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# Worldliness and Respect for Nature: an Ecological Application of Hannah Arendt's Conception of Culture

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**ABSTRACT:** Arendt's conception of culture could supersede claims that nature's intrinsic value or human interests best ground environmental ethics. Fusing ancient Greek notions of non-instrumental value and Roman concerns for cultivating and preserving worldly surroundings, culture supplies an ethic for the treatment of nonhuman things. Unlike a system of philosophical propositions, an Arendtian ecology could only arise in public deliberation, since culture's qualitative judgements are intrinsically linked to processes of political persuasion.

**KEYWORDS:** Arendt, ecology, culture, politics, judgement

Hannah Arendt's 1960 essay, 'The Crisis in Culture', offers, I believe, some of the most powerful potential contributions to Green theory that are available in twentieth century political thought. At the centre of environmental ethics are debates over whether mankind must 'respect' nature because it harbours 'intrinsic values' or whether human interests alone drive Green agendas. Arendt gets at this issue in an original and highly revealing way: by digging beneath it. She unearths the relationship between human interests, nature, and culture that is at the very root of 'intrinsic value' as a concept. Arendt's interpretation of culture, I will argue, makes more sense of what environmental ethicists call 'respect for nature' than they do themselves. She helps us see that what is at stake in Green political theory is our ability to make culturally sophisticated judgements – where 'culture' implies an attitude of preservation and nurturance with regard to nonhuman things. With an inquiry into the nature of public deliberation, 'The Crisis of Culture' shows why respect for the world, appreciation for the qualitative dimensions of human life, and political activity are closely intertwined.

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## I. CAN WE RESPECT NATURE? A PUZZLE IN GREEN POLITICAL THEORY

Perhaps no claim is more common among environmental ethicists than that some aspects of nature have ‘intrinsic value’.<sup>1</sup> Deep ecologist Arne Naess gave this claim its classic expression. ‘The well-being of non-human life on Earth has value in itself’, he contended. ‘This value is independent of any instrumental usefulness for limited human purposes.’<sup>2</sup> Intrinsic value contrasts to instrumental value: something has intrinsic value when it is an end in itself, not a provisional link in a chain of goods that are only ‘good for’ some other end. Traditionally, philosophers have proposed human beings (or some essential aspect of them, e.g. reason) as the prime example of something with intrinsic value. Most famously, Kant argued that the very concept of morality presupposed the existence of something ‘which in itself had absolute worth’ and he concluded that ‘man, and in general, every rational being exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will’. Beings that are ends in themselves deserve to have their ends respected. Disrespect occurs whenever one will robs another of its potential to be self-determining.

If nonhuman things are self-determining, then they too must be treated as having inherent worth. Paul Taylor argues, for example, that plants and animals, like human beings, have a condition of wellbeing peculiar to their species. We can speak meaningfully of a plant’s health, of its structural completeness, of its opportunity to deploy all of the functions of which it is capable. Biologists and ecologists can discover the conditions under which various plants and animals flourish. Thus, argues Taylor, ‘it is possible for us imaginatively to look at the world from their standpoint, to make judgments about what would be a good thing or bad thing to happen to them, and to treat them in such a way as to help or hinder them in their struggle to survive’.<sup>3</sup> In a similar vein, Lawrence Johnson invites us to appreciate a ‘morally deep world’ – one in which we ‘develop an awareness of other beings, and of their interests, together with an attitude of respect and consideration for their interests’.<sup>4</sup> Johnson goes beyond Taylor in arguing that moral considerability inheres not only in individual organisms, but also in ‘holistic entities’ like species and ecosystems. In either case, respect for nature means protecting and preserving self-sustaining, nonhuman entities by treating them as ends in themselves, acting for the sake of their good. From a human perspective, the intrinsic value of natural things generates duties toward them. We must fulfil these duties for nature’s sake – not for the sake of any human interest.

Luc Ferry contends that this whole line of argument is misdirected. Even if natural things have interests, interests are not really what constitutes moral value. Following Kant and Rousseau, Ferry maintains that what makes human beings into moral beings is their ability to use their liberty to check their egoism; truly moral decisions are made *disinterestedly*. No other organism has the value-

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conferring quality of autonomy. For human beings, autonomy means being able to create new values and to devise impartial rules of conduct. Our 'unnatural' autonomy by no means implies, however, that we can only dominate nature. Ferry argues that we can be moved to protect parts of nature that we find beautiful or impressively purposive. We do so for reasons compatible with the uniqueness of mankind's intrinsic value: because we value natural beings 'as if' they were human. They cause us to admire qualities similar to those we prize already in human creations. Having thus defended an environmentalism that does not merely instrumentalise nature, Ferry claims to preach a humanism that is 'concerned to respect the diversity of orders of reality'.<sup>5</sup>

There is something mysterious in the idea of 'respect' on both sides of this debate. In the Kantian tradition that Ferry favours, we 'respect' human beings because they are rational. They are autonomous beings, capable of establishing their own purposes; they are moral beings, capable of relating to others according to general principles. To impose ends upon others is to violate what distinguishes them as autonomous beings. That is why respect forbids coercion. But 'respect' cannot mean the same thing when Ferry calls us to 'respect the diversity of orders of the real'. The nonhuman things that we are to respect – dandelions and banana slugs and blue whales and all the other inhabitants of the biosphere – do not order their lives according to values they have *chosen and universalised*. Human use of them does not disrespect them in the Kantian sense, because they are not autonomous in the way that demands respect. Even when Ferry allows us to value nature for non-instrumental reasons, it is striking how far his attitude is from respect. To protect a species because we find it beautiful or playful is to make its survival depend on the vagaries of our emotional response to it. We will save the whales and pandas, but be indifferent to less loveable species. What distinguishes respect as a moral attitude toward human beings, in contrast, is that it must not be arbitrary in that way. Suppose someone claimed to 'respect' people but in fact gave respectful treatment only to those whom he found useful, attractive or amusing. The others, he killed and ate when it suited him. Wouldn't we have to say that he seriously misunderstood what it means to respect others?

The Green mandate to respect nature, however, is scarcely more comprehensible. Arguments that any inhabitant of the biosphere is respectable in virtue of its ability to flourish on its own terms lead almost inexorably to 'biospherical egalitarianism' – as Arne Naess understood.<sup>6</sup> For the argument has to be, *pace* the Kantian tradition, that reason is not the quality that makes a being respectable. According to Taylor, the differentia that, supposedly, give human beings special moral worth all beg the question of what features truly are morally worthy. In the absence of any non-question-begging criteria for moral distinction we must conclude that 'animals and plants have a degree... of inherent worth equal to that of humans'.<sup>7</sup> Johnson maintains that moral considerability inheres not in reason but in interests. Any living system which can be said to have 'integrated effective functioning of [its] self as a whole' carries some moral considerability.<sup>8</sup> Since

this is true of species and ecosystems as well as of organisms, we must to some degree respect them all.

The obvious problem with this way of conceiving respect is that it seems inconsistent with the very existence of human life. In order to feed and shelter ourselves we virtually have to kill some plants and animals. Acknowledging their inherent worth seems to condemn mankind. Not surprisingly, much ink has been spilt in efforts to explain why certain human activities that entail taking nonhuman life are, nevertheless, consistent with respect for nature. Robyn Eckersley claims that 'humans are just as entitled to live and blossom as any other species, and this inevitably necessitates some killing of... and interference with, the lives and habitats of other species'.<sup>9</sup> Turn about is fair play: nature's creatures kill each other to meet their needs. Human beings may do likewise. All species are then living equally according to the principle that any species may kill others if it is necessary for them to flourish in their own way. Taylor refines this idea with a series of priority rules for adjudicating cases of conflicting moral claims. The most important of these is the principle of self-defence. 'The principle of self-defence permits actions that are absolutely required for maintaining the very existence of moral agents....'<sup>10</sup> Human beings are justified in taking the lives of other species, provided that they do so only to fulfil their 'basic' interests. Against pure biospheric egalitarianism, Johnson proposes that we should 'give *due* respect to all the interests of all beings that have interests, in proportion to their interests'.<sup>11</sup> Different life systems all have morally considerable interests, although some lives count for more than others. It is not, however, the presence of some presumptively superior capacity like reason that makes certain entities more valuable. Johnson proportions moral consideration to factors like 'complexity, diversity, balance, organic unity or integrity' that give life-based beings their identities.<sup>12</sup> Sacrifices of less 'self-identical' entities to more self-identical ones can, under various circumstances, be morally permissible.

There is something strained in all of these arguments. It is hard to shake the suspicion that these ethicists end up smuggling human superiority back into their theories. Taylor allows, for example, the seemingly non-basic interest of protecting a society's culture to justify overriding the interests of nonhuman life; he does not really believe that humans and animals have reciprocal obligations to sacrifice themselves for each other.<sup>13</sup> Johnson argues that different entities have different intrinsic capacities, which in turn give them different interests worthy of different degrees of respect. Respecting human beings requires heeding more interests than are pursued by an amoeba or a dandelion. But it is by no means clear that every organism's interest in *life itself* – its disposition to continue living – is any less than that of human beings. Just because one entity has a larger number of interests or ones that are more complex is no reason to favour its demands over those of simpler beings. We do not generally say that people who integrate more interests into their lives are entitled to pursue their interests at the expense of people who invest themselves in fewer activities. If Johnson permits such logic with regard to relations between human and nonhuman

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things, there must be some morally relevant, *qualitative* distinction between the two orders.

What is driving nature-respecting theorists to make moral claims that are so often extensionally unattractive, sometimes downright contradictory? The strains in their theories stem, I think, from a strategy of modelling moral relations between human beings and nature on ethical arguments that have been elaborated for centuries with an eye to regulating relations between human beings (and God). Ethicists like Naess, Taylor and Johnson maintain that natural things have inherent worth because some of the same qualities that generate duties toward human beings (e.g., life, interests) inhere also in them. Yet they cannot plausibly deny that the ethical questions raised by killing nonhuman things are fundamentally different from those pertaining to humans. Their notions of ‘respecting’ nature suffer from this strategy. Whatever else ‘respecting’ other people might require of us, it certainly *forbids* routinely choosing to end their lives in order to suit our purposes. That it is wrong to kill innocent human beings is perhaps our most firmly settled moral intuition. The concept of ‘respect for nature’ is morally perplexing because, whatever it might mean, at a minimum it must *allow* for human beings *routinely* to kill the objects of their ‘respect’.

Responding that all living things have a right to do what is necessary for their own survival simply does not put the issue to rest. Ethical arguments allowing for one human being to kill another almost always refer to extreme situations (e.g., the likelihood of imminent murder, war, survival on a lifeboat) or to absence of intention, whereas environmental ethicists acknowledge that human beings will have to kill (at least) plant-life every day, intentionally, in quite untraumatic circumstances. Moreover, ethical allowances for killing human beings usually refer to a moral situation structured by notions of guilt and innocence. Deliberately to kill an *innocent* human being is the height of disrespect. Yet notions of guilt and innocence cannot apply to beings that are incapable of governing their behaviour by principles. What makes so many accounts of respecting nature either implausible or inconsistent is that they try to model an ethic governing relations between human and nonhuman things on ethical systems that have traditionally applied only to interpersonal relations. In those systems, the notion of respect is so closely tied to prohibitions against taking innocent human lives that no persuasive environmental ethics can be built on them.

Is there an alternative? Is there any precedent for an ethics that governs relations between the human and the nonhuman world? an ethics that acknowledges intrinsic values but is not polarised at the start by categorical prohibitions against killing innocents? an ethic that allows for human creativity and meeting material needs without ending by instrumentalising nature? Hannah Arendt not only suggests that such an ethic is conceivable; she recovers it from a concept of culture that is over two millennia old. Her reasons for undertaking such philosophical excavations are to be found in her general critique of modern societies.

## II. ARENDT ON CULTURE: NATURE, CARE, AND INHERENT WORTH

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt argues that the Western philosophical tradition valued contemplation so much that it obscured important distinctions within a life devoted to activity. Such a life consists of three essentially different human pursuits. ‘Labor is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body’, Arendt tells us.<sup>14</sup> By labour she meant man’s activity to support the material conditions of life: to produce food and clothing, set aside such goods for future needs, to procreate. Just so that we may live, we must, as material beings, regularly replenish ourselves and struggle against the decay of the materials on which we depend. Consumption, therefore, is an inevitable part of the life process. But only part. Arendt maintains that work and action comprise the other two distinct parts of the active life. Work takes natural materials and transforms them into the fabricated objects that furnish the human world. Action, in Arendt’s sense, consists in our capacity – especially our political capacity – for innovating, for engaging in end-constitutive collective deliberations, for altering states of affairs in the world. While all three activities are essential to human life, Arendt places action at the summit of human capabilities.<sup>15</sup>

What is troubling about modern societies, Arendt argues, is that they have made labour and consumption our paramount activities. This distorts the meaning of the other two parts of the active life. Under modern conditions, work does not produce a world of permanent artifacts around us. Instead people work like labourers: they produce in order to earn a salary that will permit them to enjoy the short-lived goods of a consumer society. In a labouring society, politics too primarily serves the life process. States measure their success in terms of economic growth. In a labouring society, consumption reigns. Arendt’s worry that ‘eventually no object of the world will be safe from consumption and annihilation through consumption’ (HC 115) links her outlook and that of political ecologists who worry that ‘productivist’ societies respect no limits as they devour everything in their surroundings.<sup>16</sup>

One distinction that Arendt makes – that between nature and world – seems, however, to make her thought diverge from the concerns of political ecology. As one interpreter explains: “‘The World’ as a category is set directly in opposition to nature. When Hannah Arendt talks about the world, she does not mean the physical world; ...the world is precisely what separates and shields man from nature. It is the human artifice of man-made objects and institutions that provides human beings with a permanent home.’<sup>17</sup> So when Arendt worries about the destructive effects of consumption, her concern is for the ‘object[s] of the world’, not ‘nature’. Nonetheless, it is precisely in her account of caring for ‘the world’ that an ethic regarding nonhuman things, including natural ones, is to be found.<sup>18</sup>

For Arendt, ‘nature’ consists of ‘processes that ... come into being without the help of man, and those things are natural which are not “made” but grow by themselves into whatever they become’. Its model is ‘the seed [that] contains

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and, in a certain sense, already *is* the tree' (HC 131). In contrast, the 'world' consists of things that people have designed and fabricated: buildings and furniture, roads and ports, art objects and books. We construct a world by removing objects from natural cycles and giving them permanence and beauty. Arendt's humble model for a worldly object is a table. Its wood is a natural product, but one whose destiny is neither further growth nor decay. Craftsmen shape it into an object that takes its place among people.

Worldly objects, Arendt insists, are important not merely for their utility, but also for their impact on individual and cultural identity. First, they set communities apart from nature in the sense that they allow human settlements to resist natural cycles of growth and decay. Those who build homes, for example, have a shelter allowing them to stay in an area regardless of the change of seasons. Using agricultural instruments enables people to clear a plot of ground and make it suitable for cultivation year after year. Arendt argues that if human beings are to appear as individuals and not be assimilated to their cyclical, biological functions, their activities need to appear against a backdrop of durable fabrications. Second, worldly objects relate people, regularising their place in the world. The home becomes an address, the field a place for common labour; the table a site where individuals congregate for discussion and ritual. Third, the objects themselves become matter for appraisal among those brought into relation by them. Ideas like beauty, elegance, functionality, and hospitality develop in relation to worldly structures. For objects to acquire such a worldly significance, however, a special condition must be fulfilled. 'This earthly home becomes a world in the proper sense of the word', she writes, 'only when the totality of fabricated things is so organised that it can resist the consuming life process of the people dwelling in it, and thus outlast them'.<sup>19</sup> Worldliness requires permanence.

'The Crisis in Culture' that so disturbed Arendt is a crisis of impermanence. It arises because 'a consumer's society cannot possibly know how to take care of the world...[;] its central attitude toward all objects, the attitude of consumption, spells ruin to everything it touches' (BPF 211). Consumption ruins the world in two ways. First, it literally destroys physical goods so that more may be produced so that still more may be consumed. In a consumer society, things exist for ever shorter periods before they are replaced or thrown out. Second, even where things like paintings or books are not literally destroyed, society tends to diminish their significance by treating them as items for consumption. Digested or bawlderised, they become entertainment: things to 'while away the time', Arendt says, 'left over after labor and sleep have received their due' (BPF 205). As a result, 'society' leaves its inhabitants with an unsatisfying, 'worldless' existence. Thus, for Arendt, having a 'world' means treating the objects around us in such a way that they endure and remain treasured, stimulating a sense of discernment and taste among those who live with them. Only then can they continue to perform their essential role of transmitting meaning in the community. Only then can they constitute a culture.



Arendt's inquiry into the original meaning of culture is what ties her ideas to Green arguments about respecting nature. 'Culture', she writes, 'is Roman in origin'.

The word 'culture' derives from *colere* – to cultivate, to dwell, to take care, to tend and preserve – and it relates primarily to the intercourse of man with nature in the sense of cultivating and tending nature until it becomes fit for human habitation. As such it indicates an attitude of loving care and stands in sharp contrast to all efforts to subject nature to the domination of man (BPF 211-212).

This passage should startle both political ecologists and some of Arendt's interpreters. Her interpreters should discover that, here, the world is not 'set directly in opposition to nature'. Nature helps constitute culture. Political ecologists will discover that their familiar insistence on not dominating nature originates neither in admiration for a pristine environment nor in the perception of morally relevant qualities that human beings share with other creatures. Our concept of 'respect' for nonhuman things is a legacy of Greek and Roman 'culture'.

'It was in the midst of a primarily agricultural people [the Romans] that the concept of culture first appeared' (BPF 212). As dwellers on the land, the Romans depended on crops for their nourishment. They were there for the duration; they cherished nature's capacity to replenish itself. Raising crops or tending animals, they had to learn about the species' own needs so that they could serve them. A sense of concern for the flourishing of living things – part of what Taylor's 'respect for nature' aims at – took form in this sort of encounter with nature. Yet Arendt does not say that the Romans developed this concern by seeing natural things as possessing the *same qualities* that engender respect for human beings. They looked at nature as something that must be transformed 'until it becomes fit for human habitation'. No appeal to respect nature will ever change the fact that a recognisably human life requires clearing some land of vegetation, reworking naturally given materials into homes and tools, selecting plant and animal species that will feed us. Nonetheless, it is possible to put a very special sort of human valuation on nature. It is possible, the Romans first understood, to adopt an attitude in relation to it that aims to advance the good of its nonhuman inhabitants.

Roman 'culture' alone, however, cannot fully explain a notion of respect for nonhuman things. First of all, even if cultivation is not pure domination of nature, even if includes some elements of care for the good of other species, the cultivator's care remains ultimately instrumental. Arendt notes wryly that 'it is hardly the mentality of gardeners which produces art'. Gardeners, after all, usually end up making dinner out of what they have so carefully tended, not simply admiring it as an autonomous centre of self-realizing life. Respect implies more than an appreciation of another thing's wellbeing. It implies also a commitment not to use that thing only as a means to one's own ends. Second, the Romans' concept of culture was so rooted in cultivation that they saw even art

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as something that was ‘supposed to rise as naturally as the countryside’ (BPF 212). Prior to the infusion of Greek culture, the Romans lacked the aesthetic sense to appreciate the great diversity of qualities that might inhere in things and make them worthy of respect. So the interplay of Greek and Roman ideas is crucial to the development of ‘culture’.

That judgements of quality not be reduced to calculations of utility, was essential to the Greek notion of civilisation. For the utilitarian mentality – regarding things as valuable only to the extent that they are ‘good for’ something else – denies things their ‘inherent validity’. The utilitarian mentality is perfectly appropriate, Arendt says, in the process of fabrication. Those who construct things need to choose suitable materials and tools to achieve their ends. But the Greeks sensed that if the standard of utility prevails in judging works *after* things take their place in the world, it causes them to ‘lose their intrinsic, independent worth, and finally degenerate into mere means’ (BPF 214-216). One who considers a table ‘good’ only to the extent that it is ‘good for’ writing on perceives no inherent worth in the table itself. Then, if writing is good only because it is good for keeping accounts, writing too has no inherent worth. Arendt’s point is that the Greeks perceived that any notion of inherent worth requires a sense of an ultimate good, something distinct from utility. When we think that to be cultured is to be refined or discriminating, to be able to appreciate things for the richness of qualities they display, not for their practical benefits, we too draw on the Greek heritage.

It is a fact of more than historical interest that so much of Greek civilisation only got passed on to posterity because the Romans applied their ‘cultivating’ interest to it. The Romans went beyond preserving Greek art. Arendt credits them with *combining* the caring attitude they had developed in relation to nature to the Greeks’ nuanced sense of taste and regard for beautiful things. That is why we use the term ‘culture’ in reference to areas that are obviously not agricultural: theatre, architecture, and poetry. The Romans inherited such arts from the Greeks; they then made it their mission to learn ‘how to take care of and how to preserve’ this legacy (BPF 212). So ‘culture’, as Arendt describes it, is not merely the addition of two stances toward the world: cultivating and preserving on the one hand, applying judgements of quality on the other. The Romans fashioned a special ethic for treating nonhuman things by *fusing* these two stances.

This fusion transforms both of its constituents. The idea of cultivation is aestheticised, or one might say, humanised by joining it to inherent worth. This is what permits Roman cultivation to transcend the consuming attitude toward nonhuman things that lingers in ‘the gardener’s’ nurturing ethic. By bringing the ethic of cultivation into closer contact with human creations, the Romans’ preservationist inclinations take on immeasurably greater valuational richness. Not merely life, but qualities like beauty, grandeur, integrity became the objects of human caretaking. Culture becomes a matter of nurturing things because one sees intriguing, non-instrumental qualities in them. The aesthetic idea of inher-

ent worth, on the other hand, is stabilised by being joined to the notion of cultivating nature. However discriminating they might have been in evaluating their artistic creations, the Greeks had little sense of ‘how to take care of and how to preserve’ them (BPF 212). For them, agriculture provided no model for revering nonhuman things. It was a violent art through which men tore necessities out of the inexhaustible earth (BPF 213). Thus they never managed to connect their worldly interests with the cultivator’s care for nourishing, preserving, and restoring things. It took the Roman sense of cultivation to bring Greek aestheticism down to earth.

This cultural attitude captures what is meant by ‘respect’ for nature’s inherent worth without generating the moral conundrums of biospherical egalitarianism. It describes an ethic of nurturing things not because they serve our utilitarian interests, but because they embody qualities that enrich our existence. To be cultured, in Arendt’s sense, is to bring to one’s surroundings a desire to enhance qualities of beauty, ‘permanence, stability and durability’ (HC 110, 152). The striking similarity of these values to those of Aldo Leopold’s land ethic, which aims to ‘preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community’ reinforces the conviction that ‘respect for nature’ arose not from seeing in nature the same moral qualities that we look for in human beings, but rather from seeing in it qualities like those that define our *world*.<sup>20</sup>

This conviction grows even stronger when we observe that Lawrence Johnson’s prescription for a morally deep world has a similarly cultural accent. Johnson constructs an ethics that, by grounding moral value in interests, can apply to human and nonhuman entities alike. When it comes to deciding what to preserve and what to destroy in the two orders, however, his proposed criteria of self-identity raise very different moral reactions. It would be an unsettling ethic indeed that proportioned different *persons*’ life chances to their different levels of ‘complexity, diversity, balance, organic unity, or integrity’. But now suppose that there is a set of *worldly* objects – paintings, let us say – in a community periodically threatened by floods. The citizens realise that in emergencies, only some paintings can be saved and so they debate the priorities to be attached to different ones. Wouldn’t Johnson’s criteria seem quite appropriate in such a debate? Wouldn’t a cultured community have to consider seriously arguments from ‘complexity’, thus saving a work with numerous levels of meaning before saving a simplistically didactic one? from ‘unity’, preferring one in which the artist integrated all her themes to one that displayed indecision? from ‘integrity’, thus ranking a completed work over a fragmentary one? No doubt other criteria should be added. Qualities like beauty, greatness, purity, even strangeness come to mind. But the point is: from the history of human efforts to care for their culturally-significant surroundings, we have available to our deliberations a host of non-instrumental, value-defining properties that are nonetheless distinct from the properties that matter most when *human lives* are at stake.

Arendt’s perspective makes for a consistent understanding of respect for nature because this ethic is free from primary prohibitions against killing.

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Because of its origins in experiences of agriculture and fabrication, an attitude of care for the world has always required accepting that mankind participates in earth's cycles of birth and death, growth, consumption and decay. It accepts, too, the violence inherent in fabricating a world, since getting material for construction means 'either killing a life process... or interrupting one of nature's slower processes...' (HC 122). Nonetheless, when the cultivator's concern for a living thing's ability to flourish fuses with the civiliser's admiration of non-instrumental qualities in things, the destructive aspects of both attitudes are attenuated. In Arendt's perspective, we would say that natural things have 'intrinsic validity' because world-like qualities (e.g., stability, beauty) inhere in them. Concern to maintain a much-valued world directs us toward tending, preserving, and caring for things having those qualities. We can bring the same attention to preserving natural entities as culturally-motivated communities do to protect their treasured works of art: making substantial, well-planned efforts to save them from floodwaters; never destroying them merely to satisfy some passing desire; but regretfully accepting their loss when destruction is unavoidable.

### III. QUALITATIVE JUDGEMENT AND PUBLIC FREEDOM

Was Luc Ferry then right after all? Is respecting nature simply a combination of two attitudes: one valuing nature instrumentally for its ability to serve human needs, the other valuing it aesthetically for its resemblance to things we have created? Not at all – and for reasons of greatest significance to *political* ecology. Ferry has no defence against charges that his preferences for saving 'beautiful' or purposive creatures are purely arbitrary. As he proposes them, those qualities are nothing more than the perceptions of an individual consciousness. He has no account of how respect-inspiring properties might come to be so widely perceived that all members of a community feel a duty to preserve them.

What secures the significance of 'The Crisis of Culture' for Green theory is a finale that ties the cultural notion of 'intrinsic value' to *political* processes that transcend arbitrariness.

According to Robert Goodin, Green political theory is distinguished by its aspiration to 'speak to issues of the *quality* of our lives'.<sup>21</sup> Qualitative judgement evaluates what is *worth* pursuing, not just whether a pursuit increases the quantity of some good we already seek – perhaps quite unwisely. To judge some matter qualitatively is to apply to it the broadest range of considerations that seem pertinent to its bringing human fulfilment. But aren't qualities like beauty and integrity too subjective to use in deciding how to tend and nurture nonhuman things?

Arendt contends that 'qualities' are not subjective in this way, because they are phenomena which, by their very nature, appear before a plurality of people. Commenting on Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, she explains:

...The thinking process which is active in judging ... finds itself... in an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement..... This enlarged way of thinking... cannot function in strict isolation or solitude; it needs the presence of others in whose place it must think, whose perspectives it must take into consideration.... (BPF 220)

Judgement does not mean merely positing my perceptions over against others. As an isolated individual I may have feelings about the qualities of things in my world. Yet where my view alone counts, there is nothing to stop me calling something beautiful today and rejecting it as tiresome tomorrow. In this case, beauty is indistinguishable from momentary pleasure; it does not exist as a quality of the *world*. My judgements are only fleeting, subjective impressions until they are thrown into discourse with others.

Political judgement for Arendt, like aesthetic judgement for Kant, necessarily implies an attempt to 'woo the consent of everyone else'.<sup>22</sup> Judgements are formed first by reviewing my conceptions through others' perspectives in the hope of arriving at a mutual agreement about what will appear in our world. Those perspectives will not merely validate my views. Saying that judgement implies 'anticipated communication' means that I do not, in my thought, purge the world of those vexing opinions that contradict my sensibility. I must expect that others shall bring all that distinguishes them as individuals to their assessments. Seeking judgement, I try out my views. I solicit others' agreement. I imagine seeking to persuade them that my decision is sound. That people discuss qualities from their diverse points of view (BPF 222), that they debate, seek to persuade each other and arrive at agreements about them is essential to the existence of qualities as qualities. Judgement gives qualities their intersubjective validity. In other words, world-constituting qualities are made respectably disinterested when they are tested in public discourse. Public deliberation solidifies them, bringing them out of the realm of arbitrary preferences and into the public realm. There, things that display those qualities can be treated with the respect that worldly things are due.

Once qualities are validated through public deliberation, it becomes possible to apply them in new ways. For qualitative judgement to do its work as a caretaker of the world, it is essential that people not restrict their debates to those things which originally provoked their interest. A community's conception of beauty may first arise, for instance, in relation to objects designed for religious ritual. Yet similar qualities of balanced form and integrity may eventually be perceived in objects once considered mundane: in the proportions of a building, in the fine craftsmanship of a well-made table. It is when judgements are *extended* in this way that they induce the community to care for enough of its surroundings to constitute an enduring 'world'.

I am suggesting that the ethic of 'respect for nature' results from a new extension whose possibility we have only recently come to perceive and that is still in the process of deliberative stabilisation. While Arendt applied her view of 'culture' only to man-made things, the fact that this concept originated in the

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cultivator's desire to make living things flourish suggests that there is nothing inherently problematic in extending its standards to biotic entities. The political implication of defending nature culturally is that our claims for 'respecting nature' should start by invoking standards that have for millennia been applied to nonhuman things, things whose presence gives communities their texture, variety, emotional vibrancy, continuity, and critical tension. Qualities like 'integrity, beauty and stability' inhere so deeply in our natural environment, both living and non-living, that they command a particular form of respect in their regard. Extending standards in this way expresses a *worldly* care: not a concern for another being's 'interest' or self-determination, but a desire to preserve what contributes most to the permanence and richness of the community's environment.

Why it is so important for environmentalists to make qualitative proposals in this 'cultural' way can be seen by comparing it with arguments that are not political in Arendt's sense. Reviewing the vast range of goals in Green programmes, Robert Goodin is disturbed by their eclecticism. He therefore sets out to bring more coherence to Green politics by identifying its 'core' theory of value, 'one cast in terms of the interests of nature itself'.<sup>23</sup> Goodin then proceeds to reconstruct Green politics by distinguishing between core agenda items and peripheral ones. He is particularly afraid that projects of radical democratisation and decentralisation might prevent the attainment of environmental objectives. That is why such proposals 'ought to be seen as subsidiary to the green theory of value'.<sup>24</sup>

Goodin judges the soundness of Green politics from a sternly philosophical perspective. This perspective disqualifies moral considerations if the philosopher, using imaginary scenarios, discovers their reasons to be 'merely contingent', not 'analytically necessary'.<sup>25</sup> The stringency of such argument is troubling enough when it rules out arguments found persuasive by many people. But it becomes truly alarming when, in addition, it is used to deflate claims for participatory democracy. For Goodin, 'participation... would not be an end in itself but instead *merely a means* to promote substantively better decisions'.<sup>26</sup> First, the philosopher sets himself up as the arbiter of 'true' Green values. Then he demotes the political processes through which people might articulate their own – possibly different – qualitative preferences.

Arendt's essay on 'The Crisis in Culture' is especially valuable in countering this sort of philosophical purism. It is not philosophical pondering that is most essential for promoting the sort of heightened quality-consciousness that Goodin desires. Quality-consciousness is a feature of culture that thrives under certain *political* conditions. 'Culture and politics... belong together', writes Arendt, 'because it is not knowledge or truth which is at stake, but rather judgment and decision, the judicious exchange of opinion about the sphere of public life and the common world, and the decision what manner of action is to be taken in it, as well as to how it is to look henceforth, what kinds of things are to appear in it' (BPF 223). Participation is not merely a *means* whose moral worth is

determined by its relation to a philosophically-sanctioned quality of life. Seeing an affinity with aesthetic judgement, Arendt maintains that qualitative political decisions must issue from deliberations among peers in a public realm because deliberation *constitutes* qualitative judgement. Philosophical purism short-circuits the very processes of public deliberation that might reinvigorate our interest in tending and cultivating nonhuman things.

Ecologists who lament the qualitative impoverishment of societies addicted to economic growth need to pay attention to Arendt's diagnosis of the ills of contemporary societies. Her thesis is that we have lost much of our ability to make qualitative discriminations because we are suffering from a syndrome of *worldlessness*. Arendt wrote of 'the crisis in culture' because she saw labouring, consuming societies using up the materials of the world. Those materials are what transmit quality-consciousness from one generation to another. So in consuming our world, we also destroy the very ethic of worldliness that supports our sense of discriminating taste and inherent worth. The crisis of culture is not just that a society devoted to consumption overindulges itself on scarce resources, like some greedy guest at a dinner party who empties the serving plate before it has gone all the way around the table. Such overindulgence is a fault that others will recognise and condemn. More appropriate would be the image of a barbarian banquet. Taking over a city whose culture they do not understand, these invaders chop up the dinner table to cast it into the fire, they break the dishes and throw away the knives and forks. After smearing the floor with discarded food, they wipe their chins with pages ripped from ancient volumes. Their vulgar banqueting ends everyone's chances of learning an ethic of 'loving care' from a world rich in morally and aesthetically satisfying options. Our crisis of worldlessness arises not directly in our relationship with nature, but mediately, in the relationship societies establish with their world.

Green hopes for a qualitatively superior world can only be fulfilled, as Arendt would say, through public freedom. Freedom as she defines it – the freedom of appearing in a public realm with one's peers, deliberating, and acting in concert with them – is internally related to the quality-consciousness that Greens favour. It is the political process of reviewing, generalising, debating and persuading that gives substance to any assertions that certain qualities deserve to be lovingly tended. Understanding this, ecologists would see their task as inspiring their fellow citizens to live up to Cicero's ideal of a humanist: one who 'knows how to take care and preserve and admire the things of the world...' (BPF 225).

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See John O'Neill, *Ecology, Policy and Politics: Human Well-Being and the Natural World* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 8-25; Robyn Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Toward an Ecocentric Approach* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 60-61.

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<sup>2</sup> Arne Naess, 'A Defense of the Deep Ecology Movement', *Environmental Ethics* 6(1984), p. 266.

<sup>3</sup> Paul W. Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence E. Johnson, *A Morally Deep World: An Essay on Moral Significance and Environmental Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 288.

<sup>5</sup> Luc Ferry, *Le Nouvel Ordre Écologique: L'arbre, l'animal, et l'homme* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1992), pp. 259-260, 121.

<sup>6</sup> Arne Naess, 'The shallow and the deep, long-range ecology movement. A summary', *Inquiry* 16(1973), p. 95.

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, p. 152.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, *A Morally Deep World*, p. 142.

<sup>9</sup> Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory*, p. 57.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, p. 265.

<sup>11</sup> Johnson, *A Morally Deep World*, p. 118.

<sup>12</sup> Johnson, *A Morally Deep World*, p. 56.

<sup>13</sup> See William C. French, 'Against Biospherical Egalitarianism', *Environmental Ethics* 17:1(Spring 1995), pp. 49-52.

<sup>14</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (New York: Doubleday Anchor books, 1958), p. 9. Henceforth, references to this book, HC, will occur in the text, in brackets.

<sup>15</sup> For a more extended account of these categories, see Kerry Whiteside, 'Hannah Arendt and Ecological Politics', *Environmental Ethics*, 16(Winter 1994), pp. 339-358. Arendt's distinction between action, on the one hand, and work and labour, on the other, owes something to Aristotle's discussion of praxis and poesis. Exploring the two philosophers' relationship, however would take us far beyond the bounds of the present essay, since Arendt's treatment of Aristotle is quite idiosyncratic and goes by way of Heidegger (with whom she also has a critical relation). See Dana R. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), esp. pp. 17-41, 211-240.

<sup>16</sup> David Macauley, 'Hannah Arendt on Earth Alienation: An Historical and Critical Perspective', *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 3:4 (December 1992), pp. 19-45; Pierre Alphonse, Pierre Bitoun, Yves Dupont, *L'équivoque écologique* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991), p. 178.

<sup>17</sup> Margaret Canovan, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (New York and London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1974), p. 81.

<sup>18</sup> As will become apparent, I also disagree with Canovan's more recent remarks, which have Arendt virtually equating nature with 'barbarism'. See Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 107-108. For an appreciation of how Arendt sees nature as an essential condition of a truly human life, see Kimberly F. Curtis, 'Hannah Arendt, Feminist Theorizing, and the Debate over New Reproductive Technologies', *Polity*, 28:2 (Winter 1995), esp. pp. 173-174.

<sup>19</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Press, 1961), p. 210. In the remainder of this article, page references to this book, BPF, will follow citations, in brackets. 'The Crisis in Culture' was originally published as 'Society and Culture' in *Daedalus*, LXXXII/2 (Spring 1960), pp. 278-287.

<sup>20</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, (New York: Ballantine Books 1970, orig. 1949), p. 262.

<sup>21</sup> Robert E. Goodin, *Green Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p. 56, emphasis added.



<sup>22</sup> BPF 222. For elaboration on this idea, see Ronald Beiner, 'Interpretive Essay', in Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Ronald Beiner, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 102-106.

<sup>23</sup> Goodin, *Green Political Theory*, pp. 8, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Goodin, *Green Political Theory*, p. 16.

<sup>25</sup> See Goodin's landscape restoration example, *Green Political Theory*, pp. 31-34.

<sup>26</sup> Goodin, *Green Political Theory*, p. 128, emphasis added.

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