



Environment & Society



White Horse Press

Full citation:

Katz, Eric, "The Liberation of Humanity and Nature."  
*Environmental Values* 11, no. 4, (2002): 397-405.  
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/5863>

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# The Liberation of Humanity and Nature

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## ABSTRACT

What does the 'liberation' of nature mean? In this essay, I use a pragmatic methodology to (1) reject the idea that we need a metaphysical understanding of the nature of nature before we can speak of nature's liberation, and (2) explain the sense of liberation as being the continuation of human non-interference in natural processes. Two real life policy cases are cited as examples: beach restoration on Fire Island and rock climbing in designated wilderness areas.

## KEY WORDS

Domination, environmental policy, environmental pragmatism, liberation, nature

In *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Herbert Marcuse declared that 'nature, too, awaits the revolution!'<sup>1</sup> Nature, in other words, has a possible future free of human domination. Without going into a detailed exegesis of the work of Marcuse or other critical theorists I would like to consider the meaning of this idea: that nature itself is open to a revolution, a liberation, a release from human domination. Unlike Marcuse, I will examine this idea by the consideration of two concrete examples of the ethics of environmental policy.

Mainstream environmental ethics has, perhaps, been slow to adopt the ideas of domination and liberation as descriptions of the human relationship with the natural world – despite the widespread use of these ideas in critical theory. William Leiss's *The Domination of Nature* was, after all, a study of Francis Bacon, and not a treatise on environmental ethics.<sup>2</sup> A notable exception, of

course, has been the work of ecofeminist philosophers. At least since 1980, when Carolyn Merchant published *The Death of Nature*, ecofeminist philosophy has emphasised as its primary theme the connection between the domination of women and the domination of nature.<sup>3</sup>

But as early as 1977, John Rodman, with perhaps an ironic eye towards Marcuse's essay, published 'The Liberation of Nature?' (with a question mark!), a classic critique of both Peter Singer's idea of animal liberation and Christopher Stone's proposal for the legal rights for nature as models of a new environmental consciousness.<sup>4</sup> If nature were to be truly liberated, Rodman argued, we would have to do better than extending utilitarianism to the animal kingdom or granting rights as convenient legal fictions to nonhuman natural objects. Taking as his symbolic act of defiance the freeing of captive dolphins, Rodman argued that we must resist the technological monoculture that is rapidly enveloping the contemporary world.

In my own work,<sup>5</sup> I have used the idea of domination – and the idea that I take to be its opposite, autonomy – as critical markers in any analysis of the ethics of environmental policy. But my use of these notions has been fairly uncritical; I have always been reluctant to get into any serious metaphysical debates about the meaning of human nature or the nature of nature itself. I believe that such deep philosophical analyses and debates may impede the timely development of urgently needed justifiable environmental policies. Nevertheless, when I claim that nature should be treated as analogous to a human subject, or that the autonomy of natural processes is the pre-eminent goal of human activity regarding the natural world, I open the door for critical questioning about the metaphysical foundations of my position. I need to defend, at the very least, my lack of concern for studying the metaphysics of nature.

The precise locus of my problem concerns the existence and description of nature in itself, the nature of nature. If, as I claim, the autonomy and self-development of nature is to be respected, if in other words, nature is to be treated as a moral subject, then we need some sense of what nature is, in itself, outside the domain of human activity. But nature is only known through human activity, and even more problematic, nature is continually modified by human activity. Thus both epistemologically and ontologically, nature in itself is 'our' nature, the nature constructed by human thought and praxis. Now according to Steven Vogel, in his book *Against Nature*, the problem of nature in itself is also the crucial problem for critical theorists such as Marcuse and Habermas – 'how to reconcile an account of knowledge as active and social . . . with the 'materialist' commitment to a nature independent of the human.'<sup>6</sup> But this problem is more than a problem for critical theory – it is a problem for all of environmental philosophy, or at least all of environmental philosophy that deals seriously with a robust non-anthropocentrism. Any account of environmental ethics that extends moral consideration beyond the boundaries of the human species would seem to require some idea of what nature and natural entities are in themselves,

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free of human influence and control. Whether we talk of 'interests,' rights, self-realisation – or whatever – we need to know what is good for nature in itself.

The problem is that we know and understand nature through human categories. For example, we use human conceptions of good to evaluate the processes of nature, the flourishing of natural entities and systems. The human interest in nature is the factor that focuses our perceptions and understanding of the natural world. If nature is understood in this way, it does not appear that it could ever be free of human domination, for the basic domination is epistemological – nature is only known through human thought. For the operation of a non-anthropocentric environmental ethic, we seem to require an idea of a nature that is autonomous, a nature that is analogous to a human subject – so that we can preserve and promote the interests of this nature in itself. But to think of a free and autonomous nature, it seems, means that we must think of a nature that is completely free of human influence, to think of nature in itself, outside of all human categories of thought.

But can we know what nature is in itself? Given our post-Kantian understanding of human thought, it seems unreasonable to think that we can know nature *an sich*. But is knowledge of the noumenal world of nature really required for the development of a non-anthropocentric environmental ethics? Perhaps I have described the problem in the wrong way. Perhaps there is no real need for a metaphysical examination of nature as such. Here is where my pragmatism begins to kick into gear; here I want to avoid metaphysical speculations; here I am willing to 'make do' with the concepts and practices that we have at our disposal as practical moral philosophers.

And so let me offer a tentative solution to the problem of nature in itself. Is there a Nature outside the knowledge and activity of human society that can be a subject unto itself? Is there a Nature that can be liberated from human domination? To answer this problem, let us compare the problem of the liberation of nature with the liberation of humans. Given the limitations of our epistemology, we do not really know what humans are in themselves either. The Kantian analysis of the knowledge of physical nature applies to humans in their physical being as well. I do not know other human beings, nor even myself, outside of socially constructed categories. All of my relationships with all individual human beings and all human groups and institutions are mediated by cultural constructs and social roles. And yet in my relationships with other humans and human institutions I can meaningfully strive to end oppression and domination, to aid other human beings in achieving liberation, freedom, and autonomy. I do not require an idea of a human being in itself for a meaningful liberatory praxis.

So what does liberation mean? It does not mean the elimination of all social constructs and categories. A human being does not become liberated when he or she transcends all social and cultural roles, duties, and obligations. Even if such a transcendence were possible – which it isn't – what could it possibly mean? A

pure human essence existing outside of all human history, free of all the rules of human social life? The pre-historical natural or biological human? Although such an abstract ideal may have a place in the conceptual analysis of the meaning of human life, it surely plays no part in our daily practice of working towards the liberation of individual humans and human institutions.

Regarding the liberation of humans, then, my point is this: we do not need an idea of an ideal human nature in order to understand practices of liberation and domination that we encounter in the everyday world. There are, of course, difficult cases. As a parent, for example, I have long been fascinated by the boundaries of education, socialisation, indoctrination, and oppression in my relationships with my growing children. But the existence of grey areas and marginal cases does not in the least prevent me from recognising the real oppression of children by their parents – and my parenting, I hope, is always guided by both an understanding of the appropriate uses, abuses, and limitations of my authority, and a rather nebulous idea of a maturing autonomous human being in contemporary culture, the characteristics I hope develop in my children. Similarly, in the broader social and political sphere, we do not require an idea of an ideal human nature in order to oppose (for example) slave-labour practices, various forms of racial, gender, and religious discrimination, economic injustice, and imperialism. Our social context informs our decisions. What we mean by human liberation is embedded within our social categories, which may of course change, as society itself becomes liberated. So human liberation is the development of specific positive freedom-and-life-enhancing roles, not the elimination of all social constraints, commitments, constructs, and categories. Although there will continue to be difficult cases, our ethics and our social praxis is enough. We need not turn to metaphysical speculation on the essence of humanity to give content to our activities regarding human liberation.

Why is it not the same for our relationship with nature? Why do we need an idea of a nature in itself, outside of all human categories of knowledge and action, to give content to a robust non-anthropocentrism? Surely our practical activities in their interaction with nature are enough to provide us with a sense of what is right and wrong. Do I really need an idea of nature in itself, the nature of nature, to know that clear cutting a forest is a form of domination, an injury to the autonomous development of the forest ecosystem? Do I really need an idea of a nature unmediated by human categories of thought and action to know that damming a free-flowing river interferes with the free and spontaneous movement of natural processes? Without denying that there will be difficult cases, it seems clear that we know what is involved in the domination (and hence, the liberation) of nature. Environmentalist practice informs our decisions; we have no need for metaphysical inquiries into the nature of nature as such.

So to return to Marcuse's claim: nature also awaits the revolution, its liberation. Can we give a concrete example of what this means? In my previous work, I have often discussed a specific example of *domination* – the re-design

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and restoration of damaged forest ecosystems – but what of *liberation*? What does the autonomy of nature look like? In a recent paper I have discussed the ethics of beach replenishment and preservation projects, and I believe that this is a good case to highlight my idea of the autonomy of nature.<sup>7</sup> I must confess that I have a personal interest in beach erosion, since I live a good part of the year on Fire Island, a barrier beach off the coast of Long Island in the Atlantic Ocean. Fire Island is an interesting case because it is a hybrid environment. The island is 32 miles long and at its thickest about a half mile wide – it is, essentially, a long sandbar. Although there is no large scale commercial development, some sections of the island are densely populated with individual homes on small lots (most less than a quarter acre). But most of the island remains undeveloped. There is a unique wilderness area in the central part of the island – the Sunken Forest – and the island is home to several threatened and endangered species of plants and birds. In 1964 the Federal Government purchased the island and made it part of the National Seashore, equivalent to a national park.

As with all barrier beaches on the Eastern coast of the United States, Fire Island suffers from erosion. Individual homes, recreational beaches, and the wilderness areas are threatened by the loss – the movement – of sand. Whether or not a policy of beach replenishment and preservation should be undertaken is a question that raises interesting issues in technology, economics, social justice, and environmental ethics. I am not going to deal with these questions here – but I do address them in the other paper I mentioned above. Here I am only concerned with the idea of the autonomy of nature. Can we look at the problem of beach erosion and the environmental policy of beach replenishment from the perspective of the liberation of nature?

Presumably, to liberate nature in this case, to permit the autonomy of natural processes, we would adopt a ‘hands-off’ policy regarding beach erosion and replenishment. Rather than try to mould and manipulate the beach environment, we would simply leave it alone – thus permitting both the natural erosion (and sometimes, the natural build-up) of sand to continue. But Fire Island is not a natural environment – it is a hybrid area of wilderness, relatively undisturbed beaches, and single family homes. There are concrete and wooden walkways, extensive bulkheading, and numerous boat channels and harbours. It is as much a built and human environment as a natural or wild one. This makes the entire idea of the autonomy of natural processes rather suspect. Only if we were to systematically eliminate all human-built structures and modifications to the shore line could we begin to approximate a natural environment. And in that case alone could the idea of the liberation of nature on the island make sense.

In the real world, of course, the systematic elimination of all human structures on the island is not going to happen. So let us simply undertake a philosophical thought experiment. Imagine an island identical to Fire Island – 32 miles long, central wilderness area, threatened and endangered species – but without a permanent human presence. No houses, no harbours, no boat channels,

no sidewalks or roadways, no bulkheading. On this imaginary island, what would the liberation of nature be like? Clearly, it would be *the continuation of the freedom from human impacts*. The autonomy of nature would be the unfolding of natural processes on the island – and the island’s interactions with the ocean – without the interference of humans, without the human development and alteration of the land. Nature would develop in its own way, not subject to the designs, plans, or projects of humanity. And to say that nature would develop in its own way does not imply that nature itself has a plan, a *telos* – we are simply eliminating the dominating tendencies of human plans – human intentionality and design.

This imaginary island thought experiment shows, I believe, that we do not need a positive conception of nature as such to understand the idea of the liberation and autonomy of nature. We do not need to know a nature outside of all human categories – indeed, the idea of nature that we have on my imaginary island is an idea constructed by our science; it is a nature that we understand through human categories. But this does not make it any less autonomous. As long as it is not being moulded and transformed by human impacts it is a free and liberated nature. It may not be free of human domination in a metaphysical or epistemological sense – but in the realm of pragmatic environmental policy, it surely is.

Now this argument obviously rests on a comparison and analogy between the liberation of nature and the liberation of humans. Let me anticipate and answer a possible objection to this argument based on an obvious dis-analogy in the comparison: human liberation generally involves both the liberation of individuals and the liberation of groups, but in the liberation of nature it is difficult to understand the liberation of individual natural entities. Once we begin to think about the liberation of individual natural entities, we enter a territory of endless debates in the realm of environmental ethics over the specific relevant moral characteristics of individuals – is sentience, self-consciousness, or life itself the particular characteristic that confers the possibility of moral standing? I believe that my argument and analysis concerning the imaginary Fire Island enables us to sidestep these questions about the appropriate characteristic for moral standing – indeed, one of the strengths of this pragmatic approach is that it enables us to avoid these debates.

Consider the case of rocks.<sup>8</sup> Does it make sense to say that rocks can be liberated? From within the traditional framework of the field of environmental ethics as it has developed over the last thirty years, we would be perplexed by this question. Unless one wants to adopt a Whiteheadian perspective – or some other form of pan-psychism – one is left with the obvious problem that rocks are not alive, not sentient, and not conscious of their own existence. Rocks have no good of their own. So how can one say that rocks can gain liberation and exhibit autonomy?

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One possible answer from within the traditional range of arguments would be to emphasise a holistic perspective on the ideas of domination, liberation, and autonomy. Unlike human liberation, which generally involves the creation of conditions for the autonomy of a human individual, one can say that the liberation of nature is a holistic liberation, in which one creates the conditions for the autonomy of natural systems. The ecosystem or bioregion is freed from the oppression of human design and modification. Under this interpretation, individual rocks – or trees or squirrels – are not themselves liberated. The system in which these natural individuals are embedded is liberated. The system acquires (or re-acquires) its autonomy, outside the demands of human purpose and intentionality.

Although I am inclined to support this holistic response to the problem of the liberation of rocks and other individual natural entities – after all, much of my work in the field of environmental ethics has been the explanation and justification of a community based ecological holism<sup>9</sup> – the position I have sketched out through the use of the imaginary Fire Island actually permits a more radical response. Yes, individual rocks can be liberated. In the Fire Island case, liberation was seen to be the freedom from human impacts. Why can we not conceive of individual rocks existing in such a state, unmodified by human activity? We can again compare two sets of comparable rocks, one subject to human modification (through drilling, hammering, or painting) and one simply left alone. Which set of rocks is free of human domination? The answer is obvious.

What is interesting about the case of rocks is that there is a real life policy debate in the United States that focuses precisely on this issue. Rock climbers use metal bolts to enable them to climb a cliff. The metal bolts are hammered into the rock face, to be used as fixed anchors to attach ropes, nylon slings, and other safety devices. The bolts clearly alter the natural face of the rock wall. But even more problematic is the fact that often the fixed anchors are left in the cliff after the climb, so that they are in place for future climbs. The policy debate in the United States concerns the use of metal bolts in National (and state) Parks and designated wilderness areas, for the Wilderness Act prohibits the installation of any permanent human structure in wilderness areas. In some places, there are so many bolts in a cliff that a metal bolt ladder appears to have been constructed.<sup>10</sup>

Although the resolution of the policy debate in the United States will probably be dictated by the courts – wilderness preservationist groups are battling rock climbers with the National Park Service caught in the middle – the point of this case is that it shows that it does make sense to think of rocks – and other inanimate natural entities – as being potential candidates for liberation in the sense that I have been using: freedom from human impacts. We let things be; we leave nature alone; we let natural entities, processes, and systems develop without the modification and moulding of human purposes and designs. Clearly



a rock cliff without metal bolts is different from one with bolts. The cliff without the bolts exhibits a kind of autonomy and freedom that has been denied the modified cliff.

Does this examination of the idea of the liberation of nature help us in the understanding and determination of environmental policy? Return again to Fire Island, the real island with complex interacting human and natural ecosystems. I live on Fire Island, and I need to know what kind of environmental policies will be morally justifiable there. My argument shows, I believe, that even in the case of hybrid environments, we ought to lean towards leaving nature alone. In most cases the absence of human domination will result in the liberation and autonomous development of nature. Where we have a choice, we should choose the least intrusive policy. On Fire Island, for example, if we wish to protect the recreational beaches, the wilderness areas, and the endangered species, we ought to preserve the beach by a process of sand replenishment, and not build permanent structures such as rock jetties and sea walls. In the rock climbing case, we have to regulate the use of fixed anchors that remain permanently in the rock face – at least in protected National Parks and wilderness areas. Of course, this is not the place for a full-scale discussion of policy alternatives, for such a discussion would require a detailed description of the specific facts of the concrete situation. My philosophical point about the formation of policy is merely this: we can make decisions about the autonomy of nature and its relevance to environmental policy without plumbing the metaphysical depths of noumenal nature, Nature in itself.

Marcuse believed that after the revolution, not only would nature be liberated, but humanity would create a new non-dominating science, founded on a new sensibility of passivity, receptiveness, and openness that would involve 'the ability to see things in their own right, to experience the joy enclosed in them, the erotic energy of nature.'<sup>11</sup> I do not know if any of this is possible. I do not believe that we can ever escape the historical conditions of our science, our economic development, and our ethical practice. Our understanding and evaluation of nature will always be contained and determined by our historically-based human categories of thought. Yet we can still understand that some of our environmental policies involve the domination of nature. It is incumbent upon us to avoid and to minimise these oppressive practices as much as possible. Only then can we respect the autonomous development of nature as a subject in itself.

#### NOTES

This paper was presented as a talk at Mansfield College, Oxford University, June 28, 1999 at the Oxford Centre for Environment, Ethics and Society as part of a joint meeting of the Society for Applied Philosophy and the International Society for Environmental Ethics. An earlier version of this paper was read at a meeting of the International Society for

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Environmental Ethics at the World Congress of Philosophy, Boston, Massachusetts, August 12, 1998. I would like to thank the participants in both sessions for helpful comments and criticisms.

<sup>1</sup> Marcuse 1972, p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> Leiss 1974.

<sup>3</sup> Merchant 1980. For the most succinct statement of the connection between domination and ecofeminism see Warren 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Rodman 1977. Rodman is critical of Peter Singer (1975) and Christopher Stone (1974).

<sup>5</sup> Katz 1997, pp. 93–146.

<sup>6</sup> Vogel 1996, p. 141.

<sup>7</sup> Katz 1999.

<sup>8</sup> I would like to thank Holmes Rolston for bringing this problem to my attention.

<sup>9</sup> See Katz 1997.

<sup>10</sup> The facts of this case were reported by National Public Radio. Mark Roberts, 'Don't Bolt Me In', *NPR Weekend All Things Considered*, August 8, 1998. The problem arose at El Dorado Canyon State Park and the Lost Creek Wilderness in Colorado. My thanks to Andrew Light for bringing this case to my attention.

<sup>11</sup> Marcuse 1972, p. 74.

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