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## Green political theory

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### **Introduction**

One of the deep attractions of green political theory is its claim to be focused on the very survival of the whole natural ecosystem of the planet. In consequence, it also addresses the conditions for our biological continuance as a species. From our own species' perspective, green theory could thus be said to be articulating the conditions whereby further meaningful human life is possible. Exactly how we address these conditions is not just a question of choice in a plural framework of values. Environmental conditions are far too important for such a response. Thus, green political theory often claims, with some justification, to be markedly different to most political theory to date. It carries a health warning. This whole perspective gives green political theory a unique signature. The purpose of this chapter is to analyse this unique signature with particular reference to political theory. The key element of this signature is 'nature'. Green political theory conceives of itself as 'green', 'environmental' or 'ecological' *because of* its key focus on nature. Nature is seen as a crucial entity in its own right – of which we are just a very minor part. Thus, green theory is not a conventional theory, disinterestedly examining the value status of the non-human world. If this more conventional philosophical path were its sole brief, there would be no purpose in overtly labelling itself green, ecological or environmental. Nature, *qua* green, is the key theme. The underlying issue of this essay therefore concerns the relation between nature and political theory. If green theory does articulate the conditions of ecological and biological survival and flourishing, then politics must be imbricated, in the sense that *how* humans act politically has a crucial impact on nature and, thus, indirectly upon our survival as a species. It follows that the character of politics itself would need to be adapted to the imperatives of green political theory. Green theory articulates a politics which is responsive to nature and therefore the conditions for human continuance. The same point would hold for green political economy.

The first section of the chapter, briefly and non-controversially, identifies the underlying notion of political theory employed by most greens, examines two

perspectives on green political theory and locates common green preoccupations. Second, the argument then turns to the history of the concept of nature. Third, having analysed the conceptual and historical dimensions of the concept of nature, the discussion shifts to a critical appraisal of the claims of green political theory. The chapter concludes on a sceptical argument which suggests that green political theory suffers from a deep internal tension arising from its focus on nature.

## 1 Green political theory

First, a dominant perspective on political theory, in the Anglo-American context, over the last thirty years, has been the normative view. John Plamenatz defined this as 'systematic thinking about the purposes of government'.<sup>1</sup> This is not conceived as a descriptive exercise, *qua* political science. It seeks to *evaluate* rather than *explain*. However, this conception of theory embodies a number of sub-approaches. The main normative foundational contenders are utilitarianism, consequentialism, Aristotelianism and deontology – with many subtle overlappings and variations.<sup>2</sup> It is within this general normative perspective that green theorists tend to utilise the term 'political theory'. Yet, green political theory works in an idiosyncratic manner. Unlike the bulk of normative theory to date, which has been largely focused on the very human purposes of government, justice, equality or rights, the green agenda characteristically tries to extend beyond human concerns.

Turning to the second issue of this first section: *prima facie* there are broadly two green normative political theory positions. The first identifies a wholly unique conception of political theory. This is the *radical* ecocentric perspective of writers such as Arne Naess, Bill Devall, Warwick Fox and Robyn Eckersely.<sup>3</sup> The central philosophical axiom of this perspective is 'that there is no firm ontological divide in the field of existence'.<sup>4</sup> An inclusive monistic conception of nature is adopted. The most well-known example of this is the Gaia hypothesis which reads the whole earth as a single organism.<sup>5</sup> The ecocentric value perspective has developed on two lines. The first is intrinsic value theory, which sees nature as an end in itself.<sup>6</sup> Crucially, intrinsic value does not require human recognition for it to exist. Nature has objective 'value-imparting characteristics'. The second ecocentric perspective bypasses value theory. It argues that what is required is not so much ethics as a psychological change in 'ecological sensibility'. The real issue is therefore psychology and ontology, not ethics. Ecological ethics derives from a mature and developed psychology.<sup>7</sup> Overall, for radicals, political theory can never be the same discipline again.<sup>8</sup>

The second dimension of green theory is underpinned by variants of *anthropocentric* argument. It is important to be sensitive here to gradations within anthropocentrism. Anthropocentric arguments stress that human beings are the sole criterion of value. The value of nature is instrumental in character. However there are many subtle variations within this approach.<sup>9</sup> It is important

to draw an initial distinction between a deep and pliant anthropocentrism.<sup>10</sup> Deep anthropocentrism is indifferent to nature and is largely outside the domain of green theory. Pliant anthropocentrism stresses co-dependency with nature, although still filtered through human interests. The 'pliant' perspective leaves traditional normative theory largely unchanged. However new issues and questions are mapped onto the older normative concerns. Green political theory thus takes conventional issues of justice, freedom, equality, citizenship or rights and then adds a green dimension, emphasising co-dependency with nature. This perspective is embodied in the *reformist* ideas of writers such as R.E. Goodin, John Dryzek and John Barry. In reformism there is a belief that green aims can be achieved through coalitions within existing institutional structures.<sup>11</sup>

The third issue of this section focuses on 'linking themes' in *all* green theories. Despite the above variance of views, there are four formal themes affirmed by green theories of most shades – although the reformists and radicals tend to configure these themes differently. First, all assert the interdependence or intermeshing of the human species with nature. This is the *signature* of green political theory. One broad implication of this is that human beings are linked with nature.<sup>12</sup> In consequence, there is a tendency to be sceptical about the supreme moral position of human beings. Minimally, value extends beyond human beings. Second, green theories usually think in terms of greater wholes, such as nature, of which we are, in some manner, a part or co-dependent. Third, there is a more sensitised awareness of nature than found in all other conceptions of political theory. Fourth, there is an anxiety about what industrial civilisation is actually doing to nature.

If we focus on the above themes, then the above two green perspectives can be restated with more precision. First, for ecocentric theory we are wholly intermeshed with nature, however, the bulk of contemporary political theory is seen to be premised on a separation between humanity and nature. The supposition often underpinning the separation is that human persons are morally fundamental. Human persons are regarded as morally (not physically) distinct from their natural environment.<sup>13</sup> Kantian understanding of human agency and autonomy provides a classical rendering of this point. Kantian freedom, rationality and morality are wholly distinct from 'natural causation'. The rational agent exists autonomously as an end in herself and stands morally apart from the natural world. Natural objects, or nature in general, can always be treated as a means to an end. The human person is the only entity which can be considered morally as an end in itself.<sup>14</sup>

In reformist theory there is still an underlying unease about the position of human persons, but it is held less stringently. Reformists adhere to the view that one must accept a more realistic anthropocentrism. This is neatly summarised in Robert Goodin's point that one can be human centred without being human instrumental.<sup>15</sup> Further, naturalness, itself, can be a source of value. Goodin suggests, for example, that nature's independence is crucial to its meaning.<sup>16</sup> He remains, though, agnostic over the metaphysical load which might be attached

to this 'independence'. John Dryzek also suggests that the notion of ecological rationality is embedded in an anthropocentric life-support system. He notes that 'the human life-support capacity of natural systems is the generalisable interest par excellence, standing as it does in logical antecedence to competing normative principles such as utility maximisation or rights protection'.<sup>17</sup> Ecological rationality is essentially 'the capability of ecosystems consistently and effectively to provide the good of human life support'.<sup>18</sup> It is important to emphasise here that it is only humans who are involved in the rational ecological dialogue. This is a pliant anthropocentrism mediated through an ecological rationality.<sup>19</sup> In sum, despite the anthropocentric focus of reformists, it is still a modified focus, which stresses the need to maintain a stable relation between humanity and nature.

The second issue concerns 'inclusive wholes'. There are greater wholes which provide value in more traditional political theory, for example, the community, nation, culture, state or race, but all these 'wholes' still focus exclusively on human beings (individually or collectively). The crucial aspect of green theory is that it focuses systematically on even broader wholes – the biosphere, ecosphere or nature. For ecocentric theories, this demands a wholly different ontological perspective. As Arne Naess argues, individual human agents should be considered as mere 'knots in the biospherical net' and not as 'separate actors'.<sup>20</sup> The self is viewed as a developing process within a more inclusive whole; it is, in effect, a locus of identification and the more comprehensive the identification, the broader the self.<sup>21</sup> In consequence, the diminishment of the river, forest, mountain or ecosystem becomes my diminishment. In this context, the widest self would be the whole of nature. In the reformist view, a *via media* is again sought. Reformists see their theory as a 'halfway house' between the ecocentric and deep anthropocentric positions. As indicated, humans are still intermeshed with the greater whole of nature, but *not* completely. It is only humans who can become conscious of this interdependence. It is therefore important, for Goodin, that 'just as you cannot reduce the value of nature wholly to natural values (as the deep ecologists might attempt), neither can you reduce the value of nature wholly to human values (as the shallowest ecologists wish)'. Value is always 'in relation to us', but this is not same as only having value 'for us'. Consequently, 'saying that things can have value only in relation to us is very different from saying that the value of nature reduces to purely human interests'.<sup>22</sup> Some features of nature exist independently from us, and, for reformists such as Goodin, nature as a whole can have value-imparting characteristics. Thus, green theory 'links the value of things to some naturally occurring properties of the objects themselves'.<sup>23</sup>

Third, it would be a truism to say that the majority of political theories to date have not been preoccupied with nature. However, nature, particularly humanity *qua* nature, is the central focus of all green theories. This is not to say that traditional political theories are not adaptable to green problems, but to date this has not been their overriding concern. This is a relatively uncontroversial

point, shared by both radicals and reformists, with the one proviso that reformists see adequate moral resources within traditional moral and political theories – in Goodin’s case in consequentialist utilitarianism, in Dryzek in Habermasian communicative ethics and in Barry in a form of neo-naturalistic ethics – whereas radicals see the need for a new ontology.

Fourth, most contemporary political theories assume that some form of industrial growth is unproblematic. However, the problem of industrialism has figured prominently in green debates. As Jonathan Porritt noted ‘by industrialism, I mean adherence to the belief that human needs can only be met through *permanent* expansion of the process of production and consumption – regardless of the damage done to the planet, to the rights of future generations . . . The often unspoken values of industrialism are premised on the notion that material gain is quite simply more important to more people than anything else’.<sup>24</sup> In fact, industrial development is often considered desirable. This is the complete opposite to green theory. There are admittedly long-standing debates within green theory about sustainable and unsustainable industrialism, however, this is still premised on the point that *something* is amiss in the modus operandi of industrial culture. Ecocentric theories have been particularly concerned to either modify industrialism or to find a radical economic alternative to it. Reformists have been more concerned to use traditional or more orthodox tools of law and state policy to control industrialism.

However, do green ideas fundamentally change the character of political theorising? The radical response to this question is that mainstream political theory is rooted in certain beliefs which are totally antithetical to environmental concerns. As Robyn Eckersley comments, ‘environmental philosophers have exposed a number of significant blind spots in modern political theory’. For Eckersley, these are not just trifling issues which can be rectified by minor adjustments. These blind spots concern, for example, our whole relation with the ‘non-human world’. They are, in other words, fundamental issues which address our very survival as a species, in relation to nature. We require therefore a radically new perspective, which moves away from the myopia of traditional theory.<sup>25</sup> For Eckersley, these fundamental issues have rarely been given the time of day in contemporary political theory. Inter-human relations take absolute priority in mainstream political theory. The state, sovereignty, justice, equality, rights and freedom are seen to be focused unremittingly on humanity, as indifferent to nature. Humans decide on whether or not to allot values to the non-human. The crucial issue here is that it is human *decisions* and human *interests* which are crucial to mainstream political theory. The non-human is merely a backdrop to the drama of human affairs. For Eckersley, the ecocentric root and branch questioning of this whole perspective should give rise to ‘a genuinely new constellation of ideas’, as opposed to a mild adjustment.<sup>26</sup> The reformist response is, however, more nuanced than the ecocentric, partly because it tries to find a *via media* between the radical perspective and an indifferent deep anthropocentrism. Ecocentric theory is seen to be rooted in unacceptable metaphysical beliefs. Deep

anthropocentrism is also unacceptable, due to its potential indifference to nature. Reformists therefore present a case for a green theory supplementing a more traditional conception of theory. John Barry's notion of 'critical anthropocentrism' catches the drift of this reformist position. It focuses on 'the place nature has within some particular human good or interest'.<sup>27</sup> It is ecologically based, but not ecologically centred.

In conclusion, despite sharing concerns, ecocentric political theory does imply a wholly new 'constellation of ideas' which transforms the whole of political theory. The new focus would be on the absolute priority of nature. For reformists, however, green political theory needs conversely to work with contemporary political theory, arguing for a green supplementation of traditional questions of justice, the state, citizenship or rights.

## 2 Nature

Rather than tackle the minutiae of the above reformist/radical debate, I want to refocus the discussion on a point which is distinctive in both green positions. Both perspectives, despite their manifest differences, are premised on the significance of nature. This is a controversial point, since radicals and reformist read nature differently. My contention would still be that nature remains central to both. This is what I referred to earlier as the unique 'signature' of green theory. The concept of nature enables us to identify something as *green* political theory. Nature is a fundamental datum on which the edifice of green political theory rests, whether in a co-dependent or monistic form. This is not a concept which has to necessarily bear any heavy metaphysical load. Minimally one expects every green theory to be concerned about nature. Yet, what is precisely meant by the term 'nature'? This question can be approached conceptually and historically.

First, the concept of nature implies a *source* or *principle of action* that makes something behave in a certain way. Any discussion of the nature of human beings would usually have this denotation. This is, in fact, the older sense of the term. It is an idea familiar from Greek philosophers to the present. However, there is a second conceptual sense of nature that refers to the *sum total* of things and events. This sense of the 'sum total' can also imply two different ideas: first, it can signify those things which are distinct from human action, intention or artifice. Another way of putting this is – nature refers to things which are driven by patterns of causation distinct from human action. The bulk of our own organic life is in fact driven by this kind of causation – the facts of death or indigestion, for example, are not under our control, only their timing or occasion. Nature is the sum of what is *not* the result of human action. Ironically, this idea has been attractive for ecocentric theories. For example, when deep ecologists speak of wilderness, it is usually nature untouched by human action. It is the wild mountain or river system without any 'unnatural' human presence. The aesthetic of wilderness experience is premised upon this 'pristine' untouched quality. The irony here is that most ecocentric theories appear to

work with a monistic metaphysics which consistently denies 'dualisms', particularly dualisms which prioritise humans. Humans are envisaged as mere temporary 'knots' in the 'biospherical net', rapidly unravelling and slipping back into the organic soup. Yet, paradoxically, the insistence on wilderness implies that humans are in some way distinct from nature. Thus, ecocentric theories, from the opposite end to deep anthropocentric theories, make a subtle contribution to a new dualism between humans and nature. In this case, humans are villains, qua ecocentrism, rather than heroes, qua deep anthropocentrism.<sup>28</sup>

The second broad sense of 'sum total' addresses the issue that humans are as much part of nature as any river system. Thus, the sum total includes humans and *all* their actions. In one sense, an aspect of this argument is grasped by some ecocentric theories, which accept that humans are omnivorous, and thus hunting animals for personal consumption is 'natural'. This view is premised on the point that human action is natural. Humans are part of the natural order. However, it is also important to note that this latter argument has unpredictable extensions. To follow out its logic more rigorously would include all human activity in industry, economics, culture and politics within the ambit of 'nature'. This, in turn, raises a further issue, namely, that environmental degradation, as a result of human actions, could also be considered natural. If humans are an evolutionary species, then all human activities are natural, even if some are extremely risky for species survival. It may be natural for us to overreach ourselves as a species and perish. It has happened to countless other species. In summary, the concept of nature is deceptive. This point is reinforced if we turn to a brief history of the concept of nature.

The historical argument sees nature as a contingent concept. In ancient Greek thought nature was intimately related to intelligence or soul. Greek thinkers would have been genuinely puzzled by later dualistic conceptions of mind and nature. Another dimension of this intelligence in nature is teleology. A design or purpose is implicit in nature. This idea precedes Aristotle and Plato in the ancient world. Cities, temples, gardens and the like are designed and will decay without an artisan, craftsman or designer. Analogously, for the ancient world, nature in general implies a purposeful intelligent ordering.<sup>29</sup> This idea of nature as a designed and purposeful order was influential in medieval Christian thought. Two views derived from this Christian perspective: the first advocated stewardship and care for God's created order, the second arose within the ambit of the fall. In the latter, a *contemptus mundi* and fear of a corruption implicit in nature affected the whole argument. In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European thought the concept of nature changed again. It came to be viewed as largely devoid of intelligence, rationality or purpose. It was, in effect, analogous to a machine. In thinkers such as Descartes, Galileo, Bacon and Kepler dualisms arose with a vengeance – body and mind or nature and mind. For Galileo, for example, what was true in nature was measurable and quantitative. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the most decisive idea to affect the conception of nature was evolutionary theory. Evolutionary

theory emphasised that nature had an immensely complex and mutable history (of which we are part), and that nature was a process and not a mechanism (mechanisms being finished and completed things). Evolution also emphasised the point that nature was not necessarily benign. Humans were essentially a primate species who had, for a contingent brief moment, successfully adapted. There was nothing very special about us, except that our organic brains had evolved in a quite unique way and we possessed some limited grasp of our situation. The upshot of this brief conceptual and historical excursus is that the concept of nature is both mutable and contested. It *cannot* be simply deployed as a source of value or as a way of differentiating green theory from other perspectives, without further explanation.<sup>30</sup>

This conclusion has a bearing on another question: in what sense can politics ever be considered natural? Green discussions of this question usually differentiate green politics as something uniquely natural. Either green politics is conducive to a harmonious relation with nature, or, the communal arrangements are, quite literally, natural. These can be called the *intrinsic* and *instrumental* uses of 'natural' qua politics. The intrinsic view suggests that certain types of politics or morality *are* natural in themselves.<sup>31</sup> Thus, there can be a natural morality or politics, in an ecological sense. This argument relies on the idea that there is a non-contested objective natural order to which we can refer. This view is characteristic of radical approaches. The instrumental view argues that certain conceptions of politics are more *conducive* to a natural order, in so far as they facilitate a more symbiotic and sensitive way of living with nature. This position is more characteristic of the reformist perspective. However, the upshot of both these views is that there are certain forms of social and political arrangements which are either harmonious with or functional for the natural environment. Consequently, it is possible to identify a natural sense of rationality, democracy, citizenship or justice. However, given that nature is contested, what effect does this have on green argument?

### 3 Critique of green values

The problem with green argument is the ambiguity concerning nature. Deep anthropocentrism ignores *any* co-dependence with nature. The opposite problem is encountered in radical ecocentrism. It prioritises a monistic conception of nature. For ecocentric theory *everything* has the equal right to subsist. The ethical community includes landscapes and river systems. Ecocentrism consequently advocates biospherical egalitarianism. However, what reformists try to do is recognise that value extends beyond humans, but not so far as to ignore humans as valuers. The language of interests, qua nature's interests, is still a human language. In speaking of nature's interests we inevitably anthropomorphise nature, however it still remains independent, to a degree. Yet, what does nature mean here?

In my own reading, the 'problem of nature' is truly sensed by reformist writers, far more so than radicals. Reformists link an awareness that human

interests are crucial with the point that we are relational co-dependent beings. We filter nature through our interests, but, we are still intimately related to an independent nature. Yet, this position has its own problems, namely, how does one account for both the link between humans and nature, in tandem with their separateness?

The strategy for dealing with this issue was originally canvassed by the social ecologist Murray Bookchin. It involves a subtle blending between nature as *distinct* and nature as *integral* to us. To achieve this blending, Bookchin distinguishes between 'First Nature' (as the product of biological evolution) and 'Second Nature' (society and culture as human artefact).<sup>32</sup> First Nature, for Bookchin, embodies a dim sense of purpose. Yet, it is only in humanity that nature is rendered self-conscious.<sup>33</sup> This is 'Second Nature'. Green theory, for Bookchin, *is* nature in human consciousness (qua Second Nature) addressing itself. As Bookchin put it, somewhat fancifully, in green theory, nature appears to be 'writing its own natural philosophy and ethics'.<sup>34</sup> Second Nature, qua green theory, reveals how a society ought be organised. Second Nature has 'built in' imperatives. Humanity *is* self-conscious nature; we therefore have responsibilities to direct evolutionary processes. This involves fostering a diverse and complex biosphere, it also implies new concepts of urbanism, decentralised authority, liberating technology and new types of community. Bookchin refers to this Second Nature as the 'new animism'. As we evolve, we see ourselves as 'nature rendered self-conscious and intelligent'. In social ecology we co-operate with the implicit teleology of nature.<sup>35</sup>

A more restrained and less teleological argument can be found in other thinkers. Barry, for example, articulates the point that we are biological as well as cultural products. As he comments, "'we" are adapted to "our" culture, which in turn is, at least temporarily adapted to its environment'. Directly echoing Bookchin, he speaks of the 'first level of our nature' which is premised upon our biological constitution. He distinguishes this from our 'second nature' which is focused on 'the centrality of culture in the determination of human nature'. For Barry, as for Bookchin, 'culture is our species-specific mode of expressing our nature . . . As it is continuous with our nature as social beings, human culture does not represent a radical separation from nature, but can be viewed as our "second nature"'. In this context, Barry defines morality and politics in 'relational terms' – relational meaning rooted in a community of humans, the community being co-dependent with nature.<sup>36</sup> Ethics is therefore viewed in the context of a form of *communitarian naturalism*.<sup>37</sup> It accepts our favouritism for our own species as quite rational, yet, as evolutionary creatures we can also criticise our own conduct, adapt and modify our activities (thus Barry's 'critical anthropocentrism'). Inevitably, in this reading, our interests move outside our own immediate species. The ethical standing of nature is itself natural. Culture 'can thus be seen as a collective capacity of humans to adapt to the particular and contingent conditions of their collective existence, including, most importantly, the environments with which they interact and upon'.<sup>38</sup>

The same distinction, between first and second nature, can be found in other thinkers who favour a reformist agenda. Thus, Andrew Brennan's distinction between relative and absolute notions of the natural, or Mary Midgely's distinction between open and closed instincts (closed are biologically fixed, whereas open instincts indicate tendencies to certain types of behaviour which are consciously modifiable), express a parallel thesis.<sup>39</sup>

There are, however, problems with this naturalistic argument. The first concerns the roots of natural morality in local communities. John Barry is adamant that naturally based ecological democracy, justice and the like, have universal significance.<sup>40</sup> Yet, if it is in our (second) nature to live in local communities, how do we get from this communitarian 'natural difference' to a global naturalistic ethic? The term 'natural' seems to be working extremely hard here and in contradictory ways. Second, it is not at all clear why authoritarian, tribal or many other types of political community cannot be natural. Third, it is not apparent why the conception of 'first nature' cannot explain culture or second nature.

Another reformist approach to the question of value is taken by Goodin. He draws a firm distinction between *agency* and *value*. Value 'provides the unified moral vision running through all the central substantive planks in the green political programme'.<sup>41</sup> For Goodin, the core green values are all 'consequentialist at root'.<sup>42</sup> Agency, however, only advises on how to bring values into practice. Thus, the 'green theory of agency is a theory about how best to pursue the Good'. Thus, importantly for Goodin, one can agree on values, without agreeing on the agency. There is no necessity whatsoever to adopt a particular lifestyle to be green.<sup>43</sup>

There are major problems with Goodin's distinction. First, can means (agency) and ends (values) be so firmly separated? Green's characteristics are concerned with how people live. Goodin is clearly out of step here with the movement. Second, values do usually give rise to policies and agency. The connection between agency and value is culturally prevalent – whether correct or not. Third, many individuals do respond to ecological issues by adopting lifestyle changes – which they perceive to be in their own long-term interest. Fourth, Goodin's value theory has no particular agency implications. Nothing that Goodin says rules out authoritarian agency. Goodin's value theory could just as well be linked with fascist ecology. Fifth, a related point, is that Goodin's consequentialist utilitarianism is potentially fickle. As Brian Barry remarks succinctly, many greens are 'quite right to reject Goodin's proposed substitute for the quite straightforward reason that it makes the case for the preservation of the natural environment depend upon what people actually want'.<sup>44</sup> If someone says that there is a utility in chopping down trees (as many logging groups across the world do argue), then nothing significant can be said against it from Goodin's perspective. If the consequence is massive profits and employment, then it could be regarded as a consequential good. Utilitarian calculus, because of its second order nature, is notoriously capricious. Sixth, Goodin's agnosticism over the 'value-imparting quality' of nature is problematic. For Goodin,

the value is not there at the behest of human consciousness and the 'value-imparting quality' (whatever it is) reacts with the cogniser. To admit this takes the edge off his dismissal of ecocentrism. Despite separating humans and nature, Goodin also suggests that humans are part of nature and that his argument is not so much a defence of nature, as of human modesty in dealing with nature. As if this was not puzzling enough, he then raises the question whether the separation between humans and nature is morally significant at all.<sup>45</sup> This admission takes his whole value argument full circle. This is not an uncommon dilemma for reformists.

Nature, in all the above green accounts, appears to be a contingent resource, lacking coherence. It might be argued, in response to this, why should not green theory be motivated by the question: what status should be given to the non-human environment in terms of policy? Why should there be a problem with nature at all? There is no decisive answer to this question, yet the following points should be noted. First, the critic would not deny here that many green theorists – for example, the whole ecocentric dimension – have been fixated on nature. Second, *all* dimensions of the green political theory do focus on the importance of nature, in one shape or another. There is no reason to call oneself green, if nature is insignificant. It would, however, be a truism that distinct dimensions of green theory work with differing understandings of nature. Third, there is nothing to stop any theorist pondering the value of the non-human world – even those utterly indifferent to nature. However, one might hesitate, with good reason, to say that this was *green* theory, as commonly understood. Thus, I would still contend therefore that nature is the crucial category of a political theory that claims to be green as opposed to one that merely addresses green issues.

## Conclusion

The crucial question is, who or what defines nature? If culture in general is reduced to nature, then there appears to be nothing, logically, that could tell us definitively what nature is. If, on the other hand, nature is a cultural and historically mutable concept, then our economic, religious, scientific and philosophical discourses continuously anthropomorphise the 'natural'. We filter this 'something' through our interests. The 'something' remains noumenal. Even calling something 'first' or 'second' nature performs this filtering task. We cannot know outside of the 'webs of significance' that we weave. Speaking of 'nature's interests' brings this 'something' into our cognitive domain. As such, either there is no way categorically to know what is outside human production and human culture, or, if we claim that we are wholly natural, then we *still* could not know the natural because *everything* becomes natural. The status of nature per se thus becomes baffling. Intermediate positions, like pliant anthropocentrism, try to resolve the conundrum by relabelling, which, in substance, simply restates the paradox in new terminology. Therefore, we do not really

know, in green terms, what is being damaged or degraded. We do not know what nature is. Nature is clearly integral (definitionally) to green theory, but nature remains incoherent and contested. If green political theory is premised on nature and we have no coherent or uncontested understanding of nature, then it follows that green political theory is teetering on incoherence.

## Notes

- 1 J. Plamenatz, 'The Use of Political Theory', *Political Studies*, 8 (1960), p. 37. D. Miller roughly follows this in defining political theory as 'systematic reflection on the nature and purposes of government', D. Miller (ed.), *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Political Thought* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1987), p. 383.
- 2 Subsequently, other subtle normative variants – communitarianism, feminism, rational choice and republicanism – have also moved into the forefront of political theory debate.
- 3 R. Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory* (London, UCL Press, 1992); A. Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, tr. D. Rothenberg (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990); B. Devall and G. Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City, UT, Gibbs M. Smith Inc., 1985). There are though differences between these writers.
- 4 Warwick Fox quoted in R. Sylvan, 'A Critique of Deep Ecology', *Radical Philosophy*, 40 and 41 (1984–85), p. 103.
- 5 The general inspiration for this type of argument came initially from the North American writer, Aldo Leopold's, *A Sand County Almanac*, and later from the philosopher Arne Naess. For Leopold, a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. As Leopold stated 'a land ethic changes the role of Homo Sapiens from conqueror of the land . . . to plain member and citizen of it', Leopold quoted in D. Scherer and T. Attig (eds), *Ethics and the Environment* (New York, Prentice Hall, 1983), p. 7.
- 6 Entities which are ends in themselves have interests in sustaining themselves and a good of their own. An entity having a good of its own is morally considerable.
- 7 As John Rodman has commented, 'It is worth asking whether the ceaseless struggle to extend morality and legality may now be more a part of the problem than its solution'. J. Rodman 'The Liberation of Nature', *Inquiry*, 20 (1977), pp. 103–4. This latter judgement is open to the charge that requiring a change in 'ecological sensibility' is still indirectly making a moral claim. There is some truth to this point. However, in response, it could be said that the whole order of priority has changed, namely, the 'ecological sensibility' argument is suggesting that moral action is a result of a prior change in human psychology. Moral sensibility is the *result* of a mature psychology, it is not the result of being convinced by moral argument or obeying moral imperatives. The sensibility argument is suggesting that one cannot expect any moral behaviour from anyone unless you are dealing with psychologies which are mature enough to actually *be* that way.
- 8 The ecocentric position (deep ecology) is described by two of its proponents as a search 'for a more objective consciousness and state of being through an active deep questioning and meditative process and way of life', see Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology*, p. 66.

- 9 There is, in fact, a great deal more complexity within all these green approaches, which cannot be dealt with here. For an attempt at a more comprehensive typology, see A. Vincent, 'The Character of Ecology', *Environmental Politics*, 2:2 (1993), pp. 248–76; also see A. Vincent, *Modern Political Ideologies* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1995, 2nd edn), pp. 215–21.
- 10 Many environmental writers, like John Rodman, Warwick Fox, Max Oelschlaeger, Richard Sylvan, John Passmore and Robyn Eckersley, also subdivide the above pliant anthropocentric concerns into 'conservation' and 'preservationism'.
- 11 J. Barry, *Rethinking Green Politics* (London, Sage, 1999); J. Dryzek, *Rational Ecology: Environment and Political Economy* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1987) and R.E. Goodin, *Green Political Theory* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992). Again, it is important to stress that there are marked differences between these reformist writers.
- 12 There are loose parallels here with communitarian arguments, particularly critical conceptions of the autonomous self considered separately from the community. The ecological self, for example, is quite clearly encumbered, although the encumbrance is nature.
- 13 This is not therefore a denial of our *physical* dependence on our natural surroundings.
- 14 It is important to note here that this does not imply that Kantian agents can treat nature simply as they like.
- 15 Goodin, *Green Political Theory*, p. 45.
- 16 A 'restored bit of nature is necessarily not as valuable as something similar that has been "touched by human hands"', Goodin, *Green Political Theory*, p. 41. See also B. McKibben's, *The End of Nature* (London, Penguin, 1990). McKibben suggests that 'Nature's independence is its meaning; without it there is nothing but us', p. 54.
- 17 Dryzek, *Rational Ecology*, p. 204.
- 18 Dryzek, *Rational Ecology*, p. 36.
- 19 John Barry tries to expand upon Dryzek's view of ecological rationality in his work.
- 20 See A. Naess, 'The Shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement. A Summary', *Inquiry*, 16 (1973), p. 263.
- 21 The self is thus, for Naess, 'as comprehensive as the totality of its identifications', see Naess, 'The Shallow', pp. 263–4, also Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, p. 261.
- 22 Goodin, *Green Political Theory*, pp. 44–5.
- 23 Goodin, *Green Political Theory*, pp. 25–6.
- 24 J. Porritt in E. Goldsmith and N. Hildyard (eds), *Green Britain or Industrial Wasteland* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1986), pp. 344–5 (original emphasis).
- 25 As Christopher Stone noted 'A radical new conception of man's relationship to the rest of nature would not only be a step towards solving the material planetary problems: there are strong reason for such a changed consciousness from the point of making us far better humans', C. Stone, *Should Trees Have Standing? Towards Legal Rights for Natural Objects* (Los Altos, CA, Kaufman, 1974), p. 48.
- 26 Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory*, pp. 2–3.
- 27 Barry, *Rethinking Green Politics*, p. 35.
- 28 There is another ecocentric way round this dualism, namely, to regard humans as still part of monistic nature, yet, we should be considered as equivalent to a troublesome virus. Thus, we might take up the view of Earth First!, and other such eco-warriors, in regarding human beings as a natural pestilence which nature will eventually eradicate to maintain ecological balance.
- 29 See C. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1967), p. 147.

- 30 It is also important to ask, in the same sceptical vein, whether the term nature is coterminous with the term environment? When ecocentric theorists speak of nature or the environment, then mountains and wildernesses make a quick appearance. In fact, most animals including humans, have usually lived on savannahs or coastal plains, where food sources are easier to come by. To push the point further, for most humans, at the present moment, the environment *means* an urban or constructed one. This is natural to us. The incisive point here is that the natural environment for most animals is *not* a mountain wilderness. The ecocentric notion of the natural environment is bizarrely idiosyncratic, although it has precise equivalents in romantic pantheistic theories from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Further, for the majority of human animals the environment is urbanised. Why then have Green theories not taken on this pervasive conception of the environment and the natural? The answer is complex, but must in part be due to the fact that Green theories to date have not really articulated a coherent concept of nature.
- 31 The characteristic doctrine arguing this is the ecocentric idea of bioregionalism, see K. Sale, *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision* (San Francisco, CA, Sierra Book Club, 1985).
- 32 This has direct echoes of earlier discussions, from the late nineteenth century over natural and social evolution, as in Herbert Spencer or L.T. Hobhouse.
- 33 Compare with Goodin's comment that we are the only creatures with a 'sufficiently sophisticated consciousness for this purpose', Goodin, *Green Political Theory*, p. 45.
- 34 M. Bookchin, 'Towards a Philosophy of Nature', in M. Tobias (ed.) *Deep Ecology* (San Diego, CA, Avant Books, 1985), p. 229. This also links up with Bookchin's central thesis that domination of nature follows from social domination.
- 35 For Bookchin 'The truth or falsity of nature philosophy lies in the truth or falsity of its unfolding in reality', Bookchin 'Towards a Philosophy of Nature', p. 228.
- 36 See Barry, *Rethinking Green Politics*, p. 46.
- 37 It is worth briefly underscoring this term 'communitarian naturalism', since it will be subject to criticism in the penultimate section of the discussion.
- 38 John Barry, *Rethinking Green Politics*, p. 50.
- 39 A. Brennan, *Thinking about Nature* (London, Routledge, 1988). For Brennan, 'humans, like all other natural creatures, grow and develop by interacting with their various environments (social and natural)', p. 184; M. Midgely, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (London, Routledge, 1995). Goodin implicitly recognises this distinction in his discussion of the problem of 'faking' nature, see Goodin, *Green Political Theory*, pp. 35–6.
- 40 '[I]t is a basic moral fact of life that under normal circumstances relations between "human beings" regardless of cultural membership, are or ought to be founded upon a set of moral considerations', Barry, *Rethinking Green Politics*, p. 56.
- 41 Goodin, *Green Political Theory*, p. 15.
- 42 Goodin, *Green Political Theory*, p. 120.
- 43 For Goodin, therefore, 'we should turn a blind eye to some of the crazier views (views about personal life-styles, transformations of consciousness)', Goodin, *Green Political Theory*, see pp. 16, 17.
- 44 See Barry, *Justice as Impartiality* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1995), p. 22.
- 45 Goodin, *Green Political Theory*, pp. 46, 52.