



Environment & Society



White Horse Press

Full citation:

Keeling, Paul M. "Does the Idea of Wilderness Need a Defence?"
Environmental Values 17, no. 4, (2008): 505-519.
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/6051>

Rights:

All rights reserved. © The White Horse Press 2008. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism or review, no part of this article may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, including photocopying or recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission from the publisher. For further information please see <http://www.whpress.co.uk/>

Does the Idea of Wilderness Need a Defence?

PAUL M. KEELING

2578 E. 4th Ave.
Vancouver, B.C.
V5M 1K3, Canada
Email: keelingpaul@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

The received wilderness idea of nature as untrammelled by human beings has been accused of assuming an untenable human/nature dualism which denies the Darwinian fact that humans are a part of nature. But the meaning of terms like 'nature' and 'natural' depends on the context of use and the contrast class implied in that context. When philosophers such as J. Baird Callicott and Steven Vogel insist that the only correct view is that humans are a part of nature, they ignore the perfectly ordinary context in which 'nature' is used to mean 'other than human'. What is at issue here are *a priori* grammatical rules which stand in no need of empirical justification. There is no incompatibility between the view that humans are a part of nature and the idea that nature is valuable because of its non-human origin. The essentialism about the word 'nature' endemic to this debate distracts from the real issue, which is the value of nature's wildness.

KEYWORDS

Wilderness, artefacts, nature, Wittgenstein

I.

Wilderness has been under attack not only from its historical foe, unchecked human development, but also from environmental philosophers. A collection of many of these critiques was published in Michael P. Nelson and J. Baird Callicott's 1998 anthology of essays on the subject of wilderness, entitled *The Great New Wilderness Debate*. The criticisms of wilderness were sympathetic ones; as Callicott explained, 'my discomfort is with an idea, the received concept of wilderness, not with the ecosystems so called' (Callicott, 1998a: 339). Nonetheless, the editors announced in the preface (somewhat presumptuously) that these critiques had 'mortally wounded' the wilderness idea. So Ed Abbey may be wrong when he says that 'the idea of wilderness needs no defence, just more defenders' (Abbey, 1977: 233), because it seems that even wilderness sympathisers believe that the idea of wilderness doesn't stand up.

The received concept of wilderness that Callicott et al. find problematic is the idea of nature in a pristine, 'untrammelled' state.¹ According to the received wilderness idea (which I shall hereafter refer to simply as the wilderness idea), a landscape is wild, and thus more natural, to the extent that it is free of the presence of human agency. It has been alleged that the wilderness idea is problematic on both empirical and philosophical grounds.

The empirical objection to the wilderness idea is straightforwardly simple: the wilderness idea is a non-issue for environmental ethics because there is no place left anywhere on the face of the earth that is completely free of human agency. But if the term 'wilderness' is best taken as an endpoint of a spectrum of human choices, actions and historical trajectories, then this empirical objection to wilderness appears to have no more merit than would similar empirical objections to 'freedom', 'justice', 'empowerment', 'cultural diversity', or almost any other widely or deeply held human ideal, based on such ideals being 'impossible' in practice. If 'wilderness' is a normative term then the empirical objection misses the point. However, it is precisely the normative connotation of the wilderness idea that gives rise to the deeper philosophical objection.

The deeper philosophical objection to the wilderness idea is that its idealisation of pristine, untrammelled nature enshrines an untenable human/nature dualism. To say that a wilderness area protects the 'forces of nature' by excluding 'human works', is to presuppose that nature and human artefacts belong to mutually exclusive ontological categories. The wilderness idea is *prima facie* committed to proposition P1:

P1 No human artefacts are natural.

But this dichotomy contravenes ecological holism, according to which human works are 'evolutionary phenomena' and are 'as natural as those of beavers' (Callicott, 1998a: 350–51). We know on Darwinian grounds that modern hu-

DOES THE IDEA OF WILDERNESS NEED A DEFENCE?

man civilisation itself is wholly a product of and continuous with nature, from which follows proposition P2:

P2 All human artefacts are natural.

The wilderness idea is incoherent because it is based on the assumption that human works are not a part of nature, which is false.²

It might be suggested that some things are more natural than others, that naturalness is a matter of degree. But judging degrees of naturalness would seem to ultimately rely on the same fundamental dichotomy, in which the human and the natural are still defined as antipodes. A number of environmental philosophers, such as Eric Katz and Robert Elliot, have chosen to defend some version of P1, maintaining that human artefacts and nonhuman natural entities are categorically different phenomena, and that this difference is important to environmental valuation. Katz argues that the existence of an artefact necessarily reflects human intention, purpose and design, whereas natural entities are intrinsically non-intentional, purposeless and undesigned, thus they belong to different ontological categories (Katz, 1997). Robert Elliot has argued that possession of unique rational capacities places humans outside the natural order; despite being Darwinian creatures, humans have 'transcended the natural' (Elliot, 1997: 123). Steven Vogel, on the other hand, has argued that explaining the non-naturalness of human artefacts in terms of the origin of their creation tends to presuppose what needs justifying – the non-naturalness of human intention/design and rational capacities. This presupposition is unwarranted, Vogel argues, because we have known since Darwin that human consciousness is a random product of nature like any other. According to Vogel, the 'sharp distinction between nature and artefact doesn't hold up' (Vogel, 2003: 149). P1 amounts to what Vogel calls a 'stipulative definition', for Callicott it is mere 'question-begging dogmatism' (Vogel, 2003: 152; Callicott, 1998b: 388).³ These philosophers argue that the human/nature distinction that underpins the wilderness idea merely expresses an outmoded, pre-Darwinian ontological dualism leftover from a Judaeo-Christian world-view – 'truly a Puritan creation' (Callicott, 1998b: 390).⁴ According to Callicott it is not just a flaw on pragmatic grounds, but a conceptual fallacy in the first place, given ecological holism, to believe that 'the best way to conserve nature is to protect it from human inhabitation and utilisation' (Callicott, 1998a: 339). Yes, Callicott and Vogel acknowledge, modern human civilisation has certainly been uniquely harmful to the environment, but this is only contingently true. Hard-nosed environmental ethicists need to face up to P2 and get on with the problem of how to inhabit and use nature more responsibly and benignly, while P1 is a mere nonscientific fetish which has no place in environmental ethics and ought to be rejected.

Defenders of the wilderness idea (those few who are left) have heretofore largely failed to remove the sting of the philosophical objection. This is unfortunate, because the objection is a red herring. The objection relies on unexamined

assumptions about language in general, and on specific assumptions about what the word 'nature' means. These assumptions are methodologically suspect, since it is precisely the meaning of that word that is at stake in discussions about wilderness. There is no important tension between ecological holism and the wilderness idea. The objection is vacuous and a distraction from the real issue, which is the value of nature's wildness.

II.

The impasse reached in these discussions of the wilderness idea by skilled philosophers suggests deep conceptual puzzlement. This puzzlement arises not so much from flaws in the concepts involved (since lack of what Vogel calls a 'sharp distinction' is a feature of many useful concepts), but from unexamined assumptions about language in general. Looking at these assumptions may allow for a better way of understanding the problem.

Indeed, the approach to language taken by both Katz and Vogel (to use these disputants as examples) is spelled out clearly at the outset in their writings, and the method is highly revealing. Both Katz and Vogel begin with the Socratic essentialist assumption that what is needed is greater accuracy in the definition of terms, as if there is some hidden univocal meaning or essence of the words 'nature' and 'artefact' which needs working out. Katz asks what 'criteria', 'distinguishing marks', or 'characteristics', we should use to know what counts as 'nature':

To answer this question we need to do more than differentiate natural objects from artefacts, we need to *examine the essence* or nature of natural objects. What does it *mean* to say that an entity is natural (and hence not an artefact)?...What makes an object natural...? (Katz, 1997: 103, italics added)

Vogel shares Katz's approach and investigates the 'nature of artefacts', by 'thinking carefully about what an artefact really is' (Vogel, 2003: 150). The point of departure for both Katz and Vogel is to 'think carefully' and examine the essence of the words 'nature' and 'artefact', in order to determine, as precisely as possible, what they 'really mean'.⁵ This approach leads ineluctably to the problematic ontological human/nature dualism of Katz (see Ouderkirk, 2002) on the one hand, and to Vogel's implausible and somewhat unhelpful generalisation that all artefacts are natural (which 'obscures important distinctions', Katz correctly argues) on the other.

It would be more profitable to approach this intractable problem by treating language not just as way of referring to things, or picturing matters of fact in the world, but also as performative speech, a certain kind of rule-guided practice. Wittgenstein pointed out that highly ramified abstract nouns (like 'nature') should be thought of in terms of their purpose rather than their 'meaning', advising us,

DOES THE IDEA OF WILDERNESS NEED A DEFENCE?

'don't *ask for* the meaning, *ask for* the use' (Pitken, 1972: 84, italics Pitken's). 'The meaning', says Oswald Hanfling, 'will consist in the work that the word is doing in a given context, and not in a corresponding entity' (Hanfling, 1989: 49). The *philosophical* question 'is x natural?' or 'what is nature, really?' is likely to lack a suitable context and hence any clear sense of what is being asked. Since the only reason for employing concepts and drawing boundaries is for some specific purpose, what is needed is not an understanding of the features of nature but the features of the situations in which we talk about nature, when to say 'nature' or 'natural'. To give the meaning of a word is to specify its *grammar*, which is the system of unarticulated, constitutive rules governing its use. Examining the grammar of a word involves examining 'all the various verbal expressions in which that word is characteristically used' as well as examining the 'worldly situations those verbal expressions are used *for*' (Pitken, 1972: 117–18).

'Nature' and 'natural' clearly have a wide range of use in the language. For example, a household compost heap of organic material may be called 'natural' because the materials are biodegradable but could be said to be 'unnatural' if it were causing an explosion in the local skunk population. Hydrogen, calcium and titanium are 'found in nature' but americium, berkelium and einsteinium are not, they were produced in the laboratory. Owachomo Bridge in Natural Bridges National Monument in Utah is a 'natural bridge'; the Golden Gate Bridge is not. 'This is a natural forest' may mean 'it's old-growth', or 'it's not a plantation' or 'they aren't made of plastic'. We can easily understand what would count as 'unnatural' in each case by the context and speech situation. While all of this is familiar and obvious, it is precisely this multi-faceted and complex usage of the term 'nature', and what it is used for, that the philosophical literature on the wilderness idea has ignored, preoccupied instead with the 'real problem' of whether humans are a part of nature or whether human artefacts are natural. The important point here is that 'the use of the word *in practice*', as Wittgenstein puts it, 'is its meaning' (Hanfling, 1989: 42). To understand the meaning of the words 'nature' and 'natural' is to have mastery over the use of such expressions as 'natural disaster', 'natural place', 'natural resource', 'natural setting', 'natural beauty', 'connecting with nature', 'being in nature', 'destroying nature' 'protecting nature', and so on, as well as recognising the language-games in which these expressions occur. Human biology is a branch of the 'natural sciences', and humans have 'natural childbirth' and obey the call 'of nature'. Yet the 'natural world' may or may not include human beings and their works, depending on the speech context and the purpose for using that expression. A person who claims to 'love nature' is ordinarily not specifying a special fondness for the human-built environment. It is not as if we cannot understand these expressions until we know what 'nature' or 'natural' means; to the contrary, the 'meaning' is compounded out of such multifarious cases of use, and the word does not work in only one way.

It might be tempting to think that getting clarity about the meanings of the terms 'nature' and 'natural' is simply a matter of consulting a good dictionary and listing the definitions. But this is to assume that the meanings of these words antecede their use, and this assumption is quite misleading. Dictionary definitions are not very helpful in resolving philosophical perplexities because the meaning of a word is often context dependent and purpose relative. This can readily be shown by looking at the regularities of our linguistic practices, where we can recognise the contexts in which a word or expression is not at home. For example, the scientifically correct observation that a bridge 'isn't really solid' in virtue of the laws of physics at the atomic level is not at home in a context where I want to walk across the bridge and want to know whether it will support my weight. Similarly, the fact that 'nothing lasts forever' should not prevent us from distinguishing a permanent installation, a permanent road, or a permanent settlement from merely 'temporary' ones if this distinction is precisely the important factor in our designs and plans. In these examples it is not the dictionary meaning of the word 'solid' or 'forever' that is a problem. It is that a person who insists on these expressions is making a move in a particular language-game. These expressions may be meaningful, and perhaps true, in that particular language-game, but they make no sense (which is to say, they have no point) when they have the wrong implication in the language-game that is actually being played.

If we look at how the terms 'nature' and 'natural' commonly operate in the language, we can find when it is not at home. The following expressions would be quite odd:

'We are using a natural process to trigger these avalanches' (announcing a proposal to trigger avalanches with explosives)

'This is a natural lake' (pointing to a lake formed by a hydro-electric dam)

'What a stunning place, isn't nature beautiful!' (from within the inside of a cathedral)

'I do nature photography' (showing a photograph of Times Square)

'I enjoy being in nature' (offered as a reason for going to an evening concert, an art exhibit, a village market)

'It's amazing what nature can do' (pointing to a computer)

These utterances would probably be greeted with 'what are you saying?' or 'how do you mean?' not because the propositions are nonsensical in themselves, but because the speaker seems to be using the words 'nature' and 'natural' incorrectly. They appear to be making a mistake, or giving the wrong signal, given the nonverbal background. Cases like these demonstrate that there is an internal grammatical relation between human artefacts and nature or natural objects that cannot be genuinely doubted.

DOES THE IDEA OF WILDERNESS NEED A DEFENCE?

When we consider how the words 'nature' and 'natural' are actually used by looking at our language-games it is readily obvious that a key purpose of the concepts of 'nature' and 'natural' is to distinguish human agency from nonhuman agency. The need to establish a sharp, mathematical boundary between the two dissolves when we properly consider the quasi-performative dimension of language; we are not, in situations like the cases above, describing what is or is not nature in some general sense, but making use of a distinction under particular circumstances, determined by what it makes sense to *say* in that context. Katz and Vogel treat 'artefact' and 'natural object' as if they were two externally related terms which admit of independent analytic definitions. But even if this could be done, it would not amount to an explanation of what artefacts and natural objects are, because differentiating artefacts from natural objects is partly constitutive of the meaning of the two terms. Katz himself recognises this: 'What is clear, of course, is that *an artefact is not equivalent to a natural object*; but the precise difference, or set of differences, is not readily apparent' (Katz, 1997: 97, italics added). The precise difference is difficult to determine because in the act of differentiating artefacts from nature the grammar of the terms is already working, already in place. An empirical investigation into the essence of human artefacts or natural objects presupposes the grammar of these terms, because the latter determines what counts as an 'artefact' or a 'natural object'. One cannot justify this internal grammatical relation empirically by an appeal to reality. Vogel's question, 'why are *those* processes called natural ones, while the ones *we* initiate are not?' (Vogel, 2003: 152) is akin to asking, 'why do we say that black is *darker* than white?' There *is* no justification beyond simply saying, 'we play this language-game, and *this* is how we play it'. There is no way to justify empirically the fact that human artefacts are not natural objects. It is true *a priori*. And if there is no further way to justify it, then no further justification should be demanded.

The philosophical objection to the wilderness idea is a function of treating P1 (that human artefacts are not natural) as the expression of some kind of pre-scientific, religious world-view; in other words as a *move* in the language-game. But the proposition (e.g.) that 'the Golden Gate Bridge is not natural' need not be a move in the language-game (an empirical proposition stating a fact about the Golden Gate Bridge); rather, it may simply be a reminder accurately expressing a linguistic *rule*, (a grammatical proposition explaining the meaning of 'natural'), according to which remarking that 'nature is beautiful' or 'isn't nature marvellous!' while pointing at the Golden Gate Bridge constitutes a mistake, a wrong signal. Now, if someone were to respond with 'well, the Golden Gate Bridge *is* natural, in fact ... *all* artefacts are natural' rather than with (e.g.) 'no, I meant the sunset', then they are engaging in irrelevant pedantry. They have not contradicted the rule; they have simply made a counter-move in a different language-game where no move was made in the first place. It is not a dispute about the facts. For in saying that 'the Golden Gate Bridge is not natural' we were

not denying that there may be an evolved human disposition responsible for the existence of suspension bridges or that iron girders are subject to chemical and structural changes that are outside human control. Nor are they now asserting that the Golden Gate Bridge is the product of geologic forces and thus we needn't reply, 'Just a minute – you aren't suggesting that this was caused by erosion and weathering!' (the way that Owachomo bridge in Utah was). It is no answer to say 'we are just using the word in a different sense', for it is the language-game that we are playing which determines what it makes sense to say.

None of this is controversial, but conceptual confusion can arise when we contemplate a formal concept with which we are already familiar in ordinary, non-philosophical discourse, and theorise about it in abstraction from any specific context in which it might ordinarily be used, thereby excluding features of its grammar. This is the trend in the philosophical literature criticising the idea of wilderness. An example is Vogel's consideration of significant, ongoing human landscaping activities such as 'digging, planting, weeding, and burning'; that 'when looked at carefully, all the processes these actions put into place *themselves are wild*' (Vogel, 2003: 162). The telling phrase is 'looked at carefully' – meaning in a context of abstract philosophical contemplation, not in any worldly context in which a person would actually *say* that flowers planted in a garden were '*wild* flowers, really', in virtue of the fact that flowers, once planted, are never totally under human control and will grow in certain ways that are not entirely predictable. The word 'wild' does have a wide range of use in the language, and human agency can be 'wild'; someone who has a 'wild appearance' is unkempt or outlandishly dressed, a 'wild mob' is an unruly crowd, and a 'wild party' is a boisterous, usually drunken, social gathering. But this is not to say that anything goes. Plants, animals and lands are 'wild' to the extent that human agency is lacking, even though (as we have just said) not all human agency is a form of discipline, restraint or control. Vogel simply eliminates the ordinary worldly context and contrast that completes the meaning of the word 'wild'; it is not doing any real work. He has, as Pitken puts it, 'extrapolated the concept to infinity'. Vogel extrapolates even further on the next page, 'if we begin to think even more carefully, we might come to see that the wild is always there in *all* our acts, and in all our artefacts'. But Vogel's thinking more carefully about the wildness of artefacts tellingly flouts any context where the word would normally, actually be used in practice, thereby depriving it of important aspects of its meaning. To extend the concept of wildness to the unpredictability of human artefacts (e.g. crack formations in pavement) is not to make any new empirical observations about human artefacts or discover any hitherto unnoticed facts about them. It is (not unlike poetry) simply to invent a new context for the word 'wild' where there are no established rules for its use. Vogel's sense of 'wild', lacking a specified purpose, could apply to anything, and is therefore quite

DOES THE IDEA OF WILDERNESS NEED A DEFENCE?

senseless. Cronon similarly eliminates the ordinary contrast between the tree planted in the garden and the tree in an ancient forest, arguing that they are 'both wild, in some ultimate sense' (Cronon, 1998: 494). But differentiating between these two trees is partly constitutive of the meaning of the word 'wild', and so the 'ultimate sense' doesn't make much sense at all (consider Wittgenstein's questions: 'How did we *learn* the meaning of this word...? From what sorts of examples? In what language-games?'). The ultimate sense will not be at home in the actual context of distinguishing and comparing old-growth forests and trees in gardens. 'But we wish to know', says Robert Chapman, 'what wildness is' (Chapman, 2006: 467). No, we want to know how the word 'wild' is used, in what contexts and for what purposes. And if humans say that they value natural places, natural spaces and natural settings, with natural scenery, natural beauty and natural features that are as natural as possible, the appropriate response is not 'what does *natural* mean, ultimately?'

Both Katz and Elliot feel compelled to defend the conceptual legitimacy of the distinction between nature and human artefacts on empirical grounds. But they don't need to. P1 is a reason for valuing wild, untrammelled nature that stands in no need of empirical justification. On the other hand, nature as indicating 'other than human' is clearly not a 'stipulative definition' or a 'dogmatism' as Vogel and Callicott contend, because it is a regular standard of correctness in our language-games in a way that mere stipulative definitions and dogmas are not. In fact, P1 is not true 'by definition' at all (a human artefact is not defined as 'an unnatural object') but a *grammatical proposition* which is a description of how the constituent terms are actually used (Glock, 1996: 50).⁶ The proposition that human artefacts are not natural is not a consequence of the meanings of the terms 'human artefact' and 'natural', but partly constitutes them. And although this rule may be autonomous in the sense that it may not be responsible to, or 'about' a putative essence of reality, it is not thereby stipulative, dogmatic, arbitrary or quirky (and there is certainly nothing *religious* about it). P1 cannot be meaningfully denied or expunged from the language, for to do so would require denying the language-games, and the purposes for playing them, from which P1 is derived. If it turned out, fantastically, that some human or group of humans were controlling natural processes, we would say that they weren't 'natural processes', after all. Our language-games about nature might then be obsolete or pointless, but this does not mean that the grammatical rule is incorrect, or arbitrary (there is no reason to expect our rules to already cover all cases). P1 is the *basis* for justifying a value judgment *à la* Elliot, 'an area is valuable ... because it is a natural area ... naturalness itself is a source of value' (Elliot, 1997: ix, 183), or criticising an environmental policy *à la* Katz: '... restored and redesigned natural areas will appear more or less natural, but they will never be natural ...' (Katz, 1997: 98). But P1 itself cannot be justified or criticised.

III.

The philosophers who have objected to the wilderness idea are quite aware that their insights (that, e.g. all human artefacts are wild, or natural) go against what we ordinarily say or 'take for granted'. But these philosophers are not conducting scientific investigations or making empirical discoveries, they are merely 'reinvestigating' facts we already know. Science may discover new empirical facts about human evolutionary biology or the earth's physical systems but this amounts to greater knowledge about nature and the human relationship to it, not greater knowledge about the 'real meaning' of the word 'nature'. Language-games in which 'nature' is praised, admired, revered and even simply recognised in virtue of its nonhuman agency, and sharply distinguished from human agency, have not been made problematic by the theory of evolution. What *is* problematic is to deny the possibility or point of these language-games. Callicott and Vogel insist that nature cannot be other to humans by ignoring these language-games and the point of playing them. But ecological holism, the proposition that humans and their works are the product of ecological and evolutionary processes, does not entail ecological monism, the proposition that humans and nature are 'one' and no 'otherness' obtains between them.⁷ As we have seen, ecological monism (collapsing the conceptual distinction between human and nonhuman agency with the claim that 'human artefacts are natural') makes no sense within the rules of grammar. This is why no ecological holist insists that 'really, strictly speaking, that's false' when we identify the term 'natural' with nonhuman agency and distinguish it from ('unnatural') human agency in ordinary speech situations, because in such situations we are getting it right, not getting it wrong, and we may be conveying important and relevant information. Here the ecological holist is in a different position from, say, an astronomer who may correctly (even if annoyingly) point out to us that our ordinary talk about sunsets is false, because a 'sunset' is *really* a 'horizon lift'. Making the human/nature distinction is not a commitment to or a product of any scientific theory or metaphysical thesis. The distinction is a linguistic practice that is justified by its use, i.e. by the language-games in which the distinction is made, and by the conditions which produce those language-games.

The ecological holist who objects to the wilderness idea may want to say, 'I am perfectly aware that "nature" (or "natural") usually means "other than human" in ordinary language, but that is not how *I* am using it'. But in that case, what is the philosophical objection to the wilderness idea an objection to? Where is the alleged internal contradiction in the wilderness idea? And how *does* the ecological holist use the terms 'nature' and 'natural'? The philosophical objection to the wilderness idea involves a characteristic deviation from ordinary usage which at the same time paradoxically relies on ordinary usage for its expression. A fairly typical example is Callicott's claim that '... the current changes imposed upon nature by global industrial civilisation are unprecedented, rapid, and radi-

DOES THE IDEA OF WILDERNESS NEED A DEFENCE?

cal and therefore, albeit natural, not normal' (Callicott, 1998: 355). Callicott's point is that all anthropogenic changes are natural, whether they are ecologically destructive or beneficial, because humans are a natural species. The mere fact that changes upon nature are human caused, rather than non-human caused, does not make them harmful. But Callicott's linguistic deviation is to use 'natural' as a label or name for ecological and evolutionary processes and, in one and the same context, 'nature' as indicating the distinction between nonhuman agency and human agency. Ordinarily in the context of assessing human impacts 'upon nature' we talk about 'natural variability', because in such a context it would be getting our signals crossed to refer to these impacts as 'natural'. The proposition that 'anthropogenic changes are natural' is not at home in such a context, because in such a context 'natural' means 'not anthropogenic'. If it did not mean this, how could we know about, let alone study and measure these impacts? The possibility of anthropogenic *changes* imposed 'upon nature' logically presupposes a conception of nature that is unchanged by human agency. Callicott cannot escape the grammar (nature as indicating 'other than human') he wants to expunge from ecological holism, because this grammar is just as binding for environmental philosophers as it is for non-philosophers.

It should be an uncontroversial point that the distinction between nature and human artefacts is an *a priori* rule of grammar. So why does this distinction present itself as an ontological problem which needs to be overcome? The problem stems from the *philosopher's* craving for generality and disregard of our language-games, which results in the unconscious assumption that the word 'nature' ('natural') only works one way, as a label or name for some kind of ontological category or 'world'. On pain of contradiction this 'natural world' either includes human artefacts, or it does not. If human artefacts are categorically excluded from the natural world, the thinking goes, then human artefacts must be 'outside' the natural world, in some other world or realm of existence.⁸ But the word 'nature' ('natural') works in a variety of ways, reflecting the diverse purposes of its use. It is not just, or even mostly, a label for an ontological category. 'Nature' as *the world* and 'nature' as nonhuman agency *in the world* are not referents for two distinct, isolable worlds or realms of existence. They are different parts of the grammar of the word 'nature'.⁹ This explains the perplexing effect of ecological monist claims like Vogel's that 'nature is not other than us; rather humans and nature are *inseparable*' (Vogel, 2003: 164). Nature's separateness and otherness to us is part of its meaning. And 'part of its meaning' is importantly different from 'one of its meanings' in that it is not discretionary or avoidable by simply saying, 'I don't mean natural in *that* way', or 'I take nature to mean ...' Such a demand for clarity and absoluteness in the word 'nature' ('natural') will generate unsatisfying paradoxes and antinomies precisely because such 'careful' (i.e. abstract, context-free) thinking will inevitably run up against the familiar remainder of the word's grammar (Pitken, 1972: 292).

Concepts emerge out of working use, for certain purposes, and the concept of 'nature' ('natural') is compounded out of both integrative and contrastive cases of use, *as* the world *in* the world. This is a duality of grammar which has to be accepted as given, not an ontological dualism which needs to be overcome. Some advocates of the wilderness idea may have been, or are ontological dualists (e.g. Christian creationists). But the idea of wilderness does not assume or enshrine ontological dualism. The philosophical objection that there is a fallacy in the idea of wilderness is an expression of what Wittgenstein calls 'discontent with our grammar' (Glock, 1996: 296). This discontent is a consequence of confusing the rules of our language games with empirical claims made on the basis of these rules. Empirical claims can be subject to genuine scepticism (are those formations ancient burial mounds or are they natural?), but the rules themselves (they are ancient burial mounds, they are not natural) cannot.

IV.

The wilderness idea is simply an affirmation of the value of nature in its contrastive aspect. It expresses the fact that nonhuman agency is a value-adding property of the natural world, that nature is valuable *in virtue* of its 'otherness' to humans (Reed, 1989; Goodin, 1992; Birch, 1994; Milton, 1999; Hailwood, 2000; Crist, 2004). To protect wilderness is to allow the widest possible autonomy to nature; a place where otherness – wildness – has its highest and fullest expression. Someone will protest: 'You say that the wilderness idea is an affirmation of the value of nature in virtue of its otherness to humans. But this is incoherent because we know that nature is not other to human', and we go around the circle again. But travelling this circle is fruitless discontent with our grammar, not a debate about wilderness.

Is independent, autonomous nature – wild nature – valuable or not? 'There are some who can live without wild things', says Aldo Leopold, 'and some who cannot' (Leopold, 1966: xvii). Maybe Steven Vogel, finding no disvalue in a totally artificial, virtual landscape with *ersatz* flora and fauna, can (Vogel, 2003: 166–7). The answer to that question does not require a debate about whether humans are a part of nature or whether human artefacts are natural. These are not genuine problems for the wilderness idea and nothing important depends on the answer to them. To insist that they are problems is not to have a debate about wilderness, but to block it. Obsession with the so-called 'paradoxes' and 'contradictions' of the wilderness idea distracts from the real debate about wilderness and has done a disservice to an important area of environmental policy. Ed Abbey was right after all.

DOES THE IDEA OF WILDERNESS NEED A DEFENCE?

NOTES

The author wishes to acknowledge Tim Hayward and Lambert Stepanich for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

¹ The received wilderness idea is best captured by the definition of wilderness in the 1964 U.S. Wilderness Act: 'Wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is ... an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. [It] generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable'. Synonyms for 'untrammelled' include unimpeded, unhampered, uncontrolled, self-willed and free.

² Callicott and others who raise the philosophical objection are usually clear that they do not mean 'nature' in its broadest, cosmological application, contrasted with the 'supernatural', which would make P2 a very uninteresting claim (because humans could not modify, transform, or diminish 'nature' in this sense). The philosophical objection is aimed at the putative ontological distinction between naturally evolved (Darwinian) phenomena and human (artefact-producing) culture. There is a closely related charge that the wilderness idea perniciously *perpetuates* or *encourages* the myth of this kind of ontological dualism which has been addressed elsewhere (Havlick, 2005). This is a separate and logically distinct claim from the claim that the wilderness idea *assumes* or *enshrines* such dualism, and the two issues are easily conflated. It is the latter issue which is taken up here.

³ Vogel writes, 'There is no harm, of course, in choosing a special word – say, *nature* – to refer to that part of the world that members of one species – say, humans – have not modified; it would be a kind of stipulative definition, a technical term' (Vogel, 2003: 152; see also p. 161 where this idea is repeated). Callicott's accusation of question-begging is directed at Holmes Rolston, who claims that 'it is a fallacy to think that a nature allegedly improved by humans is anymore real nature at all' (Rolston, 1998: 370).

⁴ Callicott's largely *ad hominem* essay 'That Good Old Wilderness Religion' insinuates that P2 is 'scientific' and therefore authoritative, while P1 is 'religious' and therefore illegitimate.

⁵ This tendency is so widespread in the philosophical literature on nature and the environment that it is impossible to enumerate its occurrences. A recent typical example can be found in Donald A. Crosby's *A Religion of Nature*. Part II of Crosby's book is entitled 'The Nature of Nature'. In Part II Crosby sets out to explain 'The Concept of Nature', beginning with a subsection called 'The Problem of Meaning' (with the characteristic philosophical observation that the meaning of 'nature' and 'the natural' is a problem. See also Katz, 1997: 141; Chapman, 2006: 464, and Vogel, 2002 in this regard). Crosby writes: 'What, then, does the term nature *mean*? We are not asking merely for a reportive or dictionary definition but for a philosophical one. A philosophical definition is generally to be understood in terms of a philosophical theory, and it can most usefully be seen as a shorthand designation for, or as a summation of, such a theory.' (Crosby, 2002: 20). The assumption is that philosophical investigation into the 'nature of x' should imitate the methods of science with its aim to explain a maximum range of phenomena under a general law or explanatory *theory*.

⁶ Examples of grammatical propositions are ‘a sofa is longer than a chair’, ‘every event has a cause’, ‘you cannot have my thought’, and ‘there is no reddish-green’. These propositions are clearly not analytic. Grammatical propositions closely resemble Kant’s synthetic *a priori* propositions and the distinction is the subject of some debate, which is beyond the scope of this paper. But the important point is that one’s basis for valuing wild nature (its nonhuman agency) does not depend on empirical proof or justification, any more than valuing sofas because you can lie down on them depends on an empirical investigation as to whether sofas *really are* longer than chairs.

⁷ As Christopher Belshaw bluntly puts it, “‘everything is connected’ is true, “‘everything is one’ is false’ (Belshaw, 2001: 187). Compare with Vogel, ‘The two worlds (artefact and nature) are really one world ...’ (Vogel, 2003: 166) and Callicott, ‘For Christians, man and nature are two, not one ...’ (Callicott, 1998: 390). The insinuation is that a wilderness advocate is (indeed, must be) a ‘dualist’ with a mistaken view of reality. The real mistake, in my view, is to be counting at all.

⁸ For example, when Katz states the straightforward inference rule that ‘Natural entities, insofar as they are natural, are not the result of human intentions’, Ouderkirk says ‘I interpret that to mean that human intentions place humans outside of nature in some way’ (Ouderkirk, 2002: 127). Vogel ‘interprets’ in the same way: ‘If those actions of ours are *not* natural, ... then we are *not* part of nature ... The human world and the natural one are thus treated as separate realms’ (Vogel, 2002: 26 and 25, see also footnote 7).

⁹ See Pitken’s discussion of Paul Ziff (Pitken, 1972: 12). Pitken points out that ‘difference in meaning is a matter of degree’. The ‘bear’ in ‘I can’t bear it’ has no connection in meaning to the ‘bear’ in ‘I was chased by a bear’. They are, simply, two distinct words. The difference in meaning is much less between ‘The division is incorrect’ and ‘Lieutenant George’s division is marching’, but in some verbal contexts they could still be ambiguous, as in ‘the division is incomplete’. But consider the difference between ‘nature’ in ‘humans are a part of nature’ (i.e. humans are Darwinian creatures subject to biological and ecological processes) and ‘carbon is an element found in nature’ (carbon was not produced in the lab, unlike berkelium). These could be said to ‘differ in meaning’, but not so much that they have ‘two different meanings’. This is shown by the fact that ‘there can be verbal contexts which are not merely ambiguous but involve both simultaneously’. A person who laments that they are ‘out of touch with nature’ or who wishes to ‘feel closer to nature’ may both wish to deepen their awareness of being members of the natural order and wish to get out of the city. Someone wanting to ‘see Lieutenant George’s division’, on the other hand, is not likely to want to see an army unit and a bit of arithmetic.

REFERENCES

- Abbey, Edward. 1977. *The Journey Home*. New York: Dutton.
- Belshaw, Christopher. 2001. *Environmental Philosophy: Reason, Nature and Human Concern*. Chesham: Acumen.
- Birch, Thomas H. 1990. ‘The incarceration of wildness: wilderness areas as prisons’. *Environmental Ethics* 12: 3–26.

DOES THE IDEA OF WILDERNESS NEED A DEFENCE?

- Callicott, J. Baird. 1998a. 'The wilderness idea revisited: the sustainable development alternative', in J.B. Callicott and M.P. Nelson (eds.), *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press), pp. 337–366. Originally published in *The Environmental Professional* **13** (1991): 235–247.
- Callicott, J Baird. 1998b. 'That good old time wilderness religion', in J.B Callicott and M.P. Nelson (eds.), *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press), pp.387–394. Originally published in *The Environmental Professional* **13** (1991) : 378–379.
- Cronon, Willam. 1998. 'The trouble with wilderness or getting back to the wrong nature', in J.B. Callicott and M.P. Nelson (eds.), *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press), pp. 471–499. Originally published in William Cronon (ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton. 1995).
- Chapman, Robert. 2006. 'Ecological restoration restored'. *Environmental Values* **15**: 463–478, doi:10.3197/096327106779116096.
- Crist, Eileen. 2004. 'Against the social construction of nature and wilderness'. *Environmental Ethics* **26**: 5–24.
- Crosby, Donald A. 2002. *A Religion of Nature*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Elliot, Robert. 1997. *Faking Nature*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Glock, Hans-Johann. 1996. *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Goodin, Robert E. 1992. *Green Political Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hailwood, Simon. 2000. 'The value of nature's otherness'. *Environmental Values* **9**: 353–372, doi:10.3197/096327100129342092.
- Hanfling, Oswald. 1989. *Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Havlick, David G. 2005. 'Reconsidering wilderness: prospective ethics for nature, technology and society'. *Ethics, Place and Environment* **9**: 47–62.
- Katz, Eric. 1997. *Nature as Subject: Human Obligation and Natural Community*. Lanham: Rowland and Littlefield.
- Leopold, Aldo. 1949. *A Sand County Almanac*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Milton, Kay. 1999. 'Nature is already sacred', *Environmental Values* **8**: 327–349.
- Ouderkirk, Wayne. 2002. 'Katz's problematic dualism and its "seismic" effects on his theory'. *Ethics and the Environment* **7**: 124–137, doi:10.2979/ETE.2002.7.1.124.
- Pitken, Hanna F. 1972. *Wittgenstein and Justice*. Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Reed, Peter. 1989. 'Man apart: an alternative to the self-realization approach'. *Environmental Ethics* **11**: 53–69.
- Rolston, Holmes III. 1998. 'The wilderness idea reaffirmed', in J. Baird Callicott and M.P. Nelson (eds.), *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press), pp.367–386. Originally published in *The Environmental Professional* **13** (1991): 370–377.
- Vogel, Steven. 2002. 'Environmental philosophy after the end of nature'. *Environmental Ethics* **24**: 23–39.
- Vogel, Steven. 2003. 'The nature of artifacts'. *Environmental Ethics* **25**: 149–168.

