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Darwinian Humanism: A Proposal for Environmental Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

There are two distinct strands within modern philosophical ethics that are relevant to environmental philosophy: an empiricist strand that seeks a naturalist account of human conduct and a humanist strand rooted in a conception of transcendent human freedom. Each strand has its appeal, but each also raises both strategic and theoretical problems for environmental philosophers. Based on a reading of Kant's critical solution to the antinomy of freedom and nature, I recommend that environmental philosophers consider the possibility of a Darwinian humanism, through which moral agents are understood as both free and causally intertwined with the natural world.

KEYWORDS

Moral agency, empiricism, humanism, phenomenology, Kant, Darwin

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am ...
Both in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it.

Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*

I. AGENTS AND PATIENTS

The mainstream of environmental ethics could be characterised as an obsession with moral patients. As Kenneth Goodpaster admonished in 1978, modern moral philosophy has generally been preoccupied with moral agency, what he calls the 'moral "take-off"', so that 'too little critical thought has been devoted to

the flight and its destination' (Goodpaster, 1978: 310). To correct the problem, environmental ethicists have turned their attention to the moral considerability, legal standing, or intrinsic value of entities and systems that are not themselves capable of participation in moral or political deliberation.

Whatever the merits of the various arguments on behalf of moral patients, I maintain that there is some risk in the single-mindedness with which environmental ethicists have gone about their work: exclusive focus on moral patients can lead to neglect of still-important puzzles about moral agency. My purpose is to consider one such puzzle, a basic tension in ethical theory concerning the character of moral agency and of our lived experience as decision makers. The tension arises between two distinct strands in the history of modern philosophical ethics: an empiricist strand that runs from Hobbes to Hume, through Darwin and on down to present-day sociobiology and evolutionary ethics, and a humanist strand that runs from Rousseau, through Kant and on down to Sartre and other defenders of human dignity. I will focus on one pivotal figure in each strand: Darwin and Kant.

One apparent tension between empiricism and humanism is very much a live issue in environmental ethics. Goodpaster, for example, writes that the key to giving due consideration to moral patients is to go 'beyond humanism'. What he means by this is that environmental ethics must pass beyond the narrow and pernicious anthropocentrism he sees as inherent in modern moral philosophy (Goodpaster, 1978: 310, 317). To the extent that they concur with Goodpaster on this point, many environmental ethicists have worked to counter humanism by naturalising humans, humanising nature, or both. The model for these strategies may be found in the writings of Aldo Leopold, who both construed humans as 'plain members and citizens' of biotic communities, and wrote of biotic communities in moral terms (Leopold, 1949: 202–4). His message is both that humans are part of the natural world and that the natural world has many of the features of human community, at least insofar as citizenship entails responsibilities to fellow citizens.

For Leopold as for any number of subsequent writers, one of the keys to strengthening the bond between humans and nature is an appeal to evolutionary theory. Not only does common descent seem to establish a sense of kinship with all life on Earth, but Leopold explicitly draws from Darwin an empiricist account of human morality. Building on the work of Hume, Smith, and Mill, Darwin proposes that 'any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts, would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well developed, or nearly as well developed as in man' (Darwin, 1981: 71–2). Following Darwin, Leopold maintains that an ethic is a kind of community instinct, which 'has its origin in the tendency of interdependent individuals or groups to evolve modes of co-operation' (Leopold,

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1949: 202) The key to the land ethic is that these modes of cooperation can be extended beyond the boundaries of the human species.

On this account, the empiricist approach to morality does seem to be at odds with humanism, at least if humanism is understood to be more or less equivalent to pernicious forms of moral anthropocentrism. If Leopold's argument is successful, then human exceptionalism loses its footing, and any attempt to focus our moral concern exclusively on improvement of the human condition would come to be seen as an arbitrary bias.

A problem with this line of argument is precisely that humanism is not equivalent to pernicious anthropocentrism. Goodpaster's conflation of the two serves to obscure an essential feature of the humanist tradition that begins with Rousseau and Kant: the centrality of human freedom. For my part, I would characterise as humanist any view that emphasises the autonomy and dignity of humans as free moral agents and our capacity for self-improvement (following Hinchman, 2004: 10; see also Ferry, 1992: 4–9). Humanists who share this view of moral agency may nevertheless hold any of a range of views on the status of non-humans as moral patients, recognising (or not) degrees of autonomy among non-human animals and ascribing (or not) other kinds of value to living organisms and ecological systems.

Based on this understanding of humanism, I take the apparent tension between humanism and empiricism on the status of moral patients to be much less important than the tension between them on the character of human morality itself. The humanist strand in ethical theory is rooted in the idea that transcendental freedom lies at the very heart of what it is to be a moral being, with the consequence that morality cannot be reduced to empirical terms (Kant, 1958: 122). From the humanist point of view, as soon as we try to explain action in terms of sentiments we can no longer think of it as moral action: it has been reduced to mere behaviour, which may be predicted but not prescribed. For their part, empiricists cannot recognise any basis for human morality that cannot be subjected to empirical scrutiny; to them, the very idea of transcendental freedom is incoherent.

There does not seem to be any easy way to overcome this most basic tension between the humanist and empiricist strands in ethical theory. Then again, there may be no need to do so. I propose that the tension between humanist and empiricist perspectives may be both inevitable for moral theory in general, and fruitful for environmental ethics in particular. After considering the merits of each perspective I appeal to a particular reading of Kant's two standpoints to show the way toward a Darwinian humanism that leaves open a space for moral agency but that also compels us to acknowledge the embeddedness of moral agents in the natural world.

II. NATURALISED ETHICS

Darwin's treatment of the moral sense in *The Descent of Man* is part of a broader strategy to overcome likely objections to one implication of evolution by natural selection. If the features of other species can be explained as the products of variation and selection working inexorably over long stretches of time, and if diverse species can be traced back to a common ancestor, then why should humans be exempt? The structure and function of human bodies are homologous with those of other mammals, after all, and we have always been engaged in the struggle for survival that favours some variations over others.

The objection, of course, is that some differences between humans and other animals seem to be differences of kind and not merely of degree. Darwin's contemporaries maintained (and many of our contemporaries concur) that humans participate in the divine, at least to the extent that we possess intellect, especially a capacity for moral judgment. That such divine attributes could have their origins in the brains of monkeys was regarded as offensive, if not outright blasphemous.

So, in the second and third chapters of *Descent*, Darwin compares the mental powers of humans and animals in order to narrow the perceived gap between them and to set up a plausible natural account of their common origin. In the third chapter, Darwin cites Kant's praise of duty, and joins him in wondering how humans have come to use 'that short but imperious word *ought*, so full of high significance'. Unlike Kant, Darwin (1981: 70–71) proposes to examine the matter 'exclusively from the side of natural history'.

Darwin follows Hume and Smith in his appeal to moral sentiments as the basis for moral obligation: 'the imperious word *ought* seems merely to imply the consciousness of the existence of a persistent instinct, either innate or partly acquired', which guides action, although it is 'liable to be disobeyed' (Darwin, 1981: 92). Darwin cites in particular the social instincts that 'lead an animal to take pleasure in the society of its fellows, to feel a certain amount of sympathy with them, and to perform various services for them' (Darwin, 1981: 72). This echoes Hume's contention in the *Treatise* that moral distinctions are rooted in sentiments that may be observed through introspection. Looking for the vice in any vicious action, Hume (1978: 468–9) asserts, 'you never can find it, till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you toward this action. Here is a matter of fact, but 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason.'

The main difference between Darwin and his predecessors is that he is able to suggest a natural history of social instincts themselves. Hume and Smith, working a century before Darwin, posited moral sentiments as fixed principles of human nature – principles that are to be observed but not explained (see Hume, 1975: 219–20n; Smith, 2004: 3). On the Darwinian account, moral sentiments are rooted in social instincts, which are open to explanation as heritable

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characteristics of individual animals. Like other heritable characteristics, they may vary from individual to individual: this one is more likely to respond sympathetically to others than that one is. In the struggle for survival, members of a species of social animals must work together if they are to survive and produce viable offspring. As a consequence, individuals with a slightly greater drive to cooperate with and care for other individuals in their group will have a relative reproductive advantage over those with a slightly greater drive to go it alone. Over time, across generations, individuals with stronger social instincts would make up a greater and greater proportion of the population. As Darwin himself puts it, moral sentiments developed ‘for the general good of the community. The term, general good, may be defined as the means by which the greatest possible number of individuals can be reared in full vigour and health, with all their faculties perfect, under the conditions to which they are exposed’ (Darwin, 1981: 98).

While social instincts are necessary to the development of morality, according to Darwin, they are not in themselves sufficient: conscience is the product of sentiment working in conjunction with intellect. The development of memory allows each individual to review past actions and the motives that produced them, providing new objects to elicit emotional responses. The experience of guilt is a prime example, elicited by the memory of moments in which stronger but more fleeting instincts overrode social instincts, leading to some offence against others in the group.

At the same time, the development of language allows members of the community to express their desires, so that ‘the common opinion how each member ought to act for the public good, would naturally become to a large extent the guide to action’ (Darwin, 1981: 72). Note that common opinion plays a largely directive role, determining *how* individuals are to act for the public good. Social instincts still provide the basic impulse, the reason *why* individuals act for the common good. Opinion may direct or deflect this impulse, Darwin maintains, but the power of common opinion itself derives entirely from ‘instinctive sympathy’: because I care about others in my group, I care what they think of me and my actions (Darwin, 1981: 72). Again, Darwin seems to be following Hume, who proclaims in the *Treatise* (1978: 415) that ‘reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them’.

An empiricist account of human morality appeals to the strategic interests of environmental ethicists in that it allows them to draw upon scientific knowledge to inform and correct moral judgments, and even to expand the scope of moral consideration. Darwin foresaw the possibility of moral extensionism as a function of expanding intellectual awareness of our connections with others, including non-human others. He notes that sympathy toward other animals is ‘one of the latest moral acquisitions. It is apparently unfelt by savages, except toward their pets’ (Darwin, 1981: 101). It is at least a theoretical possibility for

sympathy to extend still further, to other organisms and to the ecological systems in which they participate.

J. Baird Callicott's (1989: 117–27) early argument for Leopold's land ethic hinges on just this point: if we have failed to recognise our obligation to preserve the integrity of ecosystems, it is simply because we have failed to recognise the fact that ecosystems constitute a community of which we are members. The underlying moral sentiment that impels us to act in the best interests of our community remains unchanged and unquestionable, a connection fixed in our nature as a consequence of our evolutionary history as social animals.

This argument neatly bypasses the traditional prohibition against deriving an *ought* from an *is* and allows the extension of moral considerability to non-human moral patients. While Hume maintained that there is no way to derive an ought-statement from an is-statement, Hume himself also provides the middle term that connects the two: 'the missing premise', as Callicott puts it, 'referring to passion, feeling, or sentiment' (Callicott, 1989: 122). Callicott holds that Darwin's theory provides a 'plausible explanation' for Hume's belief that moral sentiments are widely shared: they are 'fixed in human nature, like all other standard traits, by natural selection' (Callicott, 1989: 119). If one of these shared moral sentiments urges all humans to preserve the community of which we are part, and if recent work in ecology lends support to the factual claim that ecosystems constitute an expanded community for us, then Callicott believes there is a good practical case for the ethical injunction that we ought to preserve the integrity of ecosystems.

Despite its appeal and the apparent strength it lends to arguments for the land ethic, the empiricist account of morality in terms of moral sentiments or social instincts raises significant strategic problems for environmental ethicists. What I mean by this is that the theory of moral sentiments may not give environmentalists what they really want, and may even serve to undermine some of their normative assumptions and political aspirations. I here treat these strategic problems as distinct from any of the more fundamental problems the empiricist approach may present for the coherence of moral theory. I will turn to those fundamental problems shortly.

The first strategic problem is that the empiricist approach to ethics is deeply conservative. For Darwin as for Hume, there is no perspective from which to criticise moral sentiments themselves, so the theory ends up validating whatever inclinations people already happen to have. In Hume's case, the appeal to sentiment often serves to reinforce traditional hierarchies of class and gender. His take on the virtue of chastity, for example, enshrines the prejudices of the majority or of the powerful concerning sexuality and the subordination of women, construing them as natural and morally binding (Hume, 1975: 571–3). Darwin also places the final appeal in matters of morality in the court of public opinion: an individual looking back over past action ought to feel guilty for giving in to instincts of which most others disapprove (Darwin, 1981: 72). This does not

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augur well for environmentalists, who think of themselves as part a movement of opposition against comparable prejudices about the proper relationship between humans and our natural environment.

Of course, it may be the case that prejudices are the result of natural sentiments that have been misdirected by mistakes regarding matters of fact. In that case, progressives and other advocates for change could simply work to correct those mistakes and so redirect natural sentiments. But suppose it becomes necessary at some point to criticise a moral sentiment directly. This would raise a second strategic problem, since it is not at all clear from what standpoint such a critique would be possible. There seem to be two choices: either appeal to further moral sentiments, which points toward an infinite regress, or stand on some other moral standard, a hidden *ought* that does not itself derive from moral sentiments (see Kirkman, 2002b: 35).

A third and more basic problem is that a Darwinian account of moral sentiment in terms of heritable social instincts must allow for natural variation among individuals within the population. Hume and Smith both assume that there is a fixed human nature, to be discovered by observation and introspection. In the Darwinian context, however, even if a particular set of social instincts is prevalent within a population, this is simply a matter of statistics. There is bound to be a range of variability that extends to include a number of outliers, from saints to sociopaths. This variability itself is natural, which implies that there will naturally be some non-negligible number of people in the population who exhibit antisocial inclinations. There seem to be no grounds on which to condemn such inclinations or the people who happen to have them except by appeal to public opinion.

There is not even any way to argue *a priori* that anti-social sentiments will turn out to put those who have them at a relative reproductive disadvantage, no reason to assume that an individual *ought* to feel guilty for allowing a stronger and more selfish instinct to override a social instinct in a particular instance. For a strict Darwinian, the goodness or badness of antisocial inclinations can be determined only in practice, in the long run. Which set of inclinations in fact leads to relative reproductive success? It is always too soon to tell, since such a determination can only be made with the benefit of hindsight. We would have to come back in a few thousand years to see how things turn out, which does little to help us decide right now which inclinations we should favour and which we should suppress.

It could be argued that we do have the benefit of hindsight: our ancestors lived under conditions that favoured inclinations toward cooperation or, at least, a particular mix of inclinations toward cooperation and inclinations toward competition. For a strict Darwinian, however, those conditions were entirely contingent, as are the inclinations they have favoured. It may be that times are changing, and that future circumstances will favour a very different mix of inclinations. It may turn out that Garrett Hardin (1968: 1246) was correct in

his belief that, in matters of environmental responsibility, conscience is self-eliminating. It may be that, environmental ethicists notwithstanding, some form of rational speciesism will work out best for us in the long run.

The fact that environmental ethicists might face strategic problems if they adopt an empiricist account of human morality does not necessarily reflect on the merits of that account itself. It seems entirely reasonable that the evolutionary history of human motivations and human intellect should have some bearing on our self-understanding as moral beings. The natural sciences have become a compelling intellectual force, extending into every domain of human experience. It seems only natural that they should extend into moral experience as well, through the conjoined efforts of psychologists, neurologists, cognitive scientists, evolutionary biologists, and others. Such efforts hold out the possibility of a complete and coherent moral psychology backed up by the authority of the scientific method.

Nevertheless, and aside from the strategic concerns of environmentalists, there are more fundamental challenges to the coherence of any strictly empiricist account of human morality. Perhaps the most important of these is the problem of freedom and determinism

From the empiricist point of view, human actions are natural phenomena to be described and explained in the same terms as other natural phenomena. In his private notebooks, Darwin writes: 'I verily believe that free will & chance are synonymous. – shake ten thousand grains of sand together & one will be uppermost, – so in thoughts one will rise according to law' (Darwin, 1980: M30–31). The only alternative is to hold that human actions are a matter of mere chance, which would serve to render all human action arbitrary and unpredictable. Once more Darwin follows Hume, who insists that 'moral evidence' – a sort of psychological prediction of human behaviour – meshes with natural evidence to form a single, coherent whole: since they 'form only one chain of argument betwixt them, we shall make no scruple to allow, that they are of the same nature and derived from the same principles' (Hume, 1978: 406).

But there is a real puzzle in this, in that Hume and Darwin both continue to describe human actions and motivations in terms of choice, deliberate action, and self-command. At one point, Darwin describes moral deliberation as nothing more than a moment of hesitation while instincts clash, the choice being made when the 'more enduring' instinct prevails (Darwin, 1981: 87). Deliberation is thus is an anonymous natural process in which rational intervention is unnecessary. If, in retrospect, an individual comes to regret the outcome of a clash of instincts, Darwin seems to believe that reason can then intervene: 'man will then feel dissatisfied with himself, and will resolve with more or less force to act differently for the future' (Darwin, 1981: 91). It is far from clear where this resolve is supposed to come from or how it can have any impact on future clashes of instinct. Resolve seems to require the causal efficacy of a free will, which has little place in an early empiricist moral psychology.

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Consider Hume's description of will as 'nothing but *the internal impression we feel and are conscious of, when we knowingly give rise to any new motivation of our body, or new perception of our mind*' (Hume, 1978: 399). The problem is precisely this: if the relations of ideas, impressions, and motivations are a form of natural causality, how can it possibly be that 'we' can 'knowingly give rise' to new motivations and perceptions? If there is no *I* apart from the law-governed association of impressions and ideas, if reason is truly inert, then there can be no such thing as a deliberate intervention in the natural process by which motivations arise and behaviours occur.

Something has to give here. In order to arrive at a coherent account of human morality, empiricists must either find a more sophisticated way to incorporate the possibility of rational deliberation and free choice, or they must purge moral language of any reference to will or self-command.

Some recent contributors to empiricist ethics are happy enough to explain away free will and moral deliberation. E.O. Wilson, for one, argues that the study of human morality is consilient with the study of human biology, which is in turn consilient with physics. Our belief that we have free will, proclaims Wilson, is only an illusion resulting from 'the hidden preparation of mental activity', and our commitment to this illusion can itself be explained as being 'biologically adaptive' (Wilson, 1998: 130–31).

Others who adopt the naturalistic perspective on human morality try to do better than this, rejecting any notion of transcendental or metaphysical freedom while working toward something like natural freedom. Daniel Dennett's account of human moral freedom hinges on the distinction between the physical level and the design level: while the behaviour of the smallest components of a system may be inevitable, given physical laws, the behaviour of the whole system need not be. As a consequence a whole can be more free than its parts (Dennett, 2004: 39, 48). After working through the details of his evolutionary account of practical reasoning, what Dennett finds is not transcendental freedom but, he insists, it is enough of the kind of freedom that matters to make us responsible for our own actions.

Even so, naturalistic accounts of freedom leave questions about what it can mean to have what Larry Arnhart calls 'a natural capacity to deliberate about one's desires' (Arnhart, 1995: 393). Arnhart glosses Hume's insistence in the *Treatise* that freedom is a kind of determinism: 'we are free when our actions are determined by our deliberate choices;' and further, 'to hold people responsible for their actions, we must assume that their motives causally determine their actions' (Arnhart, 1995: 393). The difficulty here is to discover what it is that determines choices and motives themselves. Can there be a naturalistic account of deliberation that amounts to something more than a contingent victory of one desire over another or remorse in the face of social disapproval?

For his part, Dennett's take on natural freedom is drawn from recent work in neurology and cognitive science, so he is unhampered by Hume's crude em-

piricist psychology. On these grounds, his account is more promising. Even so, there is in Dennett's work more than a hint of the detached, critical standpoint on the whole naturalist enterprise, a standpoint that may be incompatible with strict naturalism. I will return to this point later.

III. FREEDOM AND DIGNITY

The problems that arise for the empiricist tradition in ethics are serious, but not decisive. Not only does Dennett's argument seem to open up some possibility of a naturalistic account of deliberation and moral responsibility, but any problems on the side of empiricism are balanced by problems on the side of humanism, with its supposition of transcendental human freedom.

In his *Discourse on Inequality*, writing of the metaphysical condition of humanity, Rousseau sets down a hard-and-fast distinction between humans and animals: 'I see in any animal nothing but an ingenious machine ... I perceive precisely the same thing in the human machine, with this difference that Nature alone does everything in the operations of the Beasts, whereas man contributes to his operations in his capacity as a free agent.' Never mind that free will usually gets us into trouble, leading, Rousseau believes, to the corruption of benign natural sentiments and to the artificiality and vice of civilised life. The essential point here is that the exercise of will is 'an act of freedom', a 'purely spiritual' act 'about which nothing is explained in the Laws of Mechanics' (Rousseau, 1986: 148).

Kant elaborates on this notion, which he calls the negative definition of freedom, at the beginning of the third chapter of the *Groundwork*:

Will is a kind of causality belonging to living beings so far as they are rational. *Freedom* would then be the property this causality has of being able to work independently of *determination* by alien causes; just as *natural necessity* is a property characterizing the causality of all non-rational beings – the property of being determined to activity by the influence of alien causes (Kant, 1958: 114, emphasis in original).

This negative definition of freedom gives rise to a positive definition of freedom as autonomy: if the will causes action according to law, it must be moral law as distinct from natural law.

For Kant, this distinction between the autonomy of the will and the heteronomy of natural necessity is essential to the very possibility of ethics. In the Preface to the *Groundwork*, Kant explicitly sets aside any empirical approach to ethics as mere '*practical anthropology*', rather than ethics in the strict sense (Kant, 1958: 56, emphasis in original). He insists that we must pursue pure ethics, developing a metaphysic of morals and not just a metaphysic of nature, if we are to give a coherent account of obligation. Despite the obvious anachronism, this could

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be taken as a direct response to Darwin's attempt to find a natural grounding of 'the imperious word *ought*'. Darwin's efforts are doomed in advance, Kant could have argued, because he can never find a way to establish the absolute necessity of moral law without postulating transcendental freedom of the will. Sympathy, instinct, and regard for public opinion and prejudice can at most act as heteronomous principles, perhaps informing a kind of social prudence.

Like naturalised ethics, a humanist view poses some strategic problems for environmental ethicists: adopting a humanist account of moral agency has implications that seem to run counter to the values and political aspirations of environmentalists. There is not much need to dwell on these at any length, since environmental ethicists have long dwelt on the failings of humanism. A brief overview should suffice.

The first and most serious strategic problem is the implication of human exceptionalism. To be an autonomous moral agent is not just to be different from other living things on earth, it is to be in some sense exempt from natural causality. In Luc Ferry's provocative formulation, to be free is to be 'antinatural': the humanity of a human being 'resides in his freedom, in the fact that he is undefined, that his nature is to have no nature but to possess the capacity to distance himself from any code within which one may seek to imprison him' (Ferry, 1992: 6). This seems to run counter to the basic environmentalist tenet that humans are part of nature, interdependent and sharing a vital kinship with other living things.

One implication of human exceptionalism raises a second strategic problem, at least to the extent that humanism can be conflated with pernicious anthropocentrism. In this guise, humanism seems to take human interests, or the universalised derivatives of human interests, as the sole basis for moral consideration. Some of Kant's formulations of the categorical imperative are explicitly anthropocentric in this sense: we are to treat humanity as an end in itself, and think of ourselves as participating in a Kingdom of Ends, which is a moral community of rational agents like ourselves (Kant, 1958: 98–101). This excludes *a priori* any positive duties toward animals, let alone ecosystems. For a strictly Kantian humanist, the concerns of environmentalists are, at most, prudential: if humans want to go on living on this planet, we ought to behave in such and such a way.

Human exceptionalism in its modern form also gives rise to a third, more specific strategic problem: cosmopolitanism. Modern humanism calls on us to think of ourselves as citizens of the world, leaving behind local attachments to culture or to land that might limit our autonomy as moral agents or serve as an excuse for various forms of political oppression. The Kingdom of Ends does not recognise accidental distinctions of place, culture or even biology. For many environmentalists, however, it is the very particularity of the connections between people and their local context that gives environmental policies their normative force (see, for example, Berry, 1990: 197–203). In this light, cosmo-

politanism seems only to undermine the sense of place that gives vital meaning to our lives in the world.

As was the case with naturalised ethics, the strategic concerns of environmentalists are far from decisive, especially in light of the broader appeal of humanism. At the very least, humanism has the advantage that the postulate of autonomous agency neatly solves the problem of the critical standpoint. Even if we experience a struggle among competing instincts or impulses, humanism holds out the possibility of stepping back from the struggle, evaluating possible courses of action in terms of broader principles, and intervening decisively and effectively in the outcome of the struggle. From such a standpoint we can enter into a debate about which impulses *ought* to be allowed to prevail without falling back on further impulses or public opinion. In short, the humanist appeal to autonomy of the will serves to highlight an important part of our experience as moral beings, at which Hume and Darwin could only gesture: self-command.

And yet there remains a more fundamental problem for humanism. From an empiricist point of view, belief in transcendent freedom is incoherent: it simply makes no sense to posit the existence of an order of causality that is separate from natural causality and inaccessible to scientific scrutiny. For this reason, critics of an empiricist or naturalist bent (e.g., Arnhart, 1995: 391) tend to read Kant as a dogmatic idealist, or at best an ontological dualist, who clings to the existence of a spiritual faculty of free will without evidence or explanation. If they are correct in this assessment, then humanism does not have much to recommend it over the explanatory power of empiricism.

IV. ACTORS AND SPECTATORS

Far from being bound up in dogmatic idealism, Kant's critical philosophy suggests a way of dealing with the tension between the empiricist and humanist strands in ethical theory. Kant explicitly rejects dogmatic rationalism or idealism at the same time that he rejects dogmatic empiricism: both are founded on illusions that are to be dispelled by critique (see Kant, 1965: B499). In doing so, I suggest, he opens up the possibility of being an empiricist and a humanist at the same time – but only so long as neither perspective is taken as the whole truth about things as they really are.

Consider Kant's treatment of the third antinomy of pure reason, concerning causality (Kant, 1965: B473, 475). The antithesis of the antinomy is the dogmatic empiricist view that posits a totality of natural causation. Kant would say that the power and scope of the naturalist tradition should come as no surprise: scientific knowledge is valid within its proper domain, and reason pushes us toward a totality of natural causes. There is nothing in our experience that can run counter to natural causes, so empiricists cannot allow room for anything like transcendental freedom in their vision of the natural world. The thesis of the antinomy is the

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dogmatic rationalist view that posits absolute freedom. Kant would say that this view also has points in its favour, since the possibility of spontaneous lines of causation leaves open some scope for free moral action, and also leaves open a cosmological space for a prime mover. For their part, committed rationalists and idealists can never concede a totality of natural causes.

In the Second Critique, Kant hails the third antinomy as a ‘fortunate perplexity’, because it furnishes us with the way out of the labyrinth of transcendental illusion (Kant, 1993: 113–14). More to the point, it allows us to avoid having our moral lives overwhelmed by the crushing weight of naturalistic explanation (see Beck, 1960: 185–6; Hinchman, 2004: 10). Once we reject the dogmatism on both sides and accept that appearances are not things in themselves, the transcendental illusion vanishes and we are left with two distinct standpoints that need not be thought of as looking out upon two independent ontological realms. Rather, they provide a way of reconciling two different perspectives on our lived experience within the common world (Beck, 1960: 192; Kant, 1993: 120–21 (Ak.114)). A room full of people is a physical space occupied by natural objects that are demonstrably subject to natural laws, and it is also at the same time a moral space in which free moral agents can negotiate the terms of their relations to one another and engage in inquiry and deliberation about what is good and what is right. It is possible to hold these perspectives at the same time because neither on its own can capture the whole truth of what a room full of people really is.

This reading of the two standpoints can help to explain one of the puzzles in the empiricist account of human morality. Hume and Darwin continually use the language of freedom: when they speak of ‘will’ and ‘self-command’, they seem to presuppose a true self that is separate from the struggle among sentiments, directing the struggle toward ends that are deemed appropriate by whatever standard. Even as they try to view human behaviour only from the standpoint of spectators, it seems they cannot help but think of themselves and their fellow humans as actors making unconditioned choices: we are free enough, at least, to tweak our social instincts in one way or another.

Even in Dennett’s much more robust argument for a naturalist account of freedom, it always seems as though there is a more to his distinction between the physical level and the design level than just a difference of scale. It also seems to involve a slip from outside to inside, from the standpoint of a spectator to that of an actor. There is at least some linguistic evidence for this, as when Dennett repeatedly invokes the ‘we’. For example, the culminating moment of his account comes when ‘we captured reasons and made them our own’ in the process of ‘bootstrapping ourselves free’ (Dennett, 2004: 259). By putting it in these terms, Dennett is in effect appealing to other agents, urging and cajoling us to consent to his argument, appealing to what he presupposes as our practical interest in evitability. In doing so, Dennett is tacitly taking advantage of Kant’s critical solution to the antinomy of freedom and nature.

A later instantiation of humanism – existential phenomenology – sheds further light on the relation of the actor perspective and the spectator perspective. Setting aside the assumptions of empiricism and naturalism, phenomenologists maintain that we engage the lifeworld first as actors. In Merleau-Ponty's terms, the beginning of perception is always in the 'I can', the freedom of bodily potential, matched and constrained by the 'I cannot' of bodily limitations and the horizontal depths of the lifeworld (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 100). The spectator standpoint of the natural sciences is something we acquire later, as a second-order derivation from the meaning-rich lifeworld and, no matter how hard some of us may try, we can never quite shake off the actor-perspective from which we always begin and to which we always return (see Husserl, 1970: 130). As soon as we choose and act in the world – whether to go for a walk, cook a meal, or carry out a research project in human neurology – we are breathing the air of freedom.

Appealing to the two standpoints suggests an easy compromise between empiricism and humanism: as long as each side minds its own business, everything will be fine. Nevertheless, this compromise may be increasingly unstable given the full impact of the Darwinian revolution. The second-order abstractions of the sciences may have come on the scene only recently, but evolutionary theory and its consequences have the potential to shake us to the core. Dennett casts Darwinian evolution as a universal acid – one that can dissolve anything and so cannot be contained – that 'eats through just about every traditional concept, and leaves in its wake a revolutionized world-view, with most of the old landmarks still recognisable, but transformed in fundamental ways' (Dennett, 1995: 63).

At this moment in history, to shift metaphors, the intertwining of the two standpoints has become an Escher-like puzzle. Each standpoint is utterly compelling on its own terms, and each is indispensable to a full understanding of human life in the world, and yet they remain firmly at odds: each overturns the other with equal force. We seem to be left with a profound ambiguity in the human condition, an interpenetration of the actor perspective and the spectator perspective. How did we get to this point?

As Merleau-Ponty would say, even though we always start from the actor perspective, we experience ourselves as both active and passive in relation to the surrounding world, perceiving and perceptible (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 139). We push and pull on the world, it pushes and pulls on us, in very particular ways; the lifeworld and the structures of our own bodies offer us opportunities for action and impose constraints upon us. The natural sciences have emerged as efforts to systematise our pushing and pulling, and eventually to form models of what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the 'armature' or 'hinges' or 'pivots' that are hidden from us in the depths of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 133, 149, 180, 184, 225).

We have progressed so far in this systematisation that we can begin to model the hidden armature of the actor perspective itself as a product of the evolutionary history of these bodies that we are. We have, in a sense, managed to turn

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ourselves inside-out. Now that we are here, investigating the natural origins of what we are, we have begun to worry about the creeping advance of mechanistic explanation that seems poised to explain away our freedom and our dignity. And yet, we remain rooted in freedom, and the systematisation of knowledge remains one of our projects as incarnate subjects, another expression of our agency.

If there can be any such thing as Darwinian humanism, then, it is not so much a coherent worldview as it is an acknowledgment of an unavoidable ambiguity at the heart of human moral experience: we are somehow able to experience ourselves as fully free and fully natural at the same time.

V. THE TASK OF ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY

In the foregoing discussion of empiricism and humanism I noted that each raises strategic problems for environmentalists in general and for environmental philosophers in particular. At this point, I think it is worth reconsidering what those strategic interests are and to what end they are strategic. To the extent that Darwinian humanism can take shape as a viable approach to human moral experience, I propose that it leads to a new understanding of the basic task of environmental philosophy.

The conventional approach to environmental philosophy begins with the belief that humans are doing harm to the environment largely because of a problem in the way they think about their relationship with nature as a whole or with particular natural entities and systems. In light of this belief, the task of environmental philosophy has been to identify the problem and to resolve it by developing a new way of thinking, often by way of a fusion of science and ethics. This new way of thinking is to take the form of an ecological worldview or a properly ecological ethic that offers compelling arguments in defence of non-human moral patients, and the new way of thinking is supposed to express itself in new and more benign ways of living in the world.

Note that this way of formulating the task of environmental philosophy takes for granted the moral status of non-human moral patients: the whole project is motivated by the perception that humans are harming non-human others (including 'the environment') and that this harm is morally wrong. The presumption on behalf of moral patients is explicit in Goodpaster's critique of humanism, which partakes of the widespread bias among environmental philosophers against any form of anthropocentrism. In the mainstream of environmental ethics, rejection of anthropocentrism is often taken as a kind of political litmus test for any new proposal: whatever its other merits or flaws, any environmental ethic that does not reject anthropocentrism forcefully enough is thereby deemed inadequate (see Kirkman, 2002a: 142–6).

Darwinian humanism casts into doubt the conventional task of environmental philosophy. If human moral experience is as fundamentally ambiguous

as I have suggested, and if neither of the two standpoints provides insight into the way things really are, then environmentalists are unlikely to find the one, unanswerable moral argument from nature that many of them seem to want. At the very least, there seems to be no way unproblematically to naturalise human morality or to extend the dignity of moral agency to nature.

I propose that environmental philosophers redirect their efforts toward serious inquiry into the very heart of the puzzle raised by the two standpoints, to explore and elucidate human moral experience in all of its ambiguity. Humans are here understood as moral agents who pursue their various projects in particular situations, where agent, project, and situation can all be thought of as having been shaped by both moral choices and natural dynamics. One particular concern for environmental ethics is the question of what it means for human moral agents to choose and act responsibly in their environmental context, given the various ways they interact with human and non-human others, and given the opportunities and constraints that confront them as they pursue their various projects.

Stated in these terms, my proposal for environmental philosophy may come across as obvious and bland: of course we are interested in what it means to act responsibly, someone might protest. What else would we be interested in? Coming to this task by way of Darwinian humanism puts a particular spin on the question of responsibility, however. A full elaboration of a Darwinian humanist approach to environmental philosophy is work for another context, but I would here point out six features that distinguish it from the task of environmental philosophy as traditionally conceived.

First, the new approach to environmental philosophy recaptures an earlier meaning of the term, 'environment', as relative to an organism. We should speak about an earthworm's environment or a human being's environment rather than *the* environment taken in an absolute sense, as a monolithic, non-human other that may be harmed or to which we may owe something. A human moral agent's environment is the surrounding world in which the agent pursues various projects, interacts with human and non-human others, and encounters opportunities and constraints.

Second, as a corollary to the first, the Darwinian humanist approach to environmental philosophy forces the recognition that one sort of anthropocentrism, at least, may be unavoidable: we humans always start from our own point of view as agents pursuing projects in the world. Other sorts of anthropocentrism can and should be called into question, as can be prevailing prejudices about what does and what does not count as a moral patient. This is to say that the status of moral patients remains an important question for environmental ethics, but it is a question that remains open to disagreement and subject to critical inquiry; the answer should not be presupposed in advance.

Third, following from the first and second, some form of human exceptionalism remains in play, though it is duly tempered by an understanding of the implications of evolutionary theory. Humans are exceptional among earthly

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species insofar as we are moral agents who may be held responsible for our actions, their motives, and their consequences. However, because we are here in the thick of things, because we are these bodies and brains with their particular evolutionary history, our fate and our prospects for fulfilment are intertwined with the fate of other living things with which we share this planet.

Fourth, it follows from this last point that interdependence remains a vital notion for environmental philosophy, but interdependence has two dimensions that should be carefully distinguished. From our standpoint as spectators on the world, we can observe and understand how our projects are caught up on causal or natural relationships of interdependence within ecological and technological systems; from our standpoint as actors within the world, we can reason about our moral interdependence with other moral agents within cultural, social, and political systems. Environmental philosophers should inquire as to how these two dimensions of interdependence relate to one another, being careful not to conflate them or simply to posit their essential identity.

Fifth, the distinction between the two dimensions of interdependence implies that the relationship between science and ethics as forms of inquiry is likely to be complex and unsettled. The natural sciences may be indispensable for practical purposes, modelling complex relations of causal interdependence, forecasting the consequences of various human projects, and shedding light on the many ways in which human moral agency is shaped and constrained by our history as living organisms. However, there are limits to the ethical lessons to be learned from the natural sciences: any hopes that ecology or evolutionary biology would allow us to read moral principles off of nature should be set aside.

Sixth and finally, though it may be too soon to say much about this, the substantive ethical conclusions of a Darwinian humanist approach to environmental philosophy are likely to go in a different direction from their more conventional counterparts. Rather than focusing primarily on the ethical status of non-human moral patients, the new approach would consider a wider range of ethical dimensions of human projects in their environmental context, including deliberation about ends and means, consideration of impacts on other moral agents and moral patients including matters of well-being, justice and sustainability, and consideration of the legitimacy of decision-making processes and the virtues appropriate to responsible citizenship in moral communities (see, for example, Kirkman, 2004). Under the new approach, it would become possible to acknowledge that people may legitimately disagree in their self-understanding and in their selection of appropriate projects.

However much we may disagree, though, there is something all of us have in common: because we are living organisms who choose and act in the thick of things, we are vulnerable both to bad luck and to the consequences of our own and one another's actions. This is a trait we share in common with all other living things. With vulnerability as our common ground, the emphasis of environmental ethics may well shift away from defence of natural value per se toward a more

general precautionary principle. Modesty and circumspection in choosing and pursuing our various projects may become the watchwords of environmental ethics, with responsiveness and compassion as its cardinal virtues.

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