

Animal Constructs and Natural Reality: the Import of Environmental Ontology For Inter-Species Ethics*

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Abstract

Do animals exist for us as meaningful entities only insofar as each may be thought to manifest or exemplify an ideal type constituted within the set of symbolic values making up the 'folk taxonomy' specific to our culture? Or do we perceive animals directly, by virtue of their immersion in an environment that is largely ours as well, regardless of the images that we may hold of them, or of whether we hold such images at all? --T. Ingold, *What is an Animal?* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), p. 12.

Of late, there has been considerable and growing anxiety in the ranks of ecophilosophy and (at least theoretical) environmentalism generally concerning the ontological nature and epistemological status of nature and its constituents. In the face of postmodern (de)constructionism, environmental thinkers have become worried that their own sacred cow—nature—will be the next "grand narrative" to dissolve under the deflationary onslaught of skeptical, relativistic, and/or nihilistic critique. So, for example, we have Soule and Lease's collection *Reinventing Nature? Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction*.¹ And then, to take another instance, Snyder registers his opinion in "Is Nature Real?".² Holmes Rolston III and Steven Vogel are no strangers to this debate, and I intend to bring their own contributions into the fray as a focal points for reconsidering the controversy.

First, though, let us fill out and fine-tune some of the issues at stake. Recent concern about the reality (and knowability) of nature has particular purchase in regard to the ways in which we understand and appreciate those entities we call animals. Consider: criticism of various wildlife protection measures, such as the establishment and maintenance of zoological gardens and parks, are sometimes mobilized by reference to authenticity factors. (This is not always the case—sometimes these same measures are criticized as forms of maltreatment of specimens rather than misrepresentation of species; still, concerns of authenticity abound in

* An earlier version appeared in *New Nietzsche Studies* 5.3/4 & 6.1/2 (Winter 2003 / Spring 2004): 22-34, under the title "The Joyful Wisdom of Ecology: On Perspectival and Relational Contact with Nature and Animality"; the present rendering constitutes a revision and expansion, including contextual updates.

¹ Washington, D.C./Covelo, CA: Island Press, 1995.

² *Resurgence* 190 (Sep./Oct., 1998): 32-33.



the debate over wildlife/land protection and it would seem helpful to scrutinize them further.) The question can be put, for example, are we really saving the wild being in or under conditions of captivity or sanctuary? Is the refuge not in effect a prison that changes the 'true nature' or autonomy of its keep? Framing this kind of query implies a criterion of judgment, which has been phrased so that "a wild animal achieves a state of authentic well-being when it survives and reproduces offspring, based on its own genetic abilities and behavioral adaptations, in a truly natural (as opposed to [merely] naturalistic) environment."³ To assess the legitimacy of this type of criterion, ecophilosophers need to deal with the issue of what a 'real animal' might be, of whether any such entity exists or is knowable. For, at the other end of the ontological spectrum, social constructionists dispute realist authenticators of animal nature by making claims like the following: "Once brought to human attention an animal is no longer an animal in itself--it can only be that away from human sight, experience and thought".⁴ Neo-Kantian remarks of this sort raise the specter of what we might call zoological idealism. Consequently, I want here to compare the phenomenal and biological notions of animality: is it possible, I am asking, to discover that elusive beast--the 'noumenal organism'? If not, can we rehabilitate or replace ideas of biotic authenticity or objectivity without resting on essentialistic illusions?⁵ These notions have been historically and rhetorically crucial (if not theoretically or conceptually requisite) to the intelligibility of preservation as such, that is, for saving an original or preexisting type of organism (and/or habitat)—which is something different from conservation for anthropocentric utilization (e.g., amusement purposes in the case of zoos).

To start, then, let us look at a specific illustration of our problematic. Two sociologists I have already quoted, Mullan and Marvin, risk confusion when they set out to critique the zoo while simultaneously maintaining allegiance to a constructionist stance. They say that "the human experience of a [captive] creature destroys its authenticity (a quality which is linked to its independence) as a wild animal"⁶ and yet insist that "the notion of a 'real animal' makes no sense" because "animals are human constructions".⁷ How can their charge of inauthenticity be sustained, given their eschewal of a realist zoöntology?⁸ One way Mullan and Marvin

³ John Wuichet and Bryan Norton, "Differing Conceptions of Animal Welfare", in *Ethics on the Ark: Zoos, Animal Welfare, and Wildlife Conservation*, S. Norton et al. eds. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), p. 239 (see also pp. 240f.).

⁴ Bob Mullan & Gerry Marvin, *Zoo Culture* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987), p. 3.

⁵ The conceptual dialectic that drives this debate is not unlike that of the controversy surrounding the issue of ecosystem or habitat restoration. Like advocates of pristine land, biotic purists insist that (only) the truly wild animal is the 'real' animal (q.v. Paul Shepard, some deep ecologists, et al.); like the restorationists, on the other hand, zoo directors and wildlife rehabilitators are wont to defend the legitimacy of reintroduction and even 'reconstruction' schemes. See, e.g., Claude Guintard and Jacek Rewerski's "The Disappearance of the Aurochs (*Bos primigenius*) in Poland during the XVIIth Century and the 'Reintroduction' Project of this Reconstituted Animal in the Mazury Region": working on the basis of an 'inverse' breeding program to re-establish the external appearance of the European domestic cattle's lost ancestor, "an original project combining tourism, nature and tradition ('T.N.T.') is currently being developed to *install* the so-called 'reconstituted' aurochs in the northern part of the country" (abstract, *italics added*). In *Animaux perdus, animaux retrouvés: réapparition ou réintroduction en Europe occidentale d'espèces disparues de leur milieu d'origine*, Liliane Bodson ed. (Belgium: University of Liege, 1999).

⁶ *Zoo Culture*, p. 73.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 3.

⁸ There can be no appeal here to biology as arbiter, because "this [scientific] form of seeing and understanding is itself cultural and in a sense is not more a true picture of the animal than any other" (p. 8). In other words, on the



attempt to salvage coherence is to soften their anti-realism into an epistemological position so as to rule out the implication that animals "are not real physical entities living in a real physical world, but rather to emphasize they are also man-made in the sense that they are thought about by man, and it is the animal as it is thought about rather than the animal itself which is of significance".⁹ However, *metaphysically*, this retreat from hard-core constructionism flirts with neo-Kantian dualism (with its concomitant ambiguity between a species of perspectivism and some sort of two-world ontology) and, hermeneutically, it borders on tautology (insofar as significance as such *must* be thought--i.e., to be at all).

The conceptual knots in which these sociologists tie themselves are emblematic of a larger problem regarding the ontological status of nature. Metaphysically speaking, many if not most environmentalists are naive naturalists in the sense that they believe in the 'objective outdoors'--an external world existing beyond human edifice and mentality, upon which our buildings and theories are based. Some ecophilosophers, however, have rejected this mainstream conviction in favor of a constructionist stance.¹⁰ It is important to gauge whether such a stance is meant to express an actual ontology or an epistemology instead.¹¹ Yet ambiguity between ontological claim and epistemological deliverance is a typical feature of constructionist positions. In a generic study of constructionism, Ian Hacking flags just this aspect in asking, "When we say 'X is socially constructed', are we really talking about the idea of X, or about an object in the world?"¹² It is hard to get, and no doubt difficult to give, a straight answer to Hacking's question.¹³ If taken epistemologically (about processes of conception), constructionist assertions appear to be nothing more than reminders that the ineluctable hermeneutic circle binds our construals of the natural world; if taken ontologically (about reality of being), on the other hand, they seem to imply a rather radical--and notoriously dubious--species of idealism.¹⁴

Yet, perhaps some ecophilosophers are prepared to bite the idealist bullet. Steven Vogel, for instance, comes quite close to embracing a quasi-pragmatist, neo-Hegelian idealism when he claims that human "practice doesn't constitute [just] some social part of the world--it constitutes the enviroing world as such, the world of real objects that surround us, a world

postmodern front at least, the physical and life sciences yield to a Feyerabendian/Foucauldian skepsis. It will be well to bear this point in mind when we come to consider Rolston's views (often reliant on uncritical appeals to eco/bio-scientific deliverances).

⁹ Mullan and Marvin, p. 3.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Roger H. King's "How to Construe Nature: Environmental Ethics and the Interpretation of Nature", *Between the Species* 6.3 (Summer 1990): 102.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹² "Are You a Social Constructionist?", *Lingua Franca* 9.4 (May/June 1999): 68. From his book, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

¹³ King is not alone in this regard. Similar issues arise in others' application of constructionism to nature--see, e.g., Neil Evernden's *The Social Creation of Nature* (Johns Hopkins U. Press, 1992). My impression is that these thinkers do not *want* to embrace full-blooded idealism--my point is only that their writings invite if not entail it.

¹⁴ For those unfamiliar with the "hermeneutic circle" alluded to above, the reference is to the feature of interpretation that it has to start somewhere and yet that starting point must itself be interpreted at a later stage in the process of interpreting; this reflexivity is ongoing but virtuous, because each circuit of interpretation reveals new angles of a given text or phenomenon (i.e., articulation 'spirals' informatively rather than repeating trivially in strict circularity).



that is quite literally ‘socially constructed’.”¹⁵ What would tempt anyone to adopt such a robustly constructionist stance? I suspect it is the conviction, voiced by Vogel and others, that there is “no access” to the natural world that does not involve some human/social practice.¹⁶ However, from this presumption it does not directly follow that there is no nature apart from such activity; and, in fact, Vogel did elaborate his view to clarify this very matter. Coming to grips with the “*hardness and thereness* of the world”, he indicated that “the environment we inhabit is produced *in and through* our practices, but ... practices themselves are real and material”.¹⁷ Still, even recognizing this much is insufficient to avoid idealism— at least until Vogel and like-minded constructionists acknowledge that the natural world is *not wholly* produced *by* human practices, that otherness beyond the human is engaged by (and sometimes, as in cases of animal agency, engages with) our activities in the production or poiesis of the phenomena collectively denominated nature.¹⁸

To explicate the situation further, when Vogel deconstructs the notion of nature in an attempt to show it is so riven by antinomy and/or ambiguity that it merits decommissioning from the ecosophical lexicon, he ignores or conflates important distinctions between influence and determinism, contact and control, affecting and effecting environment(s). His deconstructive strategy with respect to nature is predicated on a dualistic conception of natural versus artificial: the former is taken to refer only to that which is entirely nonhuman in its status and process, but since traces of the latter can be found everywhere on the planet, it is thereby concluded that there is no nature anymore (at least on Earth). Alternatively, Vogel argues, if nature is taken to include humanity, then conceptually it cannot function as a critical contrast to human activity (since the latter would be “natural” by definition).¹⁹ But all this argumentation, I counter, is flawed by its dependence on false dilemmas. It is possible, indeed helpful to ecosophy, for us to reject not the notion of nature itself but rather Vogel’s dualism in respect of it; nature, that is, can be conceived as on a continuum with artifice—and so what matters for environmentalism is *not* the *mere fact* of human influence, but rather its *degree or extent*: that which is effectively under intelligent mastery may fairly be deemed artifactual, while whatever operates in the main from its own pre-given principles (in

¹⁵ “Nature as Origin and Difference: Environmental Philosophy and Continental Thought”, *Philosophy Today* 42 (suppl. 1998) = *Conflicts and Convergences: Selected Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy*, Vol. 24, L.M. Alcoff and M. Westphal eds., 175. Cf. Lawrence Hazelrigg’s even more emphatic stance in *Cultures of Nature* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1995), where he endorses the position that “nature *is* a product of human making. Not merely ‘the idea of nature’ or ‘nature as we think it is’ or ‘nature experienced’ ... but the concrete practical materiality, the substance and support, the actual and potential plenitude of the reality of nature—in sum the whole of the given being and being-giveness of nature as it is—is a concrete production in/by human labor in the activity of making life” (p. 12, *original italics*). More cautious, Vogel is careful to recoil from the furthest extremity of such views—by allowing that “the claim that the enviroing world is socially constructed does not mean that somehow we build it *ex nihilo*” (177).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹⁷ “Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature”, *Environmental Ethics* 24.1 (Spring 2002): 34, 37 (*first italics original, second added*).

¹⁸ As Eileen Crist’s analysis makes clear, strong constructionism poses as postmodernism, but it ironically leaves “humania” intact or even intensified—in this light, then, it requires a dosage or two of post-humanism or eco-pragmatism. See “Social Construction of Nature and Wilderness”, *Environmental Ethics* 26 (Spring 2004): 3-24.

¹⁹ “End of Nature”.



conjunction, of course, with any relevant physical conditions or forces of external necessity) can legitimately be thought of as relatively natural.²⁰ Why protect nature in this sense? Several criterial factors for environmental protection are available: (1) *ecosystemic health* sometimes calls for trophic and/or cyclic heteronomy rather than monocultures resultant from single-source mastery; (2) *aesthetic predilections* often yearn for a manifold of self-arising phenomena; (3) *organismic identity* requires material (and in some cases mental) foils to establish and maintain itself in a dialectical dance of difference and likeness. These criteria are pluralistic in scope, including psychocentric, biocentric, and ecocentric dimensions. Taken together, they stress the need for diversity or alterity—multiple otherness as allowed for by the conception of nature I have proffered above.²¹

My suggestion is not an idle vestige of nostalgic/romantic speculation. Indeed precisely because it permits us to bypass speculative excess, the posit of an extra-human horizon becomes attractive. For it is at this juncture that many feel realist compunctions, and a Rolstonian conscience begins to stir. Obviously, we want to say, our interaction or dialogue with nature is socially constructed (what else *could* it be?)—yet acceptance of that does not automatically commit us to believing all nature is made up by us. Of course, I cannot express anything about that bare world without dressing it up semiotically; nonetheless, the assumption that another reality—besides myself or us—is subject and party to (not merely an object in or construction of) my/our discourse and deeds is more plausible than the idea that I/we make the world entirely out of words and actions. One reason this is so is that the latter proposition implies an untenable interpretation of scientific and technological successes and failures.²² Thus, if we want to come to terms with the many instances of common experience in which people staking a cognitive claim are able (by applying their knowledge) to gain pragmatic results that we who lack that knowledge cannot achieve, then we will abandon full-blown idealism (and its postmodern variant of ‘textualism’) in favor of some form of realism (however weak). Why? Because the realistic notion that pragmatic coping is explainable in terms of our epistemic beliefs adequately describing enough of the actual world to get by (not necessarily enough to set up a complete correspondence theory of truth) —this notion, it seems to me, is to be preferred over any of the standard options open to idealists: confessing ignorance and calling pragmatic success a miracle, or making appeals to supernatural principles such as pre-established harmony or divine occasionalism.

²⁰ This characterization is inspired by Michael Bonnett’s neo-Heideggerian notion of nature as primordial phenomena that self-arise—see his *Retrieving Nature: Environmental Education for a Post-Humanist Age* (Blackwell, 2004), esp. chap. 5.

²¹ Thus I concur with Roy Ellen’s reflection that “we cannot avoid a concept very much like nature to make sense of the world, and that if we try to dispense with it we will have to invent something remarkably similar to replace it.” From “A Response to the Deconstruction of Nature”, his editorial introduction to *Redefining Nature: Ecology, Culture, and Domestication* (Oxford: Berg, 1996). Cf. Patrick Curry’s argument that “people *will* think about nature, so it is helpful to have available a good way of thinking about it: one that is more open to the experience of it and encouraging of resistance to its destruction.” From his “Nature Post-Nature”, accessible via <http://www.patrickcurry.co.uk/papers/Nature-Post-Nature.pdf>, 13 (*italics original*); also published in *New Formations* 26 (Spring 2008).

²² See Sergio Sismondo’s *Science without Myth: On Constructions, Reality, and Social Knowledge* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), especially chapter 5.



These provisional ontological commitments are reinforced if we now focus our attention upon the naturalistic realism in which the ecophilosophy of Rolston is embedded. Here is a thinker who reminds us, “There is always some sort of cognitive framework within which nature makes its appearance, *but that does not mean that what appears is **only** the framework.*”²³ What is salutary about Rolston’s approach is his willingness to forego the polemical pendulum swing between foundationalism and relativism. “We may not have noumenal access to absolutes;” he admits, and yet “we do have access to some remarkable [natural] phenomena that have taken place and continue to take place outside our minds, outside our cultures.”²⁴ This access is not pure--*neither purely objective nor purely subjective!* It is a transactional dynamic of interrelationship; as such, it is best understood not as impossible transcendence (unlimited by any perspective) nor as stultifying solipsism (trapped within a single standpoint) but rather as taking place *between* knower and known and capable of yielding *enough* awareness of the latter by the former to enable a negotiation, or better a navigation of the lifeworld--which is *shared* with other forms of life (in both the cultural and biotic senses of that term).²⁵ In other words, as Rolston puts it, “One doesn’t have to know it all to know something”.²⁶ Or, like Hume and a host of American philosophers (such as “pragmatic realist” Hilary Putnam), one learns to accept that functional praxes—most notably those of communication—trump the global doubts of Cartesian-type skepticism and establish contact, however tenuous or imperfect, with the other(s) beside oneself.²⁷

Suppose we were to take such an approach seriously. What would it look like in application—with respect, say, to knowing other animals? When faced with this kind of issue, Rolston himself readily appeals to the life sciences for reliable knowledge, undaunted by sociologies or histories of science that cast suspicion on the scientific enterprise as such. To be fair, he does shed scientism in acknowledging that “biological claims do not try to get underneath to some noumenal realm;” still, he views science as no worse off for that, because “biology claims that

²³ “Nature for Real: Is Nature a Social Construct?”, *The Philosophy of the Environment*, T. D. J. Chappell ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 43 (*italics and bold added*).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²⁵ “A similar view is emerging in the field of environmental history,” notes Alf Hornborg, “where ‘knowledge’ is being recognized neither as a representation of something that exists outside it, nor merely a social construction, but as a negotiated *relationship* with nature that actually reconstructs nature in the process of representing it” (*original italics*). From his “Ecology as Semiotics”, in *Nature and Society*, P. Descola and G. Palsson eds. (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 52. Cf. Roy Ellen’s dialogic portrait: “If culture gives meaning to nature, then nature gives meaning to culture ... and so on ad infinitum” (*op. cit.*, p. 31).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 53. On the related point of ‘world-sharing’ and knowing something *else* (i.e. aside from the self/same), compare David Abrams’ remarks in his “Language and the Ecology of Sensory Experience: An Essay with an Unconstructive Footnote”, *Call to Earth* 1.1 (March 2000): “the ‘society’ which constructs this indeterminate world is much vaster than any merely *human* society—it includes spiders and swallows and subterranean seepages along with us two-leggeds. ...we humans are by no means the sole, or even the primary, agents of the world’s construction” (9, *italics original*). My own metaphors are those of love- or war-making—even if done in the dark, with your partner or enemy out of full view, there is pretty little room to think you are alone.

²⁷ Putting aside Rolston-the-botanist’s preference for terrestrial terminology and switching over to aquatic or aerial figuration, one might call such an approach *floatational* (rather than foundational) philosophy—in the sense that it keeps us abreast of the wide-waving world and enables us to get where we need to pragmatically speaking, without ever mooring into some adamantine anchorage of total objectivity.



these [life] phenomena are given in themselves."²⁸ If challenged by contextualist accounts of science—such as, for example, Donna Haraway's *Primate Visions*—Rolston's reliabilist epistemology could be defended by pointing out that critics like Haraway are either uncovering **mis**representations (which only makes sense if some idea of truth or its pursuit is still operative) or else their critiques are rendered otiose (for want of a critical foil or fulcrum).²⁹ Even if all epistemic sites are built (i.e. no knowledge is simply given), not anything can count as a cognitive structure and some building methods are better than others. In the case of understanding different animals, then, the choice to characterize other organisms as say 'merely machines' or as 'feeling flesh' does not reduce to a rhetorical strife between metaphors or a political struggle amongst their arbitrary adherents (which is what pure constructivism seems to leave us with).³⁰ Why not? Well, Rolston would have it that "there is [e.g.] a chimpanzee self out there which can be known not entirely, not 'absolutely', but sufficiently so that we find that the intrinsic chimpanzee self-integrity ought not to be lightly sacrificed".³¹ Now, though sympathetic to the idea of integrity, I at least would want to qualify Rolston's siting of the chimp-self 'out there'. If this phrase means 'external to me or us', then fine—I do believe personal and cultural horizons are often transcended (in communication, e.g.); but if the term were construed to mean 'outside the perspectival nexus of the knowing process', then I would lean a little more toward the constructionist or pragmatist viewpoint: all (at least finite) knowledge is internally relational and inherently positional, I would argue, because cognition itself is a situated relation(ship).

Rolston comes perilously close to the latter interpretation given above when he writes of ready-made natural kinds (such as the wolf, *Canis lupus*) existing on their own, capable of grounding objectivist projects of discovery.³² What he seems to overlook in such moments of backslide into foundationalism is the impossibility of quarantining some mythically pure realm of being from the maculate aspects of cognition (think, for examples, of the impurities in knowledge-craft that manifest in the histories and sociologies of science mounted by Kuhn, Feyerabend, Foucault, etc.).³³ That there can be—"for us" (in the Kantian or Hegelian sense)—

²⁸ "Nature for Real", p. 56. Thus Rolston in effect collapses the biological into the phenomenal, trusting with an almost Husserlian faith that noumena are not necessary for reliable cognition.

²⁹ Some commentators, in fact, think that postmodern ecosophy may have already hung itself on the latter horn of this dilemma. See, e.g., John Visvader's "Environmental Activism in an Age of Deconstructionist Biology", *Human Ecology Review* 5. 1 (1998): "The net effect of 'demythologizing' biology and social constructionism is to make environmental values appear to be subjective and relativistic" (32).

³⁰ Perhaps I have caricatured the latter scenario: it may be possible to democratically conduct the politics of such disputes in a respectful, rational fashion (as per Vogel—e.g. "End of Nature", 36ff.).

³¹ "Nature for Real", p. 60. Cf. Leslie Mitchell's critique of animal agribusiness in "Discourse and the Oppression of Nonhuman Animals: A Critical Realist Account" (Rhodes University: Ph.D. thesis, 2007).

³² "F/actual Knowing: Putting Facts and Values in Place", *Ethics and the Environment* 10.2 (2005): 148f. "We do not think that wolves, coyotes, and foxes come into being when we humans arrive and cut up the world into such objects," he says, "much less when the scientific systematists arrive and make their decisions about genus, species, and family" (148).

³³ Rolston himself still harbors hope for a cleaner/clearer representationalism: looking to polish up pragmatic/relational epistemology, he asks "Does not all this coping require some copying?" (Ibid., 156) Probably so, I would reply—but *how much and in what respects is forever indeterminable* by us (for whom any checking of 'originals' against copies constitutes copying yet again indefinitely, which is why coping is a more helpful model for the process of cognition).



no protective firewall between epistemological contingency and putatively bedrock Being stems from the very conditions of intelligibility: in order to become knowable, communicable, philosophizable, any ontic space must be rendered accessible and given an account, must become *ontologized*—and thus submit at once to the influences of epistemic revelation and contamination both.³⁴ “What is getting contaminated conceptually is *epistemological* making up the world with *ontological* making up the world, the order of knowing with the order of being.” Rolston rejoins, “True, we humans make up our categories as we know the world; that is epistemology, found as much in science as anywhere else. But it is also true that the world made up these natural kinds once upon a [pre-human] time; that is ontology, and science convinces us of this too.”³⁵ This conceptual distinction, however, cannot hold in actual practice: any ontology is always already a *logos* (by definition), and so discursive methods of epistemology unavoidably seep into the account (just as material practices of knowing inevitably affect their objects and thus indirectly any of our eventuating ontologies).³⁶

Proceeding thus, I realize that I am now making Rolston's respect for scientific objectivity groan. What about the ideal of disinterested knowledge, it will be protested—if that's abandoned, can Rolstonian naturalism be sustained as a viable ecophilosophy? My response here is to suggest that Rolston's environmental thought might yield to, or be wedded with, a Nietzschean epistemology. In his *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche provocatively claims that “there is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective 'knowing'; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our 'concept' of this thing, our 'objectivity', be” (essay 3, sec. 12). Thus Nietzsche, amplifying his notion of “gay science”, redefines objectivity as he attempts to stave off cognitive nihilism once appeals to foundational thinking have been forsaken. The Nietzschean argument here might be reconstructed in the following terms: the view-from-nowhere is an impossible ideal of positivism; the view-from-everywhere is a theological invention (but, notoriously, divinity is dead); therefore, objectivity consists not in those formulae, but rather in continual *diversification of perspective* ('views-from-manywhere' if we insist on a label like the others).³⁷ Make no mistake—this is not a pathway a scientific traditionalist like Rolston would likely blaze on his own (indeed, as we have seen, he bears more toward a harder version of realism in his later work on the area at stake). Nonetheless, it

³⁴ This is a point that tells against Richard Evanoff's endeavor to make too neat a distinction between ontology and epistemology in his “Reconciling Realism and Constructivism in Environmental Ethics”, *Environmental Values* 14 (2005): 61-81. Although Evanoff offers a fairly good antidote to Vogel's idealistic excesses, in the end he veers too far toward uncritical realism.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 149 (*original italics*).

³⁶ Hence, in a somewhat dramatic vein, we could say that what makes our knowledge *necessary* (distance or detachment from the ontic) is paradoxically what also makes *impossible* the absolute achievement of its telos (pure immediacy or communion with the object in itself).

³⁷ There are a few contemporary proponents of this view. For example, Mark Johnson notes that “Stephen Winter has characterized such a human [neither neutral nor divine] objectivity as a form of *transperspectivity*, which is the ability of a physically, historically, socially, and culturally [as well as, I would add, ecologically] situated self to reflect critically on its own construction of a world, and to imagine other possible worlds that might be constructed” (*italics original*). Quoted from “Living without Absolutes”, chap. 9 of *Moral Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 241. Cf. Rolston on humanity's creatively transcendent powers of mental genius (“F/actual Knowing”, 160-66 and 171f.).



is my contention that (much of) Rolston's environmental philosophy is compatible with and could benefit from an infusion of Nietzschean perspectivism.³⁸

In the literature of ecophilosophy the closest anyone has come to this kind of synthesis, so far as I can tell, is N. K. Hayles.³⁹ In "Searching for Common Ground" she envisions an ecological form of cognition that involves "imaginatively bringing together the different knowings that all the diverse parts of the world construct through their interactions with it".⁴⁰ Hayles dubs this epistemology "constrained constructivism" because it retains the notion of a natural world, which comprises a set of (partially) free-standing and yet (partially) relational entities.⁴¹ Another name, from a different vantage point, might be 'footloose realism'; I prefer to think of it in Nietzschean terms as *the joyful wisdom of ecology*.⁴² However referred to, the position enables us to absorb epistemological emphases on positionality and interaction of perspectives while maintaining an ontology robust enough to serve adequately as a pivot of ethical criticism. "To sacrifice animals or exterminate species in this model", Hayles claims, "directly reduces the sum total of knowledge about the world, for it removes from the chorus of experience some of the voices articulating its richness and variety."⁴³ That there is a vitally moral upshot to this sort of perspectival/relational onto-epistemology is nicely brought out by Anthony Weston:

If our very mode of approach shapes th[e] world in turn, then *ethics itself must be a form of invitation or welcoming*, sometimes of ritual invocation and sometimes of literally creating the settings in which new possibilities [of interaction] might emerge. ... we will have only inadequate ideas of what other animals are actually capable [of] until we already have approached them ethically: that is, until we have offered them the space and time and occasion to enter into relationship.⁴⁴

³⁸ The reader may wonder here whether the cure is worse than the disease. It is worthwhile, then, to clarify the diagnosis and defend the therapy (against a prevalent type of a priori worry): the problem is that Rolston's reliance on science (especially ecology) is too flat-footed, something of a resting place for naïve faith in the deliverances of epistemic authority; the resolution I am proposing, Nietzschean perspectivism, is often said to be self-subversive—but I think this charge is mistaken inasmuch as perspectivism does not have to be adopted absolutely to be taken seriously (i.e. it *does* withstand self-application—even if it yields infinite regress on the meta-level, this result is *not* necessarily equivalent to auto-refutation of the first-order move).

³⁹ Writing from and for a geographical context and audience, James Proctor also comes into theoretical vicinity of the vantage point I am scouting and defending—his excellent survey of the relevant philosophic positions ultimately propounds an onto-epistemology of nature that joins critical realism and neo-pragmatism in a dialectical tension of complementarity by which each "sees its own shadow". Refer to his "The Social Construction of Nature: Relativist Accusations, Pragmatist and Critical Realist Responses", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 88.3 (1998): 352-76 (esp. 368ff.).

⁴⁰ In *Reinventing Nature?*, p. 58.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 49ff. Cf. Anna L. Peterson's appropriation, what she calls "chastened constructionism", in her *Being Human: Ethics, Environment, and Our Place in the World* (Berkeley: University of California, 2001), esp. chap. 3.

⁴² To better appreciate this preference it may be helpful to heed Babette Babich's remarks on Nietzschean epistemology: "Environmental or ecological exigencies tailor perceptions: this is the critical foundation of [Nietzsche's] perspectivalism" (p. 6); "Because all human knowledge is perspectival, human beings are part of the perspectival nature of the 'relational' world" (p. 90). From *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Science* (Albany: S.U.N.Y. Press, 1994). An interpretive caveat should be noted here as a hedge against tempting overstatements: to avoid intellectual anachronism and ideological ventriloquism, we need to be wary of putting too much ecosophy into Nietzsche's mouth—for more on this point, see my "Using and Abusing Nietzsche for Environmental Ethics", *Environmental Ethics* 16:2 (1994).

⁴³ "Common Ground", p. 58.

⁴⁴ "Multicentrism: A Manifesto", *Environmental Ethics* 26 (Spring 2004): 32 (*italics altered*).



To take an example from the beginning of our discussion, domesticating live nature into a series of zoological parks and botanical gardens would be contraindicated insofar as such endeavors actually and ironically impoverish the very world they seek to save and showcase (because they threaten to collapse the diversity of wild perspectives into a comparatively homogeneous perspective of captivity). And what is wrong with that, I would add to Hayles' point, is not just the numerical decrease in perspectives but also the diminution of interactive complexity and intensity that results from keeping others under control rather than engaging them freely.⁴⁵ Moreover, looking closer at this last situation, notice that the loss of reality's richness exposes a thick layer of inauthenticity. To appreciate what's at stake here, we can use the lens of another relational theorist—this one in the field of animal studies. In her endeavor to develop “A Taxonomy of Knowing: Animals Captive, Free-Ranging, and at Liberty”, Vicki Hearne emphasizes that “my terms describe not so much various conditions in which animals in *themselves* might be as **conditions we are in with the animals**, social and grammatical conditions and circumstances.”⁴⁶ Briefly, captive animals are those kept under direct control (think of lab specimens), free-ranging ones are those beyond human confinement, and those at liberty are paradigmatically working animals (dogs and horses, e.g., under conditions of training that enable the flourishing of species-being and individual excellences). Leaving aside the tricky boundary issue between the categories of free-ranging and at-liberty, it is nevertheless possible to render judgments of inauthenticity when operating on the basis of a relational system such as Hearne's. So, returning to the example at hand, the promotion and patronage of a zoo presents its keep as wild in the ordinary sense of free-ranging when the relation of keeping itself falsifies this same representation. In other words, capture and keeping are misleadingly elided and put under erasure.

Likewise, the structure of a zoo's entertainment value plays off a feeling of intimacy with ‘the wild’ in the form of dangerous creatures; yet, in general, it is not zoo inhabitants' endogenous ferocity that makes them risky relations for human contact but rather, circularly, their very conditions of captivity. Thus animals pressured by cramping or crowding encountered in confinement are much more likely to behave belligerently. As Mullan and Marvin point out (over against zoos' portrayals) the ‘danger’ is not so much inherent as it is “a product of the animal's predicament in being forced to be in undesired and unnatural proximity to man.”⁴⁷ To the extent that zoos trade on the allure of such danger, while occluding their role in

⁴⁵ I conceive this kind of criticism as supplementing (not necessarily replacing) other, standard ethical judgments (re: organismal treatment, systemic stability, etc.).

⁴⁶ *In the Company of Animals*, special issue of *Social Research* 62.3 (Fall 1995): 442 (*italics original, bold added*). See also Thomas Sebeok's nine-fold relational taxonomy—which includes categories of predation, partnership, amusement, parasitism, conspecificity, reification, taming, and training. “‘Animal’ in Biological and Semiotic Perspective”, in Ingold's *What is an Animal?*, pp. 68ff. Cf. Ted Benton's schema (likewise of nine, albeit different categories) in *Natural Relations: Ecology, Animal Rights, and Social Justice* (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 62-68.

⁴⁷ *Zoo Culture*, pp. 4f. Interestingly, this example also illuminates the side issue of whether the subjects of life sciences' studies are material objects or social objects. Hacking has it that a characteristic property of the latter is their amenability to feedback loops (whereby the object's behavior is reflexively shaped by subjection to a self-fulfilling regimen of study)—but his dichotomy between physical and human sciences leaves biology unaccounted for (72). In this light, then, Mullan and Marvin furnish zoological testimony that captive animals are indeed social beings.



bringing it about, we can again judge these institutions' exhibition of animality to be less than genuine. Moreover, it is important to notice that this judgment does not depend on discovering deviation from an ordinary truth of animal essence, but is due rather to a structural set-up that disallows acknowledgment of its own preconditions. Hence, if zoos (and their visitors) were honest about themselves—that what they keep (or see) are captive animals (who do not necessarily display the characteristics of free-ranging ones)—they would undermine one of their chief reasons for being (or watching).⁴⁸

Beside but related to the representational dishonesty just revealed, another ethico-epistemic problem with the zoo is its interruption of the interactive dialectic transpiring between freely engaged parties and their perspectives. What I have called the joyful wisdom of ecology is stifled by captivity's constraints. Obviously, the opportunities for diversifying transperspectival interactivity are reduced and/or marginalized by the architectural barriers and behavioral muting brought to bear under circumstances of confinement. In fact, for most visitors at most zoological parks or gardens, very little interaction is possible and consequently very little exchange of perspectives happens. Thus the experience is not one of creative encounter, but one of dulling spectatorship (for the seer) and monotony (for the seen).⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Compare, however, Keekok Lee's *Zoos: A Philosophical Tour* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006): the author argues that zoo residents are rendered "hybrid" creatures through a process of "immuration", that most visitors intuit as much, that only organizers pretend otherwise, and finally that the zoo could fare well if the last party would just own up to the true situation. Why I think this otherwise revelatory position remains inadequately critical is brought out in the main text's next paragraph.

⁴⁹ This line of reasoning also counters Rolston's charge that "those who can appeal only to their interactive experiences with nature, or to those that their cultures have preferred to choose, unconvinced that they or anybody else can go further [to natural entities 'in themselves'], really do not have any convincing arguments with those who choose otherwise" ("F/actual Knowing", 170).



Joyful Exchanges on a Biosophical Theme: A Dialogue between Eco-Realism and Gay Science

Characters: *Holmes*, the Rolstonian eco-realist; *Hermes*, the Nietzschean 'gay scientist'.

Holmes: So that's it? Seems he just about surrenders the substance of autonomy (which has got to be at the root of at least live nature), and replaces it only with a shadow concept in the idea of relational authenticity.⁵⁰ In that case zoos, for instance, don't violate the inherent nature of animals (because there isn't any intelligible)--they just misrepresent *themselves to us*, not really the *animals as such*.

Hermes: I think there's more to it than that. His position appears also to be a stance against the kind of biotic idealism that could lead to (at least species, if not subjective) solipsism. I mean if we actually bought into hardline constructionism, then wouldn't we have to regard other animals as being produced by us--not indeed from nothing, but still only and entirely from our own cultural resources?

Hol.: I don't deny the implication, but the bold way to avoid it is to posit a *really* real animal—you know, something 'out there' in the manner of objective realism.

Her.: How, then, could you avoid abstract postulation—what determinate content, in other words, would you propose to flesh out that idea?

Hol.: Well, as one researcher puts it, "because of their distinctive properties of transformational growth and non-repetitive motion, we see animals as such, irrespective of how we might come to describe and classify them".⁵¹

Her.: Interesting: if true, that would enable condemnation of captivity itself—insofar, that is, as repetitive movement is a behavioral by-product of zoo-keeping.

⁵⁰ Though the idea of relational authenticity applies here largely to human dealings (i.e. between institutional organizations and their clientele), it can also be used to characterize inter-species relations. For instance, the zoologist Barbara Smuts has written an edifying account of her relationship with an adopted (feral) dog named Safi: their bond is "marked by reciprocal 'surrender to the dictates of intersubjectivity'" and both parties "intervene in and *mutually* influence each other's ensemble of behavior." Primary quotes from my essay "Oikos and Domus: On Constructive Co-Habitation with Other Creatures", *Call to Earth: Journal of the I.A.E.P.* 3.3 (March 2003): 28; secondary quote from Smuts' "Reflection", in J. M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*, A. Gutmann ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 115ff. For more details, see either source.

⁵¹ Edward Reed, as paraphrased by Ingold, p. 12.



Hol.: Precisely.

Her.: Of course, we would have to subject the hypothesis to conceptual analysis and further empirical investigation; nor is it clear that these methods can circumvent constructionist objections rehearsed before. But maybe we don't need objectivism, after all: might not the earlier emphasis on (inter)relationships be enough to avoid the sort of solipsism at stake here?

Hol.: I'm not sure I follow; please spell it out.

Her.: Even if our zoological awareness is not *of* some essential animal *out there*, isn't it still the case that our natural experience occurs *with* those *besides* ourselves?

Hol.: Maybe, but your articulation is spare and leans heavily on unexplicated connotations of certain phenomenologically murky prepositional phrases.

Her.: One could, at this point, have recourse to the Marxian discourse on the "transindividual". I'm not sure about it myself, but would you prefer that instead?

Hol.: Please no, thank you, not at this time.⁵²

Her.: Just let me mention that Marx thematized a felt space of intersubjectival or better interstitial (and I dare say now ecological) reality which, were we to rehabilitate it carefully, could allow us to circumvent the reductionist difficulties both of monadology and nodal ontology--to thread a path, as it were, between the shoals of solipsism and the hollows of holism respectively.

Hol.: Come again? Though I appreciate philosophizing with poetic license, I'm afraid you've lost me in your penchant for flowery alliteration.

Her.: I'm talking about the way traditional metaphysics of subjectivity never seem to reconnect sufficiently with the social and natural, whereas newer process or Gestalt-type ontologies appear to reduce us to mere points in a weblike flux of interactivity. Perhaps a doctrine like Marx' transindividualism could help us get beyond that sort of dilemma--a happy result, I might add, for bioethical ecosophies caught up in the debate between individualism and holism.

Hol.: Okay, I'm prepared to say I'd be interested in seeing something like that develop. But for now, I'd like to return to the core issue of autonomy. So far, you've only enhanced the

⁵² Reference for the reader: see Howard L. Parson's *Marx and Engels on Ecology* (Westport: Greenwood, 1977), pp. 32, 121.



plausibility of the thesis that the world contains more than one subject or species. That quantitative result hardly excites. Don't you have anything else to say, qualitatively, about the independent status of nature or animality?

Her.: No and yes: no, because talk about the "independent status" of reality belies the whole notion of lifeworldly hermeneutics; yes, because even within the latter horizon of conversation we can yet say something substantive about the kinds of entities populating our environmental philosophy. Basically, it comes down to a recognition that the (relative) dependence of a being's meaning on something or someone else does not nullify that being's existence or autonomy. Influencing an entity, in other words, is equivalent neither to extinguishing nor to controlling it.⁵³

Hol.: So you mean we don't have to choose between viewing a natural entity either as absolutely autonomous or else as completely inert?

Her.: That's it! Hopefully, we can make room in our ecosophies for acknowledging multiple agencies of natural and cultural forces--because agency itself does not have to be conceived on the model of consciously self-produced freedom of individual will. It can be thought of instead as occupying permeable centers of power or moving through flexible vectors of force.

Hol.: And thereby we permit a measure of construction to coexist with a degree of autonomy?

Her.: If you want to put it that way. What I'm getting at is that the authentic need not be *sui generis* to have a valid (though perhaps impure) identity of its 'own'. If it had to be so, we'd have landed in the odd situation that to escape inauthenticity an animal (or any other natural feature of the world) must be divine. Surely, though, creatures count--ontologically and axiologically--even if they're not themselves gods!

Hol.: I should hope so, yes indeed. Still though, there is one thing remaining that bothers me.

Her.: What, pray tell, is that? Perhaps we can clear it up before departing...

Hol.: This perspectival/relational account we've ended up with—doesn't it say that the more viewpoints or interactions had on or with a being, the better will be our sense of its reality?

Her.: That is the gist of it, yes.

⁵³ "Just as we would not doubt the autonomy of a spouse whose speech recalls the words of his partner"—Albert Borgmann, "The Nature of Reality and the Reality of Nature", in *Reinventing Nature?*, p. 40. To hold the contrary leads to ecologically and anthropologically stultifying results —as Ira Singer (pers. com.) puts it, "If animals are only truly themselves in isolation, free of the metaphysically distorting gaze of the other, then we [humans] need to rip ourselves out of the rest of nature in order to realize our 'own' true being."



Hol.: Then I find that the nature-lover in me wonders whether this principle could lend philosophic sanction to a worrisome boom in the genetic re-engineering of natural species.

Her.: Take it easy, and don't let any fears of Frankenstein consume you. First of all, I believe it's been shown that such manipulations of genotypes are not exactly creations but rather alterations.⁵⁴

Hol.: But that's just the rub—won't we thereby have increased the possible manifold of perspectives and relations upon or toward an animal by restructuring its genome?

Her.: Indeed that appears to be part and parcel of the enterprise itself. And then it would seem that the principle of ecology's "joyful wisdom" not merely allows but actually enjoins a forward leap into the brave new world of biotechnology...

Hol.: That's right--we'd open the floodgates for a whole hideous horde of GMOs, like Oncomouse (TM) and its ilk!

Her.: Hold your gen-eng horses. All that's required, to deal with your objection, is some sort of weighting factor that might permit us to prioritize perspectives/relations.

Hol.: I don't know if that's forthcoming without reversion to the metaphysics of realism, that is in the absence of ontological essentialism and/or epistemological foundationalism.

Her.: I'm afraid my constructionist conscience cannot abide such a move. Wait a second, I remember hearing about a contemporary philosopher of technology who offers the "commanding presence and telling continuity" of real (ordinarily occurring) beings as that which privileges them over and above the concoctions of hyper-reality.⁵⁵

Hol.: I'm listening, though you're going to have to say more...

Her.: The idea is that the more-than-human world engenders genuine awe and connects us to evolutionary history and ecological community, experiences beyond the mere fascination and convenience brought forth by the all-too-human realm of high technology.

Hol.: Okay--there's certainly enough of a vitalist in me to resonate with that, but I must confess it sounds like you've smuggled the old natural/artificial dualism in the backdoor.

Her.: Not really: the distinction at hand is less about an object's provenance than about the

⁵⁴ See Mark Sagoff's "Animals as Inventions: Biotechnology and Intellectual Property Rights", *Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy* 16.1 (Winter, 1996): <http://epn.org/ippp/sagoff1.html>.

⁵⁵ Borgmann, op. cit., p. 38.



existential element of interactivity and positionality between subject and object. It doesn't matter so much whence an entity's origin came as how you relate to or with it.⁵⁶

Hol.: Isn't that, however, empirically relative to different experiencers?

Her.: Yes, but I suspect there's a great deal of commonality--at least from the frame of reference of any typical experiencer's lifetime. If you want absolutes, you'll have to look elsewhere; just don't blame me, if questing for certainty turns out to be long and fruitless!

Hol.: I won't. And though I must say goodbye for now, hopefully the conversation will continue between us and among those who have been listening...

We animals do not compose ourselves. We make each other, but not just as we please; we do not do it under circumstances we choose but under those that we find, given and transmitted by our past and our surroundings. We are linked with our fellow creatures and with the environment which transforms with our acts. ... Organisms and environment are linked in a decentered, ongoing current of mutual transformation. (Michael Steinberg⁵⁷)

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⁵⁶ In this respect, then, we could even make worthwhile distinctions *within* the realm of biotechnology—between **unilateral** tinkering or control on the one hand and phenomenological prostheses of cross-species **interrelations** on the other. See my “Inventionist Ethology: Sustainable Designs for Reawakening Human-Animal Interactivity”, *Antennae* (forthcoming in special issue on Mechanical Animals).

⁵⁷ *The Fiction of a Thinkable World: Body, Meaning, and the Culture of Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2005), pp. 39f. “The fundamental point here”, we could say with Curry, “is that a genuine and consistent relational pluralism does not restrict the network of relations and perspectives that constitute all entities to human ones alone” (op. cit., 4).



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