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Environmental Philosophy

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Throughout the 1960s and 1970s huge environmental struggles were erupting throughout Australia. Spectacular campaigns were fought for the Great Barrier Reef, the Colong Caves in the Blue Mountains, Fraser Island and Lake Pedder. Meanwhile, along the eastern coast of the continent the native forests, threatened with wholesale wood-chipping by the Forestry Commission, were providing a training ground for young environmental activists. Two of these, Val and Richard Routley, happened also to be philosophers, headquartered at the Australian National University. Their participation in the fight for the forests brought to their attention a jumble of unexamined values, assumptions and allegiances on the part of conflicting parties, a political terrain of obfuscation, ideology and sentiment ripe for philosophical analysis. Sifting through this jumble, the Routleys recognised that the environmental problems that had by that time come starkly into public view were the upshot not merely of vested interests, incompetent administration and inappropriate technologies but also of underlying, barely conscious attitudes to the natural world that were built into the very foundations of Western thought. In a series of papers they circulated to colleagues at the Australian National University, they analysed these attitudes as the expression of *human chauvinism*, the groundless belief, amounting to nothing more than prejudice, that only human beings mattered, morally speaking; to the extent that anything else mattered at all, according to this attitude, it mattered only because it had some kind of utility or instrumental value for us. This assumption, which came to be known more widely as the assumption of *anthropocentrism* or human-centredness, was a premise, they argued, not only of the forestry industry, with its narrow-minded reduction of ancient forest to timber resource, but of the entire Western tradition. In response to this assumption, Richard Routley posed, in clarion tones, the inevitable question: Is there a need for a new, an environmental, ethic? Is there a need, in other words, for an ethic of nature in its own right, an ethic that values the forest, the natural world at large, for its own sake independently of its utility, its instrumental value, for us? (Routley 1973, Routley and Routley 1982)

Drawing for inspiration on the American thinker, Aldo Leopold, and in dialogue with contemporary American environmental philosophers, such as John Rodman, the Routleys rapidly worked out the elements, as they saw them, of such a new environmental ethic. They argued that any such ethic must rest on the *intrinsic value* of natural entities, where intrinsic value was precisely the value that attached to those entities in their own right, independently of their utility or instrumental value for us. Intrinsic value, they thought, would confer moral considerability. But how exactly was this hypothesis of intrinsic value to be understood? Did it imply that natural entities would be valuable even if (human) valuers did not exist? Richard Routley thought it did. He set out the ‘last man’ argument, according to which it would be wrong for the last person left alive on earth, after some imagined terminal human catastrophe, to destroy the remaining natural environment, even if it consisted only of vegetation, rocks and rivers, and other insentient elements (Routley 1973).

But how could value exist without a valuer? Since, the Routleys conceded, the activity of valuing requires some form of mind or consciousness, non-conscious natural entities could not confer value on themselves. The Routleys were not prepared to extend consciousness, in some larger sense, to all natural entities, since that was the way of ‘mysticism’ or ‘pantheism’, anathema in those days (and probably still today) to analytical philosophers, and a *reductio ad absurdum* of any argument that led to it. So how was the purported intrinsic value of non-conscious entities to be accounted for? Uncomfortably, the Routleys plumped for a view of value as tied only to possible rather than actual human valuers: if actual human beings did in fact value natural entities for their own sake, as the last man argument purported to demonstrate, then even if human beings ceased to exist, it would still be true to say that, were they to exist, they would value those entities, and this was sufficient, according to Richard Routley, to confer intrinsic value and hence moral considerability on nature (Routley 1973). (Critics were not slow to find this argument strained. See Elliot 1982a and, for a later critique, Grey 2000.)

The kind of moral consideration appropriate to the environment would properly translate into respect, care, responsibility or concern, the Routleys argued, rather than more legalistic moral categories, such as rights and obligations, that seemed to imply a social contract. Such moral respect and responsibility were consistent with the *use* of natural resources, provided such use was respectful and hence circumscribed, limited to what was genuinely necessary (Routley and Routley 1982).

Armed with their new theory of environmental ethics, the Routleys took on the Forestry Commission in their seminal 1973 book, *The Fight for the Forests*, a comprehensive economic, scientific, sociopolitical and philosophical critique of the forestry industry in Australia (Routley and Routley 1973, Orton 1997). Environmental historian William Lines makes no bones about the impact of this publication:

No Australian author or authors had ever combined philosophical, demographic, economic, and ecological analysis in one volume as part of one connected argument. The Routleys were unique. They challenged conventional academic boundaries as barriers to understanding and dismissed claims to objectivity as spurious attempts to protect vested interests. They exposed both wood-chipping and plantation forestry as uneconomic, dependent on taxpayer subsidies, and driven largely by a ‘rampant development ideology’. (Lines 2006: 144-45)

It is hard not to concede that the Routleys – later to become, after their divorce, Val Plumwood and Richard Sylvan respectively – set the bar: they not only helped to articulate in the 1970s questions that would define the agenda for environmental philosophy for decades to come, both in Australia and in the rest of the English-speaking world, but in their hands these ideas also became a potent weapon of engagement, of strenuous environmental activism.

Meanwhile, of course, others within the small circle of Australian philosophy had responded to the Routleys’ challenge regarding the moral status of natural entities. Not all concurred in the need for ‘a new, an environmental, ethic’, an ethic that broke with the entrenched anthropocentrism of the West. For instance, in his 1974 book, *Man’s Responsibility for Nature*, John Passmore argued that, while the natural environment indeed stood in need of protection from unfettered exploitation and degradation, a case for such protection could be made in traditional Western

terms. He identified several Western traditions of human/nature relations, of varying degrees of anthropocentricity: the despotic tradition, according to which humans were indeed permitted to dispose of nature as they saw fit; the stewardship position, according to which we were entitled to cultivate nature for our own purposes but were also charged with its custody; and the cooperative tradition, in which the task of humanity was to increase the productiveness of raw nature. While despotism, the major tradition, was indeed patently unqualified to serve as a basis for environmentalism, both stewardship and cooperation could be adapted, Passmore argued, to environmental ends. Passmore also pointed out that other traditions had at times been influential in the West: primitivism, romanticism and mysticism, all of which were dismissed by him out of hand as inconsistent with science – and hence with reason – on account of attributing mind-like properties to non-sentient natural entities. Like the Routleys, he characterised such positions as *pantheist*, and ‘pantheism’ was for him, as it was for them, a term of opprobrium and last resort, requiring little in the way of refutation.

The debate between Passmore and the Routleys illustrated nicely a distinction that the Norwegian philosopher, Arne Naess, had drawn in his important 1973 paper, ‘The Shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement’. The shallow ecology movement, according to Naess, was the movement to protect and preserve the natural environment for purely anthropocentric reasons, which is to say for the sake of its utility for humanity. The deep ecology movement, by contrast, was the movement to protect nature for *biocentric* reasons, which is to say, for nature’s own sake. Stewardship and cooperation might serve as a basis for a shallow ecology movement that sought to preserve natural resources for human benefit, but they would not, as the Routleys quickly pointed out, serve as the basis for an environmentalism that valued nature for its own sake: stewardship and cooperation were both compatible with a total (albeit, in today’s parlance, sustainable) makeover of the earth’s environment, and by no means guaranteed the protection of wilderness that environmentalists of a deeper green persuasion particularly sought (Routley and Routley 1982).

The question of moral considerability – who could claim it and what conferred it – was central to the discourse of environmental philosophy as it began to take shape in the English-speaking world in the late 1970s. Peter Singer was already arguing that any creature that possessed sentience (by which he meant the capacity for experiencing pain) could claim moral considerability, since, according to his utilitarian perspective, wrongness consisted in nothing other than the giving of pain or misery to those capable of experiencing it. Little stretching of conventional Western moral categories was required then to bring sentient animals into the moral fold, and the publication in 1975 of Singer’s concise, tightly argued but accessible and amply illustrated book, *Animal Liberation*, had already helped to launch a world-wide animal liberation movement. On Singer’s criterion, non-sentient natural entities, such as insects, plants, rivers, ecosystems and landscapes, failed the test of moral considerability, but to the extent that sentient creatures depended on such entities for their existence, a case for their protection could still be argued (Singer 1979).

Amongst other early respondents to the Routleys’ challenge were some who, like Passmore, rejected the imputation of moral considerability to nature and others who accepted it, though on varying grounds. Janna Thompson considered anthropocentrism to be inevitable and any attempt to disengage value from human valuers to be incoherent, but, following Marcuse, she argued for an *enlightened* anthropocentrism, according to which a way of social life premised on appreciation for and receptivity to the joy and, as Marcuse put it, the ‘erotic energy’ of nature

would be conducive to harmony and creativity in society and hence to human fulfilment. The psychology that led to the domination of nature was, from this point of view, indicative of a larger *political* psychology of domination, and was therefore ultimately opposed to human welfare (Thompson 1983, 1990). More sceptical even than Thompson concerning the prospects for a new environmental ethic was John McCloskey. His scepticism arose principally from his sense that certain ecological entities, such as the tapeworm and the malaria organism, were self-evidently neither intrinsically nor instrumentally valuable (McCloskey 1982).

Another member of this early circle, William Grey, was initially well disposed towards the notion of the intrinsic value of nature (Grey 1982), but eventually adopted a position not unlike Thompson's, finding the basis for an environmental ethic in an enlightened anthropocentrism. According to Grey's argument, human goods and goals were inextricably entwined with nature, but not with nature under its largest, evolutionary aspect: the successive waves of extinction and planetary adjustments of evolution render nature under its evolutionary aspect beyond the scope of ethics altogether. Human goods and goals were rather entwined with the particular biological fabric of our own immediate world, the world of the present evolutionary era. That fabric requires protection if the shape and meaning of our own human purposiveness is to be preserved (Grey 1993). Robert Elliot, on the other hand, embraced the notion of the intrinsic value of natural entities, but analysed it precisely as a function of the origins of such entities in long and deep evolutionary and ecological processes, in contradistinction to artefactual entities, which originate in abstract human conceptions and intentions. Elliot brought out the force of this distinction by a comparison between fake and original objects: a fake work of art, for instance, is regarded as of little value compared to the original. By similarly contrasting instances of 'ecological restoration' with original and intact ecosystems, Elliot revealed an important aspect of what it is about 'nature' that environmentalists find intrinsically valuable (Elliot 1982b; for further discussion, see Lo 1999).

In an international context, arguments for the moral considerability of nature and for a specifically environmental ethic were by now, in the later 1980s through to the 1990s, tending to fall into distinct streams, or ecological philosophies. These ecological philosophies included deep ecology (inspired by Naess), ecological feminism, socialist ecology (generally known as social ecology), the land ethic and bioregionalism. Australian philosophers, including new players who had not been part of the Routley circle in the 1970s, made significant contributions to most of these streams, though some, such as Andrew Brennan (who arrived in Australia in 1991), preferred, in the face of such a diversity of approaches, to take a frankly pluralist rather than partisan stance on the question of environmental value, providing bracing critical commentary across the board. Environmental offshoots of the process philosophy of A. N. Whitehead and of the Hegelian tradition also came on-stream in this decade, notably via the contributions of Arran Gare and philosophically-minded biological scientist, Charles Birch.

Deep ecology was conceptualised by Arne Naess as a political platform supported by philosophical foundations – worldviews or, as he put it, *ecosophies* – which could vary from one supporter to another. It was via agreement on the platform that one counted as a deep ecologist. Over the years different versions of the platform were formulated, but central to all versions was the idea that the non-human world was intrinsically valuable and non-human beings were in principle as entitled to 'live and blossom' as were human beings. At Murdoch University in Perth, Warwick Fox, under the supervision of Patsy Hallen, wrote a doctoral thesis, published in 1989 as

Towards a Transpersonal Ecology, in which he provided the first truly systematic defence of deep ecology, arguing that the idea of the ‘ecological self’ at the heart of Naess’ own ‘ecosophy’ received confirmation, as developmental psychology, from the field of transpersonal psychology.

Freya Mathews offered a metaphysical extension of the idea of the ecological self in her 1991 book, *The Ecological Self*, attributing ‘self’ status to self-realising systems generally, arguing that not only organisms and perhaps ecosystems and the biosphere, but the cosmos itself, qualified as such systems. ‘Selves’ were imbued with a conative impulse, or impulse for self-preservation and self-increase, that set them apart from purely mechanical systems, and constituted self-value. Selves were intrinsically valuable because, by the reflexiveness of their very nature, they valued themselves.

Another book that appeared in 1991, *A Morally Deep World*, by Lawrence Johnson, also argued along ‘deep’ lines. Johnson construed the good, morally speaking, in terms of well-being. Any life process with a degree of organic unity and self-identity sufficient to endow it with well-being interests qualified as morally considerable. Such life processes could be identified at a number of levels – not only at the level of the individual organism, ecosystem and biosphere, but also at the level of species: things can turn out better or worse for a species just as they can for an individual organism. Some species flourish while others decline. Something can thus be defined as a life process with interests without it being in any way a subject of sentience or consciousness. Johnson emphasised that there was no neat way of tying up the various levels of value via strict rules and rankings. Appropriate morality was a matter of *attitude*, of respect and consideration for all entities that have interests. We should aim to forge a *modus vivendi* consistent in a general way with the balance of nature.

Ecofeminists approached the question of the moral considerability of nature from a different quarter. Why, they asked, had nature in the Western tradition been instrumentalised, stripped of moral considerability and subjugated, in the first place? Their answer was that this subjugation was conceptually of a piece with other, political subjugations, particularly the subjugation of women. The concept of nature was the cornerstone of a dualistic conceptual system organised around mutually defining pairs of opposed and differentially ranked categories, such as nature/culture, human/animal, mind/body, reason/emotion, spirit/matter, civilised/primitive, theory/practice, science/superstition, mental/manual, white/black, masculine/feminine. This conceptual system had evolved over the course of Western civilisation to legitimise the domination of a number of groups, including the working class, colonised peoples and women. The construction of ‘nature’ as a moral nullity, to which subordinated groups could be ideologically assimilated (workers, women and indigenous peoples being positioned as ‘closer to nature’ than white middle-class males), was at the core of this dualistic system. It followed that the deconstruction of this dualistic conception of nature was key not only to the ‘liberation’ of the natural world itself, but also to that of these other groups. A definitive treatment of this ecofeminist argument was furnished by Val Plumwood in her 1993 classic, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Patsy Hallen and Ariel Salleh also made pioneering contributions to the articulation of ecofeminism, Hallen via feminist critique of science (Hallen 1995) and Salleh via historical materialist analyses of gender roles (Salleh 1992). Salleh also joined Plumwood in mounting an ecofeminist critique of deep ecology (Salleh 1984, Plumwood 1993).

Indeed, from the late 1980s into the 1990s the ‘green wars’ raged, both inside Australia and outside. Ecofeminists accused deep ecologists of masculinist bias in many of their central tenets. These included their reliance on abstract theoretical conceptions of nature as sources of deep ecological attitudes and a ‘cowboy’ valorisation of wilderness and wilderness experience in preference to more modest and immediate, embodied and domestic, manifestations and experiences of nature (Salleh 1992, Mathews 2000). Deep ecologists also allegedly demonstrated a preference for holistic over relational conceptions of nature, where holism was seen to imply, in contrast to relationality, the incorporation and obliteration of others rather than engagement with them (Plumwood 1993; for a reconciliation of deep ecology and ecofeminism on this point, see Mathews 1994). Social ecologists, led by Murray Bookchin in the United States, joined postcolonialists and critical theorists in attacking deep ecologists as misanthropic, since deep ecology seemed to prioritise the interests of nature over those of the world’s poor and dispossessed. Deep ecologists were also charged with political naïvety, their prescriptions for change being deemed to lack any analysis of political power. (For a spirited Australian defence of deep ecology against these charges, see Eckersley 1989, 1992.) Richard Sylvan poured scorn on deep ecology as an insufficiently rigorous discourse, describing it as a ‘conceptual bog’, ‘afflicted’ and ‘degenerate’, and styling himself a ‘deep green’ theorist as opposed to a deep ecologist (Sylvan 1985a, 1985b). Everyone, it seemed, took a swipe at deep ecology, and Fox, for one, spent a lot of time defending it (Fox 1986, 1989a, 1989b). But ecofeminism was also disparaged, both by other feminists and by social ecologists, as ‘essentialist’, on the grounds that some of the earlier ecofeminists, seeking to claim the ecological high ground for women, had seemed to endorse the patriarchal characterisation of women as ‘closer to nature’ than men, on account of women’s reproductive biology and practices. These debates were unquestionably unnecessarily vitriolic, but they were also sometimes productive of useful clarifications, as in the debate over holism versus relationality, thrashed out between deep ecologists and ecofeminists.

Despite the fact that arguments were flying thick and fast, much of the debate in the 1980s and 1990s tended to skirt around what was arguably the foundational question of the whole discourse, namely that of the actual nature of nature – what was it, if anything, about the natural world that warranted our treating it as morally considerable? While it was plain to see why sentient animals might be entitled to moral consideration, it was not so clear why plants, let alone rocks and rivers and landscapes, might be so entitled. The Routleys’ original arguments for the intrinsic value of nature fell far short of the mark (Godfrey-Smith 1982). The deconstructive approach of ecofeminism largely by-passed the question by focussing on the *political* rationale for the moral nullification of nature. Purely psychological or phenomenological approaches, such as those favoured (though not exclusively so) by Naess and Fox, which advocated acts of psychological ‘identification’ with wider circles of nature as a source of ecological consciousness, left open the question of whether such identifications had an objective basis in ontology or were just a matter of subjective choice. Despite these evasions, there can, at the end of the day, be no avoiding the ‘hard problem’ of environmental philosophy, the question of metaphysics, of the nature of nature. We are drawn back inevitably to questions of telos, of self-meaning and self-purpose, of conativity, intentionality, agency, subjectivity and mind in nature – to the very spectre so shunned by the analytical philosophers of the original Routley circle, the spectre of supposed ‘mysticism’ or ‘pantheism’.

While some of the thinkers in the ‘deep’ tradition, such as Mathews, had approached the question of the moral considerability of nature from an avowedly metaphysical perspective, there was one branch of environmental philosophy that positively specialised in the metaphysical approach, namely that derived from process philosophy. Amongst philosophers in Australia, Arran Gare was the pre-eminent exponent of this approach. In a series of books in the 1990s, but perhaps most importantly in *Nihilism Inc*, Gare provided a broad analysis of the metaphysical foundations of modern civilisation and the political and environmental implications of those foundations, while also proffering an alternative in the shape of the process tradition, a tradition that began in the Romantic period and continued into the twentieth century in the persons of Bergson, Alexander, Whitehead and others. The process perspective, defined in contrast to the mechanistic perspective of classical science, represented the world dynamically, as intrinsically in-process, its differentia indivisible, inter-fusing and self-becoming rather than ontologically discrete, inert and set in motion only by external forces, as the particle manifold of classical physics was. From such a perspective, reality was more analogous in its structure to music than to a machine, with both the past and the future actively, morphogenetically, immanent, as unfolding form, in the present. In other words, from this perspective ‘reality’ could not be conceptually arrested at a single moment, frozen in a Newtonian snapshot of the universe, any more than a symphony can be arrested in a single note. Both time and space were in this sense emanations of form rather than antecedent containers for it. From such a perspective, we ourselves are already implicated in the self-unfolding of the world, and so it makes no sense to try to separate ourselves from ‘nature’ with a view to instrumentalising and dominating it. To compromise the self-unfolding of the world is to compromise our own existence.

This ‘hard question’ of environmental philosophy, the metaphysical question, which was by and large shunned by the earlier analytical philosophers of the environment, has come more to the fore in the last decade. As the concerns raised in environmental philosophy in earlier decades have rippled out into other disciplines and been taken up by a range of scholars in the field that anthropologist and cultural theorist Deborah Rose has dubbed the ‘ecological humanities’, a language of sentience and agency, often influenced by Indigenous thought, has crept into discussions of nature (Rose 1996, Rigby 2005, Plumwood 2009, Tacey forthcoming, and many of the articles in PAN (see below)). Attributions of ‘sentience’, in the sense of awareness, to the natural world are popping up in Australian scholarship in many contexts. Rose and Plumwood have adopted the term ‘philosophical animism’ to cover a position that construes nature as a community of persons (Rose 2009, Plumwood 2009). Mathews has developed her argument from the conativity of self-realising systems into a full-blown cosmological panpsychism (Mathews 2003, 2009). Quite diverse possibilities for interpreting nature as a locus of mind-like attributes are currently opening up, and much exciting work in this connection remains to be done.

Meanwhile, in the last decade other new themes have been emerging in the philosophically-informed discourse of the ecological humanities. Aboriginal voices, long referenced in ecological philosophy but seldom heard, are now making their own representations (Graham 1999, 2009; Grieves 2009). *Place* as a locus of identity and of conservation has been added as a key category of environmentalism. Jeff Malpas, for instance, has established a place studies network at the University of Tasmania; John Cameron of the University of Western Sydney organised a series of ecologically oriented ‘Sense of Place’ gatherings in the late 1990s and early 2000s. (Val Plumwood, on the other hand, has problematised the valorisation of favoured places.

See Plumwood 2008a.) The earlier preoccupation of environmental philosophy with forests and wilderness preservation has come under fire with a new emphasis on cultures of sustainability in the suburbs and the city (Davison 2005, Fox 2006). Andrew Brennan and Norva Lo are investigating the relation between worldviews and behaviour, challenging the traditional assumption of environmental ethics that anthropocentric worldviews give rise to bad environmental behaviour and ecocentric worldviews to good environmental behaviour: they are calling for an ‘empirical philosophy’ that sociologically investigates the correlations between belief and action (Lo 2009, Brennan and Lo 2010). Ocean ethics has finally commanded the attention of philosophers with the publication of Denise Russell’s *Who Rules the Waves? Piracy, Overfishing and Mining the Oceans*. Val Plumwood, before her own death in 2008, published a series of influential essays on the ecological significance of death (see, for example, Plumwood 2000 and 2008b).

To the old focus on value questions *in abstracto* has been added, in the last decade, a new emphasis on the literary and cultural studies of environmental themes. For example, an Australian journal, *PAN Philosophy Activism Nature*, launched in 2000, and the ‘Ecological Humanities Corner’ of the journal *Australian Humanities Review*, both encourage a mix of philosophical, literary and cultural studies perspectives in their approach to environmental themes. Kate Rigby at Monash University leads a research effort into the Romantic antecedents of ecological thought in a literary and ecocritical context. Animals – their place and meaning in human cultures rather than merely the ethics of our treatment of them – have also become a major preoccupation (Franklin 2006, Rose forthcoming). A major international conference on the cultural studies of animals, *Minding Animals*, was held at Newcastle in 2009. And as the planet enters the sixth great extinction event in its history, the significance of extinction, particularly animal extinctions, has emerged as a topic of urgent philosophical and ethnographic inquiry, as evidenced in Deborah Rose’s circle of postgraduates and postdoctoral fellows at Macquarie University.

Though for some philosophers environmental ethics was, in earlier decades, merely an academic pursuit, for most it was intended as a moral wake-up call, a call to the world to take moral responsibility for the ravages wrought by industrial society on natural systems. Core categories of environmental philosophy, such as anthropocentrism versus biocentrism and intrinsic versus instrumental value, were eventually absorbed into the rhetoric of the environment movement, but the wake-up call was not by and large heeded by the wider society. Our planet is consequently today in the throes of an ecological catastrophe the reality of which scientists no longer deny and the proportions of which defy human imagination. Now that the wake-up stage has passed, it remains to be seen whether philosophy in any shape or form, in Australia or elsewhere, will be capable of helping to elicit an effective human response to this epochal challenge.

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