Nature as Origin and Difference

On Environmental Philosophy and Continental Thought

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Recently the question of what insights and conceptual resources the traditions of continental philosophy might provide to contemporary environmental thought has received much attention; in this essay I would like to consider this issue, focusing in particular on the traditions associated with poststructuralism. To some extent, interest in this question among environmental philosophers has been marked by a fair degree of anxiety—a vague sense that "postmodernism," by turning the whole world into a text, denies the very existence of nature and therefore the significance of attempts either to understand the dangers to which it is currently exposed or to argue for the need to protect it.[1] Others, of course, have argued on the contrary that contemporary continental thought is not only compatible with but indispensable for an environmental philosophy capable of grasping the character and origin of our current environmental crisis.[2] I want in this essay to ask the question of the relation between the "postmodern turn" and environmental theory not so much in terms of the particular debates it has already engendered, but rather at a more abstract level.[3] I will identify four accounts of nature that might be distinguished in contemporary continental thought, and try to point out both the connections among them and also the difficulties they each face, asking in turn of each what it might provide in terms of a philosophically adequate environmental theory. The second and third of these are familiar ones deriving from contemporary poststructuralism. The first is probably familiar too, but is older, and is presented here as a contrast, while the fourth, which I will end up defending, is perhaps less well known and hearkens back to an earlier continental tradition associated with certain forms of Hegelian Marxism. The accounts here will be sketchy ones, for which I apologize in advance; what I am interested in developing is a kind of typology of views of nature, and thus what I present will have something of the character of ideal types.

Nature as Origin

Some of those who worry about the supposedly pernicious influence of poststructuralism on environmental philosophy do so in the name of a view of nature that has its own (often unacknowledged) pedigree in the history of continental thought, originating in traditions of Romanticism, vitalism, and neo-Kantianism. The view is certainly a familiar one, and holds a powerful grasp on the contemporary environmental imagination, especially that associated with "deep ecology" and similarly radical views. Nature on this account functions as an immense and complex organic whole, a massive order in which humans are embedded and out of which they emerged. This order has its own logic and teleology that transcend human understanding and even in a certain sense the human world. The "natural" here, indeed, is contrasted with the human-made or "artificial": what is natural is that which occurs through the workings of that massive whole independently of human will or action. Humans have a strange (and in fact paradoxical) role in this account, since they too are part of nature and hence are subject to this higher teleological order, yet in applying "calculative" or "instrumental" rationality in a doomed attempt to achieve control over it they forget their own rootedness in the natural, with dangerous consequences. Similarly, the natural is contrasted in this sort of view with the social, via a set of dichotomies whose tenor we recognize well from Rousseau. Natural impulses are reminders of our animal selves, which is to say our real selves; on top of those are imposed social rules and conventions which serve to transform (and thereby to corrupt) those impulses, producing a social world whose artificial char-

acter shows it to be a locus of distortion and deception. Thus humans behave naturally when they act in accordance with "natural processes" (i.e., those that would take place anyway in their absence) while their actions are harmful and unnatural (and immoral) when they act in ways indifferent or worse at cross-purposes to those processes. It is the hubristic human dream that our actions could fundamentally transform (indeed, master) nature that leads ultimately to a series of technological and other acts whose ultimate consequence is environmental disaster. I take it that the general contours of this kind of account are well-known.

"Nature" on this view stands for a stable world that precedes humans, ontologically prior to human activity and to the social structures (and the language) within which that activity takes place. It is what the world, including the social world, is made of. The practical processes in which human beings engage—the practices through which they provide for themselves shelter, food, and the prerequisites for communal existence—are ones that may transform the pre-given natural reality but do not in any serious sense generate a new one. The hubris of technology is the hubris of a culture that has forgotten this, believing that we can transform the world *essentially*. The utopian dreams of a technological mastery of nature forget that nature is both prior to and more powerful than anything humans can do, and so the "new world" of automobiles and nuclear power and genetic engineering and deodorized underarms they promise produces instead—and inevitably—a world of global warming, toxic wastes, dangerous genetic experimentation, and ozone holes.

The Critique of Nature

Nature on this first account is where we come from; it is the origin or foundation on which everything else is built, and we ignore this at our peril. It is this very notion of *nature as origin* that one significant strain in recent continental philosophy calls radically into question. Poststructuralism's celebrated anti-foundationalism turns in this context into what might be called a "critique of nature": to the extent that "nature" is the term we use to

stand for the original or foundational or immediate, it is precisely something whose existence various forms of poststructuralism tend to deny. The project of deconstruction, on one reading, is a project of taking that which appears to be original, foundational—in a word: natural—and revealing the complex processes of linguistic and social construction required to produce that appearance. The origin turns out, in this project, always to be constructed, and hence to be no origin at all; that which was supposed to be foundational is always discovered not to be what it claimed to be, what it was "meant" to be, and so the arrival of the origin is always, as Derrida famously puts it, deferred. With this, the promise that indeed there *is* something original, something out of which everything else is built but that was not itself built, becomes harder and harder to believe.

The unmistakable implication of this line of argument is thus that nature doesn't exist. The familiar view of nature as something prior to humans on which they work but which they cannot fundamentally transform is thereby rejected; a strongly anti-naturalist impulse now expresses itself in the form of scholarly interest in something like a "cultural studies of nature" devoted to discovering the myriad ways in which the concept of nature is culturally produced and reproduced.[4] Views of nature turn out to be historically and socially contingent: what counts as natural in the post-industrial world today, for instance, is very much a function of the ambivalence with which that world views itself and what it has wrought. Furthermore, so-called "natural" landscapes turn out upon inspection frequently to require significant expenditures of human work to maintain them in the condition tourists looking for respite from the human world have come to expect.[5]

The concept of "wilderness" has come to play an important role in this debate. As has been noted by several authors, it is an idiosyncrasy specifically of American environmental thought to emphasize the significance of wilderness and wilderness preservation as central to a progressive environmental program.[6] The idea of the untouched natural world, of areas where no human footprint can be found—and of the importance of preserving them—seems

to play a role here that it does not, say, in Europe or the third world; and the social and historical reasons for this are not hard to imagine, whether these be the existence here of an enormous and for many centuries relatively unpopulated landmass or (more likely) the stupendous historical amnesia whereby a North America that before the seventeenth century was not *so* unpopulated is still viewed as somehow having been entirely empty of human beings.[7] In any case wilderness even here, if this is defined strictly as land absolutely untouched by human action, is awfully hard to find; instead the definition gets stretched and transformed in a way that provides ripe pickings for a strategy of deconstruction. What is held up as wilderness to be preserved from human intervention always turns out on examination to reveal, somewhere, the mark of the human, and so appears next as only "relatively" wild; the discovery of true wilderness, as always, is deferred, and all we have before us is wilderness's signifier.[8]

The "trouble with wilderness," as William Cronon calls it, reveals the antinomies that bedevil the naturalist views I associated earlier with vitalism and romanticism. Bill McKibben wrote a book some years ago that received much attention called *The End of Nature*, in which he argued that the widespread climate or atmospheric changes caused by greenhouse gases or chlorofluorocarbon use meant that nature in the sense of untouched wilderness no longer existed; his claim was that *this* was the environmental catastrophe—that there will never again be a "nature." Yet there was little recognition in his book that in fact such a catastrophe has always already taken place. The trees out his window in the Adirondacks, he complains, will never again be natural ones, responding as they now do to a climate transformed by human action—and yet he concedes elsewhere that the landscape surrounding him, including the (relatively young) forest, is itself the result of failed early colonial attempts at farming, as well as who knows what activities by pre-colonial inhabitants.[9] Which is to say, the nature whose end he bemoans really ended a while ago—and to answer the question of when requires a constant deferral as the moment of origin gets pushed farther and farther into some mythic past. It is the Heideggerian

immer schon one has to appeal to here: the human hand is always already on the earth, and to pine for the days when it was not is to pine for the sort of foundation we wish we had but must learn to live without.

If nature is that which is prior to the human, of course, then humans are not natural. There is a curious inconsistency within the view I am sketching between the claim that the natural excludes the artificial and the claim that humans are part of nature.[10] Humans are not the only organisms to have produced significant atmospheric change; but when we read of how the invention of oxygen-generating photosynthesis by the early cyanobacteria increased the oxygen concentration in the earth's atmosphere from one part in a million to one part in five (and wiped out a significant proportion of life on earth), we don't think of these bacteria as having ended nature.[11] They were themselves natural—but isn't the same true of humans? If nature gave rise to everything, then nature gave rise to us too, and to everything we produce, including superhighways and strip mines—and so pure nature turns out not to be so hard to find, nor so difficult to protect, nor (for that matter) so charming. On the other hand, if "unnatural" means "artificial" then all human action turns out to violate nature. The only way out of this antinomy is to introduce a dualism of a very traditional sort, whereby certain human functions (typically bodily ones) are treated as still natural whereas others (involving will and reason) are not. Such a dualism does not move an inch beyond Descartes, of course, except that the signs attached to the two sides are inverted; more to the point, however, with it the vaunted "holism" of nature is radically ruptured.

The deconstructive "critique of nature," then, is above all a critique of this impossible and antinomical dualism, pointing us towards the ways in which humans are always already entangled in the natural, and reminding us that while we are doubtless nature's product at the same time nature is always already our product too. This is so both in the sense that the way we see it and think of it never reveals to us a nature-*an-sich* but always a nature from our particular social and historical perspective, and also in the more direct and practical sense that we are active creatures, always building and

rebuilding the world we inhabit, always (and always already) making it into our own. *There is no nature*, in the sense anyway of an origin or a world somehow beyond or underneath the human one; the single world in which we live is one in which we are always already active, and which we are further always already in the process of changing.

But then there is no world or thing to be "saved" from our changes, to be "preserved." If all worlds are equally human worlds—the precolonial Adirondacks inhabited by Algonquins and Iroquois, the not-quite-wilderness where McKibben today makes his home, and some future one where his beloved forests have been clear-cut to put up massive indoor malls air-conditioned against global warming—then we can no longer find in nature the standard by which our environmentally consequential actions can be judged. This is the source of the fear that the deconstructive critique of nature engenders in environmental philosophers—the fear that anything goes, that there is no longer any basis for preferring one kind of environment over another. In the claim that nature is a "social construct" they hear once more the hubris of the technological dream that the world could somehow be made (or remade) by us, and that we get to choose what world to make—a utopian dream whose potentially (and often enough, actually) dystopian consequences we are all too familiar with nowadays.

But for those who defend something like the "constructionist" position—and here I must acknowledge that I am one such—what appears as a dangerous weakness in the view is in fact a strength. The naturalistic fallacy is a fallacy; the political and social questions about what technologies to build and what transformations of the landscape to countenance are political and social questions, it seems to us, and we want to reject the naturalism that thinks it can find the answer to such questions by an appeal to an asocial, pre-historical, apolitical nature—by appeal, that is, to an origin from which we have strayed and to which we are called to return. This is what anti-foundationalism means: we cannot answer the practical question about how we are to act except from where we are now; and where we are now, for better or worse, is in a world where the human touch is everywhere and where a principled refusal to act is both a practical and a conceptual impossibility. Indeed, the deconstructive turn in the discussion of nature shows us why the naturalistic fallacy is a fallacy: because each appeal to nature as independent of the social turns out upon analysis to possess its own social meaning and its own historical pedigree, and hence cannot in truth achieve the origin it claims to know.

Nature as Difference

Yet there is another role that nature plays in poststructuralist theory—not simply the negative role of a concept to be deconstructed but also a more positive one, which some environmental thinkers find more congenial. Nature in this other version comes to stand not for the origin that is to be rejected but rather for *difference*. It appears now as the name we might give to the otherness of the world, to that which is always left out of any attempt to grasp the world as a whole and bring it entirely into the light. This is the radical form a postmodern anti-foundationalism takes: it calls us to attend, in every language or conceptual scheme, to what that scheme occludes, excludes, inhibits—more, it calls us to attend to the crucial fact that every such scheme does occlude, exclude, inhibit something, and does so essentially, because this is what such a scheme *is*. The idea here is not, however, that there is some single reality that, could we only see it without the scheme, would appear to us whole and unhidden, as if the scheme were simply a kind of latticework that always conceals something or other and that one could imagine removing. Instead the claim is that "reality" is subject to what's here being called a scheme; there's nothing hidden by the scheme that can be imagined as unhidden except in the context of another one. The point simply is that there always is another one, that no worldview or vocabulary can call itself final and complete, that in showing the world to us in some particular way it also at the same time (and necessarily) does not show it to us in some other way, and so that it always both reveals and conceals.

Again, I assume the general outlines of this view are familiar.[12] It is certainly connected to what I have called the critique of nature as ori-

gin, since its denial that one can meaningfully speak of a world independent of a particular social and linguistic framework means in particular that there can be no original, pre-social, nature in the sense discussed above. And yet in another sense "nature" now can still stand for difference, simply that is for the finitude and limitation of every such framework, without any longer standing for an impossible reality before or behind them. It can stand for the gap between frameworks, for that which is left out—without this being thought of as some particular present Thing. Such a view of nature as difference, further, draws attention to the incompleteness not just of theoretical structures but also importantly of technological practices. Thus while rejecting the naturalistic dream of speaking for, and protecting, a pure world of nature independent of the human, this kind of postmodern environmental theory nonetheless goes on to say that just as no human understanding of "the world" could ever be complete, neither could any technological "remaking" of it—and so every humanized world we inhabit will always also already have something of the non-human within it. Every making is also an unmaking, which is to say that to build the world in one way is again always also not to build it in another, and no matter how smart and masterful we are in our building still those non-buildings or un-makings are processes over which we have no mastery at all. In all our actions to transform the world, that is, there is an inescapable moment of otherness, of resistance, of unexpected consequences and unimagined side-effects—and we could call that moment "nature," which now comes to stand precisely for our inevitable failure, and to appear as the intractable Other of the modernist attempt to understand and control everything there is. Nature for such a view is no longer opposed to freedom in the way that distinction has traditionally been drawn, but instead comes rather to stand for freedom; except that the word "freedom" no longer bears an implicit reference to the autonomy and self-control of a unified subject, but rather precisely to that which escapes that subject's claims to mastery. Thus it refers instead to the chaotic, the unpredictable, the unthinkable, the different.

As I say, many environmental thinkers find this approach to nature more compatible with their own concerns, with its clear implication of the need for modesty in our claims to understand nature and its clear critique of the technological desire to put it fully under our control. Nature by its very nature, so to speak, escapes that control; indeed, as I have suggested, it becomes the name we give to our inability to remake the world exactly the way we want. It teaches us a lesson about humility, about limits and the need for care. This view of nature calls us to something like a *Gelassenheit*, a recognition that we are not the world and that its concrete reality and thereness, its Otherness from us, are irreducible and irremediable. The world resists us, and always has more to it than we think is there, and so to think and act in it is at the same time to call into being forces that go far beyond what we know and intend. This is built into what it is to be a world and to be an agent within it; it is not a contingent fact or a limitation to be overcome by the victorious historical march of science or technology or any other form of "enlightenment." The notion of a "revenge of nature" that punishes technological attempts at domination, which in its romantic version always seemed to depend too much on a fairy-tale anthropomorphizing of natural forces, on this account becomes clearer and more justifiable: all practical transformations of the world must produce "unanticipated" side-effects, just as all attempts by thought to grasp the world always leave something left over and ungrasped, and nature is the name we give to this very fact—and so its "vengeance" turns out to be central to what it is.

Yet there are difficulties with this view. If "nature" is to stand for the difference between thought and thing it cannot itself be a Thing, present and available for inspection and fully open to conceptual understanding. Thus we will have to avoid the strong temptation to re-reify it, to turn it into some particular object we need to honor, respect, protect, preserve—and whose nature we can know. This was McKibben's mistake, for example: he too wanted to think of nature as Otherness, but he understood this so literally and flatfootedly that for him as soon as humans put their dirty fossil-fuel burning paws anywhere near it, it

immediately lost its otherness and so met its "end." He couldn't see that human transformative activity does not rob nature of its otherness, because the otherness remains within the activity itself, is indeed characteristic of it; he buys, that is to say, the modernist utopian dream that there could be pure activity (or pure knowledge) without otherness or limitation, and simply bemoans this fact, not realizing that actually it's not a fact at all.

If nature is to stand for the inevitable gap between what we intend and what we produce, or between the world and what we think we know of the world, then we have to be careful: nature itself cannot be known, cannot be grasped or understood. Claims that nature is thus-and-such have to be eschewed; the holism characteristic of deep ecology and much other popular environmental radicalism, for example, is certainly unacceptable from this point of view, as are the claims for this or that as nature's "inherent telos." So too are things like the Gaia hypothesis as a basis for environmental theorizing of an ontological sort. Nature is no longer a thing, but rather simply a way to refer to the concreteness and thereness of the world that no amount of theorizing or of technologizing can ever start to overcome. But if it's not a thing, then it's also not some thing we need to "defend"; even talk of "letting nature be" becomes suspect here, because nature in this sense isn't anything at all. If nature is what is left out, it will be left out too of any attempts we make to protect or support it, or even to talk about it.

But with that the danger arises that the very subject matter of environmental thinking and the concrete motivations that lead people into that thinking start to dissolve. The result of this line of reasoning threatens a kind of quietism with respect to any large-scale attempts to "save" the environment or "solve" environmental problems; they appear like the same old dreams of mastery, subject to the same humbling dialectic of unanticipated side-effects and inevitable yet also unexpected failures. This comes close to being explicit in late Heidegger, with his counseling of *Gelassenheit* and his call for a patient anticipation of a god who may or may not arrive; but it's implicit, too, as I'm not the first to point out, in Nietzchean levity or Derridean irony.[13]

Furthermore, if nature is simply the fact of an otherness to the world, one so ultimate that no technological attempt at mastery can even begin to touch it, then in a certain sense it is in no real danger at all. There is just as much "otherness" in the urban world as in the world of what we used to call "nature."[14] Why, then, is the latter an appropriate object of our environmental concern and not the former?

More serious from a philosophical point of view, perhaps, is the logical problem produced when one tries to speak at all about that which by definition cannot be spoken of. The difficulty is well-known, and forms a central theme in the work of postmodern lovers of paradox from Adorno to Derrida. After all, if the term "nature" is supposed to remind us of the way our terms never fully capture that which they are intended to describe, then this term too must fail in the same way—which means that nature itself must differ from our account of it as difference, and in a way that cannot be said or even thought. "Difference," after all, is not a thing, nor is it a name of a thing; that's why Derrida brilliantly uses a name for it that is no name but a simple spelling error. "There is no name for it," he writes, adding that this is "a proposition to be read in its *platitude,*" and not a reference to some "ineffable Being" like God, or we might add, like the Nature radical environmentalists typically want to save.[15] But the paradox here—that "nature" is supposed to be the name of something that cannot be named and that assertions about it are assertions about something about which nothing can be asserted—is a paradox; there's no getting around it, except to take seriously the last sentence of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. If what nature "is"—and it doesn't matter here what techniques one uses to put the "is" under erasure—cannot be said, then the right thing for philosophy to say about nature is: nothing. And that doesn't seem to leave much room for environmental theorizing.

The trouble with interpreting nature as difference is that it falls prey to something like Hegel's critique of the Kantian notion of things-in-themselves, to wit that it just isn't clear why it's so important to insist on the existence of something (or worse, some un-thing) about which there is absolutely nothing to be said. What difference does it make whether it

exists or not? The only way one can get mileage out of the notion is by playing a kind of shell game, trading on various ambiguities (including, here, various meanings of the word "nature") so as to be able to make assertions about the noumenal realm on the one hand while just as quickly taking them back and conceding their meaninglessness on the other. Adorno is a master at this sort of thing; Heidegger does it too. (Derrida is much better at avoiding it, which may be why he actually has very little to say about nature at all.) "Nature"—ordinary nature: mountains, forests, rural landscapes—gets described as somehow "pointing at" or otherwise "indicating" the noumenal world of utter otherness or difference that the term ought in the strict sense to denote, but there's no real account of how this is possible, or of why such landscapes are better able to do this than, say, urban ones, or indeed even of what "indicating" or "pointing" in this sense could possibly mean—or, finally, how any of this could come to be known.[16]

Better here would be Wittgensteinian reticence, which would direct us back to what we can say, what we can speak about—which is the ordinary world we inhabit, the one in which and on which we work and which we come to know through our practices. This world, the world of our real environment, is as I have already suggested one where the human and the natural are inextricably intertwined, not (simply) because we are natural beings but rather because we are always already actively involved in the natural environment—we act on it, transform it, rethink and reshape it, although doubtless we do not do so any way we want. In this sense it is not "other" than us, not something that "goes beyond" or "escapes" us: rather it is right here, the very world we inhabit now, a world which everywhere shows the mark of our activity and yet of course is never identical to us or to that activity either.

Nature and Practice

I want to propose at this juncture a fourth way of thinking of "nature" that might represent an improvement upon those I have already examined. It would be a throwback of sorts, to a tradition in continental thought that in recent years suffered a decline—a tradition in which human practice plays a central role. My reference to Hegel's critique of Kant was not adventitious, for in this tradition Hegel has a significant founding place, above all because of his insistence on the active character of knowledge. His radicalization of the Kantian "answer" to skepticism—and his rejection of the doctrine of noumena—implied that we know the real world because we are involved in constituting it; the Marxist inversion of his doctrine, which stands behind early twentieth century philosophers of practice such as Lukács and Korsch, in turn suggested that the act of constitution had to be understood materialistically, as concrete human labor. Thus this view will emphasize, just as the deconstructive critique of nature as origin does, the constructed character of the environment we inhabit, insisting however on taking the idea of "construction" literally. It is through our practices, which are in the first instance above all laboring practices, that the world around us is shaped into the world it is; our first access to that world is through such practices and indeed there is no access to it that does not involve them.

Part of the point of such a view will be to deny the dualist distinction between the physical world of nature and the "artificial" social world that bedevils too much environmental thinking. For if we take seriously that practice means something like labor—by which here I mean a set of physical, bodily, activities—that distinction starts to collapse. The social world is perfectly real and physical; social institutions are produced and reproduced through concrete activities, and are instantiated in concrete objects every one of which has to be built, while on the other hand the practical processes of building through which those institutions and objects come to be are themselves always socially organized ones. The social world is a physical world, and vice versa; practice doesn't constitute some social part of the world—it constitutes the environing world as such, the world of real objects that surround us, a world that is quite literally "socially constructed."

A philosophy of practice, then, directs our attention to the built environment, which for most of us is the environment—and it is with this environment, I would argue, that "envi-

ronmental theory" ought to begin.[17] This is the significance of the "problem of wilderness" discussed earlier; to question the concept of wilderness, if by this term is meant a world absolutely untouched by humans, is to point out that the whole environment in a certain sense is a built environment, and to draw our attention even in so-called wilderness to the complex social practices that make it possible—practices of trail-blazing, of boundary-drawing, of policing, of ecological planning, not to speak of course of the political practices needed to bring "National Wilderness Areas" into being at all.[18] The point here isn't that everything in the world is Manhattan; there are differences among practices, certainly, including differences in the kinds of effects they have on what was there "before" (but we must always remember that the world "before" was itself not untouched either). The point is that there is no deep ontological difference between cities and national parks, as though the one represented human activity and change while the other represented that timeless Origin away from which the change occurred.

Or as though, more simply, one represented the human and the other nature. Practice, for the kind of view I am describing, is not something ontologically secondary, taking place between two pre-existing poles of actor and nature, subject and world. Rather this view tries to hold to the strange idea of practice as prior to those poles, arguing that both the world and the subject come to be what they are through practical action. Such an approach avoids the problems associated with positing nature—or, for that matter, the subject—as an absolute origin, as well as those connected with the fallacies of naturalism. Rather it takes its cue from the *immer schon*: as a subject engaging in practice, I am always *in media res*, finding both myself and the world in which I act to be the products in turn of earlier practices. I can no longer explain or justify my practices in terms of what the world "in itself" requires, any more than I can explain or justify them in terms of my own sovereign desires or thoughts. What I know of nature, and what I know of myself as well, I come to know only through my practices; and thus it makes no sense to appeal to a nature independent of those practices in order to guide them.

The deconstructive moment in the poststructuralist critique of nature as origin here takes the form of something like a theory of alienation, thereby revealing once again the debt to Hegel and to Marx. While the world we inhabit is in fact something that we build, have built, are building through our practices, still under current conditions it does not appear to us as such. Rather we are surrounded by objects and institutions—markets, gender roles, character structures, but also commodities, landscapes, the distinction between city and country, etc.—that seem to have dropped from the sky, seem that is perfectly "natural"; the role of critical social theory is to deconstruct that apparent naturalness and to reveal the concrete processes of construction that generate it. The call then is for a recognition and reappropriation by social subjects (socially and practically constituted as they doubtless are) of the world they have in fact produced. The motive for the deconstruction is clearer here than it is in the case of the ironic deconstructions associated with the other view: it is driven by a kind of ethical imperative towards self-knowledge. Without such an imperative, it becomes impossible to explain why the loss of nature as origin doesn't leave one in a relativistic quandary.[19] If all views of nature are socially constructed, why should one sort of view be privileged over another? Why prefer the construction of nature as Gaia or wilderness over the construction of it as matter for instrumental manipulation or resource for human enjoyment? Neo-Hegelian theories can answer this question in a way Derridean ones cannot: because processes of construction that know themselves as such are to be preferred over those that remain systematically deluded about what they are and what they produce. The problem of providing a standard by which to judge environmental actions without falling into the naturalistic fallacy—which is to say, without attempting to read this standard off from some account of what nature in itself "is"—is here solved in a non-relativistic, and I would argue an environmentally sensitive, fashion, by finding the standard in practice itself. World-constituting practices that acknowledge themselves as such, that know their implications and take

their responsibilities seriously, are to be preferred over those that do not.

In this sense the deconstructive critiques that show the "constructed" character of what we call nature have a liberatory function; they are supposed to call us to acknowledge our own entanglement in and indeed responsibility for the world we inhabit. Far from reconfirming in humans the hubristic dream of a total domination of nature, though, I think such an acknowledgment can evoke in us a startled humility, and with it potentially a change for the better not just in the level of our "ecological awareness" but in our lives and in our social structures. The world we inhabit, this view insists, is a world that for better or worse comes to be what it is through our practices; to recognize, however, that nowadays it's mostly for worse—that the world surrounding us is in the deep trouble it is, ugly, toxic, warming too quickly, with a torn ozone hole, undergoing apparently massive extinctions, with all the other signs of poor ecological health—is implicitly to call for us to find new practices, ones that will do a better job of "constructing" an environment that is healthier, more sustainable, more beautiful, more able to support life of all kinds.

There is, of course, an anthropocentrism lurking in that last sentence, and many environmental philosophers will note it immediately and perhaps reject it on that basis. It's true that what counts as "healthy", "beautiful," "sustainable," etc. can only be decided by us. It is our practices that make the world what it is, and so the question "what practices should we engage in?" is also the question "what ought the environing world be like?" and many will find the same old hubris in the suggestion that the latter is a question for us to answer. The trouble is that there is no one else who can answer it. It won't do to try to answer it by asking nature or studying nature or in some other way coming to know what nature really *is*; indeed the whole line of argument I have been developing here—and that I find in contemporary continental thought—is that this makes no sense, because there is no way nature really is, and so naturalistic attempts to find the solution to environmental problems by reading them off from nature are doomed to fail. Those who claim to be able to solve them this way are still

subject to alienation: they do not see that what they claim to find "in" nature is really something that has already been put there by previous social practices—which in this case also means by previous social ideologies. A non-alienated approach would acknowledge that the environmental question is fundamentally a social question, a question about the sorts of practices we want to engage in, and that it therefore ought to be answered only through the democratic processes in which those sorts of questions legitimately find their answers. There is no escape from that task.

How does this account of nature fare compared to the view of nature as difference discussed above? It would be easy to interpret the philosophy of practice being outlined here (especially given its Hegelian provenance) as a form of unabashed idealism of just the sort that the other account wants to condemn. Doesn't the claim that "the world comes to be what it is through our practices" involve a failure to acknowledge the otherness and thereness of the world, the way it inevitably escapes our attempts to grasp it? I do not think so; to say we construct the world that surrounds us in our practices is not to say that we dream up some way we want the world to be and then find it magically transformed accordingly; it is to say that we try to build it in a quite literal and physical way. Practice is real; it involves work and difficulty and sweat and, quite possibly, failure. It's the Marxist inversion of Hegel that's relevant here—this is materialism, not idealism. We don't imagine a world, or theorize it, we build it, and the world we build is never the same as any world we might have imagined or theorized before we started work. The "otherness" of the world, that is, is part of the notion of "practice," and indeed it is just this that distinguishes practice from theory, action from thought.

Thus the claim that the environing world is socially constructed does not mean that somehow we build it *ex nihilo*. Of course we don't; building requires materials—everybody knows that. We build the world that surrounds us out of real objects that predate our (current) building processes—but they too, of course, are objects that were themselves (at some earlier point) built. We're back to the always already: my home was built of wood, but the

wood was in the form of 2x4's which had first to be built at the lumber yard in processes that employed timber that had been felled in some forest; the timber too needed tools to fell it, which tools were produced in a factory somewhere else, out of steel that had been smelted in yet another factory, and so on and so on. It won't do, for the reasons the critique of nature as origin made clear, to look for some ultimate Thing out of which and on which all building takes place. We can assert that every act of building requires some "substrate" or other, meaning material which gets transformed in the building, without asserting that some particular privileged Substrate is itself unbuilt and deserves the honorific name "nature."

But then rather than talking of a substrate, with its (to philosophers) dangerously tempting metaphysical connotations, it might be better to talk simply of practice and of its difference from theory. In our practices we build the environing world, but what we build is always other than what we "thought" we would build; our ideas about the world always fail to grasp what's really in it, which is to say what we really put there. Thus our practices never match our expectations or our plans, and that they do not is part of what it means to say that they are practices (and not dreams or theories). Marxist versions of the philosophy of practice sometimes failed to understand this point and its implications, believing that the plan was identical to the achievement. Insisting on it is one of the important services performed by poststructuralist ideas of nature as difference, not least as a way of correcting for a tendency towards utopianizing among certain "social constructionists" about nature. The realness and resistance of the world, the difficulty of labor, call us towards a modesty with respect to our practices, deriving from a sober and even chastened recognition of the inevitable limits to planning and of the essential unpredictability of the consequences of our actions. We are even called here, too, I think, to a modesty with respect to the possibility of the kind of democratic control over our practices that I spoke of above. As indicated, the question of what the environing world ought to be can't be separated from the questions of what practices will help to build that world and how they are to be engaged in—and those are things that indeed

can never be known for certain, nor ever be entirely planned. The history of the unanticipated ecological damage caused by new practices, even those supposed to be ecologically beneficial, is too familiar.

Thus to understand that "difference," otherness, is part of what a practice *is*, is to insist upon the importance of modesty and caution in our practices, of considering ahead of time what their consequences might be, of paying attention to worst-case scenarios and "normal accidents," of making risk analyses and recognizing too the risks involved in believing them, of building in redundancy and error-checking and all the other tools needed to provide some additional security that things will more or less go the way that we expect (knowing nonetheless that they never will). What is not to be concluded here, however, is that we should therefore attempt to abstain from any transformative practices whatsoever—not merely because such an attempt would be a bad idea but rather because it is an impossibility. The call for modesty in those practices ought not to be misinterpreted as a call to try to return nostalgically to the way the world was before we engaged in them—to return, that is, to nature as origin. Nor should it be taken as a call to avoid the attempt to bring them under the sway of democratic social processes, or to give up the attempt to understand them and consciously to choose which ones we engage in, leaving them to the "natural" processes of the market, as some environmental thinkers have begun to do.[20] Consciousness is still better than unconsciousness, even if full consciousness is impossible. Rather it should simply make us more careful and more humble about what we can and cannot achieve, but no less mindful of the responsibility for the environment that our transformative role within it imposes upon us.

What I have been suggesting, then, is that the two "postmodern" views of nature with which I began—the critique of nature as origin and the identification of nature with difference—despite the real insights they have to offer about fundamental issues in environmental philosophy, each lack an appreciation for the crucial role in such a philosophy that ought to be played by the notion of practice. As a result they fail to grasp the *active* character of the relation between humans and their environment,

a failure which threatens to lead environmental theory back first of all towards a pernicious dualism that identifies the natural with the non-human, and secondly towards a naturalism that thinks it can find in a nature so purified of human action the source of an appropriate set of standards for human interactions with the environment. I have tried to suggest instead an alternative approach, one that sees nature neither as origin nor as what is left out, but rather as connected to practice. The "social constructions" through which the environment we inhabit comes to be what it is are above all practical ones: the world is made through our activities in it, which is not to say we can make it any way we want or that it is entirely us, or ours. What distinguishes practice from theory is that the former is real, difficult, concrete (and unpredictable by theory in its results): and nature might be the name we give to that very concreteness.[21]

ENDNOTES

1. See, for example, the anthology edited by Michael Soulé and Gary Lease entitled *Reinventing Nature? Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1995); Holmes Rolston, III, "Nature for Real: Is Nature a Social Construct?" in T. D. J. Chappell, ed., *The Philosophy of the Environment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Robert Frodeman, "Radical Environmentalism and the Political Roots of Postmodernism: Differences That Make a Difference," in Max Oelschlaeger, ed., *Postmodern Environmental Ethics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 121–35..

2. Heidegger is the figure most often cited here, claimed by many to be the most important of twentieth-century environmental thinkers. Michael Zimmerman has played a significant part in making this argument—ambivalent though he now is about Heidegger's legacy—and his recent book *Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) is an important text for any one concerned with the relation between poststructuralist thought and the environment. For Zimmerman's earlier views on Heidegger, see his "Toward A Heideggerean *Ethos* for Radical Environmentalism," *Environmental Ethics* 5 (Summer 1983): 99–131..

3. Other texts worth mentioning here are Verena Andermatt Conley, *Ecopolitics: The Environment in Poststructuralist Thought* (London: Routledge, 1997); Arran E. Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis* (London: Routledge, 1995); and Peter C. van Wyck, *Primitives in the Wilderness: Deep Ecology and the Missing Human Subject* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997). Max Oelschlaeger's anthology *Postmodern Environmental Ethics* includes a number of important essays on the issue, including Jim Cheney's "Postmodern Environmental Ethics: Ethics as Bioregional Narrative," pp. 23–42).

4. For three different versions of this sort of thing see, e.g., William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995); Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).

5. There are an awful lot of pipes and other equipment at work to keep Niagara Falls looking terrific; apparently indeed on occasion the Falls are simply turned off for routine maintenance—late at night, of course, when no tourists are around. And the important and ongoing debates about fire and predator suppression in the national parks similarly show how much work is needed to keep them in their natural state—or, more precisely, to define (socially!) what that natural state is. See David M. Graber, "Resolute Biocentrism: The Dilemma of Wilderness in National Parks," in Soulé and Lease, eds., *Reinventing Nature*, pp. 123–35. Cf. also Alston Chase, *Playing God in Yellowstone: The Destruction of America's First National Park* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1987). Stephen J. Pyne, in his recent book *How the Canyon Became Grand* (New York: Viking Press, 1998), writes: "The Grand Canyon was not so much revealed as it was created" (p. xiii).

6. An excellent collection of essays on the question of wilderness is J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson, eds., *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1998). On the peculiar role of wilderness in American environmentalism, see (in that collection) especially Ramachandra Guha, "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique," J. Baird Callicott, "The Wilderness Idea Revisited: The Sustainable Development Alternative," and William Cronon, "The Trouble With Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature."

7. See William M. Denevan, "The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492" in Callicott and Nelson, *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, pp. 414–42; also Gary Paul Nabhan, "Cultural Parallax in Viewing North American Habitats," in Soulé and Lease, *Reinventing Nature*, pp. 87–101. Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn have made a similar point with respect to the Amazon forests; see their *The Fate of the Forest: Developers, Destroyers and Defenders of the Amazon* (London: Verso, 1989).

8. For an interesting case study of this sort of phenomenon, see Jan Dizard, *Going Wild: Hunting, Animal Rights, and the Contested Meaning of Nature* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994). See also John Rodman, "Restoring Nature: Natives and Exotics" in Jane Bennett and William Chaloupka, eds., *In the Nature of Things: Language, Politics, and the Environment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 139–53.

9. Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989), pp. 47–49, 32. Cf. Albert Borgmann's discussion of McKibben in "The Nature of Reality and the Reality of Nature" in Soulé and Lease, *Reinventing Nature*, pp. 31–45.

10. John Stuart Mill pointed this out in his essay "Nature," in *Collected Works*, vol. 10 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), pp. 373–403; cf. Holmes Rolston III, "Can and Ought We to Follow Nature?" in his *Philosophy Gone Wild: Essays in Environmental Ethics* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1986), pp. 30–52.

11. Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan call this "the greatest pollution crisis the earth has ever endured." See their *Microcosmos* (New York: Summit Books, 1986), p. 108.

12. Of course I am abstracting here from real differences among the Heideggerian, Derridean, Adornoian, Foucauldian, etc. versions in which this kind of position appears.

13. Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Frederick Lawrence, transl. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), lectures 4 and 6; also Thomas McCarthy, "The Politics of the Ineffable: Derrida's Deconstructionism," in *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 97–119.

14. Indeed, this is one way of understanding Heidegger's claim that "the essence of technology must harbor in itself the growth of the saving power": that Being, and its difference from beings, is at play within the world-disclosure characteristic of technology, too. See "The Question Concerning Technology" in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, David Farrell Krell, ed. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 334. But of course it is just to this extent that some might question Heidegger's relevance as a specifically *environmental* thinker.

15. Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 26.

16. Sometimes, in a more sophisticated version—and again both Adorno and Heidegger do this—the locus is moved from nature to art. In Heidegger's case, anyway, this isn't much of a move: it's telling that his example is Van Gogh's painting of the peasant shoes, not (say) Leger or the Italian Futurists.

17. Thus Andrew Ross opens a discussion of environmentalism by writing: "Why not begin, as ecology has ordained, with a local environment? As a city dweller who does not regard himself as much of a nature-lover, it is important to start with the stores in my neighborhood. Living in Manhattan's SoHo. . . " and etc. (*The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life* [London: Verso, 1994], p. 1). We need more, I would argue, of this kind of "bioregionalism."

18. Cf. Mark Woods, "Federal Wilderness Preservation in the United States: The Preservation of Wilderness?" in

Callicott and Nelson, eds., *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, pp. 131–53.

19. Cf. Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*, pp. 96–102.

20. Zimmerman flirts with this idea—see *Contesting Earth's Future*, pp. 332–38. See also Gus diZerega, "Social Ecology, Deep Ecology, and Liberalism," *Critical Review* 6 (1993): 305–70.

21. I am grateful to Jonathan Maskit for suggestions and conversations that were very helpful in the writing of this essay.

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