

UNDERSTANDING MORAL LIMITS IN THE DUALITY OF ARTIFACTS AND NATURE

A REPLY TO CRITICS

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Ned Hettinger and Wayne Ouder Kirk present some cogent criticisms of my ideas in environmental ethics, especially those ideas closely associated with my attacks on the process of ecological restoration. Both trace the source of my alleged problems to a pernicious dualism of nature and humanity that they perceive in my environmental philosophy. In this reply I accept their basic analysis of my work but deny that my overall position leads to the problems they suggest. I explicitly endorse the dualism of human artifacts and natural entities, and I argue that this dualism exists along a spectrum of “more-or-less” natural or artifactual. I claim that this dualism is not pernicious, but on the contrary, it is the first necessary step to understanding the moral limits of human action in the natural world.

I begin with a consideration of the formal structure of these critical papers—there is a remarkable formal similarity between these two essays. Each author begins with a brief review of the positive aspects of my position or “theory” in environmental ethics; then there is an analysis of the problems within the position, and the problematic consequences or impli-

ETHICS & THE ENVIRONMENT, 7(1) 2002 ISSN: 1085-6633

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cations of my position for environmental policy and environmentalism generally; then there is an attempt to begin a solution to the problems encountered “on my own terms” so to speak—each author points out that within my position there are ideas that could be used to solve the problems uncovered. Thus I am urged to develop specific strands of my own thought—a recommendation that I (logically) cannot avoid.

Now on one level this formal structure is commonplace in polite scholarly discourse. Before offering criticisms of an author—especially when he is in the same room—we cite a few positive things about his work, and we end by noting that the position of the author is not completely hopeless. So perhaps the structural similarity between these two papers is not particularly noteworthy. But in this case I think it is. For the structure of the papers points out a distinguishing feature of my work that I recognize: My work is essentially negative and critical. I believe that I am raising problems and provocative questions. My criticisms apply to both traditional ethics (especially as it relates to environmental issues) and to the standard (policy-driven) versions of environmental ethics (especially the anthropocentric and individualistic variations). My criticisms also create questions for mainstream environmental policies—or I so hope, for this is my chief purpose in doing environmental philosophy. Since it is essentially critical, the most one can derive from my work in a positive vein are suggestions or hints for directions in which solutions may be found. I readily admit that I have not followed these paths to work out solutions—at least not yet. Thus in a formal or structural sense I am in substantial agreement with my critics: my essays raise a lot of problems; I do not offer fully worked out solutions; but the seeds of possible solutions may be present in the body of my work.

But I have to make one distinction concerning the nature of “problems.” Ouderkirk and Hettinger raise two distinct kinds of problems when they interpret my work. First, there are (possibly) internal contradictions in my ideas that make the theory itself incoherent in some mostly formal way. (For example, my argument for the importance of nonanthropocentric value might hide a latent anthropocentrism—Ouderkirk says at one point that I may be letting anthropocentrism in through the back door.) And second, there are (supposedly) problems in my position because my view has serious negative consequences for standard environmental policies. (For example, both Hettinger and Ouderkirk claim that my view of the distinction between artifacts and natural entities makes impossible all restoration

efforts in the natural world.) Does my position lead to unacceptable consequences for standard environmental policies? I am not sure that this is a problem for my theory. It may instead be a problem for standard environmental policies. My goal is to change standard environmental policies by (dare I say) deconstructing basic assumptions about value and meaning in the human interaction with the natural world. My goal is to upset the apple cart. Thus I do not think I can be criticized for causing problems in the realm of policy.

In turning from formal or structural issues to questions of substance, I have to admit that I am not going to respond to every criticism that has been leveled against my work by Hettinger and Ouderkirck; instead I want to discuss some general issues. First, there is the question of dualism. I am of two minds about this subject. Let me begin with a paraphrase of a famous story about Paul Freund, the Harvard law professor, who once began a talk with the following comments: "There are two kinds of people. Those who like to make distinctions, and those who do not. I belong to the second group." Freund's joke, I believe, resonates with a good deal of truth concerning any discussion of dualism—the criticism of dualism itself always presupposes a dualistic orientation. So although I do not believe that all dualisms are bad, as I will presently show, I can redirect any criticisms of my work as dualistic by turning the tables on the accuser: why create a dualism of philosophical positions, those that make distinctions and those that do not?

I believe that there is a clear distinction between natural entities and human-created artifacts. Indeed, I believe that the distinction is so clear that I am often perplexed by people who claim that there is no distinction. The most general form of the counterargument is that since humans are the products of natural evolution, and since artifacts are the products of human thought and skills that are themselves evolutionary products, then artifacts are as natural as human beings.¹ But this argument clearly blurs important distinctions in the manner in which entities are produced in the world. Artifacts are the result of human intentions. Natural entities are not. What could be clearer?

Superimposed upon this basic distinction there is a spectrum of various kinds of entities. Things can be more or less natural, more or less artificial. A wooden chair is more natural than a plastic chair, because it is more closely related to the naturally produced material that forms its basic structure. The plastic chair is the result of many more artificial

human actions—it is farther from its original natural material or source. But both chairs are definitely artifacts, and completely—should I say essentially or ontologically?—different from naturally occurring entities, for example, a fallen tree that I sit on while walking through the forest. Why are the chairs different? Because they are the result of human intention, human actions to interfere with and mold the natural processes of the world. We could stand around forever and watch nonhuman nature at work and we will never see it produce a chair.

Is this distinction some kind of nefarious dualism? Ouderkirk claims that I use this distinction to “place humans outside of nature,” that I use the fact of human intentionality to separate both humans and their artifacts from the natural world. I do not think that I am doing this. Clearly, I place human *artifacts* outside of the natural world, but I think it is an illegitimate jump to say that I therefore place *humans* outside of the natural world. I realize that we are biological beings, the products of an evolutionary process. But I insist that what we do—the things we create, build, make, imagine—these are all artifactual, outside the realm of naturally occurring entities, processes, and systems. Our artifacts, our culture, would not exist if we humans had not intentionally interfered with and molded the natural world. Nature alone could not create the world in which we now find ourselves.

So we do find ourselves in a dualistic world, a world marked by two basic kinds of things—human artifacts and natural entities—although these two basic kinds do exist on a spectrum bounded by the poles of naturalness and artificiality. What conclusions can we thus draw for questions of value, ethics, and environmental policy? Here we encounter the arguments I raise concerning the restoration of nature. The central question is, “how does the value of an artifact differ from the value of a natural entity?” In “The Big Lie” and other essays,² I argued (following the work of Robert Elliot³) that the value of a restored natural system—because such a system is a human artifact—is less than the value of a naturally occurring system. I still believe this, and nothing Ouderkirk or Hettinger has said gives me a reason to change this view.

But I do want to talk about a more general question of value in artifacts and nature, connected to the ideas of dualism and hierarchy—Ouderkirk raises this issue following the argument of Val Plumwood. Hettinger also alludes to it when he criticizes me for not differentiating between different kinds of restoration projects, for he argues that some

restoration projects are benign, especially when they seek to “rehabilitate” natural processes and areas. Thus, according to Hettinger, I seem to be claiming that all human interference in the natural world is bad.

So we need to look at the determination of value that supposedly derives from my ontological dualism. Ouderkirk interestingly observes that I seem to be reversing the standard ecofeminist line (which he takes from Plumwood) that once we have a dualism between humans and nature (and similarly between males and females) that the human and male side is going to have the higher value, and that the nature and female side is going to be considered of less value. In my critique of restoration, I argue the opposite—that nature is of a higher value than human artifacts. But the key point I want to raise in this essay is that I do not make any *general claims* about the respective values of the poles of this dualism. I am not claiming that artifacts are always bad and that nature is always good; nor am I arguing that nature is always better than artifacts. In the area of environmental policy concerning restoration projects and managed ecosystems, I am making this claim. But I do not think this value hierarchy (nature/good, artifacts/bad) is universally true. For example, I believe that the complex artifactual system we call medical practice is of a higher value than letting natural diseases take their course.

In insisting on the dualism between artifacts and nature my main aim has been to stress the *difference* in value, and not any particular hierarchical ordering of value. As Ouderkirk quotes me, “we view restored nature with a value different from the original.”⁴ *But whether the difference in value favors nature or the human artifact is entirely dependent on the context of the situation.* A house is better than a tree or a cave. It is better to write this essay using an electrically powered word processor than a stick tracing out letters in the sand. Thus I believe that the remediation of damaged ecosystems is a better policy than letting the blighted landscape remain as is—and in this way, I think I answer Hettinger’s complaint that I leave no room for “benign” interference with nature. (Of course, I also believe that we should never have damaged the natural ecosystem in the first place, and that once we begin to adopt a general policy of remediation and restoration, we may come to feel omnipotent in the manipulation and management of nature. And thus we will create for ourselves a totally artifactual world.)

So much for dualism. Let me to turn to the other major criticism offered by these papers; according to Ouderkirk and (especially) Hettinger, I

seem to lack a positive vision of an interdependent community of humanity and nature. I am accused of destroying the human-nature community that I claim is the basis of ethical decision making and of failing to articulate or to explain the positive role for human beings in the natural world. In particular, Hettinger claims that “an adequate environmental philosophy must allow that human beings belong on the planet too, and it must articulate how it is possible for us to respect nature while continuing to be human.” Well, I am not clear why an adequate *environmental* philosophy has to find a place for humans, but let’s assume that it does. Here is my solution: as much as possible, we humans *leave nature alone*. To “let it be” seems to me to be the highest form of respect we can muster. And while I leave it alone, I try to learn as much as possible about it, so that knowledge, respect, and love can all grow together.

We can use the art object/nature analogy again here. If I respect a work of art, I show this respect by my mere appreciation. I show my respect by learning about the artwork, its historical antecedents, the influences upon the artist, and similar facts. I do not attempt to change the work of art; I do not attempt to improve it. (Consider the controversy that surrounded the “colorization” of old black and white films.) At most, if the work of art is fragile or likely to be damaged, I may adjust or manipulate the conditions under which it is viewed, or the physical environment that surrounds it. But any intervention in the artwork itself will change its quality and value. My proper respectful role is to leave the physical object alone.

Hettinger argues that on my view the introduction of any or all human intention in the natural world leads to oppression and domination. He wants a more subtle standard, one that admits of degrees, so that we are free to intervene in the natural world for good purposes. I would like a more subtle standard also—as I state at the conclusion of my essay, “Imperialism and Environmentalism,” the development of an adequate criterion of intervention is the central question of all moral philosophy.⁵ We need to know when it is morally justifiable to intervene in the development of an autonomous subject, whether that subject is a human person or a natural entity or system. Has anyone found this criterion of intervention yet? I wish I knew what it was, so I could act with perfect respect towards all the autonomous subjects that I encounter. But until we come a lot closer to determining this standard, I believe it is dangerous to articulate a positive vision of the human role for intervention in the natural world. To claim that there is a positive role for humans in the operations of the natural

world is to endorse an environmental philosophy that is, at bottom, an ethic of management. Human interventions will be directly related to the positive benefits envisioned for humanity from nature. Humans will intervene and mold nature for human ends and purposes. I endorse instead a radically conservative position: until we know what we can justifiably do to intervene, we should leave nature alone. Thus I agree with Hettinger's claim about my position—but I do not think that his claim is a criticism. I do not offer a positive vision of the human role in the management of nature—I am not interested in developing an environmental ethic that is a management ethic. The introduction of human intentionality into natural systems is a form of oppression and domination. Whenever we intervene, we attempt to mold the natural world to suit our needs.

The goal of my position in environmental philosophy is to accentuate the difference between the natural world and the world of human culture and artifacts. This is a *pedagogical dualism*. We humans—overly impressed with our power to manipulate the natural universe—must learn that the proper way to treat autonomous nature is different from the way we treat our artifacts. We must not treat nature as a mere commodity for the furtherance of human satisfaction. We leave nature alone. Such a commitment does not prevent us from acting in the largely artifactual world to solve environmental problems such as pollution, environmental racism, sustainable development, or overpopulation.⁶ But why do we need to manage the autonomous natural world?

Am I only offering a negative vision? Perhaps. But we need to know what we cannot and should not do before we can start working out what we should. We must appreciate the limits of human activity. We must know our limitations.

Let me close with a story by Walter Benjamin, which I have borrowed from the novel about Benjamin's death by Jay Parini.⁷

In a remote Hasidic village, so the story goes, some Jews were huddled together in a shabby inn one Sabbath evening beside a log fire. They were local people, all of them, with the exception of one person whom nobody could identify. He was obviously poor, a ragged man who squatted silently on all fours in a shadowy corner at the back of the room.

A number of topics were discussed, and then it was suggested that everybody should say what he would ask for if only one wish were granted him. One man wanted money; another would have a faithful son-in-law; a third imagined a brand-new carpenter's bench, with shining tools. Every-

body spoke in turn, and when they had finished, only the beggar had said nothing.

They prodded him, of course, and—with reluctance—he said, “I wish I were the powerful king of a large important country. Then, one night while I slept in my palace, an enemy would invade my kingdom, and by dawn his horsemen would penetrate my castle, and they would meet with no resistance from my guards. Awakened from a deep sleep, I would have no time to dress; I would have to escape in my nightshirt. Fleeing over hill and dale, through forests day and night, I would arrive at last right here in this despicable inn, and I would be found squatting here in this corner, right now. This is my wish.”

The others looked around the room, deeply confused. “And what good would that do you?” asked one man.

After a pause, the beggar said: “At least I’d have a nightshirt.”

Recognizing the duality of human artifacts and natural entities is the first step to a critical understanding what we do and do not have, what we can and cannot achieve, in our interaction with nature and natural processes.

NOTES

1. One of the best versions of this argument as it applies to the problem of restoration can be found in Donald Scherer, “Evolution, Human Living, and the Practice of Ecological Restoration,” *Environmental Ethics* 17 (1995): 359–79. I respond to Scherer in “The Problem of Ecological Restoration,” *Environmental Ethics* 18 (1996): 222–4.
2. Eric Katz, “The Big Lie: Human Restoration of Nature,” *Research in Philosophy and Technology* 12 (1992): 231–41. This essay and several others on the ethics of restoration are reprinted in Eric Katz, *Nature as Subject: Human Obligation and Natural Community* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 93–146. My most recent analysis of restoration can be found in “Another Look at Restoration: Technology and Artificial Nature,” in *Restoring Nature: Perspectives from the Social Sciences and Humanities*, edited by Paul H. Gobster and R. Bruce Hull (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2000), 37–48.
3. Robert Elliot, “Faking Nature,” *Inquiry* 25 (1982): 81–93. Elliot has since modified his views so that his original radical critique of restoration (which I endorsed) has been softened considerably. See Robert Elliot, *Faking Nature: The Ethics of Environmental Restoration* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) and my critical review in *Ethics and the Environment* 3 (1998): 201–205.
4. *Nature as Subject*, 101.

5. Eric Katz, "Imperialism and Environmentalism," *Social Theory and Practice* 21 (Summer 1995): 271–85. Reprinted in *Nature as Subject*, 133–46.
6. I discuss the justifiable imposition of human goals in interventions regarding artifactual and hybrid systems in Eric Katz, "A Pragmatic Reconsideration of Anthropocentrism," *Environmental Ethics* 21 (1999): 377–90.
7. Jay Parini, *Benjamin's Crossing* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997). The story appears on 293–4.