

POST-SECULAR NATURE: Principles and Politics

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Introduction

This article argues that nature can and should properly be understood as sacred. Obviously, 'nature' and 'sacred' will need careful treatment. My starting-point to this end is a contrast between two modes of thinking and/or being. Briefly put, it goes as follows.¹ The first mode, *monist essentialism*, is characterised by discourse² that is monist and (as we shall see) what effectively amounts to the same thing, universalist. It entails and supports the pursuit of a presumptively exhaustive theoretical explanation of all significant phenomena and discounts any resulting problems of reflexivity and thus regress as either soluble or trivial. Such a pursuit may be most clearly evident in epistemological and methodological terms, but the commitment driving it is metaphysical.

In contrast, the mode of *relational pluralism* accepts contingency, including its own, as ineliminable. It entails perspectives which, being relational, are plural, and vice-versa. Plural, that is, in at least two ways: any perspective, being, by definition, situated, cannot exhaust other possible or actual perspectives; and internally, a perspective requires, at an absolute minimum, a perceiver and a perceived.³ Now the corresponding intellectual practice rejects the goal of objectively true universal knowledge, but it does not thereby necessarily result in the arbitrariness or mere subjectivity that realist assumptions about truth present as the only alternative.

Obviously these two modes are not of equal hegemonic power. Both politically and intellectually, monist essentialism has dominated the 'West' for at least a millennium, and that dominance is now, through the neo-imperialism of globalisation, worldwide. Its primary carrier for most of that time has been religious, i.e., monotheistic; only recently and incompletely has it also been secular, through the interlocking modernist empires of techno-science, capital and the state.⁴ Relational pluralism has persisted, however, as a minority view, intellectually articulated in modern times by Friederich Nietzsche, William James, Max Weber, Isaiah Berlin and Paul Feyerabend, among others. (Its clearest contemporary expressions, in my opinion, have been those of Barbara Herrnstein Smith.)⁵

It is important to realise that the contrast I have drawn is not exhausted by the difference between scientific realism or objectivism, on the one hand, and relativism or social constructionism on the other. It is true, and important, that the latter contains the discursive resources for relational pluralism where the former virtually bans it. But both parties can be found practising monist essentialism, whether the universal grand narrative *explanans* is material (i.e., biology and ultimately physics) or social/cultural (the postmodern trinity of class, gender and race, especially as modulated by ideology). On the culturalist side this involves an incoherence – whereby culture is held to be both a universal *and* itself a local cultural phenomenon – which has been clearly exposed by Tim Ingold.⁶

Scientific objectivists also share with the great majority of social constructionists an anthropocentric worldview that denies agency and value to

nonhuman nature. Human beings are held to be unique, and uniquely valuable, either in their ability to grasp the scientific truth or their status as culture-bearing, and especially linguistic, animals. Such hypostatisation of the linguistic conflates it with the discursive in order to render nature conveniently ‘mute’.⁷ The contrasting view is, of course, ecocentrism, which locates value and agency within nature as such, including, but not limited to, humanity: what David Abram aptly calls the “more-than-human world”.⁸

The vital point 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, because it recognises that the latter are, in all cases and respects, a subset of the open-ended, ongoing, embodied and embedded meanings that constitute life on Earth.⁹ Relational pluralism is thus necessarily (that is, within the parameters of this discourse) *ecocentric*. And conversely, recognizing the same effectively unbounded and therefore ultimately unmasterable field of more-than-human relations and perspectives as nature, ecocentrism is necessarily *pluralist*.¹⁰

The purpose of this preamble is to enable me to argue that the resulting ecopluralism (as I shall call it) includes a *post-secular sacrality*. My case is two-fold: (1) Substantively or theoretically speaking, insofar as true pluralism is ecological and true ecocentrism is pluralist, ecopluralism also ‘necessarily’ includes a spiritual dimension. And (2) there are also powerful political or normative reasons too for adopting an approach, in matters of ecopluralist concern, which can be most neutrally described as post-secular. Without assuming that a clean break is possible between principle and strategy, I shall try to take these in turn.

Nature and the Sacred

“Nature”, as Raymond Williams famously observed, is one of the most complex words in the English language.¹¹ As with any word, and *a fortiori* important ones, its meanings hinge on what they exclude, and in this case the contrasting pole has long been what is now usually called “culture”, which is reserved for human beings. In recent years, as part of the environmental/ecological movement, efforts to develop a more inclusive understanding of nature – one which undermines the enormous privilege attached to the cultural pole of the dualism – have gathered pace. (One of the most important recent contributions has been that of Ingold.¹²) I hope it will suffice to say here that the sense of “nature” I intend includes but vastly exceeds humanity; hence, “more-than-human”. Lest that become meaninglessly broad by excluding nothing as unnatural, I would add a rider from David Wiggins’s definition of “wild” as not “that which is free of all trace of our interventions...but as that which has not been entirely instrumentalized by human artifice...”¹³ Such a concept of nature does not divide humans from non-humans but crosses both, no longer foundational, categories.

By “spiritual” (which I take to be effectively cognate with “sacred”), I do *not* mean the contrary of “material”: a very old trap that is a Platonic-Christian ancestor of, and continuing presence in, the notoriously destructive Cartesian division between “subjective” and “objective”. Rather it should be understood to refer to what follows from more-than-human contingency, namely the *ultimately ineffable nature* of everything.¹⁴ As Montaigne observed, with a strikingly non-modernist conclusion, wonder “is the foundation of all philosophy; inquiry, its way of advancing; and ignorance its end.”¹⁵ Once we abandon the unattainable and destructive fantasy of a “view from nowhere”,¹⁶ we are left with varying degrees and modes of participation

in the world – or, better, worlds – among an effectively infinite number of other agents and agenda. These worlds, including “ours”, can therefore never be exhausted, finally or comprehensively explained, or completely mastered. This entails an ultimate mystery which constitutes the source and terminus of all meaning and value, which I also therefore take it to be at the very heart of both the sacred and, in its ecological aspect, not so much “wilderness” as “the wild”.¹⁷ As such, it vastly exceeds any particular use-values and purposive programmes, including not only those of demystification, however they might be judged to have succeeded in their limited specific circumstances, but also those trying to use that mystery for particular spiritual (individual) or religious (collective) purposes.¹⁸

The matter is thus complicated by the fact that key parts of certain major religions are intended, *per impossibile*, to limit and control, asymptotically, the spiritual mystery that is central to their formation. (I am not referring to the practices of any particular individuals, which cannot simply be deduced from the discourses to which they subscribe.) Max Weber put his finger on the key point in this context: a single God establishes a putative monopoly of meaning giving rise to the belief that “one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.”¹⁹ Thus in Christianity and Islam, the monotheistic religions par excellence, worship of the ultimate mystery of God became inextricably entangled with the promise, through His word as interpreted by theological experts, of ultimate mastery of the world. (I exclude Judaism insofar as it specifies Yahweh as the sole God *for Jews*.) Successfully institutionalised, monotheism was thus a massive contribution to a putatively rationalised and ordered world,²⁰ as well as paving the way for a scientific programme promising complete material mastery unconstrained by spiritual mystery – in human interests, of course (actually the particular and narrow interests of some humans).

Secularism vs. the Sacred

The Abrahamic religions unintentionally paved the way for secularisation (however incompletely and unevenly) because ultimately, the crucial aspect of monotheism is not its theism but its monism: a *single* reference-point, whether spiritual or material, but necessarily universal. Why so? Because if there is only one such principle or truth, or God, then it or He must, by definition, obtain everywhere without competition from another such one or more. And conversely, if a truth or God is universal, there cannot be anywhere (in the most comprehensive possible sense) where it, or He, does not hold good; if there are any exceptions, then it or He is “merely” local, contingent, etc.

This demand means that the putatively sole ultimate truth must be correctly promulgated and exceptions (which, of course, there will be) are detected and punished; and in order to ensure this, a caste of licensed interpreters must therefore be maintained. In short, the door is open, in Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s words, to “intellectual/ political totalitarianism (the effort to identify the presumptively universally compelling Truth and Way and to compel it universally)...”²¹

As its historians have repeatedly shown, modern science developed in direct historical, social and intellectual descent from theistic religion.²² And as Paul Feyerabend pointed out (for which he was vilified by its acolytes), science constitutes the *de facto* religion of modernity.²³ “Reason” has replaced revelation, and “the truth” or “reality” God; but ultimately, these are not essential changes, and the logic, so to speak, remains the same: first controlling and/or killing the wild, and then latterly, in conjunction with scientists’ corporate and political sponsors, commodifying it. So too does the effect, uncomfortably delineated by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno:

as the programme whose ideal “is the system from which all and everything follows” undertakes “the subjugation of nature without which spirit does not exist,” its inadmissible irrationality “turns it into an instrument of rational administration by the wholly enlightened as they steer society toward barbarism.”²⁴

Integral to this process is a series of value-laden and gendered dualisms constituting, in Val Plumwood’s term, a “master mentality”.²⁵ The effect is to actively *convert* nature from a lived as well as living experience – sensuous, multiplicitous, perspectival – into the purely quantitative and inert stuff which Galilean, Cartesian and Newtonian natural philosophy, in an apparently dispassionate and disinterested observation, posits it to *be*.²⁶ (Some New Age appropriations notwithstanding, quantum and post-quantum physicists render the madness of their speculations safe for scientific modernism by confining them to extremely narrow experimental and theoretical contexts.)

Of course, the historical process has been considerably more complicated. For example, since the nineteenth century there has been an increasingly significant contribution to the modern formation of which science is such a key part by secular humanists trying to resist and, in effect, replace institutionalised religion. In so doing, Mary Midgley has observed, “they have set up a form of anthropolatry that is every bit as superstitious, as arbitrary and as over-confident as any of the religions they wanted to avoid.” (As she adds, this “unreal exaltation of Man has played a key part in bringing us to our present environmental crisis.”)²⁷ That is not surprising; the new secular discourse’s fundamental mode, which I have identified as essentialist monism, carried on in direct continuity with, and alongside, its theistic ancestor. Nor is its co-existence with the ostensibly levelling discourse of neo-Darwinianism and evolutionary psychology, in which “we are all animals now”, an anomaly. Anthropocentrism is preserved by exalting humanity as the only animal who knows the truth, or Truth, about its own evolution – indeed, the animal which (having apparently already shown such prowess) is now ready to shoulder “the intelligent species’ burden” of genetically directing its own future evolution.²⁸

Horkheimer and Adorno took their lead from Weber’s identification of the instrumentalist, utilitarian and bureaucratic “disenchantment of the world” as the authentic hallmark of modernity. Insofar as postmodernity is centered on a crisis of legitimacy for the narratives of modernity, it has included attempts, to quote Zygmunt Bauman, at “a re-enchantment of the world that modernity had tried hard to disenchant.... The war against mystery and magic was for modernity the war of liberation leading to the declaration of reason’s independence.... [The] world had to be de-spiritualised, de-animated: denied the capacity of the subject.”²⁹

I hardly need add that such attempts have included inept re-assertions of subjectivity and idealism – whether of the New Age kind or recrudescent “traditional”, tending to fundamentalist – as against scientific materialism, rather than questioning the dualism itself. As Abram has argued, “by prioritizing one or the other, both of these views perpetuate the distinction between human ‘subjects’ and natural ‘objects,’ and hence neither threatens the common conception of sensible nature as a purely passive dimension suitable for human manipulation and use.”³⁰

The dualism of “spirit” vs. “matter” is thus complicit in the secular disenchantment of nature, and thence its rational (“scientific”) commodification. Clearly, by implication, the true and therefore potentially subversive complement of essentialist monism is “*pluralism*: multiplicity, not mere duality...”³¹ Similarly, Alkis Kontos points out that “Plurality versus one-dimensionality constitutes the crux of the matter.... The characteristics of the anthropologically-historically specific idea of an

enchanted world are: mystery and a plurality of spirits”.³² In Weber’s and Isaiah Berlin’s closely related thought, this plurality appears as agonistic axiological and moral principles – ambiguously, or imperfectly, secularised – which resist reduction to one overarching principle, complete calculability, and thence mastery.

There is also anthropological evidence that reaching experientially beyond the purely social and human results in encountering a realm that is at once natural and spiritual in a way that is pre- and post-Cartesian (as well as Platonist and Christian).³³ This realm, as Kontos says, is what Weber referred to as enchanted: the multiple, sensuous and particular “nature...without which spirit does not exist”.³⁴ I should add that while properly acknowledging such a realm requires abandoning attempts at domination, it decidedly does not rule out exploration and negotiation. But the paradigmatically appropriate response to an enchanted world is *wonder*.

Wonder

Ronald Hepburn has perceptively discussed wonder, showing that it overlaps with but is not reducible to theistic, metaphysical or aesthetic experience. Nor is it merely a prelude to fuller knowledge. (People who insist upon trying to transcend wonder before an *Urphanomen* through explanation, said Goethe, are “like children who, after peeping into a mirror, turn it round directly to see what is on the other side.”)³⁵ Rather, wonder is “notably and essentially other-acknowledging”, with “a close affinity between the attitude of wonder itself – non-exploitative, non-utilitarian – and attitudes that seek to affirm and respect other-being.”³⁶

What Hepburn calls “existential wonder” results from “the sense of absolute contingency”: what I have identified as central to relational pluralism.³⁷ It is also pluralist in its resistance to a monistic reduction – whether “upward” to God *or* “downward” to Gaia. As Brian Baxter writes, “One cannot regard life as something wonderful and yet be indifferent to its... manifestations, for life only exists in its concrete manifestations.”³⁸ The direct affinity between wonder and intrinsic value, as opposed to instrumental value, is no coincidence. There is also a parallel in another way. The objection that wonder cannot be noninstrumental because there is a wonderer who “benefits” fails for the same reason that the presence of a valuer fails to undermine the possibility of intrinsic value; in both cases, the “pure” bench-mark is a chimera. As Baxter also remarks, “The important point here is that this quality of being wonderful is attributed by people to the things themselves. It is not regarded as a purely subjective reaction.”³⁹ In his analysis of “four forms of ecological consciousness”, John Rodman has also argued that a religio-aesthetically motivated preservationism is not the same, nor potentially as effective, as an ecological sensibility in which a sense of wonder and awe plays an integral role.⁴⁰

Strategy

I mentioned earlier that there are also profoundly practical reasons for adopting a post-secular outlook. One is what Roy A. Rappaport rightly summed up as “the absolute ubiquity of religion, however defined”.⁴¹ Thus the attempt to banish it from public discourse will only undermine the intelligent and informed collective effort needed to distinguish pathological from sane kinds, and turn the whole subject over to fundamentalists who have no interest in doing so. (The cool critical reception of recent books by the so-called New Atheists seems to signal an increasing and welcome awareness of this point.)⁴²

Another reason is to make it possible to recognise and address contemporary capitalism as what, in this context, it actually is: a crypto-religion.⁴³ Many if not most of its strongest supporters, both of consumerism and of managerialism, worship the modern anthropocentric god of Progress, and subscribe with what is *in effect* a religious fervour to the doctrine of economic growth without end as the sole means to its realisation. These are ultimate values, ungroundable in their own terms as rational or scientific without question-begging; so to accept these adherents' self-description as "rational" uncritically is wrong-headed and debilitating.

Conversely, when people value nature strongly enough to act to protect it, they also do so in a way that is in effect religious – that is, again in terms of their ultimate values – and the effect is correspondingly stronger than mere respect. It *has* to be, in order to resist the all-too-available blandishments of utilitarian appeals to rational self-interest. That is why acolytes of *homo oeconomicus* call such opponents "sentimental", "nostalgic", "emotional" and other, not coincidentally, gendered epithets: in a word, "irrational". Therefore, just as recognition of the intrinsic value of the more-than-human natural world (in both theory and practice) is needed to prevent an all-too-human lapse into short-term instrumental exploitation, so too is a shared respect for the dimension of that value which is appropriately and validly described as sacred. It is an irreplaceable bulwark against the capture of nature, and the death of the wild, at the hands of scientific and corporate naturalists.

With Friends Like These...?

Secularism has been so integral to the modern programme that it remains a tenet even among some of modernity's sternest critics. A good example is the late Richard Rorty. Whatever the infelicities of his arguments and prescriptions (ably identified by Herrnstein Smith),⁴⁴ no one could doubt that his basic position is anti-realist and anti-foundationalist and, to that extent at least, "postmodern". Yet Rorty made no secret that he would like to banish religious/spiritual discourse not only from public life but altogether, if he could: a position that is thoroughly modernist in its scope, self-confidence and monism, and indeed, its superstitious fear of religion as universally and necessarily a "conversation-stopper". (The irony of this attempt to truncate discussion is surely obvious.)

Even among those claiming to defend the natural world against its despoilers, we find many speaking, to coin a phrase, with a forked tongue. One is Kate Soper, whose socialist and moderately green opposition to capitalism overlooks the latter's aggressive secularism and the reason for it: disenchanting the world is a fundamental prerequisite to exploiting and commodifying it. (As Gregory Bateson remarked more than three decades ago, if you see the world as simply yours to exploit "*and* you have an advanced technology, your likelihood of survival will be that of a snowball in hell", to say nothing of other species'.)⁴⁵ In *What Is Nature?*, Soper's measured approach culminates in a paean, couched in nineteenth-century rhetoric, to scientism – "We cannot seek to protect nature by pretending to forms of belief that have been exploded by the march of science and technology" – and a rant against "irrational forms of superstition". Just so is resistance to, say, the commercial development of genetically modified organisms described by the American and British governments and their agents in the World Bank and elsewhere.

Soper's token acknowledgement of the pernicious effects of nature's desanctification is immediately followed by her identification of any and all "religious" morality with "the coercion of fear and superstition", and "true" secular

morality with “liberation” from such coercion – as if “they” (all in the past, of course) had experienced nothing else but superstitious coercion and fear, while nowadays “we” suffer from none whatsoever. The job is then completed by an equally sweeping assumption that reverence for nature is necessarily misanthropic.⁴⁶

Soper is not alone on the political left in this attitude. Murray Bookchin, founder of the school of social ecology, inveighed against reverence for nature in lurid rhetorical detail, charging it not only with superstition and mystification but authoritarianism, fascism and (inevitably) Nazism.⁴⁷ Bookchin's longstanding identification of market and commodity capitalism as the single biggest enemy of both nature and humanity only makes the crippling inconsistency of his own reliance on the rationalist-realist scientism that constitute one of its mainsprings more extraordinary.

It is revealing of the pervasiveness of secularist ideology among intellectuals that even one of Bookchin's most acute critics, Robin Eekersley, seems to share the same blind spot. Thus her perception that “Conforming to the requirements and modes of rationality of the dominant culture has rarely served the interests of diverse minority cultures” (to say nothing of nonhuman nature-cultures) coexists with a rejection of any spiritual defence against instrumentalism, since “it would seem more appropriate nowadays to find a secular (and scientifically informed) public justification for government action to protect the environment”.⁴⁸ Yet not to belabour the obvious, secular scientific discourse is a major part of contemporary dominant culture.

That ecocentrism has been smeared by association with Nazism by Anna Bramwell, an open neo-liberal, and Luc Ferry, an aggressively secular humanist, is not surprising.⁴⁹ And such portentous and illogical nonsense as “Deep ecologists and Nazis are alike in their rejection of ordinary objectivism” is beneath serious consideration.⁵⁰ Michael Zimmerman has contributed more thoughtful essays on the subject, whose starting-point is that “while the fact that some National Socialists promoted a perverted ‘religion of nature’ must be taken into account today, that fact should not be allowed to discredit all contemporary attempts... to recover a sense of the sacred dimension of the cosmos.”⁵¹ But as Plumwood notes, in a typically acute response, Zimmerman's subsequent identification of Nazism with nature-oriented irrationalism (like that of Ferry) ignores “the well-documented complicity of the worst aspects of Nazism with modernism and rationalism”, in which the central natural ideology was provided not by ecology but biology. “At present,” she points out, “the danger from deep ecology's political naivete comes from quite a different direction, from capture by the [neo-]liberal right rather than the fascist right.”⁵²

Recently, Zimmerman has taken up the Promethean neo-Hegelianism of one of the leading theoreticians of the New Age movement, Ken Wilbur, with unfortunate effects for any defence of the natural world.⁵³ Wilbur has severely criticised Deep Ecology, but his own “spiritual” project shares essentially the same goal – Self-realisation – as the commonest version of it, Ecosophy T.⁵⁴ As Richard Sylvan pointedly observed, such a goal “emerges direct from the humanistic Enlightenment; it is linked to the modern celebration of the individual human, freed from service to higher demands, and also typically from ecological restraints.”⁵⁵

How to (and how not to) Resacralize the Earth

I am not suggesting that post-secularism is the answer to ecocrisis, only that it is a legitimate and important part of one. Nor are the questions that it raises anything but complex and difficult; but that is not the same thing as insoluble. One basic point follows

from the enormous contribution of institutionalised monotheistic religion to the modern dynamic (capital plus techno-science plus the nation-state) that is driving ecological disaster.⁵⁶ Insofar as that is characterised by anthropocentric monism, the most hopeful and indeed realistic alternative involves social and institutional forms of ecological pluralism. By implication, any positive contribution from a post-secular sacred requires it to be *both ecological and pluralist as well*.⁵⁷

The difficulties of generalization must not be used to ban discussion of important subjects. In this context, then, and even allowing for many individual exceptions, the overall negative impact upon the Earth of religious monism, to date, seems clear. Nor is it surprising that such monism, with its transcendental universalism, should generate fear and contempt for the local, chthonic, embodied, dark, female, and subjective.

Yet among those apparently opposing it there are some – viz., Romantic Neo-pagans – who seem eager simply to reverse the polarity by exalting the latter terms over their dominant contraries. As I have already mentioned, this leaves the fundamental mode, a pseudo-dualistic monism, intact; so the destructive consequences too will remain untouched. Merely replacing the one true and universal God with a single hypostatized Nature fails to undermine the inherently anti-ecological logic of monist essentialism, and it thereby becomes an enemy of a dangerously disingenuous kind. (It doesn't ultimately matter whether this Nature is mystical or scientific.) As Tom Cheetham says,

‘resacralization’ of nature as a necessary condition for the solution of global and local environmental problems has much to recommend it *insofar as* it emphasizes the local, the timely, and the particular. Nevertheless, insofar as such a move grounds environmentalism in “Nature” conceived as an alternative absolute, it is misguided and dangerous for all the reasons that such claims to transcendent knowledge always are.⁵⁸

Nor does an attempt to replace God with a single Earth-mother goddess – as distinct from a pantheon, at least – promise anything but reactionary and counter-productive muddle, the result of an ancient essentialism sporting a newly gendered content.⁵⁹ But ecofeminism has a great deal to contribute to a pluralist, materialist and locally-engaged ecological spirituality.⁶⁰ What is needed is to encourage and strengthen people's nascent awareness and appreciation of life as sacred, and already existing practices which embody an according ethic of care:⁶¹ not an abstract Life, but embodied and embedded, in relationships, communities and specific places. As Sean Kane writes,

Wisdom about nature, that wisdom heard and told in animated pattern, that pattern rendered in such a way as to preserve a place whole and sacred, safe from human meddling: these are the concepts with which to begin an exploration of myth. Of these, the notion of the sanctity of place is vital. It anchors the other concepts.... Once the power of the place is lost to memory, myth is uprooted; knowledge of the earth's processes becomes a different kind of knowledge, manipulated and applied by man.⁶²

Dave Forman has made a related point: “Protection of a place is the bottom line. Excessive emphasis on the personal growth element is Me First!, not Earth First!”⁶³

Clearly, then, for that purpose a purely personal and private spirituality, however important as part of this process, cannot suffice. (It is in any case far too

vulnerable to “lifestyle” cooption, as shown by the cosy relationship between much of the New Age movement and consumer capitalism.) In order to be effective, a post-secular sacred must also be collective and social: if not exactly a religion, on account of its pluralism and localism, then a “collective spirituality”.

More than anyone else, Wilbur has developed New Age spirituality into a relatively sophisticated new ideology, freighted with a very old contempt for mere life-on-Earth. Zimmerman, apparently captivated nonetheless, has recently suggested that “material nature... is only one manifestation of a divine with infinite dimensions. A truly deep spirituality acknowledges the absolute depth of reality, a depth certainly not discernible in the world system of modern materialism (‘the web of life’)...”⁶⁴ Thus, at a stroke, the foundational opposition of subject/spirit and object/matter is cemented into place – glossed with an aura of that Californian dream, the transcendence of limits and total personal fulfillment – together with the automatic equation of transcendence with “spiritual” (good: liberating) and immanence with “material” (bad: limiting). The “web of life” is, of course, relegated without discussion to the latter bag. But why is it assumed that lived life can have no spiritual dimension; that the latter must be transcendent? Just as the usual definition of “relativism” is that of realists, almost all contemporary definitions of “immanent” are those of transcendentalists, with transcendentalist assumptions. And these conspire (as Abram, quoted earlier, pointed out) with the scientific definition of the material as, apparently by definition, inanimate and nonspiritual. But materiality, as Plumwood writes, “is already full of form, spirit, story, agency, and glory.”⁶⁵

Radical Return to Roots

Such idealist and transcendentalist mystification is very damaging. As Kane points out, “all the work that various peoples have done – all the work that peoples must do – to live with the Earth on the Earth's terms is pre-empted by the dream of transcendence.”⁶⁶ Nor does it withstand intellectual scrutiny. As Hepburn has also emphasized, all the values resulting from the interactions that living entails, all the experiences realised thereby, “are essentially the result of a cooperation of man and non-human nature: the universe would not contain them, were it not for our perceptual-creative efforts, and were it not equally for the contribution of the non-human world that both sustains and sets limits to our lives.” Thus neither the pessimism of personal finitude nor the fantasy of infinite personal life are sustainable: “To realize that there is this cooperative interdependence of man and his natural environment checks the extreme of [both] by showing our earth-rootedness even in our aspirations. There is no wholly-other paradise from which we are excluded; the only transcendence that can be real to us is an ‘immanent’ one.”⁶⁷

However, there is also a danger in directly opposing transcendentalism. Renewing a sacred sense of life on Earth, or re-enchanting the world, is more a matter of articulating and encouraging an extant (or at the least, potential) sensibility and value rather than creating it *ex nihilo*. Being purposive and will-directed, a programme to institute re-enchantment – as distinct from an effort to create the conditions for enchantment: or better still, the realization of enchantment – can only end by betraying its goal.⁶⁸

Starting from Here

Some of the most promising resources for re-enchantment are in aboriginal religion. In Kane's words again, "As civilization feels its way forward to practices of living with the earth on the earth's terms, we are discovering the respect for nature demonstrated by archaic humanity".⁶⁹ It is true, of course, that the ancient world included some ecological devastation (despite being hampered by the lack of modern technology), and the same is true of indigenous peoples in recent times. Nonetheless, indigenous peoples have managed, on balance, to coexist sustainably with the natural world with considerably more success, and for a great deal longer, than have moderns; and a fundamental factor in this achievement was an Earth-oriented spirituality with practico-ethical implications which restrain unduly destructive practices. (It must be added, however, that another reason for their success was simply much lower numbers.) This fact makes the recent trend of attacking a straw-man called "the ecological Indian" suspiciously convenient for apologists of *homo oeconomicus*.⁷⁰ There are ecologies of the heart as well as mind, and they do make a difference.⁷¹

Nonetheless, there are at least two reasons for also engaging with existing mainstream religious discourses, notwithstanding their deep flaws and failures to date. One is that they are of such complexity and antiquity, and involve so many compromises with earlier formations, that arguably they all potentially contain resources for re-enchantment – or to put it ethically and normatively, they have what is needed (as the Dalai Lama has repeatedly maintained) for people to be good, including ecologically so. Second, and perhaps still more important, we must start from where we are.

This stipulation, however, is not as simple as it appears. On the one hand, it would be absurd to deny that tendentially monist and essentialist discourses, religious no less than any others, strongly influence our behaviour. On the other hand, as Bruno Latour puts it in the title of a work that makes this point, *We Have Never Been Modern*; in lived experience – including that of objectivists, modernists and scientists – agency refuses to observe Cartesian proprieties. For this reason, it should not be thought that I am covertly retaining a dualism, albeit inverted; strictly speaking, monism cannot actually be lived, but only preached and ineffectively, but damagingly, enforced.⁷²

Abram argues a closely parallel case in his work of ecological phenomenology, *The Spell of the Sensuous*. Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty, he reveals the processes by which abstraction requires re-interpretation (and its institutionalisation) of the experienced world of sensuous particulars. Some of the insights and arguments of ecofeminism move in the same direction. For example, Ariel Salleh points out that much of the caring and nourishing labour integral to sustainable ecological practice is already carried out, but unrecognised and untheorised.⁷³ In other words, in *practice*, to at least a significant extent, we all still effectively live as pagan and more precisely animistic pluralists.⁷⁴

The solution does not lie in reviving a quasi-Marxist notion of false consciousness, which remains irredeemably entangled in a teleologically monist discourse of Truth whose destructiveness I have already described. (Nor – although this certainly has its place – is it for us all to become Neo-pagans.) There is no space here for a detailed analysis but I would like to suggest that an engagement with extant religions which respects this *aporia* is possible through a pragmatic approach to their consequences in practice – relatively destructive vs. relatively creative – for the more-than-human world.

Of course, intense argument over what is really destructive or creative is unavoidable. For example, biotechnology will certainly continue to be portrayed by its

advocates as building upon and advancing “nature”. So the effort to expose such claims as self-interested and extremely implausible will also continue to be needed. (What kind of a world, including what kind of “nature”, is necessary to sustain biotechnological industry?) But such exposure cannot proceed, as in pre-Gramscian Marxism, on the charge that it is “ideological” as opposed to “real”. It must instead concentrate on the consequences for the spiritual-natural world that sustains us all. But that point too must be made rhetorically, rather than treated as self-evident.⁷⁵

Such a pragmatic approach would enable those working with extant religious discourses both to encourage aspects of which are effectively ecocentric and to criticize those which are harmfully anthropocentric. But it would also assist those who are trying to create new ways of encouraging and enabling reverence for nature. The only hopeful approach, in either case, is two-fold: a working “horizon” of nature as spiritual and spirituality as natural which includes, but is not limited to, religion; and an awareness of that dimension of nature not as a purely theoretical construct but as a living reality already reflected in practices, attitudes and values which need patient but urgent encouragement.

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NOTES

¹ For a more developed argument, see Curry 2003, 2007.

² By 'discourse' I mean both theory *and* practice, or both theoretical and material practice. This sense is late Wittgensteinian but I have borrowed it from Laclau and Mouffe 2001.

³ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for suggesting this point.

⁴ I have taken this analysis from Ekins 1992.

⁵ Herrnstein Smith 1988, 1997; see also Feyerabend 1987, Latour 1993, Viveiros de Castro 2005.

⁶ Ingold 2000, ch. 3.

⁷ See Curry 2007.

⁸ Abram 1997.

- ⁹ The work of Gregory Bateson has been seminal in developing this perspective in recent times. See also Harries-Jones 1995.
- ¹⁰ See Curry 2006: 108-13, and Curry 2007.
- ¹¹ Williams 1976.
- ¹² See Ingold 2000, ch. 3. Out of a large literature, see also Abram 1997 and my own discussion of ecocentrism in Curry 2006.
- ¹³ Wiggins 2000: 10.
- ¹⁴ Cf. William James 1958: 292-93 on the “ineffability” of mystical experience and Rudolph Otto 1950: ch. 4 on the “numinous” as a *mysterium tremendum*.
- ¹⁵ He adds: “Yes indeed: there is a kind of ignorance, strong and magnanimous, which in honour and courage is in no wise inferior to knowledge...” Montaigne 1991: 1165-66.
- ¹⁶ Thomas Nagel’s phrase.
- ¹⁷ Including, but more than, “wilderness”; after Evernden 1992 (himself drawing on Thoreau).
- ¹⁸ For a recent discussion see Rappaport 1999: 377-79.
- ¹⁹ Weber 1991: 139. Cf. Kontos 1994.
- ²⁰ For some of the historical consequences, see the excellent account in Fowden 1993.
- ²¹ Herrnstein Smith 1998: 179. Cf. Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 191-2: “This point is decisive: there is no radical and plural democracy without renouncing the discourse of the universal, and its implicit assumption of a privileged point of access to ‘the truth’, which can only be reached by a limited number of subjects.”
- ²² See, e.g., Henry 2002.
- ²³ Feyerabend 1978: 106-7.
- ²⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno 1994: 7, 39, 20.
- ²⁵ See Plumwood 1993, 2002.
- ²⁶ A more accurate term is that of Brennan 2000: “sadodispassionate”.
- ²⁷ Midgley 1997: 98.
- ²⁸ Fox 1995: 195.
- ²⁹ Bauman 1992: x; cf. Hassan 1992 and Gray 1995.
- ³⁰ Abram 1997: 67.
- ³¹ Viveiros de Castro 2004: 482.
- ³² Kontos 1994: 227, 226.
- ³³ See e.g. Willis 1999.
- ³⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno 1994: 39.
- ³⁵ Quoted in Hepburn 1984: 139.
- ³⁶ Hepburn 1984: 144, 145.
- ³⁷ Hepburn 1984: 140. The realization of absolute contingency is central to Buddhist discourse, including meditative practice, which is, of course, non-theistic.
- ³⁸ Baxter 1999: 67.
- ³⁹ Baxter 1999: 67.
- ⁴⁰ See Rodman 1983.
- ⁴¹ Rappaport 1999: 1.
- ⁴² E.g. Dawkins’s *The God Delusion* (2006) and Daniel C. Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell* (2007), critically reviewed in (e.g.) *The London Review of Books* (22.10.06), *The Guardian* (7.1.06 & 26.2.07), *The Independent* (21.1.06), *The Times Literary Supplement* (31.3.06) and *The New Yorker* (3.1.06).
- ⁴³ For a recent discussion of the religious roots of market economics, see Bigelow 2005.
- ⁴⁴ B.H. Smith 1997.
- ⁴⁵ Bateson 1972:462; italics in original (partly omitted).
- ⁴⁶ Soper 1995: 274-75, 277.
- ⁴⁷ See his polemic of 1995, entitled with his usual light touch.
- ⁴⁸ Eckersley 1998: 171, 178; on Bookchin, see Eckersley 1989.
- ⁴⁹ Bramwell 1989, Ferry 1995.
- ⁵⁰ Clark 1993: 45.
- ⁵¹ Zimmerman 1993: 213.
- ⁵² Plumwood 2000: 72; and v. Bauman 1989.
- ⁵³ Zimmerman 2000.
- ⁵⁴ For a critical discussion see my 2006: 73-81.
- ⁵⁵ Sylvan and Bennett 1994: 154; quoted by Katz 2000: 35.
- ⁵⁶ Ekins 1992.
- ⁵⁷ Cf. the excellent discussion in Plumwood 2002: ch. 10.

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- ⁵⁸ Cheetham 1993: 309.
- ⁵⁹ I have in mind here the work of Marija Gimbutas and Monica Sjoos. For an intelligent pluralistic counter-view, see Paris 1986.
- ⁶⁰ See Salleh 1997, Plumwood, 1998, 2002; cf. Curry 2000.
- ⁶¹ See e.g. Salleh 1997, Ruddick 1989; and the discussion in Curry 2006: 98-99.
- ⁶² Kane 1998: 50.
- ⁶³ Quoted by David Orton, personal communication.
- ⁶⁴ Zimmerman 2000: 191.
- ⁶⁵ Plumwood 2002: 226.
- ⁶⁶ Kane 1998: 255.
- ⁶⁷ Hepburn 1984: 181-82.
- ⁶⁸ See Curry 1999.
- ⁶⁹ Kane 1998: 14.
- ⁷⁰ See the excellent essay-review by Deloria 1999; also Hornburg 1998.
- ⁷¹ E.N. Anderson 1996.
- ⁷² I am grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this possible objection.
- ⁷³ Salleh 1997.
- ⁷⁴ On animism see Harvey 2006.
- ⁷⁵ See Laclau and Mouffe 2001, which is very much to the point in this context.