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Nature (and Politics)

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the leitmotif of Alan Holland's work, which is argued here to be a defence of the existence and worth of nonhuman nature. Definitions of politics have always depended on the idea of nature as a contrasting non-political realm, usually turning on the centrality of *speech*. Referencing the work of Aristotle, Kant and Bentham, I suggest that the instability of the distinction between the human and the nonhuman means that politics, as 'thing and activity', must itself be unstable. The question of whether there can be a politics without nature is explored through an analysis of the work of Latour, and the conclusion is reached that listening may well be just as important as speaking.

KEYWORDS

Nature, democracy, communication, Aristotle, Bentham, Kant, Latour

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INTRODUCTION

I am lucky indeed to have had the opportunity to work, in an overlapping generation, with Alan Holland. I had the great privilege of attending a number of his inimitable Saturday morning seminars at Lancaster University, and was then able to cajole him into working with a group of academics and policy makers on an 18-month Economic and Social Research Council project on sustainability and social justice in 1996–7. In many ways the work he did for those seminars sums up Alan's contribution to environmental philosophy and, thereby, his contribution to philosophy in general and to the even wider arguments over the meaning and relevance of environmental sustainability. During the seminars Alan regularly displayed the intellectual and personal qualities with which I have come to identify him. He somehow manages to be simultaneously uncompromising and self-deprecating, and people come round to his way of thinking through that time-honoured but rarely achieved ideal: the force of a better argument.

In the next section I outline Alan's argument in the paper he contributed to the seminar series (Holland, 1999). The very title of the chapter that Holland contributed to the book that emerged from the seminar series sums up his determination to swim against the tide when he thinks it necessary: 'Sustainability: should we start from here?' (Holland, 1999: 46–68). The paper is an enquiry into the meaning of sustainability. It is a defence of 'nature' – of which Alan was, and is, an incorrigible champion. I shall then go on to illustrate how important such a defence is even for hard-nosed political scientists, for without it, there would be no 'politics' as we know it. This is discussed by reflecting upon key definitions given by Aristotle, Kant and Bentham. I suggest that there is an intimate relationship between nature and politics, in the sense that our understanding of what politics is, is bound up with our conception of what nature is. Before closing I reflect upon the work of Latour, and issues raised by Vogel, with respect to who speaks for nature and who listens.

HOLLAND ON SUSTAINABILITY

Holland (1999: 48–52) begins by questioning two common definitions of the term 'sustainability': one that conceives of it as 'non-declining welfare', and the other as 'non-declining capital'. He believes the former to be equivocal because 'economic and … moral considerations … might pull in different directions' (Holland, 1999: 48). In other words, welfare might be maximised in economic terms but only at the cost of moral turpitude (for example, 'the case of several generations undergoing extreme hardship for the sake of the generations to follow'; Holland, 1999: 48). He also points out that the moral imperative aspect of sustainability would not necessarily lead everyone to, as he puts it, 'advocate a policy designed to achieve a non-declining level of welfare over time' (Hol-

land, 1999: 48). In other words, the moral element in sustainability is radically indeterminate as far as policy prescriptions are concerned. The final nail in the coffin of the welfare interpretation of sustainability, for Holland, is that it is very hard to put it into practice because 'actual welfare, or happiness, is a function of a number of circumstances that cannot realistically be anticipated or provided for' (Holland, 1999: 49).

These problems with the welfare interpretation of sustainability lead Holland to consider the claims of a second widespread conception of sustainability, understood this time in terms of non-declining capital. He points out that one advantage of this interpretation is that it avoids the problem of the indeterminacy of welfare objectives. From the non-declining capital point of view we do not need to try to specify the 'content' of welfare; we need only provide present and future generations with the wherewithal to make their own decisions as far as maximising welfare is concerned (whatever they conceive it to be) (Holland, 1999: 50). Holland then runs through some standard distinctions in the 'capital' theory of sustainability – natural and human-made capital, and so-called weak and strong sustainability – before delivering a typical *coup de grace*.

The *coup* works as follows. Anyone who works in Holland's field knows that 'weak' and 'strong' conceptions of sustainability are usually regarded as being quite radical alternatives to one another. Weak sustainability is typically taken to involve a commitment to non-declining levels of total capital, while strong sustainability advocates argue for 'securing a non-declining level of natural capital in particular' (Holland, 1999: 51). Holland's strikingly original argument at this point is to say that although weak and strong sustainability *appear* quite different, with supporters of the latter often claiming the moral high ground in terms of a specific commitment to 'defending nature', in fact there is no appreciable difference between them. This is because, he says, both types of sustainability are underpinned by a commitment to non-declining human welfare. In other words, on this reading, supporters of both types of sustainability see their particular understanding of 'capital' working to contribute to human welfare. Holland's conclusion is that, 'Construed as a commitment to nature, the commitment to natural *capital* is therefore hollow' (Holland, 1999: 52).

That brief sentence contains, for me, the *leitmotif* of Holland's contribution to environmental philosophy. His *raison d'être*, as I understand it, is, precisely, a 'commitment to nature', and his work is substantially directed to finding the best arguments to enable him to make such a commitment. Having recourse to arguing for 'critical natural capital' – as some proponents of strong sustainability are wont to do – will not help, says Holland. This is because the notion of substitutability that lies at the heart of so-called strong sustainability is itself equivocal. As he points out, non-substitutability 'can go both ways' (Holland, 1999: 53). That is to say that while there are indeed some features of non-human nature for which there are no human-made substitutes, it is also true that there are 'human-made features for which there are no natural substitutes' (Holland,

1999: 53). In any case there is indeed some human-made capital that can substitute for natural capital, so 'the denial of the doctrine of substitutability does not support the protection of *all* natural capital' (Holland, 1999: 53). Once again Holland's overall objective hoves into view: his commitment to the protection of non-human nature.

However, given the economic and social pressures to turn natural capital into human-made capital, what mechanisms do we have for protecting and conserving non-human nature? How do we know whether we have been successful or not? One common approach is to ascribe economic value to the non-human natural world, in the belief that this will lead to its protection and conservation. Holland rehearses some well-established objections to this approach: that the culturally-determined value of some aspects of nature cannot be captured in economic terms; that the economic value of objects fluctuates, and that this would be equally true of natural objects. The underlying problem is that, 'On the economic view under consideration, natural capital does not consist of the physical items themselves, the "physical stock", but the realized or realizable value of that stock' (Holland, 1999: 59).

This last remark anticipates Holland's simple yet striking contribution to the sustainability debate. He writes, 'There is … another possible approach to the problem of measurement, which is to attempt an inventory of the natural items themselves, and simply rely on "informed" judgements to decide whether and in what sense there has been any depletion' (Holland, 1999: 63). This bold idea cuts through a number of Gordian knots, not the least intractable of which is that of attempting to determine exactly what to measure, and how. As Holland puts it, such an approach is 'to do more than adopt a different system of measurement; it is to lay stress on a different kind of value' (Holland, 1999: 63–64). He argues that making an inventory of this sort need not be too difficult, and while there may be arguments about exactly how much coal or oil is left in the ground, or how many bullfinches go missing, these difficulties might well 'have fewer methodological drawbacks than the "economic" view' (Holland, 1999: 65).

So there we have it. Holland's approach is direct and uncomplicated and a straightforward reminder that in counting we recognise that non-human nature exists. This contrasts with the many academic disciplines apparently determined for nature only to exist through ciphers and proxies. We have already seen economists translating what Holland would call 'physical stock' (Holland, 1999: 65) into a repository of economic value. Sociologists are wont to perform the same intellectual conjuring trick, even to the point where 'nature' disappears altogether. Anthony Giddens, architect of Tony Blair's 'Third Way' politics, and the ex-Prime Minister's favourite intellectual, has said that that 'nature no longer exists' (Giddens, 1994, p. 11), that 'nature … has all but dissolved' (Giddens, 1994, p. 47), and he delights in the paradox 'that nature has been embraced only at the point of its disappearance' (Giddens, 1994, p. 206). There are of course a number of ripostes to this sophistry: no amount of social constructionism can

alter the Second law of Thermodynamics, for example. Fortunately for me, though, the discourse that follows does not depend on prior 'proof' that nature exists, only agreement that the *idea* of nature exists.

DEFINING POLITICS: THE ROLE OF NATURE

For a political scientist like myself – or for anyone for whom the classical political questions (who gets what, where and when?) are important – there could hardly be a more fundamental question than, what is politics? For all their differences each of the many answers given to this question shares a common feature: the counterposing of a 'sphere of politics' and a 'sphere of nature'. This common feature almost always goes unremarked, but it has potentially important implications for the classical questions and understanding politics itself. If the idea of nature had not existed, political theorists would have had to invent it, so essential does it seem to be to the task of defining 'politics'.

Following the standard logic of definition, when we ask ourselves 'what is politics?' we are also asking ourselves 'what is not politics?' The sphere of nature has been consistently deployed as the context for an answer to that question. It is the sphere occupied by non-human animals and objects, and these animals and objects are reckoned to possess characteristics, behaviours and qualities that theorists regard as inappropriate for (or, more technically, 'not predicable of') political beings. Politics is for humans and the capacities required for its enactment are human capacities.

In this section I review in turn the arguments from three great thinkers: Aristotle, Kant and Bentham.

Aristotle

Aristotle wrote a very rich and suggestive passage on this topic, one that has served as a crucial point of reference in western political thought ever since:

> It follows that the state belongs to a class of objects which exist in nature, and that man is by nature a political animal; it is his nature to live in a state. He who by his nature and not simply by ill-luck has no city, no state, is either too bad or too good, either sub-human or super-human – sub-human like the war-mad man condemned in Homer's words 'having no family, no morals, no home'; for such a person is by his nature mad on war, he is a non-cooperator like an isolated piece in a game of draughts. But it is not simply a matter of cooperation, for obviously man is a political animal in a sense in which a bee is not, or any gregarious animal. Nature, as we say, does nothing without some purpose; and for the purpose of making man a political animal she has endowed him alone among the animals with the power of reasoned speech. (Aristotle, 1962: 28–29)

Aristotle has set out the parameters for the political being by suggesting that sub-humans and super-humans lie outside his field of enquiry (we might assume that he means by this 'beasts' and 'gods'). But just what is it about the human being that makes it a political being, for Aristotle? What are the special capacities required of the political being – capacities not possessed by either beasts or gods? One candidate he discusses in the passage is 'cooperation', but this is quickly rejected because bees and other gregarious animals have this capacity too. Another is 'communication', but this too is rejected on the grounds that some non-human animals can communicate (a fact that is very common knowledge nowadays of course). What about 'pleasure and pain'? Is this what distinguishes humans from other animals? Once again Aristotle rules this out because some non-human animals experience pleasure and pain too.[1] The next capacity Aristotle canvasses in the passage seems likely to clinch it for human beings: 'voice'. However, Aristotle distinguishes between voice and speech. Some non-human animals have voice, and they use it to communicate pain and pleasure.

Thus the capacity to *speak* is what finally distinguishes humans from other animals. Aristotle goes on to make clear that the physical capacity to speak is less important than what speech itself enables humans to do that other animals cannot do:

> Speech is something different from voice, which is possessed by other animals also and used by them to express pain or pleasure; for the natural powers of some animals do indeed enable them both to feel pleasure and pain and to communicate these to each other. Speech on the other hand serves to indicate what is useful and what is harmful, and so also what is right and what is wrong. For the real difference between man and other animals is that humans alone have perception of good and evil, right and wrong, just and unjust. And it is the sharing of a common view in these matters that makes a Household or a city. (Aristotle, 1962: 28–29).

Three simple conclusions can be drawn from this brief analysis. First, Aristotle seeks to draw a distinction between humans and other animals. Second, the characteristic and the capacity that distinguishes humans from other animals is constitutive of what politics *is*, for Aristotle: the political animal is a speaking animal that can conduct moral conversations. Third, the distinction shows signs of instability. Overall, the distinction is essential to Aristotle's task of defining the political; we might say that if nature (or at least non-human animals) did not exist, then Aristotle would have had to invent something very like them in order to get his account of politics off on the right foot.

Aristotle is drawing a distinction between humans and other animals, as opposed to humans and the rest of nature. Given his intention to define the nature of the political animal it is understandable that he should do so. Ancient Greeks had an animistic view of the world, and the distinctions between human beings

and the rest of nature that are so much a part of our intellectual furniture would have been very unfamiliar in Aristotle's time. If he was to persuade his peers that politics requires a special kind of being to perform it, his arguments would be all the stronger if he could make them work for those parts of the non-human natural world most 'like' humans – i.e. animals, as opposed to inanimate nature. Other philosophers, though, have cast their net wider, and have defined the human as against nature as a whole. A striking example of this strategy is offered by Immanuel Kant, as part of his enquiry into the nature of morality.

Kant

Kant wrote about the conditions for the possibility of morality. He argued that there were two preconditions. First, that moral beings have to have the capacity to conceive of the idea of right and wrong. Second, moral beings also have to have the capacity for choosing between two courses of action, and acting accordingly. So one important precondition for the possibility of morality is freedom or – to use the term employed by Kant – 'autonomy'.

Kant then had to show that there are beings possessing this capacity. His first move was to define autonomy: 'Autonomy of the will is that property of it by which it is a law to itself independently of any property of objects of volition' (Kant, 1785/1969: 67). Thus a being possesses autonomy if it can decide what it should do, irrespective of external prompts or conditions. What kind of being possesses autonomy, defined in this way? Kant makes it clear that autonomy is a peculiarly *human* faculty because he says that only rational beings possess it, and, 'Rational nature is distinguished from others in that it proposes an end to itself' (Kant, 1785/1969: 63). Since (as far as we know) only human beings can propose ends to themselves in this fashion, the circle is complete:

i. autonomy can only be possessed by rational creatures
ii. rational creatures are human creatures who propose ends to themselves
iii. autonomy is therefore a human capacity.

In this way autonomy serves as a marker of the human, and so the human realm becomes, by definition, a realm of autonomy.

Crucially, Kant contrasts this realm (human, autonomous), with the 'realm of nature'. This latter realm is governed 'by laws of efficient causes of things externally necessitated' (Kant, 1785/1969: 64–65). In nature, in other words, things happen, rather than are made to happen through choosing one course of action rather than another. So Kant's discussion of morality and its preconditions leads to the following contrast: Natural beings are dependent, heteronomous, while human beings are independent, autonomous.

There are two apparent differences between Aristotle and Kant here. First, Aristotle is writing about the conditions for the existence of *politics*, and Kant

is analysing the conditions for the possibility of *morality*. Second, Aristotle confines his discussion of the non-human realm to animals, while Kant talks of the realm of nature. These differences become less marked, though, when we remember that Aristotle conceives of politics in moral terms – in terms of debates regarding right and wrong. Indeed, the archetypal political formation, for Aristotle, is defined by the sharing of a collective view of right and wrong. To this degree, the discourses of Kant and Aristotle are not so dissimilar. Second, although the two philosophers refer to different aspects of the non-human realm, they identify common capacities or characteristics in that realm which defines it against its human counterpart. The capacity that is present in the human realm and absent in the non-human realm, according to Kant and Aristotle, is the capacity to envisage multiple courses of action and to choose between them. So the deepest difference between the two realms, in Western political imagery, is that being human is being free and autonomous, while non-human nature is a realm of dependency and heteronomy.

Some problems arising from Aristotle and Kant

I pointed out earlier that the characteristics and capacities assigned to the human realm turn out to be characteristics of politics itself.[2] If I am right about that, and if it also true that what nature 'is' determines at least to a degree what we think politics is, then the nature of politics must be unstable too. As far as the subjects of politics are concerned this instability can come from a number of sources.

First there is the well-known evolutionary evidence that the differences between humans and (some) other animals are differences of degree rather than of kind. Politically, this has led, for example, to the Great Ape Project, which seeks to get the same rights granted to (the other) great apes – such as an orang-utans as bonobos – as to the great ape called *homo sapiens*. Then there is more recent evidence from the science of genetics which suggests that human beings share large amounts of genetic information with very different species – including mice, for example. The behavioural sciences, similarly, show that a large number of the behaviour and capacity traits that were thought to be exclusive to human beings are in fact shared with other animals. So the evidence from the natural sciences throws the claim for a watertight distinction between human beings and other animals into some doubt. If this distinction is not watertight, then any conception of politics whose foundation is some capacity or characteristic supposedly specific to human beings must be unstable too.

Second, a source of instability comes from the choice of characteristics itself: often it seems as though the question as to whether politics is for humans only is settled at the outset by the determination to found it on characteristics specific to humans. We have already seen Aristotle employing this strategy, and his supporters will argue that there is indeed some sense to that. Let us assume – with his supporters – that the capacity to discuss right and wrong is indeed specific

to human beings. This capacity is the foundation of an edifice of thought and action of a type unavailable to any other creature on Earth. Why not call this edifice 'politics'? Even if we grant this, though, a moment's reflection will lead us to see that the discussion of right and wrong – the practice of politics – will involve us in considering the claims of beings other than human beings. In this sense it does not seem plausible to suggest that politics could be ring fenced for humans, even if the activity called 'politics' is only done by human beings.

In addition, if the capacity to discuss right and wrong is the definitive feature of the political animal, then it is clear that quite a number of human beings will not be able to lay claim to political animal status. This may be because they are temporarily incapable of moral debate – for example through memory loss brought about by an accident, or more permanent exclusion caused by a debilitating disease such as Alzheimer's. Of course these so-called 'limit cases' have often been used by environmental philosophers to highlight the 'speciesism' involved in searching for a 'Factor X' that triggers moral considerability. Factor X might be the capacity for rational thought, for example. This would seem to confine moral considerability to human beings – but it will also exclude some human beings because they are incapable of rational thought, for one reason or another. The argument might then be that such human beings at least have the *potential* to consider questions of morality, but even this claim can founder on cases where even this potential seems to be lacking – patients in a persistent vegetative state, for example. There seems to be no way of confining considerability – whether moral or political – to human beings without at the same time defining some human beings out of consideration.

One way out of this morass is to recalibrate. So rather than set the bar at such a height that the less capable of one's chosen target group will not get over it, the bar is set somewhat lower so as to allow all of one's target group in. This success, though, is bought at the cost of allowing potentially unwanted guests through the door (to change the metaphor). Perhaps the most famous recalibration is that carried out by Jeremy Bentham.

Bentham

In *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* Bentham asks: 'What other agents then are there, which, at the same time that they are under the influence of man's direction, are susceptible of happiness? They are of two sorts : (i) Other human beings who are styled persons; (ii) Other animals, which, on account of their interests having been neglected by the insensibility of the ancient jurists, stand degraded into the class of things'. This gives rise to the most famous footnote in the animal rights/welfare literature, part of which runs as follows:

> The day has been, I grieve to say in many places it is not yet past, in which the greater part of the species, under the denomination of slaves, have been treated by the law exactly upon the same footing as, in England for example, the inferior

> races of animals are still. The day *may* come, when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been witholden from them but by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may come one day to be recognised, that the number of the legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the *os sacrum,* are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or, perhaps, the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day, or a week, or even a month, old. But suppose the case were otherwise, what would it avail? the question is not, Can they *reason?* nor, Can they *talk?* but Can they *suffer?*

Here Bentham talks presciently of the 'insuperable line' which divides those who may legitimately be abandoned to the 'caprice of a tormentor', and he canvasses the familiar capacities and characteristics that could determine the line's location – 'reason' and 'discourse', for example. He then makes the 'limit case' point – contrasting a full-grown horse or dog with an infant – before suggesting the importance of sentience.

Significantly, Bentham is talking here about morality rather than politics – his focus is the moral animal rather than the political animal, if you will. Although these two sets overlap, they do not map onto each other exactly – generally the set of moral animals will be regarded as larger than the set of political animals. He also introduces the important distinction between 'agents' and 'patients', where while a given individual may be incapable of moral agency for one reason or another, s/he may still be regarded as a moral patient, i.e. a legitimate recipient of moral consideration. The same kind of distinction could no doubt be drawn between political agents and patients, so that while an individual may not be capable of political agency, her or his political interests should be taken into account by the political process.

As this discussion suggests, most of the theoretical work in this area has been devoted to discussing where the 'insuperable line' should be drawn – whether between political and moral animals, or between the distinction within either of these categories, agents and patients. This work is important, but I believe that Holland's question can be asked of it: 'Should we start from here?' A different kind of research agenda is suggested by this question: one concerned less with where the line should be drawn, and more with the work that the line does. We have already seen how essential it seems to be to debates about the political and the moral animal: it is the 'currency' used to establish the appropriate properties of each category, as well as permitting the possibility of exchanges across the boundary.

Bentham hints at another role that the line plays when referencing the instance of slavery. He is aware that once (non-human) animals are established

as inferior, then the realm they inhabit can act as a legitimating repository for human groups that are themselves marginalized. A common strategy for justifying exclusion from political life was (and is) to regard groups as closer to the non-human animal realm than to the human realm, and therefore lacking the characteristics that would equip them for political participation, e.g. terrorists, ethnic groups. The idea of 'nature' is central to this strategy, for without it there would be nowhere to consign undesirables. So once the sphere of politics and the sphere of nature have been constructed, and characteristics have been assigned to each, 'bodies' can move across the boundary between the spheres by being assigned the appropriate characteristics.

Feminists are well acquainted with this phenomenon. Despite being demonstrably human, women were (and sometimes still are) nevertheless excluded from the political sphere by assigning them characteristics drawn from the sphere of nature. It is also worth pointing out that this construction gives rise to a pernicious choice of political strategy. Those who have fought to have their excluded group admitted to the political community – feminists, for example – have been faced with the choice of refusing association with nature and leaving it to its inferior status, or of celebrating the association and running the risk of continuing exclusion. So when Mary Wollstonescraft asked herself, 'In what does man's pre-eminence over the brute creation consist?' and wrote that, 'The answer is as clear as that a half is less than the whole, in Reason' (Wollstonescraft, 1992: 91), she was making a decision that had implications not only for feminism, but for nature too. This is because she knew perfectly well that the capacity to exercise reason was the entry card to membership of the political community, so it was important to establish that capacity as part of women's repertoire. In doing so, though, she left the capacity itself – reason – unchallenged as the criterion for political community membership, thereby consigning to political exclusion any being not possessing it.

POLITICS WITHOUT NATURE? – LATOUR

I hope that what has gone before is enough to show that the nature of politics – what we think politics is – is in part determined by the nature of Nature. I have already said that much, if not most, of the intellectual work done in this area has been devoted to establishing where the line between the political and non-political realms should be placed. I also said that the present article is motivated more by the question: 'what does the line do?' Having established that the line has the effect of dividing the political from the non-political sphere, and of establishing the (shifting) characteristics present in each sphere, it is tempting to wonder what would happen to our conception of politics if the line were removed altogether. Could we have a conception at all, given that the nature/human divide seems so essential to what we think politics is?

Some – but not much – recent theorising has been either implicitly or explicitly devoted to answering this question. Bruno Latour, for example, begins his *Politics of Nature* with the following:

> From the time the term 'politics' was invented, every type of politics has been defined by its relation to nature … As a result we cannot choose whether to engage in political ecology or not; but we can choose whether to engage in it *surreptitiously*, by distinguishing between questions of nature and questions of politics, or *explicitly*, by treating those two sets of questions as a single issue that arises for all *collectives*. While the ecology movements tell us that nature is rapidly invading politics, we shall have to imagine – most often aligning ourselves with these movements but sometimes against them – what politics finally freed from the sword of Damocles we call nature might be like. (Latour, 2004: 1)

This quotation begins with the insight that has animated most of this paper: that politics has always been defined by its relation to nature. The normal state of affairs is one in which questions of nature and questions of politics are dealt with separately, but Latour hints at an alternative, in which we treat the two sets of questions as a single issue. This will involve us, he says, in thinking what politics freed from nature might look like.

Up to now, says Latour, public life has been divided into two incommensurable 'houses' – the house of nature and the house of society. An analysis of Chapter 2 of the *Politics of Nature* reveals the characteristics of each house. As we can see from Table 1 (the terms in each column are taken directly from Latour's text), the thread that ties together Latour's account of the two houses is epistemological. The house of nature is one of objective knowledge, of matters of fact, and of certainty. The house of society is characterised by subjective opinion, matters for discussion, and epistemological uncertainty. This epistemological 'take' on the human/nature divide gives Latour the opportunity to bring the two houses together by pointing out that controversy and dispute stalk both of them, rather than just the house of society. Latour provocatively characterises the politics of ecology as a 'crisis of objectivity' rather than a 'crisis of nature' (Latour, 2004: 22):

> We are not witnessing the emergence of questions about nature in political debates, but the progressive transformation of all matters of facts into disputed states of affair, which nothing can limit any longer to the natural world alone – which nothing, precisely, can *naturalize* any longer. (Latour, 2004: 24–25)

He offers a series of examples – the BSE crisis in the UK, disputes over the Kyoto climate change agreement – to illustrate his point that the world of 'things' is no longer a realm of indubitable certainty that requires merely the right techniques to reveal the immutable order of things. This observation changes everything, for Latour. For we are no longer in the presence of two distinct houses with two distinct sets of characteristics, but are rather witnessing the painful birth of a

new collective whose common feature is uncertainty, doubt, and dispute. There is no longer a division of labour between scientists in the house of nature and politicians in the house of society. What we have now is 'spokespersons' bringing what Latour calls 'matters of concern' to our attention (Latour, 2004: 75).

TABLE 1. Two Houses and The New Collective in Latour's Writing

House of Nature	**House of Society**	**'The New Collective'**
environment	man	collective of humans and non-humans
objective knowledge	subjective opinion	controversies
matters of fact (indubitable facts)	matters of discussion	matters of concern (controversies)
object (non-speakers)	subject (speakers)	propositions which register
science (what things are)	politics (what humans want)	political ecology (spokespersons speak imperfectly for both humans and non-humans)
certainty	uncertainty	multiplication of controversies (this is one of the speech impedimenta suffered by both humans and non-humans)
science of objects	politics of subjects	political ecology of a collective made up of humans and non-humans
nature	humans	actants
nature is mute	humans discuss	humans and non-humans face speech impedimenta
the facts are speaking	I am speaking	humans and non-humans speak by means of speech prostheses
'lab coats' (scientists)	elected representatives (politicians)	spokespersons
nature obeys (defined by necessity)	humans act (defined by freedom)	actants experiment (defined by ability to surprise and recalcitrance)

The third column, called here 'The New Collective', contains the characteristics of Latour's conception of politics in the absence of the line that divides humans and nature. Space precludes explaining and discussing all of Latour's neologisms in this column. Suffice to say that Latour's tactic is to get us to see that representation, as an act of 'speaking for', is common to both the house of nature and the house of society. Scientists 'speak for' nature (although not always in the form of advocacy of course) in the same way that politicians 'speak for' the people whom they are elected to represent. 'At this stage in our learning process', he says, 'I do not claim to have the solution to the problem of the spokesperson; I seek simply to emphasise … that there are not *two* problems, one on the side of scientific representation and one on the side of political representation, but a single problem: How can we go about *getting those in whose name we speak to speak for themselves?*' (Latour, 2004: 70).

In brief, Latour has indeed attempted to describe a politics without recourse to the organising distinction between human beings and nature. Interestingly, he has not done so by denying the original Aristotelian injunction that politics is about speech. Far from it. Indeed he makes a point of emphasising his agreement with Aristotle on this point. He says he wants,

> … to maintain the eminent place of humans and [to] retain the admirable definition of 'the political animal' that has always served as a basis for public life: it is because he spoke freely on the agora that man – at least the male citizen – had the right to citizenship. Fine; who is saying anything different? Who wants to question this definition? Who wants to undermine its foundation? I am indeed situating myself in the concatenation of these principles, in the long and venerable tradition that has constantly *extended* what was called humanity, freedom, and the right to citizenship. (Latour, 2004: 71)

Latour portrays himself as taking Aristotle's conception of politics, and its underlying rationale, to its logical conclusion:

> Seeking to forbid the exploration of new speech prostheses in order to take into account all the nonhumans whom, *in any event, we already cause to speak in countless ways* would amount, on the contrary, to abandoning the old tradition and becoming savage for real. The barbarian is indeed, as Aristotle claimed, someone who is ignorant of representative assemblies … Far from calling this acquisition into question, I claim on the contrary to be extending it, naming the extension of speech to nonhumans Civilization, and finally solving the problem of representation that rendered democracy powerless as soon as it was invented, because of the counterinvention of Science. (Latour, 2004: 71)

This is an intriguing tactic. Latour is not asking us to countenance the 'wild extension of speech to things' (Latour, 2004: 71). Rather he asks us to accept that neither things nor humans speak 'for themselves' but always – in the political realm – through spokespersons. This is what they have in common, and this is what enables the founding of a new collective.

This tactic is acknowledged – but not endorsed – by Steven Vogel. Vogel notes the link between language and political recognition and says that:

> Nature appears to us as mute, with no inner life and nothing to communicate, and so we think we can do with it whatever we wish. Because we do not hear what nature has to say, nor even that it is saying anything at all, we treat natural entities as mere things rather than as other subjects with whom we share a common world. We believe that we have moral duties only to those whose voices we do hear – which is to say, our fellow humans. Those who are able to speak deserve our respect as moral agents; since nature does not seem to speak, we feel justified in denying it such respect. (Vogel, 2006: 145)

He writes that, 'if we listened carefully, and expanded our conception of what speech and language involve, we would come to see, or rather to hear, that nature and natural entities in fact do speak, and so do deserve moral respect' (Vogel, 2006: 145). On this reading the capacity to listen is as obviously important as the capacity to speak, and it is a matter of some curiosity that while dozens of articles and books have been written on the importance to democratic theory and practice of speaking, and enabling better (more representative, or direct, to taste) speech, very little has been written about the other side of the coin – improving the capacity to listen (Coles, 2004; Gastil, 2004 are partial exceptions).

He then points out, as I did above in relation to Latour, that this is a reversal of the usual strategy for including non-human nature:

> Such an argument draws a close connection between speech and moral considerability, and so between language and ethics, in a way that reverses some traditional non-anthropocentric arguments. For historically it has been anthropocentrism that has emphasised language as the basis of moral consideration, arguing that humans possess a unique moral status precisely because of their unique ability to use language. Non-anthropocentrists have typically responded to this argument by conceding on the one hand that only humans use language but denying on the other that this fact has any special moral relevance: as Bentham famously put it, the question isn't 'can they talk?' but 'can they suffer?' The argument just outlined, though, turns this around: rather than denying the moral relevance of the ability to speak, it denies instead that humans are the only creatures who possess that ability. In doing so it acknowledges a close relation between language and ethics, while adding however that we need to expand our conception of language in order to recognise that nature speaks. (Vogel, 2006: 146)

As it happens, Vogel comes to a rather different conclusion regarding the significance of all this than I have been suggesting we can read into Latour. Latour's point, as I say, is that we should not draw such a hard and fast line between the 'truth claims' of spokespersons for humans and spokespersons for non-humans, because the former are no more sites of epistemological certainty than the latter. Vogel does not take account of the Latour point that both humans and nonhumans require spokespersons, in the political arena at least, and that therefore they have something speech-related in common. Instead he makes the perfectly reasonable point that, 'nature does not speak, at least not if "speech" is understood as involving the kind of dialogue that grounds the link between language and ethics' (Vogel, 2006: 166). He is careful to say that, 'To say that non-human entities in nature do not speak, it is important to note, is not to say that they do not possess intrinsic value, or that they do not have rights, or that they do not deserve human care or protection, or that they are mere means for our human ends. It does not mean that we have no ethical duties towards them, or that they possess no moral status' (Vogel, 2006: 166). Vogel's main point is simply that when theorists claim that 'nature speaks' they are using 'speaks' in

too indiscriminate a way and this is therefore not the way to gain 'moral respect' for nature (Vogel, 2006: 146). As far as the theme of this paper is concerned, the disagreement between Latour and Vogel turns into a disagreement about the role that nature might play in politics. Latour believes that nature, like humans, can be regarded as what he calls 'propositions' or 'actants', while Vogel argues that non-human nature can only ever be an object of political debate and discussion.

CONCLUSIONS

Is what Latour offers us a new *politics*? On the one hand we cannot regard it as completely new, because even though Latour has done away with the scaffolding (the human/nature divide) he has left the fundaments of the building in place: politics is apparently about speaking. There may be a shift of *emphasis* here, though. Even though speech is still critical to Latour's conception of politics, we might say that speech's essential complement – hearing, listening – is of greater importance in his new collective than it is in the traditional world of the two houses. This is because he enjoins us to 'associate the notion of external reality *with surprises and events*, rather than with the simple "being-there" of the warrior tradition, the stubborn presence of *matters of fact*' (Latour, 2004: 79). In the new collective we must be ready for surprise and attuned to its permanent possibility, and this requires careful listening. Who knows how different the history of climate change politics might have been had we been listening harder to the drip-drip of melting glaciers and ice-sheets when they first began offering detectable signs of strain?

Alan Holland has always argued for nature and, as the assault on nature gathers pace, we should be grateful that it has such an assiduous and capable advocate. Holland's approach to determining how much nature we have left is direct and uncomplicated: count it. This is a refreshing reminder of the most basic fact of all in this debate: that non-human nature exists. So many academic disciplines seem determined to allow nature to exist only through ciphers and proxies, while some sophists even claim nature no longer exists. In this paper I have sketched out the reasons why I think 'nature' is critical for 'politics': the distinction between the human and natural matters for humans, for 'nature' and for the nature of politics itself.

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NOTES

[1] Of course this capacity turns out to be very important some 1800 years or so later when Bentham turns it to his advantage in arguing for the rights-based consideration of pain-experiencing and pleasure-experiencing non-human animals, as we shall see.

[2] This is a result of the syllogism: (i) humans are distinguished from other animals because they, uniquely, possess capacity X; (ii) the human animal is the only political animal; (iii) therefore capacity X is a definitional feature of politics itself. I also suggested that the distinction between humans and the rest of nature is unstable.

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