



October 2023

The Self-Alienation of Nature: An Anti-Teleological Environmental Ethic

Thomas P. Reagan
info@ubiquitypress.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/ijurca>

Recommended Citation

Reagan, Thomas P. (2023) "The Self-Alienation of Nature: An Anti-Teleological Environmental Ethic," *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 22. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/ijurca/vol4/iss2/22>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@CWU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@CWU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@cwu.edu.

The Self-Alienation of Nature: An Anti-Teleological Environmental Ethic

Abstract

Understanding Nature itself is an essential component of developing an environmental ethic. However, many of the 'positive ethics' (i.e. ethics based on aesthetics, biophilia, teleology) lack the critical observation that Nature does not act kindly or attempt to preserve an organism's life and well being, but rather, statistically, operates by continually ending life. This paper develops from this notion that biological concepts such as symbiogenesis and biotic potentials point towards an environmental ethic founded upon aligning with Nature's process of turning against itself. This paper claims that humans, being within Nature ontologically yet separated experientially, are alienated from the ideal Nature they must respond to. However, this ideal Nature experiences internal alienation as well; to the extent that many nonhuman animals also partake in the same objectification of life to produce self-protecting technology, one can claim Nature violates itself. And the only foundation for an environmental ethic is to mirror the process of Nature in understanding to what aim such self-destruction is aspiring. The answer: biological flux.

The Self-Alienation of Nature: An Anti-Teleological Environmental Ethic

Thomas P. Reagan
Gordon College

Published online: 07 June 2012
© Thomas P. Reagan 2012

Abstract

Understanding Nature itself is an essential component of developing an environmental ethic. However, many of the ‘positive ethics’ (i.e. ethics based on aesthetics, biophilia, teleology) lack the critical observation that Nature does not act kindly or attempt to preserve an organism’s life and well being, but rather, statistically, operates by continually ending life. This paper develops from this notion that biological concepts such as symbiogenesis and biotic potentials point towards an environmental ethic founded upon aligning with Nature’s process of turning against itself. This paper claims that humans, being *within* Nature ontologically yet *separated* experientially, are alienated from the ideal Nature they must respond to. However, this ideal Nature experiences internal alienation as well; to the extent that many nonhuman animals also partake in the same objectification of life to produce self-protecting technology, one can claim Nature violates itself. And the only foundation for an environmental ethic is to mirror the process of Nature in understanding *to what aim* such self-destruction is aspiring. The answer: biological flux.

Some become too old even for their truths and victories: a toothless mouth no longer has the right to every truth. And everybody who wants fame must take leave of honor betimes and practice the difficult art of leaving at the right time. (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: First Part*)

1. Introduction: Beginning with Death

Humanity’s environmental guilt is, although warranted, entirely misplaced in the belief that one should promote the good/flourishing of an individual being, namely its ‘living well.’ When a person ends the life, constricts the agency, or damages the ecosystems of another living being, those upholding such a belief claim ‘injustice!’ citing varying aesthetic-driven, biophilic, and teleologically oriented ethics. In so doing, however, they actively formulate an unsustainable environmental ethic: as long as it is conceived that the death of a being is never the same as its individual good/flourishing (meaning that to promote the ‘living’ of an individual being is the most ethical way to respond to Nature as a whole, being the sum of individuals whose telos is the ethical aim), such ethics will fail to respond in coordination with Nature itself, because what is good for — and therefore an ethical response to — Nature is the continual, functional death of its constituents.

Clearly, confines must be established in this theory so that humankind, though surely having the power to do so, does not pave death over the entire Earth. This paper proposes a system rooted in how Nature is produced, maintained, and further evolved: symbiogenesis and biotic potentials. Because species evolve

with one another (or, with an Object), to respond ethically to one's environment is to have the mental, productive faculty (techné) to utilize the Other-Object(s) in a way that maintains biotic potentials, i.e. the death of both Object and Self. Essentially, to have an ethic for Nature is, in a sense, to have an ethic against Nature.

2. Beyond Symbiogenesis

The standard model of pop-evolutionary theory (Neodarwinism or 'modern synthesis') relies upon the misconception that Darwin's 'descent with modification' is to be attached to (or, here 'modern synthesis' gets its name, synthesized with) Mendelian genetic stasis,¹ such that the primary cause of a new species is gradual genetic mutation. Though this process is involved, some are now arguing that it is only a small part of the picture. Most notable is Margulis and Sagan's *Acquiring Genomes*, which poses a weighty polemic against this norm by suggesting that two distinct species, rather, symbiotically co-evolve — this process they call symbiogenesis — by the long-term and repeated fusing of two organisms "to make a third kind of organism"² that is wholly unique and, essentially, a species dependent upon itself as comprising an Other in order to continue existing.

By analogy, humans have taken part in this process, only in a terribly destructive manner. In a sense, humanity's only symbiont is its own techné, that is, its rational ability to produce, craft, translate, or cultivate its environment; any human organism deprived of interaction with its highly developed techné (either of its own capacity or of those around it) is bound to perish. Humans have no venom, no hard exoskeletal structure; many red-tooth-and-claw carnivores are larger and faster. Nature has the upper hand, as far as 'might' is concerned. So how has an ape with limited physical advantages managed to climb and ultimately rewrite Nature's chain of relations? Only by the products of human techné (i.e. technology: fire, spears, buildings, airplanes) have *homo sapiens* been able to survive, and even more so flourish extravagantly, such that their ability to harness Nature, to have their techné produce effective technology from the Natural materials in the environment, has undone the previous roles of symbiosis (and similarly, symbiogenesis). Where humans would normally co-evolve with an Other (another species), they now co-evolve with an Object (their own technology).

3. Deep Ecology or Deeply Alienated?

Does this mean that humans have managed to remove themselves from the processes of Nature, or even Nature itself? This widespread concern, very much in the Rousseauian sense of seeing culture's perverting power, expresses that humankind's separation places itself at a distance from Nature, to which it must return. Critics of this position, however, acknowledge the absurdity of a biological organism's separation from the whole of the biological process, which is what one truly means when she says the word 'environment;' though humans are admittedly distinct in their interaction with other species, there is no way for humans to ever be 'apart from' Nature, and furthermore the ethic that must be developed "is one that fully recognizes that individual organisms are embedded in their environments."³ Essentially, green ecology's indistinguishability thesis states that the distance from Nature is mere illusion; to discover an ethic for the environment is to see oneself as inextricably connected to it — a sort of ontological unity between all physical things by virtue of their physicality.

These deep green thinkers rightfully assess the ‘true’ and analytic status of an organism’s physical relation Nature, and understandably do so to bolster the sense of such an ethic’s grasp of cause-and-effect. (The closer one is to its environment, the larger impact its actions, ethical or not, it will have on the whole of Nature, which includes the organism itself.) However, in attempts to think more holistically about the human-Nature relationship, they actually provide a veiled form of naïve realism in which the supposed ‘really out there,’ i.e. the absolute state of being in Nature (Heideggerian overtones withstanding), is made to be the root of the ethic, basing its position on the rather “obvious claim that human fate is interconnected with that of the biosphere,”⁴ but doing little thereafter to connect the Subject to the logic. This position mistakenly addresses rationality to produce an ethic, and overlooks that the contemporary ideology, in fetishistic disavowal, repeatedly returns with ‘I know very well, but still...’⁵

What appears more immediate to one’s experience is not that she is within Nature, but that ‘the thing out there’ has been affected by ‘the thing in here;’ one’s techné, to an extent, projects the Self (though her technology) into the external world, yet in this fusion a disjunction occurs. When one looks out her office window to see concrete streets running through otherwise ‘Natural’ surroundings, she may rightfully think, “This came not from Nature, but from me.” The reductionistic accuracy of deep ecology’s claim rings in the back of one’s head, but yields such tensions of identity (“Is that me out there?”) that dovetail quite nicely with Lacan’s mirror stage,⁶ in which one discovers what she is concurrent to discovering what she is not. To understand oneself as within Nature yet experientially with-out it at the same time is to properly understand environmental alienation.

Now, this particular discussion of human technology flips what would be the classic Marxian portrait of alienation. Rather than being distanced from the end good, it is precisely the end good’s over-proximity that leads to such tension. That Other, which was historically couched within the Natural, is distorted when the Subject transforms the Other into an Object to be employed with a secondary meaning. The very process of producing technology (simply, altering Nature), and thereafter only seeing the substance as such technology (because truly, what else could it be?), reorients one’s perspective in the system to only see her situation as Unnatural, leading to the observation: “It came from within Nature and therefore, surely, could not have left Nature. Yet mitigated through me, who is also Natural, it has become Unnatural.” This state of alienation presents the Subject without an exit, and to feel this paradox is to feel the overwhelming reality of that which is not. Humans convert Nature into the Unnatural, causing the revolt of Nature against itself.

4. The Amoral Crisis

This, however, is neither the critical moral crisis of the present ideology nor the foundation of humankind’s guilt. The ‘Unnatural’ terminology is not meant to mislead; to invert the picture, there is nothing unethical — or unnatural — about the Unnatural, about being alienated. Upon minimal examination, in fact, Nature is in a constant process of self-alienation because it self-perpetuates, meaning biologically reproduces, by killing its present self. Humans are not the only animals leading the revolt. So, where then is the folly of the present ethic (or lack thereof)?

First to say something about where it is not: the amoral Other-Object shift. Humanity, unique only in the extent, is not the only species to exercise techné in an alienating fashion. Take, for example, the beaver.

When a beaver cuts down a tree, it exercises a productive-rational function, which, in effect, alters the state of the Nature around it wherein the Other (that being another species, i.e. the tree) becomes an Object — not a tree, but now a portion of its dam — and thus is used for an alternate purpose than the tree's (previous) Natural contribution to the local ecosystem. Now the tree is to suit the needs of the Subject. However, nothing about this process calls for the advocacy of environmental activists. One must ask: If this use of techné is still viewed as Natural, what are the differences between it and human techné?

This example unifies the human experience of the Unnatural with that of other animals. Nature is filled with the forsaking of living beings, whether that is in the beaver's killing of the tree or any life form affected downstream. And with this, it is difficult to see where exactly the moral crisis is. In fact, the universality of Nature's death and alienation may lead one to question whether or not the environmental issues are really issues at all. Beyond how they affect the human species alone, what are the consequences of destroying other living beings in the process? Is it not simply that humans are the best at playing Nature's game?

Certainly, humanity does as every animal does, and it is 'as clear as noon-day' (to use Marx's phrase) that all animals — not just 'man' — "by [their] industry, change the forms of the materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to [them]."⁷ It is not the mere shift from Otherness to Objectness that holds the core of unethical action; it is not purely that humanity excises its techné or that the technology produced results in the death of other life. It is, rather, the extent to which human techné alters the Natural Death Cycle.

Underneath both modern synthesis and classical Darwinism lies the foundation of natural selection (or "differential survival"⁸), which, as Margulis and Sagan note, does not connote that the stronger organism lives but rather that most organisms die before reproducing. This, I claim, is no longer the case for much of humankind, or at least the portion of humankind that is causing the environmental crisis. The extent to which humans have evolved with their own techné has eliminated all other species as predators. Cities insulate families from Nature and its fangs, only permitting entrance to the species that are more or less domesticated (both crops and animals); many microorganisms have found their match against modern medicine. In the rest of Nature species are limited by one another — the biotic potential of an ecosystem. Humanity, on the other hand, has escaped this confine. Nature's fundamental evolutionary limiter has been checkmated by one of its own species, therefore handing the authority of Death to those with the potential to unnaturally select what lives and dies.

The possibility of finding a balanced ethic, however, lies neither in 'handing back the power' by denouncing technology for the sake of the Natural, nor in the (ideal) restructuring of Nature's established system towards a teleological approach, which seeks to preserve an organism's life and well-being.⁹ These perspectives are blind in that their presuppositions deny the current state of those asking the ethical questions. Humans no longer act as beings in Nature because the Self-Objectified as technology is Unnatural, yet they are not separated because of their physicality and proximity. Under further prodding, one discovers that all organisms are a part of the alienating process: neither in Nature nor separated from it. Organisms progress by using Others as Objects, such that without these Objects the organisms would not survive.

5. The Flux of the Matter

To take part in and thereafter actively perpetuate the process of alienation as a model for environmental understanding is to understand that a death ethic (meaning, one based upon the concept of biotic potentials and natural selection) points forward to continual symbiogenesis to complete the circle. The crux of the matter is found in understanding physical objects' fluctuating identities within the Natural system. Recall the beaver example. When the tree becomes dam wood, its identity shifts from Other to Object. However, in this process, the beaver alters its environment (i.e. organisms downstream, those who nest in the trees, etc.) in a manner that produces a new possibility of interactions. Though use of its techné is primarily to further progress itself in Nature, the beaver's technological output is one that allows for the Other (species) to adapt, find new symbionts, react and revolt if necessary. The technological effect is appropriate for the given ecosystem if the collective Other is capable of responding back in self-correction or more so self-alienation — Nature's revolt within itself, always headed towards new genes, new species, new technology.

So how does humanity take part in the biological flux? Humanity's role, given the present circumstance, is to scrutinize its production of technology in the attempt to determine just how excessive the negative effects are. For humans to produce technology that does not allow for the reaction of Nature is to produce an Object that does not permit Others to adapt; it decides their environment for them. The purpose of a death ethic, and one aiming at symbiotic flux, is to learn to produce Objects that are open for interaction from the Other. To stop producing technological Objects would be impossible; therefore the way forward is to produce such that Nature may constantly wrestle forward, deciding for itself when to leave life behind for the sake of what new may be born.

Bibliography

Benson, John. *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction with Readings*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Degregori, Thomas R. *The Environment, Our Natural Resources, and Modern Technology*. Ames: Iowa State Press, 2002.

Farber, Paul Lawrence. 'The Siren of Evolutionary Ethics: Darwin to Wilson,' in *Nature and Society in Historical Context*, ed. Mikuláš Teich, Roy Porter and Bo Gustafsson. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Kuper, Adam. 'On Human Nature: Darwin and the Anthropologists', in *Nature and Society in Historical Context*, ed. Mikuláš Teich, Roy Porter and Bo Gustafsson. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Margulis, Lynn & Dorion Sagan. *Aquiring Genomes: A Theory of the Origins of Species*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.

Marx, Karl. *Capital, Volume One*. In *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Robert C. Tucker, ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978.

Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.

Taylor, Paul W. *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.

Varner, Gary E. *In Nature's Interest?* New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Žižek, Slavoj. *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003.

Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Brooklyn: Verso 2008.

¹ Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *Acquiring Genomes* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

² Ibid., 12. Here they give the example of photosynthetic animals, particularly, slugs whose ancestors had “eaten but not digested certain green algae, which years ago entered the tissue of the animal — and stayed there,” (13). Organisms of this species (*Elysia viridis*) are always green and feed solely through photosynthesizing. This also happens with ‘higher order’ animals: cows without stomach-dwelling microbial symbionts to digest their food for them simply do not exist; the identity of a cow (as a species) now comprises both the cow itself (as a macro organism without the microbial symbionts) and the microbial symbionts to the extent that the cow cannot function, or further evolve (reproduce), without them.

³ John Benson, *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction with Readings*, ed. John Benson (New York: Routledge 2000), 131. My emphasis.

⁴ Val Plumwood, “Nature, Self, and Gender,” in *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction with Readings*, ed. John Benson (New York: Routledge 2000), 263.

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Brooklyn: Verso 2008), 12. My emphasis.

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 3-9.

⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume One*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 319.

⁸ Margulis and Sagan, *Acquiring Genomes*, 9.

⁹ Paul W. Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (Princeton University Press 1986).