

THE HOPES OF REWILDING

By

Charles B. Hayes

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Philosophy — Doctor of Philosophy

2023

ABSTRACT

Rewilding, as a form of ecological restoration and as a much broader environmental ethos, has dramatically risen in popularity and use in mainstream global environmental initiatives. In many circles, the term “rewilding” has even come to replace broad umbrella terms like “conservation” and “environmentalism,” serving to sum up the purpose and work of global environmental work as a whole. Not too long ago, however, rewilding was fringe in the science of ecological restoration and environmental thought and writing more generally. This dissertation tells the story of the rising prominence of rewilding as both a body of ecological restoration methods and as a rallying cry for environmental causes more generally. This story of popularization marks a shift toward what many have called a *positive environmentalism* – a movement that focuses less on defensively protecting a remnant of healthy ecosystems and habitats and more on actively transforming existing ecosystems in ways that encourage more diverse, less managed ecological functions. As such, rewilding is a movement marked by hope, not of saving what remains, but of transforming what has been lost. I show that these hopes of rewilding are importantly hopes, not simply for healthier lands, but for happier lives. This eudaimonistic focus of rewilding is the key to understanding both its rise to prominence and its radical diversity as a movement, as well as a helpful model for better understanding the dynamics of collective environmental decision-making in the Anthropocene.

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INTRODUCTION

In their 2020 introductory text on the science of rewilding Paul Jepson and Cain Blythe made a prediction: “As rewilding gains momentum we predict that a new term will gain ascendancy over ‘conservation’ and ‘environmentalism.’ Rewilding is, without doubt, the current frontrunner.”¹ They argued that rewilding – not simply as a word spreading in popularity, but as a general ethos of the conservation community – will come to characterize mainstream environmentalism. Environmentalism will simply be rewilding. That prediction was coming true even as they published. Jepson and Blythe’s book, simply titled *Rewilding*, was at least the fourth book with the same one-word title released since 2019, not counting appearances in longer titles and subtitles. Cambridge Press released their *Rewilding* the same year, an interdisciplinary anthology collecting the state of the science for use as a standardizing textbook. The word gained prominence outside academia as well. Influential environmentalists the world over, including E. O. Wilson and David Attenborough, made rewilding a central message in their work. Global environmental organizations like National Geographic and The Nature Conservancy are actively supporting large-scale rewilding projects, even branding their work as a whole in terms of global rewilding efforts.

Such mainstream acceptance was quite absent 15 years ago when the first proposal for “Pleistocene Rewilding” appeared in scientific journals.² Reaction was critical, sometimes quite harsh. The basic theory proposed then was that conservationists cannot continue simply protecting wild lands and threatened species as they currently exist. Conservation must be more proactive, more interventionist, at least at the start. This is because remaining preserves are both too small and already too simplified from their evolutionary complexity to sustain themselves.

¹ (Jepson & Blythe, 2020, p. 150)

² (Donlan J. , 2005, pp. 913-914)

True sustainability, they argued, requires returning a level of ecological complexity that has been absent since the extirpation (or extinction) of large animals from the land. Most eye-catchingly, the Pleistocene proposal was a plan to return the biggest animals – bison and bears, wild horses and wolves – to their historic ranges. While the idea may have been fringe, at least it was being discussed in journals, in *Nature* and *The American Naturalist*. A decade before this, rewilding was a goal restricted to a few circles of radical environmentalists.³ In this origin, rewilding was less defined. It was a hope for much larger areas of less managed land, sure, but it was also many other diverse hopes of how to shape human life and society to live with more complex, less managed ecosystems. And this meant a lot of things to the different people, and that diversity has only grown.

My first goal in the following chapters, then, is initially descriptive. I will chart the history of rewilding's rise to mainstream environmentalism. In doing so I specifically stress the positive hopes of rewilding. More than restoring ecosystems, rewilders are hopeful about finding better ways to live in and with these environments. It is a movement in search of not simply good land, but the good life. My argument is that, despite the messiness of a broad movement, environmental thought does well to commit to holding these two sides together. My ultimate argument is not a defense of any particular kind of rewilding, rather that the rewilding movement models a kind of eudaimonistic environmental thinking that is better suited to understanding the environmental issues of the Anthropocene. The second half of this work is then dedicated to defending the kind of eudaimonistic concerns that mark the rewilding movement against significant objections in environmental ethics.

³ This history is given more detail in Chapters 1 and 2. The term is widely said to originate in the journal *Wild Earth*, founded by Dave Foreman. The conversation is present from the very first issue of *Wild Earth* in 1991. The term had become standard by 1998 when Michael Soule and Reed Noss coauthored what is often cited as the first fully formed rewilding proposal in the same journal.

Chapters 1 and 2 work together with a two-fold goal. First, their task is to provide a fuller description of what rewilding is. Unlike many topics, there is a good bit of history and synthesis required to adequately describe rewilding. This is because rewilding is not a single kind of ecological restoration intervention, or even a collection of methods. Rewilding is much more of a broad social movement that has moved from various fringe initiatives and come recently to into mainstream conservation, with various changes along the way. To this end, I've separated the topic of rewilding under two kinds: *Rewilding Land* and *Rewilding Life*. Chapters 1 and 2 describe each type in turn. Second, these chapters establish my overall argument that rewilding, and environmental thinking more generally, is improved by combining the questions of the quality of environments along with conceptions of the quality of human life. In short, ecological considerations alone significantly underdetermine the shape that restoration should take. Similarly, conceptions of the good life that lack clear and tangible understandings of the kind of environment that fosters such a life are too empty for practical application. The trend of rewilding to hold both questions together – a better land and the better life that land affords – offers an important example of the most promising shape of environmental thinking in the Anthropocene.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 consider objections in environmental ethics. In chapter 3 I address the charge of anthropocentrism. Centralizing a conception of the good life into environmental ethics may appear the very definition of anthropocentrism. And, as many have argued, it is anthropocentric thinking, of prioritizing only human interests over anything else, that lies at the root of all modern environmental problems. Moreover, environmental ethics as a specific philosophical project was founded and has long been understood as a search for a non-anthropocentric ethical norms to address environmental action. It was the supposed lack of non-

anthropocentric ethics that led philosophers in the 20th century to agree that new ethical thinking was required to properly address environmental issues. The project of environmental ethics was to look outward, away from human interests, to identify features of the world – of non-human life, of ecosystems as a whole – that demanded moral consideration, that commanded respect in their own right. With this history in mind, it seems my suggestion is a double step backward, against both the project of environmental ethics as well as back to the kind of thinking responsible for environmental destruction in the first place.

I appeal to one of the founding figures of environmental philosophy, Holmes Rolston III, as a consistent voice against prioritizing human interests in environmental ethics. Rolston argues that the intrinsic value of nature should be the foundation of an environmental ethic, and not whatever goods nature may provide humans. In my response, I argue two points: First, a concern for human goods, or even a eudaimonistic ethical framework centered on achieving the good life for humans, is not at all the same as anthropocentrism. Indeed, Eudaimonistic thinking is not guilty of the pernicious features of anthropocentrism. Second, I argue that environmental ethics is improved by eschewing the binary framework of anthropocentrism vs non-anthropocentrism. The framework is not useless, but it is too blunt and general to provide the kind of guidance and understanding of human action to adequately evaluate environmental action. Centralizing talk of specific goods found through specific relationships to one's environment, which is what a great deal of recent rewilding literature is doing, offers far more adequate ways of evaluating and justifying environmental action.

In chapter 4, I consider a different kind of objection. Some have argued that environmental ethics should eschew thinking in terms of achieving goods altogether. Instead of pursuing goods, for land or for life, environmental ethics should be concerned primarily with

justifying right reasons for action. This critique cuts against both a eudaimonistic approach as well as the focus on intrinsic value from earlier non-anthropocentric approaches. The idea is that environmental ethics goes awry when any idea of environmental good – whether it be a vision of the good life, a claim of intrinsic value, a standard of ecological health, etc. – is allowed to sidestep a discursive and democratic decision-making process. Environmental ethics should turn away from promoting specific visions of the way the world should be, and instead focus on making environmental decisions in the most fair, inclusive, and publicly justifiable ways. In this view, fair processes matter more than end products. Put in slightly different terms, *right reasons* are more important than *good ends*.

The authors I review for this challenge, primarily Benjamin Hale and Luc Ferry, are very concerned about promoting open democratic decision-making in environmental matters. They understand dogmatic commitments to environmental goods, whatever the good, can be harmful to democratic processes, even opening the door to far worse forms of eco-authoritarianism. In this commitment to open democracy, I find this objection laudable. I do not think the environmental movement in the Anthropocene is in any position to so clearly know what must be done environmentally that one can dispense with democracy. Indeed, I open my work with the idea that ecology alone significantly underdetermines the shape environmental action should take. My response, then, is an argument that the kind of democratic discourse these authors promote is best served by rich, detailed testimony of exactly what kinds of life, what kinds of environments, and what kinds of environmental relationships are most choiceworthy, and why. This is the opposite of dogmatism, and far different than breezy utilitarian calculations about achieving good ends. Instead, it is a discussion that recognizes that our politics are in the important position of making environmental decisions that will shape, not simply the health of

ecosystems, but the character of human life to come. To this end, the rich testimonies of rewilders serve as good models of the kind of detailed considerations this conversation must include.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to clarifying my call for rich, detailed testimony. I consider the work of Steven Vogel, who offers another warning of how speech about environmental goods can undermine democratic discourse. In my response I introduce Albert Borgmann's idea of *deictic discourse*. This kind of speech – which usually takes the form of personal testimony, and which requires a kind of listening with a willingness to try – offers a model both for understanding a good deal of rewilding discourse as well as a model for how to better introduce the topic of the good life into environmental discourse.

In this work rewilding is not so much my topic, as my test case. In the rewilding movement I have witnessed environmental thinking unite ecological science with detailed eudaimonistic considerations that provide a model the kind of broad environmental thinking necessary in the Anthropocene.

CHAPTER 1: REWILDING LAND

“We can no longer accept a hands-off approach to wilderness preservation. Instead, we want to reinvigorate wild places, as widely and rapidly as is prudently possible.”

- Josh Donlan⁴

Rewilding is a growing thing. As it grows in popularity it transforms in meaning. In the first decade of this century, I knew of two distinct arenas of rewilding discourse, one was on the fringes of ecological science, the other on the fringes of social and political theory. The first was about the science of restoring ecosystems, the second about the ethics of reorganizing society. The first was about the complexity of ecological communities, the second about the quality of human relationships with and within ecosystems. These were almost two separate topics, the goal of *rewilding land* versus the hope of *rewilding life*.

The story from then to now is one of popularization, a movement from the fringes to the mainstream. In ecology and conservation rewilding gained legitimacy and prominence as a vision of global ecological restoration. Outside ecology the word simply spread. People are currently rewilding footwear, rewilding diets, rewilding their homes and gardens, rewilding their hearts and minds.⁵ It is hardly a unified project. It is young growth, dense and disorienting. And while I want better definitions and clear demarcations, there is much to be gained from sitting in the weeds awhile, trying to hold it all together.

⁴ (Donlan J. , 2005)

⁵⁵ This chapter and the next provide examples of each of these. For some quick examples that will receive much less attention see: “Natural lifestyle coach” Tony Riddle advocates “rewilding running” and “rewilded diets” (Riddle, 2022). Products like Ka’chava, a plant-based supplement shake, advertise “rewilding your gut” (Ka’Chava, 2022). Rewilding one’s “gut” – through dietary changes, supplements, or even fecal transplant – is a topic I do not address in the following chapters, but it gets quite a lot of attention in popular media. For the disputed science, one might start with Jeffrey Gordon’s 2012 article in *Science* (Gordon, 2012) and a more recent, more cautious review by Rachel N. Carmody, also in *Science* (Carmody, 2021). The intuition behind rewilding for human health is that humans will be healthiest in conditions similar to how the species evolved. My present work will focus more on human relationships with environments, but this intuition connecting health with evolutionary time is a theme arising in multiple areas.

At first glance, however, what is rewilding? Over the next two chapters I will give a fairly messy answer. In sum, I say rewilding is two interwoven projects: it is the project of restoring ecosystems to healthier, less managed states (*rewilding land*) and it is the project of championing forms of human life that flourish most in relationship with this rewilded land (*rewilding life*). In this chapter I will focus on the former, introducing the ecological concepts that inspired and justified a new branch of ecological restoration called rewilding. In the second chapter I consider the ways in which the rewilding movement has always been more than the science and practice of ecological restoration; it is a movement full of very human hopes for a better life. Ultimately, my argument throughout is not really for or against any particular kind of rewilding. Instead, I want to defend the importance of environmental thinking that holds these two sides together – the question of the good land as well as the good life.

The rise in popularity of rewilding is an interesting example how this is being done. The movement as a whole is marked by hopes, by real optimism that has often been absent from environmentalism. The hope expressed by many rewilders isn't simply about successfully ameliorating environmental woes, but about discovering happier, more choiceworthy lives in the process. As I'll address in chapter 3 and 4, environmental ethics has often made little room for considering human happiness. Indeed, it's the anthropocentric concern for human interests that is so often blamed for environmental destruction in the first place. I will argue that there is a way of centralizing the question of the good life in relation to one's environment that not only avoids the pitfalls of a pernicious anthropocentrism, but also enriches environmental thinking.

But first, what does it mean to rewild land?

Ecological Origins

A fine start to the story of rewilding, is to review the trends in ecological science that give shape to the most well-known rewilding projects. These are (1) the concept of *trophic cascade*, (2) a focus on the importance of *ecological function*, rather than a focus on the exact species makeup of ecological communities, and (3) the use of longer timescales in evaluating ecological health and damage. In this section I introduce these basic parts of the ecology behind rewilding and discuss how rewilding has come to prominence in global environmentalism. I hope I can offer at least a sense of the ecological justification and goal of rewilding. In the next chapter I'll look more closely at the human side of rewilding, and the vast array of projects and practices that have been intertwined with these projects. Understanding both sides together is the best way to understand the optimism of rewilding.

If it wasn't the origin, rewilding at least found its first detailed action plan in the "3Cs" framework popularized by conservation biologists Michael Soulé and Reed Noss in their 1998 proposal.⁶ The three Cs stand for Cores, Corridors, and Carnivores. The vision was of an interconnected wilderness system that could support the top predators that were most recently extirpated from much of North America – wolves, mountain lions, grizzly bears, lynx, etc. These species require large habitats. For this reason, wilderness *Cores* are needed as large areas these species can roam unhindered. But a Core on its own leads to inevitable problems. It's an island where inbreeding reduces genetic diversity and prey and other resources can quickly dry up. To prevent these Cores from becoming unsustainable islands, they needed to be connected by wilderness Corridors to allow carnivores to travel in search of resources, without depleting the prey of one area, and for the mixture of genetically diverse communities. It's easy enough to

⁶ (Soulé & Noss, 1998)

agree that big Carnivores need cores and corridors, but why is there such a focus on big carnivores in the first place?

The 3C's plan arose from increasing attention to the theory of *trophic cascade*, the documented phenomenon that the composition and regulation of ecosystems are primarily influenced by the behavior of creatures nearer the top of an ecosystem's food web.⁷ In other words, small numbers of large carnivores do nearly as much to shape an ecosystem as the climate and plants of a given area. This can seem counterintuitive. In some sense, ecosystems must be built from the ground up, as it were. The foundation of an ecosystem is surely its abiotic features: the climate, the amount of water, the availability of nutrients. Plants grow where nutrients and climate allow, herbivores come where the plants are, and carnivores follow the herbivores, seemingly the least influential actors on the character and sustainability of the system. The phenomenon of trophic cascade shows otherwise. It is not a rejection of the ground-up model (indeed, if the climate dramatically changes or the water runs out, ecosystems surely collapse), but a very important amendment. That is, the actions of small numbers of creatures at the top of a food web have cascading effects on everything else. Large carnivores influence the numbers prey, surely. But they also influence prey behavior, particularly how large herbivores move across the landscape and what they eat along the way. In turn, large herbivore behavior influences patterns of plant growth that, in ever complex turns, both shape the diversity of habitats needed for smaller creatures and dramatically influence how water and nutrients move through the system.

⁷ Today, the concept of Trophic Cascade will show up in every ecology textbook. Although a great deal of diverse research coalesced to form the modern concept, the origin of the theory is often associated with the work of Nelson Hairston in the mid 20th century, *see* (Hairston, Smith, & Slobodkin, L. B., 1960). Hairston's argument was that carnivores, through their regulation of grazer populations, played a larger role in determining plant abundance than previously thought. For usage and history of the concept see (Ripple, 2016), (Schmitz, 2000).

George Monbiot's short film on the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone may be the most evangelical call for the benefits of top-down regulation of an ecosystem.⁸ He testifies that the simple addition of wolves solved problems as widespread as the erosion of riverbanks and diminishing Aspen groves.⁹ Another textbook example of top-down regulation is the reintroduction of sea otters into the kelp fields off the coast of California, Oregon, and Alaska.¹⁰ Without otters, sea urchins decimated the kelp, removing important habitat for a host of other sea life. Returning the otters controlled the sea urchins, which brought back the kelp, which restored habitat for everything else.

But as promising as these examples are, extrapolating to a general rule about ecosystem regulation is still fraught. In one of the most complete recent reviews of trophic cascade literature, researchers conclude that "whether rewilding can restore top-down control of ecosystems remains equivocal."¹¹ The most promising stories take place in fairly simplified food webs with very recent predator extirpation. Perhaps, then, trophic cascade isn't the kind of silver bullet it appears to be in popular conservation materials. Things are complex and what works in one system might not somewhere else. But even with the admission of ecological unknowns, the authors still claim there is ample reason to move forward with large carnivore reintroductions even if it isn't the regulatory silver bullet as it has sometimes been heralded.¹²

⁸ (Monbiot, *How Wolves Changed Rivers*, 2014)

⁹ See (Mao, 2005) (Mossotti, 2012) for overviews of the research. A history and review of the Yellowstone wolf reintroduction was published by the project directors on the 25th anniversary of the reintroduction (Smith, Stahler, & McNulty, 2020). Retired National Park ranger and wolf researcher Rick McIntyre has published a series of books documenting more intimate histories of particular wolves in Yellowstone, *The Alpha Wolves of Yellowstone Series*, most recently *The Alpha Female Wolf* (McIntyre, 2022).

¹⁰ See (Silberstein, 2022), (Raymond W. W., 2021), (Raymond W. e., 2021). For popular overviews of Sea Otter reintroductions see (McLeish, 2018).

¹¹ (Hayward, 2019, p. 344)

¹² Ibid. p. 346

But 1998 was hardly the beginning of something like a 3C's plan. In fact, the proposal is famous because it provides a succinct summary and defense of what was already the decade-old plan of the Wildlands Project, an initiative spearheaded by environmental activist Dave Foreman (one of the founders of Earth First! and now President of the Rewilding Institute). Foreman started the journal *Wild Earth* in 1991¹³, dedicated to promoting a larger and more interconnected Wilderness System in North America. Soulé and Noss' 3C's approach was published in this journal seven years later. It is worth noting here that the biggest plans and on-the-ground activism around managing very large swaths of North America as an interconnected wilderness were underway well before the explicit 3Cs framework and the ecological justification of trophic cascade. This shouldn't be surprising. Projects get started for all sorts of reasons, usually for very tangible reasons, and more theoretical justifications develop along the way.

The 3Cs approach, though fairly popular and taken very seriously, remained largely a subject in conservation biology and radical environmentalist circles. The broader public's first introduction to rewilding may have been another particularly bold plan. In the early 2000s the journals *Nature* and *The American Naturalist* published earnest proposals for so-called "Pleistocene Rewilding."¹⁴ In "Re-wilding North America" – authored by Josh Dolan and colleagues in conservation biology, including Soulé and Forman – the authors argued that conservation required, as trophic cascade theories suggest, the reintroduction of large animals. But in this case, it wasn't just the animals extirpated in the last couple hundred years, like wolves and bison, but animals that had gone extinct over the last few *thousand* years.

¹³ (Foreman, 1991) All editions of *Wild Earth Journal* are now archived by the Environment & Society Portal, accessible at www.environmentandsociety.org (Wild Earth, n.d.).

¹⁴ See "Re-wilding North America" (Donlan J. , 2005) and the larger proposal in "Pleistocene Rewilding: An Optimistic Agenda for Twenty-First Century Conservation" (Donlan J. e., 2006).

Tropic Cascade explains how the function of larger carnivores is vital for the diversity and sustainability of an ecosystem. But the ecological functions of these recently lost carnivores are not the only important functions missing. Pleistocene rewilders went a step further than the 3Cs framework (although, it should be mentioned that pretty much all the same people were involved in promoting both) to stress that the dramatic loss of megafauna since the last ice age is still having detrimental fallout on the stability of ecosystems. Current ecosystems evolved with large creatures roaming in large numbers across the land – including mammoths and mastodons, Camelops, ground sloths, extinct relatives of lions and tigers, and many more. While returning extinct species may be impossible (though this has become its own rewilding project), Pleistocene rewilders proposed to introduce *functional equivalents* of extinct species. That is, they imagined that certain current large herbivores and predators from Africa or Asia might be successfully brought to North America to fulfill the ecological role of their extinct relatives. And more than returning lost ecological functions, this importation of large animals might also aid the conservation of these animals themselves, whose habitats abroad face increasing threats.

Some time ago the word “rewilding” was often exclusively associated with Pleistocene Rewilding. As mentioned above, the proposal for “Re-wilding North America” appeared in *Nature* in 2005, now often cited as the first time rewilding was introduced to a global scientific audience.¹⁵ Harry Greene, a co-author of that proposal, described the aftermath of its publication as, not simply a matter of academic controversy, but of widespread public scorn.¹⁶ The media sensationalized the proposal, painting it as a new *Jurassic Park*, more mad science than conservation. Large environmental NGOs charged that such an experimental project would siphon scarce resources from existing, proven conservation efforts. As a specifically Pleistocene

¹⁵ (Greene, 2015), (Johns, 2019)

¹⁶ (Greene, 2015)

vision, then, rewilding entered the spotlight as fringe science, intriguing at best, but largely unwelcome as a practical proposal.

The science behind Pleistocene rewilding, however, had been gaining steam for decades prior. Paul S. Martin's *Twilight of the Mammoths* summarizes a 30-year career of studying the ecological implications of mass extinction at the end of the Pleistocene.¹⁷ As, early as 1982, Martin's research was showing that New World ecosystems were missing key functional elements from how they evolved, most notably the megafaunal seed dispersers.¹⁸ His work led to the concept of "anachronistic fruit." That is, plants bearing large fruits usually evolve in a relationship with large animals that eat the fruit and disperse the seeds. With the large seed dispersers gone these large fruits are living outside their time, as it were. Without their evolutionary partner species, they are doomed to slowly diminish in range. Many of these fruits come from trees that humans have decided to propagate, such as the Osage orange, black locusts, Kentucky coffee tree, avocado, and the ancient Ginkgo. Without human planting the range of all these species did (and will again) dramatically shrink. The insight that there is continuing ecological fallout from extinctions as far back as 10,000 years ago suggested to Martin and others that ecological stability may require reintroducing the kinds of megafaunal functions present in the ecosystem over evolutionary time.

In Europe, the work of Franz Vera came to similar conclusions. Focusing less on the function of carnivores, Vera theorized that the ecology of Europe has been historically dominated by the presence of large herbivores. Instead of dense and dark primeval forests, Vera argues that prehistorical Europe was most likely park-like, a patchwork of forest, wetland, and

¹⁷ (Martin, 2007)

¹⁸ See "Neotropical Anachronisms: The Fruits the Gomphotheres Ate" (Janzen & Martin, 1982).

meadows that supported very large herds of free-roaming herbivores.¹⁹ Although largely published in the early 2000s, Vera's research on this topic began in 1979 with the formation of the nature reserve Oostvaardersplassen in the Netherlands. Here Vera studied the ecological impact of reintroducing free-roaming herbivores, a watershed experiment in rewilding. Most notably for the Pleistocene proposal, Vera introduced Heck Cattle, a variety of cattle that had been back-bred in the mid 20th century to resemble the ancient Auroch (*Bos primigenius*), the ice age ancestor of modern European cattle.²⁰ Oostvaardersplassen and the reintroduction of wolves in Yellowstone thus became the two most famous and promising test cases of dramatic ecological interventions that seemed to promote ecological stability with more hands-off management of reintroduced species.

Both the 3Cs approach and the Pleistocene proposal require dramatic interventions at the start (namely, moving the big animals in), but the further goal of these interventions is to minimize future management. These interventions are about returning complex ecological functions, then letting those functions play out as they will. Simply abandoning land might produce similarly complex and stable results, but over a much, much longer time. Aiding reintroduction jump-starts these processes.

The ecological science supporting the Pleistocene project was a major part of these early proposals, but even more central was an ultimatum that conservation, if it is going to be effective, must change strategies. They argued that traditional defensive conservation methods, even if individually successful, are inadequate to address the global environmental crises of the

¹⁹ Vera's work is compiled in his 2000 book *Grazing Ecology and Forest History* (Vera, 2000).

²⁰ For a history of Heck Cattle and their use in Oostvaardersplassen and other project see "From 'Nazi Cows' to Cosmopolitan 'Ecological Engineers': Specifying Rewilding Through a History of Heck Cattle" (Lorimer & Driessen, From "Nazi Cows" to Cosmopolitan "Ecological Engineers": Specifying Rewilding Through a History of Heck Cattle., 2016), as well as a fuller history in (Lorimer & Driessen, 2016). Heck Cattle have also been introduced in various locations in the United Kingdom. A history and review of these British projects can be found in (Hall & Bunce, 2019).

sixth mass extinction²¹ and a rapidly changing climate. It will not be enough to save what is left, even if it is all saved. Saving the wild requires *expanding it*, in terms of acres, and also *enhancing it* – that is, adding ecological complexity, adding species that provide the full gamut of ecological functions and relationships that evolved together in a given ecosystem. It is this evolved complexity that provides sustainability. Simplified systems, even if left alone, will continue to collapse.

Of course, *expanding* and *enhancing* the wild is seemingly at odds with the very meaning of wildness as untouched and unmanaged land. Yet this was the turn rewilding saw itself taking. And this turn is what has come to define it in the world of conservation, even as the specific Pleistocene dreams have become less central.²² The optimism of rewilding is that conservation can succeed by transitioning from saving the disappearing wild, to bringing wild ecosystems back.

Mainstream Acceptance

While the first call for Pleistocene rewilding was seen by some as fringe science, today rewilding has become a prominent rallying cry of mainstream environmentalism. In their 2020 introductory text on the science of rewilding, Paul Jepson and Cain Blythe made a prediction: “As rewilding gains momentum we predict that a new term will gain ascendancy over ‘conservation’ and ‘environmentalism.’ Rewilding is, without doubt, the current frontrunner.”²³ They argued that rewilding – not simply as a word spreading in popularity, but as a general ethos of the conservation community – will come to characterize mainstream environmentalism.

²¹ The now classic popular argument that Earth is currently experiencing its sixth mass extinction is presented in *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (Kolbert, 2014)

²² I will discuss this transition more in the next chapter. Johan D. du Toit argues that the Pleistocene project has become more of a “heuristic” for approaching ecosystem functional complexity, and less a specific baseline for ecosystem health. See du Toit’s “Pleistocene rewilding: an enlightening thought experiment” (du Toit, 2019).

²³ (Jepson & Blythe, 2020, p. 150)

The prediction was coming true even as Jepson and Blythe published. Jepson and Blythe's introduction addressed a general audience through Icon Books' "Hot Science" series, appearing alongside popular introductions to genetics, epidemiology, artificial intelligence, and particle physics. Rewilding was included not simply as a growing environmentalist movement, but as a mainstream science. Moreover, their book, with the main title simply *Rewilding*, was at least the fourth book with the same one-word title released since 2019 (not counting appearances in longer titles and subtitles).

National Geographic's Enric Sala published *The Nature of Nature: Why we Need the Wild* in 2019.²⁴ The work is an approachable, extended argument for a global vision of conservation that is, as Sala understands it, largely a project of global rewilding. Sala has summarized his goal as the "30 by 30" project (or now "30x30"), that is, a global project to reserve thirty percent of Earth's land and oceans as essentially wild preserves by the year 2030.²⁵ His claim is that the sustainability of the Earth's ecosystems as a whole depend upon the ecological processes that occur only where ecosystems are left relatively uninfluenced by human activity, especially industrial human ways of living. These wild refuges serve to sequester carbon, cycle nutrients, protect biodiversity, and actually replenish the nutrients and biodiversity of bordering areas that are not protected. So, let's say some state has 100 square miles of coastline supporting fisheries. At current pace, fishing is depleting all 100 square miles at drastically unsustainable rates. One solution might be to simply reduce the amount of fishing across the whole area. Salas' argument is that a simple reduction across the board will not work.

²⁴ (Sala, *The Nature of Nature: Why We Need the Wild*, 2020)

²⁵ The source for most 30x30 plans comes from a 2019 article in *Science Advances* co-authored by Sala, introduced as a "Global Deal for Nature" (Dinerstein, 2019). Many conservation organizations and governments around the globe have adopted "30x30" as a goal for their regional planning, including the European Union and the United States as of 2021 (Executive Office of the President Joseph Biden, 2021).

Even reduced industrial fishing will still simplify the whole ecosystem in ways that continue collapse. For instance, as explained in the discussion of trophic cascade, disturbing the influence of top predators, only a very small part of the ecosystem, has cascading effects that disrupt the sustainability of the whole system. For this and other reasons, a better solution is to reserve half the coastal waters, permitting no commercial fishing at all in that half. Where this happens, the un-hindered and un-simplified ecological processes that have supported the ecosystem throughout time, may serve to sustain the other half where industrial fishing still occurs. In the best cases, the same number of fish that were once taken from the whole can be sustainably taken from the half.

But protecting 30% of the planet, at this point, is not a matter of defensive preservation of untouched places. There aren't that many supposedly untouched places left (if there were the goal would already be achieved). Thus, a lot of these reserves must be rewilded reserves – land that was previously agricultural, or coasts that have been heavily fished for decades. As Sala puts it in his TED talk on the topic, “No place is safe anymore unless we rewild our planet. ... Thirty percent of our planet by 2030. Only that amount of wild nature, together with a massive reduction in carbon emissions, will be able to get us back on track.”²⁶

Far from fringe, Sala's book comes with a forward by HRH The Prince of Wales and an introduction by E. O. Wilson. Far bigger than that, the 30x30 goal has been adopted by the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People, a coalition of 90 countries working to protect 30 percent of Earth's land and oceans as wild reserves.²⁷ Mainstream global conservation is no

²⁶ This comes from Sala's 2021 Official TED Conference presentation, “A Bold Plan to Protect 30 percent of the Earth's Surface and Ocean Floor” (Sala, TED, 2021).

²⁷ See www.hacfornatureandpeople.org/home

longer a matter of preserving what's left, it's the hope of rewilding what's already been damaged.

In terms of popular media reach, perhaps the largest call for global rewilding has been Sir David Attenborough's 2020 film *A Life on Our Planet*.²⁸ Here Attenborough turned the cameras on himself, recounting his extraordinary career "documenting Earth's wild places" and tragically "their rapidly increasing destruction." The film tells a story in three acts, together forming an urgent plea to "rewild the world." It starts with Attenborough's own witness to the planet's loss of wild places. Attenborough tells of his childhood, his first experiences becoming fascinated by fossils and living creatures, and the start of his career as a filmmaker. Throughout this biography, the years of Attenborough's life are measured with a reoccurring screen documenting Earth's population, the concentration of carbon in the atmosphere, and Earth's "remaining wilderness." As the first two numbers rise, that last dramatically falls. Although punctuated with alarming numbers, the story remains a testament of love and mourning. In Attenborough's recounting, the ecological changes of the last century form a story of profoundly loss, a tale of grieving the destruction of good things. The world is not simply losing it's the ecological stability it has had throughout the Holocene epoch, it's losing what is most marvelous about it, most deserving of love and wonder: its wildness. The second act does include a little of the traditional doomsaying. It projects what's to come over the next century if current trends continue. But the third act comes swiftly, outlining the major steps for securing a better, specifically a "wilder" future. In harmony with Sala, Attenborough envisions a future planet that can reserve half of the land and oceans in a wild state, rewilding much of what was lost over his lifetime.

²⁸ (Hughes, 2020)

Many Types of Rewilding – Shared Goal of “Open-endedness”

The kinds of interventions required to arrive at 30% wild land globally vary a great deal. It is not all the 3C’s approach championed in the early days of rewilding. Here I want to introduce a number of definitions and examples of rewilding to show the kinds of projects involved in rewilding land. My focus is to show the diversity of work being done, but, as I’ll show in the next chapter, I believe the actual ecological interventions are only half the story of rewilding.

Human Geographers Jonathon Prior and Kim J. Ward have provided a definition of rewilding they believe captures the diversity of ecological interventions involved in rewilding today. They write that rewilding is, “a process of (re)introducing or restoring wild organisms and/or ecological processes to ecosystems where such organisms and processes are either missing or are ‘dysfunctional.’”²⁹ As they explain this definition in another article, they believe “rewilding is distinct from other forms of ecological restoration in that it emphasizes autonomous self-regulation within and amongst non-human species and ecological processes.”³⁰ Their argument is that while many restoration interventions may be used in different rewilding projects, the goal of “autonomous self-regulation” makes rewilding interventions distinct. And surely autonomous self-regulation is exactly what the early rewilding approaches emphasized as I explained above. Carnivore reintroduction is emphasized in the 3Cs approach because of the role top predators have in regulating ecosystem stability, the trophic cascade of top predator behavior. The focus on ecological function rather than specific species in the Pleistocene project also reveals the goal of autonomous self-regulation. Their goal was to return lost ecological functions that are necessary for long-term ecosystem stability, then step away and let those

²⁹ (Prior & Ward, 2016)

³⁰ (Prior & Ward, 2017)

functions play out. Other rewilding activities shows a similar focus on achieving autonomous self-regulation.

In her 2015 review of rewilding literature, Dolly Jørgensen identified five major kinds of intervention understood as rewilding land.³¹ The first two were the 3Cs and the Pleistocene projects I have mentioned. Jørgensen's next two examples still focus on larger species introduction, but they differ by broadening the *kinds of animals* (herbivores, including mammals, reptiles, and birds, instead of top carnivores) and the *timeline* used as an ecological reference point. Instead of focusing specifically on pre-colonization or Pleistocene ecosystems, many reintroductions simply focus on a lost ecological function from any time. These functions include things like seed dispersal, or the grazing understory plants. In these projects, Carnivores are decentralized and included in the larger concept of a "keystone species." These are species that have a disproportionally large impact on the regulation of their ecosystem.³² Because of trophic cascade effects, top predators are often keystone species. Many keystone species, however, are less assuming than large carnivores. For instance, the small Clark's Nutcracker is recognized as a vital keystone species for the subalpine regions of the Rocky Mountains. This bird disperses the seeds of the Whitebark Pine, a high elevation tree that forms a major part of the diet of at least 22 other species, including Grizzly Bears.³³ Jørgensen's point is not to say that these other projects are fully at odds with 3Cs or Pleistocene projects, only that the focus of species reintroduction spread away from just carnivores and away from a focus on Pleistocene conditions for many still very significant rewilding projects. Rewilding has seen a loosening of the goal to mimic or re-

³¹ (Jørgensen, Rethinking rewilding, 2015)

³² Now found in any ecological textbook, the concept of a keystone species was coined by zoologist Robert T. Pain in 1969 (Pain, 1969). An overview of the development and use of the concept can be found in (Mills, Soulé, & Doak, 1993)

³³ The Whitebark Pine Ecosystem Foundation publishes a great deal on the science and restoration efforts of this ecosystem (www.whitebarkfound.org). An early study of this bird/pine relationships can be found in (Hutchins & Lanner, 1982).

create a specific ecosystem reference point in the past. Instead, the focus of diversifying ecological functions – in the hope achieving autonomous self-regulation – trumps the goal of recreating a specific ecosystem from the past.

It is not my topic here, but it must be mentioned that the role of ecological history in restoration has been a central and divisive question in the field. Marcus Hall's 2010 anthology *Restoration and History: The Search for a Usable Environmental Past* covers this debate in detail.³⁴ Each chapter details the hopes and pitfalls of determining a reliable model of past ecologies to guide restoration. Although ecological history offers some parameters – and as it remains important for connecting people to the story of places they restore – past ecologies have proved either too vague to offer a guide or ecological conditions have changed in such a way that recreating past conditions is no longer viable. More recently, Hall has argued that rewilding developed as a distinct enterprise from restoration precisely by giving up on the goal of recreating past ecologies. In his words, "Rewilders can be distinguished from restorers by the fact that their ultimate goal is favoring wild conditions rather than past conditions."³⁵ Things are not always so cut and dry. It's not the case that all restorations were set on creating exact replicas of the past, much less that they believed ecosystems were static. The past provides important information and sense of connection to the history and development of a place, but only a naïve understanding of restoration takes the past as a clear and absolute guide.³⁶ Nevertheless, the trend

³⁴ (Hall M. , *Restoration and History The Search for a Usable Environmental Past*, 2015)

³⁵ (Hall M. , *The High Art of Rewilding*, 2019, p. 210)

³⁶ Eric Higgs defends the role of ecological history along these lines in his *Nature by Design: People, Natural Processes, and Ecological Restoration* (Higgs, 2003). Higgs is often cited as the restorationist, indeed the former Chair of the Society for Ecological Restoration, most insistent on historical fidelity in restoration. But although his account emphasizes studying ecological history, it also makes it clear that historical conditions are rarely fully achievable, and sometimes undesirable. Cf. (Hobbs, Higgs, & Harris, 2009) and (Higgs, 2017). Aside from informing strictly ecological decisions, the study of history is meant to create connection with place, to temper hubris, and to predict future trends. It is anything but a slavish and hopeless attempt to recreate the past.

of rewilding rising to the mainstream, however, has been marked by de-centralizing the goal of restoring historical conditions.³⁷

There are a few reasons for this. First, there is the ignorance of the past. Restorationists often have little knowledge of real ecological conditions of the past. Second, ecology changes. Not only are ecosystems dynamic and changing even in the most stable conditions, but also climate change makes it clear that a great many past ecosystems can no longer persist in their past locations. Rapid change predicted in the near future has led restorationists to plan for future conditions rather than past. Third, some changes are irreversible. Ecosystem change, whether through human wrought destruction or even through the introduction of invasive species, can trigger a “tipping point” where the overall character and regulation of the system has shifted.³⁸ For these reasons, the focus on large predators of the 3Cs approach, and the late Pleistocene reference point for the Pleistocene projects, have been expanded. But centralizing the ecological functions that have regulated ecosystems through evolutionary time and focusing on those species (carnivores, herbivores, and specific plants) that have outsized impacts on ecosystem character and regulation has remained the focus of rewilding.

So far, rewilding seems a matter of (re)introducing species. Jørgensen’s fifth form of rewilding, however, is by far the most practiced: *productive land abandonment*. This process is exactly what it sounds like: “a process in which a formally cultivated landscape develops without human control,”³⁹ or in another definition, “the passive management of ecological succession with the goal of restoring natural ecosystem processes and reducing human control of landscapes.”⁴⁰ This might seem like the most obvious meaning of re-wilding. In terms of

³⁷ On this point see (Miller & Hobbs, 2019)

³⁸ (Hobbs, Higgs, & Harris, 2009)

³⁹ (Höchtel, Lehringer, & Werner, 2005)

⁴⁰ (Navarro & Henríquez, 2012, p. 904)

intervention, it often means simply no longer farming, no longer logging, no longer fishing. The 30x30 goal will surely include lots of intentional plant and animal (re)introductions where ecologists determine that those species' ecological functions are important and unlikely to come back on their own in the short term. But for the most part, land and sea abandonment, in the sense of ceasing extraction or agriculture, is the primary form of rewilding land. In this sense, almost all Wilderness Areas in the eastern United States are projects of land abandonment, done before the word "rewilding" named such interventions. These areas are "abandoned" in the sense of ceasing the logging and farming that took place there. But they are also opened up to human use for recreation and scientific study far more than before. The focus now will be to strategically choose land where one can readily expect old and new species to quickly reclaim and autonomously build new systems. Although the direct intervention in these cases is "passive," the point is that simply ceasing heavy use creates the conditions for the revival and free operation of ecological processes and the self-reintroduction of plant and animal species from surrounding areas.

As mentioned above, and more noteworthy than the diversification of which practices count as rewilding land, is Jepsen's and Blythe's prediction that the word "rewilding" is functioning as a replacement term for "conservation" and "environmentalism."⁴¹ I argue in the rest of this chapter that this change is best understood as a change in the overall ethos of environmentalism. That is, rewilding isn't becoming a dominant term only because conservationists are adopting new restoration methods specific to rewilding. Instead, rewilding is a dominant term by bringing many familiar, long-established methods of conservation and ecological initiatives under one umbrella. When "rewilding" is used as an umbrella concept that

⁴¹ (Jepson & Blythe, 2020, p. 150)

includes activities that only a decade ago would never have been called “rewilding,” the term is then naming a unified conservation goal, rather than a specific ecological intervention.

Rewilding in this broad sense is that big goal of 30-50% of the planet left wild. Or, rewilding is the big goal of appreciating and allowing for non-human life to live less controlled by human action. This big goal includes large reserves, but it also makes sense of letting one’s yard or garden or city park accommodate more species and ecological processes.

Cambridge University Press’ interdisciplinary anthology *Rewilding* (2019) can rightly be called rewilding’s first textbook, the first “comprehensive overview of the roots, meaning, applications, and challenges of the rewilding concept.”⁴² While the roots of Trophic Cascade and megafauna reintroduction are discussed at length, overall the book employs this far broader, umbrella use of “rewilding.” The editors say that the common differentia separating rewilding from other ecological restorations is its future-focused *open-endedness*. They distinguish rewilding along the same lines as Marcus Hall above: “Rewilding is about choosing new trajectories of change towards wildness in future undefined states; restoration is generally about reversing a trajectory of change to return to a defined previous state.”⁴³

In *Wildlife in the Anthropocene*, Jamie Lorimer also identifies open-ended experimentation as the defining characteristic of rewilding.⁴⁴ The ongoing experiment at the Oostvaardersplassen, for instance, isn’t a test of whether or not a predetermined Pleistocene-like ecosystem can be created by short-term interventions; rather, it is an “open-ended experiment” to see what good things can happen when space is provided for the freer operation of ecological processes. The experiment “is valued for its ability to surprise.”⁴⁵

⁴² (Pettorelli, Durant, & du Toit, 2019)

⁴³ *ibid.* p. 8

⁴⁴ (Lorimer J. , 2015)

⁴⁵ *ibid* p. 116

Open-endedness is far more broadly applicable than a focus on trophic cascade and megafaunal reintroduction. It is more of an ethos. This is even clearer in the chapter on Urban Rewilding in the Cambridge anthology mentioned above. The term “urban rewilding” might have once sounded oxymoronic, but it fits perfectly with the new broad use of the term. The authors define urban rewilding as, “any initiative or programme that seeks to encourage biodiversity, ecosystem function, and the persistence of native species in a range of urban settings.”⁴⁶ They have no trouble linking basic “green” initiatives like urban gardens, tree-lined streets, and dog parks alongside more traditional restoration projects like stream bank restoration and reforestation along city boundaries. All of these are kinds of urban rewilding. This is because what connects all these interventions is a shared effort to encourage the freer operation of ecosystem functions, to encourage autonomous self-regulating systems – even in urban space.

My overall point in mentioning rewilding’s move to the mainstream is that the word has come to name a kind of *hope*, more than it names any particular intervention. Rewilding names the goal and reason for environmental action. Rather than merely ecological necessity or moral obligation, the reason to rewild is, as George Monbiot puts it, “an enhanced opportunity for people to engage with and delight in the natural world,”⁴⁷ or as Enric Sala ends his book, “our reward will be the sense of awe and wonder we enjoy by living in this diverse and beautiful world.”⁴⁸ If rewilding names a hope, then it makes sense that any activity working towards that hope is included under the term. In the next chapter I will look more specifically at what the hope of rewilding looks like for human lives, but I’ll close this chapter with a bit more of the history and development of the hope for rewilded land.

⁴⁶ (Maller, Laura, & Benjamin, 2019, p. 167)

⁴⁷ (Monbiot, *Feral: Rewilding the Land, the Sea, and Human Life*, 2014, p. 1)

⁴⁸ (Sala, *The Nature of Nature: Why We Need the Wild*, 2020, p. 222)

Radical Hope – A Eudaimonistic Turn

Years ago, an overview of rewilding might be expected to focus on a few centralizing examples. The conversation centered around projects briefly mentioned above, the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone National Park, the experimental grazing of Red Deer and Heck Cattle in the Netherland's Oostvaardersplassen, and more broadly the relevance of late Pleistocene ecology on present ecosystems. The ambitious vision behind these experiments was a radical hope of seeing the complexity and freedom of ecological systems returned to the world on a grand scale. Rewilding was about bears and bison, flood and fire. It was about returning big animals, big process to ecosystems that had been dramatically simplified through human use. In large part it still is. But so much now attaches to rewilding that a clear border between what is central and what is peripheral, even what is ecological restoration or what is in a broad sense social reform, isn't as obvious. The central examples are now often background information to still other rewilding projects.

Yet rewilding, in all its current diversity, is still set apart by radical hope, by an optimism about a better future. Nothing is new, not really. And yet I think the turn to positivity in rewilding conversations speaks of a larger and promising shift in environmental thought. Environmentalism has largely been defensive, a matter of guarding wild places against destruction. The task has been to preserve the last remaining acres of tall-grass prairie, old growth forest, mountain cats, caribou herds, desert fish, or rare salamander. Environmental arguments are structured to praise some distant past – some time before the damage of industrial civilization's exploitation of the land – and warn about the future. In this defensive posture environmentalism has understood itself as a losing struggle, but a noble one. "When they win,

it's forever," the Sierra Club's David Brower used to say, "When we win, it's merely a stay of execution."⁴⁹

George Monbiot has presented a different vision. He published *Feral* in large part to "encourage a positive environmentalism."⁵⁰ Echoing many others, Monbiot agrees that 20th century environmentalism, and I would highlight academic environmental ethics in this charge, has been primarily a project of prohibitions. Overall, the rise of modern environmentalism provided very good reasons for not harming the planet, from simply avoiding environmental disaster, to duties to future generations, and, most importantly, duties to the value of non-human life itself. Monbiot writes, "We have argued that certain freedoms – to damage, to pollute, to waste – should be limited. While there are good reasons for these injunctions, we have offered little in return."⁵¹ What Monbiot wants to offer, what he finds in rewilding as a positive turn, is a vision of a better way to live, a more rewarding and choiceworthy life for humans. He says this plainly: "Rewilding should take place for the benefit of people, to enhance the world in which we live, and not for the sake of an abstraction we call Nature."⁵²

This kind of statement seems at once both paradoxical and anathema. Paradoxical because rewilding is largely concerned with promoting the value and freedom of unmanaged ecosystems. Rewilders are attempting to shift large swaths of land away from human habitation and exploitation, encouraging a return of the complex ecosystem functions that human intervention disrupted. It seems anathema because environmental ethics as a discipline was founded as a project of justifying an ethical treatment of the non-human world for what it is in

⁴⁹ This aphorism is attributed to David Brower in many articles and almost never cited. Brower used it many times. It can be found on www.davidbrowercenter.org

⁵⁰ (Monbiot, 2014, p. 12)

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² *ibid.* p. 12-13

itself and not for what it provides to humans. An unrestricted concern for human benefit – for expansion, for profit, for technological progress – lies behind all environmental crises in the first place. Right? At least, this is a common enough diagnosis that comes in various versions.

It is my task to defend the kind of turn Monbiot and many other rewilders are making. In the following chapters I don't provide a straightforward defense of any particular rewilding project. My topic is still more general. I am asking *What does it mean for environmental philosophy to take a positive turn?* How can it do so without being both paradoxical and anathema? I argue that the positive turn evidenced in rewilding literature is best understood as a *Eudaimonistic Turn*. That is, the project of environmentalism is changing away from justifying prohibitions, however they are defended, and towards the question of what is the best kind of life, the most choiceworthy way to live, in relation to one's environment. The latter question is a richer question. It doesn't abandon the former; it incorporates the constraints of sustainability and duty and adds to them tangible, motivating practices for a better life. Rewilders have set the goal of a planet with at least 30% of its land left wild. They argue that it is ecologically necessary. But more than this, they argue that a life with more wildness around is a better life. And it's the appeal of a better life that explains the rise and diversification of rewilding projects. I think this eudaimonistic turn is the most promising movement in environmentalism today. In the next chapter I will offer a clearer picture of how rewilders talk about the hope for a better life.

A Note on Origins

All origins have origins, but stories must start somewhere. Surely, the eudaimonistic motivation in rewilding has an unbroken connection to the project of Wilderness designation in North America, and this movement, it has been argued many times, is a tangible echo of a

Romantic response to the Enlightenment and later industrialization.⁵³ What I'm calling the Eudaimonistic Turn evidenced in Monbiot is simply de rigueur in the most influential works of Aldo Leopold or Wilderness Society founder Bob Marshall. In *The People's Forests* (1933), Marshall presents the central goal of preserving forests in primitive states as providing a refuge from the troubles of urban life. He writes, "As society becomes more and more mechanized, it will become more and more difficult for many people to stand the nervous strain, the high pressure, and the drabness of their lives. To escape these abominations, constantly growing numbers will seek the primitive for the finest features of life."⁵⁴ The choice of "finest" harkens back to Aristotle's *to kalon*, a beautiful good, something truly choiceworthy. While Marshall is no academic Aristotelianism, this kind of good so often motivates Marshall's work.

Other founders of the Wilderness Society are on the same page. Take Benton MacKaye's proposal for the Appalachian Trail (1921); if it were proposed today, it would absolutely be marketed as a plan to rewild, not simply land, but rural life and economy. In fact, MacKaye's original Appalachian Trail proposal was published, not in any environmental or forestry journal, but in the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*. He wasn't trying to shape nature; he was trying to shape human life. As he put it, wilderness preservation is about offering a better solution to the "problem of living,"⁵⁵ understood as the impoverishing and often unjust living conditions brought on by industrial society. His original trail concept had pedestrian access connecting Washing, DC, Philadelphia, and New York City to the trail. Moreover, MacKaye is clear that his goal is not to simply provide occasional retreats (which is what the Appalachian

⁵³ The connection between wilderness designation and the romantic movement has been described in (Cladis, *Radical Romanticism: Democracy, Religion, and the Environmental Imagination*, 2014) and (Cladis, 2018)

⁵⁴ (Marshall, 2002, pp. 64-65)

⁵⁵ (MacKaye, 1921) – MacKaye's original published the Appalachian Trail proposal in the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*.

Trail provides these days), but to set up an economic system that makes a far more rural life possible for more people who would live and work in the areas protected for the trail. He writes,

The ability to sleep and cook in the open is a good step forward. But "scouting" should not stop there. This is but a feint step from our canary bird existence. It should strike far deeper than this. We should seek the ability not only to cook food but to raise food with less aid – and less hindrance – from the complexities of commerce. And this is becoming daily of increasing practical importance. Scouting, then, has its vital connection with the problem of living. The problem of living is at bottom an economic one.⁵⁶

So, maybe Monbiot's turn isn't new. Origins have origins. Far earlier than the Wilderness Society, we have Transcendentalism and Romanticism, along with various Agrarianisms that are very much kindred spirits (perhaps elder brothers). These responses against enlightenment, against features of industrialization, were regularly cast as returns to some kind of wildness. And the force of these was also, I think, eudaimonistic. The push was to question progress and ask, are the changes coming really changes for the better? Is the modernization of life really the more choiceworthy life? What goods are lost in the transition?

Wordsworth's *Guide to the Lakes* (1810) is a good example. The *Guide* is a praise of wildness, written as an attempt to capture a fading thing. One of Wordsworth's most eye-catching uses of the term "wildness" is used to describe – not the lakes and fells, not the badger or the red deer – but the Lake District's vernacular architecture. Wordsworth praises the *houses* as wild: "These humble dwellings remind the contemplative spectator of a production of nature ... to have risen by an instinct of their own out of the native rock; so little is there in them of formality; such is their wildness and beauty."⁵⁷ While other portions of Wordsworth's poetry may characterize wildness in terms of a solitary figure enthralled by a sublime universe, the nature of wildness in the *Guide* is a way of life – a threatened quality of relationship with

⁵⁶ *ibid.* p. 325

⁵⁷ From the 1810 edition, electronic edition archived at www.romantic-circles.org (Wordsworth, 2022)

community and with the land. And the threat is not just human habitation or use, not these old houses; the threat is in the new houses being built, the changing economic conditions and new patterns of life initiated by an influx of wealthy folks buying up the area. The loss of wildness is the loss of a way of life.

Mark Cladis has recently charted the use of wildness in romantic traditions, noting that the appeal to wildness most often serves as radical social critique.⁵⁸ He closely reviews the work of Wordsworth, Thoreau, and W. E. B. Du Bois, showing how all three employ notions of wildness that are not quite ecological ideas, but something more like social-ecological ideals, ways of living in relation to land as a critique of the impoverishments and injustices of dominant modes of life in their time and place.⁵⁹ It's not much of a stretch to call any of this a positive environmentalism.

So, in the next chapter I want to focus on these broader, social-ecological hopes in rewilding. One misunderstands the growth and popularity of rewilding if it is reduced to the ecological defense of trophic cascade and diversifying ecological functions. A whole side of the literature concerns, not rewilding land, but rewilding our lives. Here the eudaimonistic turn is far more apparent. If environmentalism is going to become truly positive, to take what I'm calling a eudaimonistic turn, it must widen its focus from the good of the land to the good of a life lived on that land. And that's the conversation many rewilders are starting.

⁵⁸ (Cladis, 2014 & 2018)

⁵⁹ See also, Robert Chapman's "Ecological Restoration Restored" (Chapman, 2006). Chapman focuses on Leopold and Thoreau's notion of wildness, pointing out how what each prize has more to do with modes of living than particular ecological states.

CHAPTER 2: REWILDING LIFE

“Just as Shakespeare’s Macbeth laments about life, rewilding becomes a word ‘full of sound and fury, signifying nothing’ – or perhaps, signifying everything.”

- Dolly Jørgensen⁶⁰

“I have to say that by now, after spending years philosophizing about the word *rewilding*, I fucking hate it.”

- Peter Michael Bauer⁶¹

In the last chapter I covered a bit of what rewilding optimism looks like in ecological terms. I reviewed some of the ecological concepts used to argue that ecosystem health requires wilder landscapes, large places where the large animals and big ecological processes that evolved together are free to continue their relationships. But this is only part of the story. In this chapter I talk about the social side of rewilding.

Many attempts to define rewilding have focused most on providing one definition that distinguishes all cases of rewilding restoration projects from previous forms of ecological restoration.⁶² These definitions can be useful, if broad. Specifically, they focus on the ecological science and the concepts outlined in the last chapter – trophic cascade, ecological function, longer time scales, open-ended management.

Andrea Gammon has taken a different approach to defining rewilding. In “The Many Meanings of Rewilding”⁶³ she argued for a *cluster definition*, a set of themes that run through rewilding practices and discourse. This method builds on the Wittgensteinian notion of “family resemblances.”⁶⁴ The idea is that if one simply documents many different instances and uses of a word, it is less likely that they are all connected by one core meaning, and more likely they are

⁶⁰ (Jørgensen, Rethinking rewilding, 2015, p. 487)

⁶¹ (Scout, 2016, p. 243)

⁶² This is what (Prior & Ward, 2016) and (Jørgensen, Rethinking rewilding, 2015) did, quoted in the previous chapter. Even if not a strict definition, Marcus Hall (Hall M. , 2019) and Jamie Lorimer (Lorimer J. , 2015) also attempt to separate all rewilding from restoration by appealing to the future-oriented, open-endedness of rewilding.

⁶³ (Gammon, 2018)

⁶⁴ See *Philosophical Investigations* I.67 (Wittgenstein, 1973)

connected by a series of partially overlapping similarities. For Gammon, then, no one criterion captures the meaning of rewilding, but a number of themes, no one theme always present, braid together in the diverse ways the word is used.

What interests me most in Gammon's approach is the inclusion of what she calls "secondary" uses of *Rewilding*. Gammon divides these secondary uses between "reflexive" and "primitivist" uses of rewilding.⁶⁵ The former includes the many projects of people changing lifestyles and worldviews in order to better appreciate wildness. Gammon's central example is George Monbiot, who I mentioned in the last chapter. Gammon describes his project this way: "For Monbiot, rewilding as the restoration of defunct ecologies is the condition of possibility for his human-centric meaning of rewilding: humans need encounters with a wilder world in order to experience the personal rewilding that Monbiot sees as important for our well-being."⁶⁶ The rewilding projects Monbiot describes are restorations of landscapes, but more than this they are transitions of lifestyle in and with these landscapes that prove themselves better for human well-being. Monbiot's story is a lifestyle change from what he calls "ecological boredom"⁶⁷ to a life that more deeply appreciates the diversity and dynamism of the world around it. Just what such a "wilder" life looks like is something of an open question. But the focus on human lifestyle change is what Gammon means by "reflexive" rewilding.

Gammon's other secondary use, "primitivist rewilding," is a more specific tradition within the broader idea of reflexive rewilding. Primitivists also have a focus on lifestyle change as the focus of rewilding. Gammon cites the groups Wild Abundance and the Firefly Gathering as primitivists rewilders. I will introduce both groups, along with some background to the

⁶⁵ Gammon, 2018 p. 336-338

⁶⁶ *ibid.* p. 336

⁶⁷ (Monbiot, 2014, p. 12)

primitivist traditions, more below. In brief, primitivists value small self-sustainable agrarian life and many hunter-gatherer traditions. For some, this involves creating fully off-grid communities. For others, it is a way to include meaningful ancient skills into their modern life. Here it only needs to be noted that the primitivists argue, a bit like Monbiot, that human well-being is found in reconnecting in some way with the wild world. They go much further, however, in more deeply critiquing industrial civilization and advocating for alternate forms of social and economic organization, forms that prioritize the self-sufficiency of small groups living more directly off the land. Gammon writes, “On this version of rewilding, in order to be whole and fully actualized, humans have to learn to overcome the artificial and toxic ways in which we have separated ourselves from nature. [Fixing this] requires that we re-acquaint ourselves with the natural world by learning skills that enable self- and community-sufficiency without relying on the standard means of employment and economy.”⁶⁸

Reflexive rewilding and a primitivist impulse aren’t covered in most attempts at a singular definition of *Rewilding*. And yet, both color the history and current practice of rewilding. It certainly is not the case that all rewilders are sympathetic to primitivists. I discuss this more below. And yet, the reflexive focus of rewilding is a mainstay of rewilding literature and the landmark nature literature that has inspired it, including Thoreau and Muir, Leopold and Carson. It is the notion that, more than ecological damage, something good has been lost in development of modern forms of life. It’s the hope that a better life is possible. Gammon agrees that these reflexive and primitivist uses of rewilding may be secondary, even “fringe.” She argues, however, that they are nevertheless influential uses of the word that must be kept in mind for a more complete understanding of rewilding as a movement. She writes:

⁶⁸ Gammon, 2018, p. 337

I want to suggest, however, that re-envisioning and its associated discontent are as much a theme of rewilding as are other criteria more commonly associated with rewilding as ecological restoration. ... Ignoring [these secondary themes] misses a shade of meaning to which even the more conventional uses of rewilding sometimes make allusions. ... Specifically, these fringe or secondary uses make explicit a discontent with which the more mainstream instances of rewilding and environmental thinking resonate. It is for this reason that maintaining rewilding as a single term that encompasses this breadth of usages is important.⁶⁹

My introduction of rewilding has already left room for these “secondary” meanings. I think they are even more central to rewilding as a movement than Gammon argues. This is why I divide my descriptions loosely between Rewilding Land and Rewilding Life. And I agree that the themes on the “life” side can be understood as “secondary” in many contexts. But as a broad movement, and certainly in popular appropriation, I think these secondary meanings are even more important. The “re-envisioning” involved in the hope for better relationships with one’s environment is foundational to the movement, both predating and inspiring much of the ecological science and fueling the radical hope present in rewilding proposals.

In this chapter I introduce several examples of “rewilding life.” Here I’m still answering the question: *What are rewilders so optimistic about?* It is never simply more diverse ecosystems. My point is not to defend any particular version of rewilding, or any particular hope. Some rewilding hopes may be quite unappealing to most people. Nevertheless, I hope to show that there is a benefit in the trend to centralize the kind of hope prominent in rewilding literature. That is, there is a benefit in realizing that the question of the environment is really a eudaimonistic question, a decision about what kind of life is more choiceworthy. This is the discussion many rewilders are already having. Making it explicit sharpens reasoning and reveals more of what it is at stake in the decision.

⁶⁹ *ibid.* p. 338

A Reflexive Example

Of the number of recent books simply titled *Rewilding*, Micah Mortali's 2019 volume might seem out of place. There is a bit of ecology, a few mentions of popular environmental authors, but it quickly becomes clear that this isn't a text about ecological restoration at all. It's a yoga book.

Micah Mortali begins the work with rueful descriptions of life in industrial society. "We live in a time when technology dominates our lives. The internet and portable touch-screen devices have radically altered our interactions and our societies. Fewer and fewer people are connected to the source of their food or the land on which they live. This break in our relationship with nature alienates us from the generative forces of our living earth."⁷⁰

Mortali's lamentation is about the architecture of industrial society, its material structure. Life in industrial society is shaped by an increasingly homogenous infrastructure: the foundation of highways connecting concrete city centers with endless sub-divided, centerless suburbs; the organization of offices, living rooms, and restaurants to direct attention towards screens rather than other people; the daily distance between home and work, and the greater, less tangible distance between the goods we consume and their opaque origins. Even where individual freedoms of belief and lifestyle are respected, the material structure of industrial culture sets limits to the possible patterns of daily life, patterns dictated by the cellphone, the car, and the television. One can work to cultivate other patterns – you might walk or bike commute, buy local, avoid social media, garden, go knock to say hello to the neighbors – but even these simple things become increasingly difficult when they work against the grain of one's environment. The infrastructure of our lives supports a certain kind of living, discouraging anything else. Mortali

⁷⁰ (Mortali, 2019, p. 1)

continues, “I often feel trapped in my modern lifestyle. ... I feel compelled to stay on the hamster wheel, even though I know I am contributing to the degradation of the earth.”⁷¹

As a Yoga and Mindfulness educator, Mortali became increasingly dissatisfied with teaching Yoga indoors on rubber mats and practicing Mindfulness primarily as an exploration on one’s inner life. He developed practices of *mindful rewilding* as “a tool to train yourself to be here now, with the earth as it is... This is a natural form of mindfulness, in which I surrender to the presence of the living earth and allow her dance to carry me fully into the present moment.”⁷² The objective is to gain a wider perspective on life, on one’s place in relation to the larger living world. Mortali laments that the patterns of industrial daily life make this wider perspective increasingly hard to appreciate and sustain. Mindful rewilding, though, offers a perspective on how one’s life is related to the larger world that allows one to “see through the manufactured stories and become more discerning in our actions.”⁷³ Through these practices Mortali believes, “Our species can reclaim our once wild selves and appreciate once again our natural habitats.”⁷⁴

The story here is one of *exile and return*. Contemporary life is a separation from something older, more permanent, more important. Rewilding is a name for coming home. In Mortali’s case, a particular kind of yoga and meditation is one path guiding us there.

This example is one of many. What I want to bring out in the examples below is this: the hope of rewilders are competing visions, not merely about a healthy environment, but about a Good Life. The most pertinent environmental discussions today are often more a matter of answering *Who do we want to be?* rather than *How ought we to treat our environment?* I argue

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 16

⁷² *ibid.*, p. 21-22

⁷³ *ibid.*, p. 22

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 23

that the former question, which at its heart is a eudaimonistic concern, is the better question to centralize in environmental ethics.

More Origins – Loss, Wonder, and the Word itself

The Pleistocene proposal mentioned in the last chapter, as novel as it was, grew from older and deeper soils. It was never only arguments about what ecosystems required for sustainability. Rewilding was giving voice to a sense of wonder that has long accompanied ecological research and long inspired amateur naturalism. It is a wonder awakened by history.

More often than not, learning how an ecosystem works feels like learning about how it *used* to work. As Aldo Leopold lamented, “One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds.”⁷⁵ It may be maudlin, but the writer of Ecclesiastes is often proven right: He that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.⁷⁶ The ecological eye notices what is missing.

But a reason to mourn things lost is also a recognition of something good, something worth mourning. A little history enlivens the imagination. Simple facts about the past seem revolutionary, perception-altering. I remember learning that the banks of the Monongahela River, flowing just outside my window, were once blanketed with freshwater mussels. More than random fecundity, this abundance came from centuries of skillful management by the indigenous residents. Their river provided their diet. Just one century ago new European residents of my town ice-skated across this river, on water I’ve never seen freeze. A warming climate partly explains the change, but huge dams had regulated this river’s seasonal patterns of flood and freezing long before this. When my town was founded the Sycamores along the banks of the

⁷⁵ (Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on conservation from Round River*, 1986, p. 197)

⁷⁶ Eccles. 1:18 KJV

Monongahela River where wide and hollow enough to offer ready-made shelter for travelers, with room for bed rolls and a cookfire.⁷⁷

A few facts change perception. Presence comes to reveal absence; bare mud speaks of mussel beds; greenbrier thorns speak of lost timber. A walk by the river prompts mournful reveries, a wish for shellfish and sycamore hollows, a vague longing, and a timid hope. These facts are not simply about a river, but the kind of life that river afforded – a life now lost.

This sort of wonder and longing differs from place to place, from person to person. I mention my own because wonder and longing are matters for personal testimony, not general arguments about what is ecologically necessary. Moreover, I mention my own because pining for old Sycamores is much different than other mourning, much different than many indigenous Americans remembering bison herds roaming the unfenced prairie, for instance, and the kind of life that afforded.

A student of Eastern North American forests studies after the Chestnut blight, after Dutch Elm disease, after the Red Spruce were scraped clean from Appalachian ridge tops. Here in central Appalachia, I drive home each day on a road I know is a paved-over Bison trail. What was this place like then? What might it be like to live a life of Chestnuts in autumn, Elm shade in summer, a land of clean water and clean soil, and forests that still supported Elk, Bison, and Wolves. Imagining what was is a hairs breath from dreaming what could be; emotionally, however, it's a world away, a change from grief to hope. Rewilding gave a word to the captivating sense of potential fostered in the study of ecological history.

This buoyant hope and the hard science are separate things, but never far apart. The best nature writers are those who most elegantly weave the two together. Aldo Leopold committed

⁷⁷ One of the more complete and approachable ecological histories of central/southern Appalachia is Donald Davis' *Where There Are Mountains* (Davis, 2000)

the second chapter of *A Sand County Almanac* to this woven history. The chapter “February” is a decade-by-decade lamentation of what Wisconsin, and Leopold’s own eroded Sand County farm, had lost over the last century. Such accounting is necessary to begin the work of ecological recovery. One must take accurate stock of the damage. But Leopold’s accounting here isn’t science; it’s poetry. What to make of it? Why such articulate mourning? It gives hope direction. Leopold’s *Almanac* mourns loss, but as a preamble to its deeper affirmation that a ruined farm can be a wondrous place to live, still worth time and attention, still ready to come alive again. With the right changes the former richness of the land might not simply return as we retreat, but might become part of our lives. Still more, the *Almanac* testifies that the life of restoration is a life worth living, not as a joyless duty, nor as a sacrifice for the future, but as a Good Life. And this life can happen here, on an eroded Wisconsin farm or the banks of the Monongahela River. This affirmation is the point of the poetry.

This is a different kind of optimism than the hope of expanding wild ecosystems. This is a hope for connection, for community, for a life of skillful and joyful participation in the ecology of one’s world. As I will show, rewilding is often voicing this kind of hope, a hope for more fulfilling relationships with one’s environment.

I say all this to argue that this broad hope is an important context for understanding rewilding. As reviewed in the last chapter, Dolly Jørgensen argued that *rewilding* began as a term in ecological science with a few discrete meanings, each a specific form of ecological restoration.⁷⁸ She then interprets the rapid and diverse spread of *rewilding* as a case of what linguist Uwe Pörksen call a “ ‘plastic word,’ words developed in scientific language for discrete

⁷⁸ Jørgensen 2014

ideas that then move into daily use and take on different meanings.”⁷⁹ Other examples include *development*, *modernization*, and *sustainability*. Words are always changing, but the worry of this particular escape from science to popular discourse is that the various broad and fuzzy meanings in social discourse can unwarrantedly garner something of the scientific authority of the far more discrete and qualified uses in the original science.

Jørgensen’s is a good warning, but it is too narrow a view of the history. The word “rewilding” has its roots in the Earth First! community of the late 1980s. Dave Foreman, then a leader of Earth First!, is often credited as the originator.⁸⁰ The general story is that these radical environmental advocates saw the dramatic expansion of Wilderness designation, or something like it, as necessary for curbing environmental destruction. This meant expanding wilderness-style protection to lands that do not qualify under the Wilderness Act. As part of a wave of environmental “re” words (restoration, reclamation, rehabilitation, revitalization), establishing wilderness management on land that didn’t qualify as wilderness is easily enough named *re-wilding*. Tracking down the exact origins of the specific neologism, however, quickly becomes trivial.

One of the first recorded example in print is from a 1990 Newsweek article describing the work of Earth First!.⁸¹ The article referenced “rewilding” as a word environmental activists were already using. When Foreman split with Earth First! and established the *Wild Earth* journal in 1991, he used the phrase “Wilderness Recovery Zones” for the vision of making new, larger, and interconnected wilderness areas. The topic of Wilderness Recovery Zones persisted in *Wild*

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p. 485 – For Poerksen’s full presentation see *Plastic Words: The Tyranny of a Modular Language* (Poerksen, 1995)

⁸⁰ See “History of Rewilding: Ideas and Practice” (Johns, 2019) as well as the inaugural edition of *Wild Earth* journal (1991), the latter archived at www.environmentandsociety.org.

⁸¹ (Foote, 1990)

Earth through the 90s, coalescing into Michael Soulé and Reed Noss's seminal article "Rewilding and Biodiversity" (1998) – the 3C's essay mentioned in the last chapter. This essay is often cited as an origin of the term, but it is better understood as a foundational document for a particular model of scientific conservation, one that formed within a larger milieu of rewilding dreams. That is, Soule and Noss's plan – a push to protect wilderness Cores, establish migration Corridors, and reintroduce Carnivores (dubbed the 3Cs approach) – is better understood not as *What*, but a specific *Why* and *How* of rewilding. It offered a summary of the ecological justification and practical direction for achieving a rewilded world.

It is misleading to understand rewilding as a concept of ecological science that escaped into wider popular use, as Jørgensen presented it in her first attempt above. The science itself developed within the much wider conversation. *Wild Earth* journal wasn't a science publication; it was a collection of dreams, of poems, of travel narratives, amateur naturalism, diatribes, and philosophical musings. Together it formed a testimony to the goodness of the living world and the promotion of various ways of appreciating it. The 3Cs conservation plan solidified within that diversity, not the other way around.

An even clearer example of rewilding ethos and practice pre-dating rewilding science comes from Jørgensen herself, writing a few years later. In *Recovering Lost Species in the Modern Age* Jørgensen has a chapter dedicated to rewilding.⁸² Curiously, she doesn't choose 21st century examples of Pleistocene Parks or recent wolf or bison reintroductions. She goes back 100 years to describe the work of reintroducing Musk Oxen to Scandinavia. She sees in this reintroduction the prototypical rewilding project, an effort began in 1932. As evidenced in her narrative, the desire to reintroduce large species, to witness them roaming freely where they once

⁸² (Jørgensen, 2019)

did, to live a life with them, predates the ecological justifications for doing so. It's fair to say that various discontents and longings are what inspired the ecology in the first place, or at least they are the context in which it formed, not the other way around.

Next, I look a bit more closely at two very different rewilding hopes, two very different versions of a positive environmentalism. The juxtaposition helps reveal that what is most at stake in the positive turn in environmentalism is, not quite ecology, but rival eudaimonistic visions.

A Little Primitivism

A hope for restored ecosystems is big, a hope for the quality of life and relationships those complex ecosystems afford is bigger still, but rewilding has been a rallying cry for yet more expansive dreams. For many, rewilding is a call for sweeping social transformation. It is a lifestyle, an ethic, and a politics. This was the secondary, political arena of rewilding discourse I encountered over a decade ago. The following few examples are admittedly fringe, but their threads weave through even quite mainstream rewilding conversations today. I first came across the word “rewilding” in the early 2000s, separate from ecology, in a number of leftist and anarchist zines – mostly publications of hand-stapled copier paper circulated at rock shows and protests. In these pages rewilding was a project of explaining what's gone wrong – what's gone wrong with everything – and how to fix it, or maybe just how to cope, how to carve out a different kind of life from a civilization that increasingly dictates, as they saw it, a homogenous and oppressive existence.

For some this took the form of grand political theory, like anarcho-primitivists John Zerzan and Kevin Tucker. Their publications, notably the periodicals *Green Anarchy* and *Wild Resistance* (far more polished than my early hand-stapled samples), argue that the roots of both social oppression and environmental destruction lie – not merely in industrialization, not merely

in colonialism, not merely in capitalism, but – in the very foundations of centralized, agricultural civilization. Patriarchy, racism, economic exploitation, *as well as* recklessly unsustainable uses of natural resources, have their roots in the material organization of agricultural society, so they argue. Social injustice and environmental destruction are intertwined in the invention of non-migratory city life. Zerzan writes, “Mounting evidence demonstrates that before the Neolithic shift from a foraging or gatherer-hunter mode of existence to an agricultural lifeway, most people had ample free time, considerable gender autonomy or equality, an ethos of egalitarianism and sharing, and no organized violence.”⁸³ The move to centralized, agricultural life was not an upgrade in quality of life for most people. Instead, city life was built and maintained by reigning in the freedom, diversity, and independence of the many to serve the interests of the few. The basic intuition here is a rejection of anything like a Hobbesian social contract theory. Politically centralized agricultural life was not established through enlightened self-interest; it was not an exchange of freedom for security; it was not an acceptance of the rule of law as a salvation from perpetual want and indiscriminate violence. Instead, Zerzan claims that the rise of agricultural civilization was forced and marked a distinct decline in quality of life for most people.⁸⁴

And it was not only people who suffered, Zerzan claims, but their environment as well. Primitivist Rewilders argue that centralized agricultural life necessitates unsustainable environmental destruction. A permanent city inevitably leads to the exhaustion of local resources, requiring continued expansion, usually conquest, to sustain it. Thus, social injustice and ecological destruction are both bound to the material structure of society as centralized,

⁸³ From Zerzan’s essay “Why Primitivism?” (Zerzan, johnzerzan.net, 2002)

⁸⁴ Zerzan has consolidated many of his thoughts on these topics in his *A People’s History of Civilization* (Zerzan, 2018). For a comparison of Zerzan’s primitivism with the ‘state of nature’ concept in Locke and Rousseau, as well as a fuller account of its relationship with current environmental ethics, see (Smith M. , 2002).

densely populated, agricultural communities. The answer, then, is to change that material structure of society. It is a dream of changing how humans inhabit a landscape, how they meet their needs. Rewilding in this context is the work of fostering “the innate egalitarianism and ecological-inclusion that is rooted within all of us through millions of years of evolution as nomadic societies.”⁸⁵ The organization of less centralized, hunter-gather societies inspire a vision of a happier, more just future.

I mention Zerzan and Tucker briefly as an example of the wider ideas behind some forms of primitivism. It’s not my intention here to evaluate his theories of ancient human societies. In my estimation, they seem overly romantic and simplistic. My point, however, is only to draw attention to some of the wider theories that lead primitivists (1) to assume something closer to hunter-gatherer lifestyles will produce a better life and (2) to stress again the eudaimonistic motivation present in this kind of thinking. The call to primitivism is *not* understood as a personal sacrifice to protect wild nature. It is not a moral demand or an attempt to make amends for past destruction. It’s pitched as a movement forward to a happier life. Whether such a life is happier is another question.

But primitivist rewilding is not all grand political theories. Others in these circles simply discuss the joys found in traditional skills, in more rural, less industrial forms of life. The Firefly Gathering and Wild Abundance, for instance, are groups that promote rewilding through the practice of traditional life skills, some skills that might resemble some hunter-gatherer practices, some skills that are rather modern, small-scale agrarian. The Firefly Gathering puts on an annual event offering “over 300 classes ranging from bow-making and hide-tanning, to herbal medicine and food preservation, to nonviolent communication, healing arts, and environmental

⁸⁵ This is in the mission statement of Kevin Tucker’s journal Wild Resistance (www.wildresistance.org)

remediation.”⁸⁶ A large part of this kind of rewilding is about skillful engagement with one’s environment to meet one’s needs. More simply, it’s about learning to do things. It’s about the quality of life, the quality of social and ecological relationships, achieved in small communities sustaining themselves. There is more goodness to a meal skillfully cooked than in a meal easily purchased; more goodness still in a meal skillfully grown and gathered. Rewilding is about identifying goodness lost in contemporary life, and finding ways of living that reclaim it.

This kind of expansive rewilding – from political theory to basket weaving – is what inspires Peter Michael Bauer, founder of Rewilding Portland. As he defines it, rewilding is about un-doing the domestication of the last several thousand years. This means, “to foster and maintain a sustainable way of life through hunter-gatherer-gardener social and economic systems, including but not limited to the encouragement of social, physical, spiritual, mental, and environmental biodiversity and the prevention and undoing of social, physical, spiritual, mental, and environmental domestication and enslavement.”⁸⁷ Rewilding then, is indeed about everything, because it is a project of transforming society.

Bauer began writing about rewilding in terms of changing lifestyles in the early 2000s, separate from the introduction of Pleistocene rewilding into the public eye. As his work has developed, it has had to define itself in distinction from things like the Pleistocene project. He distinguishes between *conservation rewilding* and *human rewilding*. The latter focuses on changing lifestyles, changing how we sustain ourselves and organize society inspired by hunter-gatherer ways of life. This is the real goal. It is not at all understood as any kind of sacrificial

⁸⁶ Information on the organization and all their events and workshops can be found at www.fireflygathering.org

⁸⁷ (Scout, 2016, p. 20) Cf. www.petermichaelbauer.com for Bauer’s regular writings and Rewilding Portland’s events and workshops.

return to primitiveness for the benefit of the environment; rather, it is championed as a more worthwhile kind of life in itself, superior to current conditions.

In a recent talk Bauer explained, “The main problem with conservation rewilding is that it perceives wildness as this space that is non-human – and so we abandon spaces and let them rewild. But the reality is that humans, as hunter-gathers and horticulturalists, can be an inspiration to the landscape and actually bring back biodiversity intentionally through our practices of disturbance. There can be regenerative disturbance.”⁸⁸ Bauer is well aware of dramatic changes and arguments over the meaning of rewilding. The word shifts and expands over time. When Bauer says that he “fucking hates it” – in the epigram of this chapter – it’s a humorous exasperation at the inability of one word to consistently convey his position. His project of “human rewilding” is regularly confused and criticized in terms of “conservation rewilding.” This is what happens with words, and Bauer is happy to leave behind the word “rewilding” as its meaning changes. His project, however, remains the same: “A non-appropriative, authentic, regenerative, indigenous life.”^{89 90}

Ecomodernism

It should be clear from the first chapter that not all rewilding has these kinds of primitivist leanings. The projects mentioned by Sala and Attenborough differ a great deal from the primitivists. Sure, they all hope to reserve a large percent of Earth’s land and oceans against heavy human use and resource extraction. They hope to inspire fascination and love of wildlands

⁸⁸ This is from Bauer’s speech titled “Rewilding 101” for the 2020 Beltane Festival, hosted online for COVID. A recording of the talk is hosted on Pete Michael Bauer’s YouTube channel, dated May 2, 2020. Link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEvVprwiYsw (Bauer, 2020)

⁸⁹ (Scout, 2016, p. 245)

⁹⁰ The primitivists’ visions for a rewilded society above are, to use the most general spectrum, on the fringes of the politically left. But the word has a history on the fringes of the far right as well, in masculinist philosophies, Norse neopaganism, and some circles of white nationalism. For a review of how rewilding visions have become part of some versions of far right Norse neopaganism and white nationalism, see Verena Höfig’s essay “‘Re-Wild Yourself’: Old Norse Myth and Radical White Nationalist Groups in Trump’s America” (Höfig, 2020)

in their audience. And they all appeal to a better future where ecological richness is a prized part of civilization. But the similarities fade there. While Sala and Attenborough, like nearly all mainstream environmentalist, make laudatory gestures to indigenous cultures around the world that have been able to inhabit land without destroying diversity, and while occasionally they will use the metaphor of finding ways for industrial society to *harmonize* with its environment, there is no serious call to emulate hunter-gatherer practices or social organization. There is no rueful lament of the everyday lifestyle available in industrial society, still less a wholesale condemnation of civilization.

There are rewilding projects, however, far more starkly opposed to the primitive impulse. In 2015 a number of influential environmental leaders collectively drafted and signed their names to *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*.⁹¹ This too was a document of radical hope, an optimistic proposal for a better environmental future. As the sub-title has it, “A manifesto to use humanity’s extraordinary powers in service of creating a good Anthropocene.” Instead of any narrative of exile and return to some older form of life, however, the ecomodernist position leans into technology and industrialization.

They distinguish themselves very clearly at the start: “We affirm one long-standing environmental ideal, that humanity must shrink its impact on the environment to make more room for nature, while we reject another, that human societies must harmonize with nature to avoid economic and ecological collapse.”⁹² That is, ecomodernists oppose the idea that older, re-appropriated forms of social organization and resource use have any chance of solving

⁹¹ This document, as well as its history, the background of its 19 authors and other co-signers, is available to read and download on www.ecomodernism.org. (Asafu-Adjaye, et al., 2015)

⁹² *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*, p. 6

contemporary environmental woes. The solution will require leaning into technology, intensification, and urban living.

There are two parts to the ecomodernist vision. The first is a hypothesis, *peak resource use*, and the second is a prescription, *decoupling*. First, ecomodernists predict that industrial societies are approaching peak resource use. This has two parts. Population itself is approaching a peak that will likely lead to some decline and the average amount of resource consumption in affluent industrial societies is also approaching a peak. Using western economies as their model, ecomodernists predict that raising living standards globally to current industrial standards will *not* result in the same exponential growth of population and resource use of the past two centuries, but instead will level out sometime soon.

With this hypothesis in place, the ecomodernists have a straightforward prescriptive plan. A global peak amount of resource consumption can be sustained by intensifying production and increasing efficiencies. They call the general plan *decoupling*. The goal of decoupling is to reduce the footprint of human consumption. That is, they hope to provide whatever humans need for current industrial forms of life from far smaller amounts of land. So, by intensifying farming the same amount of food can be produced in a much smaller space. Nuclear power can provide the same amount of energy with far smaller extractive footprint of fossil fuels. Urban living can sustain the current population on far less land.

Ecomodernists are very clear that the intensification is the only way to effectively decouple, to effectively free up more wild land, space set aside for nothing else besides the free operation of ecosystems. Past forms of life simply will not do this: “The processes of decoupling described above challenge the idea that early human societies lived more lightly on the land than do modern societies. Insofar as past societies had less impact upon the environment, it was

because those societies supported vastly smaller populations.”⁹³ The goal is still rewilded land. The process to achieve this, however, is industrial urban lifestyles. They write in sum, “Taken together, these trends mean that the total human impact on the environment, including land-use change, overexploitation, and pollution, can peak and decline this century. By understanding and promoting these emergent processes, humans have the opportunity to re-wild and re-green the Earth — even as developing countries achieve modern living standards, and material poverty ends.”⁹⁴

Thus, Ecomodern rewilding is not about incorporating something called wildness into modern life, but more strictly dividing modern life from it. In another proposal for rewilding the San Francisco Bay area, this division is quite literally a fence. What would it look like to return large predators to their former Bay area ecosystems? Lewis Martin, writing for the Ecomodern thinktank Breakthrough Institute, take the model of African preserves:

To accommodate the California grizzly, something equivalent to the Kruger fence [an electrified fence around Kruger National Park, South Africa] would therefore be necessary, a barrier impassable to large, dangerous, and potentially destructive animals. Such an enclosure would separate an anthropocentric zone, where nature is valued but people are given priority, from a biocentric realm, where people can visit, observe, and when necessary, manage, but where biological abundance and diversity trump other considerations. ...I see no reason why such a fence, some decades down the road, could not encircle most of the Diablo Range and eventually more than that, excluding some peripheral parks devoted to more risk-averse hikers and picnickers.⁹⁵

The vision of decoupling here even applies to values. There are “anthropocentric zones” and “ecocentric zones.” The goal of Ecomodern rewilding is thus straightforward, to greatly reduce

⁹³ *ibid.* p. 16

⁹⁴ *ibid.* p. 15

⁹⁵ (Lewis, 2015)

the footprint of anthropocentric zones through centralizing human populations and creating efficiencies in resource use.⁹⁶

What I want to note here is that the Ecomodern plan is also a plan of hope and optimism. It isn't a story of doom telling us that we must be vegans living in cities in order to avoid disaster. The hope is a plan to use resources wisely enough that we can have our cake and eat it to, as it were. We can raise global quality of life, solve global poverty, and preserve even more ecosystems with minimal disturbance and management. We can do this by decoupling what is required for modern industrial lives from reliance on so large a footprint of earth's space and resources. The ingenious and efficient technologies to do this are not seen as last resorts to avoid disaster, but as innovations to take pride in. The lifestyle of the Ecomodern urbanite is understood as desirable, and adherents argue it increases the possibility of recreational enjoyment of wildlands and creates more space for rural hobby and artisan agriculture, not as the primary means of providing for society, but as worthwhile goods for those who want them.

Why Centralize the Question of the Good Life?

My primary aim in this chapter has been to introduce examples of eudaimonistic motivations for rewilding, not simply ecosystems, but lifestyles. The chapter so far is something of a sampler, simply showing that very different kinds of rewilding share a similar eudaimonistic motivation and justification. Simply pointing this out may have been pointless in the past. As

⁹⁶ Paul Robbins has argued that such attempts to divide land into "natural" and "human" purposes tends to thwart its own purposes (Robbins, 2001). Using conservation in India as his case study, Robbins argues, "The study demonstrates that through these efforts, state planners have attempted to physically partition those land uses seen as "social" from those seen as "natural" and thereby enforce a modernist purification of land covers. Despite these efforts—indeed, because of them—hybrid and "impure" land covers, which mix social and natural characteristics and combine exogenous and indigenous species, have proliferated across the landscape. Moreover, these quasiforests have proven impossible to control or quarantine. The results of analysis, therefore, suggest that these sorts of unexpected landcover changes necessarily grow out of the very attempts to halt them through modernization."

I've mentioned, the founders of the Wilderness Society, even Leopold and Muir before him, seem to have no hesitation in justifying wilderness preservation for its benefits to human life. A life with access to relatively untouched forest is defended by Bob Marshall specifically as an antidote to "the nervous strain, the high pressure, and the drabness of [our] lives."⁹⁷ What's more, this concern for human happiness was rarely understood at odds with a deep appreciation of the value of non-human life and ecosystems themselves.

But these easy assumptions changed with the rise of more systematic environmental ethics. As I'll review in the next chapter, environmental ethics, even as a very diverse discipline, was in many ways united by a search for completely non-anthropocentric justifications for the ethical consideration of non-human life and ecosystems. With that goal, the eudaimonistic concerns of present rewilding read like a moral lapse, a tragic compromise in environmentalism. In the next chapter I will argue that this is not the case.

Before that, however, I want to close by noting two benefits to this rise in eudaimonistic concern. First, the eudaimonistic hopes of rewilders appropriately recognize that environmental decisions are always also decisions about human lifestyles. The environments we shape will shape us in turn. They facilitate certain modes of life and hinder others. Environmental ethics is never simply a matter of how to treat what is *over there*, an idea of a nature that's almost completely separate from the human sphere. Environmental questions are also questions about what kind of people we – whoever's environment hinges on these questions – hope to become and what kind of life we hope to lead. What is important about accounts like Mortali's mindful rewilding is the recognition that the infrastructure of daily life, the environment of industrial human society, is a network of forces that push its inhabitants to live in certain ways and not

⁹⁷ (Marshall, 2002, pp. 64-65)

others. And by and large, the way they are pushed is to Monbiot's "ecological boredom" at best or Marshall's "nervous strain, and high pressure." One can push against these – and Mortali's book is a list of techniques to do this – but it takes determination when it shouldn't need to. A lot of rewilding is the hope for an environment that facilitates a better life, rather than making living a good life a struggle against one's environment.

Importantly, this is not to say that environmental ethics can now be solely a matter of what produces a better human life. In the next chapter I will look at this balance specifically. It's simply the case that theories that make ecological science or ethical duty to non-humans the central concern of environmental ethics have often neglected the reciprocal effect of environmental action. Environmental ethics is not only evaluating actions toward the non-human world, it's also building the world people inhabit, the environment that shapes the character of human life.

The second benefit of the rise of eudaimonistic concern is that it reshapes environmental questions into far more nuanced choices between goods. Environmental questions are rarely binary; they aren't about whether or not to protect the environment, whether or not to consider non-human life. The question is almost always *how* to do these things. Common rhetoric likes to pose rivalries into *us* vs *them*, for and against, or even *the environmental* decision against the *careless/expedient/greedy/etc.* choice. But this clean enmity is rarely a clear picture of reality.

In this chapter I introduced Primitivist and Ecomodern rewilding specifically because they are so different from each other. I haven't offered a critique of either. At first glance, it seems some very basic requirements of what can be called a good life might recommend against Primitivism. One might expect increases in infant mortality, malnutrition, and premature death from simple injuries and treatable illness to outweigh some of the goods obtained through

subsistence farming and small communities. Sometimes, however, this is a fairly strawman critique. Sure, the movement has its radical revolutionaries. But many people have more modest goals, simply trying to build niches for what they've found to be more meaningful lifestyles, niches within the modern industrial world.

So too, at first glance the Ecomodernist Manifesto is founded on two fairly unrealistic hopes: (1) that consumption levels will plateau, rather than dramatically increase with unforeseen technologies and (2) that a population largely decoupled from wild lands will sustain concern for preserving these lands. Perhaps folks with more primitivist leanings are on to something when they stress that meaningful engagement and daily practice are a more solid foundation for concern and better relationships with non-human life and systems. Others argue that new technological solutions have a way of causing new problems.⁹⁸ But more than this, perhaps many will disagree that the highly centralized, decoupled life – even acknowledging its benefits – is actually desirable. If it's not, they'll have to explain in detail why it's not. And this is a benefit to centralizing a eudaimonistic concern in environmental dialogue.

What goods are gained and what goods are lost in any decision, what kind of life is facilitated and what kind of life is hindered, these topics become the focus of environmental dialogue that introduces a eudaimonistic concern. If nothing else, this framing provides a more honest connection between rival parties, and pushes conversation to focus on these specifics. The argument isn't "Why you should become environmental" or "Why you are immoral if you don't." Instead, arguments must share why specific kinds of environments, why specific forms of life, are worth pursuing and preserving. Or at least, the conversation promotes an acknowledgement of what good things are lost in the decisions made. Then it becomes necessary

⁹⁸ See, for instance, Paul Kingsnorth's "Dark Ecology" (Kingsnorth, 2017).

to defend when and why a loss is worth it. This kind of environmental discussion is more specific, more participatory, and more reflective.

It is not my purpose here to make recommendations between primitive-ish and Ecomodern goals. There is a good amount to critique on both sides. My point is that a decent part of what ultimately recommends either plan – not solely ecological necessity and not solely ethical demands to non-human life – is the choiceworthiness of the kind of life each affords. Rewilding literature makes it evident that the hope of improving environments also involves the reimagining of what kind of life is worth hoping for.

My point so far is modest enough, only that rewilding is a complex collection of hopes. More than a hope to heal ecological damage, it's a hope of finding a better life in that work. And this is a good trend for environmental ethics. It highlights what has always been the case, that our choices in shaping the environment are choices that determine the kinds of people we become, the quality and character of the lives we live.

Ecology can only guide so much. Ecosystem stability may require the freer operation of ecological functions, larger animals roaming larger distances, fire and flood determining cycles of disturbance. Even so, it doesn't quite determine whether this should happen behind an electric fence on the outskirts of the city or here in the backyard. More than that, ecology doesn't determine how communities engage with it, adapt to it, celebrate or bemoan it. At the same time, broad ethical mandates to preserve wild land equally underdetermine projects. As Monbiot argued, broad ethical mandates are good at defending prohibitions, but not recommending new lifestyles, not offering a specific hope.

To argue that the freer operation of ecological forces is important for ecosystem health is one thing; but the worthwhileness of a life lived in relationship with these forces is what

ultimately recommends a rewilded world. If the latter cannot be defended, then the former is destined to the same pessimistic future of most forms of preservation – ecological doom or moral duty undermined by incompatible cultural values and appetites. The future of rewilding as a truly optimistic environmentalism, then, lies in environmental ethics prioritizing the question of the good life.

In the remaining two chapters I will propose and reply to two kinds of objections to a focus on eudaimonistic concerns. The first is that a focus on human benefit undermines ethical concern for the value of non-human life. The second is that a focus on good ends undermines the ethical necessity of democratic – that is, fair, public, and rational – decision-making.

CHAPTER 3: REWILDING ANTHROPOCENTRISM

“Barring love and war, few enterprises are undertaken with such abandon, or by such diverse individuals, or with so paradoxical a mixture of appetite and altruism, as that group of avocations known as outdoor recreation.”

– Aldo Leopold ⁹⁹

While still on the topic of rewilding, this chapter touches on questions about ethical reasoning and motivation. It asks what it means to have the right reasons for doing the right thing. In the last chapters I’ve argued that rewilding is at its best when it keeps the question of the good life central to its project. Why rewild? – Ultimately, to live a better life. This answer may immediately invite critique, a critique foundational to the whole enterprise of academic environmental ethics. In a word, it’s *anthropocentric*. Centralizing the good life seems the very definition of anthropocentrism, and it was anthropocentric ethics that necessitated specifically *environmental* ethics (if not caused all modern environmental harms) in the first place.¹⁰⁰ The goal of a specifically environmental ethic was to put a check on thinking of the non-human world as valuable only in terms of its service to human interests. The project of environmental ethics was to look outward, away from human interests, to identify features of the world – of non-human life, of ecosystems as a whole – that demanded moral consideration, that commanded respect in their own right.

In that story, it seems that centering the good life for humans is quite a step backwards. It works to remove ethical checks on environmental destruction. In that story, we’re back to where we started, valuing environments – however denuded and controlled, however much steel and concrete – only in terms of how they serve human interests.

⁹⁹ From “Conservation Esthetic” in *A Sand County Almanac* (Leopold, 2013, p. 143)

¹⁰⁰ On this point, later in the chapter I will discuss Richard Sylvan’s arguments in (Sylvan (Routley), 1973)

It is hyperbolic, of course, to imagine that rewilders who centralize the hope of living a better, wilder human life (like Monbiot and many others sometimes express) are in danger of supporting mass environmental destruction. If the question is between building a parking lot or preserving a forest, everyone knows which side the rewilders are on. Diverse as they are, rewilders are grouped together among the most adamant voices for the protection of ecosystems, often calling for the most massive ceding of space and resources for primarily non-human use. This ceding is a central part of how rewilders envision the good life. On a *practical* level, then, it misses the mark to fear that rewilding is a path toward unchecked destruction of ecosystems for the benefit of humanity. That's not the real criticism. It's more a question of doing the right thing for the wrong reason. And for many, acting for the sake of living a better life, is not the right reason for environmental actions.

And yet, the most recent and most influential rewilding texts find it very easy to talk about their projects in terms of benefits to human. In one breath they discuss both wilding land and wilding human life. Rewilding Europe, the largest rewilding organization in Europe, defines their work with exactly this dual purpose: "Rewilding helps landscapes become wilder, whilst also providing opportunities for modern society to reconnect with such wilder places for the benefit of all life."¹⁰¹ Rewilding Europe is working both to "...step back and let nature manage itself" and "...reconnect a modern society – both rural and urban – with a wilder nature."¹⁰² The themes of both *stepping back* and *reconnecting* are not understood in tension with each other; rather, the kinds of reconnection they seek are one and the same with the kind of stepping back they advise.

¹⁰¹ From Rewilding Europe's "2015 Annual Review" - (Allen, et al., 2016, p. 10)

¹⁰² From www.rewildingeurope.com article "What is Rewilding?" (Rewilding Europe, n.d.)

George Monbiot's *Feral*, which may be the most popular work describing much of the rewilding in Europe, explicitly provides two definitions of rewilding. First, rewilding is “not an attempt to restore [ecosystems] to any prior state, but to permit ecological processes to resume.”¹⁰³ This process may require an ecological kick-start – e.g., reintroducing lost species or removing pernicious species – but largely rewilding is about stepping back and letting ecosystems develop without significant management. Monbiot's second definition concerns the rewilding of human life. He writes, “I see rewilding as an enhanced opportunity for people to engage with and delight in the natural world.”¹⁰⁴ The static, monotonous shape of highly managed landscapes is chided not only for how it constrains diverse and dynamic natural processes, but also for how it produces *ecological boredom*. Monbiot describes a state of ennui and alienation, where his relationships with his environment are both stiflingly predictable and impossibly distant, a life spent, “watching the seasons cycling past without ever quite belonging to them.”¹⁰⁵

But more than simply extolling the joys of interacting with wild landscapes, many rewilders suggest that a focus on the beauty and significance to be found in wilder relationships with one's ecosystem, rather than a peripheral bonus, should actually become the centrally motivating reasons behind environmental action. Monbiot, again, has called for a new “positive environmentalism,” citing that, “[Environmentalists] have urged only that people consume less, travel less, live not blithely but mindfully, don't tread on the grass. Without offering new freedoms for which to exchange the old ones, we are often seen as ascetics, killjoys and prigs.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ (Monbiot, 2014, p. 8)

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.* p. 10

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.* p. 7

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.* p. 12

Eric Sala, long time National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence and director of the international conservation effort Pristine Seas, has put the positive approach into practice in global conservation. He explains his beauty-first approach to winning support for conservation: “When [Pristine Seas] meets with country leaders, we make sure we never get into the brainy weeds. ... We never start with the head. We go straight for the heart, and taking a leader to the field is the best recipe for doing so. ... Once they fall in love with nature, these leaders intuitively feel the responsibility to protect these places.”¹⁰⁷

Paul Jepsen and Cain Blythe, in their 2020 introductory text *Rewilding*, have described the positivity of rewilding in terms of a widespread shift in environmental narratives. The story of environmentalism is changing with the rise of rewilding. They point out, “...that stories of rewilding lack the blame and the appeal to higher authority of the 20th-century environmental narrative, instead focusing on new ways of thinking and grounded action, intertwined with ideas of nature as a creative force and visions of a better future for all life.”¹⁰⁸ They liken rewilding narratives to stories of mental health recovery. The stories are not centrally about blame, or impending disaster, or about justifying any imperatives to action. Instead, “Rewilding stories, like accounts of recovery from mental health, commonly talk of ‘awakenings’ that prompt a desire to do something, which leads to a reassessment and more action through which recovery emerges.”¹⁰⁹ The recovery described is not simply ecological restoration, but the establishment of new ways of living and relating to the land, the repair of relationships. And that sort of task, well, it involves talking about human goods, about the best way to live, about the most worthwhile kind of life.

¹⁰⁷ (Sala, 2020, pp. 187-188)

¹⁰⁸ (Jepsen & Blythe, 2020, p. 109)

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p. 210

Conservationists have long used the beautiful, the cute, and the awe-inspiring to garner public support for environmental causes. Charismatic megafauna and imposing mountains are conservation mascots for this reason. This may be nothing more than tactic to attract attention and garner support. But the recovery narrative above is something more than a tactic to inspire action. This is a recasting of what the work of conservation is. It is personal work, it's work about humans as much as it is about our environments. The reasons for rewilding, then, openly include a human focus. One might imagine that the most radical efforts to cede massive amounts of space back to predominately non-human use would have the most non-anthropocentric justifications. It may seem ironic, but this simply isn't the case. Look to Jepsen and Blythe's closing words on rewilding: "Rewilding offers the prospect of a new and fulfilling way to connect with nature. In a world where many people are increasingly finding the pursuit of material desires to be superficial and wanting, we predict a surprising level of enthusiasm for the 'new wild' of rewilding and the sense of connection and well-being it generates."¹¹⁰ The vision is one of recovery, of escaping lives of unfulfilling and unnecessarily destructive consumption.

These are very human-focused reasons. And I have suggested that this lifestyle-focused side of rewilding, the side that asks "What kind of life is most worth living?" is actually the most promising part of rewilding. Others might clarify that the focus on living happier, more meaningful lives is important, but surely ethically secondary to respecting the value of the non-human world. If leaving room for wilder ecosystems didn't make one happier, they might clarify, it would still be the right thing to do. So, without committing anyone else to this view, I want to lean in to rewilding's eudaimonistic impulse. I want to say that it is good if the goal of living a

¹¹⁰ *ibid.* p. 143

better, more fulfilling and meaningful life really is the motivating reason behind rewilding. I think it is. For me, then, it seems the charge of anthropocentrism might just stick.

I answer this charge in a roundabout way. Ultimately, I want to suggest that the general framework of thinking of environmental problems as cleanly divisible between human goods and environmental goods, while not useless, is a very blunt tool. What's more, I see in rewilding practice the most promising attempts of rethinking this barren dichotomy of human versus environmental interests in subtler, more fruitful ways. The dichotomy can be useful for justifying prohibitions, but it is a dry well when it comes to recommendations, approbations, celebrations of just what kind of life is worth living in relation with one's environment. An environmental ethic must offer more than a justification of what not to do, it must offer a compelling vision of what's worth doing.

Many rewilders are doing their best to provide exactly these kinds of reasons. They are publishing testimonies, formulating projects, and living daily lives in the effort of detailing a life worth living with the land. And in the kinds of life they are describing, the blunt language of tradeoffs between human and environmental interests softens into far more detailed language about the particularities of place and the quality of specific relationships. It's on this level, where a simple divide between self-interest and moral duty is rarely so enlightening, that rewilding recommends itself.

Holmes Rolston's Critique and its History

On my last two university campuses the forestry departments each implemented public information campaigns about the ecosystem services provided by trees. They hung signs on the campus trees informing passers-by of the tree species, its age, and in bolder letters its monetary value, calculated not in terms of its lumber, but in terms of the ecosystem services that such a

tree provides. Quantifying ecosystem services in dollar amounts can serve many good purposes, but these campaigns are not without their detractors.

Some say it focuses on the wrong thing, that is, on human benefit rather than the health, value, or even rights of non-human life. Detractors may contend, “It’s not about what the tree does *for us*, it’s about *the tree*.” A public awareness of ecosystem services may influence policy for the better and it may even deepen public understanding of the dependency of modern industrial communities on their wider environments; however, awareness of economic value of trees, or even an awareness of dependency on trees, is something different than an ethical concern *for trees*. Concern of this kind is thought to be a more selfless consideration. I am not properly concerned for the tree, many reckon, if the root of my concern is about what the tree does for me. This is an objection about the quality of one’s concern for the environment. But there is a more practical objection still. The moment technology or circumstance obviates the tree’s services is the same moment the tree loses its economically quantified value. Concern for a useless tree is now rootless.

This debate around ecosystem services illustrates a perennial discussion in environmental philosophy. The question is broadly about *anthropocentrism*, about the ethical and ecological issues of placing human interests at the center of environmental thought and practice.

Environmental ethics developed as a field of professional philosophy in answer to the challenge of developing a non-anthropocentric ethic. In 1973 Richard Sylvan asked, if destroying the earth would not harm another human in any way – let’s say, if I was the last living human – would it still be wrong? Sylvan was betting that his audience would have an ethical intuition that such wanton destruction would be wrong, even if it didn’t harm human. Sylvan then argued that traditional deontological and utilitarian ethics could not adequately support that intuition. If one

wanted to keep that intuition, a new, a specifically environmental ethic is required.¹¹¹ This kind of ethic must find a way of valuing plants, animals, and ecosystems directly, and not indirectly for their relation to humans.

At the same time Holmes Rolston III was working to develop a theory of natural value that was intrinsic and objective, a natural value distinct from human interest or even perception. In 1975, his first work on the subject framed the problem in terms of “primary” and “secondary” ecological ethics.¹¹² The latter was common enough; it included any reason to preserve ecosystems for *prudential* reasons, for how ecosystems support humans. In contemporary terms, Rolston’s “secondary” ethics were considerations of Ecosystem Services. A “primary” ecological ethic, however, sought moral reasons based solely on the value of living world, on what plants, animals, and ecosystems are in themselves. This kind of ethic, Rolston argued, was as yet undeveloped and urgently overdue. The development of a primary ecological ethic shaped Rolston’s career and a good deal of environmental philosophy besides. Explicating intrinsic natural value and determining duties toward it was Rolston’s new ethical “frontier.”¹¹³ It was understood as a bold new project, a necessary step in the expansion of ethics.¹¹⁴ For a community of philosophers over the next decades, environmental ethics had something close to a unified purpose: determining how best to defend or reject ethical obligations to non-human nature *in*

¹¹¹ (Sylvan (Routley), 1973)

¹¹² (Rolston III, *Is There an Ecological Ethic?*, 1975)

¹¹³ The “frontier” metaphor is central in Rolston’s idea of the position of environmental ethics. The idea is that previous philosophical ethics had not provided a sufficient framework for evaluating environmental issues, thus ethics must forge into a new frontier to do so. In his first major book on the subject (Rolston III, 1988) he opens and closes with the metaphor: “Environmental ethics is novel, at least in the classical and modern West; it lies on a frontier” (p. 2) and “Environmental ethics lies not on a fringe but on a frontier” (p. 333).

¹¹⁴ Rolston was not at all alone in understanding environmental ethics as a novel expansion. This expansion idea is also central in Roderick Nash’s *The Rights of Nature* (Nash, 1989)

itself. Their question, then, was about the tree itself – its intrinsic value, its teleological nature,¹¹⁵ its legal standing,¹¹⁶ etc.

It is unsurprising then that 30 years later Rolston was quick to critique the rise of environmental virtue ethics.¹¹⁷ As he saw it, a virtue ethic, much like “secondary” environmental ethics (including ecosystem service arguments), centers human benefit as the justifying reason and motivation for ethical consideration of the environment. Instead of protecting forests for the human benefit of clean water and sustainable materials, environmental virtue ethics was protecting the environment as a means of growing in virtue, of living a better life. Even if virtues are a lot different than economic and material benefits, the focus is still on human benefit rather than the value of the non-human world.

Rolston provides a running example of working to protect a threatened species of desert fish. Why should I protect the fish? Surely because the fish itself is worth it, is owed my concern; not because caring for the fish makes me a better person. He writes,

Excellence of human character does indeed result from a concern for these fish, but if this excellence of character comes from appreciating otherness, then why not value that otherness in wild nature first? Let the human virtue come tributary to that. It is hard to gain much excellence of character from appreciating an otherwise worthless thing. ... The excellence of human character depends on a sensitivity to excellence in these marvelous fish flourishing in the desert.¹¹⁸

It’s a matter of priority. Rolston’s critique is not a rejection of seeking environmental virtue, or even desiring to live a virtuous life in relationship with one’s environment; rather, Rolston offers a correction about how environmental virtue is achieved. If one hopes to get environmental virtue right, then one must make environmental *value* foundational. It is only when I act in

¹¹⁵ See especially (Taylor, 1986)

¹¹⁶ See especially (Stone, 1974)

¹¹⁷ “Environmental Virtue Ethics: Half the Truth but Dangerous as a Whole” (Rolston III, 2005)

¹¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 68

recognition of the intrinsic value of the tree, and not for how the tree or my actions toward it might benefit me, that I begin to act virtuously toward the tree. Rolston's deepest charge, then, is that those who say that building virtuous character matters *most*, have misunderstood how building virtuous character works. The value of the living environment is what matters most, and only a character that appreciates this value, responds to this value, acts on behalf of this value, is a virtuous character. As Rolston puts it, "It seems unexcellent – cheap and philistine – to say that excellence of human character is what we are after [in conservation]." ¹¹⁹ The sting of Rolston's critique is that precisely by making human virtue the center of an environmental ethic, virtue ethicists forbid themselves from achieving a truly virtuous, i.e. *selfless* or *altruistic*, disposition towards their environments.

To translate this into a broader discussion of rewilding, I might say that the goods people seek in a rewilded life – the more meaningful, centering, fulfilling relationships with wildness around them – are obtained by giving priority to the value of their environment first and foremost. Any more rewarding or worthwhile life is a result of that *selfless*, *altruistic* respect of value. Wildness shouldn't be respected because it makes our lives more meaningful; rather, wildness is capable of making our lives more meaningful because it is such a valuable thing in the first place.

Conflation, Ulteriority, and Purity

I have three responses to Rolston's charge. The first is a standard reply in the literature that claims critiques like Rolston's arise from a conflation, a type of misunderstanding, of key points of virtue ethics. My second response looks a bit deeper at what it means to have blameworthy motivations. The presence of non-altruistic, or not clearly altruistic motives isn't

¹¹⁹ *ibid.* p. 70

enough to make an action blameworthy. The framework of categorizing motivations as either altruistic or egoistic is itself too blunt a tool for adequately understanding large swaths of moral life, especially relationships with the environment. I'll introduce a rough conceptual tool to better separate blameworthy motives from non-blameworthy motives. Lastly, I question the practicality of an ethic that hinges on the purity of one's motivations. Of course, there must be room to condemn, critique, and improve bad motivations. The quality of one's motivations does matter. But my overall argument is that simply dividing motivations into altruistic or egoistic, moral and non-moral, is no good at all.

The further goal is to support the trend in rewilding literature that focuses on the personal and social benefits of rewilding. Rewilders are providing testimony of a better life found in centralizing relationship with the wildness of their environments. They've found something good, something better than the status quo of industrial consumer culture, and they encourage people to join. I misunderstand this invitation if I reduce it to self-centered or even anthropocentric motivations.

Conflation

Rolston's charge is a version of what is called the self-centeredness objection to virtue ethics. As Rolston says, environmental virtue ethics get things backwards by prioritizing personal virtue over the value of the living world. More broadly, it's the older misunderstanding that virtue ethics is concerned with being happy more than doing what's right (regardless if it makes me happy). This self-centeredness objection, so virtue ethicists respond, arises from a theoretical *conflation*. The conflation occurs by taking two separate questions – namely, (1) What sort of disposition characterizes a particular virtue? and (2) Why is that disposition a virtue? – and conflating them into one.

David Solomon employs this distinction in his initial response to the self-centeredness objection.¹²⁰ There is a difference, he argues, between the theoretical account of what makes a disposition a virtue and what characterizes the practice of that virtue. And, "...within an [ethics of virtue] it is not the theory of the virtues which is supposed to be primarily action-guiding, but rather the virtues themselves."¹²¹ Take Charity for instance. The question *What characterizes a charitable disposition?* differs markedly from the question *Why is charity a virtue?* The former will include a rich description of the charitable person's use of their possessions, their recognition of the needs of others, their willingness to respond to these needs, and the quality of their reasons for helping others. A properly charitable disposition will certainly be other-regarding. It will involve a sensitivity to the needs of others and a desire to benefit the other for their own sake. There are vice terms that describe when such features are absent; vainglorious philanthropy or giving in order to put others in your debt are blameworthy because the motivations are not charitable. But, if the description of the charitable person is so clearly not self-centered, how does the self-centeredness charge arise?

It arises by conflation, by answering the question *What characterizes virtue X?* with the answer to the question *Why is X a virtue?* A theoretical account of what makes a given disposition a virtue will involve many considerations, but most virtue theories share that the virtues constitute human flourishing. Put simply, charity is a virtue because a charitable life is better than a miserly one. Even the possible rewards of miserliness, however enjoyable they may be, are simply not as good as the goods obtained through a life of charity, of the caring relationships charity builds, of a loose attachment to possessions, of a greater understanding of the needs of others.

¹²⁰ (Solomon, 1988, p. 430ff)

¹²¹ *ibid.* p. 435

Now watch what happens when I conflate these questions by answering the first question with the answer to the second: What characterizes charity? Well, caring about living a better life. But, no. That isn't how anyone characterizes charity. What's gone wrong is the conflation.

Environmental Virtue Ethicist Ronald Sandler uses Solomon's point to directly address the charge of anthropocentrism, that an environmental virtue ethic will be primarily concerned with securing human flourishing and only indirectly concerned with the environment.

This objection confuses doing virtue theory with living virtuously, and conflates what makes a trait a virtue with a virtuous person's reasons for actions. Actions, behaviors, and practices are evaluated in terms of the virtues, and a virtuous person is responsive to the morally relevant features of a situation, not to what makes a character trait a virtue. Even if what makes a trait a virtue is anthropocentric, the considerations that a person who possesses the virtue takes as reasons for acting right might be nonanthropocentric.¹²²

They are generally not using the language of virtue ethics, but I think a similar dynamic occurs when rewilders extol the benefits of rewilding. Rewilders often pitch rewilding as a better way of living, a more choiceworthy life. Call that anthropocentric if you wish. But what that better life consists in, what actually characterizes the kind of person able to enjoy that better life, are a number of centralizing, regular engagements with the wildness of one's environment that are anything but anthropocentric. They involve become attentive, fascinated with the world around me, adjusting my life to allow space and time for ecosystemic processes to continue unhindered, doing restoration so ecosystem functions can resume more quickly, etc. Why do all these non-anthropocentric things? Well, rewilders are fairly comfortable saying, at least in part, "because it's a better, more worthwhile way to live." So, does this make the whole enterprise anthropocentric? I don't think so, but I'd guess that many will still worry.

¹²² (Sandler, 2007, p. 42)

Ulteriority

So, it may deflect the charge of anthropocentrism to point out that the actual activities prescribed by rewilders are anything but anthropocentric. But I have said that rewilding is at its best when it centralizes the question of the good life. I went further than most rewilding literature goes. Why rewild? Ultimately, because it's a better life.

But why is it a better life? Well, here I'm very happy to agree with Rolston's insistence on prioritizing natural value; it is a better life because it centralizes the appreciation of and meaningful engagement with things of real value, that is, with living things and the systems that foster and develop them. Roughly, a day in the woods is better than a day looking at a screen, not because I just happen to enjoy the woods, but because those living woods are far more valuable, far more worth enjoying. More fully, and regardless of whether one hikes in the woods or not, a life shaped by understanding myself in terms of my place in the story of the development of life, and consciously shaping my relationships with my environment to better appreciate life and its systems, is better than a life of mostly unreflective relationships with my environment. And this is the case because the living world is of immense value. The better life that rewilders extol is a life of appreciating value, an appreciation found in more centralizing, more regular, more tangible relationships with the wildness of life around them.

Maybe now the question seems like splitting hairs. Desiring a better life is desiring a better relationship with things of immense value. So, yes, value is primary; value has to be there first, in a metaphysical sense at least. But is this the same as my primary *motivation* being to respect that value? My answer to this question is that the question is unhelpful. It results in more confusion than clarity about my ethical situation. This becomes clear with a comparison of different kinds of cases. Sometimes it certainly is helpful to identify what makes an action wrong

by citing non-altruistic motives. Other times, the presence of non-altruistic motives is not so clear, or better yet, not so clearly blameworthy. In these later cases I misunderstand and distort my ethical situation by demanding that it be cleanly sorted into altruistic and egoistic motivations. To show this, I look at Rolston's self-centeredness charge in light of the more everyday concept of *ulterior motives*.

There are certainly cases, as many as grains of sand on the beach, where an action is wrong because it is done for ulterior motives. I was nice to my uncle, let's say, only because I wanted to be written into his will. Classic. But a problem occurs when we use the same dichotomous framework – that motivations are either altruistic or egoistic – to evaluate all motivations.

The charitable person, for instance, is certainly moved by the plight of another. Additionally, and this is an important addition, the charitable person desires to grow in virtue, that is, desires to become better at being charitable. This person also desires to live in a world where charity is more common, where the needy are fewer. Are these latter motivations ulterior? Are they blameworthy? My intuition says "no" to both questions. And yet, if I use a blunt ethical framework that says all motivations can be sorted as altruistic or egoistic, and that egoistic motivations are blameworthy, well, then I end up in the tricky situation of condemning myself for wanting to be better and for wanting a better world. This is a common deduction and a terrible one.

So, when is a non-altruistic motive not ulterior and not blameworthy? For a very quick answer, I want to borrow a conceptual tool from a related, but different conversation. In his first attempt to develop a modern understanding of virtue, Alistair MacIntyre introduced the

distinction between *internal* and *external* goods of *practices*.¹²³ An internal good is a good obtained only by excelling at some kind of practice. The joys of performing music well – for instance, the exhilaration of the performance, the sense of ease and control that comes through mastery, the recognition and praise from qualified experts, etc. – are only obtainable by actually performing music well. These goods cannot be obtained without gaining the skill to perform music well, and are thus goods “internal” to the practice of music. An external good, the classic example being money, is a good that can be obtained through many alternative means. The \$50 payment for a gig, which is also a joy connected to performance, could have been made many ways, maybe by working at the mall, or even by stealing from the mall. MacIntyre uses the notion of practices and internal goods to develop his early concept of virtue. A virtue is a skill or disposition “which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices.”¹²⁴

Virtues are the dispositions and skills which enable us to enjoy internal goods. The important point here, is that virtues may be more or less indifferent to external goods, but they are inseparable from internal goods for which they are virtues. As MacIntyre puts it, “Virtues then stand in a different relationship to external and to internal goods. The possession of the virtues – and not only their semblance and simulacra – is necessary to achieve the latter; yet the possession of the virtues may perfectly well hinder us in achieving external goods.”¹²⁵

Consider the musician again. One might condemn a musician for “selling out” (not that I would). Selling out involves sacrificing the quality of the music for the sake of the external good of money. But no one condemns a musician for working to achieve goods internal to musical practice. And of those internal goods, the line between self-focused and others-focused is rather

¹²³ (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 188ff)

¹²⁴ *ibid.* p. 191

¹²⁵ (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 196)

blurry. Even the concept of altruism seems simply unrelated. A musician desires to become more skilled. A musician desires to please an audience. In different circumstances there may be all sorts of subtle and complex ways to critique and improve motivations, but what I wouldn't critique, simply because I can't even make sense of it, is to demand that a musician should be motivated to make great music without the desire of becoming a better musician, a musician capable of making great music. And yet, this is the kind of question Rolston's critique of virtue ethics leads him to ask.

Rolston brings things to a head near the end of his essay with the question: "Would we choose conservation without our resulting virtue?"¹²⁶ Within a certain reigning moral framework, the question can make sense. But on the face of it, it's the same question about music above. Would I choose to steward my farm well without being able to steward my farm well? Would I choose to restore forests to healthier conditions if it meant that I wouldn't gain the ecological knowledge and skill required to do so? I'd need a very sci-fi thought experiment to even consider those options. Borrowing MacIntyre's concepts, Rolston is asking, Would I choose the internal goods of a practice without gaining the skills necessary for the achievement of those goods? The answer is question: how could I?

Rolston's question does make sense if I translate it like this: "Would we choose to follow conservation rules even if they did not provide us with external goods?" That question does make sense, but it is not a question about virtue. Rolston's worry is about doing what's right even when it is costly. But costly how? He writes, "Humans can and sometimes should be short-term losers. Sometimes we ought to make sacrifices, at least in terms of what we presently value, to preserve species."¹²⁷ Rolston means the loss of various external goods, things like cheap

¹²⁶ (Rolston III, 2005, p. 76)

¹²⁷ *ibid.* p. 72

electricity, the space and autonomy of suburban housing, the promise that the children of the affluent might obtain even higher levels of affluence, etc. Yes, it is certainly the case that conservation *will* require the loss of those kinds of goods, more for those who have more of them! But this kind of sacrifice isn't simply consistent with a virtue ethic, it is best addressed by a virtue ethic.

A virtue ethic identifies which goods really are worthwhile, which kind of life is actually most choiceworthy, and then it identifies what virtues aid us in living such a life. The virtues are what prepare people to identify when sacrifice is called for and to courageously or even gracefully achieve it. The virtue of diligence is what enables the young musician to continue practicing when it means missing a party, or a TV show, or even some sleep. Prioritizing virtue doesn't keep us from making sacrifices; virtue is what best enables us to do so.

In the epigraph to this chapter Aldo Leopold notes that outdoor recreation involves “so paradoxical a mixture of appetite and altruism.”¹²⁸ I am arguing that there is no paradox. I'm arguing that the reigning rough moral framework – part Kantian, part Augustinian, part whatever else – that insists on separating motivations into egoism and altruism, blaming the former and praising the latter, is simply an inadequate framework. I am arguing that when Rewilders provide compelling testimonies of the goods to be enjoyed, of the better life to be lived, by changing our relationships with our environment that it is a bit tragic to hear the response: “We shouldn't be motivated to do the right thing because of personal benefits. We shouldn't be so anthropocentric.” The reigning non-anthropocentric ethic frames up the world as a question between doing the right thing and living the best life. The trend in rewilding is to reject that

¹²⁸ From “Conservation Esthetic” in *A Sand County Almanac* (Leopold, 2013, p. 143)

frame and testify that the best life just is the life with better relationships with our environment. I wouldn't settle for less.

Purity

My last point on this score may seem less practical philosophy and more practical advice. It is less about what is correct or incorrect, but what is realistic. It is true that reasons and motivations matter; it is true that bad reasons and vicious motivations mar ostensibly good deeds. And yet, unhappy is the person who insists on knowing their own reasons and motivations with certainty. Unhappier still is the person who insists that reasons and motivations be singularly pure.

Whether or not people can quote it, my culture is still imbued with the absurdity that: "It is not sufficient to do that which should be morally good that it conform to the law; it must be done for the sake of the law."¹²⁹ The absurdity here comes out in attempting it. Go try it. Go do something purely *for the sake of the law*. Perhaps merely search your memory of laudable actions. Now ask, did you actually act for the sake of the law? Really? Was it *only* because it was the right thing to do? Was there no admixture of personal gain, of unreflective natural habit? If there was a mixture of reward or habit, which one was primary? Which one did you act for the sake of?

Maybe you are convinced your action is still laudable. Of course. It is easy to pat oneself on the back after the fact. It is easy, perhaps necessary, to ignore one's own muddle of reasons and motivations, especially when it is quite rewarding to ignore them, to simplify them, to paint them into a prettier picture. Are you sure you aren't ignoring anything?

¹²⁹ *Groundwork* 390

Was there no fear, no concern at all for the repercussions of acting otherwise? Okay, sure, you are above such fears. But what about vanity? Was there no smug satisfaction? Was there satisfaction at all? Even though your action resulted in personal loss, in public ridicule, in exile from the city, were you not satisfied at having done the right thing? And here is the ineradicable doubt: Could that satisfaction have been the reason why you did it?

Well, it turns out it wasn't for the sake of the law, after all.

Sure, this is a slippery slope – but a slope thousands of saints have run down, flagellating themselves into oblivion. The problem isn't with the saints, it's with the framework. Best to abandon it.

Conclusion

I opened this chapter with a trend in rewilding literature to extol the personal and social benefits of rewilding. Rather than emphasizing doom or moral duty, rewilders are happy to talk about happiness. They talk about being converted to new ways of living, of falling in love with landscapes and ecosystems, of recovering from destructive and unhealthy lifestyles. I think environmental ethics benefits a great deal from these kinds of testimonies. This is because environmental ethics is in no great need of general principles to guide action; what is needed is tangible, practical ways of living on the earth capable of preserving it.

But in making this argument I wanted to address the broader idea that seeking the good life, the most choiceworthy life, is an egoistic pursuit. This critique comes from an inadequate moral framework that categorizes motivations sharply as either altruistic or egoistic. More than any one philosophical account, there is a broad cultural understanding of morality as primarily a project of doing the right thing even when I don't want to. The good person is the one who

resists temptation, the best person is the one who sacrifices all for doing the right thing. So much of moral life just doesn't fit the framework.

Many rewilders understand their project in terms of finding better ways to live. And the kinds of life they are recommending are not adequately understood in terms of duty for duty's sake or altruistic motivation. They are not cleanly divisible into human goods and non-human goods. They are trying to build better relationships with their environments, relationships they can be proud of.

CHAPTER 4: REWILDING GOODS

“We need to acknowledge, above all, that our marching orders come not from without but from within – which is to say that they’re not marching orders at all, but instead self-legislated expressions of our freedom and rationality.”

- Benjamin Hale¹³⁰

In the last chapter I considered the objection that a eudaimonistic concern in environmental ethics gets things backwards. That is, it makes human benefit the foundation of environmental concern, rather than the value of non-human life and the systems that sustain it. This kind of objection comes from the environmental movement’s insistence on non-anthropocentrism, which in most cases has served as a bulwark against unchecked destruction, a counterbalance to prevailing trends. One cares for the environment best when they care primarily *for* the environment, not human interests.

I argued that, first, a eudaimonistic ethic is not self-interested in any of the damning ways that worry environmentalists, and second, that the sharp divide between anthropocentrism and non-anthropocentrism is largely unhelpful, too blunt a tool to understand and guide ethical action. Although I focused on Holmes Rolston’s objection to environmental virtue ethics, my response was directed to the broad insistence that environmental ethics must be fundamentally concerned with natural value and not human benefit.

I have suggested that the rising popularity of Rewilding as a diverse movement has evidenced a broadly eudaimonistic turn in environmental thinking. That is, instead of asking what duties one has to the environment, or even what must be done to prevent disaster, rewilding literature centralizes the question *What kind of life is most worth living?* Rather than advocating for a particular rewilding project, and much less defending everything that gets called rewilding, I’ve said there is a benefit to environmental ethics in centralizing this question.

¹³⁰ (Hale, 2016, p. 268)

In this chapter I want to look at another, very different objection. In general, it is argued that environmental ethics should decentralize good ends and focus on fair process. That is, the goal of environmentalism shouldn't be to produce a particular kind of environment, but rather to ensure all environmental decisions are made in ethically justifiable ways.

This critique cuts against both a eudaimonistic approach as well as an intrinsic value approach. The idea is that environmental ethics goes awry when any idea of environmental good – whether it be a vision of the good life, a claim of intrinsic value, a standard of ecological health, etc. – is allowed to sidestep a discursive and democratic decision-making process. Environmental ethics should turn away from promoting specific visions of the way the world *should* be, and instead focus on making environmental decisions in the most fair, inclusive, and publicly justifiable ways. In this view, fair processes matter more than end products. Put in slightly different terms, *right reasons* are more important than *good ends*.

Consider a pressing question: Should North American wolves be reintroduced into their former habitats? One might answer: Yes, because the ecological science shows that predators are integral to ecosystem stability. Or, yes, because wolves have a right to their habitat. Or even, yes, because God intended wolves to be here. These are all very different kinds of answers (quick caricatures here), but they are alike in justifying the way things should be with an appeal to a good outside of an open, discursive decision-making process. The only right answer, as this critique would have it, is the one with reasons that pass a fair process of rational, public justification including all relevant parties. Passing this process is what makes the answer ethically justifiable. No person – not the scientist, not the ethicist, not the priest – has the authority to say how the environment *should* be.

In a broader ethical discourse, what is at stake here are rival views on (1) the final authority of moral judgements and, relatedly, (2) the nature of what it means to be morally wrong. This position above is a loose version of a *Contractualist* position.¹³¹ On this view (1) the final authority on moral judgements is a public justificatory process. Authority comes from the mutual recognition of all relevant parties that a reason for action is justifiable. Stemming from this, (2) what it means to be morally wrong is to act on unjustifiable reasons, reasons that have not or could not withstand open public scrutiny.

In general, I think there is a lot to like in this approach, especially for questions of environmental governance. In environmental discourse, views that emphasize justificatory processes over good ends are almost always coupled with a diagnosis that environmental problems result from collective human action, which is often unreflective, unorganized, and unfair.¹³² If the processes by which we make daily decisions and environmental policy become reflective, organized, and fair, it makes sense to think many environmental problems will be ameliorated. What's more, the position includes a noble political hope. It encourages a polity that prioritizes rational debate, rather than whatever propaganda, force, or legal technicality can produce a desired outcome. It hopes for communities capable of taking collective responsibility for the condition of their environment. But more than these good results, the process of

¹³¹ For a much more specific and widely discussed version of Contractualism put forward by T. M. Scanlon, especially in his *What We Owe to Each Other* (Scanlon, 1998). The authors discussed below may have wide differences from Scanlonian Contractualism, but it would be less exact still to call them simply deontologists. What relevantly unites the different critiques in environmental literature I'm discussing is a large focus on (1) public justificatory processes and (2) the evaluation of *reasons* for actions being the most important moral consideration.

¹³² Luc Ferry's and Benjamin Hale's comments on this will be discussed below, but in the next chapter I will address a very similar objection from Steven Vogel's *Thinking Like a Mall* (Vogel, 2015) for a sustained argument that the primary ecological problem is really poor collective planning, which Vogel describes as a kind of large-scale alienation. Just as the worker is alienated from their products in a Marxist framework, people at large are alienated from their environment, which in Vogel's work is a product collectively shaped by people.

submitting our reasons to ongoing public critique might just be the right thing to do. And perhaps it is.

In this last chapter I will review Benjamin Hale's defense of prioritizing right reasons in environmental ethics. I will mention other defenders of democratic environmental discourse along the way, but I appreciate Hale's commitment to writing for a wide public audience about a very public and timely topic. I review Hale's arguments against environmentalism that prioritizes good ends. In response, I argue that the kind of right reasoning that Hale promotes is only part of an answer; it's too indeterminant for the decisions that must be made. Detailed testimonies of the kind of good relationships with the environment that are worth promoting – the kind found in recent rewilding literature with this eudaimonistic focus – are important to get on with the public discussions most needed.

A Different Battle

As I've introduced a broad idea of Contractualism, it may seem I've set up the finale of this work as a battle between grand ethical theories: Eudaimonistic Virtue against Contractualist Deontology. In this case I would be compelled to argue for the insufficiency of (1) and (2), that (1) moral authority requires something more or other than a public justificatory process and that (2) the meaning of being morally wrong is something different, or simply broader, than acting on unjustified reasons. This is how theory would battle theory.

This kind of work is usually done through counterexamples. If one wanted to challenge Contractualism, it is tempting to reach for a certain kind of counter example. Imagine a world, the reply might go, where right reasons produced monstrous results. If one wants to *morally* condemn those monstrous results, then one must admit there is an ethical standard more important than having publicly justified reasons. It can be tempting, then, to imagine some sort

of techno-democracy where an inclusive polity has used fair, rational, collective processes to create policies that have nevertheless allowed extinctions to continue rise, greenhouse gasses to compound, habitat destruction to increase, etc. One might go further and imagine the planet-sized cities that, often serving this same thought experiment role, have been a regular part of science fiction. The trope of the planet-sized city, dubbed an *Ecumenopolis*, appears in Asimov (Trantor) and Star Wars (Coruscant) and many others. Now imagine that this planet's population chose to build their planet into one endless city, but did so fairly, rationally, collectively, etc. To boot, imagine folks like it and life is pretty good there. If one wants to morally condemn what was done to the planet, then it looks like some ethical standard matters besides right reasons and fair processes. Perhaps it was the intrinsic value of all the extinct species, perhaps it was the suffering of non-human animals. Or perhaps, you'll have to argue that despite seemingly fair and rational processes, the reasons were still irrational (and how so?).

My topic throughout, however, has not been strictly about the theoretical superiority of eudaimonistic ethics. Rather, it's the claim that the eudaimonistic focus in current rewilding efforts has proved fruitful. Better yet, I think a eudaimonistic concern does greater justice to the nature of my society's (in as inclusive and global a sense as I can give this) environmental predicament. That is, our current task is not a failure to prove the ethical rightness or wrongness of environmental actions. Our current task is to envision and foster a different kind of life worth living in the midst of unsustainable environmental destruction. It's a work of creativity and cooperation. It's the attempt to shape something new and better on a large scale.

With this in mind, I want to review and mostly affirm the practical goals and important critiques of a few environmental philosophers with broadly Contractualist approaches. Yes, we need more reflective, organized, and fair decision-making processes. Right reasons do matter,

and much current public discourse is full of insufficient and irrational reasons, whether supporting desirable or horrible ends.

So, I don't think the eudaimonist in this setting has to prove the absolute priority of good ends over right reasons in some broad theoretical sense. My argument is similar to my comment on anthropocentric/non-anthropocentric divide in the last chapter. There I said the concept of anthropocentrism was a blunt tool, often unhelpful in real world decisions. Similarly, in real world conversations the divide between right reasons and good ends is no kind of team sport, as if we support one way or the other. It's both. We need to submit our reasons to ongoing public critique. But what this conversation is *about*, that is, what a public environmental project must accomplish, is deciding together what kind of world we want, what kind of life is the best to live. We do need reasons for picking one kind of life over another. And the kind of detailed testimonies found among rewilders – and, notably, agrarians (a once familiar division between the two is sometimes blurry) – are great models of how one can give reasons for these kinds of decisions. Current environmental discourse does not require a way of morally justifying one action at a time out of various sets of fixed possibilities, as if there is a right way forward if only we heeded the most justified reasons. Instead, the conversation requires creatively and collectively imagining something new - more deeply diagnosing what is unsatisfactory with our current condition and trajectory, naming what kind of relationships with our environments really are the most choiceworthy, and fostering a new kind of living. The broadest environmental discourse in the Anthropocene is ultimately a conversation about what kind of life is most choiceworthy. So, if we're going to get good at public environmental discourse, at sharing and listening to reasons, the detailed testimonies of the sort rewilders are prioritizing are a great model.

All this to say, in what follows I will highlight some of the most practical critiques against environmental ethics that prioritize good ends. And my aim is to show how eudaimonistic environmental thinking, of the sort I've highlighted in previous chapters, not only avoids these problems, but also supports many of the interests of Contractualist detractors.

Benjamin Hale – A Viridian Commonwealth

I've said that rewilding is marked by an optimism for better relationships with one's environment, for a better life centered by those relationships. In the last chapter I cited a few folks specifically commenting on the kinds of positive appeals common in rewilding movements. Enric Sala says that he has shifted his conservation appeals from "the head" to "the heart." He doesn't bombard world leaders with facts or warnings. He takes them to the field, to the ocean, to the reef, to see just what's worth saving. "Once they fall in love with nature, these leaders intuitively feel the responsibility to protect these places."¹³³ Paul Jepsen and Cain Blythe said that rewilding narratives share a similar positive arc; they are stories of awakening, realizations that a better way of living is possible. That is, they are stories of being taken to a field – or ocean, etc. – and becoming convinced that a better kind of life is desirable and possible.¹³⁴ George Monbiot contrasts a life of suburban ecological boredom with a thrilling and energetic life made possible by living in less tame landscapes.

My point has not been that the particular visions of the good life in the rewilding movement are actually the best versions of the good life. The point is that it is monumental that the question of what kind of life is most choiceworthy is being centered in the environmental movement. As it happens, Monbiot's vision of an escape from ecological boredom can seem – at times – a bit juvenile, a bit beatnik, a bit more harry-chested fantasy than many might like. Of

¹³³ (Sala, 2020, pp. 187-188)

¹³⁴ (Jepson & Blythe, 2020, p. 109)

course, this isn't to disagree with any of the ecological arguments that make up much more of Monbiot's work. The point is that as a whole he's testifying to a better kind of life, rather than only the value of non-human life or the authority of ecological science merely. At the end of the day, this sort of environmental appeal offers a far richer frame for evaluating our environmental ills and working to develop creative alternatives.

But there is another kind of objection waiting here. What if all appeals to goodness – whether it's the beauty of nature, the intrinsic value of non-human life, or even the more fulfilled and authentic lives testified to by rewilders – what if any appeal to goodness is ultimately misguided?

This is the argument Benjamin Hale makes in his book *The Wild and the Wicked*. He courts the idea that, just maybe, the whole living world we call “nature” might not be that great after all. What's more, maybe the lifestyle of “the greens” is far less than appealing. In his introduction he explains,

[Many people] think that in order to argue that environmentalism is right, they must also show that nature is good, that being green is good. Their thought, then, is that to be green, one should embrace all things natural. One should buy granola and drive a hybrid and drink tea and cook tofu. In effect, one should start hugging trees. Unfortunately, this view belies a deep-seated intuition that nature is not as precious as some claim, which begets a *big* problem.¹³⁵

Hale wants a kind of environmentalism that works even if one decides that the woods full of wolves aren't obviously valuable, or that veganism and odd deodorant doesn't obviously mark a better kind of life.

Enric Sala's attempt to appeal to the heart, rather than the head, is off the table for Hale. In fact, Hale suggests that this appealing to the heart, albeit in very different ways, is more or less what all environmentalism has been doing for half a century. The environmental movement

¹³⁵ (Hale, 2016, p. 2)

has been trying to convince people that nature is good, beautiful, valuable in a number of ways, deserving of one or another kind of ethical consideration, or even just fun. These are very different kinds of appeals – e.g., showing the cuteness of charismatic megafauna and arguing that animal life, however charismatic or horrifying, has value deserving of consideration – but they are similar for Hale in that they both hinge on appealing to the value of the wider non-human world. For the same half-century as environmentalists have been making these appeals, environmental destruction has sharply increased. Perhaps this is enough evidence to show that the arguments and propaganda haven’t worked. Or rather, Hale says, it only works for folks already leaning that way: “‘Love thy mother’ has been the reverse-battle cry, and it has hit home only with those who are soft at heart.”¹³⁶

But whether it *works* or not, that is, whether environmental ends can be achieved by such appeals, is very much beside the point for Hale. Hale argues on principle, not utility. Focusing on good ends, to the detriment of caring about right reasons, misses something important about the nature of morality itself, even what it is for humans to be moral beings.

In what follows I will focus on Hale’s two biggest arguments *against* prioritizing good ends in environmentalism: Hale calls these *Narrowness* and *Tactical Thinking*, reviewed below. But first I’ll lay out his central case for prioritizing the justification of reasons over the promotion of good ends. Hale sums up his position, “What really ought to be driving our environmentalism is our humanity, not nature’s value.”¹³⁷ What Hale means by “our humanity” becomes plain in four main points in his positive argument for prioritizing the public justification of reasons as the central activity of environmental ethics. These are:

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 284

¹³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 4

- (1) Humanity is marked by the ability to act based upon reasons.
- (2) The quality of one's reasons are the most important factor in morally evaluating human action.
- (3) Thus, if we care to morally evaluate environmental action, we must evaluate the quality of our reasons, not only the goodness of our ends.
- (4) Lastly, the best way to evaluate our reasons is through discursive, public justificatory processes.

These first two points are well-trodden, if not uncontested, philosophic ground that Hale surveys very well. As Hale explains, the precondition for morality is the particular quality of human nature; it is because humans make free decisions based upon reasons that morality has any sense at all. This is the central way people can make a distinction between an accident and a crime, between a faux-pa and a pointed insult, or between ingratiating flattery and real friendliness. The moral distinction between these is a distinction about the *reasons* the person acted upon, not upon the resultant ends, good or bad. In the case the flatterer, the motivating reasons are what we condemn, not the nice compliment. In Hale's words,

[The human will] is vital to understanding ethical problems. [The will] is, essentially, the *bearer of reasons*, standing apart from the simple goal-oriented drives characteristic of animals and instead functioning to provide rational support for the things we do. According to many ways of thinking, it is only people, and only collectives of people, who maintain the capacity to express their wills in the formation of law.¹³⁸

He continues, explaining how an ethics that focuses on *reasons* above *ends* does justice to the nature of humanity:

If we turn our attention more directly to focus on reasons, and specifically acknowledge that we are humans who can share reasons, justifying our actions in the process, I think we can maintain our grip on our humanity while also acknowledging that it is out of our humanity that our commitment to a clean and healthy environment must emerge. ... In fact, our own capacity to endorse some principles and reject others, thus shaping an

¹³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 147

identity around our commitments ... may very well be what keeps us human, what defines us as free.¹³⁹

The third move stems from these. If the heart of ethics is about having justified reasons for action, then Environmental Ethics is no different. Or another way of putting it, what is *ethically wrong* (and not simply unfortunate) about climate change or animal extinction is not that these events are happening; what's wrong is the unjustified reasons people have for the actions that have caused these events. A meteor that caused the same result would not be an ethical matter. It's certainly an undesirable state, but it does not involve a morally deficient reason. "In short, merely assessing states of the world does not open the door to reasons, and it seems to me that it's these reasons that we're after when we talk about morality and ethics."¹⁴⁰

The heart of Hale's work, however, comes in the final point. The book's ultimate goal is to explain what is involved in justifying one's reasons and to inspire readers to dedicate themselves to the continuous work of justifying their reasons for acting. I'll provide more detail on Hale's idea of justification below in the review of his negative arguments against focusing on good ends. But two main points are stressed throughout.

First, justification is a *continuing process*. One cannot justify something once and for all. Changing conditions, changing contexts, changing stakeholders, and the limitations of one's knowledge demand an openness to reconsidering and re-justifying reasons in the face of changing circumstances. "Whenever possible, we should keep our options open. As we devise our business plans, we need to ask what our reasons are and whether we can justify our business to a community of not so like-minded others, to those who stand neither to gain nor to suffer under our eventual action."¹⁴¹ More importantly, Hale warns against viewing justification as

¹³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 148

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 120

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 174

simply determining that some end or goal is worth promoting, and then considering most any means to that end as justified. Instead, Hale warns against “epistemic closure.”¹⁴² As he explains it, epistemic closure results from any kind of pseudo-justificatory process that comes to a final answer in such a way that dissenting opinion can be preemptively rejected, and progress thus becomes a tactical matter of how best to promote that (inadequately) justified goal. “Closure is a function of the orientation toward success, toward winning. Once we’ve allegedly done the hard work of justification, we’re free to close our justificatory loop and aim at our goal.”¹⁴³ Rather than picking a goal and running with it (even a goal as good as stopping species extinction, preserving habitat, etc.), environmental ethics must be about continually justifying one’s reasons for action, especially the means used to reach any end. “The way in which we know that we have identified the right reasons is by ensuring that our reasons are regularly subjected to the scrutiny of a wide community of diverse evaluators.”¹⁴⁴

Second, and included in the last quote, justification is a *public process*. There is an energetic joy in Hale’s promotion of public justification. It’s uncomplicated and beautiful. He urges: “Round up your reasons and take them on the road. Take them to your friends, who will likely agree.... Take them to your neighbors, who may or may not agree.... Take them to the person on the other side of the state, on the other side of the world. Take them farther, looking backward, as if from a time machine far in the future, to see whether what you’re doing is something that future people could accept. If so, why?”¹⁴⁵ Hale’s work doesn’t get into the details of exactly what kind of governance mechanism, or ideal discourse situations should be sought to ensure the best justification. But he makes it clear again and again that as an individual,

¹⁴² *ibid.*, p. 220ff

¹⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 223

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 232

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 278

one has too limited a view to adequately justify one's reasons. The purpose of justification is to ask if everyone else involved, especially those with dissenting opinions, different goals, different values, can agree that one's reasons for action are warranted.

Rather than diving into what kind of process might yield better justification, which is a field of its own, I want to move to Hale's negative arguments about how centralizing good ends – perhaps the eudaimonistic ends of rewilders – undermine or abandon the requirement of public justification. I believe they do no such thing. In fact, I think an environmental movement that focuses on rich, detailed testimony about the joys and impoverishments of one's daily relationships with their environment provides a beautiful model of how best to enter real, public discourse about environmental action.

Now that the context for Hale's arguments against a focus on good ends can be made clear. In sum, focusing on good ends leads to poor justification processes, or even leads to undermining or sidestepping justification altogether. He claims it does this in two ways: Narrowness and Tactical Thinking. I turn to these now.

Narrowness

Throughout the book, Hale warns against "collapsing" or "flattening" ethical reasoning into a conception of the good. Whether that good is a world that has mitigated the damage of climate change or species extinction, or whether it is a world that fosters particular qualities of relationship with one's living environment, Hale warns that a focus on the good state environmentalists are working to bring about causes a sort of tunnel vision for ethical reasoning.

When we transform our reasons into a monolithic idea – like the value of nature, the worth of life, the price of a product, the pursuit of happiness – we winnow our reasons down into that single, univocal measure. We reduce the complex relationship that we have to the world and that the world has to us.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 269

Hale likens this kind of ethical thinking to a game of “would you rather?” We all make fun conversation of arguing about what’s better, e.g., to die by fire or drowning? To be able to fly or to be invisible? We can go back and forth all evening, for and against.

If we think we can pass judgement on an action simply by appealing to the end state of the world (or even the expected end state of the world), we become little more than moral mathematicians, assigning values of good and bad, better and worse, to possible outcomes – like kids waiting for the bus. The human project of ethics is reduced, then, to a simple actuarial project of crunching the numbers.¹⁴⁷

Hale’s target isn’t simply fully fledged, radical utilitarianism. He’s against an often-unreflective consequentialism that underlies a great deal of environmental thinking. The rewilders or the agrarian apologist might argue that a life of small community, of skillful work with the land, and of joy in wild places is a better life than suburban loneliness and consumerism. That very well might be true. But does simply arguing that one kind of life, one state of the world, is better than the other constitute responsible ethical reasoning?

Hale’s answer is a strong “no.” The question we should ask is (not, *which state of the world is better?*, but...) are my reasons for promoting one kind of world rationally and publicly justifiable to all concerned? Environmentalism, then, shouldn’t be a campaign to promote any particular vision of a better world; it should be a corporate effort – “on a scale that Tocqueville could never have anticipated”¹⁴⁸ – to justify our reasons for acting the way we do to all involved and to our strongest rivals. The right reasons for doing something are the reasons that can pass a process of public, rational justification. This process will bring out the complexity of our actions and reasons, with far more rich considerations than weighing which state of the world is better than another.

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 120

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 273

Presumably, focusing on the public justifiability of reasons (1) enriches the reasoning process with the views of a wider and more diverse people involved and (2) quickly shows the insufficiency of many common reasons. Primarily, the reason “because it will make us happier” becomes a pretty dubious reason. First, it forces us to listen to those who are fairly certain it will not make them happier. But more than this it’s clear that many actions are not properly justified simply on the grounds that it makes one happy. I couldn’t justify murder this way, for instance, so why is it often taken as a good enough reason for environmental policy? Prioritizing the search for reasons that can be justified, then, is a better way.

Perhaps this seems elementary enough, but the charm and value of Hale’s argument is how it provides an approachable and inspiring defense for more earnest public evaluation of our reasons for environmental action. This is something I’ll always support.

Tactical Thinking

Aside from narrowness, there is another danger lurking in a focus on good ends without prioritizing right reasons. In sum, the danger is assuming that ends are enough to justify the means. Hale’s running example here is ecologically motivated terrorism.¹⁴⁹ In 1998, members of the Earth Liberation Front set fire to buildings at Two Elk ski lodge near Vail, Colorado. The fire was an effort to stop the expansion of development into high Rocky Mountain environments. Any number of similar acts could be cited. But here Hale can quote the arsonists’ own stated motivations. Kevin Tubbs, a member of the group that set the blaze, explains that:

I was only motivated by a passion to save animals and a desire to help the environment so that we could pass on a healthier and a more vibrant Earth to our children and to future generations. In these actions, I always acted out of love... I helped out with these actions only with altruistic intentions.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 205ff, 215-216

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 215-216

Without passing judgement on Tubbs, his explanation is the cliché of a gritty comic book villain. Some villains are nihilistic, but most are trying to be heroes. One wishes that this kind of thinking was reserved for Marvel villains like Thanos, the galactic warrior who eliminates half the Milky Way's population for the sake of a sustainable future. But alas, "I hurt you because I love you" is a far too common excuse in real life.

Hale is not the first to warn that an environmentalism which focuses on good ends more than rational and democratic processes, is in danger of excusing atrocity. French Philosopher Luc Ferry's 1992 work *The New Ecological Order* makes this case at length. In the wake of Francis Fukuyama's declaration that the "end of history" had arrived with the fall of the Soviet Union, that Western liberal democracy had established itself as the final form of human government, Ferry set out to show that an even deeper, but all too familiar danger to liberal values was ascending. In what he loosely refers to as "postmodern deep ecology" – a diversity of thinkers ranging from Arne Naess' Deep Ecology, Val Plumwood's Ecofeminism, and Earth First!'s direct action campaigns – Ferry saw a philosophy poised to undermine liberal democratic values.

Ferry doesn't shy from comparing the new environmentalism directly to the worst of both the authoritarian Right and Left, to both Hitler and Stalin. He writes, "Deep ecology can combine in one movement both the traditional themes of the extreme Right and the futurist ideas of the extreme Left. The essential element which gives coherence to the whole is the heart of the diagnosis: anthropocentrist modernity is a total disaster."¹⁵¹ This sort of environmentalism was revolutionary – in the same universal sense as Soviet ideology. The means and methods of democratic reform can't save us from environmental destruction if the values of liberal

¹⁵¹ (Ferry, 1992, p. XXVII)

democracy – particularly its humanism – are the cause of environmental destruction in the first place.

Ferry saw the new environmentalism raising various interpretations of ecology to the level of moral and political authority. That new ecological authority then dictates decisions, rather than democratic processes.¹⁵² And while the environmentalists themselves might be the kindest folks around, any philosophy that insisted upon a moral and political authority outside of liberal, humanist democratic processes was, at the end of the day, the foundation for authoritarianism. Thus, Ferry's closes: "As a political movement, ecology will not be democratic; as a democratic movement, it must renounce the mirage of grand political visions."¹⁵³

In his book Hale is never so severe, but the insistence on democratic processes is the same. Hale takes pains to stress that tactical thinking isn't wrong simply because it's a slippery slope to authoritarianism, or manipulation, or terrorism (although the slope is real and we have all fallen off it often enough). Tactical thinking in ethics is wrong because it fails to treat other people as the rational and free beings that they are. That is, it fails to respect our opponents' humanity. People who disagree are seen as obstacles to be overcome, rather than people to be listened to and reasoned with.

Being ethical and acting rightly is not, and cannot be, about winning some sort of geopolitical game. It is not about bringing about an environmental paradise in which everyone drives hybrids and children's cribs are festooned with ivy. Rather,

¹⁵² As footnoted above, philosopher Steven Vogel has proffered similar, and similarly sharp arguments against anti-democratic trends in environmental philosophy. I review these in the next chapter. His arguments in *Thinking Like a Mall* (2015) defend two main points. The first is metaphysical: the non-human world simply isn't the kind of thing that can provide normative prescription. People who come to a democratic discourse claiming to represent normative authority derived from "nature" are as manipulative and oppressive as those who claim some god's authority to justify their positions. He likens those who claim to "speak for nature" to "shamans" and "ventriloquists"; the behavior isn't simply undemocratic, it's oppressive. His second point is political: only a more deeply democratic process can empower human communities to take responsibility for the quality and condition of their environments.

¹⁵³ (Ferry, 1992, p. 14)

Environmentalism must be about having the right reasons. The way in which we know that we have identified the right reasons is by ensuring that our reasons are regularly subjected to the scrutiny of a wide community of diverse evaluators.¹⁵⁴

It is the process of rational, public justification that Hale is defending. Whatever good end we might want, a concern to behave rightly will show us that we must submit our reasons for promoting these ends to ongoing public scrutiny. This justificatory process is what ultimately justifies our ends. Or as he plainly states it, “If the decision leading up to the action has gone through this justificatory process, then the state of the world that results from the process of justification can also be called justified.”¹⁵⁵ The good end alone doesn’t justify itself, and it surely doesn’t justify the means. Environmental policy, then, isn’t something we can derive from outside this sort of process – not even from ecological science. “We need to acknowledge, above all, that our marching orders come not from without but from within – which is to say that they’re not marching orders at all, but instead self-legislated expressions of our freedom and rationality.”¹⁵⁶

If this is the case, then what environmentalism needs most is a polity that fosters rational justificatory processes – both in our individual decisions and public policy – and a citizenry prepared to participate. Thus, environmental ethics requires, “fair and equal citizenship among like parties.”¹⁵⁷ Or perhaps more aspirational, “We need not just a project about what will make my life, or your life, or some other stakeholder’s life, better or worse. We need everyone to study ethics and philosophy and science.”¹⁵⁸ Hale calls such a society a *viridian commonwealth*.

¹⁵⁴ (Hale, 2016, p. 232)

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 276

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 268

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 289

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 273

Yes, And...

Narrowness and Tactical Thinking are surely undesirable in ethics. And fair public decision making that prioritizes justificatory reasons should be the goal. The fact that one can point to eudaimonists and other ethicists that are neither narrow nor tactical, that also have done a great deal to advocate for democratic processes and rational discourse is important; it shows that we're dealing with a slippery slope, however present and dangerous of a slope. Exemplary exceptions notwithstanding, it is still true that narrowness and tactical thinking abound in the environmental movement, and we should all be working together to make rational discourse more common and powerful. Hale's book is a great piece of approachable public philosophy for this purpose.

My reply, then, is not simply that the eudaimonist turn in rewilding literature can be 'not guilty' of these errors. I want to argue that a eudaimonist concern, centralizing the question of what actually is the most choiceworthy life in relation to one's environment, helps perfect Hale's own purpose.

The Right is not Sufficient for the Good

There is an old critique of prioritizing the right over the good.¹⁵⁹ It's a thought experiment that appeals to an intuition that caring about certain goods, about certain qualities and motivations of action, matters more than concern for justifiable reasons *merely*.

Imagine a friend is in the hospital. The prognosis is not good. You decide it is your duty to visit your friend, to bring comfort and companionship in their time of need. As an ethical

¹⁵⁹ This example was most famously used in Michael Stocker's 1976 paper "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories" (Stocker, 1976). Stocker focused on the "motivational structure" of ethical life, arguing that both deontological and utilitarian theories fail to do justice to evaluating motivations in action. Since that time, the thought experiment has become a mainstay of ethics courses and, as I first encountered it and am employing a version of it now, it has been broadened a bit to simply suggest there is a lot more – more even than motivation – than rightness or adherence to a principle in evaluating the action.

person you want to confirm that it is the right thing to do to visit your friend. You may even weigh out your reasons against rival reasons, you seek out opinions that disagree. You might ask the preference of the friend's family. You might ask the medical staff supervising. You want to ensure that your acting for the benefit of your friend and not your own selfish reasons. You want to ensure that your action is something you could recommend universally. You want to ensure that you won't do harm.

Now, imagine two types of visitor. Person A does not really want to visit, isn't particularly moved by the value of their friend, isn't compelled to offer comfort out of love for the friend. But, evaluating all the reasons, Person A decides it is still the right thing to do to visit and to comfort. At the very least, Person A sees that they would want companionship in their time of need. So, Person A visits.

Person B also recognizes that they would want comfort and companionship in their time of need. Person B also weighs out their reasons against rival opinions. Person B is also concerned that their reasons are universalizable. Granting that these conditions are met, however, Person B really wants to be there for their friend.

Now, if you were the one in the hospital, which visitor would you want? The person committed to doing the right thing, or the person who can't help but care about you (who, as it happens, also cares about doing the right thing)? Most folks pick Person B. Of course, that could just be a selfish impulse. I certainly want people to care about me. But what about this question: Which person is the better friend?

Person A has the qualities we might want in our health care workers. Person B has the qualities we'd hope for our friends. Many folks think Person A is not simply less desirable, but is at least a little blameworthy. Even in going to visit, they've failed to live up to what it means to

be a good friend. Even though both have met the standards for right action, being a good friend demands something more.

Like everyone else, I often don't want to do the right thing. Hopefully I work up the fortitude to do it anyway. But I also chastise myself, not simply for wrong actions, but for the presence or absence of desire, of wanting better or worse things. I worry about not having the best desires, the better impulses, the better first instincts. Everyone does, I think. If such chastisement has any ethical weight, then ethics is about more than the justifiability of action. I'll leave this point here for a moment and bring it back after the next point.

The Right Underdetermines the Good

Hale promotes public justificatory processes. Indeed, passing a public process (the details of which are not really discussed) is what it means for a reason to be justified. "If the decision leading up to the action has gone through this justificatory process, then the state of the world that results from the process of justification can also be called justified."¹⁶⁰ As I mentioned at the start of the chapter, it can be tempting to bring up a monstrous counterexample for this kind of process-based moral theory.¹⁶¹ That is, if the process can produce monstrous results, well, this is a *reductio ad absurdum* against the sufficiency of the process. Although I don't put much stock in this kind of counterexample, it's fair to expect an environmental ethic to not be so open-ended that it easily justifies environmentally monstrous results.

At the same time, an environmental ethic, especially one that prioritizes public decision-making processes, can't determine every aspect of how a community lives with their land. Surely a great diversity of environmental relationships – various ways of organizing society, cultural

¹⁶⁰ Hale, 2016, p. 276

¹⁶¹ These are commonly called "moral catastrophe" examples. For more, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on "Deontology" dedicates space to these examples in Section 4 (Alaxander & Moore, 2020).

practices and meanings, whole vastly different kinds of lifestyles – can count as environmentally ethical. Granting that diversity is necessary, I wonder if there is more work for environmental ethics than insisting on fair processes.

I'll use a thought experiment, much like Hale's own throughout his book. So, imagine a world where people do care about justifying their reasons. They recognize that a great deal of environmental harm has been caused by thoughtless actions and they resolve to publicly justify their reasons and change their actions in the face of better reasons. They all crowd into a room to better discuss an ethically justifiable environmental policy moving forward. This world is some beautiful ideal of a city council meeting. The meeting has come to order. The first question on the agenda is *What environmental policy should we have?* Now, what do they talk about?

Of course, it isn't really an answer to say, "We should build the policy that we have the best justified reasons for building." That open-ended principle has already been adopted. The meeting will have to discuss tangible proposals.

Now, imagine two such worlds. They both go through an ideally fair process. At the end, however, the societies that result are vastly different. One is largely agrarian, distributed. The other largely urban, centralized. Let's say they've both solved the same ecological problems, but in vastly different ways. Great.

Let me stop. One of the problems with this thought experiment so far is that, personally, I might be completely satisfied with either world. I can only dream of either. But the imagined worlds introduce a question: Could there be anything *ethically* distinguishable between the worlds? It seems to me that these two worlds will allow very different lifestyles. This seems good. I want an environmental ethic that allows for diversity. But I worry that Hale's account would have me conclude that any difference between these worlds can only be a matter of taste,

of mere preference, that is, not ethically relevant. It's true that the difference between worlds will be a difference between goods - between different possibilities, between lifestyles, identities, and relationships that the infrastructure of each world either fosters or discourages. It's also true, however, that the difference between these goods matters a great deal, and not as something as easily dismissible as personal preference. In the case of the hospital visitors above, the difference between the two may have been a good, a quality of desire, but it's what makes all the difference.

This thought experiment looks a lot like the end of Chapter 2. Ecomodernists and Primitive-ish groups are advocating for very different worlds, worlds with different infrastructures, worlds that foster and discourage very different kinds of life. The situation of discussing the environmental future is a discussion of what kind of life is most choiceworthy. It's about building the infrastructure that determines what lifestyle and relationships are fostered or discouraged. Put better, it's a discussion about what sort of people to be and to become.

My argument is that the rewilding visions that centralize a concern for what kinds of life and relationships with our environments are ultimately choiceworthy are the best examples of actually getting on with the conversation that needs to be had. Lord knows we need interlocutors that care about justifying reasons. Lord knows we need to listen to each other more. But the topic of the conversation is this: What kind of life do we want to live? Identifying and justifying reasons for this necessitates centralizing the question of the good life in relationship with the environment. The details will matter. The choice between competing goods will matter. The eudaimonistic concern in rewilding literature is a step in the right direction, for attending to these choices, for getting on with this discussion, and for doing it well.

CHAPTER 5: REWILDING DISCOURSE

“The champions of good procedure post guards at the doors of city hall to prevent undemocratic types from entering. Inside, the tables and chairs have been arranged to achieve an order of equality and openness. But no one, in fact, enters, sits down, and begins to converse.”

– Albert Borgmann¹⁶²

In the last chapter I introduced Benjamin Hale’s objections that an environmentalism which centralizes a hope for goods leads to pernicious forms of *narrowness* and *tactical thinking*. Both are problems in environmentalism, and yet I argued that the need for detailed testimony and discussion of exactly what kind of environment and environmental relationships are most choiceworthy, and why, remains the most important focus for public environmental decision making in the Anthropocene. In this chapter I want to look in more detail at another, related criticism concerning environmental discourse, this one put forward by Steven Vogel.

Like Luc Ferry’s charge described above, Vogel is concerned that democratic decision making is undermined by an environmentalism that employs normative, authoritative understandings of nature. In brief, a democratic process about how to shape the environment must be a discussion among equals who are equally responsible to explain their own preferences and defend their reasons. Environmentalists that employ fixed, normative understandings of nature are appealing to an extradiscursive authority – a standard outside and presumably above the preferences and reasons of the decision-making body. In essence, normative understandings of nature function like appeals to divine authority. If my community is debating, say, divorce or abortion, and my contribution to the discourse is simply “God forbids these things,” then I am refusing to participate as an equal who is equally responsible to defend my own reasons for my own preferences. What I’ve really said is that everyone else comes to this discussion as equal individuals, but I am representing a higher authority. Ignoring whether such outside authorities

¹⁶² (Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, 1992, p. 4)

exist, and whether they can be represented this way, it is a performative contradiction to enter a democratic discourse with reasons that deny the legitimacy and authority of the discourse itself. If all that matters is what God or Nature demands, then why make a democratic appeal? As I explain in detail below, Vogel calls this kind of speech *ventriloquism*, a speech supposedly on behalf of and appealing to the unquestionable (quite literally unquestionable, in that it is not there to answer questions) authority of something outside the discourse.

Like Hale's critique in the last chapter, this critique is much larger than the issue of rewilding, but it bears upon my call to centralize the question of the good life in environmental discussions. Are rewilders committing this kind of performative contradiction in their testimonies to the good of a rewilded world?

It can certainly seem so, in at least three ways. First, a good deal of rewilding advocacy takes the shape of a basic fallacious appeal to nature. Something like, *[X] is how ecosystems/humans evolved, thus it is good to preserve/practice/restore [X]*. The evolutionary history of the ecosystem is being appealed to as a normative authority. Second, rewilding appeals are often presented, or at least understood by an audience as, *normative brute facts*. That is, it can seem like rewilders promote their personal lifestyle preferences as if they brute facts. For instance, that rural life is better than urban life, that the woods are better than suburbs, that amateur naturalism is simply an inherently superior hobby than whatever you're doing with your free time (watching television, working on cars, travelling to cities, etc.). Whether these are deep philosophical mistakes or merely very poor rhetoric has to be decided on a case-by-case basis, but no matter, these two kinds of argumentative error are easy to dismiss (their persistence in popular discourse notwithstanding).

I'm interested in a third kind, however, one that I've tangentially mentioned in the preceding chapters. Consider Enric Sala's words on his organization's rhetorical strategy, mentioned in Chapter 3: "When [Pristine Seas] meets with country leaders, we make sure we never get into the brainy weeds. ... We never start with the head. We go straight for the heart, and taking a leader to the field is the best recipe for doing so. ... Once they fall in love with nature, these leaders intuitively feel the responsibility to protect these places." Sala's strategy is to engage his audience with the very thing, the real material ecosystem, for which he is advocating. The strategy is less of an argument, and more of an invitation to experience. Or again, remember Jepsen and Blythe's review of rewilding narratives, also mentioned in Chapter 3. They point out, "...that stories of rewilding lack the blame and the appeal to higher authority of the 20th-century environmental narrative, instead focusing on new ways of thinking and grounded *action*, intertwined with ideas of nature as a creative force and visions of a better future for all life."¹⁶³ They continue, "Rewilding stories, like accounts of recovery from mental health, commonly talk of 'awakenings' that prompt a desire to do something, which leads to a reassessment and more *action* through which recovery emerges."¹⁶⁴ I highlight the word "action" because it ties in with Sala's taking world leaders on field trips. The connection is an appeal to go do something, to engage with the world in a particular way, to then evaluate the good of preserving and promoting this good.

This third kind of appeal is the topic of this chapter. As I explain below, this kind of appeal is what the philosopher Albert Borgmann has called *Deictic Discourse*. As Borgmann presents it, deictic discourse should be an important part of a democratic polity. When I have said in the previous chapters that there is a popular kind of rewilding narrative that has

¹⁶³ (Jepsen & Blythe, 2020, p. 109) *emphasis mine*

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 110 *emphasis mine*

centralized the question of the good life, and that this eudaimonistic turn is good for environmentalism in the Anthropocene, I could have said that rewilding discourse has become *deictic*.

This last chapter moves in three steps. First, I present Steven Vogel’s account of *ventriloquism*, explaining why this kind of speech presents a problem for democratic discourse, simply presenting a performative contradiction and best and at worst wielding unwarranted authority over others. Next, I describe Albert Borgmann’s account of deictic discourse, how it differs from ventriloquism, and how it can play an important role in democratic discourse. I then close with a conclusion to the whole work, suggesting that environmental ethics does well to understand the breadth and diversity of rewilding as a result of its eudaimonistic aims and the deictic speech that most adequately fit those aims.

The Problem of Ventriloquism¹⁶⁵

According to Vogel, the root cause of the environmental crisis is our alienation from “nature.” That is, we fail to understand that nature is – in a real, material sense – a product of humanity’s collective social practices. Our practices create, re-create, alter, and destroy our environments. We socially construct our environments through a series of actions that none of us chooses individually, and which none of us collectively deliberated about and decided upon. These are the claims most central to Vogel’s important contribution to environmental philosophy. In this chapter, I sadly must breeze over Vogel’s materialism, his refreshing focus on the real material conditions of our collective relationships to our environments. Instead, I focus on the upshot of this philosophy, that human can solve this alienated state by increased open

¹⁶⁵ This section was originally co-authored with philosopher and friend Dr. Joey Aloï for a paper submitted to *Environmental Ethics* (forthcoming 2024). In its present form this chapter has been altered to fit the topic of this dissertation, but I must acknowledge Aloï’s important contribution in both conversation and writing for this section summarizing Vogel’s position.

democratic discourse that takes responsibility for the shape of the environment. This kind of discourse will refuse to accept that things must remain the way they are, and will recognize its collective power to change things for the better.

None of us intended to create the sixth great mass extinction event; none of us want global climate change and the devastation it wreaks. But as individuals, we are powerless to do anything about the environmental crisis because it is caused by our social actions, not our individual actions. There is no better name for this distance between our individual hopes and goals and our societal actions than the concept of Marxist *alienation*, and this is the concept Vogel uses to describe our collective relationship to our environments: “we cannot choose to change them, nor would we even know how to do so, although it is our own acts that produce them.”¹⁶⁶ Our everyday environments are largely produced by actions, and filled with artifacts, that none of us have chosen, that do not act as their creators intended, and that none of us feel we have control over.

For this reason, Vogel’s solution to our environmental crisis relies upon a more transparent communal deliberation about our social construction of nature, one which is democratic and genuinely dialogical. If the problem is that we are both individually alienated from the environments we have socially constructed and communally alienated from each other and the roles we play in this process of material social construction, then the solution is a genuine, open, and honest dialogue about what sorts of environments we do want to live in and how we might best construct them socially. Vogel writes, “dialogue actually transforms the social and political situation and thereby makes certain solutions possible whose value individuals are capable of monologically recognizing but which they cannot by themselves put

¹⁶⁶ (Vogel, 2015, p. 81)

into practice.”¹⁶⁷ The practice of a genuine dialogue is open and honest. We attempt to learn about each other’s opinions and lived experiences in order to honestly and transparently choose a course of action based on something approaching consensus. We genuinely listen in the hope of learning, we are open to the possibility of being persuaded, we are not merely interested in rhetorical conquest and hoodwinking our interlocutors. This process of genuine dialogue is crucial for engaging in the types of social practices which construct an environment that most closely meets our hopes and dreams and goals.

Of course, this sort of genuine dialogue is only possible when speech flows back and forth, when we listen and speak with each other as equal partners in this task of social construction. All sorts of political, social, and economic power dynamics can distort this sort of dialogue, as can deliberate attempts at propaganda and illicit coercion. For this reason, we need to be able to speak from our hearts and our experiences, and trust that our interlocutors are doing the same. If we are to have an honest conversation about practices of social construction, we need to be able to take the first-person speeches, arguments, and opinions of our interlocutors at face value. It is no solution to alienation when social practices change only through duplicity, manipulation, or the operation of brute force.

For this reason, Vogel is concerned with *ventriloquism*. Ventriloquism occurs when one or more of the participants in a dialogue claim that they are not speaking on behalf of their own opinions, not expressing their own values, not speaking from their own lived experiences, but, rather, speaking with some special authority on behalf of non-human entities. By introducing a voice into the communal deliberations which cannot be questioned, cannot respond to correction or dissent, the ventriloquist wields an authority that none of the other interlocutors have. The

¹⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p. 221

ventriloquist does not have a responsibility to explain or justify the arguments they make on behalf of bike lanes, elk, or the microbiome. Indeed, to attempt to explain or justify these arguments would be to admit the ventriloquism is a ruse. The ventriloquist will present these value judgments as if they were fact, in need of no explication or justification, as transparently obvious as the height of Mount Rainier or the painfulness of fire: “such claims, just because they can’t be questioned, will be treated as *unquestionable* in the sense of being unquestionably *true*.”¹⁶⁸

The problem, for Vogel, is that the muteness of all nonhuman entities on our planet ensures that the ventriloquist cannot be honestly interpreting on behalf of mountains, salmon, or the climate. Rather, the ventriloquist is merely inserting their own opinions about mountains, salmon, or the climate into the debate in such a way that they are shielded from criticism or inquiry. No other participants in the dialogue have the privilege of baldly asserting their opinions about these entities without some sort of argumentative or empirical justification. This gives the ventriloquist an unjustified, and unjustifiable, argumentative privilege that the rest of the participants in this communal dialogue just don’t have. “*This* is the deepest danger in the idea that nonhuman entities can speak – and it is a political danger. Because they speak no human language, in order to understand what such entities say we need people to translate for us: and yet what claims to be a translator might turn out to be nothing but a *ventriloquist*, and we have no good way to distinguish one from the other.”¹⁶⁹ (189).

Precisely because Vogel explains the environmental crisis as a result of our individual and communal alienation from the ways in which we socially construct our environments, honest, transparent, and deliberate conversations about what we do and don’t like about the ways

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.* p. 187 italics in original

¹⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 189

we currently construct our environments, and about how we ought to do so in the future, are crucial for solving and dealing with our environmental crises, including, of course, environmental injustice. Because ventriloquism puts a mask of fact over the values of the ventriloquist, it is supremely disruptive to the honesty and transparency required by genuine dialogue. The danger of ventriloquism lies in the fact that it might deepen alienation, and thereby worsen the environmental crisis and environmental injustice. It deepens alienation by presenting “nature” as a fixed outside authority, rather than a flexible product of the people having the conversation. No one of us has privileged access to normative knowledge about the non-human world. Or, more precisely, to the extent that we have a type of privileged access, it is because we have engaged in the sort of practical study or first-hand interaction with this world that we ought to be able to make transparent through argumentative and expository discourse.

The present question, then, is if rewilders become ventriloquists when they appeal to the goodness of certain kinds of ecosystems and lifestyles. Before deciding this, I will introduce another kind of speech that can easily be mistaken for bald ventriloquism.

The Power and Weakness of Deictic Discourse

Deictic discourse is a form of first-person speech that does accept responsibility for itself as Vogel demands. And yet, this speech testifies to goods beyond itself – more specifically, it testifies to *material things* and the goods of human practices and relationships with these material things. This appeal beyond the speaker, this pointing to the world, however, does not have the force of an appeal to outside authority. Rather, it functions as an invitation for an audience to appreciate a good for themselves. The important difference I want to draw out is that between an *appeal* to extradiscursive authority and an *invitation* to experience or interpret the world in a particular way. My purpose is to show not only that deictic discourse is not guilty of

ventriloquism, but also that it is vitally important for the kind of discourse necessary for taking unalienated, collective responsibility for the environment.

To this end, I show the origin and purpose of deictic speaking in Borgmann's philosophy of technology. Next, I outline three features of deictic discourse that clearly separate it from *ventriloquism*. Finally, I close this section with Borgmann's appeal for the necessity of deictic discourse; namely, without it our discussions and our decisions are bound to simply perpetuate the reigning values of a technological age, the same values – too often hidden and unanalyzed in our political discourse – that have shaped our society's relationships with its environments in the first place.

Overlapping Interests

There is a fruitful overlap between Vogel's and Borgmann's description of environmental problems. Both agree about its major symptom, that we have collectively constructed an environment that we do not like. From ugly and abandoned downtowns, the loneliness and waste of suburban sprawl, to the sixth extinction and beyond, these problems are almost universally disfavored, while still being collectively created. Further, Borgmann agrees that there is some amount of alienation from the recognition of and participation in the collective processes that actually do the shaping of our environments. And lastly, both call for a new sense of collective responsibility for our environment as the most promising way forward.

This overlapping agreement is evident throughout Borgmann's work, but perhaps most clear in the introduction to his latest book, *Real American Ethics*. This work opens with a call to "take our mutual and inclusive responsibility more seriously and understand it more deeply."¹⁷⁰ Responsibility for what? In this case, for the shape of one's country, for our environments – of

¹⁷⁰ (Borgmann, 2007, p. 4)

all kinds, domestic, public, urban, rural, and even wild – and the kind and quality of life those environments afford. Borgmann’s book is a detailed extrapolation of one of Winston Churchill’s aphoristic lines: “We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us.” But, as Borgmann immediately points out, “The individual does not shape buildings. We do it together, after disagreements, discussions, compromises, and decisions.”¹⁷¹ It is not too much of a stretch to hear a bit of Vogel’s understanding of the social construction of nature in the following passage:

The ways we are shaped by what we have built are neither neutral nor forcible, and since we have always assumed that public and common structures have to be one or the other, the intermediate force of our building has remained invisible to us, and that has allowed us to ignore a crucial point: We are always and already engaged in drawing the outlines of a common way of life, and we have to take responsibility for this fact and ask whether it is a good life, a decent life, or a lamentable life that we have outlined for ourselves.¹⁷²

We have built this; we must take responsibility for it. This is the heart of what Borgmann has called “real ethics,” which is “taking responsibility for the tangible setting of life.”¹⁷³

And yet, anyone familiar with Borgmann’s work knows that a central part of “taking responsibility” and of working to improve how we shape and inhabit our environments, is through a concerned attention and public testimony to the normative character of *reality*. This is the context in which Borgmann calls for deictic discourse. Although there is overlap in describing the symptom, Borgmann differs from Vogel in diagnosing the cause. It is not that we fail to have organized discourse, it’s that our discourse, like everything else in our age, is shaped by the characteristic way of understanding and relating to the world in a technological age. Just like our environments have been shaped by various values and practices to reinforce some kinds of life over others, so too our discourse itself – its practical, material forms in our public

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 5

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 6

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 11

decision-making processes – has been shaped by the same self-reinforcing values. Deictic discourse is a way of breaking out of the status quo to more clearly evaluate the shape of things and offer alternatives. Below I offer a basic example, and then I will summarize three features of deictic discourse, revealing its difference from ventriloquism and translation.

Consider this. The city of Wheeling, WV (my current home) is renovating its downtown streets and sidewalks for the first time in three generations. This streetscape project is the subject of ongoing public meetings, filled with residents advocating for various interests and values they hope to see shape the final physical shape of their downtown. It includes all the usual suspects: downtown businesses worried about disruptions in customer traffic, downtown residents worried about parking, families wanting safe parks, cyclists wanting trails, and, of course, architectural, engineering, and construction companies wanting any excuse for prolonged business. Let's say you want to advocate for a downtown friendlier to pedestrians. How do you do this at the town hall meeting?

One method is a kind of *pandering*; that is, I might argue that whatever my opponent values – e.g., increased customer traffic downtown – is best achieved by creating an environment more friendly to pedestrians. This may be true. So, I can win over my opponents, not by changing what they value, but by showing that their values overlap with my proposal. For instance, pedestrian access increases foot traffic, which in turn promotes the increased business that downtown business owners desire.

Another method might be an appeal to *justice*; that is, I might argue that pedestrians deserve similar access to the downtown and increased safety and ease while doing so. It is unfair, I might say, that the infrastructure of our city rewards car traffic and punishes pedestrians. In this

case, I also am not interested in changing what my opponent values, but I am arguing that there must be a limitation on pursuing their interests to avoid infringing on the rights of others.

But what if I hope to change what my opponent values? What if I want them not simply to concede or compromise, but to really appreciate the good of a largely pedestrian downtown? The most effective method, if it were feasible, would be to take my opponent to some of the most beautiful and enjoyable pedestrian cities and let them experience the difference. It certainly does happen, again and again, that when people experience the joy of strolling through medieval European villages, or the ease and calm of a Scandinavian bike commute, that they start wanting these goods in their own cities. They return home and see it with new eyes. The offense of noxious exhaust, the prevalence of road rage, the constant anxiety of every street crossing, all these everyday experiences are newly seen as such unnecessary burdens. Our city, they easily see, could be different. We can shape it differently. Both the impoverishments and the potential of their own home are revealed through the experience of a different good.

If I can't take everyone to Siena or Copenhagen (I can't take myself there), I might try to give convincing testimony to the good of a pedestrian downtown. I might appeal to my city's history, to the way there used to be city squares full of people, to how businesses opened to seating on the river, to how all the downtown apartments used to be full because it was not only convenient, but pleasurable to walk to work. I might use a vivid architectural drawing, a short film, some poetic or artistic means of conveying the value of living in a pedestrian city along the Ohio River. All of these are kinds of deictic discourse.

Three Features of Deictic Discourse

Borgmann's discussions on deictic discourse are most fully elaborated in his *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*.¹⁷⁴ Although the stress of that work, and much of Borgmann's work thereafter, has been an explication of the nature of technology and how our current age is best understood as a specifically technological age, there is much to be gained about the nature of discourse about our environments while leaving the discussion of technology to one side. Below we summarize Borgmann's view on deictic discourse in three propositions.

1. *Our real environment is already a collective decision about what is good, what ultimately matters in life.*

As said above, Borgmann explains the context for deictic discourse by first showing that we have already shaped our environments in ways that privilege certain kinds of life and prevent and marginalize other ways of life. Our environments are not simply a statement about what is important in life, but a material structure that reinforces it. And yet our common discourse does little to attend to this reality. Again, "We are always and already engaged in drawing the outlines of a common way of life, and we have to take responsibility for this fact and ask whether it is a good life, a decent life, or a lamentable life that we have outlined for ourselves."¹⁷⁵

Borgmann made this point plain in his early work on technology. "Beneath the appearances and parlances of radical openness [in liberal democracies] there is a definite pattern of institutions and procedures and of life."¹⁷⁶ And again, "We have taken a collective position *in our actions*, though not in our discourse, regarding the good life."¹⁷⁷ This context is what gives sense to deictic discourse. The reason deictic discourse is needed is precisely because we require

¹⁷⁴ (Borgmann, 1987)

¹⁷⁵ Borgmann, 2007, p. 6

¹⁷⁶ Borgmann, 1987, p. 169

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 171 *emphasis mine*

a way of collectively evaluating the ways in which our environments are always already reinforcing certain kinds of life and we need a type of argumentation capable of communicating real alternatives.

Thus, although deictic discourse will always involve pointing to a particular real, material aspect of the world, its purpose is to attempt to communicate about what ultimately matters in life. Deictic discourse is for expressing what kind of life is most worth living. And more often than not, it is an attempt to show that the life most worth living is different than the kind of life privileged and materially reinforced by our environments – environments that our collective actions have shaped, and in turn our shaping us.

2. *Deictic discourse shows but does not force.*

So, if I want to show others the problems and impoverishment of the life privileged by our shared environment, and I want to testify to better alternatives, what kind of argument do I use? As in the “pedestrian” example above, it is often most appropriate to *show* rather than *tell*. But we want to make clear that this appropriateness is not a matter of what is most effective; it is not a utilitarian or sophistic argument about what will work best in a democratic setting. Instead, the nature of deictic discourse is dictated by its subject matter. The discussion is about experiencing the goodness, the value of a certain kind of relationship to the world. This kind of subject matter is one that cannot be packaged into a deductive argument and forced upon an audience, not because it won’t “work” – won’t convince the audience – but because the subject matter itself doesn’t fit that form. Deictic discourse is always an invitation for another to see the world in a certain way – and we cannot force them to see, we can only do our best to shape the conditions, to set the scene, and to ask them to look. As Borgmann describes it, “At its most important it is always a plea, and especially in a democracy it must be a plea; it cannot be

trickery or imposition. More particularly it is a plea on behalf of a certain kind of life. The challenge for the philosopher is to be an effective advocate. But at the end of the day, when all the presenting and persuading has been done, that way of life has to recommend itself in its own right.”¹⁷⁸

The very important upshot of this is that deictic discourse is *weak* in one sense. That is, it does not force its conclusions directly upon its audience. It openly admits that it is powerless to do so. Rather, it points to reality, and believes that, should the viewer be so disposed, the experience of goodness will convince them itself. The cogency and rigor of deductive argument or of scientific explanation are neither denied nor diminished in Borgmann’s analysis. Neither are they in conflict with deictic discourse. They are simply unsuited to the goals of deictic discourse. As he puts it,

Discourse of ultimate concern can draw continued strength from something that is present visibly, forcefully, and in its own right, and it can address others by inviting them to see for themselves. Thus deictic discourse need not cajole, threaten, or overwhelm. ... Speakers of deictic discourse never fully warrant the validity of what they tell but point away from themselves to what finally matters; they speak essentially as witnesses.¹⁷⁹

And again, “[Deictic discourse] does not strive after cogency since it cannot, nor does it wish to, control its subject matter. But neither is it arbitrary since it is guided by an eminent, publicly accessible, and tangible concern which can be pointed up and explained.”¹⁸⁰

But this weakness in directly forcing a conclusion upon an audience is part of different kind of strength. When deictic discourse does “work” – when full communication is made and another “sees” the value the speaker testifies to – it commands more than intellectual assent. It compels the other to action, to seek that good for themselves. The other forms their own

¹⁷⁸ Borgmann, *Real American Ethics*, p. 163

¹⁷⁹ Borgmann, *TCCL*, p. 178

¹⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 169

connection to the real, material thing testified to and seeks to enjoy it. They want the life made possible by the good they have found. This is not the case with more forceful argumentation: “The assent that is exacted by scientific cogency is as narrow as the explanation. Normally it ties me into the world by so thin or shallow a bond that I am not moved to act.”¹⁸¹ And again, “Deictic explanation discloses something to us and elicits active assent; it moves us to act. ... But it remains contestable because it cannot, nor does it want to, control its subject matter or the conditions of its reception. Though deictic discourse is contestable, it is principled as well. It has a publicly accessible subject matter that can be considered and examined. It rests its case not by subjective standards but by pointing away from the subject to the thing in question.”¹⁸²

Deictic discourse is thus a kind of pointing. “Look,” it suggests, “Isn’t this better?” The audience is always free to say, “No, it’s not better.” Or perhaps, “Yes, but it is also more and different than you see.” And yet, if they do agree, the assent becomes a commitment to a good, not merely an intellectual assent.

3. *Deictic discourse requires a discourse ethics of participation, a willingness to try.*

Here I may test your patience with a much longer quote of one of Borgmann’s descriptions of how deictic discourse works, and when it is unlikely to work or even be appropriate. The quickest examples involve talking about *taste*, in food or in art. If I want to convince someone that chocolate tastes good or, for something more specific, that Neutral Milk Hotel captures the ambivalent energy of suburban millennial adolescence, well, does it make sense to form a deductive argument for these things? Surely, I am misunderstanding what I’m trying to communicate if I did go about forming such an argument. The better method, of course, is to ask others to *try it*. Take a bite. Listen. Sure, I can set the scene. I can prepare the other to

¹⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 179

¹⁸² *ibid.*, p. 181

hopefully experience what I have experienced. I can ask them to cleanse their palate first. I can suggest that they get in an old Honda Civic and listen to the album on a drive across the fly-over states. But I can't argue them into the conclusion of experiencing my experience. This would be to misunderstand what I'm attempting to communicate.

Here Borgmann explains the setting required for deictic discourse:

Say I have been touched by the majesty of the wilderness or the force of Bach's orchestral suites. In a calm and thoughtful setting I will speak freely and perhaps effectively of what has moved me. I will trace and highlight the crucial features of these phenomena and recount their eloquence. This can be done when my listeners and I are within hailing distance of nature and within earshot of music in the quiet repose of friendship and inquiry. *In each situation I may be able to draw the listeners into the very presence of these forces and have them see, listen, and agree for themselves.* But there are contentious situations where I would not begin to try and make a case for the wilderness or for Bach. ...

There may be a situation of lighthearted sarcasm where someone dares me to protest my devotion to the wilderness. Irreconcilable convictions may clash in a setting of anger and frustration. And philosophers are at times issued the challenge to defend their ultimate concern the same way they are expected to defend the mind-body identity thesis.

Such settings are immune to the kind of discourse that is appropriate to nature and music. ... Youthful defenders of nature often come to philosophy with a request for a cogent mode of discourse to make their cause prevail regardless of opposition. ... When environmentalists are told that such irresistible argumentation is impossible, they are distressed.¹⁸³

We cannot argumentatively force an audience to see the value of the wild. But we can more adequately point away from ourselves and to the wild, the real material thing, and set the scene for them to experience it for themselves. If one wants to argue that a life dedicated to the mountains is more choiceworthy than a life dedicated to the mall, perhaps the best argument is not a lecture, but a walk. Experience the differences of the real, material things.

This point says something about what it means to be a *listener*. In these matters there must be a willingness to try in order for deictic communication to occur. If someone has elegantly expressed why chocolate taste good, and I have listened attentively, evaluated their

¹⁸³ (Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 2003, pp. 90-91)

reason, and yet refused to take a bite, then I haven't really listened – I have not done what I must to evaluate their claims.¹⁸⁴

The upshot is that Borgmann's description of deictic discourse is not only a suggestion for how one speaks about things that ultimately matter, but also a guide for how one must listen and how we must shape our communal discourse to allow for this kind of communication. In addition to shaping the environment at large, communities must curate their forums, their discourse space, to allow for this participatory, active discourse ethic.

Fostering Deictic Discourse in Deliberation

Where might deictic discourse belong in those communal deliberations that, on Vogel's account, work to remove alienation? On the one hand, deictic discourse is first-person speech, and so it is unobjectionable and would be of no concern to Vogel. It might even be encouraged if it increases democratic participation. But on the other hand, it often takes the form of speech on behalf of a silent thing, place, practice, or event; indeed, sometimes the human speaker claims they heard the silent thing speak eloquently, its value was communicated, shine forth, in such a way that people tend to describe it as seeing and hearing the value. In this sense, deictic discourse is inadmissible, or at least self-contradictory in ways that rightly give pause to other participants in the democratic dialogue. Looking at it in this way, deictic discourse both does and does not follow Vogel's rules of discourse ethics, which means it might be rehabilitated or allowed as some impoverished version of an argument – halfway there, but in need of rigorous interpretation and elaboration by one human speaker on behalf of another.

¹⁸⁴ There are, of course, plenty of occasions where we might not be convinced to try out a practice and yet not be guilty of violating the norms of democratic conversation – trying a food to which one is allergic. But by the same token, one is not required by the norms of genuine conversation to listen attentively to the Senator filibustering by reading from the phone book.

But understanding deictic discourse in this manner misses what is most fundamental about it. It is not first-person discourse in the sense that the speaker is telling us something about their personal preferences, as in, “I like strawberry ice cream.” Rather, it is a testimony *about the thing* first and foremost, and how engaging in a practice with that thing has formed the individual as the person they are. It is a discourse about how a certain practice has shaped the first-person perspective of the individual speaking. To use a grammatical analogy, the human speaker is the object of the sentence, not the subject. The subject is the thing (and associated practice) on behalf of which the human speaker is speaking. The speaker claims that the thing’s voice can be heard in practice, that the thing is publicly accessible, and the speaker invites their interlocutors to engage in this practice in order to “hear” the voice, for the thing to become “eloquent” in its own right. The weakness of deictic discourse lies in the fact that speakers can neither force their interlocutors to engage in the practice, nor can the speaker arrogate to themselves the authority of the voice heard through the practice.

My worry, then, is not that Vogel’s descriptions of democratic deliberation and of nature’s silence would disallow deictic discourse. Rather, my worry is that an interpretation of the conceptual categories “first-person speech” and “ventriloquism” as mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive – and the accompanying and supporting analysis, which relies on a hermeneutics of reconstruction, neglecting the hermeneutic task of integration – encourages a misunderstanding of deictic discourse. It is a misunderstanding that obscures and distorts the power of deictic discourse by seeing it as an impoverished form of genuine democratic dialogue – perhaps confused in its appeal to the voices of nonhuman things, perhaps unconfident enough to feel the need to girder itself with ventriloquism. Furthermore, it excludes or dismisses a normal and customary manner which ordinary people speak about things of great importance.

And, finally, it obscures the aspect of deictic discourse which should be of most interest to rewilding environmentalists: the invitation to engage in a new type of collective practice, a new way of materially socially constructing the world. This is the kind of invitation that rewilders are giving.

In fact, it is often in keeping with the democratic intentions of Vogel's work to recognize deictic discourse, and not ventriloquism, at work when speakers invoke voices that their interlocutors cannot hear. Imagine a common protest, citizens argue against building a new ski lodge on supposed "sacred ground." How should one respond when these dissenting citizens join democratic discourse, speaking of voices, testifying to practices, and relating an experience of "sacredness" that are silent and absent to many of their interlocutors? Perhaps there is no easy answer to this question, but it is a very bad answer to rule that those participants are simply *irrational* and *corruptors* of democracy. It is a bad answer to only understand such an appeal as a power grab based on extradiscursive authority.

And yet, this is what Vogel does. In the very last footnote of his book writes Vogel give his suggestion of how to regard such appeals in a democratic setting: "To say [extradiscursive appeals] are 'ruled out,' of course, is not to say they are prohibited, since freedom to express any view is itself one of those necessary procedural presuppositions. It is simply to say that they do in fact possess this self-contradictory character."¹⁸⁵ So, the appeal to the sacredness of the land, in this case, is "ruled out," but not prohibited. It takes a keen and sympathetic eye to appreciate the difference. I don't see it.

Vogel's commitment to procedural inclusiveness here is commendable. But to hear the speech of such testimony as nothing but performative contradiction at best, and mendacious

¹⁸⁵ Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall*, p. 263 n. 41

ventriloquism at worst, seems dismissively paternalistic, and not in keeping with the spirit of open and honest deliberation Vogel so rightly prizes.

What's more, if the listener understands the speech as deictic, and not ventriloquistic, they will see that proper listening demands an ethics of openness, a willingness to try, in order to participate in this kind of discourse. The audience, giving it an honest try, may end up finding the experience silent and empty, valueless. But to not feel the responsibility to try in order to participate in this kind of dialogue is simply to misunderstand the kind of appeal being made.

The call to action at the heart of this closing argument is not to ask philosophers to engage more often in deictic discourse. In fact, for all the reasons Vogel gives, environmental philosophers ought to be wary of the ventriloquist and ought refrain from echoing their cadence. Rather, I am claiming that philosophers – and any other participants in democratic dialogue – ought to be more open to deictic discourse and skilled at recognizing deictic discourse for what it is. Environmental philosophers especially ought to keep a keen ear out for the invitation to practice, avoiding hasty accusations of ventriloquism. Deictic discourse is a third thing, neither ventriloquism nor straight-forward first-person attestation. Deictic appeals are not a corruption of democratic dialogue, but some of the most common and most important forms of communication for a community to better understand each other's experience of their environment and take responsibility for shaping its future together. Deictic discourse is this: We've found something good here, things worth preserving, practices worth fostering in our communal life and identity; try it and see.

CONCLUSION

Our environmental situation in the Anthropocene is not a search for any one clear and correct answer about how we must treat our environment. Ecological science can provide important bulwarks, borders that show some minimal requirements for ecological sustainability. But the decisions we must make are not about what is minimally required for some amount of sustainability; instead, our decisions are about what kind of communal life we want. The choice of environment is a choice about who we want to be and how we want to live. In my estimation, popular rewilding discourse is leading the way on recognizing this. They are centralizing the question of the good life, and using largely deictic appeals to invite others to try new practices, to join different practices, and, hopefully, to discover the value of these things and practices for themselves.

The Ecomodern and Primitive visions I reviewed in chapter two illustrate the kind of choices environmentalism currently faces. The question between each is not what the ecosystem requires, but what kind of relationship do *we* – whatever community is coming together to make these decisions – want to have with our environments.

My point has been modest, only that rewilding is a complex collection of hopes. More than a hope to heal ecological damage, it's a hope of finding a better life in that work. And this is a good trend for environmental ethics. It highlights what has always been the case, that our choices in shaping the environment are choices that determine the kinds of people we become, the quality and character of the lives we live.

Ecology can only guide so much. Ecosystem stability may require the freer operation of ecological functions, larger animals roaming larger distances, fire and flood determining cycles of disturbance. Even so, it doesn't quite determine whether this should happen behind an electric

fence on the outskirts of the city or here in the backyard. More than that, ecological science underdetermines how communities engage with environments, adapt to them, celebrate or bemoan them. At the same time, broad ethical mandates to preserve wild land equally underdetermine projects. Ethical prohibitions may function as the same kind of broad bulwarks that limit some actions, but they do not narrow down options enough to persuasively recommend real, tangible modes of living a good life and environment that fosters it. A more specific hope is required.

To argue that the freer operation of ecological forces is important for ecosystem health is one thing; but the worthwhileness of a life lived in relationship with these forces is what ultimately recommends a rewilded world. If the latter cannot be defended, then the former is destined to the same pessimistic future of most forms of preservation – ecological doom or moral duty undermined by incompatible cultural values and appetites. The future of rewilding as a truly optimistic environmentalism, then, lies in environmental ethics prioritizing the question of the good life.

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