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The Metaphysics of Crisis: Maintaining Moral Contingency in Environmental Philosophy

The truth of the matter is that hardly any one has ever yet mastered the fact that the world is round. The world is round – like an orange. The thing is told us – like any old scandal – at school. For all practical purposes we forget it. Practically we all live in a world as flat as a pancake. Where time never ends and nothing changes.¹

Thus wrote H. G. Wells of a Victorian lady who thought she and her successors would always have weekend parties at Claverings, her mail and tea by her bedside every morning. I will argue that this ‘nothing changes’ attitude also characterises how much of environmental ethics (and environmental theory more generally) views the relationship between human beings and the rest of the natural world. They are typically grounded on ontologies or paradigms which do not face the implications of crisis. The situation of environmental ethics is thus similar to Lady Homartyn, who ‘lost any belief...that fundamental things happen.’²

To be sure, environmental ethics are typically inspired by the intuition that something desperately bad has happened in recent environmental history, that there is something morally wrong about the way human beings currently relate to the rest of nature. Moreover, any environmental ethic is informed by an underlying model which outlines how nature and culture relate. As Clive Ponting points out, ‘The answer to [the question of humanity’s relation to nature] is crucial in determining how [we] decide which human actions can be regarded as legitimate or morally justified.’³

In my view, however, the dominant nature/culture metaphysics on offer do not permit the possibility of *crisis* in our species’ relation to nature; they do not recognise a morally-contingent fracture in that relationship. This means that the environmental ethics we construct lack adequate moral contingency, in particular because ecological disaster is conceived to be integral to the project of being human. I will examine the nature/culture metaphysics of Holmes Rolston, III, J. Baird Callicott,

¹ H. G. Wells, *Mr. Britling Sees it Through* (New York: MacMillan, 1916), 1.2.5. I am indebted to Daniel Barbour for alerting me to this quotation.

² *Ibid.*

³ Clive Ponting, *A New Green History of the World: The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 116. In this, Ponting agrees with Lynn White, Jr., who argued that ‘What we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship’ (Lynn White, Jr., ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,’ *Science* 155, no. 3767 [10 March 1967]: 1206).

and Val Plumwood, and argue that the shortcomings of their environmental ethics can be overcome by a metaphysics of crisis, or what I call 'rupture.' Without the possibility of a rupture in our relationship with nature, we will be forced to scuttle the very enterprise of environmental ethics itself.

Mainstream Environmental Ethics

Roughly speaking, the usual metaphysical models available to environmental ethicists have not much changed from the basic options provided by the Pre-Socratic philosophers: monism and dualism. Monism is a way of saying that 'all is one,' whereas dualism has instead two fundamental categories, often in opposition to one another. In environmental ethics, the metaphysical question does not concern substance or the most basic components that constitute all reality, but rather how two particular aspects of reality – (human) culture and (the rest of) nature – connect. While there are many important correlations between substance dualism (e.g., Anaxagoras, Descartes) and nature/culture dualism, or between substance monism (e.g., Parmenides, Spinoza) and nature/culture monism, nature and culture can relate in a variety of harmonic or dichotomising ways in spite of what we think they might ultimately be made of. The metaphysical issue here, then, is not one of composition but of connection between realities.

Nature/culture metaphysics are value-laden at a number of levels. Not only has the Western tradition assumed that hierarchies of being constitute hierarchies of value, but one of the components of the relation is *society*: i.e., the realm of human moral agency. It should come as no surprise, then, that environmental ethics usually (even if unconsciously) emerge out of one's nature/culture metaphysics. These sorts of deep models provide the limits within which environmental ethics may operate. This is likely why J. Baird Callicott claims that his disagreement with Holmes Rolston, III, over the relationship between nature and culture is more fundamentally divisive than their disagreement concerning the objectivity of nature's intrinsic value. Callicott is a nature/culture monist,⁴ and Rolston a nature/culture dualist. Val Plumwood attempts to articulate a mediating position that allows for nature/culture hybridity in ways that she thinks Callicott and Rolston's metaphysics do not.

Callicott argues that since Darwin, the evolutionary continuity between humans and the rest of nature is indisputable. There is no fundamental distinction between us and them; all are members of the same community of life. Therefore, Callicott claims that 'human works are no less natural than those of termites or

⁴ Callicott's nature-culture monism is not to be confused with his 'moral monism,' viz. the issue of whether or not we can 'reconcile the whole spectrum of traditional and novel ethical domains' under the aegis of a single ethical theory (J. Baird Callicott, 'The Case against Moral Pluralism,' in *Beyond the Land Ethic* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999], 144; originally published in *Environmental Ethics* 12, no. 2 [Summer 1990]: 99-124).

elephants. Chicago is no less a phenomenon of nature than is the Great Barrier Reef...⁵ Given that we are just as natural as all the other plants and animals, it is senseless to view wilderness as pristine so long as it is separated from human intervention. Even Aboriginal peoples modify their environments, and besides, contemporary civilisations have already polluted every last square inch of the planet anyway.⁶ Notice that Callicott is not saying we could be or used to be one with nature; he's saying that we *are*, our pollutants notwithstanding. His is a grammatically declarative 'just so' story. Callicott's argumentation is intended to give us timeless 'facts,' a stable world picture that unifies apparent flux. Metaphysically speaking, this is the way he thinks things *just are*, or *have to be*. The ethics of Chicagoan effluents come afterwards.

Rolston, by contrast, is an unapologetic dualist. Human culture, he argues, is entirely novel in natural history. It emerged *out of* natural selection, so much so that our species is 'ecologically abnormal.'⁷ Cultural values require natural values to exist, but are not reducible to them; ballet is marvellous but not 'natural' in any ecologically meaningful sense. Here too we have a metaphysically static world picture: Rolston sees no need to comment on the 'fact' that our cultures 'make an increasing "exodus" from nature.'⁸ This just happens, a value-neutral result of evolution.

However, Rolston thinks his dualism is an improvement over Callicott's monism. Because nature/culture dualism possesses a 'contrast class of events'⁹ (whereas Callicott's monism apparently doesn't), it can do more axiological work. Callicott is committed to saying that Chicagoans who pollute Lake Michigan are just as natural as Chicagoans who do not.¹⁰ Callicott's account of 'the facts' naturalises and normalises anthropogenic environmental degradation, such that it isn't value-neutral after all. Rolston, by contrast, thinks himself free to say that culture *ought not* to colonise nature completely, that we should *suppress* our innate cultural tendency to 'degrade the system.'¹¹ For him, bringing culture into balance with nature is a matter of restraint, of practical reason conquering human nature.¹²

⁵ J. Baird Callicott, 'La Nature est morte, vive la nature!' *Hastings Center Report* 22, no. 5 (September-October 1992): 18.

⁶ Callicott's second point follows Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1988); cf. J. Baird Callicott, 'My Reply,' in *Land, Value, Community: Callicott and Environmental Philosophy*, ed. Wayne Ouderkirk and Jim Hill (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 301.

⁷ Holmes Rolston, III, *Conserving Natural Value* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5; quoting E. O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 272.

⁸ Holmes Rolston, III, 'Nature and Culture in Environmental Ethics,' in *Ethics: Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy*, vol. 1, ed. Klaus Brinkmann (Bowling Green, Ohio: Philosophy Documentation Center, 1999), 154.

⁹ Rolston, *Conserving Natural Value*, 5.

¹⁰ Holmes Rolston, III, 'Naturalizing Callicott,' in *Land, Value, Community*, ed. Wayne Ouderkirk and Jim Hill (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 108-109.

¹¹ Holmes Rolston, III, *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 72.

¹² Cf. Rolston, *Environmental Ethics*, 35-38, 40-44 and Rolston, *Conserving Natural Value*, 26-33.

But Callicott does not think this is an improvement. No amount of self-lacerating monism-approximation can hide the fact that Rolston's dualism naturalises our ecological abnormality. He suggests that people who see themselves as freaks of nature are far less likely to be ecologically sensitive than those who feel they are a part of nature. Besides, Callicott does not think being as natural as coral polyps makes us incapable of condemning water pollution. He has his own dualistic contrast class: 'ecosystem health' and the lack thereof.¹³ Humans can and should live within healthy ecosystems; it's wrong when we cause ecosystemic morbidity. Trouble is, Callicott doesn't think that humans can share even *healthy* ecosystems with some species, particularly 'large predators.'¹⁴ Therefore, he argues for human self-exclusion from wilderness areas, creating biodiversity reserves that sequester vulnerable nonhuman others away from our unhappy influence.

Therefore, in order *not* to betray environmental ethics, Callicott ends up in the same spot as Rolston: humans are, by nature, an ecological contaminant. We are not told why human beings 'naturally' cause ecosystemic morbidity or 'naturally' cannot get along with bears. Ecologically-sensitive apartheid is apparently a result of just another value-neutral 'fact.' The final irony is that Rolston's own ecologically-sensitive apartheid *would* betray environmental ethics. The gap between humanity and nature is so irreducible that he accepts the possibility of cultural values reaching a magnitude great enough to justify the obliteration of nature's very ability to sustain biological life!¹⁵ So much for balanced harmony: Rolston could end up with an exclusively cultural monad. Why? That's just the way culture is.

Middle Ground?

In sum, Callicott makes pollution and anthropogenic species extinction par for the course, while Rolston makes us ecological freaks that could justifiably turn Earth into a culturally glorious chunk of concrete. Monistic or dualistic, each makes ecological disaster fundamental to the human constitution, while fearing the other will undermine environmental ethics! Each introduces an ethic of self-suppression to

¹³ Callicott, 'La Nature est morte,' 18.

¹⁴ J. Baird Callicott, 'Should Wilderness Areas Become Biodiversity Reserves?' in *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (Athens & London: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 588; originally published in *The George Wright Forum* 13, no. 2 (1996): 32-38.

¹⁵ 'There is a kind of "promise" in nature, not only in the sense of potential that is promising but in the reliability in the earthen set-up that is right for life. ... [N]ature is a fountain of life. That was the original etymology of "nature," from "natans," giving birth.... It seems a shame now for humans to break that "promise." ... But humans ought not to break what has been so promising in nature – not at least without an argument that the values they make in culture exceed the values they break in nature' (Holmes Rolston, III, 'Disvalues in Nature,' *The Monist* 75, no. 2 [April 1992]: 268). If the 'promise in nature' is nature's rightness for life, and if surpassing cultural value may justify the 'breaking' of this natural value, then it follows that (armed with sufficient cultural value) we may make Earth a place *inhospitable* for the continuation of life itself.

salvage the moral dimension of environmental theory. In either case, the human tendency to foul its own nest is built into their metaphysics.

Val Plumwood tries to offer a middle position between these two options, in the hope of mitigating their oddly similar problems. She criticises the imperialist, dichotomous conception of wilderness-conquering culture which, like Rolston's dualism, locates virginal 'pristine wilderness' at one pole and the despoiling 'pure culture' at the other. Plumwood also repudiates Callicott's monistic 'wilderness skepticism,' which denies the appropriateness of the concept of wilderness or naturalness and rather accepts ecologically-destructive practices as normal.¹⁶ Her solution is to assert a continuum between the dualistic poles of (pure) nature and (pure) culture, and to allow that a variety of hybridities lie in the middle.¹⁷

However, all her metaphysics seems capable of showing is that 'certain forms' of nature are dependent on culture, and that *all* culture is dependent on 'the healthy operation of non-pristine, biospheric nature.'¹⁸ But simply 'recognising nature in what has been seen as pure culture and culture in what has been seen as pure nature'¹⁹ does not change the fact that the pure forms of both still exist on the poles of the continuum, a conceptual duality which she had earlier repudiated. An affirmation of mixed middles does not undermine the conceptual duality of the virgin on the one pole, or the despoiler on the other. Plumwood does not offer a critique of the idea that (presumably unadulterated) culture can or should comprise one end of the conceptual polarity, let alone indicate *where* a culture should sit in relation to the poles. Nature and culture still are eternally and metaphysically different things, conceptually opposing each other like the two ends of a magnet. And while she shares with Rolston those dualistic notions of pristine wilderness and pure though despoiling culture, she lacks his argument that culture should perfect a balance with the natural end of the continuum. Plumwood gives us a metaphysically static slide rule; positions on the rule may vary, but the rule does not. Her continuum, which assumes the conceptual validity of pure culture and pristine wilderness, is just that: 'the' continuum, a matter of fact.

Now Plumwood wants to tie her ethics to this stable metaphysical scale because she thinks Western imperialist culture is environmentally *worse* than certain forms of Indigenous culture. But the sheer fact or quantity of mixture does not help us understand why (for her) Western colonial culture is *bad*. Cultures of various sorts *simply sit* somewhere on her continuum of hybridity. Plumwood's graduated scale gives no indication that a 70:30 mix of nature and culture, for example, is any better or any worse than a 30:70 mix; she cannot make it affirm only *certain* arrangements of nature and culture. If one culture is 'purer' than another, then that's just what it

¹⁶ Val Plumwood, 'Wilderness Skepticism and Wilderness Dualism,' in *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, 666.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 669-670.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 670; Rolston agrees with her on this point; see his *Environmental Ethics*, 224, *Conserving Natural Value*, 18, and 'Nature and Culture in Environmental Ethics,' 154.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 675.

is. Even though she criticises contemporary wilderness advocates for inverting the value of virgin wilderness without stepping outside the exclusionary function of the original dualistic framework, her own approach fails to exclude the imperialistic interpretation of culture and thus (implicitly) *affirms the integration of the coloniser with the colonised* as a crossing of boundaries.²⁰ For all we know, Western culture might be colonialist *by necessity*, given the sort of hybrid that it is. Restricting ethical approbation to a certain portion of the hybrid realm would require a critical approach to culture per se. But beyond putting ‘civilization’ in scare quotes whenever it is understood as superior to Aboriginal forms of culture, all we get from Plumwood is a moderated dualism that treats colonialisng culture as a (metaphysically mixed) matter of fact. In so doing, she ends up with Callicott, struggling to morally criticise the metaphysically unremarkable hybrid that constitutes ecologically degrading Western monoculture.

Rupture

Rolston, Callicott and Plumwood all present metaphysics that are stable and static. They give us snapshots rather than moving pictures; like Plato’s Forms, they give us being instead of becoming. Out of this sort of world-picture they try to develop their ethically-charged views of culture’s (in the singular) proper relation to nature. I will try to articulate an alternative understanding of nature and culture which prevents us from considering whatever ecological disaster the dominant global culture is concocting at the moment as just another value-neutral fact about what human beings simply do. On a metaphysics of rupture, culture would not automatically relate to nature in only one way, as dictated by its (ostensibly) internal and eternal characteristics but, at the very least, relate to nature in varying ways depending on external conditions. Crisis conditions could obtain in one context, and not another.

Notice the role of necessity in the nature/culture paradigms we have examined so far. Rolston understands the timeless essences of culture and nature to be mutually antagonistic, while attempting to reconcile the former to the latter by sheer force of moral duty. Callicott understands the timeless essence of culture to be natural, so much so that he must search elsewhere for a basis for condemning environmental degradation – a basis which sees the timeless essence of human nature as incompatible with certain non-human species and healthy ecosystems. Plumwood understands the timeless essence of culture as hybridised with nature, but this simply shows nature-hating imperialist culture to be no different than the forms of Indigenous culture she advocates. Neither metaphysic has anything to say about a *crisis* in the nature/culture relationship, about change, radical change for the worse, historicity, or value-laden nature/culture contingency. What we get

²⁰ Ibid., 670.

instead are accounts of the nature/culture interface that tell us the way things have to be, because that is essentially the way nature and culture already are, have always been, and always will be.

But 'World War II, the Holocaust, atheistic communism, the atomic age, and the cold war' are not just-so stories,²¹ and neither was the pesticide pollution detailed by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. Crises are occurrences, and bad ones at that. It should go without saying that environmental ethics is not simply a form of applied ethics; it is an endeavour of philosophy more broadly. In place of monism and dualism, I submit that we need a paradigm that allows for the possibility of *rupture*. What might a metaphysic that allowed for the possibility of crisis look like? It is not easy to sketch out a picture of this view, because it requires us to think of nature and culture in terms of a variable metaphysical picture rather than a stationary one. At the most general level, a metaphysic of crisis would simply require us to consider the possibility that nature/culture relations may have been substantially altered for the worse at some point in time, rather than see monism, dualism, or hybridity as the eternal truth of the matter. It would *not* require us to deny the evidence that Rolston marshals for dualism, that Callicott marshals for monism, or that Plumwood marshals for hybridity, but rather to look for a way to appropriately understand these bodies of evidence while being motivated and informed by the intuition that something has gone desperately wrong in the way in which human culture relates to the rest of nature. We would not necessarily be committed to the belief that an environmental crisis has in fact happened – we might find that our intuition to that effect is mistaken – but we would also not be committed to the prior assumption that there is no contingency in nature/culture relationships.

By my lights, there are at least four levels to understanding a metaphysics of rupture. First, as we have already seen, if crisis is permitted to intervene in the nature/culture relation, *contingency* rather than necessity must characterise any particular relation between nature and culture. If a World War is a crisis, for example, the implication is that it was not always there, did not have to happen, and should not have happened – even though it did. Environmental crises would be equally unnecessary. According to this perspective, it would be possible (though not necessary) for culture to be natural, just as it would be possible (though not necessary) for culture to be unnatural.²²

Second, this contingency could be both spatial or temporal. If contingency is a part of the whole scheme of things, it might be the case that the way things are here is not the way they are over there, or that the way things are now was not always that way, and therefore might not always be that way. For example, cultures 'over there' could stand in a dualistic relation to nature, whereas 'over here' cultures could stand in a monistic relation to nature (or vice versa). Cultures could also

²¹ James F. Keenan, 'Crises and Other Developments,' *Theological Studies* 69, no. 1 (March 2008): 125.

²² See my 'Following Human Nature,' *Environmental Ethics* 28, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 165-183 for an attempt to further articulate the concept of 'natural culture.'

relate to nature dualistically at one point in time, monistically in another. Before the 20th century, there weren't any World Wars. But now there have been at least two. The possibility of crisis requires us to take metaphysical *historicity* seriously. The model of rupture permits, even requires us to examine a variety of contingent natural/cultural interfaces – which is to say, to engage in the philosophy of culture.

Third, the changes wrought by this contingency are *epic*. Crises don't refer to superficial scratches, but rather to tears in the fabric of something. World Wars are atrocities because they are significantly out of line with some standard of profound importance; so also are environmental crises. Whereas static metaphysics encourage acquiescence to putatively irresistible 'facts of life' (which are usually the same as mainstream socio-cultural reality), a metaphysic of crisis implies a certain radicality. If a culture's relation to nature has become deeply flawed, then it is not clear that the rift can be repaired by reforms, any more than a broken window can be adequately reconstituted with glue, or that Humpty-Dumpty can be put back together again. The problem with crises is that they can make us lose confidence in what we take to be sacrosanct about our particular culture.

Finally, when culture is disassociated with ontological and temporal permanence and thus pluralized, shaken and criticised, it becomes subject to *moral* evaluation. The changes this metaphysic allows are *value-laden*; neutralist 'just-so' stories won't do. Perhaps some historic changes are for the better, but what concerns us here is the ability to map deep shifts that are for the worse. World Wars, after all, are malpractices of freedom. Stable world-pictures which attempt to unify apparent flux, as in classical metaphysics, set the parameters within which ethics is permitted to operate. If ought implies can, then the so-called 'facts' place limits on what ethics may prescribe. But if the nature/culture interface is subject to rupture, then ethics is freed to critically evaluate that very framework which previously limited what ethics could and could not say. Crisis, by introducing contingency into metaphysics, makes the paradigm explicitly value-laden. After all, moral agency requires contingency; ethics is a form of becoming rather than eternal being. While metaphysical *stasis* has the (undesirable) effect of placing (what is thought to be) *culture itself* beyond criticism, rupture means that *cultures* (in the plural) can go bad (though they don't have to). A metaphysic of crisis implicates environmental ethics in a *moral* evaluation of culture.

Moral Contingency in Environmental Ethics

The possibility of rupture in the nature/culture relation thus frees environmental ethics from the so-called 'facts' of how humanity 'just is.' Historical contingency means that, as Galileo apocryphally whispered, 'it moves.' The framework of rupture frees us to argue that *presently*, our culture has gone bad – cultures can do this – but it's not necessary that they all do. Given the intuition of an ecological crisis (or an argument that there is one, which is beyond the scope of my paper to pro-

vide), environmental philosophy must ask why? which ones? how so? This involves looking back and looking around critically – before or while we look forward. It's instructive that the discipline *did* look back in its early days. Lynn White Jr.'s seminal article 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis' suggested that Christian anthropocentrism was the root of the problem, built right into concrete technologies like the mouldboard plough.²³ He advocated a spiritual reorientation of our culture. Today, however, such soul-searching is unseemly: suspiciously nostalgic, ideological, or idealistic.

Yet once we conceive of the relation between nature and culture in terms of contingency, we are better prepared to ground the environmental ethics Rolston, Callicott and Plumwood all seem to want. Rolston tries to salvage his dualism by moving towards *mimesis*, trying to achieve a balanced harmony that tells culture to follow nature in spite of their inherent opposition to each other. A metaphysic of crisis could agree with Rolston that, here and now, nature and culture are dualistically opposed. We in the West are not presently following nature. Callicott might agree, for he tries to salvage his monism by moving towards *krinein*, introducing an alternate contrast class of events and separating ecologically-unhealthy human culture(s) from sensitive nonhuman entities. But we are not constituted by our being sundered from nature either. Rupture allows us to accept Callicott's monism *de jure*, but not necessarily *de facto*. Nature/culture monism emerges as a morally superior goal. Chicago may not be natural, but human habitation in healthy ecosystems can be and should be again. We can get along with bears.²⁴

Plumwood wants to affirm this sort of cultural contingency, even though her scale of hybridity does not ground it.²⁵ She thinks she transgresses dichotomies by pointing out the mere fact of nature/culture hybrids, but colonialist culture turns out to be just as much a hybrid as any other cultural arrangement, and therefore no better or no worse than any other cultural arrangement. An ontology of rupture, however, provides the kind of contingency Plumwood's evaluation of culture

²³ White, 'Historical Roots', 1205.

²⁴ For further (though brief) remarks on co-existing with large predators (specifically bears) in a non-sentimentalising way, see my 'Wilderness, Wasteland and Homeland: Comments on Drenthen,' *Ethical Perspectives* 14, no. 4 (December 2007): 475.

²⁵ Plumwood eventually insists that not all human cultures are fundamentally the same. She recognises a distinction between how Western and Indigenous cultures interface with nature. Moreover, she realises that monism and dualism are context-dependent. Callicottian monism is inappropriate in contexts where 'destructive practices...are the norm,' whereas Rolstonian dualism is inappropriate 'where nourishing land practices are the norm' (p. 666). Plumwood goes on to recognize radicality in her rejection of the assumption that 'environmental problems could be satisfactorily resolved with minor adjustments within a liberal political and economic system which is fundamentally both unjust and hostile to nature' (p. 667; she indicates that this point is further developed in her paper 'Has Democracy Failed Ecology? An Ecofeminist Perspective,' *Environmental Politics* 4, no. 4 [1995]: 134-168). Yet, although she emphasizes that the cultural/natural interface is 'contingent' (p. 683) and 'variable' (p. 684) and does not 'indiscriminately applaud hybridity' (p. 672), she gives no indication of how her metaphysics of hybridity explain or ground these otherwise astute claims about culture and nature.

needs: Western imperialist culture could be understood as a dualist relation to nature precipitated by a critical break from it, whereas certain Aboriginal cultures (on her reading, as well as Rolston's – see below) might justifiably be seen as appropriately monist. Rather than a continuum of opposable components, crisis permits us to posit some version(s) of nature/culture monism as morally preferable – say, the Indigenous cultures Plumwood refers to – and then delineate a process of deviation from this normative ideal, namely a crisis. Post-rupture, certain cultures could be understood to embody a dualistic relation towards nature, which would be decried as axiologically negative – for instance, on Plumwood's analysis, Western colonial culture. The West would certainly be a nature/culture hybrid to some degree, but its flaw would lie in its historic break from monism and its dualistic attempts at exodus from nature.

While it is beyond the scope of this essay to argue that nature/culture monism actually *is* morally superior to nature/culture dualism, a metaphysics of crisis provides the resources necessary for ethical evaluation of cultures and their interactions with nature, which is precisely what Plumwood, and even Rolston and Callicott want to do, but are not permitted to do by their static “just so” stories about human nature and culture. Crisis metaphysics *allow* environmental ethics to decry nature/culture dualism in the present, look back or elsewhere to nature/culture monisms for inspiration, and call for a nature/culture monism in our future.²⁶ Crises are entrances into the temporal experience of the world. Crisis means that the nature/culture interface isn't necessarily always going to be (or hasn't always been) the way it is now. Monism, dualism or combinations thereof are *things that can happen*, not necessarily facts about eternal reality that just are or just aren't. Environmental ethics becomes theoretically possible because culture is finally seen as flexible, as capable of *going bad*.

Moreover, the crisis paradigm gives backing to Rolston, Callicott and Plumwood's misgivings about environmental pragmatism. Pragmatism seeks to achieve goals within the limits of what is possible; environmental pragmatism seeks to achieve environmental policy goals within the limits of what is politically possible. Accordingly, the best thing environmental ethicists can do is use whatever argumentative strategies get ‘the job’ done, which very often means avoiding (ostensibly) radical and unhelpful notions such as non-anthropocentric intrinsic natural value.²⁷ The problem here is that the limits of what is politically possible are taken for granted as theory-neutral facts. Environmental ethics become beholden to what is ‘within reason,’ and can advocate only those changes that are acceptable to the societal status quo. ‘Possibility’ (i.e., ‘reality’) is determined by the prevailing cultural system. Pragmatic environmental policies are seen as reasonable ‘solutions’

²⁶ See Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York & London: W. W. Norton, 1991), especially chapter 3, on the use of memory to creatively inform present and future action.

²⁷ Cf. Bryan Norton, ‘Why I am Not a Nonanthropocentrist: Callicott and the Failure of Monistic Inherentism,’ *Environmental Ethics* 17, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 341-358.

only because their corresponding ‘problems’ are defined by the (supposedly) unassailable social order that caused them; the status quo sets the conditions for the possibility of its own modification. Thus, pragmatic ‘solution-based’ approaches to environmental policy reinforce a cultural entity which is not, actually, second nature. In this way, pragmatism mirrors the technocratic idea that all problems are technical with technical solutions, wherein negative aspects are pooh-poohed as ‘side-effects.’ This is problematic at the best of times, because no particular culture is necessarily unchangeable at any given point in time, but should the society become critically flawed – say, in an epoch of crisis – then pragmatism becomes implicated with the crisis rather than ameliorating it. This is not to say that environmental pragmatism cannot be redeemed; it is only to say that environmental pragmatists must also incorporate cultural contingency when deciding what the limits of possibility are.

Because Rolston, Callicott and Plumwood’s metaphysics do not entertain the contingency of crisis, they all end up as good pragmatists: making environmental ethics fit within the existing schema of a high technological culture (Rolston and Callicott intentionally, Plumwood unintentionally).²⁸ Their static metaphysics do not allow for the possibility that technological sophistication contributes significantly to the civilised tendency for wreaking ecosystemic havoc. For both Callicott and Rolston, the general historical trajectory of the now dominant global culture is taken for granted, whereas Plumwood integrates Western colonialisation into her non-axiological continuum of hybridity as a boundary-crossing member (as if that were a good thing). But a framework that allows for rupture in the relation between humans and nature will not permit such quietism.

The possibility of rupture makes it unwise to take any culture for granted, let alone cyborgising ourselves into the globalised monoculture currently presiding over our contemporary environmental crisis. Crisis means that all varieties of culture, spatially- or temporally-distant or present, are subject to *critique*. We don’t just *have to* relate in this way to nature. The present is *not inevitable*, given the human constitution. The difference made by a metaphysics that allows for rupture is that environmental theorists must critically evaluate human cultures (which are plural in both time and space instead of a static singularity) in order to locate and (hopefully) rectify the breach that caused our contemporary crisis. But clearly, the trouble with taking rupture seriously is that it quickly leads to extremely radical implications. Rolston claims that primitive tribal cultures do not degrade the system,²⁹ and that domesticated animals are a pathetic shadow of their wild counterparts,³⁰ but he explicitly refuses to entertain the idea that it would be bet-

²⁸ See Rolston, ‘Nature and Culture,’ 152-153; Callicott, ‘La Nature est morte,’ 22; and Plumwood, ‘Wilderness Skepticism,’ 670.

²⁹ Rolston, *Environmental Ethics*, 72.

³⁰ Holmes Rolston, III, ‘Living on Earth,’ in *Nature, Value, Duty: Life on Earth with Holmes Rolston, III*, ed. Christopher J. Preston and Wayne Ouderkirk (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 240-241 is the most recent restatement of his views on domesticated lifeforms.

ter for North America to return in some fashion to a pre-Columbian state.³¹ In 1980 Callicott was willing to entertain a sort of primitivism in his defence of Leopold's land ethic,³² but that theme – along with his strident critique of animal liberation – seems to have fallen by the wayside. It's not hard to imagine why: who wants to listen to an environmental philosopher tell us that we should go back to the Stone Age? Similar suspicions surround Plumwood's defence of certain Indigenous cultures.

Dualism and monism may be variously problematic, even scuttling the possibility of an environmental ethic, but at least they are easier to swallow than a rupture-permitting paradigm which requires us to think as far back as the Paleolithic and countenance the end of civilization as we know it.³³ Rupture presents 'facts' difficult to face, rocks and hard places, as it were. Either the mainstream of environmental ethics turns radical, or it eventually admits complicity with the dominant social order, acquiescing to the standards of 'possibility' that society sets for itself in the name of pragmatic compromise, and merely slowing rather than ending our penchant for environmentally destructive behaviour. While improvements in environmental policy are better than nothing, at some point we will have to choose between radicality or collusion. All I ask is that we recognise that cultural analysis and evaluation is at stake in ecological philosophy. The end of this paper is, I hope, a starting point. Let's return to thinking about crisis again, bringing moral contingency back into the basic modelling of environmental ethics.³⁴

Abstract

Environmental philosophers appear to have static understandings of human culture. Be they nature/culture monists, dualists, or something in-between, the relationship between 'culture per se' and 'nature' is not understood to be subject to shifts. I argue that this way of modelling the relation leads to anti-ecological social acquiescence. If we understand nature/culture relations as allowing for the possibility of rupture, however, then monism, dualism, and intermediary/supernumerary positions can be seen in temporal and contingent terms.

³¹ Rolston, *Conserving Natural Value*, 93; Holmes Rolston, III, 'Treating Animals Naturally?' *Between the Species* 5, no. 3 (Summer 1989): 137.

³² 'The land ethic...requires a shrinkage, if at all possible, of the domestic sphere; it rejoices in a recrudescence of wilderness and a renaissance of tribal cultural experience' (J. Baird Callicott, 'Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair,' *Environmental Ethics* 2, no. 4 [Winter 1980]: 334).

³³ Granted, at some level, Plumwood seems more willing to walk down this path than either Rolston or Callicott.

³⁴ In addition to the peer reviewers of this journal, I would like to thank Mary Richardson, John Basl, and other participants of both the 14th International Interdisciplinary Conference on the Environment (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, 2008) and Session 1 of the International Society for Environmental Ethics at the Pacific meeting of the American Philosophical Association (San Francisco, California, USA, 2010) for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

A metaphysic of crisis allows us to consider whether some forms of culture have gone bad while others may not have. Ultimately this leads to a kind of discomfort, for it undermines certain penchants for environmental pragmatism and exposes a radicality at the root of otherwise mainstream naturalistic environmental ethics.