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Ecocentrism and Persons

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ABSTRACT: Ecocentrism has to establish an intrinsic connection between its basic value postulate of the non-instrumental value of the nonhuman world and a conception of human flourishing, on pain of failure to motivate acceptance of its social and political prescriptions. This paper explores some ideas recently canvassed by ecocentrists such as Robyn Eckersley, designed to establish this connection – transpersonal ecology, autopoietic value theory and ecofeminism – and finds them open to objection. An alternative approach is developed which concentrates on the connection between non-human nature and personhood, via the phenomenon of culture. Persons are conceived of as essentially culture-creators, and the fact of their embodiment in ecosystems is argued to be essential to their activities as culture creators. The variety and integrity of such systems thus turns out to be essential for the flourishing of what is essential to personhood. This means that ecocentrism has to be abandoned in its pure form, and replaced with person-centrism, but this conclusion is argued for on the basis of the extension of the concept of the self – a strategy often endorsed by ecocentrists themselves.

KEYWORDS: Ecocentrism, environmental ethics, intrinsic value theory, persons

I.

Ecocentrism involves the basic value-postulate:

(E) The non-human natural world has intrinsic value, independent of its instrumental importance for human well-being

In this paper I will explore some of the difficulties for ecocentrism, as a philosophical foundation for Green political theory, which centre on the problem of establishing an intrinsic connection between principle E above and a conception of human well-being or flourishing. This connection is clearly needed in

order to establish for individual human beings some compelling sense that acting in accordance with E will achieve for them, and the individuals about whom they care most, a form of human life which will be found satisfying and fulfilling. Without some such claim ecocentrists will lack a connection between their fundamental value postulate E and what Thomas Nagel has identified as the 'personal' standpoint,¹ which always characterises the consciousness of self-aware beings such as ourselves. It is true that we can also adopt the 'impersonal' or universal standpoint and endorse principles which refer to the interests of universal or impersonal entities, such as 'society' or the 'common good'. But such conceptions are weak sources of human motivation much of the time, and always run the risk of being trumped by the requirements of the 'personal' standpoint.²

The difficulty for the ecocentrist, of course, is that prima facie principle E sets out precisely to eschew the 'personal' standpoint entirely and to bid people to adopt a point of view with respect to non-human nature which completely leaves behind human interests and concerns.

None of this is news to ecocentrists, and many people have made suggestions as to how the personal and impersonal viewpoints can be fused in ecocentric theory. There is the theory propounded by Arne Naess³ which seeks to stretch the personal standpoint so that it becomes coterminous with the impersonal one. This is to be achieved by reconceptualising the self so that self-identity and self-understanding are bound up with a grasp of oneself as at some level identifiable with non-human nature. This is the 'larger self' theory.

Another attack on the same problem is to be found in Robert Goodin's 'green theory of value',⁴ which seeks to establish that non-human nature provides an indispensable context for human life to possess meaning, and that it is essential to its doing so that non-human nature be conceived of as being completely independent of the personal standpoint of individual human beings. This is the 'larger context' theory. In developing it, however, Goodin is clear that the cost of accepting it is the abandonment of pure ecocentrism. The green theory of value is human-centred, but not human-instrumental.⁵

This paper is another attempt to deal with this problem – one which offers a solution which differs from those of both Naess and Goodin, although it has some similarities to each. Like Naess, and unlike Goodin, I think the key to a solution lies in developing the concept of the self further, although what has to be done here is, I think, to ponder the concept of *personhood* and relate it to non-human nature. Like Goodin, and unlike Naess, however, I think that a viable theory does involve the abandonment of pure ecocentrism.

II.

First, however, I will consider some arguments explored recently by Robyn Eckersley⁶ which seek to elucidate and defend the ecocentric position. It is a

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feature of the suggestions she explores that they operate in such a way that the intrinsic value of non-human nature is directly connected to human flourishing. Hence, if such arguments work, then the difficulties faced by ecocentrism which we have been noting ought to disappear.

Eckersley's discussion begins with the observation that ecocentrism takes its cue from the ecologically-informed philosophy of the internal relatedness of life forms within ecosystems, according to which 'there are no absolutely discrete entities and no absolute dividing lines between the living and non-living'.⁷ Acceptance of this viewpoint in turn leads to an ethic of general emancipation, according to which all beings should be permitted to fulfil themselves in accordance with their natures – a principle which will apply both to human beings and to non-human nature.

However, the ecological principle of interconnectedness appealed to by Eckersley does not seem to be straightforwardly related to the principle of general emancipation which is supposed to unite human and non-human flourishing. For all that the interconnectedness appealed to shows, it seems possible for the flourishing of some beings to require that others do not flourish (parasites, for example); or for the flourishing of some beings to require only that others *exist*, but not that they should flourish, either individually or as a species (domestic animals in factory farms, for example).

Also, the *kind* of interconnectedness between ourselves and non-human life-forms is important when we are considering our attitudes to non-human nature. The science of ecology suggests that the connections are physical and biological, via energy pathways, for example. However, it is arguable that ecocentrists really need to establish interconnectedness between human beings and non-human nature at the level of values or meaning. The focus should thus be on the kinds of meaning – moral, aesthetic, religious, and so on – which non-human nature can have for people. Only thus is it going to be possible to establish the right kind of connection between principle E and the concept of *human* flourishing, which is value-laden and concerned with meaning through and through.

One suggestion along these lines which Eckersley explores⁸ is the ecofeminist claim that at least between one group of human beings – women – and non-human nature there is a connection of meaning. Women, with their nurturing, caring and life-giving natures are more 'in tune' than men are with natural processes. Thus they will find the caring and nurturing attitude to non-human nature required by the full recognition of E to be congenial and conducive to their own fulfilment as women.

There may be truth in the claim that human beings whose self-understanding involves caring and nurturing will find the forms of life enjoined by ecocentrists to be congenial in this way. But it is clear that this is a contingent fact about them, if it is a fact at all. There seems no incoherence in the idea of a being whose caring and nurturing instincts are directed only to its own kind, as is true of nearly all non-human life forms, for example. And in the human case it is at least arguable

that caring and nurturing comes most naturally, for both males and females, though on occasion for neither, with respect to their own offspring and relations⁹.

A more general kind of approach to the problem is explored by Eckersley via a consideration of the concept, hotly debated between liberals and socialists, of autonomy. The key move, according to Eckersley, is to expand the concept of the 'self' whose autonomy is characterised in the classic Kantian terms as 'living in accordance with self-imposed principle'.¹⁰ What this expansion seems to mean is, in effect, accepting that non-human nature has its own capacity for autonomy. Non-human life-forms have their own ways of living and modes of being. Respect for autonomy in general thus requires respect for the modes of living of such beings and underpins the project of 'general emancipation' already alluded to above.

The focus on autonomy, and the expansion of its application mooted by Eckersley, then allows her to establish a link between E and human flourishing. She argues that since ecocentrism is committed, by its acceptance of E and the expanded concept of autonomy, to the project of general emancipation for all creatures, it necessarily also supports the conditions conducive to the exercise by humans of their autonomy. Giving this concept in turn what is in effect a socialist gloss, she then suggests that this commits ecocentrists to the pursuit of social justice in human societies.¹¹ This, then, establishes a direct link between E and human flourishing.

These ideas are not pursued very far by Eckersley, and it is, of course, a serious problem with the suggestion she makes that it is not entirely clear what is meant by extending the Kantian sense of autonomy (the following of self-imposed principle) to creatures which do not seem able to impose principles on themselves in any sense.

Another attempt at elucidating how one might reasonably arrive at an extension of the concept of autonomy to non-humans, thus motivating acceptance of the general emancipation principle, is via what Eckersley refers to as 'Autopoietic Intrinsic Value' (AIV) theory.¹² In her account of it, the key claim of AIV is that non-human nature is capable of being self-renewing and that self-renewing entities are 'ends-in-themselves'. This is another of Kant's classical characterisations of autonomous beings – beings which possess intrinsic, or non-instrumental, value.¹³ Hence we should extend the concept of autonomy to non-human nature, even to entities such as ecosystems, for they too possess self-producing or renewing capacities.

However, Kant's argument to persuade autonomous agents to value the autonomy of others began with the demonstration of the importance of one's own autonomy, and then turned on the view of autonomy as an exercise of rationality¹⁴. This may not be the only possible concept of rationality, but it is one which excludes the attribution of autonomy to creatures believed to be devoid of the requisite kinds of rationality. Kant's argument was that since we must value our own rationality, as a condition of the meaningfulness of our own existence; and since rationality is a matter of consistency – not making a distinction without a

difference – we cannot value our own rationality without thereby committing ourselves to valuing the rationality of others, for to fail to do that *would* be making a distinction without a difference, and thus failing to value rationality.¹⁵

There is a problem about trying to rework this argument if we do not understand autonomy as an exercise of rationality, but instead regard it as synonymous with the concept of self-renewal/production. Certainly one *can* intelligibly claim that we must each value our own self-renewing capacities, for we cannot have meaningful lives if we go out of existence. However, this in no way commits us to the valuation of the self-renewing capacities of other entities. We may, of course, value their self-renewing capacities for *instrumental* reasons of our own, but that does not amount to viewing them as possessing intrinsic value, and in any case is a value-attribution exercise which requires us to consider each case on its own (instrumental) merits. We are not committed to a blanket valuing of all self-renewing entities by our instrumental valuation of the self-renewing capacities of some of them. Thus, Kant's argument works, if it does, because of the peculiar logic of the concept of rationality. It is plain that this concept is not involved in the concept of self-renewing/producing beings, and so it is hard to see how we can be argued into accepting the intrinsic value of entities just insofar as they instantiate this concept.¹⁶

A further view, labelled 'transpersonal ecology' by Eckersley¹⁷ does not aim at argument to convince us to accept E, she tells us, but rather aims to produce psychological conversion to the ecocentrist viewpoint. It does this by developing an extended 'sense of self'. That is, in the manner adumbrated by Naess, transpersonal ecologists seek to encourage us to identify ourselves with non-human nature so that its flourishing and ours become one and the same.

There are some obvious problems with this idea, especially given that it is supposed to lead us to identify not just with aspects of non-human nature which possess a mentality and resemble us in various respects, such as the primates and higher mammals, but also with entities which we can only grasp via the possession of quite sophisticated theory and which (at least, on most views of the matter) are devoid of mentality, such as species and ecosystems. One can certainly care about such things – seek to preserve them, respecting and marvelling at them. But how feasible is it to *identify* with them, to regard them as in some sense part of ourselves?

There is one way in which this might be conceived to happen which I will now outline, although it is a way with which ecocentrists may not be entirely happy. It is possible to undergo an extension of the sense of self with respect to at least some entities devoid of mentality. People, for example, often seem to experience this with respect to their automobiles. However, two conditions of this happening appear to be that there should be physical control of the entity concerned via the human body (the automobile is experienced as an extension of the human body); and that the external appearance of the entity needs to be regarded as a direct expression of the human self in question (it 'makes a statement' about the owner).

If one were to generalise this to the relations between the human self and non-human nature it would imply that (i) we identify with non-human nature insofar as it is viewed as an extension of our physical selves via our manipulation of it, which suggests in turn the necessity for artifactuality; and that (ii) we need to convert it into a symbolic expression of our personal psychology, again requiring that it be 'made over' by us. These ideas are, of course, central to the Hegelian/Marxist theme of the overcoming of alienation by praxis.

On the face of it, these suggestions are unwelcome to the ecocentrist position because they look to be a version of the Enlightenment theme of rendering non-human nature entirely subservient to human purposes and needs, when what is needed, according to ecocentrists, is to respect non-human nature for its own intrinsic value. But it may be feasible to argue that the Enlightenment interpretation of the key ideas is not the only one available. This may not seem possible at first because we appear to be faced with two contradictory requirements:

- (a) that we 'make over' the world so that it expresses ourselves to ourselves and to others; and
- (b) that we respect non-human nature by maintaining its processes intact as far as possible.

Here, (a) seems to imply that we countenance wholesale interference with non-human nature, whereas (b) seems to imply that this be kept to a minimum. However, it is arguable that, in the context of our present world, (b) could be regarded as being as much a manifestation of human making and self-expression as would be the effort to convert the whole of non-human nature into a global garden city.

Clearly, on any account, wildernesses will not continue to exist, species will not survive, the atmosphere and oceans will not remain unpolluted unless human beings make strenuous and protracted efforts to secure these aims. If we do successfully achieve them, then they can unproblematically count as manifestations of praxis. And, as is inherent in the very idea of praxis, we will have remade ourselves in the course of this 'making over' of our world. It is perhaps not too strained to suggest that it will be precisely a sense of our identity with non-human nature, whose (continued) existence will then be in a clear sense our achievement and an expression of our values, which will then be attained. In a nutshell, a world which shows as few obvious effects of human artifactuality as possible will, in modern conditions, be the largest artefact we can achieve. Such an artefact will be conceivable by us as an extension of our (collective) personality and as something which reflects that personality back to us. Non-human nature and the human world will then have been totally fused.

There are various problems with this hypothesis, however. From the ecocentric point of view it perhaps still looks too anthropocentric, as if it involved the claim that the only way in which we can be brought to recognise the value of non-human nature is by making it an instrument of our human personality. Also, the

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hypothesis posits an enlarged sense of self as the *result* of the implementation of the green project. However, it does nothing to show people why they should *now* embark on such a protracted and difficult project in a situation where large numbers of them do not have such a wider sense of self.

There is one point which needs to be made at this juncture, now that we have surveyed various suggestions for establishing the connection between principle E and human flourishing. We have looked at ecofeminist arguments, autopoietic intrinsic value theory and transpersonal ecology. I have indicated why they should be regarded as not adequate to do the job required. However, it should be noted that they all seek to establish a connection between principle E and human flourishing by seeking to effect an identity, partial or whole, between human beings and non-human nature.

This suggests that the ecocentric/anthropocentric distinction has ceased to have any real meaning. The defence of principle E turns out always to involve appeal to something of prime importance for human beings too, so that the idea of non-human nature's having intrinsic value, irrespective of human concerns, has become very unclear. When we put non-human nature at the centre we find that we put ourselves there too. The real issue, therefore, is which of the ideological rivals has the most adequate conception of humanity, not whether ecocentrism is superior to anthropocentrism.

However, what we still need is an argument to establish the connection between E and the concept of human flourishing which can give people the motivation to undertake the green form of praxis. In the next section I will try to find such an argument.

III.

The point made at the end of the last section is recognised in effect by Eckersley when she suggests that what is required is a new, ecological concept of the self,¹⁸ in which persons are related to, not set apart from, non-human nature.

Two points immediately arise. One is the cautionary thought that the 'ecological' concept of the person ought to be developed out of existing concepts of the person with which people are reasonably familiar.¹⁹ A concept which makes no contact with existing concepts is unlikely to have the appeal necessary to motivate action. The second is the question of how persons, as opposed to the animal species *Homo sapiens*, are to be shown to be part of nature. As members of that animal species we are interconnected with non-human nature. But what is the significance of that fact for the persons which we also are?

What is a person? The following characterisation of a person, drawn from the European tradition of philosophical and social scientific thought to be found in such thinkers as Hobbes, Kant, Rousseau, Hegel and Marx, picks out the features essential to personhood. Some of them are of direct relevance to our problem:

A person is a self-conscious being, with the following abilities all being implicit in the possession of self-consciousness:

- (i) to formulate intentions and determine how to carry them out efficiently;
- (ii) to develop a concept of self-interest and to pursue self-interest so conceived;
- (iii) to commit itself to values and to criticise itself in the light of failure to realise those values to which it has committed itself;
- (iv) to differentiate between itself and others of its kind; and
- (v) to participate with others of its kind in creating a culture of shared values and the associated customs, traditions and institutions which embody those values.²⁰

It is a corollary of these features of personhood that the prime focus of interest for persons is other persons of the same kind. For it is from them that the values, principles and conceptions come in the light of which the individual person formulates its projects, criticises and assesses itself.²¹

Thus, it is natural for persons to regard the non-person context within which they are embedded as primarily, or essentially, vehicles for interpersonal interaction. Hence, one can argue that it is not anthropocentrism, conceived of as a viewpoint with its roots in Judeo-Christian and Enlightenment modes of thought, which is the main cause of human persons' attitude of domination towards nature. Rather, if the above characterisation of persons is correct, then persons of whatever species, wherever they live in space and time, will tend to have that attitude towards the non-person world. Thus, if any attitude is the problem here it is the attitude one might call 'person-centrism'.

If this is correct, then the question obviously arises as to whether persons can avoid person-centrism. The latter might be unavoidable for persons. It might be the case, for example, that members of the human species could only avoid person-centrism by seeking to avoid being persons entirely, perhaps by trying to become purely 'natural' beings, like non-human animals, locked into some suitable ecological niche, living only for the moment and at the level of instinct. The cost of doing so would appear to be the destruction of the kind of mental life essential to personhood. However, as long as the above-noted abilities remain intact the suppression of their exercise will be a very tall order.

The question which needs to be addressed, then, is whether it is possible for persons intelligibly to conceive of the non-person world as something more than a mere vehicle for interpersonal interaction. It would clearly be very helpful for the ecocentric case if it were possible to establish a link between non-human nature and personhood which was intrinsic to, and, at least in part, determining of, the very nature of personhood. Further, this should ideally be an intrinsic connection whose recognition by persons would lead naturally to humility before non-human nature and a compassionate concern for its existence and well-being.

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The beginnings of an answer may be found in ability (v) noted above in the characterisation of persons. Persons are essentially culture-creators. Is it possible to argue that non-human nature is essentially what culture is created out of? If it were so, then if non-human nature were to be removed there would be no person-created culture, and with no culture there would be no persons at all.

On the face of it this looks to be a highly implausible claim. Imagine that our world was completely made over into an entirely urbanised form, with monocultural agriculture to sustain it; with wilderness and wildlife existing only in zoos, genetic banks, on film and in virtual reality theatres. This surely would be a description of a world in which human culture had become all-pervasive, rather than one in which it had become impossible?

At this point, however, a version of Goodin's green theory of value becomes visible, this time in the form of what one might call the transcendental deduction of the category of culture.²²

The key claim here is that the resources for human culture (the culture of a particular group of persons) must be non-human(non-personal). This is because it is impossible for there to be a source of culture which was entirely person-based. A world consisting only of persons would have no wherewithal to formulate values, principles or purposes. This in turn is because, as the analysis given at the start of this section indicates, 'personhood' can only be formulated in purely formal terms. If, per impossible, a group of persons were to exist who were only persons, and not embodied in some animal species located in some ecosystem on some planet, they could not generate culture because they could not generate anything. Persons require to be embodied to become determinate enough to develop the self-consciousness, intentionality, value and cultures which give them substantial existence.²³

The content and meaning of their purposes and values then comes from their embodiment in a context of extra-personal nature. The categories which human beings have used to establish their particular aims and values are thus necessarily drawn from the animalian predicament of embodied persons inhabiting a non-human natural context: 'mighty hunter, feeder of my people'; 'great builder'; scientist (tamer of nature); artist, priest (interpreters of nature's meanings). Non-human nature, then, has to be viewed as a concrete matrix of opportunity and opposition to give specific content to human values and purposes, and to furnish the essential context within which human persons can crystallise out a sense of what they are, derived from their joint construction of a culture of artifacts and symbols, necessarily using their experiences and interpretations of non-human nature to do so.

This is the theme of 'praxis overcoming alienation' again, but with the additional claim now emerging that it is essential to culture and to personhood that what is alien should never be 'made over' in its entirety, for then the material out of which culture, and personhood, is made disappears and when that happens culture and personhood disappear too.

However, is not this claim overblown? Even if the above argument is successful, does it not show only that persons need non-human nature to get culture under way? Surely, however, once cultural creation is under way, then there is no essential need for non-human nature to remain as a sustainer of culture? Why should not the cultural life of persons achieved in the maximally person-transformed world outlined above not simply continue for as long as there are human beings in existence?

We need to try to show, then, that human cultures cannot be sustained *purely* from cultural materials by means of one, or both, of the following two processes:

- (a) reflection, exploration and experimentation internal to a culture; and
- (b) encounter with other cultures – dialectical interplay; absorption; collage.

A culture is a more or less dynamic complex of interrelated elements encompassing the following categories: language; art, religion and philosophy; science and technology; economic and political systems; customs and traditions, such as rules of etiquette. More rudimentary cultures will not have developed under some of these headings – science, for example. But all human cultures develop language, art, religion, philosophy, technology, customs and traditions, at least to some degree.

The first point to make is that many cultural activities under these headings do require a context of non-human nature directly in order to exist at all or to be fully intelligible. Within our own culture, for example, such widely popular activities as rambling, hill-walking, mountaineering, bird-watching and hunting need non-human nature (albeit, a nature which is often extensively made over by human hands) to be feasible.

Some scientific disciplines – biology, ecology, ornithology, zoology and botany, for example – take non-human nature as their direct object of study. It is clear from the very idea of ‘sites of special scientific interest’ that such disciplines have an interest in as wide a range of species and habitats continuing to exist as possible as objects of study, sources of data and arenas for the testing of theories. Arguably it is from many of the disciplines and sub-disciplines in those sciences which directly study non-human nature that we are obtaining insights into our own nature as embodied persons.

Many forms of art need non-human nature as a source of subject-matter and of design ideas, even in the practical design of artifacts. Obviously, this applies to landscape painting, but it is essential to the development of any art with a strong visual component, including architecture and dance. The endless variety of nature is essential here, as a continuing source of forms, designs and motifs.

The example of the art of painting may help to elucidate and support this claim. Can paintings be made entirely out of the experience of other paintings? It is certainly arguable that painters initially acquire the idea of what painting is from their encounters with existing paintings, encounters which they can then use as launching-pads for their own works.²⁴ But it is clear that the painter needs to return unflinchingly to non-human nature in order to replenish the well-springs

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of painting. Even the development of new schemata and new artistic vocabularies requires the painter to have encounters with non-human nature in order to provide the elements experienced under the schemata, and this is no less true of non-representational painting.

The point might be made in reply to such considerations that such aspects of our own culture as appear to need direct confrontation with non-human nature conceived as such are by no means universal – not everyone is interested in them. Also, there are plenty of ingredients in our culture – many games, for example – which do not appear to need the continued flourishing of non-human nature to provide them with meaning and purpose. So are not these points too weak to establish the necessity for human culture of the existence of non-human nature? Activities such as those mentioned may fade away without there being any significant diminution in the cultural possibilities left to us.

However, the existence of such cultural activities alerts us to a Rawlsian-style defence of non-human nature.²⁵ Activities such as those mentioned are clearly part of the self-understanding and flourishing of those who participate in them. None of us can know for certain that they might not become part of our own conditions for flourishing, even if they are not so at the moment. Also, such people as find them essential to their sense of self are not members of a separate group of human beings. They are interspersed among the general population, and are thus objects of caring feelings as children, spouses, parents and so on. Thus, even if these activities in our culture carry no meaning for a given individual, that individual may find himself caring for others for whom they are extremely important.

Thus, we all have an interest in maintaining the non-human natural context within which such cultural activities are to be carried on. Rawlsian people in the Original Position would undoubtedly want to preserve as varied a natural context as possible to permit the possibility of engaging in such meaning-conferring activities, for themselves or for those for whom they care.

More generally, many complete forms of life, such as those centred on hunting and fishing, need the specific contexts and opportunities provided by non-human nature in order to exist. The customs, traditions, art-forms, social arrangements and religious beliefs associated with such lifestyles depend, therefore, derivatively on such a context. Across the world, the spread of western cultural forms, the degradation of the natural environment, and the sheer increase in human numbers are attacking the underpinning in non-human nature of such diverse ‘experiments in living’. However, it might be claimed that no human cultural form *has* to exist to secure human well-being and that diminution in the range of cultural forms is not necessarily a problem. For after all, people are adaptable, and within a generation or so the grandchildren of fisherfolk can happily exist as urban sophisticates.²⁶

Why, then, should there be as wide a variety of human cultures as possible, including those directly dependent on specific contexts of non-human nature? Two reasons may be given. The first is that the variety is needed in order to allow

the possibility of exploring all the ways in which it is possible to be human. Even if some such experiments in living have their pernicious aspects, they add to the sum total of our self-knowledge, and may contain redeeming aspects for human culture which would be otherwise unobtainable – for example, consider the way in which blues and jazz emerged out of the slave experience in the USA.

The obverse of this point is that no single cultural formation can be entirely adequate to all the sides of our human personality. This is, of course, a central liberal theme, but one which can be turned to account by Green theorists concerned to defend the integrity and variety of non-human nature.

The second reason is that any single culture which does not periodically, or continuously, replenish itself by the second process noted above – namely, encounter with other cultures – runs the serious risk of becoming ‘played out’. The possibilities of purely internal development are probably limited. A culture which does not receive jolts from either direct contact with non-human nature, or from contact with other cultures faces the strong possibility of decay. A single, homogeneous world culture which we may be in the process of creating, would, on this view, be a disaster for human cultural development as a whole. Hence, we need to sustain as many diverse experiments in living as this tiny planet will allow, including those which require healthy non-human natural environments within which alone they can develop.

In a nutshell, then, the person-centric argument for the maximum diversity of non-human nature is that it is needed for the maximum diversity of human culture. The latter in turn is essential to the continued health of human cultural development.

It has, of course, long been a liberal theme that only within an economically-dynamic capitalist system is human diversity properly catered for. The trouble with this view of human diversity is that it is conceived of too individualistically. Individual flourishing only occurs within cultural formations. Diversity of modes of flourishing, therefore, requires diversity of cultures and that in turn, as we have seen, needs diversity of non-human nature within which experiments in living can take place. On this view a single, homogeneous technosphere, of the kind which green theorists fear we are setting in train, is an impoverished environment for persons, however materially well-off they may be.

There is, however, a point critical of ecologism which emerges from these arguments for the diversity of environments within non-human nature and the diversity of cultures which they underpin. Ecologism, it may be claimed, seems itself to be aiming for a single, stable ecologically-defensible cultural formation. Does not ecologism, like all totalising ideologies, foreclose on certain possibilities of human cultural development? Cannot the first of the arguments given above be turned round against ecologism, so as to argue for the possibility of, for example, patterns of urban organisation within which very *unecological* modes of life may be sustained (for, at least some of our loved ones may find these to be terribly important for their self-understanding)?

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Clearly, what is needed at this stage by the proponent of the personcentric argument for respecting the variety of the world of non-human nature is a principle to deal with this objection. This principle will require that the maximum variety of human cultures is to be allowed compatible with the preservation of that diversity of non-human nature which is needed to underpin cultures. That is, any culture which requires the eradication of the variety of nature is to be ruled out.

Clearly, some cultures permitted under this principle will have features which are morally objectionable on other grounds. However, the above principle at least allows the possibility of experiments in living which require a specific context of non-human nature within which to operate, even if not all such experiments may be ones in which it would be in the moral interest of human beings to persist. To put the point in another way, the person-centric argument for the variety of human cultures does not preclude moral criticism, and attempted termination, of some of the experiments in living which natural variety makes possible.

Thus, human persons would do well to maintain non-human nature in as rich and varied a form as possible, so as to provide the largest set of possibilities for contexts within which human culture can find its significance and resources. Since human culture as it has recently been developing has been extensively destroying non-person nature, human persons need to learn to restrain their cultural acts so as not to cut off the branch on which they are sitting. Human culture must limit itself so as to preserve itself, for only then can human persons guarantee their continued flourishing as persons.

We should, then, endorse personcentrism, and demonstrate that the existence of a flourishing non-personal world is a necessary condition of the flourishing of persons. If human persons can be persuaded of that, then their willingness to undertake the strenuous measures to preserve and protect that non-personal world ought to be markedly increased.²⁷

NOTES

¹ See, for example, Nagel, 1991, 4-5:

The impersonal standpoint in each of us produces ... a powerful demand for universal impartiality and equality, while the personal standpoint gives rise to individualistic motives and requirements which present obstacles to the pursuit and realisation of such ideals...

My claim is that the problem of designing institutions that do justice to the equal importance of all persons, without making unacceptable demands on individuals, has not been solved – and that this is so is partly because for our world the problem of the right relation between the personal and impersonal standpoints has not been solved.

The problem identified by Nagel here is supposed by him to arise with respect to traditional political theories, but it plainly arises also for ecocentrism.

²John O'Neill (1993: 159) offers an Aristotelian/Marxist argument to connect individual human wellbeing and our capacity to appreciate disinterestedly the intrinsic value of the natural world (as in scientific study of it, for example). The latter is claimed, correctly I think, to be our characteristically human capacity and thus in exercising it we are at our most fully and satisfyingly human.

The argument, however, is open to the objection that, as Nagel has claimed, our ability to ascend to the level at which we can view the world from the impersonal standpoint of morality and science is, for most of us, a fitful and fragile business. The arguments developed later in this paper could be seen as an attempt to connect the appreciation of the intrinsic value of non-human nature with individual human well-being in a more robust way, via the conception of oneself as embedded in a culture. They are, therefore, intended as complementary to the Aristotelian/Marxist positions.

³Naess, 1989.

⁴Goodin, 1992.

⁵Goodin, 1992: 44.

⁶Eckersley, 1992, chapter 3.

⁷Eckersley, 1992, 49.

⁸Eckersley, 1992, 63-71.

⁹As one of the referees for this article noted, Eckersley is herself 'highly critical of the proposition that women are more "in tune" than men are with natural processes'.

¹⁰Eckersley, 1992: 54.

¹¹Eckersley, 1992: 56.

¹²Eckersley, 1992: 60-61.

¹³This point is attributed to Fox, 1990: 172.

¹⁴Kant, 1948: 91.

¹⁵This, at least, is my understanding of what Kant is saying in a notoriously difficult, though penetrating, discussion.

¹⁶It has been argued by, for example, Regan (1988) that at least some non-human animals may be devoid of rationality, and thus autonomy, in the Kantian sense and yet still be worthy of moral consideration. He argues that those animals which are 'subjects of a life' possess rights of the same sort and to the same degree as do human beings. The concept of 'preference autonomy' applies to such creatures. Whatever the merits of this case, it is clear, as Regan himself recognises, that it extends the scope of human moral concern to only a relatively few members of the non-human realm. It also rests upon a concept of a 'subject of a life' whose meaning and moral weight are likely to be highly controversial. Many may find it persuasive, but it would be preferable if a concept of autonomy could be found which is applicable to non-humans and which did not lend itself to being morally trumped by the Kantian concept of autonomy, involving rationality, which applies only to human beings (as far as we know).

¹⁷Eckersley, 1992: 61-63.

¹⁸Eckersley, 1992: 54.

¹⁹I am here endorsing the general immanentist position in moral and political debate, espoused, for example, by Walzer, 1983, xiv.

²⁰Different philosophers have stressed some of these elements more than others. Self-interest and means-end rationality (points (i) and (ii)) were of particular importance to Hobbes, and he gave a very specific account of how (v) is possible and why it is necessary; self-consciousness and the differentiation of oneself from others were of great concern to Kant; (v) was given a non-individualistic basis in Rousseau, a theme developed by Hegel and Marx and taken further in more recent socialist and conservative thinking.

ECOCENTRISM AND PERSONS

²¹ This is a theme at least as old as Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* and has been the focus of much of the discussion amongst recent communitarian theorists.

²² The allusion here is, of course, to Kant's attempt to establish what is necessary for there to be the possibility of experience. Here I try to establish what is necessary for there to be the possibility of culture.

²³ These claims may gain plausibility from the arguments put forward by P.F. Strawson to establish the logically primitive nature of the concept of a person, in which a person is essentially conceived of as an entity to which both mental and physical attributes are to be ascribed. See Strawson, 1959.

²⁴ This is the theme of Sir Ernst Gombrich's account of the history of western visual art in terms of 'schema-and-correction', presented in Gombrich, 1977.

²⁵ Rawls, 1972, ch. 3.

²⁶ Ted Benton has considered the claim that habitat protection, while it may be necessary to preserve the well-being of non-human animals, is not important in the human case because the direct relations of causal dependency which link habitat conditions, patterns of social life and individual well-being in the case of non-human animals simply do not apply to humans (Benton, 1993, 174).

He replies that human adaptability is neither limitless nor devoid of definite causal conditions, even though we cannot say in advance of an analysis of the mode of life, especially the material culture, of a human community, what those conditions will be (p. 174). Further on he makes a claim for the idea of an environmental right to preserve the 'ecological integrity of a sufficient geographical terrain for the living of that social life' (p.175). These arguments are complementary to my own, which might be regarded as furnishing reasons why even people who are not themselves members of a community whose culture is under threat may view such a threat as being directed towards them too.

²⁷ I would like to acknowledge the very helpful comments made on an earlier draft of this article by two anonymous referees. Any faults which remain are, of course, entirely my responsibility.

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