Why Political Ecology Cannot Let Go of Nature

Sean J. McGrath

Preview

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Overpopulation, climate change, genetic engineering, geoengineering, the mass extinction not only of nonhuman species but of indigenous human cultures and their languages—all of these dubious markers of humanprogress compel us to think nature anew. None of the familiar epithets apply. We must think nature in the way it is given to us to think it today. No longer is nature accessible to us as divine cosmos or eternally balancedcontainer of human life. Traditional preconceptions of nature have come to an end in the Anthropocene. We can no longer deny the finitude of the earth; we can no longer pretend that it will remain what it is for us now, that it is invulnerable to what we do.

The Anthropocene discloses not only the fragility of what Pope Francis calls "our common home,"[2] but the untenability of older ways of thinking about it. Bruno Latour goes so far as to say that we must now do without nature. He writes, "There is no harmony in this contingent cascadeof unforeseen events and there is no nature either—at least not in this sublunary realm of ours. But to learn how to situate human actions intothis geostory is not—such is the crucial lesson—to 'naturalize' humans either. No unity, no universality, no indisputability, no indefeasibility is to be invoked when humans are thrown in the turmoil of geostory."[3] The 'order of things' has dissolved in the Anthropocene. But Latour goes too far; nature still means and can continue to mean more than the "already

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[1] This paper is a revised version of Chapter One of my *Thinking Nature: An Essay in Negative Ecology* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

[2] Francis I, *Encyclical on Climate Change and Inequality: On Care for our Common Home* (Brooklyn and London: Melville, 2015).

[3] Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Six lecture on the Political Theology of Nature*, The Gifford Lectures, given in Edinburgh, 18-28 February 2013, accessed 1 August 2017, http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/downloads/GIFFORD-ASSEMBLED.pdf, 72.

out there now real."[4] Today, when the only promising prospect for the survival of humankind (which seems unable to imagine the end of the consumer-capitalist economy responsible for overheating the planet) appears to be geoengineering—transforming the earth into a sustainable- energy storage system, a giant battery—is it still meaningful to speak of nature at all? This is the first question we must consider, then. Is anything still to be thought by means of the term *nature*? Is nature as symbol really dead? Have we exhausted its significance and appeal? Or is the opposite the case? Has the "death of nature," proclaimed not only by Latour but by various environmental thinkers and journalists over the past two decades, not in fact precipitated the most lively discussion of nature we have seen since the beginning of the nineteenth century? The question concerning nature has never been more in the forefront of both public and academic discourse than it is now. The philosophy of nature has never been more relevant.

A certain sense of nature has died, no doubt. But nature is an overdetermined symbol. As such, it can survive the extinction of one or another of its senses. The question is, what does nature as a symbol still mean today? And what new meanings are emerging from this symbol in the Anthropocene? We will not answer this question by *constructing* a meaning for nature that promises to work in an age of seven billionhumans—of global consumerism and irreversible anthropogenic climate change. Constructing a meaning for nature in our current context would implicate us in pure idealism, render us dangerously out of touch with the level at which ideas are shaping history. We must, rather, look and see what senses of nature are alive for us and and could guide us toward the social and political transformations that must occur if humanity is to havea future on the earth.

What does it mean to call nature a symbol, and more specifically, an overdetermined, or, as I will develop it below, a hermeneutical symbol? All symbols are signs but not all signs are symbols. A sign stands for something that we can call, with Frege, its sense. Some human signs are context dependent and indicative, and not in essence different from the signals animals use to communicate with each other. Other signs, uniqueto the human animal, it seems, represent an indeterminate range of possible senses and have functions that are not limited by context. With

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[4] This is Bernard Lonergan's phrase for reality in the view of naïve realism. I have borrowed it here for different, but not entirely opposed, purposes. See, Bernard Lonergan, *Understanding and Being: The Halifax Lectures on Insight*, eds. Elizabeth A. Morelli andMark D. Morelli (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 106-107.

Ernst Cassirer, we call such signs symbols.[5] The way symbols trans-contextually evoke multiple senses is indicative of the distinct function they have in discourse. A sign *signals* by pointing directly by means of its univocal sense to the thing or state of affairs it represents: either in thepast, in the immediate present, or in the future; a sign *symbolizes*, however, by virtue of its plurivocity of sense and its trans-contextuality. The symbol references an indeterminate range of possible senses in an indeterminate range of possible contexts.

"Look at that storm coming." "Stop!" "Ethan! Take off your boots!" In such speech acts, we signal rather than symbolize. The language in these formulations designates them as signs; the words used inthese examples are used in a primarily indexical mode. Signaling is a complex form of animal communication that we have in common with other species. Indeed, that other animals signal is crucial to understanding the continuity between nonhuman-animal thought and human thought. Thebeaver slaps its tail to warn others of danger. Pavlov's dog drools when hecorrectly interprets the meaning of the bell's ringing, a signal that he has been trained to associate with the promise of food. The dog scratches the door to ask to be let in. The baby cries "Momma" when it wants to tell Daddy that he will not do. These examples of signs are characterised by their univocity and indexicality: each has one unambiguous sense that directly and contextually represents its referent. Signs are *contextually* meaningful, pointing as they do to a clear and concrete situation in which they have immediate significance. The proper response to a sign is usuallyaction of some kind.

Because symbols, however, are non-indexical and indirect, that is, trans-contextual, they can possess a plurivocity of sense that does notannul intelligibility but on the contrary, increases it. The crucifix does not simply represent the cross upon which Jesus was killed 2,000 years ago; it

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[5] See, Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1962), 31: "Symbols—in the proper sense of this term—cannot be reduced to mere signals. Signals and symbols belong totwo different universes of discourse: a signal is part of the physical world of being; a symbol is a part of the human world of meaning. Signals are 'operators'; symbols are 'designators.'" Even more apposite to the point we are making, see, Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 36: "A symbol is not only universal but extremely variable….A sign or signal is related to the thing to which it refers in a fixed and unique way….A genuine human symbol is characterised not by its uniformity but by its versatility. It is not rigid or inflexible but mobile." For a more elaborated discussion of Cassirer's distinction betweensign and symbol, see, Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*, Third Edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 53-78.

does, of course, represent that, but it stands also for a wide range of other things besides. It means redemption to some, oppression to others. Itsuggests sacrifice, suffering, love, the problem of evil, and more. It is animated by several meanings because it is not fastened to one. Its vagueness or multiple-intentionality is precisely the source of its power.[6]

Any word or image can be used, depending on communicative context, significatively or symbolically. Some symbols (hermeneutical symbols) are distinguished by their overdetermination by multiple senses. Other symbols, scientific symbols, are reduced by explicit definition and regulated logical usage to one univocal sense. H2O always means the substance that freezes at 0 degrees Celsius at sea level and boils at 100 degrees. The crucifix does not merely communicate, as all signs do, nor is its range of significance restricted, as are scientific symbols; it *expresses*. And what it expresses is not a concrete, singular referent, but a range of meanings offered to thought for the sake of reflection. The proper response to the expression of a symbol is less an action (say, genuflecting) than a quality of thinking. The symbol calls us to contemplation. To take asymbolic use of language as merely significative is to miss its point, and vice versa. One does not stop at a street sign to ponder its significance;one simply obeys it. She who commands my attention by calling out my name in a crowded room *signals* to me; he who gossips *symbolizes* the person characterized in absentia.[7]

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[6] See, Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy. An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 18: "A symbol exists, I shall say, where linguistic expression lends itself by its double or multiple meanings to a work of interpretation. What gives rise to this work is an intentional structure which consists notin the relation of meaning to thing but in an architecture of meaning, in a relation of meaning to meaning, of second meaning to first meaning, regardless of whether that relation be one of analogy or not, or whether the first meaning disguises or reveals the second meaning….Enigma does not block understanding but provokes it; there is something to unfold, to 'dis-implicate' in symbols. That which arouses understanding is precisely the double meaning, the intending of the second meaning in and through the first."

[7] My distinction between scientific and hermeneutical symbols, while indebted to Ricoeur, is more or less derived from Susanne Langer's Cassirer-inspired distinction between "discursive" and "presentational symbol," the former referring to the scientific use of a sign, the latter including all symbolic sign usages, such as the symbols of myth, ritual, religion, and art. See Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key,* chap. IV. For a recent development of Langer's distinction see Joddy Murray, *Non-Discursive Rhetoric: Image and Affect in Multimodal Composition* (Albany, MY: SUNY, 2009), especially 11-25. Both scientific (or discursive) and hermeneutical (or presentational) symbols are indirect and context-free, but where the scientific symbol forecloses the pluralization of meaning by explicit and enforced definition, the hermeneutical symbol means whatever it canmean in evolving and uncontrolled human discourse. While its precision and univocity

A sign is either relevant or it is not; it either serves to indicate something contextually significant or it does not. Symbols are not confined to their contexts; they develop sometimes unanticipated resonances as they evolve over time. Symbols can die, to be sure, but the mark of their death is their failure to continue to mean something to a community of speakers. Dead symbols no longer interest us. They no longer produce meanings that concern us. They no longer illuminate our existence in any significant way. With rare exceptions, the symbol of Zeusis dead for most us today. In contemporary environmental discourse, 'nature' is used by and large as a hermeneutical symbol, a symbol not confined to any scientific sense it might have or once have had. It is for this reason that nature continues to live for us even as certain of itshistorical senses have ceased to be tenable or are, for good reasons, regarded as obfuscating. But what precisely nature means for us at this late hour, with only twenty-five percent of the planet's surface still wild (and rapidly disappearing) and no corner of it untouched by humankind—that isan open question.[8] The medieval sense of nature as eternal and reliable moral order is no longer compelling for an age on the cusp of designing life in a laboratory. The related ancient idea of cosmos as infinitely coded container of human existence, resonant with archetypes and quivering with sympathies and antipathies—the magical *kosmos* of Plato and Hermes Trismegistus—is similarly spent. That this magical sense of nature persists as a cultural commodity, fueling the "re-enchantment" industry in the form of the pseudoscientific backdrop for New Age books and post-religious spiritual esotericism is only further indication, if more is needed, that we no longer genuinely inhabit an infinitely meaningful cosmos. And the Romantic sense of the infinity of nature, the boundlessness of life, Spinoza's *Deus sive natura*—this too is gone, along with the vanished (indeed vanquished) wilderness and our Romantic naiveté.

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draws the scientific symbol close to the signal, the inexactness of the hermeneutical symbol is in many ways a perfection of symbolization. For the sake of clarity, here arethe three principal distinctions, aligned in a table:

Signs	**Scientific symbols**	**Hermeneutical symbols**
indicative	expressive	Expressive
non-conceptual	univocal	polyvocal
contextual	abstract	trans-contextual
conventional	defined	overdetermined (vague)
practical	indifferent	evocative of feeling

[8] On these statistics, see Mark Williams, et al. "The Anthropocene Biosphere," *The Anthropocene Review* 2, No. 3 (2015): 196-219.

Certain fashionable eco-theorists, notably Slavoj Žižek, Timothy Morton, and Bruno Latour, have reinvigorated environmental philosophy by urging us to dispose of the term 'nature' altogether because, it isclaimed, it no longer serves the environmental cause. We will refer to this movement provisionally (for now) using Morton's term "Dark Ecology," even though there are important differences—to be discussed in whatfollows—between Žižek's Lacanian critique, Morton's Buddhistic object- oriented immanentism, and Latour's Actor Network Theory. According to Latour, nature as a symbol died in the science wars.[9] Close consideration of Latour's use of the term 'nature' reveals that he takes issue with its deployment as a scientific or discursive symbol, not a symbol in thehermeneutical sense. His claim that political ecology needs to let go of nature is thus less extensive than it first appears. For Latour, considering nature as an order of value-free facts to which the natural scientist has unsullied access, and of which natural science alone is the trusted gatekeeper, is no longer tenable. We know simply too much about the contrived, evaluative, and political quality of scientific discourse to continue to believe in such a sense of nature. Most importantly, Latour claims that the persistence of this sense of nature in popular scientism isan obstacle to political ecology insofar as it allows much of the nonhuman world to be ruthlessly exploited by humans who continue to regard such exploitation as a non-political act. The sense of 'nature' at issue in Latour is univocal rather than hermeneutical, and bound up with one particular family of discourse. It is the nature at work in science's claim to bedirectly reporting "facts of nature" rather than interpretations or social constructions.

If we follow Timothy Morton, however, we extend the critique to other symbolic uses of nature. For Morton, the Romantic sense of nature— infinite wilderness, the inexhaustible freshness of "the wild"celebrated by nineteenth-century poets and fetishized by early environmentalists—dogs environmentalism today with a consumer fantasy. The continued romance with so-called wild nature, Morton contends, perpetuates a concealed anthropocentrism that is lethal in our present context. In the face of systemic corporate green-washing, self- indulgent eco-tourism, and the false advertisement of rural cultures and pristine natural landscapes—landscapes that not only no longer exist but that have been destroyed by the very global capitalism for which the ads were engineered—it is hard to deny his point (Morton, 2007). However, to

[9] Bruno Latour, *The Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans.Catherine Porter (Harvard University Press, 2004).

repeat (and it bears repeating, for it is the core of my argument), a living, hermeneutical symbol is never restricted to a single sense. A symbolic use of the term nature, then, cannot be declared dead simply because the early scientific meaning of nature is now recognized as inaccurate or becausethe Romantic sense of nature has proven itself to be untenable. There may be, and no doubt are, other senses of nature that live and perhaps thrive with the demise of both scientific realism and Romanticism.

What Latour and Morton rail against is the use of the term 'nature' to buttress the eco-ideology that derails the environmental cause. And it cannot be denied that we are awash in eco-ideology, from the eco-tourism that is apparently the last hope for the "pristine" places of the earth (a so- called green economy that turns agrarian laborers into service providers, effectively re-indenturing rural communities), to the recycled cups from which we sip our four-dollar Starbucks lattes. The consumer machine knows we are concerned and has found a place for that concern. When I can add charges to an airline ticket to offset my "carbon footprint" in payment to a corporation that is busily flying as many planes as it profitably can, I know that I am duped. There are no shortage of examples of eco-ideology at play in contemporary politics, but a particularly telling case is Donald Trump's overhaul of the Environmental Protection Agency—the EPA, the leading American scientific research institute into global warming—to purge it of climatologists. Trump proceeded to appoint Scott Pruitt, a spokesperson for the oil and gas industry, and a known climate change skeptic, as director of the EPA, and Pruitt proceeded to gut the EPA of climatologists. Defending the bizarre appointment in a press conference, Trump boasted that now we will protect our air and water by stimulating American manufacturing. He has long exempted himself from the duty to speak truthfully; now he no longereven needs to speak coherently. Trump standing before the world and saying he is protecting the environment while undertaking actions that are plainly destructive of it is the essence of eco-ideology. The ideologue lies with such conviction that we can scarcely believe he or she does not see the contradiction. In the same week that Pruitt was appointed, Ivanka Trump was cued to make climate change her signature issue (when she is not busy marketing her clothing line). The very week of Trump's overhaulof the EPA, two hundred and fifty people were killed in a flash flood in a village in Colombia, swept away while they slept as a result of spring rainsthat were twice as heavy as expected. The story hardly made the news.The signs of disaster are all around us and we pretend not to see them, while people like Trump help us feel that the disavowal is the new normal.In a recent interview, Latour has offered a disturbing answer to the

question, how is it possible for the elites to persist in denyinganthropogenic climate change, when the consensus of international science refutes them? The elites are aware of the ecological disaster befalling us, Latour argues, but they keep silent because they prefer to construct a future outside the common world. In other words, they know that they, or their descendants, the one per cent, will inherit what is left of the earth; who cares about the rest?[10]

The Romantic era did not die with Nietzsche or even Heidegger; instead it entered a new, more aggressively disavowed key, in which our longing for wholeness and a return to a cosmocentric life—no longersustained by natural vistas and hiking tours of the Alps (there are toomany highways and cafés and fellow tourists to keep that nineteenth- century fantasy going)—are now managed by CGI-manipulated advertisement.[11] Romantic nature is now primarily a virtual phenomenon. It is maintained by large-budget HD documentaries, carefully pre- designed "safaris," and Disney-themed parks. It is not uncommon forchildren to complain about genuine wildlife-spotting that it is far less interesting than watching the staged dramas on the nature channel. But does the critique of Romantic nature not miss the point that 'nature' is, andfor the most part, always has been primarily a hermeneutical symbol? To disabuse us of one symbolic association of nature is not to deny thepossible legitimacy of others. Nature was a symbol for the Romantics and remains a symbol for us today, which is not to say that its meaning has notchanged.

It is crucial to be clear about how we are using our traditionalsymbols of nature, if we are to think nature in a new sense. Latour's concept of nature as the order of facts is a scientific symbol (univocal, abstract, and determinate); Morton's concept of nature as the Romantic wild is a hermeneutical symbol (polyvocal, trans-contextual, and overdetermined). When the scientist speaks of 'a fact of nature,' she does not equivocate but defines; when Goethe waxes poetic about 'nature,' he does not define anything, but rather, evokes feeling. The two critiques represented by Latour and Morton find an important point of convergence in contemporary eco-ideology. Both the scientific and the Romantic symbols of nature are deployed in service of the ecological idol of *holism*. The eco-ideologue will use both symbolic senses for the nature that needs

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[10] Eric Aeschimann and Xavier de La Porte, "Bruno Latour: 'Les super-riches ontrenoncé à l'idée d'un monde commun,'" Bibliobs, accessed 1 August 2017, http://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/idees/20170316.OBS6702/bruno-latour-les-super-riches-ont-renonce-a-l-idee-d-un-monde-commun.html.

[11] Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 94-99.

protecting, alternating between them as necessary. So we are told in one breath that we are living out of harmony with nature and that nature will restore balance at our expense (hermeneutical symbol of the undeterminedwhole to which we belong), and in the next, that we need to preserve nature for the enjoyment of our children's children (scientific symbol, which stands for the planetary order of things without us). That these symbols contradict each other (for the scientific conception excludes us while the Romantic concept includes us) does not disturb the eco- ideologue, for his purpose is not to speak coherently but to use rhetoric to achieve an end. It does not matter to the ideologue that nature that is eternally balanced simply cannot need or even receive our protection. As order of facts or planetary system, nature is the solid, structured reality— sutured together by law—to which scientific language ostensibly corresponds. As infinite wilderness, the scenic verdant backdrop of humanlife, nature is approached principally through art and imagination. Both scientism and Romanticism assume a separation of the human from the natural: the human is on the one hand, the scientific observer, and on the other, the artistic genius—and in both instances separate from what is observed or meditated upon. That science understands the whole to be calculable while Romanticism regards it as infinitely surpassing understanding does not disturb the structural similarity between the two attitudes. Nature is conceived as a whole objectified by the scientist as much as by the Romantic, even if the two use different means to produce discrepant accounts of this wholeness.

The myth of a stably structured reality over and against the neutral scientific eye simply does not work at the quantum level, nor does it make sense of what scientists do when they debate what is and is not deserving of a name.[12] Neither does the infinitely meaningful cosmos survive the debasement of Romanticism by consumerism. When the Romantic is exposed to be at heart a consumer who experiments with identity through shopping, the "intuition" that ostensibly connected him with everything is seen in a less kindly light. In a reversal of the history of the concept of intellectual intuition, Romantic intuition has come to appear far closer to Fichte's notion of it than to Schelling's: it is not the intuition of theuniverse but the intuition—or should we say *projection*—of an idea of the self that unites early Romanticism and its late-modern variant, consumerism. What the Romantic enjoys in 'nature' is his own self

[12] This is now a commonplace in science and technology studies, but it was not when Latour and Woolgar wrote *Laboratory Life* in 1979. See Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

enjoying nature.[13] This, then, is the sense of nature that has died for us: nature as the balanced order of being to which we and all other living things belong. When nature as cosmological whole becomes a finite object for calculative science and Romantic aesthetics, it is no longer a whole, for it leaves something out: the calculator and aesthete who are able to objectify and aestheticize the whole in virtue of their transcendence of it.

The purely ideological use of the dead sense of nature as cosmological whole is most visibly at work in environmentalism. At the core of every ideology is a disavowal: we refuse to acknowledge and live out of what we know. The ideologue does not *want* the truth; it interferes with a form of life he perpetuates because his identity is bound up with it. In the ideology of scientism, the supremacy of science over every other discourse consists in its having recourse to "reality" as the bedrock of truth that confirms or disconfirms the scientist's propositions and theories. The image of infinite wilderness likewise consolidates, however inversely, the supremacy of the aesthete. Environmentalism dips freely into scientistic or Romantic ideology as needed, in order to confirm the environmentalist's need to be one who belongs to the universe. We have upset the natural harmony of things with our technology, our hubris, our calculative reductionism, we are told, and climate change is the consequence. The impacts wrought by the warming atmosphere are evidence of nature's equilibrium reasserting itself at our expense. If we could only embrace moderation (a life of meditation, vegetarianism, voluntary simplicity, etcetera) "in harmony" with nature, we might be able to begin ceasing to destroy it.

The ideals of early environmentalists live on in the often repeated claim that consumerism and consumer-driven technology are "out of balance" with the natural order to which we belong. Insofar as this trope persists, climate change and mass extinction are regarded as symptoms of an imbalanced relationship to the whole of which we are only a part. The ideological core of environmentalism is particularly unmistakable in the environmentalist who fetishizes Native American or other traditional non- Western attitudes to living: the Western environmentalist knows, even if

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[13] This is clear to see in a close reading of Schleiermacher's second speech on religion. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. and ed. Richard Crouter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). It is not the infinite without that one feels in Schleiermacher's religious experience, it is the infinity *within* imaged by nature without. On the difference between Fichte's and Schelling's notion of intellectual intuition, see Michael Vater, "Introduction," in F.W.J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. Peter L. Heath (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1978), xi-xxvi.

he denies it, that holism is not characteristic of his culturally native understanding of nature. It is not unusual, then, to find committed environmentalists also interested in non-Western religious rituals that haveas their aim the awakening of a sense of belonging to the whole, a sense that Western thinking's mind-body and subject-object dualism ostensibly represses. From yoga retreats in tropical resorts to neo-shamanism, from Ayurveda to Peruvian psychotropic healing rituals, environmentalism is not only a spirituality but a politics of denial, and a lucrative one at that.

This is not to say that environmentalism is simply New Age. A great deal of science has been marshalled in support of the effort to retrieve a sense of belonging to the whole. Here the environmentalist shifts ably from Romantic ideology to scientism and back again. To cite a rather heavyweight example, the physicist David Bohm is referenced frequently in environmental discussions. Bohm sees the ambiguous results of quantum physics as evidence of both the illusoriness of the subject-object distinction and the abstractness of surface conceptions of space, time, and causality. These structures of thought create the illusion of a mechanistic "outsidedness" of thing to thing, of merely efficient causal relations among events, concealing a deeper order of unimaginable interconnectedness, one that in curious ways resembles the ancient *kosmos* with its signature microcosm-macrocosm homology.[14] In Bohm's understanding of the significance of quantum physics, all that is exists interdependently in the undivided whole of being. On the explicate level, we see linear causality, discrete particles, and multiple levels of duality, but on the implicate level revealed by quantum physics, nothing is fundamentally separate or independent. Environmentalism tends to align such observations with a futuristic optimism that is deeply modernist: the future can be better than the past if only we can render science andtechnology holistic before our delusions of "duality" kill us.

The holistic ideal is in fact as old as the environmental movement itself. Arne Naess' "Deep Ecology" got underway in the early seventies with a highly influential essay on Spinoza.[15] Naess' Spinoza is a thinker ofthe cosmos as a balanced whole, and of nature as God, *Deus sive natura*—if not an organism in the typical sense because of the absence of a notionof final causality in Spinoza, nevertheless an undivided unity in which everything that exists shares in the one infinite essence of substance.Spinozistic immanence allows Naess to deny any hierarchical relations

[14] David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (London: Routledge, 1980).

[15] Arne Naess, "Spinoza and Ecology." *Philosophia* 7, No. 1 (1977), 45-54.

among beings that could justify elevating the interests of human beings or human communities above those of their nonhuman counterparts.

Deep Ecology rejects most environmental ethics for its anthropocentrism, for example, the application of utilitarian or deontological ethics to environmental problems. Such ethical models, presuming that the human is the measure of the good, merely extendtraditional ethical paradigms to include the nonhuman. Naess calls for a new ontology in which the human being is understood to be only onebeing in a system of interconnected beings, one with neither special privilege nor responsibility. *Pace* Kant, it is not the human being who uniquely deserves our respect; the living environment as a whole has"intrinsic value"—value that is not a function of the value judgments of human beings (surely a contradiction in terms). As such, "inalienable" legal rights ought to be transferred to all living things and the nonliving matter that supports them, without regard for their specifically human utility.

Apart from Spinoza, Naess could find little support in the Western tradition for his biocentric ethics. But in the East, he found plenty. A scholar of Gandhi, Naess draws on the latter's beloved *Bhagavad Gita* to expand Deep Ecology into metaphysics and spirituality. *Gita* 6.29 speaks of the realized human being who sees himself in all being and all beings inhimself. "With self by Yoga integrated, [now] he sees / The self in all beings standing, / All beings in the self: / The same in everything he sees[.]"[16] In Naess' reading, the *Gita* expresses the maxim of self- realization that he also finds in Spinoza. Since everything is interconnected, the self-realization of any living being is part of the self- realization of every other living being. Spinoza speaks of the *conatus* in allmodes of substance, which is the desire of every individual thing to persist in its being, and in the case of living things, to realize its potential and maximize its power or essence: "Everything, in so far as it is in itself, endeavours to persist in its own being."[17] Spinoza comments:

> Individual things are modes whereby the attributes of God are expressed in a given determinate manner; that is, they are things which express in a given determinate manner the power of God, whereby God is and acts; now no thing contains in itself anything

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[16] *Bhagavad Gita,* 6: 29 in, R.C. Zaehner, *Hindu Scriptures*, trans. R.C Zaehner (NewYork: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 348.

[17] *Unaquaeque res, quantum in se est, in suo esse perseverare conatur.* Benedict de Spinoza, "The Ethics, Part III, Prop. VI," in *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*,Vol. 2, trans. R.H.M. Elwes (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 136.

> whereby its can be destroyed, or which can take away its existence;but contrariwise it is opposed to all that could take away its existence. Therefore, in so far as it can, and in so far as it is in itself, it endeavours to persist in its own being.[18]

Unlike those readers of Spinoza who see in the doctrine of *conatus* nothing more than an ethics of self-maximization (not at all at odds with either liberalism or corporate capitalism), Naess reads Spinoza as an ecological thinker who places the interests of the whole above the interest of the part. The enemy of environmental holism is the liberal consumer who presumes that the human being is separate from the whole, an individual negatively free to carve her own path of destruction through thematerial world. Deep Ecology shares with the political right conservative assumptions about the relation of the individual to the community. The good of the individual is to be subordinated to the good of the biotic community, the social expanded to include all living things on the planet and the non-living materials upon which they depend. Is it a surprise, then, that in its most extreme forms, Deep Ecology becomes fascistic, advocating the abolition of the doctrine of human rights in the interest of an ethics of the whole? Naess himself believed in radical population control aimed at reducing the human population to about one hundred million people. He failed to specify what was to be done with the other sixthousand nine hundred million.

Environmental holism can also take an apocalyptic turn. Considerthe conventional reading of James Lovelock's "Gaia hypothesis."[19] The planet is an organism, the hypothesis goes, and like any organism, itregulates itself. Every part is ordained to the whole of which it is a part. When the organism is healthy, there is a balanced subordination of part to whole, and the whole thrives. Sickness, then, is an imbalance in homeostasis: one of the parts steps out of the whole, becomes autonomousand inflamed, operating as though it were itself the whole—like a cancer cell reproducing maniacally without consideration for the life of the organism on which it depends. The human community, Lovelock contends, is the infection, and climate change is the planet's attempt to restore homeostasis.[20] "We have grown in number to the point where our presence is perceptibly disabling the planet like a disease. As in human

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[18] Spinoza, *Ethics*, 136.

[19] James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[20] James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia: Earth's Climate in Crisis and the Fate of Humanity* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

diseases there are four possible outcomes: destruction of the invading disease organisms; chronic infection; destruction of the host; or symbiosis—a lasting relationship of mutual benefit to the host and the invader."[21] Like a fever, the planet seems to be cooking the human infection. That this likely means the end of human life on earth is only badnews for humans.

Lovelock's recent books are so bleak in outlook that they should be regarded as belonging to the genre of dystopian apocalyptic literature. In terms of the science, he does little more than repeat the now well-known theory of anthropogenic climate change: "…[N]othing so severe has happened since the long hot period of the Eocene, fifty-five million years ago, when the change was larger than that between the ice age and the Nineteenth Century and lasted for 200,000 years."[22] In terms of politics, Lovelock's work is a desperate plea for a transformation in attitudes. Sinceglobal warming is a consequence of the last century of industrial activity,it might already be too late for humanity, Lovelock muses gloomily. *The Revenge of Gaia* ends with a passage that could have been pulled out of Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*:

> Meanwhile in the hot arid world survivors gather for the journey tothe new Arctic centres of civilization; I see them in the desert asthe dawn breaks and the sun throws its piercing gaze across the horizon at the camp. The cool fresh night air lingers for a whileand then, like smoke, dissipates as the heat takes charge. Their camel wakes, blinks and slowly rises on her haunches. The few remaining members of the tribe mount. She belches, and sets offon the long unbearably hot journey to the next oasis.[23]

To be sure, Lovelock is not entirely certain that this decline ofcivilization into climate-precipitated tribalism is the only option for us, although he regards the effects of the climate change already caused by thepast century of industrial activity to be irreversible. If there is a chance for us, it resides in a remembering of nature: "We need most of all to renew that love and empathy for nature that we lost when we began our love

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[21] Quoted in, Crispin Tickell, "Preface," in James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia: Earth's Climate in Crisis and the Fate of Humanity* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), xvii.

[22] Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia*, 7.

[23] Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia*, 159.

affair with city life."[24] But what does "nature" mean in this context? What should we love if Lovelock's advice is to be heeded?

The so-called death of nature may in fact herald the rebirth of nature,the return of nature as a symbol—in all its historical and conceptualcomplexity—to contemporary theoretical, environmental, and political debate. The symbol of nature is no doubt theologically overdetermined. The transformations it is currently undergoing speak to the need for a reconsideration of our religious heritage and its relationship to modernity—particularly the ecologically ambiguous legacy ofChristianity.

[24] Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia*, 8.