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Re-Thinking Nature: Towards an Eco-Pluralism

PATRICK CURRY

Sophia Centre, Bath Spa University College
Mailing address: 10 Burnand House, Redan Street
London W14 0LW, UK
Email: pmcurry@gn.apc.org

ABSTRACT

Both scientific realism and social constructionism offer unpromising and even destructive ways of trying to understand nature and human–nature relations. The reasons include what these apparent opponents share: a commitment to the (latterly) modernist division between subject/culture and object/nature that results from what is here called 'monist essentialism'. It is contrasted with 'relational pluralism', which provides the basis of a better alternative – ecopluralism – which, properly understood, is necessarily both ecocentric and pluralist.

The purpose of this paper is to present an initial case for a pluralist ecocentrism and an ecocentric pluralism.[1] I first consider the disturbing agreement of objectivist realists and subjectivist constructionists on nature as lifeless, passive and manipulable. I then try to define a better way of construing nature, starting with suggestions by three authors (Herrnstein Smith, Latour and Ingold) which I call *relational pluralism*, as distinct from *monist essentialism*. Such pluralism is, I argue, integral to the ecocentrism missing from the positions of both realists and constructionists, and ecocentrism is integral to it in turn: hence, *ecopluralism*. A review follows of representative voices from the environmental literature – realists, constructionists and scientific humanists – relative to the issues at hand.

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1.

To begin with, let me point out something about each of two major and apparently contrasting approaches to nature. First, there is the clear complicity of objectivism, realism and rationalism – culminating, potentially and often actually, in scientism – in the ecological crisis. Such approaches are united in maintaining and propagating the idea of the 'environment' (a word that already does a lot of work marginalising nonhuman nature) as essentially a mere setting for the human drama, most of which comprises a set of passive resources for the advancement of human interests, with the latter being the most, or even only, ethically considerable kind. This anthropocentric utilitarianism blends seamlessly with an even more impoverished and impoverishing economics, enshrining individualistic self-interest-maximisers.[2] Now such ideas are abstract, but their effects – proceeding largely through the principal institutionalised forms of modernity: corporate capital, the nation-state, and modern science and technology[3] – are anything but. One example is the current drive to patent life-forms and their component parts, natural as well as genetically engineered: driven by investment with a view to returns, protected by states through organisations like the WTO, and accomplished through scientific technology. A view of nonhuman nature as appropriate for and amenable to this sort of programme is insufficient, in itself, to enable its realisation; but it is integral, and arguably necessary, for the attempt. Such a view involves rejecting notions of nature as itself a possible locus of value, insight, meaning or wisdom. In the usefully blunt words of R.H. Peters, 'We must concentrate on prediction alone if we wish to reap the benefits of science. We thus quantify and generalize, we depersonalize the world in order to dominate. The price is worth paying.'[4] Let us call such advocates *realists* or *objectivists*.

Neil Evernden, in *The Natural Alien*, terms the ideology of this school 'resourcism': 'a kind of modern religion which casts all of creation into categories of utility' to humans, whereby there is literally nothing in the natural (and human) world which cannot be 'transformed into a resource…'[5] By implication, a defensible, rigorous and non-misanthropic ecocentrism is needed as part of the mitigation, let alone resolution, of the ecological crisis. One might think, then, that environmentalists and ecologists (both political and scientific) would be at the forefront of opposing anthropocentric resourcism and developing an ecocentric alternative. Not so, however; 'environmentalists', drawing upon scientific ecology, are now increasingly often arrayed against the theory and practice of ecocentrism. One recent example: drawing upon a book by Norman Moss, significantly entitled *Managing the Planet*, Fred Pearce maintains that humans have the right to impose their moral values on the rest of nature, or 'tame' it, and a 'near-duty' to use biotechnology to do so.[6] But this is perhaps intellectual froth compared to the ubiquitous so-called environmental impact

assessment (EIA), which rules out of court any considerations other than the impact on human interests – themselves often narrowly construed as economic – and *a fortiori* any discussion of values and priorities in relation to those interests. No wonder John Livingstone has described them as 'a grandiloquent fraud, a hoax and a con… [which] anoints and blesses the process of "development"'.[7] True, there is a precautionary and preservationist wing of environmental 'modernisers', which however doesn't alter the fundamental values and attitudes concerned, or more than slightly slow the overall impetus.[8] 'Management', usually 'scientific', of 'resources', and in human interests – although, of course, actually in a small minority of even those – remains the nigh-well universal cry.

This situation confirms the correctness of Evernden's early perception of the 'fatal weakness' of the ecology movement (as well as suspicions about why his work has not received more attention):

> The basic attitude towards the non-human has not even been challenged in the rush to embrace utilitarian conservation. By basing all arguments on enlightened self-interest the environmentalists have ensured their own failure whenever self-interest can be perceived as lying elsewhere.…The industrialist and the environmentalist are brothers under the skin; they differ merely as to the best use the natural world ought to be put to.[9]

2.

The second understanding of nature involves a family of approaches commonly held (by both its proponents and opponents) to take the opposite view in relation to the first: social constructivism, cultural relativism, and poststructuralism and/or postmodernism. This general approach has had a big impact in environmental philosophy, along with other areas of the academy, as is reflected in the plethora of titles along the lines of *The (Re)(De)Construction of Nature, The (Re)Invention of Nature, The (Re)Creation of Nature, The (Re)Interpretation of Nature* and so on, sometimes with qualifiers like *Social* and *Cultural*. Its recent popular statements include Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory* (1995) and William Cronon's collection, *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (1995). Both are full of *aperçus* of which the following, respectively, will serve as examples:

> Even the landscapes that we suppose to be most free of our culture may turn out, on closer inspection, to be its product.… At the very least, it seems right to acknowledge that it is our shaping perspective that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape.[10]

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> [Nature] is a profoundly human construction…. [Wilderness] is quite profoundly a human creation…it is a product of that civilization, and can hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which it is made.[11]

There is an academic 'postmodern' top end of this market, of course, but underneath the febrile neologisms the understanding of nature here remains strikingly modernist.[12] Ludmilla Jordanova's formulation may be disingenuous – an imperative intervention disguised as a neutral description – but it is admirably concise and overt: '"Man" never left centre stage, nature *never has been, and never will be*, recognized as autonomous.'[13] The nonhuman natural world is a *tabula rasa*, whether mere inert matter or a dynamic but meaningless chaos, upon which human beings struggle to write, read and erase each other's social, cultural and political concerns. So I shall call the members of this school *constructionists* or *subjectivists*.

Now it is true that constructionists have made some real and hard-won gains *vis-à-vis* the tyranny of modern mainstream scientism. They are summed up in one of the late Paul Feyerabend's parting shots: 'The objection that [a] scenario is "real", and that we must adapt to it no matter what, has no weight, for it is not the only one: there are many ways of thinking and living.' But anyone tempted to concur with postmodern complacency should pay close attention to his next words: 'A pluralism of this kind was once called irrational and expelled from decent society. In the meantime it has become the fashion. This vogue did not make pluralism better or more humane; it made it trivial and, in the hands of its more learned defenders, scholastic.'[14]

The error here has both a substantive and a strategic dimension. The first boils down to this: trying to oppose objectivism by privileging its subjectivist opposite is either stupid or dishonest, when merely inverting the schema actually preserves the dualism, *including* the objectivist pole, and all that it entails. And one of the things so entailed is the anthropocentrism I have noted. Now I don't want to suggest that cultural resourcists are in the same political camp, or nearly as dangerous (because not nearly as powerful), as the material and corporate resourcists who are, currently and for the foreseeable future, the principal enemy. In contrast to the latter, very few deconstructive cyborgs have been spotted actually out razing old-growth forests. Nonetheless, the remarkable thing about the second approach is that in all essentials, it involves the very same idea and value of nature as the first. Both views subscribe to the humanist and/or modernist arrogation of all value, meaning and agency. And both firmly exclude a nature which, *in itself*, is to any significant degree active and autonomous, has any interests, is possessed of any kind of subjectivity, is a site of non-use or 'intrinsic' value, or has any ethical significance or considerability. In short, both schools are at best non- and at most anti-ecocentric. (Here I could also mention, as a special case, the work of those authors who try to combine the naturalism of the first school with the politics of the second; I will return to this group.)

Strategically, the degree and coherence of this overlap strongly suggests that the adherents of the second approach are engaged, however unwittingly or unwillingly, in tacit collusion with the first – or at the least, making their activities harder to criticise and resist, whether intellectually, morally or politically. Seen in this light, the cultural resourcism of constructivism has all the makings of a disturbing *trahison des clercs*. It is next of kin to the resourcism of industrial developers, under the common aegis of anthropocentric and modernist humanism, and encourages, as I have said, the same instrumental and utilitarian attitude towards nature. It undermines the positive contribution the academy could make to resolving the ecological crisis, and reduces still further any room for an ecological politics worthy of the name. Just as resource-based ecologists have ensured their own failure by rendering nature vulnerable whenever human self-interest can be perceived as lying elsewhere, so cultural studies resourcists, I suggest, implicitly licence the reactionary (de)construction of nature by the more powerful mainstream interests they often claim to oppose.

3.

The situation just described gives rise to the following questions: why do professional intellectuals find nonhuman nature so hard to deal with – or rather, to be frank, tend to come so badly unstuck as to end up, in Gary Snyder's apt words, as 'the high end of the "wise use" movement'?[15] And, more important, what is a better way of going about things?

Regarding my first question, it is tempting to conclude of the constructionists: how convenient, and flattering, for them. Poor old nature: *sans* meaning and value until they are graciously conferred by an enlightened humanity, led by the department of literature/cultural studies/philosophy. But we should recall that the classic realist strategy is to disguise particular and interested claims as disinterested, universal and objective ones, on behalf of God, Truth, or indeed Nature. (De)constructionists have therefore understandably adopted the opposite strategy, proclaiming that the world, including humanity, and truths about them, are not discovered but made; and that since that is so, those truths – and ultimately, that world – can be unmade and remade better. Perhaps that is why, at least in part, whatever professional intellectuals of this persuasion touch tends to disappear: not only nature but literature, childhood, the past: all magicked by the appropriate theoretical version of this belief into a blank screen for 'our' concerns, fears, hopes and neuroses.

What leads them on, then, is the promise of a better world: certainly no bad thing, in itself. But in the words of James Thurber, 'You might as well fall flat on your face as lean over too far backward.' It is all very well to offer hope to the oppressed by maintaining that 'we' made, and make, nature or reality or truth, so we can un-make and re-make it. But how much longer can we ignore the

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corollary: that if we can deconstruct their 'Nature', then so too can they (literally) deconstruct ours? Do we really want to agree that nature is nothing more or other than something that can be made over at will by the most powerful groups with an interest in and the means of doing so? The result of this voluntarism run wild is that constructionism now functions, to a depressing extent, as academic window-dressing for consumer capitalism, a free-rider on the trillion-dollar project to sell us all, in Bill Gates's words, 'a new, mediated way of life'. (And of nothing is this truer than Donna Haraway's pseudo-critical celebration of the glamour of hypermodern technology.)

Note too the extent to which, as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro points out, the metaphors of construction, production and invention, so beloved of these so-called postmodernists, are thoroughly modernist – not least in the way they mirror the monotheistic metaphor of creation whose progeny they ultimately are.[16] Hence they participate in the same logic of monism, even as many profess pluralism. It seems that one of Derrida's *aperçus*, at any rate (and ironically, one stated with unaccustomed clarity) has gone largely ignored: 'All that ['quite simply everything'] is political, but it is not only political.'[17]

Turning to my second question above – what is a better way? – we could sharpen it up by asking, is there some way to protect the hard-won gains of relativism or pluralism while also acknowledging nature's intrinsic value, reality and agency? In which case, it would have to be a way which doesn't involve attempting *either* to return to naïve realism, etc. (in order to save nature from idealist relativists), *or* to push through vulgar constructivism (in order to save humans from scientific materialists).

Taking these options in turn, Snyder's suggested remedy – 'take these dubious professors out for a walk, show them a bit of the passing ecosystem show, and maybe get them to help clean up a creek' – is indeed tempting, and might help. But it strongly smacks of Dr Johnson's answer to Berkeleian idealism; and kicking a stone, as a philosophical refutation, fails. (Both pain and stone could exist in, even only in, the mind of God.) It is also highly counter-productive as a strategy. Take another example; in response to Keith Tester's characteristically constructionist suggestion that discourse about animals (such as that of animal rights) is 'not concerned with animals at all…on the contrary, the idea says rather more about society and humans', Ted Benton understandably ripostes that if 'a fish is only a fish if it is classified as one, perhaps, if we were to impose the socially produced category of fish upon the viper its bite would lose its venom?'[18] In other words, there is a 'real' animal, which is sufficient to refute Tester's arrogant sophistry. But that is a mistake, again both substantively and strategically: the former because the correct answer to Benton's question (as Viveiros de Castro suggests) is, 'No, it wouldn't, but some fish would become poisonous';[19] and the latter because even the most sophisticated scientism draws its strength from just such ultimately simplistic realism. Advocates of the so-called scientific management of the planet are only too delighted to add a little

more academic *caché* to their portfolio of the kind exemplified (for example) by Soulé and Lease's academic stone-kicking in *Reinventing Nature? Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction* (1995).[20]

The second alternative – trying to push through the current constructionist programme – is equally unattractive, not only because of its contempt for nature, which such a project would simply worsen and cement into place, but because it is doomed anyway; as the pole of a reciprocally dependent dualism, the cultural envelope can never be pushed far enough to fully encompass (in its advocates' eyes) its evil biological twin, any more than the reverse is possible. Constructionism is therefore badly placed to take on evolutionary psychology (*né* sociobiology), which so urgently needs doing. The new social Darwinians like no-one more than an opponent who can only dogmatically insist on the preeminence of 'environment'. It keeps the whole debate going, with its absurd assumption that nature/nurture constitutes a fundamental dichotomy, and thus guarantees them continuing purchase and publicity. And by the same token, as I have already mentioned, inverting and thus confirming the dualism leaves objectivism essentially undisturbed.

Of course, there is some truth in both the realist and the constructionist positions. The real problem stems not from their differences but what they share. In addition to their anthropocentrism, both views subscribe to the closely related modern metaphysic – initially Cartesian–Galilean–Baconian, but with deep Greek and Judaeo-Christian roots – of (ontically) mind *vs*. matter, and (epistemically and axically) subject *vs*. object. They simply occupy different poles of this dualism and then attempt to reduce its opposite, thus constituting, in effect, 'two vying "monisms"'.[21] Scientism struggles to reduce all that is human to a scientifically naturalised nature (pretending that no other kind of nature is possible); humanism, as concisely stated by Barthes, tries to 'always remember to reverse the terms of this very old imposture…to establish Nature itself as historical'.[22] But both attempts not only confirm the shared underlying assumption of an ontological split (albeit one each promises to overcome), they also covertly back each other up in attempted monism as a meta-strategy, in all its essentialising and imperialistic universalism. That is what perverts the truth of each view, by refusing to recognise its own limits. It amounts, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith puts it, to 'intellectual/political totalitarianism (the effort to identify the presumptively universally compelling Truth and Way and to compel it universally)...'[23]

As a result, not only does the constructionist critique of realism ultimately fail. It also simultaneously permits nonhuman nature a real life only on the condition, and to the extent, that it is a strictly human one (i.e., cultural, social, political), while abandoning it to the not-so-tender mercies of the biological managerialists when and where its culturalist programme reaches its inevitable limits. From an ecocentric point of view, the result is a kind of double betrayal.

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I should also add that there is a 'spiritual' version of subjectivism, often self-positioned in opposition to scientific naturalism, which however escapes none of the above analysis. As Bahro remarked, 'It makes no great difference whether we are "materialistic" or "idealistic" monists – that is, people who are convinced of the unity of the world.'[24] Although he was anticipated by Gregory Bateson, David Abram has more recently incisively pointed out that both the abstract objectivity of scientism and the subjectivity privileged by New Age discourse

> perpetuate the distinction between human 'subjects' and natural 'objects', and hence neither threatens the common conception of sensible nature as a purely passive dimension suitable for human manipulation and use. While both of these views are unstable, each bolsters the other; by bouncing from one to the other – from scientific determinism to spiritual idealism and back again – contemporary discourse easily avoids the possibility that both … the perceiver and the perceived are interdependent and in some sense even reversible aspects of a common animate nature...[25]

4.

What better alternative – more promising, hopeful and yes, with due respect for context, truer – am I suggesting? The resources for an answer are certainly there in the work of Feyerabend, especially in *Farewell to Reason* (1987) and his posthumous autobiography *Killing Time* (1995). But the clearest and most systematic exposition I know is that of Barbara Herrnstein Smith in her two books, *Contingencies of Value* (1988) and *Belief and Resistance* (1997). Not that systematicity has any inherent virtue – what has? – but it does make it harder for the arguments to be dismissed without bothering to think about or even read them, which remains Feyerabend's usual fate. (Of course, William Burroughs's approach also has a certain undeniable appeal: 'Subjective, objective – what's the difference?')

It is always dangerous trying to encapsulate a rich and subtle argument, but I shall try. In relation to value (axiology) and knowledge (epistemology) respectively, Smith makes the case for reclaiming relativism, in which value and truth are not the objective properties of entities, but changing functions of consequential interactions among multiple and never exhaustively delineable variables: not subjective (a matter of personal taste or desire: although that counts too), but *contingent*. The result is 'a conceptualization of the world as continuously changing, irreducibly various, and multiply configurable', yielding – in keeping with 'our irreducible scrappiness' – only 'local resolutions and provisional stabilities'.[26]

The point is not that objectivism and realism are wrong, or even necessarily authoritarian (although they certainly can be, in the attempt); it is that such

reasoning *never occurs*.[27] There is 'no particular single dimension or global parameter';[28] no 'general, all-purpose epistemic methods are available: no touchstones of truth, no automatic refutations of error, no ready-made exposures of deception'.[29] And if analysis is not then transcendental, universal or uncondi- tioned, 'it must be restricted, partial, and local, which is not to say, it must be heavily emphasized, "subjective" in the usual limited objectivist senses of the latter, or "privatized" or "individualistic" in their current polemical senses'.[30]

In particular, the classical objections to relativism, so understood – the Egalitarian Fallacy ('then all theories must be equally valid'), the Anything Goes Fallacy ('then any belief or practice becomes acceptable'), the Self-Contradic- tion Fallacy ('in arguing this truth the relativist contradicts him- or herself'), the Quietism Fallacy ('then why do anything?'), not the mention the Nazi Death- Camps Fallacy ('that is where this sort of thing ends up') – all result from realist/ objectivist assumptions about the meanings of the terms being used (including the assumption that no other meanings are possible) which beg the question at issue.[31] That is, they assume that an uninterpreted objectivity is available, either in practice or just in principle, which then supposedly renders all the relativists's arguments either 'merely' contingent (*ie*. arbitrary) or 'merely' subjective (*ie*. a function of purely personal preference, political power, etc.). Pressed, realist critics will invariably try to fall back on so-called universal conditions, or intersubjective agreement, or experimental replication, or even (when desper- ate) something called 'obvious common sense', as if these can accomplish anything without further specification to the point of 'mere' contingency. *Ceteris paribus* ('other things being equal') might as well be a magical incanta- tion. Such faith is touching, but less than philosophically impressive.

5.

Smith's work is very usefully complemented by that of two others, to which I shall now briefly turn. The first is Bruno Latour's in *We Were Never Modern*. By way of a bridge, however, I would point out that the implications of her relativism apply equally to instances of cultural (or social, psychological or spiritual) absolutism, of the kind already discussed, as to the biological or materialist kind. Given that 'relativism' is also the name sometimes used to describe the former approach, which I have characterised as cultural and/or social constructionism (and some of whose proponents actually subscribe to the fallacies just enumer- ated), there is room for considerable confusion here, which I shall address in a moment.

Latour's term for the approach of the cultural/social essentialisers is 'abso- lute relativism', which he contrasts critically with a 'relative relativism', or 'relationism', which corresponds closely to Smith's position. The former, he points out, never relativise anything but cultures, leaving nature to be universalised

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by hard science. Thus absolute relativism agrees with 'its enemy brother rationalism' that 'the reference to some absolute yardstick is essential'.[32] As a result, 'all the subtle pathways leading continuously from circumstances to universals have been broken off by the epistemologists, and we have found ourselves with pitiful contingencies on one side and necessary Laws on the other – without, of course, being able to conceptualise their relations.'[33] As Neil Evernden points out – and his analysis in *The Social Creation of Nature* (1992) strongly complements that of Latour – 'For the humanist concept of "Human" to exist, we must first invent Nature: our freedom rests on the bondage of Nature to the "Laws" which we prescribe'.[34]

This situation is the outcome of what Latour brilliantly delineates as the modern constitution, with its three guarantees: first, 'even though we construct Nature, Nature is as if we did not construct it'; second, 'even though we do not construct Society, Society is as if we did construct it'; third, 'Nature and Society must remain absolutely distinct'.[35] And these guarantees, including the last boundary, are strictly policed; indeed, a great deal of what we call 'education' goes into their maintenance. Not surprisingly, a contract that is at once imperialistically parochial and dogmatically arbitrary requires considerable institutionalised enforcement to naturalise.

Relationism, by contrast, is all about relations: practices, instruments, documents and translations. This focus only becomes possible with the realisation that 'the very notion of culture is an artifact created by bracketing Nature off. Cultures … do not exist, any more than Nature does. There are only natures–cultures, and these offer the only possible basis for comparison.'[36] Nature–cultures, subject–objects, local–globals – these are the appropriate *foci* of analysis. And they are constituted by networks, which themselves 'are simultaneously real, like nature; narrated, like discourse; and collective, like society'.[37] Not an essence, then, nor even poles, but a process: one which is all of these things, and which *produces* both humans and nonhumans (as well as divinities). That last distinction is therefore neither fundamental nor foundational.[38]

6.

The third author I want to bring in here is the anthropologist Tim Ingold. He too points out that to be consistent, not only 'must the concept of nature be regarded as a cultural construct, but so also must that of culture.'[39] But that leads to an infinite regress. Furthermore, the givenness of the nature/culture distinction is assumed by both scientists and humanists, even though it is markedly absent (even rejected) by hunterer–gather societies. 'Anthropological accounts, however, typically present this view as entailing a particular social and cultural construction of nature, thereby reproducing the very dichotomy that, in other contexts, is recognized as peculiar to the Western tradition.'[40]

Recalling Latour's 'modern constitution', it is an axiom of this contingent and peculiar view, so confidently universalised, that personhood is a state of being not open to nonhuman animals. While humans 'are both persons and organisms, animals are all organism'. That is the condition for tolerating the moral/biological conflation of 'humanity', and for conducting enquiries into the animality of human beings while ruling out any into the humanity of nonhuman animals.[41] To quote Evernden's parallel analysis again, 'There can be no exceptions: Nature is the realm of necessity, and there is no room for self-willed beings with purposes of their own.'[42]

Ingold therefore suggests that instead, we 'follow the lead of hunter–gatherers in taking the human condition to be that of a being immersed from the start, like other creatures, in an active, practical and perceptual engagement with constituents of the dwelt-in world … apprehending the world is not a matter of construction but of engagement, not of building but of dwelling, not of making a view *of* the world but of taking up a view *in* it.'[43] It further follows that personhood 'is open equally to human and non-human animal (and even non-animal) kinds', since they share a common ontological status, 'by virtue of their mutual involvement, as undivided centres of action and awareness, within a continuous life process'. (Again, this is very close to Smith's account.) 'In this process', he continues, 'the relations that human beings have with one another form just one part of the total field of relations embracing all living things. There can, then, be no radical break between social and ecological relations; rather, the former constitute a *subset* of the latter.'[44] Interestingly, this conclusion resonates with that arrived at by (to my mind) the most incisive ecocentric philosopher to date, the late Richard Sylvan: 'the ecological community forms the ethical community'.[45]

7.

Let us pause for reflection. I have argued that realism/ objectivism is both false (in terms of the relevant debates) and, more to the point, unhelpful at best and highly destructive at worst in its effects in the larger world. I have also pointed out that in both its assumptions and its procedures, subjectivism, the former's apparent adversary, often colloborates with it. But the basic point is that since it is fundamentally shared by constructionists, the appropriate way to describe that mode cannot be as 'realism' or 'objectivism'. I would therefore like to reconstrue the fundamental problem as *essentialist monism*, understanding the latter term to include the dualisms that often comprise it. What I mean by this is a world-view (including an epistemology) which views universally true knowledge – supposedly licensed by the objects of its inquiry, which are considered to have ultimately stable or permanent 'natures' – as an achievable goal, even if only in principle. It is then obliged to maintain this fiction, in practice, through

contingent supplementations which, since they are theoretically and ideologically illicit, cannot be recognised and discussed without the danger of heresy.[46] It is, in Kenneth Burke's apt phrase, 'rotten with perfection'.[47]

It is a secondary consideration whether the 'laws' laid down are material, social, or spiritual. The *modus operandi* is the same in all cases, and indeed is clearly traceable from its Christian monotheistic and Greek philosophical roots to its modernist–humanist heir, with universal scientific truth standing in for the one God, and reason for revelation (still subject to authorisation, of course) as its sole licit guarantor. As Weber perceived, its foundational premise is the *belief* that there is a single reference point whereby 'one can, in principle, master all things by calculation'.[48] Such monism is necessarily also universalist, since if there is only one such principle it must, by definition, apply everywhere without exception. Of course, to ensure that the one truth – which is not self-evident – is 'correctly' perceived and promulgated, a priesthood of approved interpreters is also required … and so on. As Laclau and Mouffe say, this point is decisive: there can be no radical and plural democracy, as opposed to authoritarian absolutism (whether overt or covert), 'without renouncing the discourse of the universal and its assumption of a privileged point of access to "the truth", which can be reached only by a limited number of subjects'.[49]

This mode is also profoundly implicated in the ecological crisis, insofar as it chiefly facilitates the disenchantment of the world – a practical prerequisite to its desecration, commodification, marketing and sale. It is also almost impossible to subscribe to a monist universalism without ultimately rejecting limits (since it is, by definition, without any) – another key element of anti-ecological modernity. Yet note that ecological fundamentalism, by merely replacing the one true and universal God, or secular Truth, with a mystical Nature (even Gaia), would leave the logic untouched, thereby itself becoming the enemy of what it wants to save. Monist essentialist discourse as such is *tendentially* anti-ecological, regardless of the content of its privileged signifier.

Since both realism and constructionism are varieties of essentialism, the contrary needs a term. In ways already discussed, dualism commonly functions as a tacit part of essentialist monism, which it tacitly supports by providing what the latter aims to absorb, and thus a *raison d'être*. So the relevant conceptual pair, as Viveiros de Castro says, is 'monism and pluralism: multiplicity, not duality, is the paired complement of … monism'.[50] There is no ideal name for this idea. Viveiros himself suggests 'perspectivism'. Smith has bravely stuck with 'relativism', but the tide of misunderstanding (not helped, as I have said, by some of its apparent advocates) continues to run strong.[51] As the editors of a recent collection put it, 'The spectre of relativism haunts pluralism…'[52] That the spectre is a gross and vulgar caricature is neither here nor there.[53] That is undoubtedly why Latour chose instead 'relationism', but establishing a neologism is also a lengthy and risky prospect. Another alternative, 'non-essentialism', is purely negative. That may well be a virtue, of course, but I would like to chance my arm on a positive term nonetheless, namely *relational pluralism*.

The ontic dimension of this world-view may be summed up as contingency (of which necessity is a special limiting case), which analytically entails plurality, which in turn entails relations.[54] In Louis MacNeice's words – and those of a good poet are apt to be as least as accurate as any – 'World is crazier and more of it than we think,/ Incorrigibly plural'.[55] The epistemology accordingly recognises the relatively local, temporary, incomplete and provisional nature of all knowledge (which is not, however, therefore impossible or illusory), and indeed of everything *qua* thing, of whatever kind.

Conversely, in this view there is no need to establish 'the truth' in the usual objectivist sense, as distinct from a rhetorical–pragmatic consensus (but not in the same sense, i.e. 'merely': as if any other kind were in practice possible). A 'universe that is a hundred percent relational…[is] one in which there would be no distinctions between primary and secondary qualities of substances, or between "brute facts" and "institutional facts"…'[56]

Such pluralism breaks with the monist metaphysic embodied in the modern constitution which arrogates agency, intelligence and value to humanity alone, and instead locates it (so to speak) in the unbounded network of interactions – the 'more-than-human'[57] – of which humanity is but a part, however distinctive: 'uniquely human without any sense of special privilege'.[58] *It is therefore 'necessarily' ecocentric.* (Necessarily, that is, within the terms of the limited and contingent discourse that constitutes it.) The alternative is a pseudo-pluralism that arbitrarily limits itself to the human, and imposes an absolutist monism on the rest of nature. By exactly the same token – that unbounded and therefore ultimately unboundable network (for want of a better single word) – ecocentrism, properly so-called, *is 'necessarily' pluralist*. The alternative is a pathological ecocentrism which either includes humanity in nature but effectively eliminates it in a collectivist subordination that reproduces the logic of monist essentialism – or else excludes it from nature, thus reinforcing the dualism of the modernist dead-end.

To some extent, this double conclusion follows directly from work I have already discussed, and I have simply drawn it. So rather than reiterate that work beyond the extent I already have, I will devote the rest of what follows to aspects that seem important but have not (so far as I know) already been explored. But I would like to acknowledge that ecocentric pluralism is not the only positive or promising way around; or to put the matter another way, it is itself 'multiply configurable', with a family resemblance surviving the resulting differences of emphasis. Together with the authors I have mentioned above, it resonates strongly with the deep-green ethics of Richard Sylvan;[59] the pioneering work of Gregory Bateson and its further development by Maturana and Varela;[60] the emphasis on situated and embodied 'barefoot' epistemology by ecofeminists such as Ariel Salleh and Val Plumwood,[61] and in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, as brilliantly articulated by Abram;[62] and the importance, recently rediscovered (by intellectuals), of local knowledge.[63] David Wiggins has recently employed analytical philosophy to good effect in this connection.[64] Although

their potential green dimension has not yet been developed, to my knowledge, there are also clear connections with the pragmatism and pluralism of William James;[65] the post-critical philosophy inspired by Michael Polanyi's concept of 'tacit knowledge';[66] and the 'forms of life' of the later Wittgenstein.[67] And I would like to mention that the oldest and almost certainly most sophisticated critique of essentialism of all – not excepting that of Derrida, with which there is a significant and tantalising overlap[68] – is that of the second/third century philosopher Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna, based on the concepts of *anatman* (nonself), *sunyata* (emptiness) and *pratitya samutpada* (co-dependent origination). Obviously, I have neither space nor, very often, competence to follow up these encouraging connections here.

What is less encouraging is the dire state of much specifically environmental discourse today. Before proceeding to the unexplored aspects of eco-pluralism just mentioned, a brief review of the current alternatives which dominate the literature today might be salutary.

8.

Let us take the influential recent work of William Cronon as an instance of the constructionist school. His starting-point is a radical split between nature and culture. Token acknowledgement of the reality of the former is soon swept away by his assertion of 'the universal nature of nature'.[69] The other side of this conveniently blank screen is that culture, by contrast – and therefore professional cultural expertise – is all-determining. Ironically, this is a parochial cultural assumption; in Amerindian cosmology, as Viveiros de Castro has shown, culture is the universal given that assumes particular natural forms.[70] And as Anna Peterson, like Ingold, points out, 'Claims about the social construction of nature rely, ultimately … on a self-contradictory assumption that culture is both a human invention and the basis from which everything else is brought into being'.[71]

Cronon thus reproduces precisely what he is ostensibly criticising: 'the dangerous dualism that sets human beings outside of nature'.[72] That outcome follows from his chosen strategy, which is not to encompass human–nature interactions, within the larger meta-natural ambit, in a way that would reveal how these two mutually constitute and change each other beyond any hope of self-sufficient purity, but rather to absorb and thus eliminate the natural pole altogether. And I mean *eliminate* the natural – in the sense of what Evernden calls 'the wild',[73] which is Cronon's real target – initially as anything that should, or indeed can, be considered, but even as an experience; and ultimately, as a reality. It seems that in Cronon's ideal world there would be no wilderness: not in his rhetorical definition of places where there are or have been no people, but in the sense correctly proposed by David Wiggins: 'not as that which is free of all trace

of our interventions … but as that which has not been entirely instrumentalized by human artifice, and as something to be cherished … in ways that outrun all considerations of profit.'[74] This ideal is perfectly clear: Cronon writes that in 'its flight from history, in its siren-song of escape … wilderness poses a serious threat to responsible environmentalism'. And since his constructionism subsumes wilderness as a natural place under wilderness as a cultural construct, the way is open to view the former as the problem. It is therefore unsurprising to find him adding a pitch for the 'management' of ecosystems that would, if successful, eliminate the last vestiages of the wild – *per impossibile*, but not incapable of doing great harm in the attempt .[75]

I am also strongly reminded of a shrewd remark that most critics of 'escapism'

> are confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter. Just so a Party-spokesman might have labelled departure from the misery of the Führer's or any other Reich and even criticism of it as treachery. In the same way these critics, to make confusion worse, and so to bring into contempt their opponents, stick their label of scorn not only onto desertion but on to real escape, and what are often its companions, disgust, anger, condemnation, and revolt…[76]

It seems to me that such modernist fervour does indeed supply the animus with which many constructionists attempt, gross inconsistency nothwithstanding, 'to identify the presumptively universal truth and compell it universally' (and Smith's percipient words bear repeating): that nature 'is', for everyone, everywhere and all time, strictly an invention, artefact or construction. So, like Kenneth Anderson, I too do not see 'why committed radical ecologists should accept being roped back into the coral of modernist progressivism … [seeking] in the end to draw radical ecology into the "conversation" of bureaucracy and managerialism, from which, once drawn in, it will go nowhere that "progress" does not approve it should go.'[77]

There are, of course, other less egregiously anti-ecocentric modernists in the same general camp. One is Bryan G. Norton; but even he falls into an unnecessary and damaging gulf between 'objective' and 'subjective' value in nature. He rightly wants to avoid the realist essentialism associated with the former, but thinks that in order to do so we must reject ecocentrism – wrongly, if the former's colonisation of nature is rejected. He sees the unavoidable role of experience in realising value, but thinks that it must be supported by 'objective' empirical verification – wrongly, if experience is not devalued, as in the realist fantasy of 'objective knowledge', as 'merely' subjective.[78] And he rejects the concept of intrinsic value in nature as monist – wrongly again, if ecocentrism is, as I have argued, pluralist. Norton's pluralism is laudable, then, but his unnecessary anthropocentrism subverts it.[79]

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9.

If this side of the debate is dispiriting, the realists are arguably still more so. There is no better example than Holmes Rolston III and his defence of 'Nature for Real', who answers his own question, 'Is Nature a Social Construct?' with a resounding 'no'. But what he really means is, is nature *only* a social construct? And it is perfectly possible (indeed, important) to answer that question in the negative without drawing the conclusion that nature is therefore real in the objectivist and *a fortiori* scientistic sense.

Rolston's work is littered with language which begs the principal question at hand, and concepts which simply assume as foundational, without any argument, a Cartesian objective/subjective divide, and the priority of the former pole.

> Trees are not *really* green after we have learned about electromagnetic radiation and the optics of our eyes.… There is a realm *out there*, labelled nature … Cupitt is right that there is 'no "pure" and extra-historical access to nature'; but does it follow that nothing in our '…representations of nature' represents what is *actually there* in '*Nature itself*'?'[80]

It seems that Rolston has failed to grasp the point that since what is 'really there' can only ever be apprehended through the results of interacting with it (whether or not these interactions are technologically enhanced), representations can only ever be compared to other representations; or that representations would certainly be impossible without nature, but it does not necessarily follow that they are representations *of* nature. Nothing daunted, he proceeds to decree that as a result of accumulated sifting and testing, 'we in the West', enlightened as we are, have scientific concepts about nature which 'are true, or at least truer to the world, than the concepts they have replaced.'[81] Flourishing a vulgar and circular Darwinianism – survival entails fitness and fitness entails survival – he concludes that we (but exactly who?) have successfully coped (this may just be premature) 'because words *copy* enough of a world that lies *on the other side of language* for us to survive and flourish'.[82] At the risk of belabouring the obvious, words cannot 'copy' worlds, and we can never reach the other side of language, or rather – and this is a vital distinction, to which I shall return – discourse; at least, not knowingly. The Earth is at once both utterly real *and* unavoidably a 'web we have spun': real, narrated and collective, as Latour puts it.[83] As it happens, I thoroughly applaud Rolston's ecocentrism; but monist realism is not the way to go about furthering that cause.

Another monist-realist is J. Baird Callicott. His approach is more subtle, pointing out that nature can be valued for itself but not in itself, and calling for a theory of non-instrumental value in nature that is 'neither subjectivist nor objectivist'.[84] In practice, however, this goal is sacrificed to yet another realist attempt to occupy and eliminate lived experience. Assuming that experienced value is 'merely' subjective – as if 'objective' value, to which the latter is

implicitly compared, were ever actually possible – Callicott has decided that it must be grounded and justified by scientific naturalism. He thus falls back into the same scientism as Rolston: 'scientific foundations are universally endorsed' (far from true, even in 'the West' – and even *if* true, no bridge to 'the truth'); reality can 'corroborate our representation of it' (as if recourse to another representation, and the resulting infinite regress, could somehow be bypassed); and that old self-serving chestnut that 'the institution of science is self-correcting' (even if granted, self-correcting in relation to what?).[85]

'Reality' here is an empty signifier which assumes what is to be shown, and whose value can never be cashed in in the way Callicott intends (i.e., 'objectively' and 'scientifically' rather than rhetorically and strategically). It is also the emblem *par excellence* of science at its most aggressively modernist and imperialist: precisely what Feyerabend described as 'the attempt to enforce a universal truth (a universal way of finding truth) [which] has led to disasters in the social domain' – to say nothing of the ecological – and to empty formalisms combined with never-to-be-fulfilled promises in the natural sciences'.[86] That Callicott determinedly advocates science as 'epistemologically privileged' in the course of an otherwise excellent survey of non-scientific perceptions, conceptions and valuations of the natural world is extraordinary. Fortunately, it is open to pluralists to avail themselves of his valuable findings without accepting the prejudice that frames them.[87]

10.

Before concluding this survey, we must briefly consider the case of scientific humanists like Tim Hayward, Kate Soper and John O'Neill, who combine an ideology of scientific naturalism with the 'left' cultural politics of constructionism. Avowedly adherents of 'the anthropocentric principle of enlightened self-interest',[88] one of their principal aims (to quote Hayward) 'is to identify the ecological values that are implied by or are consistent with human interests'[89] – a project, in other words, that in the case of any conflicts between human and nonhuman interests would *automatically* award the palm to the former. And as strict subscribers to the modern constitution, like good constructionists, they arrogate subjectivity, agency and meaning to human subjectivity alone; but the resulting denatured 'nature', redefined as 'global resources' for solely human ends, is then turned over to scientific realists for its 'rational management'. This manoevre enables them to enlist in both camps of the debate.

Scientific humanists also attack those who perversely hold to the kind of experience of nature that is most resistant to such a programme (and I quote O'Neill) for their 'anti-scientific, mythologized and personalized picture of the natural world'.[90] But such scientism is not merely question-begging in assuming that nature is exhausted by what natural science defines it as; in its contempt for

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all qualitative, sensuous and spiritual experience of nature as merely 'secondary' in the Galilean sense (no coincidence),[91] it plays directly into hands of those whose programme involves the further privatisation and manipulation of humanity and nonhuman nature alike. And in relation to the latter, I would just remind the reader that humanity has already appropriated almost half of the planet's photosynthetic energy, re-ordered and impoverished a massive amount of its land surface, and is currently driving forward a mass extinction of other species. In this context, a determination to cut ecologism to fit human interests and demands amounts to saying something like this: 'Come come, be realistic. The ruling species will have its way, so rather than make unreasonable demands let us ask how we may soften the blow.' In short, by combining monist essentialism with anthropocentrism in ecological guise, the scientific humanists promulgate a particularly insidious form of 'modernisation'. Not surprisingly, perhaps, most of the scientific humanists' political provenance is broadly Marxist; but it seems fair to ask that with enemies of neo-liberal globalisation like this, what need has the latter of friends?

11.

The upshot of the preceding review of the literature is this: to the extent that the purpose of so-called environmental philosophy is to promote thinking about nonhuman nature – especially as part of acting towards it – in ways that understand it, respect its integrity, value its presence and protect its future, then much of that philosophy is in a rather sorry state. Obviously there are exceptions, some of whom I have mentioned and drawn upon. But I hope that in my discussion, some of the positive potential of ecopluralism, in contrast, will be evident. In any case, it should now be clear that the absolutist essentialism of both objectivist realists like Rolston or Callicott and subjectivist constructionists like Cronon, as well as the humanist hybrids, is both untenable and destructive; likewise the dualist metaphysic (mind/matter, culture/nature, inner/outer, etc.) they also share. Theirs is a phony war, and a costly distraction from the real and urgent issues. An eco-pluralist position – or better, perhaps, direction[92] – has powerfully positive implications for the questions of instrumental *vs.* intrinsic value and anthropocentrism *vs.* ecocentrism, for example, which there is unfortunately insufficient space here to explore.

NOTES

RE-THINKING NATURE

[1] I am principally concerned here with what we know and believe (the epistemic), but not in a way that assumes it can cleanly be separated from what actually is (the ontic); the latter may determine what we know about it, but since it only acquires existence for us (let alone meaning) insofar as it is known, that knowing is itself, for all intents and purposes, ontically determining. Nor do I think the epistemic can avoid an irreducible normative dimension, which introduces unavoidable value, ethical and political considerations. A brief explanation of my terminology: I say 'epistemic' rather than 'epistemological', and so forth, because my subject is human knowing (cognising, theorising, communicating), not the secondary philosophical orrery of 'the justification of true beliefs', etc.

[2] Midgley 1997: 95.

[3] Ekins 1992.

[4] Peters 1980: 194. Some of Peters's colleagues might feel it unwise to admit there *is* a price, of course.

[5] Evernden 1985: 23.

[6] *Times Higher Education Supplement* (2.3.01): 25.

[7] Livingstone 1981: 33. See also Orton 2000.

[8] E.g. the recent work of Gregg Easterbrook, Richard North, Daniel Botkin and Stephen Budiansky.

[9] Evernden 1985:10; cf. Ehrenfeld 1976.

[10] Schama 1995: 9–10.

[11] Cronon 1995: 25, 69.

[12] For a good analysis of the difficult relations between ecology and postmodern cultural studies, see Drinkwater 1996. See also Briggs 2001.

[13] Jordanova 1987. (She is actually taking Keith Thomas, in his *Man and the Natural World* (1983) to task for being insufficiently anthropocentric.)

[14] Feyerabend 1995: 164.

[15] Snyder 1998.

[16] Viveiros de Castro 1998.

[17] Derrida 1988: 136. Cf. 'everything may be political, but politics isn't everything': Mala Singh, quoted by Michael Lambek, quoted to me by Edwardo Viveiros de Castro (personal communication).

[18] Tester 1991: 16 (I have deleted the disingenuously tentative padding); Benton 1993: 65–6; this discussion is taken from from Fudge 2000.

[19] Viveiros de Castro (personal communication).

[20] With the striking exception of Hayles's fine paper therein.

[21] Evernden 1992: 95, citing Jonas 1982: 16; cf. Latour 1993.

[22] Quoted in Evernden 1992: 27; it would be possible to quote de Man, for example, to the same exact effect.

[23] B.H. Smith 1988:179.

[24] Bahro 1994: 72.

[25] Bateson, 1979; Abram 1996: 67.

[26] B.H. Smith 1988: 151, 148.

[27] B.H. Smith 1997: 6.

[28] B.H. Smith 1988: 175.

[29] B.H. Smith 1997: 32.

[30] B.H. Smith 1988: 175.

[31] See B.H. Smith 1997, ch.5.

[32] Latour 1993: 113.

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[33] Latour 1993: 119.
[34] Evernden 1992: 60.
[35] Latour 1993: 22; cf. Latour 1999.
[36] Latour 1993: 104.
[37] Latour 1993: 6.
[38] Cf. the brilliant paper by Viveiros de Castro.
[39] Ingold 1996: 120–1.
[40] Ellen and Fukui 1996: 8 (paraphrasing Ingold).
[41] Ingold 1996: 130–31.
[42] Evernden 1992: 56.
[43] Ingold 1996:121.
[44] Ingold 1996: 131, 150; my italics.
[45] Sylvan and Bennett 1994: 191.
[46] My analysis draws on Laclau and Mouffe 1985.
[47] Simons and Melia 1989: 263. (With thanks to Laurence Coupe for this quotation.)
[48] Weber 1991: 139; cf. Kontos 1994.
[49] Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 191–2.
[50] Viveiros de Castro 1998.
[51] Cf. perhaps Stanley Fish, as quoted in *The New Yorker* (11.6.01) p. 71: 'I keep saying the same thing and getting misunderstood in the same way.'
[52] Baghramian and Ingram 2000.
[53] Something that realists can only explain by recourse to delusion, fraud, etc., but that a relativist sees as a normal and ineliminable aspect of the nature of discourse (which can, however, be contested in specific cases).
[54] Again, see Laclau and Mouffe 1985, especially Chapter 4. 'Plurality is not the phenomenon to be explained, but the starting point of the analysis' (p.140).
[55] MacNeice 1966: 30.
[56] Viveiros de Castro 1998 (referring to Searle 1995).
[57] Abram 1996.
[58] Snyder 1990: 68.
[59] Sylvan and Bennet 1994.
[60] Bateson 1972, 1979; Maturana and Varela 1980, 1987; and see Capra 1997.
[61] E.g. Salleh 1997, Plumwood 1993.
[62] Abram 1996.
[63] Scott 1998.
[64] Wiggins 1998.
[65] See O'Shea 2000.
[66] Polanyi 1958, and (e.g.) Scarborough 1994.
[67] Wittgenstein 1958. (Not 'language-games', a misleading term which is too frequently misunderstood.)
[68] V. Magliola 1984.
[69] Cronon 1995: 35.
[70] Viveiros de Castro 1998.
[71] Peterson 1999: 354.
[72] Cronon 1995: 81.
[73] Evernden 1992, who also rightly locates the wild 'in' as well as 'outside' human beings. Cf. Drinkwater 1996.
[74] Wiggins 2000: 10.

[75] Cronon 1995: 81.
[76] Tolkien 1988: 56.
[77] Anderson 1995.
[78] Norton 1991; and see McQuillan 1998 and Preston 1998.
[79] For a good discussion, see Minteer 2001.
[80] Rolston 1997: 38, 42, 50; my italics.
[81] Rolston 1997: 42.
[82] Rolston 1997: 58; my italics.
[83] Rolston 1997: 58.
[84] Callicott 1985: 367.
[85] Callicott 1997: 189, 176.
[86] Feyerabend 1987: 61.
[87] Callicott 1994; and see the discussion in *Worldviews* vol.1 no.2 (1997).
[88] Hayward 1994: 71.
[89] Hayward 1998: 16.
[90] Quoted in Soper 1995: 276.
[91] Cf. Abram 1996.
[92] As F.M. Alexander is supposed to have remarked, 'There is no such thing as a right position, but there is a right direction.'

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