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From wilderness to ordinary nature: A French view on an American debate

Rémi Beau*

The wilderness debate that has raged in American environmentalism since the 1990s has led to the valuation of less-spectacular forms of nature than wilderness. This increasing interest in ordinary nature brings American environmental thought to an environmental ground more familiar to French ecologists. Although the wilderness idea that focused on untrammelled places was difficult to integrate into the French philosophical landscape, reaching common ground could foster exchanges between American environmental ethics and French political ecology. More precisely, the renewal of naturalism that emerged from the wilderness debate could inform French political ecology, which sometimes tends to reduce environmental problems to social issues.

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INTRODUCTION

A French philosopher in the environmental field may be ambivalent about the great debate on the wilderness idea that began at the end of the 1990s and was described in the two important books edited by John Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson.ⁱ A French philosopher could be somewhat torn between the gain of a more familiar environmental ground, where he can use his philosophical background, and the loss of the promise of a renewal of natural philosophy. Indeed, the manner in which the opponents of the wilderness idea highlight its cultural construction obviously finds echoes in the French philosophical tradition. Since the 1960s, the claim that nature is socially construed has sounded like a leitmotiv in French philosophy. Thus, to show how the wild and

pristine nature celebrated by the wilderness idea is actually a pure product of American white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant (WASP) culture requires the environmental debate to be located on a ground well known to French philosophers. This deconstruction seems to offer a good opportunity to foster relationships among American and French thinkers on environmental matters. However, one may wonder whether these critics weaken not only the wilderness idea but also environmental philosophy in general. In France, the few philosophers who have considered environmental ethics have been interested in the discipline precisely to explore a domain entirely ignored by moral philosophy at least since Kant: nature beyond humans. Environmental ethics appeared to be an escape from sociocentrism. From this perspective, the deconstruction of the wilderness idea that insists on the social dimension of nature seems to deny the critical power and the novelty of environmental philosophy. If nature is socially construed, the philosophers who have claimed that their aim is to address morality in nature would continue to focus on humans. Consequently, the dismissal of the wilderness idea would have facilitated the dialogue between American and French environmentalists, but it did so at the price of the dissolution of the main substance of environmental philosophy.

This conclusion overlooks some of the positions taken in the debate on wilderness. By analyzing the criticism of wilderness proposed by its opponents, we will show how this debate could foster real exchanges between American and French environmentalisms without dismissing the critical force of environmental ethics. In this sense, we will underline that the question is not to choose between the wilderness idea and sociocentrism but instead to widen the idea of nature from the wilderness to ordinary places. Accordingly, we will see how this move is conducive to the development of a new naturalism.

FROM WILDERNESS TO ORDINARY NATURE

One of the hypotheses submitted by the environmentalists who initiated the wilderness debate posited that the preservation of the remote and deserted areas that are deemed wilderness might not be the only concern—or even the primary concern—of nature-protection policies. These thinkers noted that while environmentalists were debating about how to manage—or more precisely, how not to manage—wilderness areas, the ecological state of all of the places that remained outside the limits of national parks was deteriorating alarmingly. The question was not as much to encourage the creation of new parks (even if that could be accomplished in the same time) as to highlight that there was also nature to protect in places that were both nearer and more familiar than wilderness

spaces. In other words, these environmentalists claimed that if wilderness was considered the location of nature proper, nature should also be considered to be in the countryside, in rural landscapes, in our backyards and even in our city streets.

In the conceptual framework of the wilderness idea, places are natural if and only if humans are absent or at most, temporary visitors. As stated in the Wilderness Act of 1964:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.ⁱⁱ

The claim that nature can be found in places inhabited by humans is a departure from this view. In this sense, William Cronon, in his famous essay “The Trouble with Wilderness, or, getting back to the Wrong Nature,ⁱⁱⁱ” which largely contributes to the wilderness debate, invites environmentalists to pay attention to common places where nature coexists with humans. For Cronon, nature is far from being only in the remotest areas: it is everywhere, “in the seemingly tame fields and woodlots of Massachusetts, in the cracks of a Manhattan sidewalk, even in the cells of our own bodies.^{iv}”

The point raised by the critics of wilderness idea is that focusing on places where humans do not live prevents us from thinking of new ways to develop better cohabitation with nature. As ecofeminist Val Plumwood puts it,

If Nature proper is found only in places without any human influence, there is no way we can recognize the importance of nature or respect its limits in our daily lives, except through elite or exceptional practices of nature escape. If nature is normally ‘somewhere else,’ we do not need to be sensitive to its operations in our local environments of urban, working, and domestic life.^v

In this sense, environmental thought should retreat from the “Big Outside” praised, for example, by Dave Foreman, to less remarkable and spectacular places, the ones where we live and that Cronon calls the “common middle ground”: “The middle ground is where we actually live. It is where we—all of us, in our different places and ways—make our homes.^{vi}” This idea of the middle ground can be traced back to Aldo Leopold’s idea of conservation. Indeed, as Baird Callicott reminds us, the forester was particularly interested in places that lie between wilderness and cities, which he called the “middle landscape.” Callicott writes as follows:

And in ‘Wilderness,’ Leopold attends less to wilderness than to the potential for wildness in the middle landscape, as it is sometimes called, of North America—the rural landscape between densely settled urban areas and the largely unsettled designated and de facto wilderness areas.^{vii}

Elsewhere, he adds in the same vein that

Leopold worked with Wisconsin farmers to grow wild game ‘crops’ ancillary to domesticated crops. In this *middle landscape* between the streets of the city and the wilderness, Leopold began to think of conservation as harmony between people and land^{viii}.

In sum, another line of environmentalism seems to emerge from the wilderness debate, extending the scope of thought regarding the protection of nature to spaces transformed by humans.

Environmentalists who argue in favor of this approach draw from sources other than those used by wilderness thinkers. For the latter—Sigurd Olson, for example—the source of environmentalism was the tough, rough experience of wilderness. As he states, the men whom he came to know do not satisfy their “unquenchable desire” with the “out-of-doors”; they need “unbroken country, primitive conditions and intimate contact with the earth.^{ix}” In contrast, wilderness critics tell us very different stories that have motivated their commitment toward nature protection. Cronon describes how he experiences the “sacred in nature” not in remote wilderness but in places closer to home. He mentions successively a “small pond near [his] house where water bubbles up from limestone springs,” a sunset that casts a “golden light on the misty farms and woodlands below” and again, Aldo Leopold’s farm.^x Baird Callicott expresses his attachment to the urban environment of the city where he grew up:

From my earliest childhood experience, my environmental aesthetic has been shaped by this idyllic blend of the natural and the built environments [...]^{xi}

Elsewhere, Callicott mentions his feelings for the banks of Mississippi River, where he roamed as a boy, and bemoans its pollution by industrial and municipal sewage.^{xii} When he tries to remember which experience made him care about the non-human world, Andrew Light recalls what he describes as prosaic experiences:

As a child I spent just about every afternoon playing at a place called Flat Rock Creek in the little town that I grew up in outside of Atlanta. It ran behind a row of suburban houses wedged between old farmland, which would eventually become a golf course after my family moved away. Though a place like this certainly can be huge for a little person, in my case it didn’t take me outside of myself but rather became the first place that I ever cared about^{xiii}.

In these vignettes, we note that these environmentalists have a background of nature experiences that are quite different from those of a thinker such as John Muir. Andrew Light describes these experiences as the moral journey of environmentalism from wilderness to place. Similarly, Callicott invites us to travel with Leopold:

We need to follow Leopold further along the spectrum he traveled, intellectually as well as physically, from

the roadless wildlands of the Arizona and New Mexico Territories, to the middle landscape of the Upper Midwest, and on into the city.^{xiv}

Our point here is to understand the implications of such a shift, if it must become real, for the French reception of American environmental philosophy. French philosophers gave environmental ethics a cold welcome. When not entirely ignored, the philosophical works that emerged in the 1970s in the Anglo-Saxon world were primarily met with severe criticism in France because they were uniquely considered as anti-humanist thought.^{xv} This cold reception remained the status quo until pioneer works published at the end of the 1990s began to introduce environmental philosophy in a non-distorted manner.^{xvi} Why was French philosophy unable for so long to welcome American environmental ethics?

In addition to the theoretical reasons that we will examine later, we can identify what we call an environmental reason, which is the radical difference in natural morphology between the two countries. In a country such as France, where landscapes have long been humanized, the wilderness idea does not match ecological reality. Consequently, elaborating a wilderness ethic in philosophy seems far from the main concern of French thinkers, even if they are concerned about environmentalism. Reciprocally, wilderness thinkers are mute when they have to consider the protection of humanized nature. For example, John O'Neill narrates how ecologist Sylvan Routley remains incredulous before the English natural site of the Yorkshire Three Peaks, which for him was anything but natural.^{xvii}

In this respect, the “journey” that leads American environmentalists from wilderness to ordinary places is promising. The fact that their environmentalism was borne of similar experiences of nature seems to help bring their thoughts to a ground that is familiar to French philosophers. In this sense, we can see how the experiences of ordinary nature that we narrated previously echo the experience described by Catherine Larrère. The French pioneer in environmental philosophy has related that her first acknowledgment of the persistence of nature in our so-called entirely humanized world took place in the city of Rio de Janeiro.^{xviii} Thus, the meeting of American and French environmentalism would be easier if environmental ethics were to effectively address ecological problems encountered in partially humanized places.

What about these transatlantic ecological exchanges? As we noticed, few philosophers have worked to contrast American environmental ethics and French ecological thought. To the books mentioned above, we can add a book by Kerry Whiteside, *Divided Natures: French Contributions to Political Ecology*,^{xix} which contains the most direct dialogue between the theses of both sides of the Atlantic.

However, as interesting and worthy as this book is, the dialogue eventually becomes one-sided in the sense that Whiteside primarily works to show how French political ecology could inform and reform American environmental ethics. This issue becomes particularly clear in light of the book's conclusion, which argues that the latter can learn from the former that what we really need to address environmental problems is less a non-anthropocentric ethic than a new humanism.^{xx} In this view, we would like to take the reverse path by exploring how environmental ethics could be significant in French ecological debates.

First, we will attempt to show how part of the wilderness debate cuts across the criticism of modernity led by some French thinkers. Next, we will examine how the step taken by environmental ethicists toward ordinary nature led to the renewal of the conception of nature and naturalism. Finally, we will see how this renewal could inspire French ecologists despite their growing reluctance to refer to the word nature.

NATURE BEYOND DUALISM

One of the main critiques given by philosophers about wilderness is that if wilderness as a place is without humans, wilderness as an idea goes *against* humans. By saying that, such philosophers insist that what they see as wrong with wilderness is how it is associated with an ideology that systemically opposes both man and nature. For example, Callicott and Cronon^{xxi} explicitly claim that the goal of their criticism is the wilderness idea, not the ecological sites gathered under the name wilderness. They bemoan that the wilderness idea remains theoretically anchored in a dualist conceptual framework that radically separates the social world of humans from that of natural objects, society from nature. Indeed, the recognition of the value of American wilderness, concomitant to the end of the Conquest, is the reversal of the scheme of domination that inspired precisely that Conquest. As Cronon puts it, this reversal originated both in the development of the theme of the sublime and in the myth of the frontier. As the frontier began disappear, some thinkers began to wonder whether American citizens would miss the untamed nature of the West that formed a counterpart to civilization. Therefore, the will to dominate nature gave way to the call for its preservation. In this view, the theoretical framework remains the same; the value is simply displaced from one of the two opposite poles, civilization, to the other, nature.

To the philosophers who question the wilderness idea, the environmental ethicists of the second part of the twentieth century largely inherited their perspective from their preservationist ancestors, which was evidenced when they attempted to give theoretical foundations to the intrinsic value of

nature. Denouncing moral anthropocentrism, they grounded their philosophical works on the same dualism that justified the exclusion of natural beings from the moral sphere. In other words, they opposed the value of wilderness with the ideology of the mastery of nature that they traced back to Descartes's philosophy, but they maintained his dualistic worldview.^{xxii}

This debate among American environmentalists is similar to the themes discussed by a line of French thinkers who led the criticism of philosophical modernity. First, the development of the wilderness debate seems to find echoes in an anthropological stream opened by Claude Levi-Strauss that questions the relationship between nature and culture. In famous words written for Rousseau's 250th birthday, Levi-Strauss argues against the delineation made by Westerners to separate humanity from natural beings:

We started by cutting man off from nature and establishing him in an absolute reign. We believed ourselves to have thus erased his most unassailable characteristic: that he is first a living being. Remaining blind to this common property, we gave free rein to all excesses. Never better than after the last four centuries of his history could a Western man understand that, while assuming the right to impose a separation of humanity and animality, while granting to one all that he denied the other, he initiated a vicious circle. The one boundary, constantly pushed back, would be used to separate men from other men and to claim—to the profit of ever smaller minorities—the privilege of a humanism, corrupted at birth by taking self-interest as its principle and its notion.^{xxiii}

Levi-Strauss identified in the Western nature/culture dichotomy an instrument to minimize other cultures. Instead of recognizing the cultural diversity of the relationship between humans and their environment, dualist thoughts divide living beings onto each side of the frontier and affirm some societies' belonging to nature. However, although he bemoaned its implications and worked at highlighting the diversity of cultures that inhabit the world, Levi-Strauss did not really escape from these categories of nature and culture.

This is precisely what one of Levi-Strauss's most famous successors, Philippe Descola, wanted to achieve. Following his master's direction, the French anthropologist attempted to identify nonvariable structures in societies. As Descola was studying Achuars,^{xxiv} he arrived at the conclusion that the conceptual opposition between man and nature was misleading when we wanted to study the relationships between humans and non-human beings. More precisely, Descola argued that such considerations represent one of multiple ways to think of these relationships, which take place in a particular worldview or ontology. In *Beyond Nature and Culture*,^{xxv} Descola describes other ontologies and argues that among the four ontologies that he recognizes in the world,

naturalism—the Occidental ontology—is the only one to draw such a line between humans and nature. Thus, he asserts, the thought of nature as a whole as the opposite of humanity is a cultural construction. In addition, the specificity of this ontology of the Moderns is that the apparent assumption of nature’s cultural relativity actually tends to impose its worldview on the rest of the earth’s inhabitants. Indeed, the recognition of a diversity of cultures presupposes the existence of one single nature from which these cultures distinguish themselves. Multiculturalism and mononaturalism are two sides of the same coin. In other words, multiculturalism is a mask both for universalism and for ethnocentrism.

In the same vein, sociologist Bruno Latour studies the consequences of modern dualism—which expresses itself in a range of oppositions: nature versus culture, subject versus object, nature versus society—in political ecology. In his two books *We Have Never Been Modern*^{xxvi} and *Politics of Nature*,^{xxvii} Latour analyzes how the commonalities between nature and culture actually incapacitate politics for the sake of modern science. For Latour, as soon as we radically delineate the world of human subjects from the world of natural objects, we become unable either to think about or to build a political community that integrates both human and natural beings. The reason is that in this modern ontology, it is science and only science that endorses the charge of producing objectivity: political actions are somehow disqualified or subjected to the authority of scientific discourse. For Latour, the thought of the preservation of nature exemplifies this scheme, which renders political ecology impracticable. Prioritizing nature before humanity, environmentalists prevent themselves and more broadly, civil society from considering how to protect it. If nature is external to societies, then the latter’s members cannot elaborate collectively on how to inhabit nature while preserving it; therefore, the protection of nature involves the submission of societies to experts’ authoritative rules. In sum, Latour judges environmentalism’s conception of nature as unsatisfying because it remains modern.

Returning to the wilderness debate, we can see how the opponents of the wilderness idea follow a parallel pathway to that of French thinkers who advocate the necessity of relinquishing modern ontology in favor of elaborate political ecology. Both streams of thought acknowledge the fact that maintaining the radical opposition between man and nature cannot solve environmental problems. In sum, they agree about the need to go beyond dualism.

However, when we speak about how to go beyond dualism, this agreement may fail. How can we go beyond dualism? One obvious answer is to suppress one of the two antithetic poles; in France, this is the most widespread answer. Nature is nothing but a social construction; therefore, dualism

no longer stands. As Latour and Descola argue, we should simply stop using the word “nature” and use “non-human beings.” Regarding the significance of the desire to drop the word “nature,” Latour addresses the following criticism to Baird Callicott in an endnote of *Politics of Nature*:

If it sufficed to critique the notion of nature to escape from it, political ecology would have the philosophy to which it aspires. Unfortunately, this is not the case. An article with such a flamboyant title as ‘La nature est morte, vive la nature!’ seeks to demonstrate that, after the mechanistic view of nature, another “more organic” vision is going to take its place. ‘The new conception of nature is more organic... and includes man as, in [Aldo] Leopold’s words, ‘a plain member and citizen of the biotic community’’. One might expect some measure of doubt from John Baird Callicott about the political usefulness of the notion of nature. But no: in passing, and without even noting the fact, he has short-circuited the work of unification. We have thus moved from the presumed dualism of the past to a comprehensive unity, without noticing that nature plays the same role twice!^{xxviii}

The same is true of Cronon, discussed a few pages earlier:

William Cronon’s is even more striking. Cronon is the author of probably the best book there is on the history of an environment (Cronon 1991^{xxix}). And yet he concludes the introduction to a book that brings together the most sophisticated American postmoderns with a sentence that leaves the old nature completely intact: ‘And yet the rock remains, as do the trees and the birds, the wind and the sky. They are first and foremost themselves, despite the many meanings we discover in them. We may move them around and impose our designs upon them. We may do our best to make them bend to our wills. But in the end they remain inscrutable, artifacts of a world that we did not make and whose meaning for themselves we can never finally know... This silent rock, this nature about which we argue so much, is also among the most important things we have in common. That is why we care so much about it. It is, paradoxically, the uncommon ground we cannot help but share.’ Six hundred pages of deconstructionist criticism follow, letting nature play the role it has always played in modernism: that of a world already common, indifferent to our disputes!^{xxx}

There would no longer be a place for nature in environmentalism^{xxxi}. However, we can wonder whether this dismissal of nature as a category would pave the way for the reduction of all environmental problems to social issues in the sense of human issues—in other words, whether this way out of dualism would lead to the absorption of one term by the other. Exchanging nature for non-humans, an expression that explicitly claims the irreducibility of reality to the human sphere, we may paradoxically build a human and purely human world. In this sense, Callicott recently offered a response to Latour:

[Latour] is a metaphysical idealist, thoroughly deconstructing the object side of the subject/object dichotomy,

but leaving the subject side unscathed. For Latour, reality is just as it is socially constructed in the Rousseauian ‘common ego,’ in the collective consciousness. In a word, the formerly objective world is but a skein of rapidly evolving and changing constellations of scientific ideas. According to Latour, science constructs—composes—Nature.^{xxxii}

In this brief discussion between Callicott and Latour, the convergence between American environmental ethics and French political ecology does not seem able to go far beyond the acknowledgment of the necessity to overcome radical dualism. Both sides accuse each other of ending dualism by simply ending one of the two opposing terms of nature and culture. For Latour, environmentalists who attempt to overcome the great dichotomy but refuse to give up the word nature inevitably return to pure naturalism. For Callicott, by reducing environmental ethics to environmental politics, the “French connection”^{xxxiii} either remains dualist or adopts a constructionist view that assimilates nature to a pure social reality. In other words, both sides denounce how the other has exchanged dualism for a type of monism, naturalism against social constructivism.

In light of Latour’s critical reception of the works of Cronon and Callicott, we must reconsider the vivid reactions provoked by the two authors’ criticism of wilderness inside the American environmental stream. The doubts about the theoretical foundations and the utility of the wilderness idea expressed by some of their colleagues have triggered strong responses from leading figures of environmental philosophy. Among them, Holmes Rolston III offers a response to Callicott in which he reassesses the importance, in his mind, of wilderness and suggests that any environmental theory that excludes this concept from its philosophical grounds is only a “so-called environmentalism” and ultimately, a true anthropocentrism. He wrote as follows:

So the problem with Callicott, repeatedly, is to get his environmental philosophy really naturalized. He so resolutely opposes dichotomizing humans and nature that he cannot find any integrity for nature on its own. He remains, for a would-be naturalist, surprisingly humanistic—with people projecting their values onto nature, with people managing their landscapes.^{xxxiv}

Concerning Cronon, the reactions to his famous essay *The Trouble with Wilderness*^{xxxv} and to a book he edited, *Uncommon Ground*,^{xxxvi} were even more vivid. In his own field, Donald Worster blames Cronon for reducing environmental history to anthropocentric cultural history.^{xxxvii} More broadly, in the environmental array, his drive to increase interest in humanized forms of nature was assimilated as a postmodernist attack not only against wilderness but also against nature itself.^{xxxviii} Even from a perspective less hostile to constructivism, Ana Peterson identifies in the constructivist criticism of

wilderness idea—for example, that led by Cronon—the risk of falling into the most classical form of anthropocentrism. As she puts it,

This is a common underlying theme in many social constructionist critiques of environmentalists' ideas about nature. In the end, it is not just the supposed naïveté of the idea of a nature without humans that bothers the critics, but the idea that nature—anything—could have importance apart from human inhabitation or discourse. Such anthropocentrism, in straightforward and unapologetic form, characterizes most conservative critiques of environmentalism, which simply assert that the world (or deer, or trees, or rivers) was created for human benefit and that virtually any human use is therefore justified^{xxxix}.

In this regard, authors such as Cronon and Callicott are not easy to locate in the environmental panorama. On the east side of the Atlantic, they are criticized for maintaining naturalism, whereas on their proper side, they are considered post-modern constructivists. We would like to show that what this crossed analysis of Cronon and Callicott's works highlights is that in their own ways (which differ from one another), they both represent an attempt to escape from the opposition between naturalism and social constructivism. Sailing in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, they attempt to address social problems within environmental thought but keep asserting that the word "nature" is meaningful. They are actually in search of a non-dualist and non-reductive naturalism, a type of Atlantis in the thought of the twentieth century.

WHAT NATURALISM FOR ORDINARY NATURE?

To define this "new" naturalism, we can go back to the core of the wilderness debate. As mentioned above, one of the most crucial points underlined by Callicott and Cronon was that in this debate, their scope includes the wilderness idea, not nature in itself. In other words, the deconstruction of the wilderness idea is different from the deconstruction of nature. Again, they doubt the idea that wilderness was the unique image of nature per excellence, but in no way do they claim the end of any forms or any conceptions of nature. For Cronon, the term wildness can better capture the meaning of nature. In the same vein, Callicott and Nelson, in their introduction to *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, consider this shift one of the two alternatives to classic wilderness idea. They write:

We see two alternatives to the received wilderness idea currently taking shape. One alternative would deanthropocentrize the classic wilderness idea; the other would replace the received wilderness idea with the obviously related, but very different, concept of wildness and the concepts of free nature, sustainability, and reinhabitation that are allied with it.^{x1}

The passage from wilderness to wildness is indeed significant and has important consequences for environmental thought. The distance between the two terms depends on two different conceptions of the idea of the otherness of nature. In the wilderness scheme, it is a radical one: The term highlights the strong opposition between human and natural places. The otherness of nature is defined by its incompatibility with human agency, by the absence of relationships with humans. Additionally, the wildness idea includes the assessment of the otherness of nature, but it does not take place in a human-nature dichotomy. Nature is as wild as she is autonomous and independent from human agency, but the otherness associated with wildness does not prevent nature from co-existing with human agency, even if this co-existence is far from being always harmonious. However, whereas the idea of inhabiting wilderness represents a contradiction in terms, humans can inhabit nature without entirely denying its wildness. By valuing wildness, we become more aware of the fact that human societies are not built on an artificial ground but instead are embedded in nature. Nature and humanity share a common ground. As Cronon puts it, this could lead us to question how we inhabit nature:

Calling a place home inevitably means that we will use the nature we find in it, for there can be no escape from manipulating and working and even killing some parts of nature to make our home. But if we acknowledge the autonomy and otherness of the things and creatures around us—an autonomy our culture has taught us to label with the word ‘wild’—then we will at least think carefully about the uses to which we put them, and even ask if we should use them at all.^{xii}

In this sense, naturalism characterizes how humans inhabit nature. Indeed, beyond the possibility of a pacified or a less-conflictual juxtaposition, the otherness of wildness, contrary to the otherness of wilderness, allows us to consider the encounter between human and natural agencies. Humans can act with nature, not just against nature. That is, human agency can combine with natural agency. This naturalism defines a continuum of, not a dichotomy between, naturalness and humanness or artificialness. The wilderness idea tends to confine us to one single alternative, which is destroying or respecting nature, the latter signifying abstention. Holmes Rolston perfectly illustrates this point by writing as follows:

Only humans have the cognitive power to erect cultures that destroy wild nature. Humans must, and ought to, destroy wilderness when they build their cultures; neither agricultural nor urban lands can be wilderness.^{xiii}

As we depart from the wilderness idea to the wildness idea, we can, conversely, envisage a respectful way to inhabit nature. As Val Plumwood states:

Defining our wilderness experience as a quest for the presence of the wild nature, not the absence of humans, creates conceptual space for the interwoven continuum of nature and culture, and for that recognition of the presence of the wild and of the labor of nature we need to make in all our life contexts, both in wilderness and in places closer to home.^{xliii}

The journey from wilderness to ordinary nature triggers a redefinition of naturalism. Although the notion of wilderness insists on nature as a place—an unviolated place—the idea of wildness is more preoccupied with nature as a process. In this view, nature has no locus per se; rather, nature refers to the many more-than-human agencies that constitute the reality of the world. To understand this form of naturalism, we can refer to the often-cited John Stuart Mill’s definition of nature:

[W]e must recognize at least two principal meanings in the word ‘nature.’ In one sense, it means all the powers existing in either the outer or the inner world and everything which takes place by means of those powers. In another sense, it means, not everything which happens, but only what takes place without the agency, or without the voluntary and intentional agency, of man.^{xliiv}

We can criticize the wilderness idea as a misunderstanding of the relationship between nature in the first sense and nature in the second sense. In the wilderness tradition, the second sense, the definition of nature as occurring without human agency, intensifies the first sense of wilderness. It holds that among the “powers existing in either the outer or the inner world and everything which take place by means of those powers,” only that which does not rest on human agency is *truly* natural. The two definitions are differentiated according a weak and a strong distinction. In the weak sense, everything is natural. In the strong sense, that which is independent from man is truly natural. Against this interpretation, we can assess that the two definitions do not take place in the context of a weak or strong differentiation but are two equally strong, complementary meanings of the word nature, and it is through the interplay of these two meanings that we can understand the relationship between humans and nature.^{xliv} Indeed, each definition is highlighted by the other. Looking at the second definition from the first, we understand that humans and their activities take place in nature. Looking at the first definition from the second, we understand that nature is an actant in the world, that there is a natural agency independent from human agency. From this perspective, as human beings, nature in the second sense builds on nature in the first sense. In other words, we can say without contradiction that nature inhabits nature (as we do).

The way to the alternative between social constructionism and naturalism takes shape. Indeed, this new naturalism maintains that if the reality we live in is construed, we build it not on but with nature. In other words, naturalism does not oppose itself to the social construction of reality; our

reality is instead a co-construction by natural and human actants. The idea of building with—not against—nature is crucial, and it allows us to distinguish between a co-construction thesis and a radical constructionism such as Steven Vogel’s. In his book, precisely named *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory*, Vogel wrote as follows:

We are responsible for what we build precisely because *we* build it, and because in building it we build the world and build ourselves as well; but too often nowadays we do not acknowledge that responsibility.^{xlvi}

The last sentence shows how this form of constructionism remains human-centered, the “we” only designating human subjects who are responsible for the world they have built. Vogel refuses the idea that humans interact with nature because according to him, that idea presupposes a conception of nature as something “independent of us and given from all eternity, that unmediated “nature in itself.”^{xlvii} The naturalism that we have drawn intends precisely to dissociate the two ideas of independent and unmediated nature associated here by Vogel. We acknowledge the otherness of nature in mediated ways, but this does not mean that nature is entirely dependent on us. The wildness idea of nature holds that nature often resists us, contradicts our intentions, surprises us, or plays with us. As French philosopher Pierre Hadot reminds us, when not reduced by modern categories, nature has often been associated with the image of a player in the history of thought.^{xlviii} In the words of Donna Haraway, nature is a coyote or a trickster.^{xlix} These images weigh in favor of acknowledging the fact that nature and natural actors participate in the building or to be less constructionist, in the shaping of the world. As Anna Peterson writes,

This view calls us to respect, take seriously, and seek out the viewpoints and the worlds shaped and inhabited not just by other humans, but by a whole host of organisms sharing the planet. All these organisms are, like humans, embodied and embedded in the physical world. However, they are also all shapers of it, in various ways, active agents and not merely blank slates waiting for human symbols and discourse (and hoes and bulldozers) to make something of them.¹

Thus, environmental philosophy can elaborate a new form of naturalism, which is perhaps one of the main achievements of this relatively young field. By finding a “balance between the social constructionist critique of the ‘naive’ idea of an essential, universal nature, on the one hand, and a sense of the independent reality and value of nature, on the other,”^{li} it describes why environmentalism could and should continue to take sides with nature. From there, this new naturalism opens a new debate that has to meet the challenge of developing a political ecology that counts with and on nature and humans.

CONCLUSION—A 21ST-CENTURY DEBATE

Returning to the dialogue between American environmental ethics and French political ecology, we could attempt to define a new common basis for future discussions. As Catherine Larrère has highlighted, French political ecology has largely been reluctant to use the word nature.^{lii} This refusal rests on an opposition to a sort of naturalism that consists of searching in nature for norms to regulate social interactions or to naturalize human activities. This is the naturalization that French philosophers consider when they critically address the development of ecology. From this perspective, if political ecology reduces itself to an appeal to follow nature, it is at least useless and at the worst, is ethically and politically dangerous. There are no natural rules to follow that could order our social cooperation or pacify our relationships with nature. Does this mean that we must reject any type of naturalism? The answer is no. One way to support this answer emerges from the wilderness debate that continues in American environmental philosophy.

Claiming that nature is not only in the great outdoors but also in the places we inhabit, and exposing theoretical naturalisms consistent with this ordinary nature, authors as different as Callicott, Cronon, Peterson and Plumwood, among others, have set the conditions of a new debate in environmentalism, a twenty-first-century debate. Shifting from wilderness to ordinary nature, we are released from an indisputable normative principle of naturalness that worried French authors such as Descola and Latour. Thus, it seems that we have reached a common ground where we can develop a new idea of nature that will consider both nature's participation in our societies and our contribution to the flourishing of the widest diversity of natural beings.

However, one might wonder how we can achieve such a development when we have rejected the strong principle of naturalness. How can we depart from the view that anything natural is good while remaining able to judge actions or states of the world as better than others for the sake of nature? We can begin by claiming that it is one thing to say that something is good because it is *natural* and another to say that something is good *for* nature or natural beings. However, the question that follows is if the criterion of the absence of human interference is not sufficient, what does it mean to be good for nature? What principles or guiding rules, if any, could we follow to help flourish the otherness of nature?

From our perspective, the most promising way to answer these questions is to adopt an integrative perspective. Indeed, in our minds, the thoughts that seem the most insightful in this regard share the common thesis that human beings and natural beings belong to a same whole, whether it is a community, a society or the biosphere itself. From that perspective, these ecological thoughts

endorse, at least partly, the type of ecocentrism for which Callicott, after Leopold, has argued. The crucial point is to understand that we share with nature and natural beings a belonging to communities and that we have to relate the normative view of our relationship to nature to this belonging. In other words, when we ask ourselves about how we can help nature flourish, we have to envision a collective flourishing, not an individual one. That means that the normative judgment pronounced in the name of nature must refer to the state of the concerned community, which accommodates a diversity of natural and human beings. In this sense, ecological good is a common good. This forms the starting point of the dialogue between the American and French environmental philosophers we will cite to conclude this paper. How can we achieve or move toward an ecological common good? After showing the basis upon which the philosophers could rejoin themselves, we can redraw a sharper partition between environmental ethics, for which we choose Callicott as a representative, and political ecology.

Callicott has devoted the main part of his philosophical work to elaborating an ethical theory that can provide an answer to our environmental dilemmas. In other words, he believes that ethics gives us guiding rules that if we follow them, can pacify our relationships with the natural members of our communities. Dynamizing Leopold's land ethic, Callicott proposes as a new summary moral maxim the following:

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the beauty of the biotic community and to disturb it only at normal spatial and temporal scales. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.^{liii}

Asserting this maxim with some second-order principles, he establishes an ethical theory that can prioritize among our different moral demands, notably those that are caused by the biotic community and those that are caused by humans^{liv}. In sum, Callicott thinks that a well-informed ethical theory, particularly one that is ecologically informed, can resolve, at least theoretically, the conflicting demands that emerge from the "mixed communities"^{lv} that we inhabit. This new "science of ethics" represents a monist attempt to reconstruct a common world beyond dualism.

This monism is challenged by political ecology. Answering a question about Callicott's ecocentrism, Descola precisely captures the core of the discussion.^{lvi} As he mentioned in *Beyond Nature and Culture*, the French anthropologist sees in ecocentrism a promising approach to the quest to establish a common good that considers non-human beings. More precisely, he wrote the following:

Some people, myself among them, may see in an ecocentric ethics such as that favored by Callicott a

philosophical foundation solid enough for humans to engage in a less conflictual coexistence with nonhumans.^{lvii}

Ecocentrism goes beyond dualism and insists on the co-presence of a diversity of human and non-human beings that has to be organized. However, the point is precisely the extent to which we should assign the task of unifying this diversity to a monist and scientifically grounded ethical theory.

Callicott has convincingly argued against the radical separation between science and ethics and has rehabilitated, in this sense, the expression of the science of ethics. The question relates to the place of sciences in Callicott's philosophical works. Catherine Larrère raised this issue in a chapter of a book dedicated to the works of Callicott. In that text, while acknowledging the precious contribution of the environmental philosopher to the renewal of natural philosophy, she wonders if science has an overly preeminent place in his work. She writes concludes as follows:

That is why environmental ethics requires a philosophy and Callicott was right to assert that such a philosophy had to be natural philosophy, not practical philosophy alone. But then we must not forget that in “natural philosophy” there is “philosophy,” not just science. Philosophy, therefore, must be granted more independence, regarding science, than Callicott seems ready to concede.^{lviii}

In his reply, Callicott primarily agrees with Larrère on the need to distinguish between natural philosophy and a scientific worldview, and he clarifies his conception of the relationships among science, natural philosophy and ethics:

What I should have all along written about is the way changes in science [...] have induced changes in natural philosophy, which in turn informs ethics.^{lix}

In a volume of the French journal *Cahiers Philosophiques*,^{lx} where Callicott and Larrère somewhat continue their conversation, the former makes clearer his intent to depart from scientism by indicating the importance of establishing a partnership between the humanities and the sciences “to create a new worldview.”^{lxi}

Nevertheless, an issue remains that makes this conversation an ongoing one. Should we continue seeking to develop one single and unified worldview—not only a scientific attempt but also a philosophical one? Does a naturalism that is emancipated from dualism necessarily come to join a new sort of monism? The passage from wilderness to ordinary nature reveals the plurality of our relationships with nature. It stands for the idea that we can make a society with nature. This cannot

be achieved only by elaborating a worldview that would somehow distribute the right places for nature and humans. We would need to examine with fresh eyes our social activities and question the degree of naturalness or wildness at stake and the share given to natural beings, not to find in nature something like an absolute normative source but to give voices to additional perspectives that must be considered in resolving the conflicts inherent to any society. As Larrère puts it, we “face an indefinite plurality of human and non-human beings.”^{lxii} From that perspective, the research on an ecological common good is as political as it is ethical. That is the point emphasized by a political ecology that intends not to replace but to build upon environmental ethics.

First attempts to develop new ways of thinking about nature which give wildness a place in human altered landscapes can already be observed in France. As a conclusion, we would like to mention two concepts which exemplify this ecological trend. The idea of ferality represents the first one. Elaborated in France by Annik Schnitzler and Jean-Claude Génot, the concept of feral nature refers to the nature growing on places which used to be exploited but have been set aside by humans.^{lxiii} Advocating for « laissez-faire » management and the rewilding of the European forests, the authors walk on the edge between ordinary nature and wilderness.^{lxiv} Their call to loosen the control over nature sounds like a proposal to empower wildness in largely humanized territories. The second concept is the one defined by French gardener Gilles Clément under the name of « third landscape ». In his *Manifesto*, the author writes that « the Third Landscape - an undetermined fragment of the Planetary Garden - designates the sum of the space left over by man to landscape evolution - to nature alone ».^{lxv} What Gilles Clément has in mind is mainly the nature which dwells in the margins of the territories submitted to the control of humans : « left behind, urban or rural sites, transitional spaces, neglected land, swamps, moors, peat bogs, but also roadsides, shores,

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- xxiv Philippe Descola, *The Spears of Twilight: Life and Death in the Amazon Jungle* (New Press, 1998).
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- xxvi Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Harvard University Press, 2012).
- xxvii Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature* (Harvard University Press, 2004).
- xxviii *Ibid.*, n. 35.
- xxix William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1991).
- xxx Latour, *Politics of Nature*, n. 13.
- xxxi This position echoes, on the American side, that of Steven Vogel, who writes: "It would be better at this point perhaps to drop the term nature and replace it with the more precise term environment. The subject matter of environmental ethics is the Umwelt, the world that surrounds us, a world that is always already the product of our previous practices, and changes as those practices change." See Steven Vogel, *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory* (SUNY Press, 1996), 168.
- xxxii J. Baird Callicott, *Thinking Like a Planet: The Land Ethic and the Earth Ethic* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 248.
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