

From Mastery to Mystery

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A Phenomenological Foundation
for an Environmental Ethic

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

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THE QUESTION OF NATURE

No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions.

—Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

An ethics of the environment must begin with the sheer and simple fact of being struck by something wrong happening in the surrounding world. It is by noticing that something is out of joint—does not fit or function well—that a response is elicited and an action induced.

—Edward S. Casey, “Taking a Glance at the Environment”

In the quotes above, Leopold and Casey agree upon a little-explored insight: environmentalism begins with a feeling. For some, this sentiment is an intuition that there is something amiss with how many human beings currently live within and interact with nature. For others, it is an emotional connection to a place or an acknowledgment that many current environmental practices are simply unsustainable. There is no one source of environmentalism that can be identified as the most important, but in all cases we *care* for nature first, and from there we consider what is to be done. For this reason, an important question that usually remains unspoken is, How do those of us already concerned with the integrity, stability, and beauty of our planet’s ecological systems inspire others to care about nature? Unfortunately, such a task can appear even more daunting than convincing the government of the United States to accept a global agreement on climate change. While caring about nature is clearly not sufficient to ensure the adoption of a more ecologically friendly lifestyle, without such care I venture that environmentally friendly policy is doomed to failure. The

question we face, then, is how to bring about such concern for the welfare of nature.

The problems we encounter in this regard are myriad, and there is little consensus concerning what they are and how they are to be addressed. This book will argue that the main problem we encounter in establishing a caring concern for nature is a hermeneutic one. Hermeneutics, very generally speaking, is the practice of discovering and interpreting meaning. But it does not merely deal with the meaning of linguistic expressions. Rather, modern hermeneutics finds meaning in social practices and phenomena, bodies, and even existence itself. Central to hermeneutical practice is the notion of an interpretive framework: human beings seek and discover meaning only within the context of a specific network of already established meaningful relations. To assert the existence of an interpretive frame is not to say that the frame cannot be shifted or altered. In fact, the claim that I will make is that a change of precisely that kind is what is necessary: we must alter the very way nature is conceived in order to inspire the necessary changes in affection that can motivate a healthier relationship with nature. Speaking negatively, without such a shift we lack a solid normative framework from which to voice our environmental concerns.

Bryan G. Norton has already indicated this problem as the “environmentalists’ dilemma” in his *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists*.¹ On the one hand, the language and meaning that dominates policy discussion is that of economics, and that language does not capture the true force of environmentalists’ concerns. Saying, for example, that mountaintop removal is reprehensible because it fails to include in its economic evaluations supposed “externalities,” such as the poisoning of rivers and the destruction of local communities, fails to capture the indignation and dismay that many feel as a result of the practice. On the other hand, environmentalists have failed to develop a common tongue to express their concerns, so the economic lingua franca remains unchallenged. Since many proponents of preservationism (though by no means all) believe that the economization of value is one of the causes of the domination of nature while the conservationist is less averse to such thinking, the two groups will from time to time end up fighting each other rather than opposing practices that threaten their commonly held view of a more ecologically responsible lifestyle. Norton proposes resolving this dilemma by reconciling the conservationist and preservationist approaches to environmentalism, not by means of dealing with what he calls their “two apparently exclusive worldviews and sets of value assumptions,” but by

focusing on their shared objectives.² Since his goal is policy-oriented, this decision makes sense to a certain extent, but for those of us who are made uncomfortable by the implications of the worldview used to support both the economic/conservationist and the preservationist positions, Norton's solution fails to touch the problem he so astutely identified in the first place: the very ways in which different people conceive of nature lead us to identify significantly different practices as environmentally friendly or destructive.

So while Norton may be correct in indicating the common ground held between members of different camps of environmentalists, the sad fact is that in many cases consensus on how best to deal with these problems deteriorates as soon as a plan of action begins to be discussed. Take, for an example, the practice of ecological restoration. Though practitioners tend to have good intentions, some environmentalists have levied criticisms against the practice: that it indicates a resignation of the main goals of preservationists; that it is impossible to restore nature since any system that we could reestablish would be an artifact; that restored systems require continual management to remain in their restored state; that the project itself reflects a romantic nostalgia for things past, and so on. Against these charges, those who defend the practice maintain that it is one of the best ways to expand the wild spaces we have remaining and to repair damages wrought in the industrial era. I do not intend to mount a defense of ecological restoration here, but I do wish to note the manner in which the interpretive frameworks of the two sides contribute to an impasse of sorts. Opponents tend to view nature as an order devoid of human presence, while advocates see nature more in terms of a cybernetic system. Even in this latter group, however, there are those who view human influence, or at least that of Europeans and their descendants, as inimical to nature, which is why the pre-Columbian period is usually selected as a target for restoration. There are environmentally conscious individuals in both camps, but the differences in their interpretive framework prevents them from perceiving the situation in the same light. This divergence of perspective is a result of the interpretive framework each employs, which is constituted by a certain set of assumptions of a *metaphysical character*; what is in question is *what nature is* and therefore *what is natural*. The dispute seems to revolve around the legitimacy of a practice, but the conflict is actually situated at the level of meaning. Hence the need for hermeneutical intervention.

John van Buren has seen the same need and has therefore proposed pursuing a critical environmental hermeneutic. He describes such a hermeneutic as occupied primarily with "the *sense* or *meaning* of the environment for

perceivers and is thus unlike the natural sciences, which are focused primarily on the biophysical aspects of the environment.”³ Such a hermeneutic would develop along three distinct axes: “(1) environmental epistemology (describing and critically evaluating the different views of what the environment is), (2) environmental ethics in a narrow sense (describing and evaluating views of the value of environment), and (3) environmental politics (describing and evaluating who has or should have political power in the environment).”⁴ Importantly, however, van Buren notes how these questions involve one another: narratives concerning what the environment is will be laden with value, both ethical and political.⁵ Though his essay deals primarily with how these questions pertain to forests, they also suggest a broader project, namely how best to interpret and understand the narratives that structure our metaphysical understanding of nature itself. My intention in writing this book is to undertake exactly this project: to provide a hermeneutic of nature that will enable us to approach the ethical and political problems that we face concerning the natural world in a different way. Unlike van Buren, then, my aim in discussing the narrative structure of the conception of nature is not merely descriptive, though I agree with him strongly concerning its potential to resolve vexing political disagreements concerning the environment.⁶ Rather, with the insight that these conceptions are in fact both ethically and politically normative, I am arguing for a way of thinking about nature that can help us to address the pressing concern of how to make sense of individuals’ perceived indifference to the environment (at least in terms of their behavior) and perhaps impart some sense of why it is important to care for nature. My subsidiary concern is to avoid placing us within the event horizon of certain philosophical black holes (e.g., the debates concerning intrinsic value) in environmental ethics.

Such a project is not without precedent.⁷ Val Plumwood, perhaps more than any other philosopher, has shown us how the hermeneutical concerns about the significance of nature and our ethical intuitions are intertwined. In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, she analyzes the ways in which our metaphysical beliefs concerning nature have been used to justify and promulgate politically oppressive forms of behavior.⁸ In her view, the common root of the oppression of women and the domination of nature lies in dualistic thinking. Dualisms operate along five key dimensions: (1) the creation of two *wholly distinct* classes on the basis of a difference in properties (hyper-separation); (2) defining the identity of the disempowered class in terms of properties it lacks in relation to the empowered class (relational definition); (3) the instrumental objectification of the disempowered class; (4) a denial

of the dependency the empowered class has upon the disempowered (backgrounding); and (5) stereotyping members of the disempowered class so as not to recognize salient differences between its members (homogenization).⁹ As should be clear, dualisms differ from dichotomies in that they establish a hierarchy that licenses the oppression or objectification of one of the classes. In order to secure the political order they underwrite, dualisms also typically form networks (e.g., the relation between reason-emotion, culture-nature, and man-woman) (*FMN*, 44–47). The nature-culture binary is a particularly pernicious dualism at the foundation of much Western thinking. Plumwood traces the form of this dualism beginning with Plato's thought into our contemporary metaphysics, revealing the different ways in which the philosophical tradition is party to establishing a metaphysical discontinuity between humanity's cultural and historical life and "the rest" of nature. Descartes's metaphysical dualism provides a convenient example: Bodily substances are hyperseparated from mental substance as a result of defining natural bodies in terms of properties they seem to lack in relation to minds. The body is then reduced to the instrument of the mind's agency, and its contribution to that agency is discounted as being inessential to knowing. Animals, even as they display certain intentional properties that are allotted to the mind alone, have those differences with objects such as rocks effaced in an effort to homogenize them within the category of natural bodies. The legacy of Descartes's dualistic philosophy continues to shape the contemporary philosophical landscape insofar as current forms of "naturalism" accept the Cartesian understanding of matter and strive to explain phenomena such as agency and intentionality in terms of supposed material processes.¹⁰ If the domination of nature takes this dualizing form, then the first step toward liberating nature is the hermeneutical project of developing a new sense of nature. To do otherwise is to persist in relating to nature as a passive domain radically different from ourselves and preserve the dualism of nature-culture.

Though I agree with Plumwood's analysis, the issue is made more complex by the fact that other philosophers who share the same diagnosis offer an alternative solution to the problem: rejecting the concept of nature in its entirety rather than reformulating it at all. Neil Evernden, for example, also argues that the assumed dualism between the two is a philosophical artifact that serves to underwrite a political scheme.¹¹ In his view, the concept of nature is just as easily employed to justify progressive agendas as it is oppressive ones, which is why naturalism cannot serve to justify or explain plans for social action (*SCN*, 16–17).¹² To demonstrate his point, he presents the

debate we have been discussing between those who “wish to husband nature efficiently” and those who “wish to treat it well, as one would (or should) another person” as one that rests on rather shaky foundations (101). Both sides accept that there is something that stands in the place of nature, but they define the concept in such a way that it supports their political and ethical goals. For this reason, Evernden takes nature to be a placeholder concept that embodies the agenda of the group in question. So conservationists tend to define nature in a materialistic fashion, while preservationists tend to want to find something *more* in nature (e.g., intrinsic value, spiritual meaning, or some larger self). The dispute is irresolvable because *nature is not a thing with properties*. Thus, neither the conservationist nor the preservationist has a valid position because they both make the mistake of thinking of nature as a thing. In Evernden’s view, the best course of action is to cease speaking of nature and to approach each being in its novelty.

So both Evernden and Plumwood agree that the concept of nature is inherently linked to the establishment of a particular social order. In accepting that connection between the two, the divide between ontology and ethics erodes: responses to metaphysical questions contain within themselves an inherently socially oriented practice, even in science. This relationship between nature and politics is what prompted Arne Naess to advise that philosophy supporting environmentalism “move from ethics to ontology and back.”¹³ In following this advice, we begin with ethics because it is built upon the shared sentiment that we ought to care for nature, proceed to ontology to help us determine how and why we ought to care, return to ethics in order to seek a way to enact that program, and always remain open to further ontological investigation that can shift us from our current path. For the purposes of the current work, I assume an ongoing ethical commitment to a healthier relationship to the environment and begin with the second step of the process, namely an ontological investigation into the character of nature. I believe this is fair given that all the parties I will discuss orient themselves toward establishing a nondominating relationship to other beings. My goal is to preserve the intuitions that sustain both Plumwood’s and Evernden’s analyses, specifically that the way forward for environmentalism lies along the road of a reformulated conception of nature, but at the same time that it would be a mistake to think about nature as a substantial being that bears properties.

Retaining the concept of nature is critical for at least two major reasons. First, there is already an emotional connection between many people and their environs that is clearly expressed in the term. Even if the intention is

to change the relationship between individual human beings and the rest of nature, it will be easier to enact that change by asking people to focus on an already understandable and acknowledged relationship rather than by asking them to reconceive their experience as a whole from the very beginning. Though the latter reconception may be the ultimate goal, we must, as Martin Heidegger would say, “twist free” of our already established ways of thinking before we can think anew. The second reason to continue to speak of nature follows from this point, namely, that the only way to understand and repair the damage we have wrought within the natural world (and one another by means of various strategies of naturalizing oppressions) is by cultivating a more progressive conception of nature (*FMN*, 195–96). As Plumwood makes this case in “Toward a Progressive Naturalism,” “the fact that a few people have begun to contest the devaluing and agentic disappearance of nature or woman does not mean that we have arrived at a system of thought or life that can dispense with the concept.”¹⁴ In other words, because the dualistic conception of nature and humanity has been the means by which various oppressive political schemes have been justified and perpetuated, asserting counternarratives that challenge the dualizing master narrative constitutes the first step in twisting free of the oppressive aspects of the metaphysical inheritance of the West.¹⁵ These narratives ought to focus on establishing the ontological continuity between humanity and nature, while also preserving the specificity and difference of each constituent of nature.¹⁶ The importance of this strategy lies in how it simultaneously challenges dualistic thinking via the ontological continuity while not homogenizing beings and thereby allowing what is distinct about each to shine through.

A more vexing problem for the current hermeneutical project emerges, however, when we return to the ethical domain and ask what is to be done regarding the human impact upon nature. One of the many consequences of offering a counternarrative to the dominant conception of nature in Western thought is that what it means to preserve such a nature is going to change radically. Preservation usually refers either to sustaining the ability of natural systems to self-regulate or to keeping what is left of so-called “pristine” nature undespoiled and beyond the reach of humanity. On this view of preservation, the normative status of nature is taken as given: human actions ought to be governed by what is “good for nature.” Calling for preservation requires, in at least a limited sense, taking the current state of nature to be more valuable than other states; it requires a normative evaluation of the current state of affairs with respect to a possible future. Given the current state of

environmental affairs along with the political paralysis that impedes changes in that state, such calls for preservation are understandable, but on what basis is the value judgment made? There is a need, then, to determine the basis of the normative claim. Everything hinges upon *why* nature should direct human action and *how* one comes to determine what is good for nature.

Philosophers have, of course, provided responses to these two questions, but, as Steven Vogel points out, these responses frequently lead to antinomies that make the responses untenable.¹⁷ The problem stems mainly from the competing commitments that philosophers sympathetic to the preservation of wilderness want to maintain. On the one hand, there is a strong commitment to antihumanism or, as it is stated more usually, a resistance to anthropocentrism. For example, Tom Regan argues that any ethic that would call itself an environmental ethic, in order to distinguish itself from traditional ethical systems that deal with relations between human beings, must accept that there are both nonhuman beings and some nonconscious beings that have “moral standing.”¹⁸ The justification for his claim is that if one does not accept either of these conditions, the formulated ethical system will be one for the use of the environment rather than an environmental ethic.¹⁹ Additionally, if one accepts that nonhuman animals are morally considerable but not at least some nonconscious beings, then one is advancing a “kinship ethic” based on the extension of human ethics to certain other animals that exhibit similar properties rather than formulating a distinctively environmental ethic. Regardless of whether one accepts the moral framework within which Regan operates,²⁰ his point that what makes an environmental ethic unique is an antihumanistic standpoint is an important one because it underlines the central problematic of the line of questioning that calls itself environmental ethics: What place does humanity have within the natural world? Is there a responsibility, or perhaps even a duty, to *manage* nature? Is nature still nature if it is placed completely under the management of human beings?

The disquietude that some environmental thinkers feel with respect to the management of wild places brings to the fore another commitment involved in arguing for the preservation of wilderness, a belief in the inherent “freedom” or “independence” of nature. Usually, this freedom simply refers to the fact that nature is capable of functioning on its own without human intervention. The hope, however, in making such a claim seems to be that in affirming the independence of nature from humanity, nature will be acknowledged as having a domain beyond or outside that of human action worthy of preservation. By setting up nature as a sphere apart, one can proceed to

argue that it ought to remain outside the influence of human beings, remain in an untouched state. Even Plumwood, who criticizes this idea as another embodiment of a hyperseparation of humanity and nature, still argues for the autonomy of nature as embodied in a particular kind of teleology (*FMN*, 134–36, 161–64).

Aldo Leopold's "land ethic" serves as a good example of how the commitments to antihumanism and to nature as an independent sphere work together. In many ways, Leopold's "land ethic" is still a dominant voice in environmental ethics, since his work serves as a touchstone for a wide range of disciplines. The centerpiece of the theory is the antihumanistic assertion that humanity is a "plain member and citizen" of "the land-community" (*SA*, 240).²¹ The land, for Leopold, is a way of expressing the ecological system of energy exchange that occurs between bodies of different types. So the observation is that humans, just as all other natural beings, are subjected to and dependent upon ecological laws. As is obvious throughout the text, however, Leopold conceives of the land in terms of an organism, in other words, as an independent, self-regulating being (e.g., 190, 195, 261, 272). What is relevant for our purposes is that the land ethic finds in the processes of nature a form of organized independence that leads him to break with ordinary conceptions of the land as property and conceive of it as a "biotic mechanism" (251). With the antihumanistic insistence on humanity's being just a plain member of the land community, combined with the insight that nature forms an independent realm of circulating energy, Leopold asserts his one normative principle that transforms his ethic into a moral theory: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (262).

Together, then, these two commitments provide the foundation of arguments for the preservation of nature and humanity's ecological place *within* the larger system of nature rather than with respect to it. However, in the convergence of these two commitments, Vogel identifies a tension that pervades much of the philosophy that deals with nature. If one accepts antihumanism, then one accepts that humanity is just another part of nature, as are other animals, plants, and stones. This point is readily seen in Leopold. To do so, however, requires that the effects of human behavior be considered just as natural as the effects of the behavior of any other living being, since the difference between the two sets of actions is one of magnitude, a point with which Leopold also agrees (*SA*, 255–58). Given this situation, if the normative foundation for an environmental ethic is to be what is good for nature,

then it is difficult to see how one is to criticize natural behavior as contravening nature. Leopold's principle seems to break down at the epistemological level: How does one determine what does and does not preserve nature without, in a certain sense, placing oneself outside of it? After all, on this view a humanized nature is still nature. In a very general way, we might say that certain practices, such as dumping toxic chemicals into a river, are inherently bad, but only by affirming a certain stability and fixity of nature that would make it susceptible to "wise human management" and thereby undermine the value of the independent evolutionary processes of nature. If one desires to criticize human behaviors as violating or going against the integrity of nature, placing the emphasis on upholding the independence of nature from humanity, then, in this context at least, doing so requires the reassertion of human separatism due to the fact that innumerable animal (e.g., beavers or elephants) and plant (e.g., kudzu or purple loosestrife) species act against the integrity of their environments and yet we do not see anything "wrong" with their actions. In some cases, such actions are even used as evidence against their rationality. To criticize humanity for similar actions results either in renegeing upon the commitment to antihumanism (we should "know better," which implicitly affirms the humanist belief in exceptionalism) or in slipping into the misanthropic attitude of which Murray Bookchin has accused deep ecology (we are like kudzu, choking out life wherever we go).²² Without further elaboration, then, the two main commitments of environmental ethics oriented toward the preservation of nature seem to be incompatible.

Vogel's solution to these difficulties is also to abandon the concept of nature in favor of an "environmental philosophy without nature."²³ What he intends to do is to overcome the tensions in arguing for preservation through the acknowledgment that human beings transform their environments, just like any other living being, and so nature is a social construction.²⁴ When Vogel speaks of social construction, however, he has a very precise sense for the term in mind. Rather than the type of social construction of *ideas* that is usually discussed, Vogel argues that one can explain the current state of the global environment by accepting that it is a product of human actions, a work of human labor, even if unintentionally. To make such an assertion, however, is to deny directly the second commitment discussed above while at the same time acknowledging at least a significant portion of humanity's responsibility for the current state of affairs (AN, 10). While the result of denying the independence of nature allows us to hold humanity accountable for the environment, it also places nature entirely under the aegis of the

human, social realm (166). Subsuming nature into the social realm removes the problem of establishing nature as the source of normativity because nature, as a product of human action, has a value derived from its value for human beings. It also eliminates the problem that concerned Evernden of situating the source of normativity in a concept that lies beyond the reach of rational contestation (9–10). Environmental ethics, then, is no different from other forms of political and ethical questions; it simply deals with a particular genre of human interaction: humanity's communication with its environs. "Environmental ethics" should thus be heard quite literally: what is under discussion is the status of the human environment, not the health of nature. I use the words "communication" and "discussion" quite deliberately given that Vogel is expanding Habermasian discourse ethics so as to make it better suited to deal with questions involving at least one party that does not engage in discourse. While nature cannot, in Vogel's view, enter into dialogue, and thus also cannot be a source of values or have considerability independent of its relation to human speakers, one can make ethical claims concerning the environment precisely because it is an object of human discourse and culture (170). Of course, this brings about a rejection of the commitment to antihumanism as well. But since Vogel does not limit himself to instrumental rationality, relying instead on Habermas's notion of communicative rationality, the value found in nature is not purely one of what is *useful* to humans. Rather, he states, "the question of value in nature, such a theory suggests, is a question to be answered by a *nature-building process become self-conscious*, one that knows the world it inhabits to be its own construction and its own responsibility and so poses for itself—discursively—the question of what that world should be like" (171). To return to the earlier example, the reason we do not dump toxic chemicals into the river is just that most responsible citizens would agree that a world with toxic waters is not a desirable one to live in. The vision, then, that is to replace the preservation of nature is one of humanity fashioning the surrounding physical world into a suitable environment for itself and other living beings.²⁵

While such a view certainly would serve to address the charges of misanthropy levied against those who would preserve nature at the expense of humanity, it does so at the cost of what many believed was meaningful about pursuing an environmental ethic: its antihumanism. Vogel's concerns about social justice and the coherency of an environmental ethic as currently framed, however, are well grounded, and so we are faced with another challenge: Is a distinctively ecological ethic possible? Can one maintain the two

competing commitments that seem to be required for such an ethic without leading to incoherence? The second major concern of this book will be to formulate a response to this challenge in the affirmative. The strategy for doing so will be to argue that Vogel dismissed the thought of nature too soon: in developing a nondualistic counternarrative regarding nature, resources emerge for making normative claims about nature without falling prey to the pitfalls Vogel astutely identifies. If one begins from the intuition that the anthropocentric worldview is at least partially responsible for the current state of affairs in the environment, an intuition that many environmental philosophers share, Vogel's attempt to avoid the tensions inherent in environmental preservationism is somewhat of a nonstarter.²⁶ Luckily, he leaves open a route for our hermeneutic project to provide an alternative resolution: if, as he affirms, an environmental ethic's shortcomings are derived from a need for "a *considerably* more sophisticated account of what it means when it speaks of 'nature' than has in general heretofore been forthcoming if it is to achieve any important results" (AN, 8), then there is at least some hope of formulating an authentically environmental ethic in the traditional sense once we arrive at a reformulated conception of nature. For current purposes, then, Vogel should be understood as providing a provocation to a philosophy of nature, not a decisive blow.

To recapitulate briefly what has been argued so far, we can identify a need for a hermeneutic of nature coming from two distinct sets of concerns. The first set is the practical problem of how to create an affective relationship to nature in order to engender a nondominating relationship with the nonhuman world. The second emerged from the projected response to this need and concerns the danger of accepting conflicting guiding principles once we begin to construct an ethic based upon a certain conception of nature. In both cases, I have suggested that by examining the dominant philosophical conceptions of nature within the Western tradition and offering an alternative way of understanding what nature is and how it operates, we can begin to address these legitimate and pressing concerns. For this reason, what I offer here should be viewed as a *foundation* for a normative theory, not in and of itself a work that is going to offer any concrete answers to environmental problems (however they are formulated).

I have chosen the phenomenological tradition as a means to elucidate the alternative conception of nature for a number of reasons,²⁷ the first and foremost of which is the extent to which those thinkers have rigorously maintained that our understanding of nature is a faulty one and in need of

correction. In many ways, the problem of naturalism is the problem of phenomenology.²⁸ Thus, attempting to give some account of a phenomenological conception of nature is a convenient way of developing a novel conception of nature from within the philosophical tradition rather than from outside of or opposed to it.

Each of the chapters reflects the above intention in a different way. I begin in the first chapter by dealing with what I regard as the most serious of contemporary attempts to eliminate the discussion of nature from environmentalism. That challenge emerges from the work of Bruno Latour and some of his advocates' claims that a suitable relationship to the environment can be established only once the concept of nature is relinquished. Latour's views have been mostly popular in the social sciences, but that is to philosophy's detriment. Like Plumwood and Evernden, Latour rejects the dualizing tendency in modern thought that gives rise both to the dominant forms of contemporary naturalistic philosophies and to the schools of social construction that seek to oppose them. The problem with nature is that we usually understand it as simultaneously possessing immanent laws that establish the relations between beings in advance and from the start and transcendent of humanity such that it should remain independent of any "pollution" from the social world. Even if a philosophy is not outrightly dualistic, these dualistic presumptions continue to color our relation to nature, and so the concept ought to be discarded as a relic of the unattainable modernist ideal of total purification of nature from the social and of the social from nature. He further blames the modernist conception of nature for giving rise to a monolithic "Science" (rather than "the sciences") in order to know it, which creates profoundly undemocratic institutions and practices. Leaving nature behind allows us to have a more charitable (not to mention accurate) understanding of nonhumans, agency, and the work of the sciences, which in turn he believes will give rise to more democratic institutions. Such institutions are necessary to having a healthier relationship to the other members of the common world that we all inhabit together. In establishing these points, Latour's analysis is rich and insightful, which is precisely why it needs to be thought through.

Since Latour considers himself an opponent of phenomenology, and Martin Heidegger's version in specific, the second chapter begins with a consideration of how their two views can be seen as complementary and the limitations of their alliance. In order to elucidate these matters, I begin by explaining Heidegger's "history of being," in which some others have found resources for contemporary ecologically minded philosophy.²⁹ Heidegger

offers an explicit critique of the popular ecological conception of nature as an organized system, arguing that such views are a product of a philosophical evolution that begins with pre-Socratic thinking. Though I make no attempt to reconstruct Heidegger's argument concerning the history of being as a whole, significant time is spent developing the implications of conceiving of nature as the central conception of all Western philosophy. Heidegger's intent here is akin to Plumwood's and Evernden's insofar as all three are striving to demonstrate how certain conceptions of *what* beings are come to institute fixed, hierarchical ways of dealing with those beings. Like Foucault after him, Heidegger conceives of this kind of systematic ordering as a form of domination.³⁰ For Heidegger, what makes this domination possible is mistaking a given interpretation of the being of beings for the unchanging essence of being as such. In other words, we take a given hermeneutical understanding of the world and objectify it such that it becomes the *only comprehensible* hermeneutical frame for common sense. Mastery, then, is a hermeneutical issue: beings are dominated by reducing them to any one of their appearances. In the case of nature, the forgotten assumption is that a being's essence is defined in terms of what is constantly present, what is invariant. What rectifies this situation is a renewed attentiveness to the ways in which human beings both dwell within an inherited network of received meanings and relations (the "world") and simultaneously are always potentially authors of a future divergent from the one opened up by that inheritance. What Heidegger uncovers through his meditations is that the domination of the earth is a product of a failure to remain mindful of the essential openness of humanity and the manner in which beings are always already understood in terms of a world. The domination of beings that leads to their being reduced to their utility within a given nexus of worldly relations can be ended only by means of a continual holding open of the moment of interpretation so as not to reify any one meaning as the unchanging essence of things.

The implications of this for ecological philosophy are myriad because, in Heidegger's reasoning, the devastation of the earth that it seeks to prevent is a direct product of the domination of beings. In the third chapter, then, we will investigate how Heidegger attempts to reconceive nature as that which resists disclosure within a given hermeneutical framework. This notion, while it completely eliminates nature as a domain on its own, is the first step toward retaining the commitment to nature's autonomy because it explicitly affirms the impossibility of total human control, of subsuming nature completely within the human world. To this end, Heidegger also shows how

nature and history are not incompatible and in fact must be thought together. What Heidegger offers, then, is the possibility of a relational rather than a substantial conception of nature that eschews dualistic thinking.

Heidegger, however, only shows the way to this renewed nature that is no longer dominated by humanity. From the perspective of the current project, the shortcomings of his views on nature lie in his twofold humanistic insistence: first, that only humanity has a world and therefore that language discloses only to humanity; and, second, that the processes of temporalization (and therefore of history and nature) he discusses emerge only within human existence. In moving to the fourth chapter, then, we will seek a way to overcome these difficulties while maintaining the essential insights concerning what we must seek in a conception of nature.

My proposal is that such a conception of nature can be found in the structures presented in the phenomenological ontology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. What Merleau-Ponty offers that is not found in Heidegger is an explicit means of decentering humanity from its privileged position as the sole projector of meaning. But it was not always the case that Merleau-Ponty was driven by Heideggerian concerns. Consequently, we will trace the contours of the relational concept of nature by pursuing the development of his thought from a modified Husserlian phenomenology to a novel approach to a Heideggerian mindfulness of being. What we will find is that Merleau-Ponty's explanation of "flesh" as a foundational relationship between beings permits us to speak of nature as something other than a social construct while at the same time discussing how humanity participates in the larger whole. Though Merleau-Ponty is quite aware of scientific accounts of nature, he discovers an alternative to reductive materialistic accounts of nature in the process views of Alfred North Whitehead. The process view of nature allows him to maintain his preferred emphasis upon perception while at the same time finding a basis for a relational ontology that affords a foundational role to all bodies and other forms of life. In this view, nature is no longer thought of as a substantial domain, but as a collectively expressed sense in which all beings participate in the expression. The advantage of thinking of nature in this way is that it allows for the kind of political discussion that Plumwood, Evernden, and Vogel want to open up, while at the same time providing a vision of nature that can support a distinctively ecological ethic. So, by the conclusion of the book, we will have arrived at a conception of nature as an evolving pattern or mosaic, but one that is mutualistic—it is a common production of all beings—without being teleological. In many ways, this view of

nature shares many features of Latour's "common world," a term Merleau-Ponty uses himself.

Before beginning this task, I would like to say a few final words with respect to possible ways in which the current project might be misconceived. The first possible misinterpretation is that it is taking a side in the extant debate between so-called realists and social constructivists. Like Ted Toadvine, I believe the power of the phenomenological position lies in rejecting the very terms of the debate, not in affirming either side.³¹ So while the reformulated conception of nature will reflect a criticism of what I take to be a rather narrow conception of "the real" on the behalf of realists, I also will avoid making meaning and value the sole purview of human beings. The view of nature I develop here can affirm the best intuitions of both sides without having to assume either position. On its basis, we can acknowledge the independence of nature without resorting to scientific realism to do so, but we can also find ways to refer to nature as movable normative ground. So, in turning our attention to the *concept* of nature and the narratives we use to give meaning to the world around us, let us keep in mind that the fact that nature is a historical concept does not necessarily undermine the independence of the natural world. One can accept that "nature" is a human signification, subject to historical changes, while at the same time agreeing that there is a nature in which human beings are but one participant.

The second potential misconception is one based in the style of what follows. Especially in the second and third chapters, I will be dealing quite closely with texts from Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Though I hope that scholars of those two figures will find things of value within those pages, it is not my intention to offer a comprehensive interpretation of their respective philosophies. Rather, my intention is to draw attention to certain aspects of their thought in light of how they might be productively employed so as to address the problems described above. At times this will result in the omission of critical concepts for the philosophy overall in favor of highlighting less obviously important ones (I do not, for example, emphasize the role of poetry in combating dominating ways of thinking in Heidegger); at other times familiar concepts will be pushed in new directions in order to be more helpful in an environmental context (as with Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh). I should also note that I have retained the technical language of these philosophers in discussing their ideas, though I have done my best to introduce and explain the concepts so as to make them more familiar to those who have not devoted themselves to understanding phenomenology.

With those caveats, the time has come to begin our inquiry. For at least four hundred years, the ethical ideal of mastery has guided the human relationship to nature. The project of mastery over nature has been embodied in diverse forms, ranging from technological exploitation, to the pursuit of absolute knowledge, to a tendency to shape and mold one's body obsessively, and so on. While I have no illusions concerning my ability to displace that ideal definitively in what follows, I do hope to shed light on another way of thinking about how to oppose it. By focusing upon the interplay between our ontological concepts and the resulting hermeneutical meanings we find in the world, the mystery of our relationships with other beings once again can become the subject of wonder and enchantment within the world. If we are to resituate the instrumental attitude toward beings that others have so rightly criticized into a more appropriate domain, a good place to start is in the rediscovery of what in the world is mysterious and necessarily remains so. My argument will be that an ontology that makes mystery an ineliminable aspect of our relationship with the world supports dispositions and attitudes toward nature, such as openness, adaptability, and caring, that are either simply not possible or unlikely under an ideal of mastery.

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