The Politics of Nature: Reflections on Hedonism, Progress and Ecology*

By Kate Soper

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For reasons which appear so obvious as to be hardly deserving of any comment, the concept of “nature” has been central to all eco-political discourse. It is “nature,” after all, that we are told is being lost, damaged, polluted and eroded; and it is “nature” that we are enjoined to respect, protect and conserve. But with the burgeoning of environmental studies in a variety of overlapping spheres (geography, philosophy, social theory, sociology, history, cultural studies), it has become increasingly obvious that the reference to “nature” is no more than a kind of shorthand: a convenient, but fairly gestural, concept of eco-political argument whose actual meaning (or meanings) in this context are slippery and far from clear. Hence the growing attention paid to the analysis of the concept of nature which has accompanied the development of contemporary green thinking.

My own book, What is Nature: Culture, Politics and the Non-Human, was conceived as a contribution to this emerging body of conceptual analysis. The book drew attention to the complexity of the concept of nature; to its historical role, through association with primitivity, bestiality, corporeality and femininity, in preserving certain conceptions of the human community; and to the shifting and multiple ways in which it has been invoked to applaud or condemn human behaviors. But its most distinctive contribution, perhaps, was to place the engagement with the concept of nature in the context of the

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contemporary contrast between what I termed respectively “nature-endorsing” and “nature-skeptical” approaches; and I want to begin by briefly returning to some of my argument on this.

The contrast here is essentially between the discourse of ecology, on the one hand, and that of what can broadly be termed postmodernist cultural theory and criticism, on the other. Both have denounced the technocratic and instrumental rationality of the Enlightenment project, and inveighed against its “humanist” conceptions: ecology on the grounds that this has encouraged an “anthropocentric” privileging of our own species which has been distorting of the truth of our relations with nature and resulted in cruel and destructive forms of dominion over it; postmodernist theory on the grounds that it has been the vehicle of an ethnocentric and “imperializing” suppression of cultural difference. Both, moreover, have emphasized the links between the dominion of “instrumental rationality” and the protraction of various forms of gender and racial discrimination.

Yet while the ecologists (particularly those of a “deeper green” disposition) tend to invoke “nature” as a domain of intrinsic value, truth or authenticity, much post-structuralist influenced theory and criticism emphasizes its culturally constructed or purely discursive status, is loathe to recognize any independent natural determinations, and seeks to present all supposedly natural aspects of human subjectivity as the artifact of culture. In their recent work, *Contested Natures*, Phil Macnaghten and John Urry argue, for example, that “there is no singular nature as such, only natures” and that these are “historically, geographically and socially constituted,”¹ and this rhetoric informs a good deal of rather glib reference to the “culturality” of nature. *Nature-skepticism* is also evidenced both in the deconstructivist emphasis on the instability of the nature-culture divide, and in the argument of those Foucaultian-influenced theorists who have insisted that there is no “natural” body, that even needs, instincts, and basic pleasures must be viewed as the worked up effects of discursivity, and that everything which is presented as “natural” must be theorized as an imposed — and

¹Phil Macnaghten and John Urry, *Contested Natures* (London: Sage, 1998), p. 15. They also, in this context, claim that there are therefore “no simple natural limits as such,” although this appears gainsaid by their comment within a paragraph or two that “the planet is now largely acknowledged as having finite limits and thus no longer identified as offering endless bounty.” One might note, too, that Anthony Giddens, although hardly qualifying as a postmodernist, refers continuously to the “disappearance” of nature in his more recent work. See, for example, *Beyond Left and Right: the Future of Radical Politics* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1994).
inherently revisable — norm of culture. One may cite here, too, the theorization and advocacy of cybernetics as the final collapse of the natural-artificial distinction, and other related strands of neo-antiromanticism, such as Donna Haraway’s insistence on our "cyborg" status. (Haraway admittedly refers us to a substratum of some kind which exists prior to its “humanization,” but she nonetheless appears to want to restrict the concept of nature only to that produced through human labor; and it is this alone, she suggests, which is “touchable” and therefore “knowable”).

Where the ecologist, then, refers to a pre-discursive nature which is being wasted and polluted, this post-structuralist theory directs us to the human hand in its making, and to the ways in which relations to the non-human world are always historically mediated, and indeed

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2 Although Foucault is, indeed, the major influence on this line of argument, he is not entirely consistent in what he says about the “body,” and it is debatable how far his account supports those who have drawn on it to deny it any “naturality” (see, for example, Susan Bordo, “Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology and the Crystallization of Culture,” in I. Diamond and L. Quinby, eds., Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance [Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988], pp. 87-117; M.E. Bailey, “Foucauldian Feminism: Contesting Bodies, Sexuality and Identity,” in C. Ramazanoglu, ed., Up Against Foucault [London and New York: Routledge, 1993], pp. 99-122). The fullest and most sophisticated defence of the "constructivist" account of the body is to be found in the argument of Judith Butler (see Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity [London and New York: Routledge, 1990]; Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex [London and New York: Routledge, 1993]).


4 Haraway writes, “We are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism...”; the cyborg “has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity,” Simians, Cyborgs and Women (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 150.

5 Thus she writes, “Neither our personal bodies nor our social bodies may be seen as natural, in the sense of existing outside the self-creating process called human labour. What we experience and theorize as nature and as culture are transformed by our work. All we touch and therefore know, including our organic and our social bodies, is made possible for us through labour,” ibid., p. 10.
“constructed,” through specific conceptions of human identity and difference; and where the one calls on us to respect nature and the limits it imposes on cultural activity, the other draws attention to the erosion of the distinction between the organic and the artefactual, targets the cultural policing functions of the appeal to “nature,” and invites us to view the nature-culture opposition as itself a politically instituted and mutable construct.

In What is Nature? I call in question both these stances, and claim that both “nature-endorsing” and “nature-skeptical” perspectives need to be more conscious of what their respective discourses on “nature” may be ignoring and politically repressing. Just as a simplistic endorsement of “nature” can seem insensitive to the emancipatory concerns motivating its rejection, so an exclusive emphasis on “discourse,” signification and the construction of nature can very readily appear evasive of ecological realities and irrelevant to the task of addressing them.6

In developing this critique, I argue for an understanding of humanity-nature relations which is both realist and humanist: realist in the sense that it recognizes the contrast between the independent “nature” that is presupposed as the permanent ground of all human activity and environmental change (that which I term the “realist” concept of nature), and the “nature” through which we refer to the historically changing and culturally transformed environment (that I term the “lay” or “surface” concept “nature,” the nature of immediate human experience and aesthetic response); and humanist, in the sense that it is opposed to that form of naturalism which wants to emphasize how similarly (rather than differentially) placed we are to other animals in respect of our “essential” needs and ecological dependencies and seeks to ground ecological policy in this recognition.

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6 Some may reject this formulation as too evenhanded. They will object that postmodernist theory is the vehicle of reactionary forms of neo-liberalism which have nothing to offer a green movement committed to radical social change. My own perspective is rather more complex. I do not dismiss all forms of postmodernist argument as irrelevant to the left, nor do I presume that all those deploying them are apologists of the system whose espousal of leftwing values must be viewed as in some sense hypocritical. On the other hand, I would agree that these values cannot be coherently defended by those adopting an anti-foundationalist position and that postmodernist theory is in this sense inconsistent in claiming adherence to them.
On this basis, I charge the postmodernists, for their part, with being too ready to deny or disregard realist nature, the nature which is not the creation but the prior condition of culture: the nature whose structures and processes are independent of human activity (in the sense that they are not a humanly created product) and whose forces and causal powers are the condition of, and constraint upon, any human practice or technological activity, however Promethean in ambition (whether, for example, it be genetic engineering, the creation of new energy sources, attempted manipulations of climatic conditions or gargantuan schemes to readjust to the effects of earlier ecological manipulations).

Such a conception of nature as the permanent ground of environmental action is clearly indispensable to the coherence of discourses about the "culturality" or the "changing face of nature" conceived as surface environment, reliant as this is on a distinction between the causal powers operant at a deep level and the historicity of their consequences, whether these are naturally precipitated (the earthquake or volcanic eruption) or humanly engineered (the ancient barrow or nuclear bunker). A realist conception is also essential to any discourse about the culturally constructed "body" and its mutable gender significations, since the very emphasis on the variable and culturally relative quality of human sexuality requires as its counterpart a recognition of the more constant and universal features of embodied existence if it is to be meaningful. We must recognize a natural body in this sense if we are to speak of any medical intervention in it, or any controlling use of surgery or dieting or body building to alter bodily shape and appearance in accordance with (or defiance of) social norms of beauty and gender identity.

Moreover, though it contests the supposed naturality of current sexual practices and institutions, this extreme conventionalism on nature strictly speaking denies any basis either for justifying this critique of existing practice, or for defending the more emancipatory quality of the alternatives it would institute in its place. Those, in other words, who insist so forcefully on the historically relative and purely politically determined character of the divide between the supposed givens of nature and the impositions of culture, ought also explicitly to accept that this denies them any reference to the former in challenging the edict of culture on how we ought to be or behave. They ought to accept, that is, that we can take all the conditioning away from nature only by consenting to the determinism of culture. In practice, however, not only is this not explicitly recognized and accepted, but often enough a covert reference to naturality is also to be found sustaining the
conventionalist rhetoric. In postmodernist feminist argument, for example, the “merely normative” quality of monogamous or heterosexual relations is often enough presented as if it is constituted as a form of coercion which was preempting some more natural, spontaneous and hence emancipated mode of sexuality.\footnote{In Judith Butler's argument, for example, heterosexuality is presented as a “compulsory” norm. But in terms of her own analysis of a norm as established only through iterative performance, it is not clear why heterosexuality is to be viewed as any less voluntary or pleasure-motivated than lesbian sex. It is true that Butler is reluctant to present lesbian desire as an excluded Truth, and tends to vacillate between a “forbidden fruits” approach to its pleasures and a less constructivist account of these. But if she is going to vacillate, she should also do so in respect of heterosexuality. Either gay/lesbian sexual desire is brought into being only through its prohibition, in which case, it, too, is experienced only in virtue of a “norm,” or it speaks to a disposition which is simply different from the equally uncoerced and spontaneous disposition of heterosexuals.} “Polysexuality,” the gender-less culture, the society of “bodies and pleasures”: all this is promoted as if it were the more immediately self-fulfilling advance on the artificial and too narrowly constraining norms of existing culture. In Donna Haraway's argument, despite the proclaimed resistance of the cyborg to any identification with nature, cyborgs are still approved for having “a natural feel” for a united front politics, and cyborg “sex” is still recommended to us in terms of a naturalist vocabulary of “intimacy” and “fruitful couplings.”\footnote{Haraway, op. cit., p. 151.} Nature in this sense appears to figure as an indispensable reference point even of the more professedly anti-naturalist forms of emancipatory discourse.

In this connection one must recognize, too, that the project of promoting a global order that is both ecologically sustainable and socially just would seem ultimately incompatible with the wholly relativist conceptions of human needs and welfare which have been so strongly advocated in recent challenges to Enlightenment forms of humanism and essentialism. These postmodernist approaches to welfare have insisted that needs must be conceptualized as the historically specific properties of socially embedded individuals; that universalist or so-called “thin” theories of need are inherently ethnocentric and paternalist in their epistemological claims to have access to the “truth” about human needing; and that only “thick” approaches to welfare (those that recognize the always culturally formed and dependent quality of needs) can give proper respect to the experienced status of needs, and to the ways in which individuals, or at any rate particular groups and
cultures, must be allowed to be arbiters of these. They have, in short, offered an extended critique of the supposedly anti-democratic tendencies of any essentialist approach to needs. But in doing so, they are defending a conception of democracy which would seem to problematize the possibility of trans-national ecological agreements and initiatives (since these can be mounted only on the basis of some consensus about the common plight and basic needs of humanity at large); and the relativism of its approach would make it difficult to see on what grounds we could challenge even the most ecologically exorbitant and wasteful forms of consumption: why should they, too, not be respected as gratifying the experienced needs of particular culturally embedded individuals? Indeed, if “democracy” is conceived as demanding indefinite respect for the cultural plurality of needs, forms of welfare and conceptions of the “good” life, it commits us to the absurdity of defending those patterns of consumption which have been most destructive of cultural diversity and are least compatible with its promotion.

For all these reasons, then, we need to affirm the role of “realist” nature both in shaping the outcome of our ecological and self-creating activities and in setting some minimal, but universally applicable, conditions of human survival and well-being.

3.

On the other hand, just as the “nature-sceptical” constructivist position can be charged with abstracting from the determinations of “nature” conceived as independent causal process, so there are “nature-endorsing” types of ecological discourse which can be charged with being too ready to abstract from the political effects of its cultural representation.

This is true, in the first place, of those who present “nature” to us as a domain of intrinsic value which has been necessarily and progressively depreciated as a consequence of the intrusive and corrupting activities of the human species. Such an approach obscures the fact that much of the “nature” which we are called upon to preserve or conserve (most obviously the “natural” landscape) takes the form it does only in virtue of centuries of human activity, and is in an important material sense a product of cultivation or “cultural construct.” It also, in doing so, inevitably overlooks the often very

Indeed some would question whether there are any parts of the earth — even its remoter Arctic regions and wildernesses — which bear no traces of the impact of its human occupation. If nature is too glibly conceptualized as
exploitative social relations which have gone into the making of the environment and are inscribed in its physical territory; in Britain, for example, in its grouse moors and enclosures, its feudal hamlets and country estates. Much that the preservationist and heritage impulse speaks of as “natural” landscape or seeks to conserve as the encapsulation of a more harmonious order in time — as a more natural way of living of the past — is the product of culturally divisive class, gender and racial relations, whose social origins and sources of discord are disregarded in these retrospections.

It is difficult, moreover, not to be skeptical about such nostalgia for the loss of a supposedly more organic and “natural” order of the past, given how regularly it has figured in the laments of the right-wing and patrician critique of “progress.” When, after all, it might be asked, has historical reflection on the present not sought to contrast this to a more fortunate moment in time — to a prelapsarian space-time of “nature” whether conceived directly in mythical-theological terms as an absolute origin in Eden or Arcadia, or more mundanely and relatively as the utopia of erstwhile rural stability which has been displaced by modernity? And when has the appeal to “nature” in this sense not tended to legitimate social hierarchies and divisions of labor that need to be challenged and dismantled?10

One may also note the extent to which our conceptions of the aesthetic attractions and value of the natural world have themselves been shaped in the course of our interaction with it, and have therefore to be viewed, at least in part, as reactive responses to its effects. The shift from the aesthetic of the cultivated to that of the sublime landscape, and the Romantic movement into which it subsequently fed, clearly have to be related to the impact of Enlightenment science and industry in knowing and subduing a rude, threatening and chaotic nature. Untamed nature begins to figure as a positive and redemptive power only at the point where human mastery over its forces is extensive enough to be experienced as itself a source of danger and alienation; and it is only a culture which has begun to register the negative consequences of its

that which is entirely free of human “contamination,” then in the absence of anything much on the planet which might be said to be strictly “natural,” the injunction to “preserve” it begins to look vacuous and self-defeating. 10Raymond Williams offers extensive discussion of the relativism of the nostalgia for a lost time/space of “nature” and of the tendencies of the literary pastoral tradition in England to “cancel history” in The Country and the City (London: Hogarth Press, 1973), especially pp. 9-45. See also T. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory (R. Hullot-Kentor, trans. and ed.) (London: Athlone Press, 1997), pp. 64-5.
industrial achievements that will be inclined to return to the wilderness, or to aestheticize its terrors as a form of foreboding against further advances upon its territory. The romanticization of nature in its sublimer reaches has been in this sense a manifestation of those same human powers over nature whose destructive effects it laments.\(^{11}\) (It is no accident that the sublime aesthetic is a relatively late development in North America, where the preference for the cultivated, “Concordian” landscape prevailed well into the 19th century.)\(^{12}\)

Our conceptions, then, of the value and the pleasures of the natural world have clearly changed in response to actual human transformations of the environment. They have also been continuously mediated through artistic depictions and cultural representations whose perception of nature has often been partial and politically inflected.\(^{13}\) Those who

\(^{11}\)I do not intend to suggest here that the 18th century theorists of the “natural sublime” were themselves conscious of these underlying conditions of their aesthetic interest in the remote, wild and terrifying aspects of nature. For the “master” theorist, Kant, an appreciation of the sublime is potentially available to us all, and its pleasure to be analyzed in terms of the way it recalls us to a sense of the superiority of the powers of human reason over anything encountered phenomenally. My point is that the emergence of the vogue for the sublime comes in the wake of a progressive domestication of the environment.


\(^{13}\)The relationship between the aesthetic experience of landscape and its portrayal in art and literature is not one way but mutually determining; and the political meanings embedded in the latter are both reflective of the actual inscription of social relations within the environment and refracted back into the aesthetic responses to it. One relevant instance is the way in which a distinction between different types of landscape, and the taste in them, served in the “civic humanist” aesthetic of the 18th century in Britain to map — and hence politically legitimate — a supposed difference between social strata. A distinction between the “panoramic,” ideal landscape, and representations of occluded, enclosed landscape without much depth of field, figured a difference between a refined capacity for thinking in general terms and a vulgar (and supposedly also female) incapacity to do so, with the taste in the former being associated with the powers of abstraction essential to the exercise of political authority. See John Barrell, “The Public Prospect and the Private View,” in Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell, eds., *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
refer us to the unmediated aesthetic value of nature as “other” to culture, should bear in mind how far preferences in nature have, in these senses, been the “construct” of cultural activity and of its particular modes of artistic and literary representation. Indeed, in our own time, as Alex Wilson has illustrated so clearly in his study of the making of the North American landscape, “nature” is often enough being materially constructed in ways which adapt it to contemporary needs while at the same time encouraging a culturally specific perception of its aesthetic attractions.\(^1\)

If, therefore, we are to give full due both to the actual history of the making of the environment, and to the contemporary tailoring of “nature” to modern needs and perceptions, we must inevitably recognize the conceptual difficulty of simply counterposing nature and culture as if they were two clearly distinguishable and exclusive domains. Much which ecologists loosely refer to as “natural” is indeed a product of culture, both in a physical sense and in the sense that perceptions of its beauties and value are culturally shaped.

But there are also, of course, very serious ethical and political objections to conceptualizing nature as an autonomous locus of intrinsic value which we should always seek to preserve from human defilement and instrumental appropriation. After all, this is a logic which might seem to require us entirely to abstract from human interests, and to give priority to “other” nature regardless of what merit it might have in our eyes, and whatever its ravages upon human health and well-being — which is a policy as absurd in its practical recommendations as it is immoral in its implications. This kind of deep ecology or ecocentric polemic against “anthropocentricity” all too readily lends itself to a reactionary anti-human speciesism. To depict all human beings as equal enemies of nature is to abstract from the social relations and sexual division of labor responsible for ecological abuse; it is also to condone policies on its disabuse which are likely to hit hardest at those sectors of humanity which are least to blame for ecological depletion and pollution.

One does not have to be some blatant eco-fascist to fall into these errors of thinking. The professed aim of a recent book by Robert

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1993), pp. 81-102. See also Barrell’s *The Dark Side of the Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

14 Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), *passim*, but see especially ch.1 for his discussion of the tailoring of the great national parkways to please an essentially visual and one-dimensional aesthetic.
Goodin, for example, is to supply a theory of value for Green Party politics, and he is clearly committed to the democratic and humanly emancipatory aspects of the Green Party program. But when Goodin argues that green politics is driven by a "single moral vision" rooted in the primary, self-occurring value of nature, and that it is always more important that this value be preserved than that it be preserved in a particular way or through a particular agency, he is offering a moral foundation for ecology which could in principle legitimate the most reactionary policies on conservation.

Goodin is no doubt right that value and agency are divorced in the sense that ecological crisis might be accommodated in a variety of political modes. But it is precisely because a regard for the immediate interests of nature may be consistent with the most patriarchal and least democratic political forms, and the implementation of totalitarian methods of controlling human consumption, population and migration, that a green politics which professes a concern for global equity, gender parity and the collective well-being of future generations must eschew a simplistic theory of value. The attempt to accommodate ecological scarcities can be made in a variety of ways (capitalist, socialist, authoritarian, fascistic) all of them in contestation over what it means for human beings to flourish (which means also over the issue whether some more than others should be allowed to do so both now and in the future). In this sense, I would want to go along with Bruno Latour's claim that political ecology is "totally incapable of defining the common good of dehumanised Nature," and that what, on the contrary, is important about its emergence is that it "suspends our certainties with regard to the sovereign good of human and non-human beings, of ends and means."16

One could reformulate these points in terms of the necessity of recognizing that "nature," when conceived in the only form in which it can be said to be fully independent and non-artefactual, is nature in my realist sense of causal power and process, and cannot in itself supply an ecological politics. Nature in this conception is essentially theoretical-

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explanatory and has very little normative import.\textsuperscript{17} It may “recommend” certain types of action, and it will always “have its say” in determining the consequences of what we do, but it does not enforce a politics. Nature in this realist sense sets some limits and constraints on what we can do, or try to do, but these will be very elastic, and it is we who have to decide what it is ethical to pursue within those limits.

4.

It follows furthermore from my humanist position that I reject the view — often voiced by those pressing a nature-endorsing and more eco-centric perspective — that ecological good practice requires us to recognize our affinities with other living creatures rather than to insist “anthropocentrically” on our distinction from them. It is sometimes implied (and the position is defended explicitly by Ted Benton),\textsuperscript{18} that a “naturalism” or “monism” which views the distinction between humans and other animals as a matter of degree rather than of kind, is alone compatible with the adoption of eco-friendly policies. Many green thinkers, that is, have thought that while the “humanist” emphasis on human difference licenses an instrumental and destructive use of nature as mere means to human ends, the emphasis on human communality and continuity with other species encourages a more proper respect and preservative instinct.\textsuperscript{19}

As should be apparent from the argument outlined above, I reject any view encouraging us to abstract from the critical differences between humans and animals in respect of the role played by language and symbolization in mediating human relations to biology. To neglect the distinguishing features of, say, human sexuality is to risk ignoring the varying, historical and constantly contested forms in which human beings experience their desires, their bodily existence and their functions in reproduction. More generally, I would argue that any attempt to account for human in terms of animal behavior is vulnerable to the charge of being speculative and thus unverifiable. It is always open to one defending a naturalist position to speculate on the ways in which human “needs” for poetry and pornography, casinos and Catholicism,

\textsuperscript{17}Cf.
\textsuperscript{18}See
\textsuperscript{19}See
archaeology and astronomy, are "built upon" or emergent out of more "animal" types of needs, but it is only if we are disposed to overlook the differences between symbolic and non-symbolic modes of being in the world that we shall be inclined to accept the account as uncontroversially informative; and even then, it can always be challenged by an alternative explanation of the putative line of connection between the human and the non-human. This is because what we map back onto the "animal" as prototypical of humanly elaborated needs or dispositions is necessarily to some degree a projection of our own self-understanding, and of the meanings attributed to our specific ways of doing things.

As we have seen, there are ecologists who are prone to accuse humanists of an anthropocentric arrogance in the emphasis they place on human superiority. But there is a confusion in supposing that in any vaunting of the human over the animal mode of existence we are somehow doing an injustice to the latter or at risk of exonerating cruelty to animals. I would dissent from any attempt to bend the dualist argument in support of an approach to other sentient creatures that denied their capacity for pleasure and pain. But Hamlet is also right to contrast the potentialities granted by our "capability and godlike reason" to the life of the beast, whose "chief good and market of his time" is merely to sleep and feed. To be sensitive in this area is precisely not to seek to overcome the conceptual barriers between ourselves and other animals, but rather to be as open as possible to the implications for non-human nature of the human forms of sensibility with which we are bound to approach it. In any understanding we bring to other animals we need to be aware of the limits of our understanding; our very empathy with them requires us, as it were, to respect their difference from us and the ways this may constrain our capacity to "communicate" on their behalf. One of my favored expressions of the point is in Derek Mahon's poem *Man and Bird*, where he suggests that to think from the position of the birds is to accept a certain inability to do so:

All fly away at my approach
As they have done time out of mind,
And hide in the thicker leaves to watch
The shadowy ingress of mankind.
My whistle-talk fails to disarm
Presuppositions of ill-will;
Although they rarely come to harm
The ancient fear is in them still.

Which irritates my *amour propre*
As an enlightened alien
And renders yet more wide the gap
From their world to the world of men.
So perhaps they have something after all —
Either we shoot them out of hand
Or parody them with a bird-call
Neither of us can understand.  

In presenting himself here as an "enlightened alien" doomed to parodic whistling, Mahon, one cannot help feeling, does more to illuminate the quality of the "gap" between the "world of nature" and the "world of man" than many insisting either on the difference of the "world of nature" or on our actual or desirable closeness to it.

We have to be clear that all representations of the "difference" of nature will be discursively mediated and informed to some degree by the ideas we have of human identity. In this sense, there is no escaping conceptual anthropocentricity, though also nothing deplorable about being caught within it. But secondly, and more importantly, we should not pretend to a unity or communality with non-human nature that could be had only by denying or overlooking our more specifically human needs, concerns and qualities. We (or at any rate, some Western intellectuals) may suffer at times from what might be called the "envy of immanence" — by which I mean the desire to be more like plant and animal life, immersed in nature rather than consciously confronting and representing it. This is the wish to be admitted to what Rilke termed the "Open" wherein one would become (as Heidegger puts it in his exposition of Rilke) one of the "great accustomed" who are by nature "benumbed" and live only in their "dim delight" — and it is a wish or envy which also finds expression in the poetry of Wordsworth, Edward Thomas, and a number of others. But in the final analysis very few of us would opt for immanence were we to be offered the choice, and certainly neither Heidegger nor any of these poets showed any real interest in renouncing their aspirations to philosophical or poetic transcendence.

I believe, in fact, that our current ecological situation is to be illuminated primarily, not by reference to the nature of non-human

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22In Heidegger's terminology, it is the wish not to have to go with the venture as one that is represented. See "What are Poets for?" in *Language, Poetry, Thought*, p. 110 (Heidegger himself discusses Rilke and Holderlin in this context).
nature nor by recalling us to our affinities with it, but through consideration of the fraught nature of our own — distinctively human — condition as creatures who are both a part of nature and apart from it: both members, like other animals, of a natural species and dependent on natural resources for the supply of all our material needs, but at the same time quite unlike them in the urge we have to cultural transcendence. This tension between immanence and transcendence, the pull of nature and the pull of culture, has obviously been registered repeatedly in literary and theoretical writing, although its ecological implications have seldom been much dwelt upon. Rousseau, for example, recognized that we share our amour de soi or urge to self-preservation with other creatures, but are distinguished from them in the extent and self-consciously emulative quality of our amour propre or zeal for cultural creativity, distinction and esteem.  


26Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment (London: Verso, 1979), Chap. 2. (I recognize that I am here putting my own particular spin on Horkheimer and Adorno’s account, although I think it is an elaboration that has some encouragement in their own discussion, where it is clearly implied at several points that the disastrous “progress” of
Odyssey becomes a story, one may say, which illustrates the pros and cons of human culturality: of what had to be given up, and what was to be gained in its stead, as a consequence of the emergence of industry, symbolic culture and distinctively human subjectivity. What we are offered in these equivocal mythic episodes is a form of retrospection on, or retrieval of, a pre-cultural past, that is at once both nostalgic and menacing. In its nostalgic aspect, it represents various forms of fantastical longing: to "return to the womb"; to forget the ego and human individuality; to live in a world of instantaneous gratifications without the hardship of labor and the deferment of gratification; to be returned to a more "animal" condition, and relieved of the alienation of being caught up in a normative order of duties, moral laws, punishment, regrets, remorse. It registers, if you like, what I earlier termed the envy of immanence.  

Yet in their more menacing aspect, all of these mythic images contain their own admonition. Their allurements are in every case tainted with something fearsome, which acts as a warning not to yield. Simultaneously both sinister and seductive, the Sirens, Circe, Calypso, and the Lotus-eaters stand as warnings against the loss of the individuated, self-realized, more distinctively human existence that would be sacrificed in the return to nature, even as they figure the allure of regression to a greater closeness with it. Eros, to employ the Freudian metapsychology, is inextricably intertwined with Thanatos in these mythic episodes, either in the sense (as with the Sirens) that death is the consequence of seduction; or in the sense of death as a return to quiescence, subsumption in immanence, the return to primitivity and the "animal" state, together with its loss of human subjectivity and individuation.  

enlightenment has been achieved only at the cost of repression of natural instinct and hedonist renunciation. In their paradoxical interpretation of the entwinement of myth and enlightenment, it is both a "disaster" that Enlightenment has "become" or "reverted" to myth, and a disaster brought about, at least in part, by the advance beyond a more cyclical and reproductive way of life.)  

The indolence of the Lotus-eaters and of Calypso is pitted against Odysseus, who represents industry and postponement of pleasure essential to sustaining human culture. Calypso and the Sirens, for their part, both attempt to seduce Odysseus into believing he can cross the boundaries defining of human existence and still survive.  

This death, we might note, is the conception of Thanatos that Freud associates with the merely fantastical gratifications afforded by the Pleasure Principle, which he contrasts to the real satisfaction that can only be attained through obedience to the Reality Principle This is the obedience
Yet the "progress" allegorized in the dominating figure of Odysseus, the "task-master," has also proved a deeply equivocal form of advance beyond immanence, in that it has been sustained only through class and gender oppression and chronic ecological degradation. Horkheimer and Adorno go so far as to suggest, in fact, that "The curse of irresistible progress," is "irresistible regression." Industrial development, technological mastery, the ever increasing productivity of labor, have served not to free people from the tyranny of the work ethic and its associated forms of misery and injustice, but to confirm them in an essentially "primitive" dedication to toil and hedonist deprivation. The narrow and puritan habits of mind, the failure of self-development, the social and gender oppressions that marked the archaic stage of the "struggle" against nature: all this, they argue, has in essence been carried over, albeit in altered form, into the economic structures and culture of the most developed societies of the Western Enlightenment. In the process, moreover, the gratifications afforded in compensation for the pains of a more "primitive" existence — the "simpler" life, an unspoilt environment, a secured place within the community — have also been sacrificed. The civilization which might have allowed us the best of both primitive "simplicity" and modern "complexity" has given us too little of either.

One might note, too, in this connection, the more directly biological impact of this negative dialectic, where the growing tendency is for the more impoverished and exploited victims of capitalist modernity to be ever further removed from the security and comforts of doing things in "nature's way," while the latter, on the other hand, has often enough become the luxury of the richer and more privileged. As a result of the complex chain reactions set up by market relations, it is almost invariably the least economically advantaged who also become the most disadvantaged in respect of their access to "nature," whether this is understood in the sense of unspoilt environment, purity of air,
water and resources, or recourse to relatively unmediated biological process.\textsuperscript{30}

If we are ever to unravel the dystopian web of contradictions in which the marginalized and least privileged peoples of the capitalist world are now so deeply entrapped, a major transformation of current patterns of resource use and consumer dependency will be needed within the more affluent sectors. For us today in the West, the utopian aspiration must be to establish a modus vivendi which uncouples our pleasures and modes of self-expression from reliance on global exploitation, both social and environmental: which can reconcile the ecological and egalitarian needs for a more cyclical and reproductive (more "natural" or "immanent") mode of interaction with nature with the more distinctively human and individualist needs for continuous cultural creation and productive innovation (with the demands of transcendent being). Can we find ways of living rich, fulfilling, complex, non-repetitive lives without social injustice and without placing too much stress on nature? Can we find ways of not “going back to nature” (in the sense of reverting to tradition, simplicity and immanence) but of advancing to a more assertively human and ecologically benign form of future (of going beyond the limiting and ecologically irresponsible forms of transcendence currently furnished by modernity)?

These questions are at most hinted at in the argument of Dialectic of Enlightenment. Indeed, although Horkheimer and Adorno are clearly before their time in offering a dialectical critique of the destructive

\textsuperscript{30}A striking instance is provided by Nancy Scheper-Hughes' study of the “modernization of infant mortality” in the favelas, or slums, of the Brazilian sugar-plantation region. Deaths from diarrhoea due to unhygienic bottle-feeding would be largely preventable were the women to return to breast-feeding, but this is now made almost impossible for a number of complex, market-related reasons: loss of faith in the purity of breast-milk as a consequence of earlier aggressive and medically inflected advertisement for manufactured formulas; the newly emergent practice for fathers to make a gift of tinned milk to the mother as a token of accepting paternal responsibility, and thus legitimizing the child; the total lack of on the job breast-feeding capacities in the factories in which the women are employed. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, \textit{Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). (My information on this study is based on Donna Haraway’s discussion of it in \textit{Modest-Witness@Second-Millennium.FemaleMan-Meets-OncoMouse}\textsuperscript{TM} [London: Routledge, 1997], pp. 202-12.)
effects on nature of the process of Enlightenment, they are nonetheless writing well before the emergence of the contemporary green movement and hence without reference to its particular frame of political concerns. Their text is in this sense unconscious of the more specifically ecologically accented tensions that I am here arguing are registered in its engagement with mythic materials. One may also argue, following Habermas, that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* offers a too pessimistic — and ultimately inconsistent — appraisal of the “disaster” of Enlightenment.

In drawing on their argument I do not mean to endorse it in its entirety, only to indicate the light it sheds on core tensions of our current environmental situation, and to defend its dialectical presentation of the paradoxes of Enlightenment “progress” as having some relevance both to the current forms of green critique of instrumental rationality, and to the dilemmas of political ecology at the present time. For even though Horkheimer and Adorno present the Enlightenment destruction of “outer” nature as in part accountable to the sacrifice of an instinctual “inner” nature, and of the gratifications of a simpler, more “immanent,” mode of being — they also make it clear that there can be no reversion to an earlier “mythic” phase as a means of countering the “disaster” of Enlightenment. The utopian program that might rescue us from the continued cycle of social exploitation and ecological decline lies not in a return to a “nature” but in a new and unprecedented form of transcendence of it.

This brings me to a further reason for contesting nature-endorsing conceptions of human affinities with other species, namely, that they invite too static and fixed a conception of our needs. Human beings are similarly placed to other animals in respect of certain basic needs of survival, and, as I earlier argued, we do in this sense need to work with a universalist and (minimally) essentialist conception of human nature. But they are very unlike other biological species in respect of their capacity consciously to monitor their impact on the environment and to rethink forms of production and consumption in the light of ecological constraints. This malleability or underdetermination in respect of human pleasure and modes of flourishing needs to be emphasized as a potential asset of ecological adjustment. For us, unlike other creatures, living in ways which place less stress on nature involves re-thinking

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our conditions of flourishing and forms of transcendence in the light of current and likely future resources, the value we place on equality within the human global community in the present and the obligations we feel to future generations. Any globally responsible adjustment to ecological scarcities will require affluent societies to restrict current sources of gratification and self-realization (very swift and flexible means of transport, for example), but it seems mistaken to dismiss these current “satisfiers” as pandering only to “false” or “unnatural” needs. Adjustment of this kind is not so much the eradication of “false” needs but the exploration of new pleasures. It will require those living in such societies to be imaginative and undogmatic in their attitudes to what they can enjoy: to open themselves to the possibilities of an alternative hedonism and to modes of living and self-fulfillment rather different from those associated with prevalent Western assumptions about flourishing.

One of the challenges of such a project will be to disencumber the more positive political aspects of Enlightenment — the commitment to pluralism, racial equality, democracy, gender parity, mass education, cosmopolitanism — from its altogether less progressive forms of economic rationality and ecological complacency. It will be to find ways to conserve the environment and to remain in some kind of ecological equilibrium while resisting any regression to the hierarchical and patriarchal cultural and social divisions that have traditionally always accompanied more reproductive and ecologically sustainable societies. Another will be to develop the means of enjoying novelty and the stimulus of “progress” — of enhancing our lives with strange and unexpected experience — but without the spur of new material goods and without the constant recourse to ever more time-saving and space-contracting modes of transport and delivery. Can we, so to speak, convert to a low material consumption, bike-speed actual pace of life while enjoying an ever more entrancing and exciting mode of being in our erotic relations, and friendships and modes of spiritual engagement?

In both instances, one may argue, progress can only be made through release from the current dominance of the work ethic and a move towards a more rational and democratic division of work and leisure. In this sense the reduction and fairer redistribution of work must be placed at the center of the eco-political utopian imaginary. Under the current economic dynamic, people are either being forced out of work altogether into the demoralizing dependency and penury of unemployment, or finding work only by joining the expanding group of contingent and highly flexible part-time workers without benefits or job security, or else, where they are in full-time employment, are being
pressurized into ever more intensive and "workaholic" routines. This is an allocation of work and rewards which does little to reduce economic and social divisions within the nation state. Global justice and ecological conservation will not be advanced by employment structures which depend on the continuous diversion of human material resources to wasteful and luxurious production and ever more sophisticated technological expansion within the more privileged economies; nor, with the exception of a privileged minority, will human pleasure and self-development, since neither the jobless nor the contingent workers who have the time but not the money or security, nor the employed who have the wage but all too little time, have been placed in a position seriously to enjoy rich and diverse modes of existence. On the contrary, they are all victims in differing ways of an economic imperative which is as ecologically wasteful as it is insensitive to what it is squandering in terms of human pleasure and fulfillment.

In short, economic procedures which are defended across the official left-right political divide as viable and essential to human well-being, are in reality committed to an irrational and immoral division of time, labor and wealth, which many now fear could issue ultimately in social and ecological breakdown. Hence the importance the green movement has rightly attached to the campaigns for the reduction of the working week without loss of income or security, and for the shifts on the same basis to part-time work and job-share schemes. Hence, too, the inspiration that can be drawn from those who have centered their political ecology around the relief from work, the extension of free time, and the severing of the supposedly indissoluble link between being in employment and enjoying reasonable conditions of existence.

There is no doubt, too, that a rethinking of attitudes to work, and a move to job-sharing and the proliferation of more secure and pensioned part-time jobs, would also help to resolve many of the tensions deriving from the dissolution of patriarchy in Western societies and the emergence of gender as a site of contestation rather than a sphere of reproduction. For there is no way in which these tensions — which have followed on the feminist challenge to the gender division of labor, and the schism between "public" and "private" realms and their respective activities and priorities — can be satisfactorily met through back-tracking attempts to shore up and perpetuate the conventional male-female allocation of roles, status and position. Nor, however, can

they be so through the ongoing commodification of the sexual and affective field associated with the nurturing and caring functions still largely performed within the family. For to proceed in that way is to consolidate new forms of elitism between those who can afford to pay for all forms of child-care and domestic servicing, and the under-class of ill-paid (and still largely female) providers of those services; it is also further to commercialize the “symbolic” domain in ways that are inappropriate to its provision of love and care, and resistant to the pleasure and fulfillment it can offer. We are speaking here of tensions of the transition from patriarchy which can only be happily resolved in a society where it has become the norm for both sexes to share more equally both in outside work in the “public” sphere and in childcare and domestic tasks in the “private” — and that means, essentially, in a society that has re-valued its time expenditure and adjusted its conception and organization of “work” accordingly.

But that in turn would presuppose the existence of a culture of interpersonal relations that had overcome gender oppression and discrimination, on the one hand, yet at the same time resisted the current drift towards a more narcissistic and self-sufficient mode of sexuality, on the other. This would be a culture in which gender parity would be able to co-exist with passionate forms of personal dependency, intense erotic engagements and enduring commitments; a culture which had fought free of patriarchal repressions but without dissolving the messy and emotive but also intensely rewarding bonds that come with being a realized, fully organic, distinctively human being. The utopian “erotic” I am advocating here is clearly in some tension with the autotelic and rather solipsistic enjoyments of gender “performance” and self-styling currently advocated by some feminist theorists. Nor does it subscribe to the fashionable celebration of cyberotic sex and the disembodied and transient enjoyments of virtual reality “couplings.”

On the contrary, where the flexibility and de-socializing tendencies of these new modes of sexuality will coexist very comfortably with the very similar imperatives of a work oriented, highly competitive and anti-collectivist culture, an erotic of passion, dependency and conviviality must figure as an alternative hedonism to it, and should be promoted as such.

In wanting to counter the supposed “utopia” of cyber sexuality, I am not, however, denying that there are aspects of the “net-working society” and the shift to “informationalism” that have utopian

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33 See, for example, the works cited in footnote 3.
34 I take both these terms from Manuel Castells, op. cit.
potential from an ecological and hedonist point of view. The new forms of electronic communication and virtual reality interaction do, in principle, allow us to cut down on the polluting, noisy and high-energy consuming forms of transport involved in "face-to-face" communications and material transfers in "real" time-space. They could also allow for an unprecedentedly global and democratic exchange of information; for greatly extended public participation in policy making and in the informal discourse networks of the public sphere; and for a proliferation of interesting and novel "conversations." But as with all forms of new technology, these developments in computerization have emerged within hierarchical social and economic structures, whose marks they bear, and which they are serving now to reproduce. No enthusiasm for the potential of "informationalism" should allow us to overlook the fact that access to its communication systems will remain restricted for the foreseeable future to a tiny intellectual and business elite, and that two-thirds of the world's work is still done by laborers in the field. Moreover, the evidence of such studies as have been carried out on the matter indicate that computerized systems have done very little to cut down on the numbers still commuting to work; and that, if anything, "face-to-face" exchanges have multiplied as a consequence of the increase in electronic communication. So far, it seems the new technologies have been used to "enhance" life in ways that are still dependent on high-speed, high-energy transportation of persons and material goods; to expand and complexify an existing structure of consumption rather than to divert desire into more eco-friendly types of gratification.

Let it be said here, too, in conclusion that in pointing to the ecologically rational and hedonist aspects of breaking with the capitalist work ethic, one would be foolish to deny the extent of its internalization and the alarm experienced by many at the prospect of a reduction in their work routines, even were this to incur no loss of remuneration. In asking whether the attitude engendered by capitalist societies to work and its rewards can be replaced by commitments having less ecologically and socially exploitative consequences, we are asking whether entrenched forms of monetary greed, compulsive modes of behaving, deep-seated habits associated with class and gender divisions, can, indeed, find their gratification in alternative ways of being, and this is by no means certain. Idleness may be eco-friendly,

36Ibid., Chap. 6, esp. pp. 394-98.
but it will also require people to find ways of enjoying it, and of breaking in the process with very engrained patterns of living.

My point, then, is not that we can be sure of advancing beyond Western consumerism and its partial and very limited modes of "transcendence." My point is simply that the potential for doing so certainly exists, and is more likely to be actualized through compelling projections of the pleasures to be had in converting to an alternative mode of consumption. A naturalist approach to our position in the ecosystem which implies that human beings are possessed by nature of a set of needs whose satisfaction is a condition of their flourishing, and of which we could in principle gain an objective knowledge, does not necessarily encourage this form of hedonist rethinking.

What I am suggesting here, essentially, is that we must view our capacities for developing alternative outlets for "transcendence" to those hitherto provided by Western industrial and consumerist culture as qualities which, in a sense, further remove us from a natural simplicity or immanence, rather than return us to it. Our future ecological viability depends on a potential consciously to adjust to the consequences of our environmental impact, and to develop new modes of human experience and satisfaction in the light of it, of a kind denied to other beings.