

## Chapter 1

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# Introduction

You might have thought that environmental ethics would enthusiastically embrace a naturalistic view of values. When the whole effort is to rejoin the human enterprise to the encompassing world, mustn't values be accorded an organic place in that world as well? How else to picture value except as deeply rooted in embodied perception, coalesced around desire, need, and susceptibility, and tuned to more-than-human as well as human rhythms?

Such a picture has another immense attraction too: it does not make value, as such, a *problem*. Values so understood do not need to be “grounded,” at least in the sense that without certain sorts of philosophical self-justification, they would have no hold in the world at all. They may need more fertility, reconstruction, and redirection; they may need criticism, deepening, and change; but the bottom line, regardless, is that they are already *here*, quite gloriously here—all of them, of course, the congenial along with less congenial. Values are not fragile or rare or delicate or endangered. We do not live in an axiological desert but in a rain forest. Everywhere the air is thick with them.

Most readers will know, however, that contemporary environmental ethics has followed a very different path—so far, at least. In the field as we find it, naturalism is widely mistrusted, and the very existence of environmental values *is* taken to be a problem, indeed the most fundamental and intractable of problems. We are invited to “ground” our ethical claims on some independent and philosophically locked-down “intrinsic value,” or on an ethical theory of a more traditional sort awkwardly retrofitted for broader-than-human scope. This, for better or worse, is what seems natural to most philosophers—so natural, indeed, that its methodological commitments often are not even articulated but are simply left without saying. And so not only do we learn to live in the thin air: we also come to imagine that it is, so to speak, the only kind of atmosphere there could be.

This book is, among other things, a plea to reconsider. The essays presented here aim to recover and elaborate a systematic alternative to

this entire conception of the proper tasks and methods of environmental ethics. Environmental ethics emerges here in another key; in radically different axiological biome, as it were, with thicker air and life already abundant; and two-footedly “grounded” on the *actual* ground. Correspondingly, this book also offers a kind of methodological complement to other work in the field—mine and others’—already in this alternative key. The necessary sort of work is already underway. The challenge is partly to learn to see it as such.

Fully embraced, moreover, a thoroughgoing naturalism leads us much further. I want to suggest that it points to a vision of philosophical engagement as “reconstructive” in the Deweyan sense—and not just of environmental philosophy but of the environment itself. The familiar question of anthropocentrism, for example—of human-centeredness as a doctrine—appears in an entirely different light. I argue that the root of the problem is not a doctrine at all, but an actual process: anthropocentrization, the narrowing and relentless humanizing of the actual world, a world that we *make* and that pervasively remakes itself both experientially and conceptually. Typically we suppose that we must determine what the philosophically mandated “nonanthropocentrism” must look like and then rebuild the world to suit. From a pragmatic perspective the actual challenge is to “go the other way around, not make— or more pointedly to de-anthropocentrize—the actual world in such a way that a new ethic, only barely conceivable now, might *evolve*.

“Nonanthropocentrism,” after all, is only a placeholder, a refusal without content. We know that we want to escape, but only in the vaguest way where we need to go. Instead, the task must be to enable the emergence of a new ethic—by the kinds of settings we create, by the larger-than-human invitations we offer both in our own bearing and through the patterns of attention and the possibilities of encounter we build into the world. We need an environmental *etiquette*, then, as much as an ethic. Its development will be a *process*, an ongoing evolution rather than some form of theoretical exertion. And it must be a genuinely *multicentric* process, in place of the usual moral extensionisms that, however well-intended, still end up making ourselves the touchstones and “centers” of an “expanded circle.” This book offers one path in those directions.

### Pragmatism

Environmental ethics’ fundamental complaint is supposed to be that the dominant attitude toward nature reduces the entire more-than-human

world to no more than a means to human ends, and indeed only to a few of those: to commercially provided consumption opportunities, more or less immediate and supposedly consequence-less. This crassly self-centered value system is often labeled *pragmatism*, which naturally makes it hard to imagine that the philosophical movement called Pragmatism in any way could be encouraging to environmental ethics.

This, though, is only the crudest and most journalistic sense of the word “pragmatism.” John Dewey’s distinctly American philosophy actually offers something radically different and, in my view, radically more promising. It is on this point that my work in the field began, now twenty-five years ago.

Notice first that only a few short and seemingly completely natural philosophical steps lead the familiar line of environmental-ethical argument from the rejection of that crass instrumentalism directly into a familiar and very specific paradigm. If you think that the problem is that we reduce everything to means to human ends, to resources for our use, then what could be more obvious than to defend natural values by making them *intrinsic* rather than “merely” instrumental? Somehow, we conclude, they must represent another kind of value: ends rather than means; values entirely outside of the give-and-take of everyday making-do.

It seems obvious enough. Yet the reality is that a vast amount of energy and ingenuity is spent imagining what such intrinsic values in nature could be, how they can be kept pure and isolated from anything instrumental, and how they might finally be “grounded.” Strenuous and lavishly outfitted overland expeditions continue to be launched to link them up to everything from self-interest to a variety of new ontologies. Massive philosophical resources go into rearguard actions to defend them against various critics and skeptics—though, for all that, the bottom-line argument all too often is still only some re-invocation of the original bugbear: “Well then, is nature to be left only a mere means to our ends?”

My first article in the field took issue with all of this. “Beyond Intrinsic Value”<sup>1</sup> argued that Dewey’s pragmatism points toward a far richer and more workable understanding of values. Dewey calls us “to embrace the richness and diversity of our actual values and then to make full use of that richness and diversity to open up a new sense of possibility in practical action. Pragmatism so understood represents a pluralistic, integrative, even experimental approach to ethics, at once almost an ordinary kind of practical wisdom and a philosophically self-conscious alternative in ethics.”<sup>2</sup> On a Deweyan view, both means *and* ends can *already* be found everywhere: what we really need is to articulate and re-integrate those now overlooked and marginalized.

Instead of the familiar insistence on “grounding” intrinsic values in nature, then, I say that our real challenge is to develop something more like an *ecology of values*: to situate natural values in their contexts, understand their dynamics, and bring them into fuller attention and wider play. Even the most precious experiences in and of nature, barely noticeable to so many others and desperately needing wider play, are already as “grounded” as they need to be, thank you. They are rooted deep in the interplay of experience and the larger world. What they really need is more visibility: more loving elaboration, new and recovered kinds of language, as well as more intentional and systematic design for their readier emergence in experience.

Put another way: just as the first task of environmentalism proper is to bring forth a richer sense of where we actually live, of how deeply intertwined we are and must be with the Earth, so, I argue, one of the first tasks of environmental ethics is to bring forth a richer sense of what we *do* value: of how value, down to earth, actually goes. Even those kinds of ethics that seem on the surface so relentlessly human-centered often bring the Earth in the back door, and a wide and mostly unguarded back door at that. Think of our susceptibility to animals, both domestic and wild. Think of our fascination with stars and storms. Think of the hundreds of millions of Americans who claim to be gardeners, the tens of millions who belong to a wide range of environmental organizations. Think of the great nature poets, from Wordsworth to Wendell Berry. Think of fundamentalist Creationists, for God’s sake, who celebrate this world as Creation, though not a very dynamic one, I guess. Think even of our very own professional selves, who would not be so desperately in search of intrinsic values in nature in the first place if we were not *already* persuaded that nature is (to put it in a less ontologically suggestive way) precious in its own right. We are trying to create (what we will then describe as “discover”) the sources and underpinnings of (what we will then describe as a “justification for”) values and perceptions that we in fact held long before we felt the need for such philosophical exertions. Maybe it is time to widen the lens. Environmental ethics may have much more leverage than we usually imagine, right where we already are.

### Social Contingency and its Implications

Along with situating values in the sphere of desire I also want to bring them emphatically into the orbit of social construction. If value is, as I propose, deeply rooted in embodied perception and coalesced around desire, need, and susceptibility, then particular values and indeed the

whole shape of value-systems are also—yes—contingent. They are not “givens,” not some kind of timeless essences, but socially and culturally shaped, and thus open to reshaping as well. I will add right away that for me this contingency—indeed, pragmatism’s embrace of a kind of deconstructive method, seeking out and even celebrating contingency, foolhardy as it too may seem to many in environmental ethics—is in fact a methodological touchstone. It is what provokes and enables the fundamentally *reconstructive* turn that gives my work whatever distinctiveness it may have. But it is also, I know, a rather unsettling path, whose implications will need to be drawn out slowly in this essay and throughout this book.

Take for instance the supposed problem of self-centeredness again—or, more broadly, as Alan Watts famously put it, the “skin-encapsulated ego.” As we know all too well, egoism is often supposed to be a sort of default human condition. Indeed, from Hobbes through the theory of the “Moral Point of View,” such a pessimism about human nature has been made into the rationale for ethics itself. Dewey would argue, though, that self-centeredness is no more natural or essential than its opposite. Human nature, in general, is *plastic*. People have and have had many different “natures,” and likely will have still others in times to come. No matter, it may be the case that the human selves are markedly involuted or fortified in our time. From a social-constructionist angle, still, this fact, so far as it really is a fact, is not an invitation to keep debating about “true human nature,” but reappears instead in another and more challenging guise. Maybe the real danger is that this is what we are *becoming*. Egoism and the crasser utilitarianisms, so far from somehow being the default human condition, might therefore better be pictured as radical reductions of it, end results of a long and militant process of self-desiccation. But it is not too late to change directions. Marx may after all have been right when he said that the real task is not to solve certain philosophical problems but to change the world so that such problems do not arise in the first place. It’s not that the problems are unreal—they can be quite real, and may even have solutions, of a sort anyway—but rather that they are unnecessary.<sup>3</sup> The universe does not compel us to drive ourselves, either individually or as a species, ever deeper into our hard little shells. There are other ways, and once again perhaps quite close beside us.

Broadly deconstructive themes arise first in my essay “Before Environmental Ethics” (Chapter 2 of this book). Its specific project is to argue that that contemporary nonanthropocentric environmental ethics is profoundly shaped by the very anthropocentrism that it aims to transcend, and therefore that we may have to go much farther afield

than we have so far imagined if we are to (eventually) truly transcend anthropocentrism. Consider, for example, the question that contemporary environmental philosophers take as fundamental: whether “we” should open the gates of moral considerability to “other” animals (sometimes just: “animals”), and to the likes of rivers and mountains. “Before Environmental Ethics” comments:

[This] phrasing of “the” question may seem neutral and unexceptionable. Actually, however, it is not neutral at all. The called-for arguments address all and only humans on behalf of “the natural world.” Environmental ethics therefore is invited to begin by *positing*, not questioning, a sharp divide that “we” must somehow cross, taking that “we” unproblematically to denote all humans. To invoke such a divide, however, is already to take one ethical position among others.<sup>4</sup>

For one thing, this entire frame of reference is largely peculiar to modern Western cultures. Other cultures have felt no compulsion to divide the entire world between all humans on the one hand and all nature on the other. Even our own immediate predecessor societies lived in *mixed communities* to use Mary Hedges’s apt term. “The” question above may be *our* question, of course: the urbanized, modern, Westerner’s question. But that is just the point. “The” very question that frames contemporary environmental ethics presupposes a particular cultural and historical situation, not at all the only human possibility, and which is itself perhaps precisely the problem.

We could even reconsider the supposedly fundamental means/end distinction in this light. Everyday experience suggests that most values exist in the middle: *both* means and ends, or *between* means and ends, as I put it in another early article, “Between Means and Ends.”<sup>5</sup> Dewey writes of “immediate” values; I speak of “values-as-parts-of-patterns,” invoking a holistic view in place of the linearity of means-end relations. In general, the simplest point is that nearly everything has both aspects. Every value both takes its place in a long—indeed endless—chain of means and also has its own gratifications in itself. Contrariwise, if we are losing this two-sidedness—in particular, if more and more of the multiple and modest natural values next to us are being simplified down to mere means, a dramatically simplified “ecology of values”—then, once again, we have a *problem*. Albert Borgmann and others have perceptively argued that precisely this is the distinctive malaise of modern industrialism.<sup>6</sup>

With these last points you already begin to see, I hope, that there is life after deconstruction: that the specific contingencies of the pres-

ent structure of values also open up specific avenues and strategies for change. This theme especially will take time to unfold, and there are others that come first, but at this point we should at least note that precisely this contingency also undercuts the supposed conceptual barriers to environmental ethics that are sometimes invoked from outside the field.

Take a familiar kind of linguistic or conceptual objection. Still widely argued is that it is conceptually confused to hold that a mountain or forest might have some kind of right against dynamiting or clear-cutting, or that nonconscious beings have moral interests or other any kind of independent standing against whatever we might wish to do to them. It is part of the very meaning of *rights* or *interests*, many critics say, that you cannot have them without awareness or at least feeling. Therefore, inanimate nature cannot have moral standing, and the whole project of an environmental ethics—valuing nature for its own sake—is simply confused, mistaken, misconceived. But it is a curiously rigid and self-congratulatory argument. Surely the very same premise—that environmental values are not readily conceivable in present terms—might much more sensibly be taken to imply that present concepts must be *changed*. In a world whose fundamental self-understandings are in flux, why ever suppose that such a particular conception of interests is somehow fixed, secure, and timelessly given, let alone somehow accessible to philosophers in the solitude of their studies or classrooms? This concept of interests, and indeed the conception of moral consideration that ties it to interests in the first place, is an artifact of a very specific legal system—and there is nothing wrong with that, either, but it is certainly not the whole story, or any kind of necessity. Such systems are *created*, they evolve, and they always must expect re-creation as well.

And we could add: *of course* the proposed reconceptions will look “confused.” How else would they look to the guardians of the established order? That is more like a sign that they are actually getting somewhere.<sup>7</sup>

### Self-Validating Reduction

A step further into the coevolution of values and world and we begin to notice some deeper and trickier dynamics. These are the theme of “Self-Validating Reduction: A Theory of the Devaluation of Nature” (Chapter 3 of this book).

Often enough we encounter a world that has an apparently “given” character. And often enough, to be honest, the values for which

environmental ethics wishes to speak—indeed, the values for which ethics in general wishes to speak—are genuinely hard to *see* in that world. The animal inmates of factory farms are bred for such docility and stupidity, and raised in conditions so inimical to any remaining social or communicative instinct, that the resulting creatures are pretty poor candidates for rights or any other kind of moral consideration. Likewise, most of the places of power revered in the pagan world are gone—often deliberately destroyed by command of the new, self-describedly “jealous Gods.” But as even the faintest remnants of the great natural world’s sacredness are degraded and even the whispers silenced, it becomes progressively harder, sometimes even for us environmentalists, to see what all the fuss is about.

The familiar consequence is that environmental ethics (and often ethics in general) is often perceived, even by its advocates, as sentimental, “nostalgic,” lost in some realm of abstraction and idealization only tangentially related to “the real world.” Sometimes, I am sure, it is. But this entire set of expectations, I argue, is also flawed to its core. The reduced world is not somehow the limit of reality itself. It is a world we have *made*—not the only possibility.

Moreover, it is a world we have made in a peculiarly self-reinforcing way. At work here is a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy that I call “self-justifying reduction.” Those animals in factory farms, for instance, having been reduced to mere shadows of what their ancestors once were, we then can look at them and genuinely find any sort of moral claim unbelievable. “See? They really *are* stupid, dirty, dysfunctional, pitiable.” But then even more drastic kinds of devaluation and exploitation become possible. Already the genetic engineers speak of chickens with no heads at all. The circle closes completely. And the same story can be told, of course, of the reduction of so many particular places and of the land in general.

The implications are dramatic. For one thing, it follows that the environmental crisis is not fundamentally the result of some kind of error in reasoning, essentially to be engaged on the philosophical level. Instead, it is “a slow downward spiral, a reduction in fact as well as in thought, in which our ideas are as much influenced by the reduced state of the world as vice versa, and . . . each stage is impeccably rational.”<sup>8</sup> Philosophical conceptions are not merely epiphenomenal in this process, but they *are* part of a larger dynamic in which material factors also make a difference.

For another thing—again, and crucially—this world is no kind of given. The way things are, right now, is not the way they must be. We are not stuck defending the world as it is or simply trying to read values off the world we now see before us. “The world as it is”

is itself a production of multiple and sustained reductions. It is in flow, and open to change. Ethics speaks, instead and in addition, to *possibilities*—sometimes to thoroughly hidden possibilities, if need be, but possibilities nonetheless. Part of the very outrage is that they remain so hidden, that they are so insistently reduced. Ethics' fundamental effort, then, is to find ways to bring those possibilities forth. Its voice cannot be one of mere reportage, justification, or "defense." No: it must be a call, an *invitation*—to assist, and join, the self-unveiling of a different kind of world.

### Environmental Etiquette

"Self-validating reduction" is the first of a series of concepts that together begin to offer a new sort of conceptual toolbox for environmental ethics. Two more are introduced in "Environmental Ethics as Environmental Etiquette" (Chapter 4 of this book), an essay with my philosophical and backwoods co-adventurer Jim Cheney. Here self-validating reduction finds its complement in "self-validating invitation," while environmental ethics finds its more challenging opposite in what Cheney and I call "environmental etiquette."

There are musicians, now, who paddle out to the orca in open ocean in canoes trailing underwater mikes and speakers, inviting them to jam, working out new musical forms together. You can order the CDs on the Internet.<sup>9</sup> There are animal trainers whose "ways of moving fit into the spaces shaped by the animals' awareness," as Vicki Hearne elegantly puts it—and "fit" not so much consciously as instinctively. Then and only then do the animals respond. There is a self-validating dynamic here too, then, except headed in the other direction. On the usual ethical epistemology,

we must first know what animals are capable of and then decide on that basis whether and how we are to consider them ethically. On the alternative view, we will have no idea of what other animals are actually capable of—we will not readily understand them—until we *already* have approached them ethically: that is, until we have offered them the space and time, the occasion, and the acknowledgment necessary to enter into relationship.<sup>10</sup>

If the world is a collection of more or less fixed facts to which we must respond, then the task of ethics is to systematize and unify our

responses. This is the expected view, once again so taken for granted as to scarcely even appear as a “view” at all. Epistemology is prior to ethics. Responding to the world follows upon knowing it—and what could be more sensible or responsible than that? If the world is *not* “given,” though—if the world is what it seems to be in part because we have *made* it that way, as I have been suggesting, and if therefore the process of inviting its further possibilities into the light is fundamental to ethics itself—then our very knowledge of the world, of the possibilities of other animals and the land and even ourselves in relation to them, follows upon “invitation,” and ethics must come *first*. Ethics is prior to epistemology—or, as Cheney and I do not say in the paper but probably should have said, what really emerges is another kind of epistemology—“etiquette,” in our specific sense, *as* epistemology.

But then of course we are also speaking of something sharply different from “ethics” as usually understood. We are asked not for a set of well-defended general moral commitments in advance, but rather for something more visceral and instinctual, a mode of comportment more than a mode of commitment, more fleshy and more vulnerable. Etiquette so understood requires us to take risks, to offer trust before we know whether or how the offer will be received, and to move with awareness, civility, and care in a world we understand to be capable of response. Thus Cheney and I conclude that ethical action itself must be “first and foremost an attempt to open up possibilities, to enrich the world” rather than primarily an attempt to respond to the world as already known.

Cheney, true to his nature, also takes the argument on a more strenuous path, exploring indigenous views of ceremony and ritual. Once again the question of epistemology turns out to be central. Euro-Americans, Cheney says, want to know what beliefs are encoded in the utterances of indigenous peoples. We treat their utterances as propositional representations of Indigenous worlds. But what if these utterances function, instead, primarily to *produce* these worlds? Cheney cites the indigenous scholar Sam Gill on the fundamentally performative function of language. When Gill asks Navajo elders what prayers *mean*, he reports, they tell him “not what messages prayers carry, but what prayers *do*.” More generally, Gill asserts that “the importance of religion as it is practiced by the great body of religious persons for whom religion is a way of life [is] a way of creating, discovering, and communicating worlds of meaning largely through ordinary and common actions and behavior.”<sup>11</sup>

What then, Cheney and I ask, if this performative dimension of language is fundamental not just in indigenous or obviously religious

settings, but generally? How we speak, how we move, how we carry on, all the time, also literally brings all sorts of worlds into being—and thus, again, the ethical challenge put mindful speech, care, and respect *first*. Indeed we would now go even further. Here it is not so much that epistemology comes first but that, in truth, it simply fades away. The argument is not the usual suggestion that the West has misunderstood the world, got it wrong, and that we now need to “go back” to the Indians to get it right. Cheney is arguing that understanding the world is not really the point in the first place. We are not playing a truth game at all. What matters is how we relate to things, not what things are in themselves. Front, center, and always, the world *responds*. The great task is not knowledge but *relationship*.

### Multicentrism

By now we have moved far indeed from the usual frames of reference in environmental ethics, at least as an academic and philosophical field. Yet it remains my concern to stay in dialogue—indeed, dialectic—with that field. Not only is the line of thought unfolding here meant itself as a “position” of sorts in that field, but it also suggests a systematic critique of and alternative to the field’s usual theories and conceptual categories. Moreover, in my view, it is a very widely shared critique and alternative—much more widely shared, and in fact much more specific and systematic, than currently recognized. “Multicentrism: A Manifesto” (Chapter 5 in this book) is an attempt to give it an explicit and inclusive shape—and a name.

We know that the challenge of finding an alternative to “anthropocentrism” has multiplied “centrisms” all over the map. Insisting that more than humans alone matter—that the “center” must be bigger, indeed far bigger, than us—we are offered ethical systems that focus on suffering or self-awareness, and so “center” on certain forms of consciousness in many, possibly all, other animals. Beyond these lie “*biocentrism*” (life-centered ethics) or “*ecocentrism*” (ecosystem-centered ethics), again in many varieties. Beyond these in turn lie Gaian ethics, where the whole Earth moves in its own right into the great circle of moral consideration.

Arguments between these views sometimes are taken to practically exhaust the field itself. Yet all of these views, whatever their divergences, take for granted a very specific set of theoretical demands. They all start from the supposition that the post-anthropocentric task is to expand the moral universe by highlighting some single feature, now supposed to be

more inclusive than anything just human, that can plausibly be argued to justify or “ground” moral status as such. In this sense they are all, as I put it, forms of *monocentrism*. We imagine larger and larger circles, but what lies within them and what justifies moral extension across them is supposed to be—of necessity—one sort of thing.

One problem, I argue, is that in an unnoticed but also almost tautological sense, this project remains ineradicably *human*-centered, despite its generous intentions. Not only is *our* standing never in question, but moral standing is extended to others by analogy to our own precious selves: to animals, maybe, on the grounds that they suffer as we do.

But here is the most fundamental worry: Can an ethic of relationship actually remain so monocentric, homogeneous, single-featured? Might we not even wonder whether monocentrism almost by definition militates *against* real relationship? The eco-theologian Thomas Berry has declared that the essential task of environmental ethics is “to move from a world of objects to a community of subjects.” Berry’s almost Buberian language of subject-hood is not much heard in the environmental ethics we know. The phrase may call us up short. A true community of subjects must be an interacting whole of distinctive, nonhomogenized parts, in which no one set of members arrogates to themselves alone the right to gate-keep or even, need, to welcome, however generously, moral newcomers. We are all “in” to start with. Thus Berry might be read as calling not merely for an alternative to anthropocentrism but for an alternative to the entire homogenizing framework of “centrism” itself. And this invitation, arguably, has very little to do with the received project of “expanding the circle” of moral consideration. What we actually need is a vision of multiple “circles,” including the whole of the world from the start.

What I propose to call *multicentrism* thus envisions a world of irreducibly diverse and multiple centers of being and value—not one single moral realm, however expansive, but *many* realms, as particular as may be, partly overlapping, each with its own center. Human “circles,” then, do not necessarily invite expansion or extension, but rather augmentation and addition. In a similar pluralistic vein, William James challenges us to imagine this world not as a *universe* but as a “*multiverse*,” and thus a world that calls for (and, we might hope, calls *forth*) an entirely different set of skills—even, perhaps, something more like improvisation and etiquette, once again, in the all-too-serious place usually accorded ethics. Certainly it would have to be a world in which etiquette is in play: where collective understandings are *negotiated* rather than devised and imposed, however sympathetically, by one group of participants on the others.

All of these themes, I believe, are emerging from a wide variety of work both within and outside academic environmental ethics. My own emerging emphasis on the responsiveness of the world, and correspondingly how much a responsive world can be reduced by unresponsiveness on the other side; Cheney's insistence on the constitutive role of what he calls "bioregional narrative," co-constituted between human and more-than-human; our mutual friend Tom Birch's argument for "universal consideration," according to which moral "consideration" itself must, of necessity, keep itself considerably and carefully open to everything (*there's* universality for you!). Many strands in ecofeminism, from a persistent and overdue attention to actual patterns and failures of human-animal relationships to Val Plumwood's incisive exposure of the whole seamy conceptual underpinnings of "centering," whether it be on and by males or Europeans or humans as a whole. Thomas Berry, David Abram, Gary Snyder, Paul Shepard, Sean Kane, and many others, cited and drawn upon in this paper, all speak of the human relation to nature in terms of *negotiation* and *covenant* rather than the philosophical unilateralism we have learned to expect.

There is a *movement* here, in short: much more than a collection of scattered, hard-to-categorize complaints and idiosyncratic, extraphilosophical views, but a shared, alternative vision of the world—and of the tasks of anything rightly called an "environmental ethic." "Multicentrism" is not the perfect name for it—the chapter explores this problem too—but for the moment I think it will have to do.

### De-Anthropocentrizing the World

One more conceptual renovation completes the alternative conceptual toolbox I have been advancing in this set of essays. To introduce it, we may begin by returning to the closing themes of "Before Environmental Ethics."

I argue, in that essay and elsewhere, that there is no leapfrogging the culture in thought, as if we could think our way to a thoroughly post-anthropocentric ethic from the very midst of a thoroughly anthropocentric culture. Thinking by itself will not get us out of this mess. In fact, we live in a dramatically "reduced" world in which our very ethics is implicated both as sometime agent of reduction (anthropocentrism, in its many guises, dismisses and devalues the natural world) and as one of its many *effects* (for what philosophy is more natural to "read off" a wholly humanized world?). In truth we cannot even begin to imagine what a truly nonanthropocentric ethic would be like. As I put it elsewhere:

A thoroughly humanized language; the commercially colonized imagination; even the physical settings in which the question of post-anthropocentrism comes up—all of these inevitably give our supposed post-anthropocentrism a profoundly and necessarily anthropocentric cast, though often enough, and naturally enough, well below the threshold of awareness.<sup>12</sup>

Whatever finally succeeds anthropocentrism will even not be called anything like “nonanthropocentrism.” Not-X, for any X, is simply a negation. The term itself is only a reflex of our present reaction, not a program but more like a hedged and partial form of refusal. Anthropocentrism’s successor will in fact be about *something else*—and, like any ethic, about something else in *particular*, one or a few of the infinity of possibilities always before us. But what can we say about it? How can we even get going? And what can philosophy—environmental ethics or any other part of philosophy—actually contribute?

It is already quite clear, I am sure, that in my view the task is emphatically *not* a matter of completing the systematization or cautious extension of the ethical systems we already happen to have.

Today we are too used to that easy division of labor that leaves ethics only the systematic tasks of “expressing” a set of values that is already established, and abandons the originary questions to the social sciences. The result, however, is to incapacitate philosophical ethics when it comes to dealing with values that are only now entering an originary stage. Even when it is out of its depth, we continue to imagine that systematic ethics . . . is the only kind of ethics there is. We continue to regard the contingency, open-endedness, and uncertainty of “new” values as an objection to them, ruling them out of ethical court entirely, or else as a kind of embarrassment to be quickly papered over with an ethical theory.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, however, the situation of environmental ethics, at least, calls for something entirely different, or so I claim. Here we stand at an originary stage, and the challenge is not so much to discover or report or defend a kind of ethic that already exists, but to construct or reconstruct something far more ambitious and new. If values co-evolve with entire cultural systems, the co-evolution of new values is more like a cultural *project* than any form of philosophical discovery.

Philosophical method, then, along with our conceptual toolbox, must be revised and repointed. Though we continue to imagine that the true virtues of an ethical philosopher are the all too familiar precision, lucidity, literalness, seriousness, and theoretical unity—all good, systematic virtues—the truth is that at stages closer to the beginning, to the moments of origin, the appropriate style and standards are closer to the opposite, to the genuinely youthful. Here we can only be exploratory, experimental, unsystematic, open-ended, imaginative, metaphorical.<sup>14</sup> In ethics at such a formative stage, virtues for system-*making* or -remaking are required: improvisation, curiosity, risk taking, susceptibility. Inventiveness is key; a willingness to follow out unexpected lines of thought; and multicentric pluralism: welcoming multiple voices, expecting and encouraging them, quite likely speaking in multiple voices oneself. Etiquette, as Cheney and I argue, is crucial: that is, the reconstitution and deepening of multiple relationships, and the exploration of new possible relationships. Art, not science. Genuine experiments, open-ended, in our own persons, and perhaps over lifetimes.

We must also take the project of “reconstruction” in its absolutely most literal sense. To say it again: the key thing, the unacknowledged bulk of the problem, on my view, is not the ideology, not some sort of philosophical mistake that inappropriately privileging can somehow “refute” but rather anthropocentrism’s underlying, cultural preconditions, its own quite literal “environment”: the pervasive embodiment and ongoing self-reproduction of the ever-more-thoroughly humanized world that underlies and underwrites it. It is here that change work is most urgently needed—and is most inviting and in some places already well underway. Following out this line of thought, the character of the actual built world figures more and more centrally. I propose therefore to shift the conceptual focus from anthropocentrism to what I call anthropocentrization, and correspondingly from somehow “refuting” anthropocentrism or advancing nonanthropocentrism to literally rebuilding—or, more exactly, *de-anthropocentrizing*—the world.

This is the thrust of “De-Anthropocentrizing the World: Environmental Ethics as a Design Challenge” (Chapter 6 in this book).

Tomorrow belongs to the designers. Tomorrow belongs to those who are beginning to remake our ways of living, yes, and of eating, building, celebrating, keeping time, sharing a world with other creatures. [I] offer here a philosophical prolegomenon to their work, then, and more: a philosophical claim to it. Here lies a different kind of invitation to

philosophy, a different kind of philosophical dialectic and task: “breaking the spell of the actual” not in the service of some already-theorized post-anthropocentric alternative, but precisely in the service of finding our way to it.<sup>15</sup>

And the essay goes on to advance actual proposals for remaking the culture: new kinds of architecture, of agriculture, of music-making and art; even new, or re-understood, holidays.

De-anthropocentrizing re-designers are already seriously at work. Large-scale and inventive “cultural tinkerers” such as Stewart Brand, for example, with his plans for ten-thousand-year clocks and other ways of inviting us to live in a longer—indeed vastly longer—“Now,” much as, he says, the first Apollo photographs of Earth from Moon invited us to live in a much larger “Here.” They became icons of global awareness out of a more parochial time—a function Brand also energetically promoted (*before* Apollo, which he declares was worth every penny of its (then) \$25 billion cost just for that one photo) and still promotes. And so too, for Brand, our cultural nearsightedness, our self-reduction to the purview of a few moments or the next business quarter, is most fundamentally a *design problem*, not an invitation to begin by rethinking our philosophical categories. We need to devise and create cultural forms that lengthen our view.

Multiply this approach many times over, vary its goals to speak to every aspect of our narrowed and hyper-anthropocentrized world, and you have a new and wild vision of the possibilities for what currently takes itself to be a small academic speciality. Reconnecting with animals; re-designing neighborhoods for contact, maximizing the margins and “edges” where encounters are more likely; honoring and deepening “mixed community”; re-localizing food-growing; re-contextualizing the old holidays within the great cycles of light and dark, and generating new holidays as well (imagine that: suppose we invented an insistently *celebratory* environmentalism) . . . here we have not only an entirely unexpected and surely far more compelling and inviting cultural program than environmental philosophy offers at present, but also a radical path to the reconstruction of environmental philosophy itself.

### Environmental Education

We know that all is not well in the schools. What is puzzling is that, even so, environmentalists have so readily acquiesced in—indeed have plumped hard for—the institutionalization of “environmental education,”

a new subject that, entirely predictably, quickly became human-centered in both its epistemological orientation and its normative assumptions, not to mention firmly anchored within the managerial structures of school itself: preset curricula, testable and technical skills, the works. School as we know it is a leading standard-bearer and exemplification of both anthropocentrism and, more pointedly, anthropocentrization. “Literacy,” for instance, in the form of the widely promoted goal of “ecological literacy,” the excuse for it all, is clearly a schoolish skill. But should it not make us a little uneasy to remember that pretty much the only people who have so far managed to live sustainably on this earth have been *illiterate*? David Abram provocatively argues that the very phonetic alphabet, of all things, is a prime agent of anthropocentrization, cutting us off from the voices of the more-than-human all around us. We need to have more doubts.

My first essay in this area was “Instead of Environmental Education,”<sup>16</sup> a kind of companion and follow-up to “Before Environmental Ethics,” indeed arriving at much the same place. The impetus and energy for reconnection, for love for the Earth, I argue, primarily lies *outside* of school: in the life of the family, community, and ideally the practice of a whole society, as well as in its ways of building, growing food, celebrating, foraging, and playing and dying. This is where the *idea* is a set of practices that school, at its best can augment and support but cannot create on its own out of whole cloth. “Environmental education” cannot somehow succeed by itself, any more than stand-alone ethical reconceptions, as if a philosophical reorientation could ground all others. *Both* require systematically transformed cultural practices. In such a transformed world, teaching can be dynamite. In the world as we know it, teaching can still provoke and unsettle and suggest—I sketch some ways to do this, too—but cannot turn the corner on its own.

This challenge, and puzzle, is also close to our own everyday practice, since most environmental philosophers are themselves university teachers. As a teacher I am constantly challenged to rethink my pedagogy along the lines of my unfolding environmental philosophy—a challenge indeed, as environmental philosophy in my view diverges ever farther from the sort of “content area” that fits most readily with the traditional conception of teaching as the transfer of information. Environmentalism in my thinking is taking a very different direction—but how then to teach it? Even for more mainline environmental ethics, the challenge arises. Almost by necessity, school cuts us off from the experience of a larger world: from natural rhythms, natural beings, more-than-human flows of knowledge and inspiration. In fact, we could hardly design a *worse* setting for environmental education. What to do?

“What If Teaching Went Wild?” (Chapter 7 in this book) is the beginning of my answer. I begin by echoing the above set of concerns—the need for something vastly more ambitious than environmental education—and then turn quickly to the classroom teacher, firmly situated within school and our times. Us, after all. Can teaching “go wild”—can we begin to reconnect—even here? I argue that we can. Indeed I argue that it may even be possible to make a foil of school’s hyper-humanized setting to this very end: we can force anthropocentrism to reveal itself, in silhouette as it were, and to begin to draw forth alternatives not merely “somewhere else” but right in the very belly of the beast. But the required pedagogy is much more personally demanding and unnerving than the usual sorts of pedagogical innovations.

To be willing to remake the very space of a classroom, to invite a kind of more-than-human wildness into a space that started out so neat, bodiless, wholly anthropocentrized, and in control, you must be attentive in a bodily way to the very shape and feel of space itself. . . . You yourself must experience the human/other-than-human boundary as more permeable than our culture teaches us it is.<sup>17</sup>

In the end the advice is practical: students end up eating flowers, combing the room for spiders, and even rediscovering their own selves as animal—for the great wild world is, in at least one important sense, *right here*. Not incidentally, you get a sense here for what a multicentric environmental etiquette might look like in entirely achievable practice. Even, after all, in school!

### Farther Afield

The last two essays in this book range farther afield—through the evolution-creation debate, and then, of all places, into outer space—with the same set of concerns and conceptual tools.

In January of 2003 my biologist colleague Gregory Haenel invited me to co-lead his course studying evolution in mainland Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands. The course begins on the mainland coast of Ecuador, with its rain forests and ragged sandstone promontories, where the great oceanic currents last brush land before angling out across 700 miles of water to those tiny volcanic islands on the equator, another kind of edge. All of the life that colonized the Galapagos had to fly or swim or float there, most of it from here. Our students did their forest

and shore plant and animal inventories, waded out into the surf to toss in a variety of seeds to see which might have a chance of floating, built up their hypotheses of what they might find on the Islands.

Then we went to see. So many stunning, unique, immensely trusting animals. Days spent traipsing over the bare lava or through thick brush; nights seasick on the small boat on the open sea, examining the logbooks in which previous guests express all kinds of thoughts, profound doubts as well as deep appreciation; arguing with Greg into the wee hours in our little cabin—I too was provoked. I came home realizing that even here, even at the place of Darwinism's own origins, there is a kind of creativity at work not captured by the familiar mechanistic metaphors of traditional Darwinism. There are other ways to think about adaptation—there is more room to recognize spontaneity, improvisation, intelligence—within Darwinism itself. But this is certainly no brief for Creationism either, which simply does not engage the complex interrelations and dynamics of life also so evident here (and, as Greg always insisted, in fact evident *everywhere* to the trained eye).

Even the current, seemingly a priori standoff between evolution and creationism may shortly yield to a quite different set of antagonists, as a vision of a far more dynamic, catastrophic, and perhaps also short-lived Earth history is coming into view with, of course, its own characteristic pattern of insights and oversights. The Great Mystery once again eludes us.

Thus my essay “Galapagos Stories” (Chapter 8 of this book), an attempt to recast the evolution debate toward, once again, a deeper love for the Earth itself and a deeper appreciation for its dynamism. We are not, in fact, in the end-game of a battle to the death between a goliath called “Evolution” and another called “Creation.” It may be that the real challenge of our time is very different: to find more productive and revealing ways to speak to the impulses that drive both, and newly emerging alternatives too. Again—we live in ordinary times.

Chapter 9 concludes this collection by going up to, and probably over, another sort of radical edge. It pays to remember that it was the space program that gave us our first true vision of Earth as a single, fragile whole. Maybe it is no accident that the first Earth Day so closely followed the first Moon landing. Likewise, the continuing and possibly soon-to-be-reinvigorated space program opens philosophical doors that have barely yet even been imagined. We are already engaged in deep space exploration that frames not just the Earth as a single whole, but the entire solar system, or even larger wholes. Profound challenges to established ways of thinking—now including environmentalism itself—arise once again, as we begin to recognize ourselves not merely as Earthlings but as “Solarians,” or maybe “plain cosmic citizens.”

For one thing, the vast horizons of space offer a sort of express trip beyond anthropocentrism—not so easy a voyage to get off, either physically or conceptually. (Test case: what were/are your reactions when you realize(d) that this book’s cover photo is in fact from Mars?) We are also reminded that Earth’s “environment” is not a closed system. It may turn out that we are only a local corner of a cosmic ecosystem. How would our systems of Earth-centered ethics, themselves only recently and so very laboriously won, look then? If, on the other hand, life is rare in the universe, maybe it is our very own task to spread it to the stars. Could we even imagine genetically engineered living forms, trees maybe, inhabited by myriads of still others, pushed by the vast “solar sails” already being tested—giant wooden sailing ships again going forth to unknown adventure? How will environmental philosophy, or its successors, rise to this challenge?

You see, anyway, that thinking about space may lead us to contemplate unexpected provocations well beyond environmentalism itself, not to mention a return to (hu)manned space exploration in, perhaps, a wildly different key. Happy to think ourselves at the very edge of radicalism in ethics, we may still be unprepared for the sheer spaciousness of the philosophical challenges posed by “space.” How can we assume, for example, that an Earth-centered ethics is somehow, by the end of the line, as inclusive as ethics can get? Suppose environmental ethics itself is only a station on the way to somewhere else? Thus a book that begins with a chapter called “Before Environmental Ethics” ends, in a sense, with the question of what comes *after* environmental ethics.

But then too: might not environmental philosophy also make its own distinctive contribution to this most momentous of reconceptions, as humans imagine stepping off the home planet in earnest? If the exploration of space may transform environmental philosophy, so environmental philosophy may also transform the exploration of space, again in real and deeply engaging ways. This too is part of our task, our challenge, and the fascination of our times and work. I don’t say that any of it is probable. In fact, nothing is particularly probable once we are thinking out a few centuries, let alone a millennium or two. But it is *possible*, aye—and who would have thought it? Marinate space exploration in eco-philosophy for a few centuries, and who knows what either one will end up looking like. The only safe bet is that we are in for a wild ride.

## Notes

1. “Beyond Intrinsic Value: Pragmatism in Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics* 7 (1985), pp. 321–39, reprinted in *Environmental Prag-*