for many environmental philosophers. It is what makes our field the cutting edge of ethics. Everything is to be valued under the aspect of wider and wider categories: sentience, or life, or creative dynamism, or, in the end, sheer being.²

The suggestion is that what we have in common, even with tigers and trees and probably even with rocks and bacteria, is more important than that which divides us. We are supposed to come to “identify” with the entire world.³ Surely it is true that there are commonalities to be found, identifications that apart from this procedure we would no doubt overlook. The implicit monism, though—arranging our argument so that the commonalities and identifications alone ground the ethic—is more troubling.

For one thing—the simplest point—an approach based purely on commonality necessarily slights difference. Specific modes of life or styles of consciousness, or ultimately even the fact of life or consciousness itself, may no longer count at all. As the circle becomes wider and wider, commonalities become thinner and thinner.⁴ The search for a single, inclusive criterion of moral standing ultimately washes out nearly everything.

Arguably, though, the underlying dynamic of this argument is more unsettling still. Despite its veneer of egalitarianism, concentricism is profoundly human-centered underneath. Since “the expanding circle” expands by finding commonalities with what lies within the already-accepted circle, the self and its essential character—and, a little farther out, the *human* and *its* essential character—still sit as ultimate arbiter. The suffering of others, human or nonhuman, for example, comes to count in the utilitarian argument because I can connect it to my own, because I recognize that suffering is bad for me and

² Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation*, 2d ed. (New York: New York Review of Books, 1990) and Tom Regan’s *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California, 1983) make the case for animals; Paul Taylor’s *Respect for Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) and Albert Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) make the case for the considerability of all life; Aldo Leopold’s *Sand County Almanac* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949) is often read as a form of “eco-centrism.” Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, in *The Universe Story* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), celebrate the being of absolutely everything.

³ On “identification” the classic source is Arne Naess, in “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement: A Summary,” *Inquiry* 16 (1973): 95–100, and “‘Man Apart’ and Deep Ecology,” *Environmental Ethics* 12 (1990): 185–92.

⁴ This way of putting it I owe to a reviewer for this journal. In regard to human affairs the concern that universality has its costs, especially to the culturally particular, has been voiced by critics from Marx in “On the Jewish Question” to contemporary communitarians.

therefore, unable to draw any morally relevant distinction between me and a wider range of others, I must conclude that it is equally bad for them. All commonality refers back to the already-given center, and in fact it is guaranteed that whatever commonality drives any given “expanded” ethics, I have got to have it—indeed *par excellence*.

In short, a kind of ego-centric and species-centric model, so familiar from the ethical tradition generally, has not been deeply challenged but in fact is almost unconsciously imported into the ethics of “the expanding circle.” As Val Plumwood concludes, Singerian moral extensionism “does not really dispel speciesism; it only extends and disguises it.”⁵ Man (often literally) is still the measure of all things. Sometimes it barely even dispels egoism, as when a wide range of otherwise quite different philosophers struggle mightily to bring all of nature *inside the self*, of all places, so as to engage self-protectiveness and self-interest in the service of environmental values.⁶ You understand the motive, but when John Seed, for example, suggests that the natural outcome of “expanding identifications” is the recognition that “I am the rainforest,” you have to seriously wonder what is becoming of the rainforest. A truly radical environmental ethic may have farther to go than we thought—and perhaps in less familiar and less comfortable directions as well.

III. MULTICENTRISM

Many alternative lines of thinking now converge on a view that calls all the existing concentrisms into question—an alternative, systematic, multicentric project.

(A) DECENTERING THE HUMAN

Multicentrism begins by insisting that neither one’s own self nor the human/species self is the only model of being or presence or the only possible touchstone for moral consideration. Others have their own stories, not to be “measured by man.” Only by understanding our place in this way is it possible for us to honor our distinctiveness as essential to our particular mode of being and (in part) to what we take to be our consequent moral standing, yet not

⁵ Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 148.

⁶ Naess’ appeal to “expanded identification with the non-human world” as the ground for environmental ethics is explicitly linked to “self-realization.” Australian eco-activist John Seed famously insists that in acting to save the rainforest I am essentially acting to save myself, because what environmental philosophy must teach, in the end, is that “I am the rainforest” (John Seed, Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming, and Arne Naess, *Thinking like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings* [Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1988]). J. Baird Callicott offers a metaphysical analogue to this argument in “Intrinsic Value, Quantum Theory, and Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics* 7 (1985): 257–75.

impose ourselves as models for everyone and everything else's being and moral standing.

Rejecting anthropocentrism may seem to be nothing more than the utterly familiar opening move of most environmental philosophers. The typical follow-on assumption, however, is that anthropocentrism must be replaced with some other, bigger centrism. *Multicentrists* strive for *decentering* instead: we reject *any* monocentrism.

The conceptual apparatus for this decentering emerges from a number of related critical fields: in feminist and post-colonial work, for instance, where the aim is to decenter the "male subject" (androcentrism) or the colonizers' identities (Eurocentrism), respectively. A recent anthology linking both of these areas is even titled *Decentering the Center*.⁷ Ecofeminists draw out the parallels between the construction of oppressive Self-Other dichotomies in human spheres such as these and similarly oppressive dichotomies beyond the human sphere ("[hu]man versus 'animal,'" for instance, and "[hu]man versus nature").⁸

In all of these cases the danger is what Plumwood labels "hegemonic" centrism: establishing one's own (or one's group's) centrality by systematically reconstructing all otherness either as some version of the One Center's dynamic, and/or by marginalizing and radically devaluing it in relation to that Center, reducing it to orbit and periphery.⁹ Indeed, the hegemonic type of centrism is so pervasive, and perhaps seems so natural, that we may become uneasy with characterizing a (hopefully) non-hegemonic alternative as any form of centrism whatsoever—although words like "polycentric" and "multipolar" are in the air too. Still, at least, *decentering* is the necessary starting-point. We must resist the dynamic of assimilation and marginalization that ecofeminists identify so clearly, and thus recognize a world of multiple voices and beings that do *not* reduce to a single type and do *not* naturally fall into the orbit of one single sort of being's center.

(B) A DIVERSITY OF CENTERS: OR, THE MULTIVERSE

Drop a single pebble in a pond and you create a concentric set of ripples. Toss in a handful of pebbles and ripples set off from a dozen points at once, each its

⁷ Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding, eds., *Decentering the Center* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000). For other representative anthologies, see Nancy Duncan, ed., *Bodyspace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

⁸ See Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) and *Environmental Culture* as well as a wide range of other books such as Karen Warren's *Ecofeminist Philosophy* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000) and Susan Griffin's classic *Woman and Nature* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).

⁹ Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, chap. 5. I return to this theme in sec. 4 below.

own “center,” each soon intersecting and intermingling with others without losing its distinctness, its own place of origin and its own way of “making waves.” A *decentered* world is not (need not be) an *a-centered* world. Instead we envision a *many-centered* world, a diversity of centers, a world of thick and polynodal texture. Each of a thousand human and more-than-human presences organizes a certain part of the world around itself, forms a distinctive local pattern, a certain organic completeness and cohesion. David Abram proposes as an illustration Van Gogh’s painting “Starry Night”: each star is its own vortex or spiral of energy, not somehow drawing all the rest into its orbit, but surely and visibly a presence in its own right.¹⁰

The very first example of an “I/Thou” relation that Martin Buber offers in his book of the same title involves a tree. We can experience a tree as a “picture,” Buber says, or as an invitation to botanizing or chemistry or in many other ways. We can also “be drawn into a relation” with “the tree itself,” he says, as it stands “in conversation with the elements and with the stars” as well as with ourselves.¹¹ Here we enter a world of *difference* that is nonetheless not *alien*—of separate identities that somewhat intermingle. Always there are other stories being unfolded; always other “force-fields” (Neil Evernden’s term¹²) within which we move.

Intentional consciousness is one kind of “centering,” then, but not the only one.¹³ Around us are not merely a multitude of humans or of conscious centers, and not merely a multitude of other mid-sized and discrete “force-fields” like rocks and trees, but a multitude of other *kinds* of “force-fields”—rhizomes, tectonic plates, bacteria, nebulae—at many different levels of organization too, from species and ecosystems to individual cells. Indeed, in place of the notion of “universe” itself, it is high time to speak instead, following William James, of the “Multiverse.”¹⁴ To speak of multicenteredness, then, is to invoke a world thick with many sorts of presence, in which we move amidst and within other or larger force-fields or centers of gravity.¹⁵ I believe that this is the root intuition for which environmental ethics from the start has tried to speak—only

¹⁰ In discussion in spring 2002. Abram also suggested the lovely term “polynodal.”

¹¹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. William Kaufmann (New York: Scribner’s, 1970), pp. 57–59.

¹² In Neil Evernden’s *The Natural Alien* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto, 1985), pp. 40–41 and 98–99.

¹³ “Does the tree then have consciousness, similar to our own? I have no experience of that. . . . What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself.” (Buber, *I and Thou*, pp. 58–59)

¹⁴ William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism and A Pluralistic Universe* (New York: Dutton Books, 1971), pp. 275. “Things are ‘with’ one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything or dominates over everything. . . . The pluralistic world is . . . more like a federal republic than like an empire or a kingdom. However much may be collected, however much may report itself as present at any effective center of consciousness or action, something else is self-governed and absent and unreduced to unity. . . .” (p. 274).

¹⁵ They move within us too, for the self is a kind of multicentric “federal republic” as well. It’s multicentricism all the way down. I am indebted to Bob Jickling for this point.

in a monocentric language unsuited to a world brimming not just with life but with shifting and self-organizing energies of many different kinds.

(C) THE MULTIVERSE CALLS FORTH AN ETIQUETTE

In a diverse world of unsuspected depths, we are called to a kind of attentiveness much wider and much less pre-structured than the existing monocentrism suggests.

Tom Birch lays out certain essential arguments for what he calls “universal consideration.” Nothing, says Birch, is to be pushed aside without a thought—not, however, because we have or can find some universal criterion of moral standing, but because the very process of paying attention, even to devise or apply such a criterion, already has to be universal, already has to take in everything. What is required, in short, is moral consideration in what Birch calls “the root sense”: the process of actually, carefully, considering all things. *All things*. Moral consideration is a process, open-ended toward the other creatures, toward whatever lies on the other end. In fact, universal consideration requires us to reverse the usual burden of proof as we approach others in the world. “Others are now taken as valuable, even though we may not yet know how or why, until they are proved otherwise.”¹⁶

The practice of universal consideration, moreover, requires a new kind of comportment. An open-ended world of multiple, diverse, and always somewhat opaque centers requires us to move with caution, attentiveness, circumspection. Ethics is no longer constituted by a merely abstract respect, but demands something far more embodied: a willingness and ability to make the space, not just conceptually, but in one’s own person and in the design and structure of personal and human spaces, for the emergence of more-than-human others into relationship. Here multicentrism embraces a leading theme in the larger environmental literature that so far has only barely percolated into philosophical ethics: what Gary Snyder, echoed by many others, calls “etiquettes of freedom and of grace.”¹⁷

This is not a merely one-way practice. Many postmodernisms converge with the claim that the world we think we know is profoundly shaped by our approach to it, by our established ethics and ways of knowing. The attitudes and comportment with which we approach other centers partly determine the ways in which they respond or show up. Thus, as Jim Cheney and I have argued, we can no longer think of ourselves as merely responding to a world considered

¹⁶ Tom Birch, “Moral Considerability and Universal Consideration,” *Environmental Ethics* 15 (1993): 313–32.

¹⁷ Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (San Francisco: North Point, 1990), pp. 3–24. Grizzly tracker Doug Peacock insists upon “interspecific tact,” Wendell Berry speaks of an “etiquette” toward nature, Calvin Martin of “courtesy” between very different beings. I develop this theme in chap. 7 (“Transhuman Etiquettes”) in my *Back to Earth* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

to be given and fixed.¹⁸ If our very mode of approach shapes that world in turn, then ethics itself must be a form of invitation or welcoming, sometimes of ritual invocation and sometimes of literally creating the settings in which new possibilities might emerge. On the usual view of other animals, for instance, we must first know what animals are capable of and then decide on that basis whether and how we are to consider them ethically. On a more open-ended view, we will have only inadequate ideas of what other animals are actually capable until we *already* have approached them ethically: that is, until we have offered them the space and time and occasion to enter into relationship. Ethics both implies and is implied by etiquette, in this sense, itself.

(D) ETHICS AS A CO-CONSTITUTED PROCESS

If there is but one circle of moral consideration with ourselves at the center, it is natural to suppose that we can and must make moral decisions by our own lights. One kind of consideration remains, though perhaps operating over a wider sphere. Monocentrism thus extends and disguises a mono-logical ethic as well. Unicentrism extends and disguises uni-*lateralism*.

Multicentrism undercuts the very possibility of this sort of unilateralism. *We cannot practice ethics on our own*. Once other centers are acknowledged, always somewhat opaque to us as we are to them, there is no alternative but to work things out together, as far as is possible, when all are affected by the decisions taken. The key to ethical life in the multiverse becomes what Paul Shepard calls “the elaboration of covenants and negotiations with the Other.”¹⁹

Such an alternative vision of ethics is evolving as a wide range of thinkers challenge the traditional conception of ethics as a principle-based decision-making method for resolving ethical quandaries. Many feminists argue for a concept of ethics as, in Margaret Walker’s lovely words, “a collection of perceptive, imaginative, appreciative, and expressive skills and capacities which put us and keep us in contact with the realities of ourselves and specific others.”²⁰ A persistent strand of writing in this very journal is patiently exploring the theme of dialogue beyond—sometimes way beyond—the human sphere.²¹ Carolyn Merchant elaborates a “partnership ethics” in which “both humans and

¹⁸ Jim Cheney and Anthony Weston, “Environmental Ethics as Environmental Etiquette: Toward an Ethics-Based Epistemology in Environmental Philosophy,” *Environmental Ethics* 21 (1999): 115–34.

¹⁹ Paul Shepard, *Nature and Madness* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1982), p. 38; Vine Deloria uses similar terms in his *Spirit and Reason* (Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum Publishing, 1999), pp. 51–52.

²⁰ Margaret Walker, “Moral Understandings: Alternative ‘Epistemology’ for a Feminist Ethics,” *Hypatia* 4 (1989): 21. A classic source for revisioning ethics in this key is Eva Kittay and Diana Meyers’ collection *Women and Moral Theory* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1987).

²¹ See Christopher Manes, “Nature and Silence,” *Environmental Ethics* 14 (1992): 339–50; Christopher J. Preston, “Conversing with Nature in a Postmodern Epistemological Framework,”

nature are active agents.”²² In the work of musicians such as Jim Nollman we catch glimpses of unimagined possibilities of cross-species connection.²³ From another angle, communicative ethicists have worked out a model that locates key ethical features—impartiality, mutual recognition, freedom from deception and self-deception—not in specific principles or outcomes but rather in the procedures by which such decisions are made, and recent writers such as John Dryzek and again Plumwood are bringing that tradition into environmental thinking to sketch what Dryzek calls a “communicative ethics for the biosphere.”²⁴

I say more of this below. The point for now is just that, however difficult or unfamiliar, this is multicentrism’s mandate, and in fact a great deal of ongoing work is already in this key. Ethics is an ongoing process, co-constituted far beyond the human sphere, and recognizing, sustaining, and enriching that process is itself ethics’ deepest requirement.

IV. QUESTIONS AND CONTRASTS

Plumwood challenges the use of any kind of “centrism” label for a positive alternative. In several detailed works Plumwood lays out a systematic theory of centrism as such, including egocentrism, androcentrism, and Eurocentrism as well as anthropocentrism and the transhuman centrisms. In each case, one center claims priority and superiority, devaluing and consequently opening the way for exploitation of all other poles, reducing them to feeble, inferior, and deficient reflections of itself.²⁵ This, again, she calls “hegemonic” centrism. And here is the rub: *any* centrism, in Plumwood’s view, is at least implicitly hegemonic. At the very least, using the term in the way I propose may confuse and dilute the critique of hegemonic centrism. Moreover, the multiplication of centers by itself does not guarantee that the multiple centers will not themselves be hegemonic, as colonialism’s record suggests.²⁶

Environmental Ethics 22 (2000): 227–40; and Scott Friskies, “Dialogical Relations with Nature,” *Environmental Ethics* 23 (2001): 391–410.

²² In Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden* (New York: Routledge, 2003), chap. 11, p. 228

²³ Jim Nollman’s *Dolphin Dreamtime* (London: Anthony Blond, 1985) is subtitled “The Art and Science of Interspecies Communication.” Rich and wide-angled treatments are David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996) and Derrick Jensen, *A Language Older than Words* (New York: Context Books, 2000).

²⁴ John Dryzek, “Green Reason: Communicative Ethics for the Biosphere,” *Environmental Ethics* 12 (1990): 195–210; Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, chaps. 5 and 8.

²⁵ The “Otherised” group, as she calls it, is first marked out as radically separate (women from men; colonized from colonizer; animals from humans). Differences within the Otherised group are then denied and submerged (all women are radically distinguished from all men; all animals from all humans. . .). Mutual dependence is denied and the Other is construed as inessential or defective, and made invisible. Finally, the Other is viewed as valuable only as means to the One’s ends (nature for human ends, etc.). Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, chap. 5.

²⁶ Plumwood has urged this concern upon me as part of an extensive and energetic correspondence since I began this project several years ago. I am grateful for her persistence and insight,

Plumwood's preferred responses are "counter-hegemonic" or "counter-centric" strategies: foregrounding interdependence rather than independence, for instance; emphasizing within-group differences and cross-group commonalities rather than vice versa; affirming rather than devaluing the distinctive characteristics of nonhuman others.²⁷ The aim, she says, is to "attain solidarity with others in their difference," rather than either incorporating and ultimately subsuming difference ("I am the rainforest") or making difference radical and absolute.²⁸ Solidarity's demands are thoroughly practical and political, adapted to the demands of particular struggles and our own culture's peculiar burdens and pitfalls.

It is absolutely true that we do not want to find ourselves rejecting the familiar hegemonic centrism only to erect a new one of exactly the same type. Despite the stereotypes, few feminists want to simply replace patriarchy with matriarchy. Few Afro-centrists want to devalue everything European in favor of a new African hegemony. On the other hand, many (not all) philosophers and activists working in these areas continue to speak of their projects as "centric." Indeed, the project of creating a new *kind* of centrism seems to them essential. What they offer is not really a rejection of centrism as such but rather a new understanding of centeredness, a new understanding of power, opening the possibility of a genuine kind of centrism free from the hegemony, so to say, of hegemonic centrism itself. In this sense we call a person "centered" when they have a focus, an equilibrium, some balanced sense of self to fall back upon. It does not preclude other, similar or not so similar "centers." Plumwood herself speaks eloquently of defending nonhuman earth others as "independent centers with potential needs, excellences, and claims to flourish of their own."²⁹ Leading African philosophers and activists write of Afrocentrism as making Africa "subject, not object"—not, however, to exclude other "subjects"—and of "placing Africans at the center of knowledge about themselves."³⁰

which have immeasurably improved my thinking on this and many other points. I regret that we still somewhat disagree on the question of label.

²⁷ Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, chap. 8.

²⁸ "The choice these two frameworks offer us, of valuing nature either as Same or as Different, is ultimately an anthropocentric one, since to base value exclusively on either sameness or difference from the human implicitly construes the human as the center and pivot of value." *ibid.*, p. 201.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

³⁰ Molefi Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), p. 3, and C. Tsehloane Keto, *Vision and Time: Historical Perspective of an Africa-Centered Paradigm* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2001), "Vulindlela" (preface). The term *polycentric* is adopted by Samir Amin, in *Delinking* (London: Zed Books, 1990). He defines it as "subjecting the mutual relations between the various nations and regions of the planet to the varying imperatives of their own internal development and not the reverse" (p. xii). Keto explicitly speaks of a "multicentered scholarship" and of a "non-hegemonic African-centered analysis"—as well as a non-hegemonic Europe-centered analysis (Keto, *Vision and Time*, pp. xii and 25). Though he carefully distinguishes an "Africa-centered paradigm" from "Afrocentrism," he does so, he says,

The critical words here are *empowerment*, *self-definition*, *inclusion*—and, once again, *center*. These thinkers are not looking for an a-centered world but rather a *polycentric* world, centered many times over, only without a *dominant* center. Plumwood is surely right that any center, defined too readily by simplistic self-conceptions and the exclusion of others, slides toward a kind of self-aggrandizement. Contemporary international politics offers all the example one needs. On the other hand, on a genuine pluralistic vision, what is excluded is not devalued but is instead *revalued* in terms of its own dynamic self-centering, and the exclusions are never total. Separate centers may be both sharply different in some ways, even totally different in some ways, and similar in others. There can be both overlap and heterogeneity. Plumwood is right that these points must be continually insisted upon—but that is true regardless of what terms we adopt.³¹

Consider several other brief contrasts. Multicentrism obviously can be called *pluralistic*, but it has only an oblique connection with the “pluralism debate” that has unfolded over the past decade or so in environmental ethics. The advocates of this sort of pluralism have typically defended the usefulness of multiple ethical theories rather than just one. J. Douglas Rabb speaks of “polycentrism,” for instance, but his multiple “centers” turn out to be different ethical theories.³² Correspondingly, pluralism’s critics have mostly contested just this point.³³

Multicentrism, by contrast, implies a much more radical and polymorphous pluralism. Multiplicity and variety, as on James’ view, are fundamental to the world itself: to things themselves, in short, not just to values. Rather than the usual sorts of moral theories, then, multicentrists are more apt to seek diverse articulations or manifestations of values that do not claim universality, and conceive the reconciliation of apparently competing values as a form of

as a reaction to certain unscholarly excesses by some writers who use the latter label, not a conceptual difficulty with “centrism” itself (p. xvii).

³¹ Still, in the end, why not some other descriptive and less risky label? Apart from the difficulty of actually coming up with a decent alternative label (okay, *you* try it), the fact remains that the debate between “centrisms” still claims the spotlight in the teaching anthologies and in this journal. The rest of us, then—the many and varied alternative voices I have tried to draw into this essay—must enter the lists in a way that is as obviously and constructively as possible engaged with the dominant range of views. In my judgment doing so requires advancing a view under the heading of “centrism” itself. No list of centrisms, I would hope, can now be considered complete without *multicentrism*—but the very concept is also a kind of Trojan horse, for multicentrism offers an alternative to the entire centric project as so far understood. In time it may be better to go back to James and label the new view something more like “multiversalism,” or adopt Irene Klaver’s punnish suggestion and call ourselves “*ex-centric*.” But only in time.

³² J. Douglas Rabb, “From Triangles to Tripods: Polycentrism in Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics* 14 (1992): 177–83; and Peter Wenz, “Minimal, Moderate, and Extreme Moral Pluralism,” *Environmental Ethics* 15 (1993): 61–74.

³³ J. Baird Callicott, “The Case against Moral Pluralism,” *Environmental Ethics* 12 (1990): 99–124; esp. 104.

integrative practice and on-the-ground (there's "grounding" for you!) negotiation, rather than somehow necessarily a theoretical activity.³⁴Theories, whether one or many, may not be necessary at all.

Multicentrism might seem to imply a form of environmental "holism" or "biospheric egalitarianism." Contra holism, though, multicentrism does not assert a single ecological "whole" that is somehow the single, prior ethical center. The multiverse is more mixed and complexly textured, including both ecological "wholes" and individuals of various sorts and levels—species, organisms, biotic communities—all in flux and flow, and none always or necessarily prior. Again, the real work of decision making is more like a balancing act. "Biospheric egalitarianism" is a little closer, maybe, but it is too formal, abstract, unworkable, and above all unilateral: it seems to suggest that once rights or values are appropriately ("equally"?) distributed, human decision makers can figure out what to do without the need to consult or negotiate. Multicentrism, once again, proposes a different *kind* of decision procedure: a procedural model based on open-ended dialogue and negotiation.

Multicentrism also suggests an unexpected critical angle on familiar megacentrisms such as biocentrism and ecocentrism. It begins to seem that these views are emboldened to call themselves "centrisms" in the first place only because they are—implicitly—wholly oppositionally defined. The aim is to center on something bigger than humanity. Both of these views, though, to put it crudely, are *too big* for "centers" in the sense being advanced here. They are not nodes of a matrix but the matrix itself.³⁵ It is certainly not clear how we can "center" on the Earth as such: this is more like *a*-centrism than any actual centrism whatsoever.³⁶ I suspect, then, that such mega-centrisms really represent only a form of resistance or refusal of the usual anthropocentrism. To "go beyond" anthropocentrism, on a multicentric view, what we must really challenge is not the "anthropo-" part but the implicit (con)centrism.

V. MULTICENTRISM IN PRACTICE

Multicentrism asks us to "take care" with respect to *everything*, and the sort of mindfulness thus implied can only be called polymorphous too. That animals must suffer if we eat meat is certainly a point in favor of vegetarianism, for instance, but then again, the whole universe "suffers," in a certain sense, no matter what we eat. There are wide-ranging effects both subtle and not so subtle. So we must be self-conscious and careful in any case, taking care to

³⁴See my "On Callicott's Case against Pluralism," *Environmental Ethics* 13, no. 3 (1991): 283-86, and "What are We Arguing about?" symposium presentation on "Monism versus Pluralism in Environmental Ethics," Central Division Meeting, American Philosophical Association, Chicago, 24 April 1993.

³⁵David Abram made this point in discussion in spring 2002.

³⁶Except from a galactic point of view, which someday may be important.

walk as lightly as we can. There may be quite different and even unexpected practical implications in different places and times. We are also called to “take care” in the spiritual sense of thankfulness and awareness of communion: care, for example, not to waste food, to share it generously, and to prepare it with an eye to retaining its particular gifts. A further step would be to begin to recover native people’s practices of negotiating food with the beings we might consume (and, reciprocally, with those who might consume us).³⁷

These are not the kinds of implications one probably expects for what is after all, in part, a practical ethic. That such an ethic must wholly concern itself with decision-making methods, however, is not the only possible practicality one might ask of it. We might do better to see certain quintessentially ethical features precisely in multicentrism’s “universal carefulness”—a kind of honor, for example, and an overriding commitment to attentiveness. Its practicality is of a different kind: fully engaging a complex practical question, for instance, even if the consequence is to leave us more tentative, rather than insisting on a more or less final, arguable, conclusive answer.

To conceive ethics along the lines of *etiquette*—opening of the “space” for interaction, for the re-emergence of a larger world—also calls for a kind of particular, embodied exploration. Anthropologist Henry Sharp writes that for the Chipewyan Indians, “all animate life interacts and, to a greater or lesser degree, affects the life and behavior of all other animate forms,” and draws a telling contrast :

[T]he Chipewyan interact with all life in accordance with their understanding, and the animate universe responds. White Canada does not come silently and openly into the bush in search of understanding or communion, it sojourns briefly in the full glory of its colonial power to exploit and regulate all animate being... It comes asserting a clashing causal certainty in the fundamentalist exercise of the power of its belief. It talks too loudly, its posture is wrong, its movement harsh and graceless; it does not know what to see and it hears nothing. Its presence brings a stunning confusion heard deafeningly in a growing circle of silence created by a confused and disordered animate universe.³⁸

Graceless movement, a jarring presence, even just talking too loud: this innocent clumsiness reflects a failure to carry in our very bodies an understanding of ourselves as living in a larger animate universe; and failure too, crucially, to draw out, to co-participate with, that universe. “Environmental etiquette,” then, has none of the trivial connotations of mere manners. It calls for a visibly enacted openness to the world. It also goes far beyond individual

³⁷ See Plumwood’s *Environmental Culture*, pp. 225–27. Once again she is way out in front.

³⁸ Henry S. Sharp, *The Transformation of Bigfoot: Maleness, Power, and Belief among the Chipewyan* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), pp. 144–45. I am indebted to Jim Cheney for this citation.

comportment. We need to design neighborhoods specifically for darkness and quiet, building a world that invites animal dwelling and migration. We might time new holidays to animal migrations or the Aurorae Borealis, turn out all the lights on the solstices and equinoxes and nights of meteor showers or comets, teach gardening and bird identification in the schools, go on walkabouts for class trips.³⁹

Multicentrism's most striking implication is its move toward a "communicative ethics" that ranges far beyond the human sphere. Imperative is to move from the familiar one-species monologue to a truly multi-polar dialogue. The root intuition is profoundly simple, though enormously difficult for us late moderns: it is to recognize the larger world itself as a communicative realm. "All animate life interacts." As Abram reminds us:

For the largest part of our species existence, humans have negotiated relationships with every aspect of the sensuous surroundings... All could speak, articulating in gesture and whistle and sigh a shifting web of meanings that we felt on our skin or inhaled through our nostrils or focused with our listening ears, and to which we replied—whether with sounds, or through movements, or minute shifts of mood... Every sound was a voice, every scrape or blunder was a meeting—with Thunder, with Oak, with Dragonfly. . . .⁴⁰

"We are never alone," native peoples say—not even in seemingly most wild or "empty" of places. We live and move, always, among other "centers." As Abram makes clear, this is at once a basic experience and the upshot of the latest science. The last decades have seen a proliferation of research and narrative writing on animal cognition and the subtle flows of communication involving everything from cetaceans and insects to the Earth itself.⁴¹

In many specific ways, often below the cultural radar, a kind of more-than-human reciprocity and mutual accommodation is in play already. Sometimes it is even in plain-as-day words:

In the 1950s, Western anthropologists visiting the [Kalahari Desert] noted the eyes of many lions glowing just beyond the [Bushmen's] cooking fire; the animals would cease their roaring when a hunter sauntered off to the edge of camp and

³⁹ Along with our joint paper cited above (n. 18), commentaries by Cheney and myself on Birch's concept of universal consideration expand this theme ("Universal Consideration: A Epistemological Map of the Terrain" (Cheney) and "Universal Consideration as an Orinary Practice" (Weston) both appear in *Environmental Ethics* 20 (1998)). The celebratory note is especially important: think of the appeal of what we could call "celebratory environmentalism" as opposed to "environmentalism of threats." There are implications for teaching as well: see my essay "What if Teaching Went Wild?" in Scott Fletcher, ed., *Philosophy of Education 2002* (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2003): 40–52 (revised and forthcoming in *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 2004).

⁴⁰ Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*, p. ix.

⁴¹ See my *Back to Earth*, chaps. 2–4.

asked them to keep the noise down so the children could sleep. Human and lion shared a watering hole, one using it by day and the other by night. . . .⁴²

Parks throughout the U.S. and Canada now routinely instruct back-country visitors in the appropriate etiquette for encounters with bears (speak firmly but not threateningly; back away but don't turn or run; don't stare. . .). A wide range of writers highlight ways in which wild animal populations systematically negotiate boundaries and other practices with adjacent human communities. Abram writes of the little rice offerings by means of which ants (yes, ants!) and people in Bali arrange the borders of their respective living spaces.⁴³ Arne Naess and Plumwood write of the almost-formal mutual accommodation of farmers and bears in Scandinavia, dingos and humans in Australia.⁴⁴ Vine Deloria reminds us that native peoples attend to a whole range of interspecies communications—encounters, dreams, visions—and tell stories of animals *becoming* humans, and vice versa, creating the covenants that later generations (of both) can enter.⁴⁵ Entire new schools of architecture and city design are based on what Ian McHarg famously called “design with nature”—very much with the emphasis on the word *with*.⁴⁶

When we begin to make a systematic practice of multicentric “negotiation” in this sense, further unexpected possibilities open up.⁴⁷ Think of negotiation in much longer time-frames, too—stretching over centuries, perhaps—and we can imagine a kind of dialogue in which we put questions to nature, in the form perhaps of a variety of small and slow experiments, carefully attended to, in

⁴² Jim Nollman, in *Utne Reader*, March/April 1998, p. 100. There is more to this story, though: “When ranching was introduced . . . , cattle began to share the watering hole without regard to schedules. At first lions kept their distance, as if cattle were an extension of the human family. But eventually they attacked. Ranchers reciprocated by shooting the lions, and within a few years lions had killed several Bushmen. . . .” Notice that this activity is still a communicative form—just a different and more lethal one.

⁴³ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, p. 11.

⁴⁴ Arne Naess, “Self-realization in Mixed Communities of Humans, Bears, Sheep and Wolves,” *Inquiry* 22 (1979): 231–41; Val Plumwood, “The Fraser Island Dingo Cull and the Ethics of Negotiation,” paper presented at Environment Day Symposium, Social and Political Theory Program, Australian National University, Canberra, June 2001. See also Bob Jickling and Paul Paquet, “Wolves, Ethics, and Epistemology,” paper presented at “Culling Mammals,” a symposium organized by the Mammal Society and the International Fund for Animal Welfare, London, November 2000.

⁴⁵ Deloria, *Spirit and Reason*, chaps. 4, 5, and 10; see also Snyder's lovely essay “The Woman Who Married a Bear” in *The Practice of the Wild*, pp. 155–74. *Covenant* is a precise word, too (remember it is also Shepard's). The mutual obligations and expectations that arise from such species-border-crossings are not entirely voluntary, can be renewed or broken, but are not constantly created anew (a point emphasized by Cheney).

⁴⁶ Ian McHarg, *Design with Nature* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969). See also Merchant, *Reinventing Eden*, pp. 236–39.

⁴⁷ See my essay “Self-Validating Reduction: Toward a Theory of Environmental Devaluation,” *Environmental Ethics* 18 (1996): 115–32.

which alternative forms of suburban development or farming or even genetic engineering are tried out. Nature responds: the land languishes or flourishes, we and the ants or the lions live together in peace—or not. And there are other forms of direct presence as well. Rivers and mountains aren't going to enter Congress themselves, for example, but why not expect Congress to meet on *their* terms—for example, in the Grand Canyon or in the Great Smoky Mountains? Would the votes on Alaskan oil drilling look the same if they were held in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge?

Christopher Stone points out that the law has long admitted nonhuman participants—ships, bridges, colleges, municipalities, corporations—which take part in litigation and negotiation through their representatives.⁴⁸ So do individual humans who are unable to participate in their own voices; so may future human generations as well. At the very least, then, other “centers” should, and can, have similar representation. Again, as Vine Deloria reminds us, such a practice is already ancient in the councils of native peoples.⁴⁹ Snyder points out that it is part of the practice of the commons as well.⁵⁰ Now we might imagine a new kind of priesthood of cross-species emissaries, an extension of John Seed and Joanna Macy's ritual of the Council of All Beings, or of the “ecosteries”—ecological monasteries—under development by Alan Drengson and others, where people can devote their lives to achieving an attunement with nature, making them natural representatives of the more-than-human in the most practical of decisions.⁵¹

Ethics so reconstructed will not necessarily produce the quickest and most efficient decisions. This is true of any ethic that values process: the very constitution of relationship *in* process is part of the point. We might even learn to mistrust the quick and efficient: perhaps it is part of the real function of ethics to slow things down. Still, there may also be times when certain questions and challenges cannot wait. For such times we need a provisional, temporary, even “emergency” multicentric ethic: go light, treasure what's left, rebuild where we can, minimize big risks. As Plumwood notes, this is what good ecological activism already is geared to to accomplish. It is a basic kind of environmental ethic that backgrounds anything deeper. What multicentrism adds is the wider and wilder vision: a sustainable, participatory, multivocal philosophical practice—a way back into the Multiverse.

⁴⁸ Christopher Stone, *Should Trees Have Standing?* (Los Altos, Calif.: William Kaufmann, 1974).

⁴⁹ Deloria, *Spirit and Reason*. A lovely teaching tale is Paula Underwood, “Who Speaks for Wolf?” in *Three Native American Learning Stories* (San Anselmo, Calif.: Tribe of Two Press, The Learning Way Company, 2002).

⁵⁰ See Snyder, *Practice of the Wild*, pp. 25–47.

⁵¹ Seed et al., *Thinking like a Mountain*. See also the “Workshop Manual” at <http://www.rainforestinfo.org.au/deep-eco/cabcont.htm>. The website for the Ecostery Foundation of North America is <http://www.ecostery.org>.