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# Natural Subjects: Nature and Political Community

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ABSTRACT

Environmental political theory poses new challenges to our received political concepts and values. Increasingly, we are reconceptualising nature as a *subject* rather than solely an object of politics. On one front, we are being challenged to think of natural entities as subjects of justice – as bearers of rights or interests that the political system should accommodate. On a second front, we are being challenged to see nature as a subject of power, constructed and ordered through scientific and political practice. These reconceptualisations have significant implications for our political practices and institutions.

KEY WORDS

Nature, power, justice, environmental politics, environmental justice, Green political theory

Is protecting the environment a political matter? Much of the discourse surrounding environmental policy suggests that it isn't. When we approach environmental conflicts from a purely scientific perspective – as problems needing technological solutions – politics may look like nothing more than a constraint on our ability to impose better technological regimes on the natural world. On the other hand, when we approach environmental conflicts as a matter of individual ethics, it's tempting to elide politics simply by assuming we're addressing individuals who have the capacity to make choices that matter. Political theorists, in contrast, typically reject both of these perspectives; they see politics everywhere. First, they view science itself as political. Scientists are part of a political system aimed at imposing order on the social and natural worlds, and the scientific study of nature is itself a political process (a point that I hope I can clarify later). Second, political theorists typically don't assume that individuals have the capacity for

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free choice. Instead, they focus on how social systems structure, constrain and sometimes eliminate individual choice. From this perspective, environmental issues are fundamentally political.

Fortunately, the western philosophical tradition gives us a rich stock of resources for thinking about the political dimension of our relationship to the environment. Of course, numerous scholars have criticised this tradition for its anthropocentrism and its mechanistic concept of nature, which would seem to work against viewing the natural world as anything other than raw material for humans to use as they will (White 1967; Ehrenfeld 1978; Meyer 2001). But this tradition is richer and more complex than those criticisms would suggest, and offers a valuable set of concepts for understanding our contemporary environmental condition. It is after all centrally concerned with the problems raised by resource scarcity and competition, humans' animal nature and the inhospitability of the natural world to human ends. We inherit from the classical philosophers the view that humans are neither animals nor gods but share characteristics of each. We inhabit a middle territory between wilderness and heaven, trying to survive in a dangerously unpredictable world and to deal with beings – both human and nonhuman – whose purposes are independent of and sometimes in competition with our own (Glacken 1967; Taylor 2002: 180). Politics, under this view, is aimed at making a collective home for ourselves in this mutable and sometimes hostile world. So this tradition is largely concerned with the just allocation of resources, the form and bounds of competition, the tension between self-interest and the public good, the problems of creating durable, transgenerational communities in an unstable environment, and the challenge of arranging social life to accommodate our biological needs.

As a result, many of our political concepts have proven well-suited to dealing with environmental issues. For example, environmental justice advocates use traditional understandings of distributive justice to contest the distribution of environmental harms and benefits, and the language of rights to seek greater participation in environmental policy making. Advocates for sustainable development can draw on our long tradition of conceptualising the political community as something that extends through time and therefore has to achieve intergenerational continuity. For that matter, much of environmental politics is best understood, quite conventionally, as using political institutions to deal with collective action problems.

Nevertheless, contemporary environmental theory does pose some new challenges to our received understandings of justice and politics. Increasingly, we are moving toward reconceptualising nature as a *subject* rather than solely an object of politics. That reconceptualisation marks a dramatic transformation in how we value the natural world, and has significant implications for public policy and political institutions. My aim here is to review some of this recent thinking in environmental political theory with a view toward mapping out the difficulties and implications of taking natural entities as subjects of politics.

I.

First, one of the central themes in contemporary environmental theory is the claim that we should think of nature not simply as something to be justly distributed but as a subject of justice itself. Aldo Leopold famously argued that humans are members of a biotic community whose nonhuman members can be recipients of justice (or injustice) (Leopold [1949] 1966: 237–64). Animal rights' theorists have similarly argued that animals have the characteristics of rights-bearing entities, such as interests, agency and the capacity for suffering (Singer 1977; Jamieson 2002). These characteristics make coherent the concept of domination of or injustice toward animals. Christopher Stone would extend *legal* rights even further, to trees and other nonsentient entities, on the grounds that such rights can serve as a useful device to incorporate the interests of nonhumans into policy making (Stone 1974). This technique doesn't require that we attribute full agency or equal moral status to nonhumans, of course; it's enough to assert that they have interests that can be accommodated with our own.

This line of argument, however, assumes that we can *identify* the interests of nonhuman entities. This is a tricky business: How do we determine the interest of entities that can't speak for themselves, and with whom we can't readily empathise? Some theorists have addressed this question by suggesting that even nonsentient entities must have an interest in physical integrity, in the unfolding of their potential, or in proper 'functioning' (Rodman 1983; Low and Gleeson 1998; Gillroy 2000). Thus articulating an entity's interest involves making judgments about its natural functioning. But that simply reformulates the original problem: how do we determine an entity's natural functioning? We could ask ecologists (that seems to be a popular position among ecologists), but we're going to run into trouble when we try to define 'natural'. Do we mean without human interference? That might restrict our ability to apply this approach to domesticated animals and plants. And in any case, aren't humans part of the natural world? How do we justify leaving their impacts out of the definition of 'natural'? Even more problematically, this approach requires us to explain what makes 'natural' normative. After all, an ecosystem might flourish better (by some criteria) if we did interfere and manage it.

These are perplexing issues. But such philosophical puzzles aren't necessarily a barrier to developing a politics that takes nature as a subject of justice. In practice, it's often enough to secure a rough, workable consensus that it's not in the interests of wolves to lose most of their habitat, that forests don't benefit from being clear-cut, and that most species wouldn't volunteer to become extinct. This might be what John Rawls calls an overlapping consensus – that is, we all agree on what's in the forests' interests but disagree about the philosophical grounds for that conclusion (Rawls 1999: 340). But, as some environmental pragmatists have suggested, even a more tentative consensus without much in the way of philosophical foundations can still serve as the basis for extending

justice to nature (Light 1996). Politics, in practice, doesn't need very secure philosophical foundations.

Still, politics is a collective enterprise, and we do need some way to talk to each other about what justice toward nature might mean. Liberal political theory offers the notion of a social contract, but is it possible to extend the social contract to include nonhuman entities? The project seems rife with difficulties, but perhaps not intractable ones – particularly if our goals are the limited ones of *re-cognition* and *re-evaluation*: knowing and valuing the natural world in a different way. If we look at the social contract theory of Thomas Hobbes, for example, we find that the barriers to including animals in the contract are surprisingly weak. Under Hobbes' view, at least some animals are capable of killing humans and have a degree of prudence, which makes them roughly equal to at least some humans. (We might find the same characteristics even in some non-sentient entities, if we're willing to define 'prudence' broadly.) It turns out that the only reason we can't form contracts with such nonhumans is because they can't speak (Hobbes [1651] 1968: 197). If we can think of ways of communicating with nonhuman beings (which, as suggested below, may not be impossible), even that barrier begins to look pretty flimsy.

True, to many political theorists the idea of a contract with nonhumans seems inapt. John Rawls refused to extend his contract doctrine to nonhumans on the grounds that they lack the capacity for a sense of justice (Rawls 1999: 448). Robyn Eckersley, too, concedes that there is something 'strained and ungainly' about extending to the nonhuman world concepts that have been tailored to protect human interests. To do so, she suggests, seems to involve anthropomorphising natural entities (Eckersley 1992: 58–9). More troublesome, I think, is that to make a contract one also must have the ability to conform one's behaviour to rules generated through social processes; most natural entities don't have that capacity. On the other hand, many humans (infants, the mentally deranged, etc.) lack a sense of justice, the capacity to conform their behaviour to rules, and even the capacity to consent. And some animals (most dogs, for example) do seem to have some sense of fairness and can follow rules. Surely the easy distinction between humans and animals – that all humans are moral persons and all animals are not – has been substantially undermined by the animal rights theorists mentioned above.

Moreover, one could argue that the rational human who enacts the social contract is itself an idealisation – we might even say an anthropomorphisation, a representation of a being whose consent would be able to legitimate the exercise of power. The fact that many humans don't live up to the contractarian ideal isn't a problem for the theory; after all, we generally don't use contract theory to decide whom to exclude from the protection of the social contract but merely as a heuristic device to think about how to exercise power legitimately. Rawls, for example, would extend his contract to anyone with the potential capacity for a sense of justice – even if that potential will never be realised due

to some accident. Anyone who could contract if not for fortuitous circumstances is included (Rawls 1999: 442–446). His reason for setting the bar so low seems to be a concern not to exclude anyone our moral intuitions tell us is a moral person – and, importantly, to ensure that our *institutions* are structured on an inclusive basis. It's not difficult to extend this rationale to cover at least some nonhuman entities.

In fact, Rawls notwithstanding, I believe we often do use this sort of thinking to decide what rules and punishments are reasonable to impose on our pets. In effect, we ask what rules the family dog might agree to if he could give consent, making the necessary trade-offs between his self-interest and the common good. To complain that this sort of thinking anthropomorphises natural entities is to miss the point of the exercise, which is to bring into play our own sense of justice when we attempt to control nonhuman entities, the better to *recognise* those entities and attend to their distinctive ends and ways of being. In other words, the social contract idea can help us think and feel differently about our relations with the natural world – to see ourselves as governors, judges and representatives of subjects with their own purposes and interests. If natural entities have independent ends and some degree of agency, and human society is attempting to govern and order the natural world, then it makes sense to recognise and legitimate that exercise of power by drawing on the political concepts of law, justice, rights and duties. (Or, more provocatively, if it still doesn't make sense to do so, then perhaps we should reconsider whether those concepts make sense as applied to humans. Reconceptualisation can go both ways, as I will suggest below.)

Even if we can manage these conceptual difficulties, however, expanding the boundaries of political duty in this way poses significant challenges for citizens and policy makers. As citizens, for example, we would have to take more seriously our moral duties to nonhumans in making political decisions. Advocates of ecological citizenship have given a good deal of attention to delineating the grounds of those duties, what they consist in and to whom they are owed (Dobson 2003; Barry 2002; Light 2002). These questions raise additional philosophical problems, of course. But the primary challenge of ecological citizenship, I would suggest, lies not in understanding our duties to nature but in figuring out how to fulfil them. This is where an individualistic perspective – approaching environmental problems as a matter of individual ethics – is constraining, because it doesn't give us much insight into the social, political and economic structures that support or undermine individual agency. Those structures can make it difficult even to fulfil our duties to other humans; ecological citizenship requires that we attend to the interests of a myriad of nonhuman entities as well. This conception of citizenship is enormously demanding, and none of our political institutions – from our individualistic voting system to the nation-state itself – is designed to support it.

Ecological citizenship would therefore require new institutions designed to help citizens make informed and responsible choices, and to ensure representation of and accountability to nonhuman entities. For example, some theorists have suggested that we open up democratic decision making to communication from nature, aiming at an ecological reflexivity by attending to 'signals' from nature (Schlosberg 2005; Mills 1996; Dryzek 1998). Under this proposal, we would build into our decision making processes mechanisms for noticing and responding to feedback from natural systems. Of course, political systems already do respond to signals from nature, in a rough way: when there's a flood, for example, people complain and the government takes some action in response. But typically political systems respond only to natural events affecting humans (and perhaps only some humans, depending on the system). What is needed are devices, such as environmental accounting or proxies, that bring to our collective attention natural events that don't directly and immediately harm humans but are nevertheless signs of natural entities in distress. In other words, we need better, more creative ways to communicate collectively with the nonhuman world.

In addition, ecological citizenship requires us to rethink political space, or the physical boundaries of the community of justice. Natural systems aren't bound by the nation-state, so (under this view) our political duties aren't, either. Of course, those boundaries have always been problematic, since human relationships and state actions have never fully respected them. But environmental problems seem particularly resistant to physical confinement; it's often necessary to think both globally and locally at the same time. The challenge here is developing authoritative, inclusive processes for transnational, subnational and multi-level decision making. This is not to suggest that we must centralise authority, as in a transnational government. Decentralising and fragmenting decision making authority can be an effective way to ensure that local interests are adequately represented and can even facilitate inter-community cooperation. However, we do need a better understanding of how and when such fragmented systems succeed in producing authoritative and effective environmental policy (Dobson 2003: 97–117; Weber 2003).

Finally, we may have to go even further and reconceptualise political rationality itself. Mark Sagoff, for example, criticises conventional cost-benefit analysis for reducing environmental goods to commodities, rather than respecting their social meaning as goods that should be valued for their own sake (Sagoff 1981). Similarly, Wendell Berry suggests that environmental decision making should begin from a deeply-felt passion and empathy for a particular place, as opposed to the abstract, objective decision making methods characteristic of modern bureaucracies and large corporations (Berry 2003: 85–105). In general, the concern is that the intrinsic value of natural entities may not be recognised under the dominant forms of political reasoning. I wouldn't want to overstate this point, of course. Our political processes taken as whole are not particularly

hostile to subjective perspectives and emotions; on the contrary, political debate in democratic polities is notoriously open to personal narrative, pathetic appeals, street theatre and other forms of expressions beyond rational-critical discourse (Smith 1999). But arguably the high salience of bureaucratic and scientific decision making in environmental politics may tend to undermine the legitimacy of those other forms of democratic discourse.

## II.

That point brings us to the second front, the reconceptualisation of nature as a subject of power. Environmental political theorists have yet to address the implications of this reconceptualisaion in depth, but the foundations for such exploration are well-established in literature on the social construction of science (Kuhn 1962; Latour and Woolgar 1979; Shapin and Schaffer 1985; Haraway 1989). This literature examines the social processes that produce scientific knowledge of nature, highlighting the politics of those processes in the laboratory and within the scientific community. The knowledge produced by these processes, in turn, enters into the political system, lending scientific authority to policy decisions. From this perspective, we don't see the scientific enterprise as standing apart from and in tension with the political enterprise. Scientific inquiry itself is structured internally by political relationships, and its apparent autonomy from the larger political system is in fact the product of policy decisions and is serving political purposes (Fischer 2000).

More deeply, however, this literature critiques the *methods* of modern scientific investigation. Those methods require the scientific community and its allies to develop strategies of control, to impose a certain sort of order on the natural world so as to make it amenable to empirical and especially experimental study. Any physics experiment illustrates the point, but even ecologists have to exert some control over the ecosystem they're studying in order to produce scientific knowledge about it. As Frank Fischer summarises, 'the model form of the experiment … proves to be more than a matter of applying a causal research design to a given reality'. Instead,

> reality is … fitted to the empirical instrument. In some cases, science gets its results by identifying and organizing those parts of reality that are amenable to the research design. In other cases, it goes beyond such selection processes to restructure the social context (Fischer 2000: 72).

In other words, modern empirical science requires that we make nature predictable in order to predict it. Of course, that project also involves imposing order on the social world, if only because we can't conduct modern science in a chaotic social environment. The research scientist has to control her human labour in the laboratory at the same time she is subjecting the nonhuman elements of her experiments to manipulation. So we should see science as part of an integrated

political system – a system of legitimated (and contested) power relationships – for ordering both human and nonhuman nature simultaneously.

That claim challenges the ideological position that scientists are merely observing rather than creating the phenomena they study. More subversively, however, it invites us to see in the practice of science a Foucauldian deployment of power. Under Foucault's view, power is not merely a repressive, negative force; rather, it creates knowledge, producing subjects and subjectivity itself. Joseph Rouse, following this line of reasoning, notes that 'power in this sense permeates the natural sciences'. Nature, he suggests, 'exists in a social milieu and shows up in definite ways in response to specific social practices'. In other words, it takes certain skills and materials, and in fact a complex set of social practices, to produce the phenomena (such as electric currents or chromosomal mutations) that are the central concern of natural scientists (Rouse 1987: 207–8, 204).

This post-positivist view of nature necessarily leads us away from liberal political theory into a messier conceptual environment where the nature/human and even the subject/object distinction tend to collapse. For example, French theorist Michel Serres offers the provocative idea that if nature is subject to scientific, technological disciplinary regimes, it is not without its oppositional strategies; it fights back, so to speak. Natural entities are not just subjects but unruly and rebellious ones. Even more disturbingly, he describes the ways in which humanity as a whole has become like an objective force of nature beyond social control. From this perspective, the natural world has become a fragile, vulnerable subject needing protection from an objectified humanity (Serres 1995: 2, 38).

Serres' way of thinking about humanity and nature seems aimed in large part at destabilising our conventional conceptual habits, but it still leaves us locked in a struggle against the natural world. A kinder if equally destabilising vision emerges from the work of Donna Haraway. Haraway similarly explores the production of natural subjects – quite literally, for example, examining the creation of nature preserves and pedigreed dogs, both artefacts of powerful social technologies. But Haraway is not merely reversing the subject/object dichotomy as Serres does; she undermines it altogether. Nature, for Haraway, is not opposed to the human, to culture. She suggests we think in terms of *nature-cultures*, recognising the deep interrelation of biology, technology and culture that structure social experience and give rise to such creatures as 'purebred German Shepherd', 'Endless Summer hydrangea' and 'philosophy professor'. Her point is not that the natural world has been hopelessly disfigured by humans. Rather, the distinction between 'natural' and 'human' needs reconsideration; humans and nonhumans are inextricably involved in 'co-constitutive relationships in which none of the partners pre-exist the relating' (Haraway 2003: 12). It is too simple, for example, to say that humans domesticated dogs – or that dogs domesticated

humans, as some would have it. Rather, we coevolved as companion species, shaping each other through our interdependence.

What does this mean for political theory and practice? Haraway's arguments arise out of reflection on our actual practices – how we currently interact with nonhumans and what meanings those transactions produce. Her point is that we should attend to these practices and take them more seriously as *political* practices. Where such attention will take us remains an open question. For example, she points out that her post-positivist view may not be compatible with a liberal animal rights discourse, but it does insist on a complex ethical (and, I would add, political) discourse. That discourse may not abandon the language of rights, contracts and justice altogether, but it may need to enrich them with new meanings to handle the complexities of interspecies relations. She cites for example the argument of Victoria Hearne: Hearne rejects the notion that rights exist preformed in independent beings, waiting to be uncovered. Rather, she suggests that animal rights *emerge out of* committed relationships between humans and animals. Both parties, Hearne argues, construct 'rights' in each other that are appropriate to their distinctive forms of happiness. Thus the question for Hearne is not what rights animals have but how a human may enter into a rights relationship with an animal (Haraway 2003: 53).

Such reconceptualisations promise to raise a host of new questions concerning our political relations with the natural world – and, for that matter, with each other. My aim here is merely to suggest that we should begin to address them more systematically. At their heart, I think, lies an epistemological issue fundamental to our relationship with the environment: how do we know nature? That is, how do we as individuals and members of a society produce scientifically and politically valid forms of knowledge about the natural world? How do we recognise and attend to the nonhumans with whom we live and work and play? By thinking broadly and creatively about those questions, we should be able to work toward a more just and peaceable community with nature.

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