

What the Mountain Knows

The Roots of Environmental Philosophies

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If rights and obligations only apply between human beings, how can we feel obliged to protect our environment? Catherine Larrère shows that the answers provided by ecological philosophies are largely based on modern Western thought: if there are values that we should respect in nature, this must mean that we are not alone in the world.

“Is there a need for a new, an environmental ethic?”: in 1973, an Australian philosopher, Richard Routley (who would later have people call him Richard Sylvan), speaking at an international philosophy conference in Sofia, in Bulgaria, put forward a message that was to renew moral thought by introducing nature into the field of ethics: the idea was that there are good and bad ways to behave in nature, that our relationship to it has limits other than those defined by our technical power, that we have duties towards it, that it may have rights – that nature, therefore, has a moral value (Routley, R., 1973).

The idea was not, admittedly, completely new, and the concern that inspired it was not unprecedented. There has been an interest in nature that we can trace back to the 19th century, and that has gone hand in hand with the rapid transformations of the environment brought about by industrialisation. It is industrial societies, and only industrial societies, which have defined and given meaning to a project for the protection of nature, aimed at protecting certain areas from economic and industrial development. The first national park, Yellowstone, was established on 1 March 1872 in the United States, while in France, from 1853, protective measures were implemented for the “artistic series” of Fontainebleau. The fact that this movement for the protection of nature has taken on a considerable breadth and importance in the United States is probably due to the speed and violence with which the lands and spaces appropriated by the settlers were transformed: they took less than a hundred years to carry out something that Europeans had taken centuries to achieve. They were thus brutally brought face-to-face with the results of their actions. When the frontier disappeared, the American settlers could start to think that part of their identity was threatened by this, and that they needed to preserve a nature against which, but also with which, American identity had asserted itself. There is thus an entire tradition that draws from American romanticism (especially in Thoreau and Emerson’s writings) a love of wild nature, of the wilderness, which must be respected and preserved. John Muir, the founder of the Sierra Club, which remains one of the most powerful American environmental organisations, is one of the most well known representatives of a movement for the protection of natural areas that resulted, in 1964, in the passage of the Wilderness Act, which governs the protection of nature in the United States (Nash, Roderick F., 1967).

After the Second World War, while protecting natural areas from industrial transformations became more and more of an issue, the global effects of these transformations were also noticed and feared: the extension and multiplication of pollutions, the depletion of resources, extinctions or irreversible destructions. While people were taking on the task of reconstructing European economies, and putting their minds to how to provide the rest of the world with access to a level of wealth and wellbeing comparable to that of Western countries, they were also starting to worry about the possibility of indefinitely following the same mode of economic development: a whole body of thought developed along these lines, and was particularly influenced by the Meadows report on the limits to growth (Meadows, D. 1972). In 1962, Rachel Carson, an American scientist who specialised in marine biology, published a book, *Silent Spring*, which many view as the text that launched the environmental movement in the United States. In it, she showed the cumulative and devastating effects of pesticide use, in particular of DDT. The idea appeared that these were not punctual events, but that the consequences of our technical interventions in nature (to which must be added the increasing weight of a fast-growing human population) combine with each other and are globalised into an environmental crisis. We can thus attempt to go back to the roots of this crisis, and try to identify its common origin in a certain type of relationship to nature. In 1967, a historian of technology (more specifically of medieval technology), Lynn White Jr, published an article that was to have a huge impact in the prestigious *Science* journal: “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis”. In it, he made Christianity – and the Bible, from which Christianity proceeds – responsible for the environmental crisis: by creating Man in his image, God set him aside from the rest of Creation – which, from that point onwards, was nothing more than a tool at the service of human needs.

This thus prepared the ground for philosophical reflexion on these environmental or ecological issues, and several talks or publications went in this direction. 1973 saw the simultaneous publication, as well as Richard Routley’s article, of an article by Arne Naess that would coin the expression “deep ecology”, another by Peter Singer on animal liberation, and an article by Georges Canguilhem, entitled “The Question of Ecology”.

While these articles meet at a point where we can trace the philosophical outline of an emerging system of thought about environmental issues, only Routley’s article directly poses as its central question that of an ethic of nature or of the environment¹. We can thus view this article as the starting point of a line of philosophical and moral reflection on the environment and on the relationship between man and nature which, in Anglophone countries (The United Kingdom, North America, Australia), has developed into an environmental ethic movement, with a range of different trends, peer-reviewed scientific journals, associations and conferences. In this pioneering article, the author created a fictitious scenario, that of the last surviving man on Earth (following a global catastrophe), “Mr Last Man”. Before dying, he undertakes to destroy everything that surrounds him, plants, animals... How can we judge what he is doing? If we go by the ethic that prevails in the Western world, where there are only rights and obligations between human beings, he is not doing anything wrong, since he is not hurting anybody. But if we believe that there are values in nature, that we have obligations in respect of these values, then his actions are morally reprehensible.

Biocentrism

¹ Naess’ article has a more political bent, and subsequent developments in his thought (Naess, A., 1989) integrate the moral dimension into an original “ecosophy”.

The environmental ethic that developed in the wake of this article was built around the idea of intrinsic value – that of natural entities, or of nature as a whole. We find the expression “intrinsic value” in Kant’s writings: anything that must be treated as an “end in itself” has an intrinsic value, which applies, for Kant, to humanity and, more generally, to any reasonable being. Everything else is viewed only as a means, as an instrumental value. The environmental ethic qualifies as “anthropocentric” this position which only grants moral dignity to human beings and leaves everything else outside of it, meaning nature, which is viewed as a set of resources. The aim of the environmental ethic is, in contrast, to show that natural entities have moral dignity, that they are intrinsic values.

The idea is that where there are means, there are necessarily ends. All living organisms, from the most simple to the most complex, be they animals (even those without nervous systems), plants, or single cell organisms..., employ complex adaptive strategies in order to preserve their existence and reproduce – strategies which are means at the service of an end. There are therefore ends in nature. We can consider any living being as the functional equivalent of a set of intentional actions, as an “end in itself”: “organisms,” claims Rolston, one of the theoreticians of intrinsic value, “value these resources instrumentally because they value something intrinsically: their selves, their form of life.” (Rolston III, Holmes, 1987, 269). The opposition between human persons and things that characterises anthropocentrism is replaced by a multiplicity of teleonomic individualities which can all equally claim to be ends in themselves, and therefore to have an intrinsic value (Taylor, Paul W., 1981, 1986; Rolston III, Holmes, 1994b; Callicott, J. Baird, 1999a). Any living individual is, equally to any other, worthy of moral consideration: this is what is known as biocentrism.

The biocentric environmental ethic thus recognises a will to live (an infinity of individual wills to live) operating in all of nature, and gives to life, to all that is alive, the moral dignity which the Kantian ethic bestows on free beings. This is thus an ethic of respect for nature, of which Paul Taylor has outlined the principles: (1) All living beings have an equal status. (2) An intrinsic value cannot be treated as a simple means. (3) Each individual entity has a right to protection. (4) This is a matter of principle, a moral principle (Taylor, P. W., 1986, 78-79). The ethic of respect for nature is therefore a deontological ethic, which assesses moral actions depending on whether or not they comply with moral principles, without anticipating any consequences. This deontological aspect might explain the success of the ethic of respect for nature. It implies a genuine moral conversion: we must detach ourselves from the egoism of traditional, anthropocentric moral concepts (which their opponents refer to as “human chauvinism”) to discover the value of the world that surrounds us. What right do we humans have to only attribute value to ourselves?

The acknowledgement of intrinsic value requires a kind of moral jump, an attention to the living world that has been quick to win over supporters. Intrinsic value has become the rallying cry of many activists fighting to protect nature. Its imprint can also be found in the various legislative texts that regulate the protection of species: they usually imply the prohibition of any individual removal of the components of these species. This attention paid to the individual entity is characteristic of biocentrism.

Bestowing an intrinsic value on each living entity is equivalent to admitting that it exists in such a way that it cannot be disposed of in an arbitrary manner, that it cannot be replaced at will by an equivalent. This does not lead us to refraining from any intervention in nature that might risk killing living beings (this would be impossible), but it does make it necessary to justify such interventions. As long as anthropocentrism is dominant (meaning

that human beings are viewed as the only ends in themselves, the only beings worthy of being taken into consideration morally), then in any situation where biological diversity is endangered, the burden of proof lies with the protectors of nature: they must prove that this or that loss of biological diversity will incur more costs than benefits for human populations. Adhering to biocentrism would lead us to reverse the burden of proof: it would be necessary for those who are suggesting new activities that might potentially be dangerous to provide proof that there are valid reasons for destroying intrinsic values.

However, while supporters of the biocentric ethic justify its practical utility in this way, we may have a few doubts about the reality of such utility. How can an ethic which assigns equal value to all living entities respond to the needs of a policy for the protection of nature that requires making choices between several possible scenarios, which itself implies that it must be possible to rank values according to a hierarchy? In addition, protecting nature is not so much about safeguarding individuals as safeguarding populations, and taking into consideration complex systems (ecosystems, sets of ecosystems, landscapes) in which the living and the inanimate world (to which the biocentric ethic does not attribute any value) are closely interlinked. We therefore see that there is a need for an ethic that is not just satisfied with issuing a few statements of principle (which mainly translate into prohibitions), but rather allows us to guide protective measures on a practical level.

Ecocentrism

Some environmentalists, such as Baird Callicott, thus believe that value should be attributed, not to separate elements, but rather to the system that they form, to the “biotic community”. This approach, which is known as “ecocentric”, is inspired by the ideas of an American forester who lived in the first half of the twentieth century, Aldo Leopold. In a book he wrote towards the end of his life, *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold, writing in the American tradition of narratives about nature (of which Thoreau was the initiator with *Walden*), brings together a series of short stories, or vignettes, told according to the months of the year, and in which he describes his morning walks in his Wisconsin (“Sand County”) estate, and the animals he comes across there, which are all users of one and the same territory. These lively and engaging tales lead to the presentation of an environmental ethic (referred to by Aldo Leopold as the Land ethic). It can be summed up in one sentence: “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.” (Leopold, A., 1966, p. 191).

One of the most famous stories in the *Almanac*, “Thinking Like a Mountain”, allows us to understand the meaning of this (Leopold, 1966, 114-117). In this tale, Leopold presents himself as a hunter, who upon hearing the cry of the she-wolf he has just shot, calls into question his convictions about the disappearance of wolves being necessary. Through this tale, Leopold provides a criticism of the policy of exterminating “pests” that had been decided upon by the American Bureau of Wildlife, a policy which he had initially been actively involved in, and which had led to the disappearance of wolves in many American states. People thought that this extermination would benefit hunters, but the proliferation of deer and bucks that had followed it was short-lived, and led to long-term ecological damage (overgrazing, degradation of slopes). “Thinking Like a Mountain” dramatises this situation and shows how the farmer and his flock, the hunter and his prey, all stand to benefit – at least this is what they believe – from the disappearance of the wolf. But, from the perspective of the common asset that the mountain constitutes for them all, with its resources – trees and grass – they are wrong, they are being short-sighted. The wolf has its place within the biotic community that lives from the mountain. The prosperity of the flocks and of the prey relies on

it in the long-term. Leopold thus discovers the level that brings together all perspectives, giving a place to each one: it is the perspective of the mountain, which “knows” that, without the wolves, the deer will proliferate and damage its slopes.

Unlike biocentrism, which insists on the inherent, intrinsic value of each living entity, taken in isolation, Leopold’s ethic puts an emphasis on the interdependence of these elements and on their common belonging to a whole, that of the “biotic community”. This ethic, which has sometimes been referred to as “holistic” (in contrast to the individualism of biocentrism), derives duties or obligations from the fact of belonging to a whole (symbolically represented by the mountain) that includes all of its members. These do not have any value in themselves, independently of the place that they occupy within this whole and which gives them value. Man is thus not external to nature, but a part of it: he is a member, in the same way as wolves or deer are, of the biotic community. Baird Callicott, who set himself the task of identifying the philosophical foundations and scientific references in Leopold’s Land ethic, effectively highlights the double, diachronic and synchronic, dimension of this solidarity of living beings (Callicott, J. Baird, 1989, p. 82). The diachronic dimension is the continuity of evolution as it is defined by the teachings of Darwin. “Men are only fellow-voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution,” claims Leopold, who stresses the moral repercussions on our sentiments of this scientific hypothesis: “This new knowledge should have given us, by this time, a sense of kinship with fellow-creatures; a wish to live and let live; a sense of wonder over the magnitude and duration of the biotic enterprise” (Leopold, Aldo, 1966, p. 99). We are part of a whole, the elements of which are interdependent. What the mountain “knows” is what ecology learns from the scientific developments that occurred in Leopold’s day: the understanding of trophic chains, of the complex exchanges of energy around which the pursuit of life is organised, and which Leopold describes using a concise and poetic phrase: “the land pyramid” (Leopold, 1966, p. 183-188).

As Baird Callicott explains, an ethic is “the internal description of the structure of a community by its own members” (Callicott, J. Baird, 1989, p. 66). As far as the biotic community is concerned, this description is provided by ecology, or by the theory of evolution. Being closely connected to a scientific content, the Land ethic thus lays itself open to constant revisions. Leopold’s statement stressing the integrity and above all the stability of the biotic community is out-dated: it hearkens back to a version of ecology that stresses the balances in nature, whether in terms of the concept of the climax, as Clements has presented it, as the stable state which is the outcome of various successions, or in terms of the thermodynamic view of ecosystem balance as outlined by Tansley. More recent developments in ecology (the ecology of disturbance, the ecology of landscapes) have called into question this supremacy of balance, which now appears as nothing more than a rare and precarious moment in natural dynamics that are most frequently characterised by disturbances². Callicott thus undertook to update Leopold’s claim, taking into account these scientific transformations, which has led him to put forward a new version of it: “A thing is right when it tends to disturb the biotic community only at normal spatial and temporal scales. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” (Callicott, J. Baird, 1999 b. p. 138).

The Land ethic can appear to be a redundancy of ecology: “These are,” according to Leopold, “two definitions of one thing.” (1966, p. 174). What the ethic contributes to ecology is a mode of experience: it calls upon feelings. Continuing his exploration of the conceptual

² Regarding the long persistence, in scientific ecology, of the concept of balances in nature and its recent calling into question, see Blandin, Patrick, 2009.

foundations of the Land ethic, Callicott highlights everything it owes to the theory of moral sentiments of Hume and Smith, of which Darwin, the Darwin of *The Descent of Man*, may be viewed as the continuator. Belonging is experienced, felt as a feeling of fraternity with other creatures, and the entire progression of the *Sand County Almanac*, which starts with short stories describing animals with just enough anthropomorphism to make us feel attached to them, is aimed at awakening or reawakening our feelings of proximity to nature, before we discover the descriptive content that guides them. As Leopold puts it himself, the Land ethic is “actually a process in ecological evolution” (1966, p. 174). These feelings of proximity, of belonging which we share with the other members of the biotic community, are a component of the social behaviours of which Darwin outlines the emergence in *The Descent of Man*. The Land ethic can thus be viewed as a variation on evolutionist ethics: it is, according to Leopold, “a kind of community instinct in-the-making” (1966, p. 175).

Like other evolutionist ethics, the Land ethic is concerned with the emergence of social behaviours (“an ethic,” explains Leopold, “is a differentiation of social from anti-social conduct” 1966, p. 174). But most evolutionist ethics (from Darwin to sociobiology) only examine social behaviours within a single species. The Land ethic is plurispecific. By expanding “the limits of the community so as to include soils, water, plants and animals or, collectively, the land” Leopold’s Land ethic not only goes beyond the limits of humanity (the ordinary limits of morality), it becomes the ethic of a mixed community that includes diverse populations, from different species.

The biocentric ethic is deontological: it defines universal standards, mainly in the form of prohibitions – the ethic of respect is essentially an ethic of non-intervention. Leopold’s Land ethic is consequentialist: the quality of an action (“a thing is right”) is measured in terms of its effects on the biotic community (“stability, integrity, beauty”). Thus, Leopold defines the ecologist, or protector of nature, not as someone who abstains from intervening, but as someone who intervenes appropriately and who is not afraid of leaving a mark, or a trace: “I have read many definitions of what is a conservationist, and written not a few myself, but I suspect that the best one is written not with a pen, but with an axe. It is a matter of what a man thinks about while chopping, or while deciding what to chop. A conservationist is one who is humbly aware that with each stroke he is writing his signature on the face of his land.” (Leopold, 1966, p. 68).

But the aspects that constitute the advantages of the Land ethic (it allows us to formulate specific and positive injunctions) are also what opens it up to criticism: because it aims for an overall result (at the level of the community), it does not necessarily take into account the value of individuals, a value which is a matter of principle for deontological ethics. Like all consequentialist ethics (notoriously utilitarianism), the Land ethic lays itself open to the reproach that it sacrifices individuals to the common good, but, because it is plurispecific, it also lays itself open to the reproach that it does not grant more importance to one species over another. In the biotic community, human beings thus end up being doubly exposed: as individuals, and as a species, which one is all the less justified in favouring when you consider that this species is the one that is most responsible for seriously endangering the biotic community which it is a part of.

Pragmatism

The difficulties involved in attempts to get beyond the usual limits of morality in order for it to include all living beings or the biotic community explain why people have attempted to draw up an environmental ethic by calling into question the rigidity of the distinction

between intrinsic value and instrumental value. It is not necessary to oppose intrinsic value to instrumental value, it is enough to make apparent the diversity of instrumental values. Utility is not just immediate, or material, we must also take into consideration the fact that there is a future, and future generations, and that there are disinterested interests, such as aesthetic or cognitive interests. Viewing nature as a set of resources does not necessarily mean undertaking to destroy it: nature does of course provide us with goods (raw materials, agricultural products...) that we consume by destroying them, but it also provides us with services (pollination, recycling, nitrate fixation, homeostatic regulation), without which we would not have access to these goods, and which it is in our interest to keep active, and definitely not to cause the disappearance of. The same thing may be said of the cognitive or aesthetic interest in nature. The reason that scientists, like systematists, do not need a particularly elaborate environmental ethic, is that by defending nature, they defend their work object: Stephen Jay Gould gives a good description of how the disappearance of a species is a tragedy for the naturalist (1996, p. 23-41). In the same way, people who admire the beauty of nature, or find in the sublime a spiritual experience that lifts their soul, are doubtless placing value on a subjective experience that is unique to them, but, in doing so, they need an untouched nature without which it would be impossible for this experience to take place. Programmes for the protection of nature are perfectly justifiable from an anthropocentric perspective, and we can, as Bryan Norton does, believe that this is the mode of justification that is most common among environmentalists (Norton, Bryan G., 1987, p. 175). We can thus distinguish from the reductive anthropocentrism that is condemned by bio- or ecocentric ethics, an extended anthropocentrism (sometimes referred to as “weak”) such that valuing man does not necessarily imply devaluing nature.

Based on the common sense argument according to which instrumentalising nature does not necessarily lead to destroying it, a whole pragmatically-inspired school of thought has developed, which calls into question the desire to base an environmental ethic on intrinsic value. This ethic is accused of relying on heavy metaphysics and of leading to sectarian positions. The search for intrinsic value is a search for a single, monistic theory of value. Such a theory is all the less likely to be accepted by a majority of people once you consider that it requires metaphysical interrogation, a search for its foundations, when philosophy today has more of a tendency to proclaim the end of metaphysics. To this monistic and solitary view of value, pragmatists oppose a pluralistic and relational view. Why do we need to limit ourselves to “intrinsic value” to define the value of a forest? There are plenty of reasons why you might find worth in a forest, plenty of ways to value it. In addition, values are not isolated: there are, for each of us, value systems that are linked to each other. And this applies all the more given that values are not completely independent, they only exist in a given context: the (ecological) value of a plant is not the same depending on whether it grows in abundance in a specific environment or whether, in another place, it is one of the rare specimens of the species that still survives (Weston, Anthony, 1996).

The issue here is to highlight the practical use of such an approach: it aims to establish a consensus regarding what aims to pursue. The pluralism of values is not opposed to this consensus – on the contrary, it supports it. Different evaluations may well converge and, far from leading to oppositions, support the aims. By exploring the numerous reasons which make us place value on a particular place, we discover all the more arguments to protect it. Far from rejecting arguments in favour of the protection of nature, the anthropocentric provenance of which might make them suspect (as environmentalists who rigidly reject anthropocentrism are accused of doing), Andrew Light (like Norton and the other pragmatists) calls on all possible justifications, as long as they are not compromised by

intolerable commitments (fascist ones, for example), and as long as they have the same aim. The more justifications there are, the better! It is thus not necessary to attempt to convert to a pre-existing theory any people who might be reluctant to work towards this aim: we must find arguments that are acceptable within the framework of their own moral concepts and thus enrich the argumentation in favour of the environment (Light, Andrew, 2003).

Where supporters of intrinsic value tend to look for a killer argument that will convince people, and only succeed in being sectarian, pragmatists highlight the democratic values of pluralism: it allows for compromises (since everyone who agrees on a particular aim will be prepared to let go of some of the issues on which they diverge) and promotes deliberation since, by confronting arguments with each other, we can be led to change reasons and come together on a common basis.

Thus, by re-establishing man as the centre of values, pragmatists are not abandoning environmental concerns. But are they not turning away from what might be viewed as the main lesson to be drawn from non-anthropocentric ethics: that we are not alone in the world, that non-humans also count, for themselves?

Conclusion

In France, this questioning of the moral dimension of our relationship to nature has been demonised under the term of “deep ecology”. Luc Ferry, in *Le nouvel ordre écologique* (1992) has confused several different strands of environmental and animal ethics under this catch-all term, including the ecosophy of the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (who invented the expression “deep ecology”), but also the ethic of responsibility of Hans Jonas, or Michel Serres’ *Contrat naturel*. He recognised in all these strands the same expression of an anti-modern and anti-Enlightenment romanticism that could only lead to fascism. Since the predicted effects of this have not yet been seen, this criticism has lost some of its virulence, and the reception of American concepts, which was delayed for a long time, has at last been made possible³. Nevertheless, while this philosophy of the environment is no longer sparking fierce opposition, it is more tolerated than well known.

This is probably due to the fact that this it is essentially a philosophy of the protection of nature that was developed in the – very American – cultural context of wilderness: huge natural spaces that are, as much as possible, kept apart from human intervention. The United States boast about having a network of natural parks that is unique in the world. But the protection of nature occupies a less and less important place in current environmental or ecological concerns: the protection of human societies against the harmful consequences of their technical actions (resource depletion, various forms of pollution, climate change, nuclear accidents) is what is holding most of people’s attention, and leads us to thinking about human responsibility and the philosophy of technology more than about the philosophy of nature: Ellul, Illich or Jonas more than Callicott, Rolston or Leopold. No doubt, this analysis of technology does not completely ignore its relationship to nature, but this is pushed into the background of an analysis that is centred on man.

At the international level, be it that of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) or that of the major environmental NGOs (IUCN, Greenpeace, WWF), targets for the protection of nature have been adopted according to standards that are often inspired by

³ To the study carried out by Catherine Larrère (1997) and Hicham Afeissa’s anthology (2007) has been added a major set of publications and translations, in particular from Wildproject, which has made this philosophy accessible to a francophone audience.

American policies – and ethics. They have nevertheless been criticised, by anthropologists (like Philippe Descola), sociologists (Bruno Latour), environmentalists from the South (Ramachandra Guha) or historians of the environment (William Cronon). They have shown that both the concept of wilderness and the ethics that structure its protection arise out of a Western view of nature, a dualist view that does not have any equivalents in other views of the world or other ontologies. Imposing the standards of wilderness on other parts of the world does not mean protecting nature, it means emptying these spaces of their usual inhabitants in order to turn them into leisure parks for Western tourists, or places that are scientifically monitored. This ultimately leads to strictly protecting certain areas of wild nature (or areas which are reputed to be wild) and to let more or less anything happen in other places.

The criticism of wilderness was not just imported from the outside into environmental philosophy: it was also carried out within American schools of environmental ethics and philosophy, which led to a debate within their ranks that opposed the supporters and critics of wilderness (Callicott and Nelson 1998, p. 2008). It brought to light the romantic roots of the American idea of wilderness, its social and ideological aspects (recreational spaces for urban inhabitants in search of a virile confrontation with nature), its dependency on certain scientific schemes for the protection of nature (those of the balances in nature, of a “climax” which can only be reached in the absence of man). This debate did not conclude, however, that the concept should be abandoned, but rather that it should be redefined: once we have abandoned the myth of a virgin nature, untouched by man, it is still necessary to maintain a network of spaces that allows big predators, which find it difficult to handle a human presence, to move around freely, and that can also serve as a scientific indicator to define a certain “naturalness”. Holding on to the idea of wilderness thus allows us to hold onto a certain way of referring to nature in terms of its otherness.

This debate, which is far from being closed, bears witness to the critical capacity of environmental philosophy. While environmental ethics are part of Western naturalism, and can be described as modern in this sense, they nevertheless illustrate the plasticity of Western ontology, its ability to call itself into question from the inside. And what is this criticism directed at? In a contribution to the debate about wilderness, Val Plumwood attacks what she calls “wilderness scepticism”, the idea that this is nothing more than a social construct. According to her, this way of reducing nature to culture, of assimilating the human and the cultural leads us to the solipsism of the human (Val Plumwood, 1998, p. 672). Outside of what is human, nothing exists, nothing makes sense. We can reckon that we have explored everything there is to explore about the human; the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiro de Castro talks about “the old Europeans, long since resigned to the cosmic solipsism of the human condition” (Viveiro de Castro, 2009, p. 23). And indeed, this solipsism has led a certain number of philosophers to claim that human beings must either escape from their humanity, by becoming trans-human, or leave for other planets. In contrast, environmental ethics invite us to explore our terrestrial condition, to discover the beings that share it with us. We are not alone in the world: it is a rather encouraging thought. Far from being anti-humanistic, environmental ethics lead us to discover what it means to be human beings.

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| Published on Books&Ideas, [7 April](#) 2014, Translated by Kate McNaughton, with the support of the Fondation Florence Gould. ©booksandideas.net

First published in French in laviedesidees.fr, 30th April 2013.