

Religion and the Environment

Edited by Ronald A. Simkins

Theistic Naturalism and the Politics of Nature

Richard Fern, Branford, CT

Introduction

[1] Max Oelschlaeger has argued that there is “no alternative to reaching an environmental ethic that grows out of religious truth claims” (224). I agree and want to explore some reasons why this is and the implications thereof. My comments will be exploratory and all too brief in light of the issues raised, issues encompassing not only the nature of nature but, also, the interplay of religion, science, and politics – no small scope but all implicit in Oelschlaeger’s claim. For if he is right, as I believe, we need to change now dominant understandings of both modern science and political deliberation.

[2] I proceed in three steps. To begin, I sketch a philosophical ethics of nature, “humane holism.”¹ This affirms the moral worth of (and our resultant moral obligations to) nature in part by way of individual creatures (*natura naturata*) and nature as a whole (*natura naturans*). These claims raise contentious questions about what modern science can and cannot tell us about the inner workings of nature. I explore this issue in the second section in relation to the overtly creationist perspective of “theistic naturalism.” In so doing, I argue that modern science, while illuminating reality so far as its light will shine, is constitutively blind to the most important features of nature, wild and human. By the end of this section, we should

¹ I prefer to speak of an “ethics of nature” rather than an “environmental ethics” for two reasons: first, to shift attention away from its value for us to such value as nature has in its own right and, second, to embrace in one unified framework ethical concerns about the distinctively wild and uniquely human.

have a good idea why Oelschlaeger is correct in turning to religious faith and, further, why a religious ethics of nature needs not, and ought not, disregard either philosophical reflection or scientific inquiry. In the third and final section, I consider some ramifications of this turn to religious faith for the way in which matters of common concern are engaged in modern, pluralistic societies.²

Humane Holism

[3] The most obvious reason that people care about nature is that it has *derivative value*. Derivative value is “derivative” because it depends on the value something has for something else; this may be either instrumental or intrinsic. As for the first, nature is a valuable resource relative to the otherwise valued ends of many creatures, be this for food and shelter, or the raw material needed for microchips. As for the second, nature is for many individuals a source of value on its own, be this intrinsic value aesthetic, scientific, or religious. One thinks here of persons who value the “great outdoors” for not only the “black gold” hidden there but also “rocky mountain highs.” Such individuals value nature as not only a “resource” but also a “source” of value, a contributor to the good of their life in and of itself, not simply as a means to other ends.

[4] Both forms of value, instrumental and intrinsic, are of interest to ethicists, who look to understand the role they play in human life and assess the (in)justice of their production and distribution in human society. Any ethics of nature needs to take these and related issues seriously. My central concern here, however, is on a more theoretical question about *inherent value* and, in particular, *moral worth*. What this involves can be seen by reflecting on the value ascribed to human beings. Humans are presumed to have moral worth and, thus, be entitled to moral consideration, whatever their derivative value for others. As a result, human beings are *direct* (and not only indirect) *objects* of moral concern.³

[5] Does nature possess, in whole or in part, inherent value of a morally relevant sort? I believe it does and, thus, is not ours to use as we please, whatever our gain or however moral our use of nature relative to other humans. The most immediate argument for this conclusion involves a now well-known extension of moral norms, arguing that our reasons for ascribing moral worth to human beings apply as well to many non-human animals and, thus, to wild nature qua *natura naturata*. Whatever their derivative value, human beings have moral worth as a result of being either or, typically, both sentient and intentional creatures – that is, one, living “a life that goes better or worse from the inside-out” and, two, “a life of their own choosing.” Sentience and intentionality are morally constitutive properties. To encounter sentience is in itself to have a morally salient reason to respect a being’s interests;

² My arguments in all three sections follow closely, though not invariably positions developed at greater length in *Nature, God and Humanity* (Fern 2002), henceforth abbreviated as NGH. I will use footnotes to flag further discussion there of issues engaged here and, as occasion demands, correct misconstruals of positions taken there.

³ It is important to bear in mind that the terms “intrinsic” and “inherent,” as that of “(moral) worth,” are used differently, even in contrary ways by ethicists. For more on my own usage and its relation to that of others, see Fern 2002: 11-18.

to encounter intentionality is in itself to have a morally salient reason to respect the choices and intentions of a being.⁴ Given this, the moral standing of non-human animals follows immediately: insofar as any creature is sentient or intentional, it has moral worth. In this regard, species membership is beside the point and “speciesism” indefensible.⁵

[6] The only relevant basis on which to deny non-human animals moral standing is to declare, along with Descartes, that they are “biological machines,” mere things. This assertion, which I take to be false, raises an epistemological question of great importance for ethics: by virtue of what characteristics, or properties, do we recognize the presence of either sentience or intentionality in others, wild or human? In response, I want to affirm two general claims. First, in addressing factual questions of this sort about non-human animals we need to take into account all the similarities and differences involving us and them discovered by modern science – physiological, evolutionary, and behavioral. Second, however much we can learn from science regarding the above; neither sentience nor intentionality is the sort of reality that can be apprehended by way of scientific inquiry.

[7] Recognizing direct objects of moral concern, wild or human, is at core an interpretive, hermeneutical problem. We grasp or, better, find ourselves grasped by the presence of other sentients and selves as we engage them personally, and find their concerns and irreducibly personal reality a part of our stories, our lives. This need not and ought not be viewed as the projection of subjective properties on an otherwise objective reality. It is, rather, an epistemic stance by virtue of which we come to grasp elements of reality not otherwise comprehensible: “seeing why we are justified in believing some non-human animals are conscious will make clear how and why some truths about the world in which we live never turn up in a scientific theory, even though they stare us in the face all the time” (Fern 2002: 71). That we depend on value-laden terms and an irreducibly personal process for the apprehension of sentience and agency does not mean that we can distribute moral worth at will, willy-nilly. Our use of the relevant notions is given sense and constrained by not only what we can apprehend scientifically, as above, but even more the observed capacity of some but not all creatures to participate in paradigmatically human activities (see Fern 2002: 18-23; Midgley 1978, 1984). The way we work and play with dogs but not trees, for instance, makes the moral standing of dogs self-evident in a way that the moral standing of trees is not, even if trees turn out to be direct objects of moral concern for other reasons, in another sense, as I will now argue.

[8] The case is less clear when we consider the moral status of nature at large. Here, the status appears not to obtain. Even those who conceive of nature holistically, as Gaia, do not

⁴ These reasons are *prima facie*; there may be and often are morally relevant reasons to the contrary (see Fern 2002: 18-38).

⁵ Northcott inexplicably claims, according to NGH, “the strongest account philosophers can give of the moral value of sentient beings arises not from talk of their *intrinsic worth* . . . but from the *contribution* of all life forms to human identity and welfare” (Northcott 2003: 338; italics added). Nowhere, however, do I make such a claim nor would I: derivative value is never for me a source of either inherent value or moral worth. Part of the problem here may be that Northcott’s term, “intrinsic worth,” has no place in my account.

claim that it is actually sentient or intentional. Might there, though, be another property that renders wild nature as a whole, *natura naturans*, a direct object of moral concern? It is not uncommon now to appeal in this regard to the awe-inspiring wonder of nature, its remarkable self-regulating complexity, marvelous beauty, and great antiquity, even miraculous creativity. And here intuitions differ. It seems to me, however, that while such appeals identify inherent values we ought to respect and, thus, not destroy wantonly, this is not enough in and of itself to establish moral worth. That it is not can be seen by imagining a hypothetical planet, “Nearth,” with a no less complex, ancient, beautiful, and creative nature than our own that eventuates in massive, unredeemed misery. Confronted by such a horrendous reality, we surely ought, as John Stuart Mill eloquently argued, undermine and subvert it in every way possible, not defer to it or render it moral respect. Mill, of course, saw Earth itself as a kind of Nearth, a view contrary to my own (see further, Fern 2002: 39-65, esp. 56-60).

[9] More than inherent value is required for moral standing. Further, as the above example indicates, this “more” will need to be related to, bound up with morally paradigmatic goods of well-being (relative to sentients and selves). While this appears to leave “mother nature” out in the cold, given that she is neither sentient nor intentional, there is a way the complexity, antiquity, beauty, and creativity of nature can be understood that does ground a persuasive argument for moral standing. Or so I want to argue. Consider the moral law, that is, morality itself. While morality is not the sort of thing we can care about in the way we care about selves and sentients, we clearly ought to show moral respect for moral norms. Though neither sentient nor intentional, these norms have inherent value and, more particularly, moral worth in light of their constitutive relationship to morally worthy states, well-being, and the doing of justice. Further, while the order of nature is clearly other than that of morality, it will also be related to morally worthy states in a constitutive and morally significant manner if natural processes are constitutively oriented toward the realization of morally paradigmatic goods, that is, if nature as a whole is “sentiotic.”⁶

[10] Briefly, a process is “sentiotic” if and only if it is, one, teleotic; two, internally oriented toward creaturely well-being; and, three, a constitutive element of the well-being it produces. The well-functioning of such a sentiotic process will itself be an integral part of the morally relevant goods to which it gives rise (allowed to function in accord with its teleotic nature, its “deep telos”). So viewed, appeals to sentiosis encompass values such as complexity, antiquity, beauty, and creativity in a way that ensures the intended object of respect – nature so conceived – is morally praiseworthy. The moral worth of sentiotic processes stems from their value-laden constitutive telos, not their derivative value for us or any other creatures. Not only may sentiosis exist apart from living creatures, it would as such deserve moral respect no less than our planet “prior to the coalescence of organic molecules into our most

⁶ Note well, as expanded on below, that “sentiosis” is a philosophical, not a scientific concept and, correspondingly, that the deep, sentiotic telos of nature must not be confused with the invariant regularities, or “laws of nature,” discovered by modern science (see Fern 2002: 87).

primitive ancestor, long before dinosaurs walked the earth,” long before it had derivative value for any creature, wild or human (Fern 2002: 64).⁷

[11] It is not that the value of nature for us, relative to our own well-being, has no relevance for the way we ought to view and treat nature as a whole. Nature is a bountiful fount of goods and, even more, a vital, nurturing womb of life; hence, the expression “mother nature.” While this special relation in which we stand to natural processes is not in itself a source of inherent value or, more particularly, moral worth, it is a basis for ascribing to us a special, even constitutive duty to care for the sentient well-being of our metaphorical parent, that deep telos in our nature which gives rise to and sustains our well-being – past, present, and future.⁸ A similar point holds as regards the moral relation of human beings to one another. While speciesism is not plausible as an account of moral worth, the special relation in which members of the human species stand to one another does matter morally, as seen in the recognition of distinctively human rights.⁹ Special relations matter morally, but they do not, in and of themselves, establish moral worth.

[12] There is nothing inconsistent or ad hoc here. As for moral worth, our reasons to care about wild nature involve the inherent value and moral worth of nature, be this by way of sentience, intentionality, or sentiosis. None of these properties depend on whatever value nature has for us. Where derivative value does come into play is with regard to the debt of gratitude and resultant duty of care we owe to individual animals, as the case may be,¹⁰ and less obviously but no less importantly, to that nurturing womb of life apart from which *we* human beings would not now or ever be in joy or sorrow. Here we need to distinguish between moral standing and significance as well as “nature” as a general concept and “nature” as the historic process to which we owe our existence.

[13] These and related complexities ensure that even if we have good reason to believe, one, that numerous non-human animals are sentients and/or selves and, two, that the deep telos of nature as a whole is sentient, there remain contentious questions regarding our duties to wild nature, in general and on specific occasions. One such indeterminacy involves the moral significance of non-human interests compared to our own: “there is no rationally-compelling account of how much non-humans count morally compared to humans” (Fern 2002: 2).

⁷ In reviewing NGH, Gottlieb equates sentiosis with nature’s “tendency to support the well-being of human beings” and offers this as my rationale for ascribing moral worth to nature-as-a-whole (530). Both claims are mistaken: sentiosis is not defined in this way nor is derivative value a basis for ascribing moral worth.

⁸ In NGH, having presented the argument from sentiosis and, thus, “presuming that nature has moral worth,” I argue on the basis of nature’s value for us that “we owe our metaphorical mother not only moral respect but [also] a constitutive duty of care” (Fern 2002: 65).

⁹ Thus, as both Gottlieb and Northcott note, I reject “biotic egalitarianism” and its claim that the (equivalent) interests of all moral subjects count the same, one for one. Biotic egalitarianism (1) undermines the recognition of distinctively human rights; (2) eventuates in moral absurdities; and (3) adds little, if anything to the protection of non-human interests (see Fern 2002: 33-37).

¹⁰ One thinks here of the moral infamy in abandoning or otherwise gratuitously harming animals, from pets to racehorses, milk cows to seeing-eye dogs, that have “served us well.”

Another indeterminacy involves the significance of respecting wild nature, *natura naturans*, as a sentiotic process. Where the operative course of nature conflicts with the sentiotic end of nature, we may be morally justified in interfering, perhaps required to interfere, with nature as it now appears. To deny this would consign us to an extreme environmental quietism, resulting in moral absurdity, possibly even eco-fascism, relative to the interests of individual selves and sentients.¹¹ How, though, are we to avoid the opposite extreme of a rampant technopoly that shows no respect for the moral worth of natural processes?¹² Where are we to draw the line, morally speaking? As I see it, this question cannot be answered in a single, determinate, rationally-compelling manner by any ethic. What we know beyond reasonable doubt, by way of collaborative reflection and inquiry, while not insignificant, allows for conflicting, similarly reasonable conclusions. One consequence is that in reaching determinate decisions about what morality requires of us, we must rely on invariably contentious and by-reason-ineliminably diverse religious and cultural convictions on matters of faith.

[14] We all make suppositions about nature, wild and human, apart from which we could not draw the moral conclusions we do. Some of these are well-established, beyond reasonable doubt. Others are highly contestable, resulting in an ineliminable indeterminacy of moral reason. The fact that reasonable disagreement cannot be eliminated does not mean that we must abandon morality or despair of setting parameters to our disagreements. There is much on which we do agree, and drawing on this we can narrow our disagreements and illumine common ground, such as it is. Thus, humane holism looks to develop (arguably) rationally compelling generalities into a more or less rationally compelling philosophical ethics. In so doing, it “presumes to know the bottom-line truth about the world in which we live” and remains “committed to a critical, scientific, and moral realism” (Fern 2002: 67). Of course, disagreements will remain, along with competing ethics. The value of a philosophical ethic, rightly construed, is that it illumines those deep tensions with which we must live, as

¹¹ I address this danger in NGH. There I affirm alongside a “principle of deference” (to sentiotic processes), both a “principle of necessity” (allowing humans to use wild nature, in whole and part, for their own good “when doing so is necessary to preserve a critical element of their own good”) and a “principle of decency” (requiring that respect be shown for the interests and choices of all sentients and selves) (Fern 2002: 31-33; see also 172, 192-94; 196-97). Perhaps this is insufficient, as Quash worries (127f), to avoid an undue reliance on “the material world” for ethical norms, but I do not think so, given the strong distinction I draw between scientific and ethical claims. In any case, the humane holism I argue for in NGH is *not*, as Northcott claims, “virtually indistinguishable from the position of Norwegian deep ecologist Arne Naess” (2003: 338). In addition to the above, the concern with individual well-being that Naess discounts, by essentially equating it with the well-functioning of nature-as-a-whole (see Northcott 1996: 113ff), is built into the very notion, sentiosis, on which I base the case for moral holism, thus exacerbating rather than (fascistic-like) eliminating tensions and indeterminacies.

¹² Gottlieb usefully identifies a number of tensions, asking: “If the value of nature lies in it sustaining us, why not make all the improvements we want? Why not spray the rivers to kill the black flies that produce blindness in Africa, turn messy jungles into well-ordered parks, and eliminate the grizzlies that have the nasty tendency to kill people who get in their way?” (530). While it is *not* my view that “the value of nature lies in it sustaining us,” the questions raised are good ones. I offer no easy answers, but in NGH I do discuss similar tensions at length relative to the prospect of turning nature into a giant “pleasure park” – something I argue is not, for many reasons, a good idea (Fern 2002: 216-23).

reflective selves and, politically, a pluralistic society. And this is not unimportant: what we need is “not a way to escape these tensions, by means of a heightened morality, a re-formulated science, or, even, a new conception of God, but, more modestly, a way to live with them, learn from them, keep them and us in balance” (Fern 2002: xi-xii, 215).¹³

Theistic Naturalism

[15] The philosophical ethic of humane holism is not intended to stand on its own (see Fern 2002: 95-102, for a discussion of the interwoven, epistemic authority of “reason,” “experience,” and “tradition”). For one thing, as noted, further explication is needed of the presumed deep telos of nature, that morally worthy end toward which a sentiotic nature is heading. A second, related need is to ascertain what reasons there are to believe that nature actually is sentiotic. Even if, as I contend, the argument from sentiosis to moral worth holds up, it is by no means evident that the world is teleotic, let alone sentiotic. My own belief that it is such is rooted in an openly religious perspective on nature, that of “theistic naturalism.” According to this view, the world is brought into and sustained in existence freely out of love by an irreducibly personal, radically transcendent Other, the God of traditional biblical theism. I want here to address some general questions about the relation between this overtly creationist point of view and the portrayal of nature found in modern science (for the theological particularities of theistic naturalism, see Fern 2002: 136-64).

[16] The distinctive contribution of theistic naturalism relative to humane holism is its account of nature as created. This gives us reason to believe, from the standpoint of traditional biblical theism, that nature is sentiotic. This view of nature I take to be coherent, well-supported, and, in general, reasonable. I do not claim that the truth of this view or traditional biblical theism can be proven beyond reasonable doubt; to the contrary, I deny it is possible to so establish the truth of any worldview, religious or not. Others will disagree and continue to argue, some with passionate conviction, that their particular view of the world is rationally compelling. Be that as it may, theistic naturalism (and for it the belief that nature is sentiotic) rests on an overt act of faith. In this sense, while argumentative, the account I give of theistic naturalism is expository, not demonstrative.¹⁴ This holds for appeals to scripture no less than natural theology. I see no way, for instance, (nor would I look) to *prove* scripturally that theistic naturalism offers the demonstrably correct account of traditional biblical theism, be this by way of “proof-texting” or a more sophisticated theological hermeneutic. To the contrary, I accept on faith, as integral to that *regula fidei* in terms of which I read scripture, the for-me-compelling image of a personal, uncompromising great, all-powerful, loving and just God, aware of and concerned about the well-being of all creatures, large, small and in-between, past, present and yet-to-come, both

¹³ I return to this point in the final section. See Fern (2002: *passim*), arguing for a “principled pluralism”; see also Peterson (222), Braaten, Giostra and, especially, on indeterminacy and pluralism in general, McKim.

¹⁴ Thus, my discussion of the traditional arguments (and their standard criticisms) in NGH is meant to display the reasonableness of belief in the all-powerful, altogether good God of traditional biblical theism, not *prove* that such a being exists (see Fern 2002: 77-78, 117-24; for more on this general approach, see 131-35, 136-63, and, especially, 155-59).

human and wild. That I find this image compelling rather than another is no doubt in part a product of my pietistic, pentecostal upbringing. In any case, whatever the image, interpreting and applying such images and their associated moral ideals requires religious ethicists to take into account not only distinctively religious sources but, no less, academic disciplines, such as modern science and philosophy, and, crucially, the contingent, yet constitutive particularities, the Wittgensteinian presuppositions, that underlie every culture and make possible all human thought and discourse.¹⁵

[17] What makes theistic naturalism “theistic” is its assertion that there exists a divine reality other than, beyond, the order of nature. What makes theistic naturalism “naturalistic” is the theologically more contentious claim that nature is the extended, constitutive body of humanity and, as such, an essential medium of our relation to God (see Fern 2002: 105-10, 139-43, 167-68, 201-7).¹⁶ In this, theistic naturalism stands against historically important forms of “otherworldly religion,” faiths such as gnosticism, Manichaeism, and, even, forms of traditional biblical theism. Contrary to these, it affirms a fundamental and irrevocable continuity and, therewith, harmony of created ends and goods, wild and human. This makes it an instance of (what I call) “congruent naturalism,” the essence of which is well captured in the following remarks by Erazim Kohak:

By speaking of “naturalism” . . . we shall mean any philosophy which recognizes the being of humans as integrally linked to the being of nature, however conceived, treating humans as . . . fundamentally *at home* in the cosmos, not “contingently thrown” into it as into an alien context and “ek-sisting” from it in an act of Promethean defiance (8).¹⁷

¹⁵ For more on the role of inspired images and, more generally, “imaginative theology” (by comparison with systematic and dogmatic theology), see the discussion of miracles in NGH (Fern 2002: 124-35). For examples of how scripture so viewed illumines ethical reflection, see the explication of *creatio ex nihilo* (Fern 2002: 136-64) and, more narrowly, the discussion (in relation to the contentious claim made there that animal predation is an integral part of creation) of Isaiah’s oft-noted vision of the peaceable kingdom, including the to-us-odd, rarely mentioned continuance of animal sacrifices in that wondrous time to come (Fern 2002: 219-23). The open-textured, critical dynamic of this hermeneutic is summed up in “the fallacy of misplaced ecstasy” (Fern 2002: 100ff), holding it a fundamental error to interpret the charismatically-inspired Word of Scripture as if it contained, hidden or explicit, a materially or normatively complete account of the world in which we dwell.

¹⁶ I draw in NGH an explicit contrast with Sallie McFague’s characteristically panentheistic portrayal of the world as “God’s body” (see Fern 2002: 136-9, 202-5). While I strongly agree with McFague that we are bound to the world constitutively, I believe God is bound to creation (and us) only in the freedom of divine love, not by virtue of a metaphysical or moral necessity (for a parallel argument, see Jones: 263f; also 149-292 for a “grammar of God” instructively similar to and different from theistic naturalism). Like Jones, to whom I owe much in this regard, I am looking for a way between the impervious God of classical theism and the not-quite-God of process thought.

¹⁷ Kohak portrays “nature” phenomenologically, as “the primordially given cosmic context in which humans find themselves and to which they themselves belong in their bodies and minds, as humans are in fact aware of it, whether thematically or not, in their daily lived experience, not as it appears in the theoretic nature-constructs which seek to capture it” (8; for different but illuminating examples of congruent naturalism, see Midgley; Wilson; Fern 2002: 61-65, 69-70, though the term “congruent naturalism” is not used in the latter).

That theistic naturalism is naturalistic in this sense follows from its account of nature as created; unlike the radically transcendent Sacred Reality to which we owe existence, we are thoroughly natural creatures, earthbound come what may.¹⁸

[18] Theistic naturalism is *not* naturalistic in a second, common sense of naturalism. On this sense, which I will call “dismissive naturalism,” to be “natural” is to be part of an all-comprehending, self-contained order of objects, processes, and causes, identified and, in principle, capable of explanation without reference to any external, non-natural reality. Typically, dismissive naturalism takes the form of “scientific naturalism,” in which “naturalism is polemically defined as repudiating the view that there exists or could exist any entities or events which lie, in principle, beyond the scope of scientific explanation” (Danto: 448). Those adopting this view need to show how mental events, sentience, intentionality and such, can be accounted for in the same terms as physical events and objects, photosynthesis, quarks, mitosis, brains, and the like. Some dismissive naturalists, among them atheistic existentialists such as Sartre and Camus, dismiss scientific naturalism, arguing that the radical freedom of “being-for-itself” cannot be grasped in the same terms as a causally determined “being-in-itself.”¹⁹ I will call this view “humanistic naturalism.” Both scientific and humanistic naturalists affirm the “naturalistic principle,” which views all causes as (dismissively) “natural” and rejects altogether notions of a causally active deity and, more broadly, supernatural causality, as affirmed by traditional biblical theists.²⁰

[19] How does theistic naturalism, given its supernaturalism, view the history and, more important, on-going inquiries of modern science? The answer in brief is that it welcomes with open arms whatever light science sheds on the workings of nature and, thus, all well-established scientific data and theories. Accordingly, though overtly creationist, theistic

¹⁸ It is important not to reverse these terms, as Gottlieb inexplicably does in designating as “naturalistic theism” what he mistakingly claims is my “central *religious* thesis,” namely, that “the world is created by God and thus deserves our respect because we are, acting in the image of God, to care for all of creation” (530). While I certainly affirm divine creation and a duty of care for creation, this “thesis” misses altogether the specifics of my position as a theistic *naturalist*.

¹⁹ This view is congruent with that developed in NGH regarding the inability of science to recognize, let alone explain, sentience or intentionality. Note, though, that humanistic naturalists tend, as seen paradigmatically in Camus, to deny vehemently congruent naturalism. Scientific naturalists tend, on the other hand, to be congruent naturalists, often by way of Darwin.

²⁰ Unlike in NGH, here I commit “theistic naturalism” to the affirmation of supernatural causality. I do not like to use the term “supernatural,” given its common explication in purely negative terms, as a denial of dismissive naturalism (as in Hume’s critique of belief in miracles, for which, see Fern 1982). Lacking a viable alternative, however, I continue to do so; at the least, this usage flags an important element of historic theism by contrast with post-Schleiermachean “religious modernism,” which, though rejecting dismissive naturalism, accepts the naturalistic principle and, thus, limits itself to a metaphysically-active God. For an instructive, strong critique of scientific naturalism from the perspective of religious modernism, see Haught. For a discussion of the reasonableness of belief in miracles, see Fern 2002: 130-35; Alston: 197-222; Wolterstorff 1995: 114-29. While the basic reasonableness of such belief is now well established, more needs to be said about the different kinds of causes and their relation (see here Polkinghorne 2005; for a useful, critical overview of recent work, see Saunders). Here the interests of theistic and humanistic naturalists overlap.

naturalism readily accepts evolutionary theory, commonalities, and contentions. Further, in so doing, it does not (as do some accounts of “intelligent design” and “the new creation story”) import into science notions of teleotic direction or, more generally, normatively-laden relations which have no place there (see Fern 2002: 82-89, for a discussion of the error of importing value-judgments into the science of ecology). Here, it is worth noting Celia Deane-Drummond’s concern that “biological science does not appear to be *consistent* with the idea of vitalism that,” she presumes, “is implied by the concept of sentiosis” (130). Though misplaced, this concern reflects a genuine difference and resultant tension between theistic naturalism and biological science. The first views nature as value-laden and purposeful in a way that the second does not and never can. This tension only amounts to an inconsistency, however, if we overlook either the intrinsically abstract nature of modern science or the non-scientific nature of sentiosis. I will comment further on the first mistake in a moment. More to the point here, it needs to be realized, as Deane-Drummond does not, that sentiosis carries *no* implications regarding vitalism qua scientific theory, whether as developed naively, long ago by Galen or more recently, with great sophistication by Hans Driesch. A sentiotic view of nature is more accurately regarded as a form of animism, an overtly religious point of view.

[20] Some, of course, have taken animism to be *inconsistent* with a scientific view of the world. But, whether or not modern science has rendered animism *incredible*, to claim that animism is logically inconsistent with what science tells us about the world is an error akin to taking the inability of a scale to recognize color or odor as inconsistent with a more phenomenologically accurate description of the world. The account of nature that science offers, as seen in Galileo’s inquiry-defining distinction between primary and secondary properties, is limited methodologically. What science cannot put in terms accessible to scientific inquiry, it sets aside hopefully for another day, though a day that may never come, depending on whether what gets set aside, for instance, sentience, turns out to be explicable in scientific terms. In any case, however inclusive of reality the picture science paints, that picture will and must conform to conditions built into scientific inquiry. Accordingly, while it is evident science has discovered an amazing mathematical order in nature, the fact that it has found there no value-laden, irreducibly personal causal relations is an inevitable result of its inherently quantitative form of inquiry, not a failure to find what it would have were natural processes value-laden in the manner animists and theistic naturalists believe.

[21] In so speaking, I embrace a view to which Alfred North Whitehead gave paradigmatic form over 80 years ago. As Whitehead saw it, science, in its quest for a mathematical order hidden beneath the value-laden concrete facts of experience, necessarily ends up with what it presumes from the start, “elaborate logical constructions of a high degree of abstraction” (50). While I go in a rather different direction with this point than Whitehead – who in his great book, *Process and Reality*, lays the basis (as mediated by the work of Charles Hartshorne) for process theology and, thus, panentheism – our views of science and its relation to the world in which we live are much the same: “to suppose that the failure of something incapable of representation in [scientific] terms . . . to appear in a scientific account of the world implies that it is not [real], misunderstands the disciplined withdrawal that made

modern science possible” and, in so doing, ignores “the possibility that science is ‘but a part, though an important one, of man’s effort to understand himself, his culture, his universe’” (Fern 2002: 82; citing Greene: 8). Those distorting the nature of science in this manner commit what Whitehead labeled “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.”

[22] This general view of science, as inherently abstractive, predates Whitehead and, indeed, was held by not a few from the beginning, as witness Osiander’s preface to Copernicus’ treatise on the heavens (see Dijksterhuis: 296-98). Sometimes it has been confused with a denial of scientific realism but this, as Whitehead sees and I agree, is not essential to the view: “As every surveyor and architect knows, abstraction is consistent with realism. The maps surveyors prepare, like the blueprints of architects, depict places and things, relations, with numerical precision” (Fern 2002: 81). Far from showing this view mistaken, post-Kuhnian work in the history and philosophy of science has made evident its explanatory power. Though old, it is not outdated.²¹

[23] It follows that “while every ethic needs to be consistent with what science tells us about the world, we must . . . not expect too much out of science” (Fern 2002: 89). There are many things in the world not found in the intrinsically abstractive data and theories of science. For one thing, as noted above, modern science cannot establish the bare existence of mental events, let alone show that any creature, wild or human, is sentient or purposeful; yet we are confident some creatures, not least ourselves, are both. Nor can modern science show that nature as a whole is sentiotic. That it cannot does *not*, of course, give us reason to believe that nature *is* sentiotic; for that we must look elsewhere, as theistic naturalism does in its overtly religious, faith-based account of *creatio ex nihilo*. That an ethics of nature must look elsewhere than science for its grounding beliefs about nature does not mean that it can ignore what science does tell us about nature. There is no inconsistency in claiming both that no scientific account of nature can ground an ethics of nature and that what science tells us about nature needs to be incorporated into theological and ethical perspectives on nature, as affirmed by traditional biblical theists from at least Augustine on.²²

²¹ For a more developed account consistent with and broadly supportive of the view I adopt of modern science, see, for instance, Polkinghorne, who, having noted the fallacy of misplaced concreteness (2000: 11), goes on to describe scientists as “map-makers” (2000: 32) and argue persuasively that the basic continuity of scientific inquiry lies not at “the ‘pictorial’ level of description” but, rather, as proclaimed by critical realists, at “the more abstract level of mathematical characterization” (2000: 84). I do not, of course, mean here to commit Polkinghorne to other claims I make, such as those regarding sentiosis or supernatural causality.

²² Thus, in NGH, in discussing the morality of predation, wild and human, I take into account ecological and evolutionary theories and, especially, the role played in these theories by physiological harm and death (see Fern 2002: 214-33). Gottlieb errs in implying that such reliance on science is inconsistent with the claim that science cannot ground an ethics of nature. By way of ferreting out this error, let me stress that I do not subscribe to the position Gottlieb attributes to me in NGH in this regard, namely, “that no scientific account of humanity’s physical dependence on the natural world justifies, by itself, *any* normative account of that world’s value for us” (530; italics added). While science cannot justify an *ethic*, the science of physiology, for instance, renders evident our dependence on and, in the process, justifies many claims regarding the *instrumental* value of nature for us. As Holmes Rolston notes, “Organisms are healthy, thrive and flourish . . . The standards [by which we judge this] . . . are in the organism itself, relative to its . . . naturalistic reference frame” (105). In this sense, as Rolston’s work makes clear,

The Politics of Nature

[24] It is now clear, given the general line of argument developed in the first two sections, why an ethics of nature has to rely at crucial points on “religious truth claims.”²³ It may seem at this point, however, to those weary of interminable debates and endless nuances, that reflections of the above sort are a distraction from the immediate need to turn the tide of ecological disaster. This attitude is understandable but mistaken. For one thing, as Ben Quash notes, “environmental ethics . . . suffers too often from being crisis-led, and the danger of becoming obsessed by decisions about what move to make next in a high-pressure game is that the ethicist may never ask questions about the shape of the board and the rules of play” (127). While case studies and prophetic words are needed, it is also important to pause now and then and reflect on why eco-prophets disagree not only about what to do but, no less, on what is at stake in our relation with nature. Philosophical and theological reflections on such matters, rightly concluded, help us see that one crucial, ineliminable reason for this continuing disagreement is that any ethics of nature will depend on faith-based, religious and cultural presuppositions about the nature of nature (and many other things). Recognizing this root of (normative and factual) pluralism helps us rein in the fires of moral passion, realize that those with whom we disagree may be neither fools nor knaves, and perhaps even have good reasons to believe as they (perhaps mistakenly) do.

[25] That we step back from immediate, pressing issues and reflect on the source of our divergent response to these issues need not be a sign of political indifference. To the contrary, it may, as here, be integral to a political agenda. We need to not only flag injustices and stupidities but, also, find ways to articulate and share with one another our divergent views about such matters – ways that sustain politically fruitful dialogue among diverse persons of diverse faiths, as opposed to dismissing out of hand those with whom we disagree. Moreover, it is vital that traditional biblical theists, especially, Muslims, Christians, and Jews, be brought into this dialogue and their distinctive beliefs and values treated with respect. No substantive, enduring change can be effected, here or abroad, without their free consent or radical disempowerment. Theistic naturalism addresses this need by articulating in a faithful, yet critical, scientifically and philosophically informed, manner, the beliefs and values of traditional biblical theism. This allows for their reflective engagement with and development in response to the beliefs and values of other citizens. It also allows for

science has much to teach ethics about value. For another example, see Pope, arguing for the superiority of Thomas’ view of the natural law on the grounds that Thomas “recognized that true human happiness is not that of angels, but includes natural goods such as bodily health, friendship, and a modicum of temporal goods” (68).

²³ This reliance is not limited to an ethics of wild nature. Having argued that “our moral subculture of rights” originated in and has subsequently been sustained by “our Judaic and Christian heritage,” Wolterstorff concludes: “if the secularization thesis proves true [and religion turns out to be a thing of the past], we must expect that that subculture will have been a brief shining episode in the odyssey of human beings on earth” (2008: 293). It is from a similar perspective that I look to redirect ethics in general, as noted by Peter Ochs, “back to the scriptural source of western values” (this remark appears on the cover of the paperback edition of *NGH*). The point is not, for me or Wolterstorff, to turn back the clock but, rather, restore an awareness of the fundamental truth in what that heritage has long proclaimed true of our nature, wild and human.

informed, critical dialogue among theistic naturalists, who, after all, do not agree about who God is or what God expects of us, let alone the morality of practices such as meat-eating, eco-tourism, and oil exploration. The goal is to enable conversations, not pontificate.²⁴

[26] However persuasive in its own right, the overtly religious stance of theistic naturalism and its incorporated ethic of humane holism comes fraught with significance for society at large. The ramifications of taking it seriously are directly political and, more broadly, constitutional.²⁵ I will focus here on the latter and, more particularly, the problem that reliance on a religious ethic poses for modern, pluralistic societies. Let me get at this by calling attention to a similar problem encountered by Rawls in his account of political deliberation in a liberal democracy (see 133-72). Here, Rawls calls on (what he takes to be) an “overlapping consensus.” This minimal conceptual framework sets parameters for reflection by free and equal citizens on matters of public concern; as such, it allows for a “reasonable pluralism.” The problem, pointed out by many critics, is that this account ends up relying on contentious, far from universally shared, presumptions about what is and is not reasonable; thus, some critics have argued that Rawls’ account unjustifiably disadvantages long-standing, traditional religious beliefs and values (see Fern 1987).

[27] One response to such criticism is that of the recalcitrant Rawlsian who perseveres in claiming that an impartial consensus exists and sustains a “public reason,” a minimal, thin conceptual framework, open to all, whatever their religious and/or cultural particularities. It is important to pursue this option as far as we can, in which regard political theory is much indebted to Rawls. But it will inevitably, in my opinion, come to rest on beliefs and values,

²⁴ One of my concerns is to show that religious faith need not function as a “conversation stopper.” For more on this important constitutional issue, see the strong critique of Rorty, who once held this view, in Wolterstorff 2003; see also Rorty’s reply, for concessions and an attempt to contrast historic (traditional) and liberal (modernist) religion in this regard.

²⁵ Examples of the former can be found in NGH. For one, humane holism (in combination with theistic naturalism) supports a view of human nature and good contrary to the now common reliance on “cost-benefit analysis, where concerns count only insofar as they can be given a monetary value” (Fern 2002: 195). For another, an instructive parallel between “ecological conservatism” and “cultural conservatism” emerges, supposing, as I argue, that the argument from sentiosis to moral worth applies to *human* cultures, *mutatis mutandis* (Fern 2002: 191-200). This parallel suggests a link between the preservation of biotic and cultural diversity and, accordingly, flags a need to move beyond a now dominant culturally-disembodied, romantic environmentalism and pay close attention to diverse, culturally-rooted perceptions of nature, wild and human (Fern 2002: 233-41; for more on this link, see Milton: 222-26). I argue in this regard that it is an error for environmentalists to focus attention on generic “risks” at the expense of culturally-particularized and politically conflicting “hopes”:

We need, in working for change, to stress not only what we have in common but, also, our ineliminable differences. We do not live in generic worlds. We live in the culturally specific commitments and charismatically funded convictions that make us the particular persons we are. Accordingly, we require multiple, overlapping, yet irreducibly diverse and conflicting visions of the future. A large part of the problem in moving forward is that we assume people who agree about immediate problems . . . must share the same vision of a good life. This [assumption] is self-defeating (Fern 2002: 240).

This is a point that those who worry, rightly, about global warming would be well advised to keep in mind.

faith-based presuppositions that prove no more reasonable than not a few of those the account rejects and burdens. A second response is that of those who set aside claims to impartiality and give open priority to a more or less determinate point of view – a comprehensive, thick account of our nature and good. The basic problem here, as above, is that no such account, religious or secular, can be developed with the requisite specificity and also persuasively claim that it is the only, or even most, reasonable account. Our commonly accessible, generically human reason will not take us that far. In the end, both responses, thin and thick, give an undue preference to the views of some.²⁶

[28] It is clear, given the necessity of reaching determinate decisions, that pride of place must be given – at some point in some way – to the views of some and not all. This, however, does not mean, as commonly presumed, that there must exist a preferred point of view, a (thick or thin) conceptual framework providing an authoritative account of “public reason.” Alternatively, we can (as pluralists) recognize and draw on, as occasion demands, a great many such frameworks, among them “justice as fairness” and the (at many points) congruent framework of “theistic naturalism.” We can, in short, address the problem of pluralism by adopting a “many-flowers approach.” This allows for “multiple, overlapping, yet irreducibly diverse and conflicting visions of the future” and, in so doing, honors the fact that we live and find well-being not in our generic commonality but rather in “the culturally specific commitments and charismatically funded convictions that make us the particular persons we are” (Fern 2002: 240; compare also Stout’s notion of “bricolage,” see 63-91, 203-86). It will, of course, be necessary, given that some visions of the future are morally reprehensible, to draw a line at some point: every society must and ought to disadvantage, even actively repress some forms of behavior and belief. Tensions remain wherever we turn. What we need to do, however, as in the case of commonality, is to see just how far we can go, as a society, with diversity.

[29] This leaves us with a serious problem. While we require, as pluralists, a multiplicity of conceptual frameworks – relative to the many “little platoons” and social unions present in modern, liberal democratic societies – we also require a *way* to avoid the implicit or explicit dominance of any one framework, thick or thin, secular or religious, elitist or common, wise or foolish. In this sense, an overtly pluralistic, multiple frameworks approach, rather than resolving, intensifies the problem of constitutional order.²⁷ It is a mistake, however, to conclude that the only viable options are those noted above. This is too quick. As not a few political theorists have argued of late, there is an alternative that requires the giving of priority not to an encompassing conceptual framework, thick or thin, but rather to encompassing constitutional *procedures*. These procedures would be aimed not at determining

²⁶ For instructive variations of the first approach, see Rawls, Appiah, and Swaine; for the second, Raz, George, and Nussbaum. As seen in these examples, there is no sharp line between these two approaches; in exposition and practice, they intermingle.

²⁷ While advancing the end of a truly pluralistic society so far as it goes, NGH stops short in this regard. My awareness of the need to say more was much quickened by fellow participants in a fall 2007 doctoral seminar on “theocracy and democracy” at Yale University, taught by Gene Outka, to whom I owe much in this and other regards.

a maximally or minimally reasonable view of the world, but rather at creating and sustaining a forum for talking and listening to one another, giving voice to distinct points of view without attempting to set in advance parameters for reasonable belief or reflection.²⁸ Such a “post-imperial dialogue” (Tully: 57) would be, in part, a *modus vivendi*, a response to the need to “just get along,” to keep the peace. It will be much more than that, however, insofar as it finds principled justification in the (irreducibly) diverse perspectives of individuals and groups seeking the benefits of association. Agreement on forms of dialogue and association can be reached even by those who cannot agree on first-order questions about the nature of nature, let alone the miracle-working power and undying love of God.

[30] Let me in conclusion call attention to a vital difference between procedures and conceptual frameworks. Forming inclusive frameworks requires us to bracket out particularities of belief and value, as I do my own distinctively Christian faith in the framing of theistic naturalism. There I intentionally adopt a broad and loosely-defined point of view, one open to affirmation by not only Christians, Jews, and Muslims but also those who approve of sport hunting as well as those who regard it as a moral abomination (see Fern 2002: 163, 223-33). This inclusiveness can create a sense of exasperation, religiously and morally, and, correspondingly, a strong desire that the proclaimer of such “clear [one’s] throat once and for all and come out and say it” – tell us where one stands on the issues (Wells: 141f).²⁹ But, of course, one cannot, given the nature of an encompassing framework. Encompassing procedures, in contrast, do not require the same bracketing of particularity. Their point is to enable the articulation of diverse particularities without the procrustean constraints inherent in an officially established point of view. Here, unlike the case with regard to conceptual frameworks, particularity and pluralism go hand in hand. For one thing, a viable form of the latter is essential to the former given the rationally ineliminable diversity of reasonable particularities. For another and no less, a strong particularity is essential to pluralism if it is to avoid dissolution in the cosmopolitan vacuities of so much multiculturalism. In both respects, expressing one’s beliefs and values from one’s own point of view is important, in part, because it offers an opportunity to convey (best as one can in one’s own terms) their basic reasonableness and truth. Even more important, it allows others to see you as you are all the way through, where you come from and where you are going, and, then, decide on their own whether there is a basis in what you say for common worship or a shared political agenda. And

²⁸ For some instructively differing accounts of what such an arrangement might look like, see Galston; Gray; Stout; Tully.

²⁹ Wells offers instructive criticisms in this regard, arguing that NGH ought to have said more about the “thoroughly trinitarian groundwork” he presumes (correctly) to underpin its own avowal of theistic naturalism (141f). Likewise, Quash argues that “a more explicitly Christian (and less apologetically ‘theistic’) account” would have better displayed the value NGH attributes to particularity and diversity (130). I now see that the concerns raised by Quash and Wells flag a need to say more that I do in NGH about the manner in which conceptual frameworks, such as that of theistic naturalism, are essential to (and enable) both pluralism and particularity.

that I maintain, not commonality or diversity alone, is the key to a truly sentiotic (politics of nature).³⁰

Bibliography

Alston, William P.

1989 *Divine Nature and Human Language*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony

2005 *The Ethics of Identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Braaten, Laurie J.

2003 "Refined, Detailed Arguments Evident in Fern's Balanced Tome." *Science and Theology News* 4, 2: 22.

Danto, Archur C.

1967 "Naturalism." *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Paul Edwards. New York: Macmillan.

Dijksterhuis, E. J.

1961 *The Mechanization of the World Picture*. Translated by C. Dikshoorn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Deane-Drummond, Celia

2004 Review of *Nature, God and Humanity* by Richard L. Fern. *Ecotheology* 9, 1: 129-35.

Fern, Richard

1982 "Hume's Critique of Miracles: An Irrelevant Triumph." *Religious Studies* 18 (September): 337-54.

1987 "Religious Belief in a Rawlsian Society." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 15 (Spring): 35-58.

2002 *Nature, God and Humanity: Envisioning an Ethics of Nature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Galston, William A.

2002 *Liberal Pluralism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³⁰ Many thanks to Ron Simkins for his patience and insightful suggestions regarding a paper that first appeared under the rubric, "Christocentric Naturalism and the Second Coming of White Buffalo Cow Woman." Also, my thanks to all those involved in the Kripke Center Symposium where that paper was given. I am indebted to my wife, Sara Post Fern, for helping make "what appears at last" more readable (and coherent) than it would otherwise have been.

George, Robert P.

1993 *Making Men Moral*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Giostra, Alessandro

2003 Review of *Nature, God and Humanity* by Richard L Fern. *Reviews in Religion and Theology* 10, 2: 177-79.

Gottlieb, Roger S.

2003 Review of *Nature, God and Humanity* by Richard L Fern. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72: 528-31.

Gray, John

2000 *Two Faces of Liberalism*. New York: New Press.

Greene, John C.

1981 *Science, Ideology and World View*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Haught, John F.

2006 *Is Nature Enough?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jones, Joe R.

2002 *A Grammar of Christian Faith*. Volume 1. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Kohak, Erazim

1984 *The Embers and the Stars*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McFague, Sallie

1993 *The Body of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

McKim, Robert

2001 *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Midgley, Mary

1978 *Beast and Man*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

1984 *Animals and Why They Matter*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Mill, John Stuart

1969 "On Nature." In *Three Essays on Religion*. Westport: Greenwood.

Milton, Kay

1996 *Environmentalism and Cultural Theory*. London: Routledge.

Northcott, Michael S.

1996 *The Environment and Christian Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- 2003 "Running Out of World: Science, Theology and Ethics at the End of Nature." *The Expository Times* 115: 337-39.
- Nussbaum, Martha C.
- 2000 *Women and Human Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oelschlaeger, Max
- 1994 *Caring for Creation*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Peterson, Anna L.
- 2004 Review of *Nature, God and Humanity* by Richard L. Fern. *Environmental Ethics* 26 (Summer): 221-22.
- Polkinghorne, John
- 2000 *Faith, Science and Understanding*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- 2005 *Science and Providence*. Second Edition. West Conshohocken: Templeton Foundation.
- Pope, Stephen J.
- 1994 *The Evolution of Altruism and the Ordering of Love*. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Quash, Ben
- 2004 Review of *Nature, God and Humanity* by Richard L. Fern. *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17: 126-30.
- Rawls, John
- 1993 *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Raz, Joseph
- 1986 *The Morality of Freedom*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Rolston, Holmes
- 1988 *Environmental Ethics*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Rorty, Richard
- 2003 "Religion in the Public Square." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31: 141-49.
- Saunders, Nicholas
- 2002 *Divine Action and Modern Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stout, Jeffrey
- 2004 *Democracy and Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Swaine, Lucas

2005 *The Liberal Conscience*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Tully, James

1995 *Strange Multiplicity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Wells, Samuel

2003 Review of *Nature, God and Humanity* by Richard L. Fern. *Theology* (March/April): 141-43.

Whitehead, Alfred North

1967 *Science and the Modern World*. New York: Free Press.

Wilson, Edward O.

1978 *On Human Nature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Wolterstorff, Nicholas

1995 *Divine Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2003 "An Engagement with Rorty." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31: 129-39.

2008 *Justice*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.