Nature and Silence

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A viable environmental ethics must confront "the silence of nature"—the fact that in our culture only humans have status as speaking subjects. Deep ecology has attempted to do so by challenging the idiom of humanism that has silenced the natural world. This approach has been criticized by those who wish to rescue the discourse of reason in environmental ethics. I give a genealogy of nature's silence to show how various motifs of medieval and Renaissance origins have worked together historically to create the fiction of "Man," a character portrayed as sole subject, speaker, and *telos* of the world. I conclude that the discourse of reason, as a guide to social practice, is implicated in this fiction and, therefore, cannot break the silence of nature. Instead, environmental ethics must learn a language that leaps away from the motifs of humanism, perhaps by drawing on the discourse of ontological humility found in primal cultures, postmodern philosophy, and medieval contemplative tradition.

A Tuscarora Indian once remarked that, unlike his people's experience of the world, for Westerners, "the uncounted voices of nature ... are dumb."[1] The distinction, which is borne out by anthropological studies of animistic cultures, throws into stark relief an aspect of our society's relationship with the nonhuman world that has only recently become an express theme in the environmental debate. Nature *is* silent in our culture (and in literate societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative.

The language we speak today, the idiom of Renaissance and Enlightenment humanism, veils the processes of nature with its own cultural obsessions, directionalities, and motifs that have no analogues in the natural world. As Max Oelschlaeger puts it, "... we are people who presumably must think of the world in terms of the learned categorical scheme of Modernism."[2] It is as if we had compressed the entire buzzing, howling, gurgling biosphere into the narrow vocabulary of epistemology, to the point that someone like Georg Lukács could say, "nature is a societal category"—and actually be understood.[3]

In contrast, for animistic cultures, those that see the natural world as inspirited, not just people, but also animals, plants, and even "inert" entities such as stones and rivers are perceived as being articulate and at times intelligible subjects, able to communicate and interact with humans for good or ill. In addition to human language, there is also the language of birds, the wind, earthworms, wolves, and waterfalls—a world of

[1] Quoted in Hans Peter Duerr, *Dreamtime: Concerning the Boundary Between Wilderness and Civilization*, trans. Felicitas Goodman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), p. 90.

[2] Max Oelschlaeger, "Wilderness, Civilization, and Language," ed. Max Oelschlaeger, *The Wilderness Condition: Essays on Environment and Civilization* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1992), p. 273.

[3] George Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1968), p. 234.

autonomous speakers whose intents (especially for huntergatherer peoples) one ignores at one's peril.

To regard nature as alive and articulate has consequences in the realm of social practices. It conditions what passes for knowledge about nature and how institutions put that knowledge to use.[4] Michel Foucault has amply demonstrated that social power operates through a regime of privileged speakers, having historical embodiments as priests and kings, authors, intellectuals, and celebrities.[5] The words of these speakers are taken seriously (as opposed to the discourse of "meaningless" and often silenced speakers such as women, minorities, children, prisoners, and the insane). For human societies of all kinds, moral consideration seems to fall only within a circle of speakers in communication with one another. We can, thus, safely agree with Hans Peter Duerr when he says that "people do not exploit a nature that speaks to them."[6] Regrettably, our culture has gone a long way to demonstrate that the converse of this statement is also true.

As a consequence, we require a viable environmental ethics to confront the silence of nature in our contemporary regime of thought, for it is within this vast, eerie silence that surrounds our garrulous human subjectivity that an ethics of exploitation regarding nature has taken shape and flourished, producing the ecological crisis that now requires the search for an environmental counter-ethics.

Recognizing this need, some strains of deep ecology have stressed the link between listening to the nonhuman world (i.e., treating it as a silenced subject) and reversing the environmentally destructive practices modern society pursues.[7]While also underscoring the need to establish communication between human subjects and the natural world, John Dryzek has recently taken exception with this "anti-rationalist" approach of deep ecology, which he suspects is tainted by latent totalitarianism.[8] As an alternative, he proposes to expand Habermas' notion of a discursively rational community to include aspects of the nonhuman, to break the silence of nature, but to retain the language of humanism that suffuses the texts, institutions, and values we commonly celebrate as the flowers of the Enlightenment. Others, such as Murray Bookchin, have in like

[4] Surely one reason laws against the inhumane treatment of pets have entered our rigorously anthropocentric jurisprudence must be the sense that domesticated animals communicate with us (presumably in ways wild animals do not) and therefore acquire a vague status as quasi-subjects.

[5] See especially, Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage, 1973), pp. i-x; "What Is an Author?" *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault,* ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 113–38.

[6] Duerr, *Dreamtime,* p. 92.

[7] See, especially, John Seed, Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming, Arne Naess, *Thinking like a Mountain: Toward a Council of All Beings* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1988). For an original and enlightening discussion of the interrelationship between language and wilderness, see Oelschlaeger, "Wilderness, Civilization, and Language," pp. 271–308.

[8] John S. Dryzek, "Green Reason: Communicative Ethics for the Biosphere," *Environmental Ethics* 12 (1990): 200.

fashion also attempted to rescue reason from its own successes at quieting the messy "irrationality" of nature, to have their *ratio* and ecology too.[9]

It is a dubious task. By neglecting the origin of this silence in the breakdown of animism, the humanist critics of deep ecology reiterate a discourse that by its very logocentrism marginalizes nature, mutes it, pushes it into a hazy backdrop against which the rational human subject struts upon the epistemological stage. It has become almost a platitude in modern philosophy since Kant that reason (as an institutional motif, not a cognitive faculty) is intimately related to the excesses of political power and self-interest. As Foucault puts it, "we should not need to wait for bureaucracy or concentration camps to recognize the existence of such relations."[10] The easy alliance of power and reason that sustains those institutions involved in environmental destruction also sustains their discourses. Thus, at the very least, we should look askance at the emancipatory claims humanists like Dryzek and Bookchin are still making for reason in the field of environmental philosophy.

In this paper, I want to avoid the jaded polemic between rationality and the irrational, and enter the issue "perpendicularly," so to speak, by taking the silence of nature itself (not the desire to rescue reason, the human subject, or some other privileged motif) as a cue for recovering a language appropriate to an environmental ethics. In particular, this approach requires that I consider how nature has grown silent in our discourse, shifting from an animistic to a symbolic presence, from a voluble subject to a mute object. My aim is neither a critique of reason nor a history of Western representations of nature, both of which have been made happily redundant by a century of scholarship. Rather, I offer a brief genealogy of a discourse, including reason, that has submerged nature into the depths of silence and instrumentality.

Heidegger is surely correct when he argues that all language both reveals and conceals.[11] However, our particular idiom, a pastiche of medieval hermeneutics and Renaissance humanism, with its faith in reason, intellect and progress, has created an immense realm of silences, a world of "not saids" called nature, obscured in global claims of eternal truths about human difference, rationality, and transcendence.[12] If the domination of nature with all its social anxieties rests upon this void, then we must contemplate not only learning a new ethics, but a new language free from the directionalities of humanism, a language that incorporates a decentered, postmodern,

[9] Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Cheshire Books, 1982).

[10] Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 59.

[11] Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1959), pp. 93–206.

[12] I use the term "Renaissance humanism" broadly to include a pastiche of the cultural obsessions mentioned, which have continued through the Enlightenment. The "meaning" of these motifs may change as different institutions use them strategically for different purposes. Nevertheless, they have been consistently deployed in the domination of nature, the issue at hand here.

post-humanist perspective. In short, we require the language of ecological humility that deep ecology, however gropingly, is attempting to express.

In his comprehensive study of shamanism, Mircea Eliade writes: "All over the world learning the language of animals, especially of birds, is equivalent to knowing the secrets of nature..."[13] We tend to relegate such ideas to the realm of superstition and irrationality, where they can easily be dismissed. However, Eliade is describing the perspective of animism, a sophisticated and long-lived phenomenology of nature. Among its characteristics is the belief (1) that all the phenomenal world is alive in the sense of being inspirited—including humans, cultural artifacts, and natural entities, both biological and "inert," and (2) that not only is the nonhuman world alive, but it is filled with articulate subjects, able to communicate with humans.[14]

Animism undergirds many contemporary tribal societies, just as it did our own during pre-Christian times. Indeed, the overwhelming evidence suggests the universality of animism in human history.[15] Even in modern technological society, animistic reflexes linger on in attenuated form. Cars and sports teams are named after animals (as if to capture sympathetically their power). Children talk to dolls and animals without being considered mentally ill, and are, in fact, read fairy tales, most of which involve talking animals. Respectable people shout at machines that do not operate properly. While modern scholarship tends to focus on "explaining" this kind of thinking in psychological or sociological terms, my interest in it lies in the sense in which it gives us what might be called the "animistic subject," a shifting, autonomous, articulate identity that cuts across the human/nonhuman distinction. Here, human speech is not understood as some unique faculty, but as a subset of the speaking of the world.

Significantly, animistic societies have almost without exception avoided the kind of environmental destruction that makes environmental ethics an explicit social theme with us.[16] Many primal groups have no word for wilderness and do not make a clear distinction between wild and domesticated life, since the tension between nature and culture never becomes acute enough to raise the problem.[17]This fact should strike a cau-

[13] Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstacy* (Princeton: Prince University Press, 1972), p. 98.

[14] See Robert H. Lowie, *Primitive Religion* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), pp. 99–135. Like humanism, animism may have many "meanings" depending on how institutions use it, but the institutions in animistic societies tend to wield power in a manner too discontinuous and inefficient to dominate discourse the way ours do. See Stanley Diamond, *In Search of the Primitive: A Critique of Civilization* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1974).

[15] See Edward B. Tyler, *Primitive Culture* (New York: Holt and Co., 1889), p. 425; Louise Ba'ckman and A˜ke Hultkranz, *Shamanism in Lapp Society* (Stockholm: Alquist and Wiksell, 1978), p. 27. Although Ba'ckman and Hultkranz only discuss shamanism, it is well-attested that shamanistic practices depend on an animistic world view.

[16] The Easter Islanders, whose culture was apparently animistic, are the only exception I know of, and their problems probably tell us more about the fragility of island ecosystems than social structures.

[17] See Darrell Addison Posey, "The Science of the Mebêngôkre," *Orion,* Summer 1990, pp. 1623; Jon Christopher Crocker, *Vital Souls: Bororo Cosmology, Natural Symbolism, and Shamanism* (Tucson, Ariz.: University of Arizona Press, 1988).

tionary note for those, such as Bookchin and Robert Gardiner, who illegitimately use modern technological societies to stand for all humanity throughout history in global claims about culture compelling humans to "consciously *change* [nature] by means of a highly institutionalized form of community we call 'society.'"[18] Our distracted and probably transitory culture may have this giddy compulsion; culture per se does not.

In the medieval period, animism as a coherent system broke down in our culture, for a variety of reasons.[19] Not the least of these was the introduction of two powerful institutional technologies: literacy and Christian exegesis.

Jack Goody argues that alphabetic writing "changes the nature of the representations of the world," because it allows humans to lay out discourse and "examine it in a more abstract, generalised and 'rational' way."[20] This scrutiny encouraged the epistemological inference, apparently impossible in oral cultures where language exists only as evanescent utterances, that meaning somehow resides in human speech (more particularly in those aspects of it susceptible to rational analysis), not in the phenomenal world. Down this road lies the counterintuitive conclusion that only humans can act as speaking subjects.

Taking Goody's analysis a step farther, David Abram maintains that our relationship with texts is "wholly animistic," since the articulate subjectivity that was once experienced in nature shifted to the written word.[21] At one time nature spoke; now texts do ("it says ..." is how we describe writing). As cultural artifacts, texts embody human (or ostensibly divine) subjects, but stand conspicuously outside nature, whose status as subject therefore becomes problematical in ways unknown to nonliterate, animistic societies.

The animistic view of nature was further eroded by medieval Christianity's particular mode for interpreting texts, exegesis. Christian theology was clear, if uneasy, on this point: all things—including classical literature, the devil, Viking invasions, sex, and nature—existed by virtue of God's indulgence and for his own, usually inscrutable, purposes.[22] With this point in mind, exegesis, the branch of religious studies dedicated

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[18] Murray Bookchin, "Social Ecology versus 'Deep Ecology': A Challenge for the Ecology Movement," *Green Perspectives, Newsletter of the Green Program Project* 4–5 (Summer 1987): 27; Robert W. Gardiner, "Between Two Worlds: Humans in Nature and Culture," *Environmental Ethics* 12 (1990): 339–52.

[19] Animism had already collapsed in classical Mediterranean cultures with the earlier introduction of literacy and humanism. See Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World* (New York: Bantam, 1984), p. 57.

[20] Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 37.

[21] David Abram, "On the Ecological Consequences of Alphabet Literacy: Reflections in the Shadow of Plato's *Phaedrus,*" unpublished essay, 1989.

[22] See Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), pp. 67–98. For a contrast between the exegetical and non-exegetical traditions in the Middle Ages, see Cecil Wood, "The Viking Universe," *Studies for Einar Haugen* (The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1972), pp. 568–73.

to interpreting the Bible, concluded that behind the *littera,* the literal (often mundane) meaning of a biblical passage, lay some *moralis,* a moral truth established by God. And beyond that lurked some divine purpose, the *anagogue,* almost certainly beyond the ken of human intellect, unless divine revelation obligingly made it evident.

The cognitive practice of exegesis overflowed the pages of the Bible onto other texts and ultimately onto the phenomenal world itself. By the twelfth century, the German philosopher Hugh of St. Victor could talk about "the Book of nature"— a formulation that would have puzzled a Greek or Roman intellectual of the classic period, not to mention Hugh's own tribal ancestors just a few centuries earlier.[23]Like the leaven or mustard seeds in Christ's parables, the things in nature could thus be seen as mere *littera*—signs that served as an the occasion for discovering deeper realms of meaning underlying the forms of the physical world. According to medieval commentators, eagles soared higher than any other bird and could gaze upon the sun, undazzled, because they were put on Earth to be a symbol of St. John and his apocalyptic vision, not the other way round. From this hermeneutical perspective, it was inconceivable that eagles should be autonomous, selfwilled subjects, flying high for their own purposes without reference to some celestial intention, which generally had to do with man's redemption. Exegesis swept all things into the net of divine meaning.

Such, at least, was the theory (and although it appears alien to modern thought, we should consider that our relationship with nature, despite its outward empiricism, is not that different; we have replaced the search for divine meanings with other "transcendental" concerns such as discerning the evolutionary *telos* of humanity[24]). Exegesis established God as a transcendental subject speaking through natural entities, which, like words on a page, had a symbolic meaning, but no autonomous voice. It distilled the veneration of word and reason into a discourse that we still speak today.

It is, of course, a simplification to suggest that a period as intellectually and institutionally diverse as the Middle Ages experienced nature in one way only.[25]Nevertheless, in broadest terms, for the institutions that dominated discourse during the Middle Ages (i.e, the Church and aristocracy), nature was a symbol for the glory and orderliness of God. This idea found its cosmological model in the so-called *scala naturae* or "Great Chain of Being," a depiction of the world as a vast filigree of lower and higher forms, from zoophytes to Godhead, with humankind's place higher than beasts and a little less than angels, as the Psalm puts it. Curiously, for the medieval exegete, the

[23] Hugh of St. Victor, *The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor: A Medieval Guide to the Arts,* trans. Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 64. The metaphor of the world as a book appeared as early as Augustine's *Confessions*, but it did not begin to mold discourse about nature until the later Middle Ages.

[24] For a discussion of the "return of exegesis," see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Press, 1973), pp. 297–99.

[25] As early as the thirteenth century, Albertus Magnus, mentor of Thomas Aquinas, was already writing "natural histories" that were extra-, if not anti-exegetical. Albertus Magnus, *Man and Beast,* trans. James J. Scanlan (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval and Renaissance Text and Studies, 1987).

Great Chain of Being at times acted as a theological restraint against abusing the natural world, at least within the hushed, abstracted cells of the cloister. Thomas Aquinas invoked the *scala naturae* in an argument that—*mutatis mutandis*—could have been made by a conservation biologist condemning monoculture:

> [T]he goodness of the species transcends the goodness of the individual, as form transcends matter; therefore the multiplication of species is a greater addition to the good of the universe than the multiplication of individuals of a single species. The perfection of the universe therefore requires not only a multitude of individuals, but also diverse kinds, and therefore diverse grades of things.[26]

When the Renaissance inherited the *scala naturae,* however, a new configuration of thought that would eventually be called humanism converted it from a symbol of human restraint in the face of a perfect order to an emblem of human superiority over the natural world. Originally a curriculum emphasizing classical learning, humanism came to emphasize a faith in reason, progress, and intellect that would become the cornerstone of modern technological culture.[27] Drawing on humanity's position in the Great Chain between "dumb beasts" and articulate angels, humanism insisted there was an ontological difference between *Homo sapiens* and the rest of the biosphere, infusing a new and portentous meaning to the ancient observation that humans had rational discourse while animals did not. "Man" became, to quote Hamlet, "the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!" (though Shakespeare, as if aware of the absurdity of the claim, follows this statement with an obscene joke at Hamlet's expense).[28] The tragic soliloquist might have added: the sole subject of the phenomenal world. About the same time *Hamlet* was written, Francis Bacon expressed this teleological craze more bluntly: "Man, if we look to final causes, may be regarded as the centre of the world; inasmuch that if man were taken away from the world, the rest would seem to be all astray, without aim or purpose..."[29]

Strained by the scientific revolution, the celestial links to this chain may have grudgingly come undone in our time (conveniently leaving our species at the apex of the order), but its cultural residue still haunts the human and physical sciences. It is the source of the modern notion that *Homo sapiens* stands highest in a natural order of "lower life forms"—a directionality that comes straight out of the *scala naturae,* which

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[26] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles,* bk. 3, chap. 71. Quoted in Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being,* p. 77. Aquinas, of course, meant species in the philosophical, not the biological sense, but the principle is strikingly similar.

[27] See David Ehrenfeld, *The Arrogance of Humanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

[28] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* act 2, sc. 2, lines 306–10.

[29] *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon,* ed. Robert Leslie Ellis and James Spedding (1905; reprint ed., Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 6:747.

seems to hover translucently before our eyes, distorting our representations of the natural world into hierarchical modes, while itself remaining all but invisible.[30]

The Great Chain of Being, exegesis, literacy, and a complex skein of institutional and intellectual developments have, in effect, created a fictionalized, or more accurately put, fraudulent version of the species *Homo sapiens:* the character "Man," what Muir calls "Lord Man." And this "Man" has become the sole subject, speaker, and rational sovereign of the natural order in the story told by humanism since the Renaissance.[31]

Our representations of nature may have undergone a variety of important permutations since the Middle Ages, molding and conditioning our discourse about respecting or abusing the natural world. But the character of "Man" as the only creature with anything to say cuts across these developments and persists, even in the realm of environmental ethics. It is the fiction reiterated by Bookchin in his teleological description of evolution as "a cumulative thrust toward evergreater complexity, ever-greater subjectivity, and finally, ever-greater mind with a capacity for conceptual thought, symbolic communication of the most sophisticated kind, and self-consciousness in which natural evolution knows itself purposively and willfully."[32] Through humanism, the boisterous, meandering parade of organic forms is transfigured into a forced march led by the human subject.

It is hardly surprising that this subject should demand such an overbearing role in environmental philosophy. Post-Enlightenment emancipatory thought, from idealism to Marxism to Freud, has made the human subject the expectant ground of all possible knowledge. Empiricism may have initiated an "interrogation" of nature unknown to medieval symbolic thought, but in this questioning no one really expects nature to answer. Rather, the inquiry only offers an occasion to find meanings and purposes that must by default reside in us. As the self-proclaimed soliloquist of the world, "Man" is obliged to use *his* language as the point of intersection between the human subject and what is to be known about nature, and therefore the messy involvement of observer with the observed becomes an obsessive theme of modern philosophy.[33] In the form of the Heisenberg Principle, it has even entered the serene positivism of scientific thought.

Postmodern philosophy has rudely challenged this transcendental narcissism, viewing the subject as fragmented and decentered in the social realm, a product of institutional technologies of control rather than the unmoved mover of all possible knowledge.[34] This challenge has set the stage for the reevaluation of the silence of nature

[30] For a discussion of this "translucent" quality of representations, see Roland Barthes, *Mythologies,* trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), pp. 109–59.

[31] The concept of "Man" as a fiction is taken from Foucault, *The Order of Things,* though I have shifted his usage to accommodate the theme of nature's silence.

[32] Bookchin, "Social Ecology," p. 20.

[33] For a comprehensive discussion of the problematic use of the human subject as the ground of knowledge since the Enlightenment, see Foucault, *The Order of Things,* pp. 303–43.

[34] See, for instance, Foucault, "Critical Theory/Intellectual History," *Politics, Philosophy, Culture,* pp. 17–46.

imposed by the human subject. In environmental ethics, however, resistance to the tendentious rhetoric of "Man" has come almost exclusively from the camp of deep ecology.

From one perspective, the biocentric stance of deep ecology may be understood as focusing evolutionary theory and the science of ecology onto the idiom of humanism to expose and overcome the unwarranted claim that humans are unique subjects and speakers. Although regrettably silent on the issue, biologists qua biologists recognize that humans are not the "goal" of evolution any more than tyrannosaurs were during their sojourn on Earth. As far as scientific inquiry can tell, evolution has no goal, or if it does we cannot discern it, and at the very least it does not seem to be us. The most that can be said is that during the last 350 million years natural selection has shown an inordinate fondness for beetles—and before that trilobites.

This observation directly contradicts the *scala naturae* and its use in humanist discourse. From the perspective of biological adaptation, elephants are no "higher" than earwigs; salamanders are no less "advanced" than sparrows; cabbages have as much evolutionary status as kings. Darwin invited our culture to face the fact that in the observation of nature there exists not one scrap of evidence that humans are superior to or even more interesting than, say, lichen.

Predictably, we declined the invitation. Not everyone likes being compared to lichen, and traditional humanists in the environmental debate, explicitly or implicitly, continue to affirm the special subject status of "Man." Bookchin, for instance, insists that humans have a "second nature" (culture) which gives them not only the right but the duty to alter, shape and control "first nature" (the nonhuman world).[35] Henryk Skolimowski sounds a similar trumpet of ecological manifest destiny, proclaiming: "We are here ... to maintain, to creatively transform, and to carry on the torch of evolution."[36] While refreshingly more restrained, Dryzek seems to accept Habermas' position that the essence of communication is reason—which is not coincidently the kind of discourse favored by human subjects, or more precisely by that small portion of them who are heirs of the Enlightenment. Almost all of us, including biologists, refer to "lower" and "higher" animals, with the tacit understanding that *Homo sapiens* stands as the uppermost point of reference in this chimerical taxonomy. (Contrast this system of arrangement with the decentered and hence more accurate taxonomy of many American Indian tribes who use locutions such as "four-legged," "two-legged," and "feathered.")

It is no exaggeration to say that as a cultural phenomenon, as opposed to a scientific discourse, evolutionary theory has been absorbed by the *scala naturae* and

[35] Bookchin, "Social Ecology," p. 21. In a recent article, Bookchin truculently denies that he endorses the domination of nature, but then goes on to suggest with a straight face that perhaps humans should someday terraform the Canadian barrens (presumably after removing the polar bears) into something more to our liking (or to the liking of whatever institution is powerful enough to carry out such a bizarre scheme). "Recovering Evolution: A Reply to Eckersley and Fox," *Environmental Ethics* 12 (1990): 253–74.

[36] Henryk Skolimowski, *Eco-Philosophy* (Boston: Marion Boyers, 1981), p. 68.

strategically used to justify humanity's domination of nature. Evolution is often represented graphically as a procession of life forms moving left to right, starting with single-celled organisms, then invertebrates, fish, amphibians, and so on up to "Man," the apparent zenith of evolution by virtue of his brain size, selfconsciousness, or some other privileged quality. Strictly speaking this tableau, which we have all seen in high school textbooks, only describes *human* evolution, not evolution in general. Nevertheless, for a technological culture transfixed by the presumed supremacy of intellect over nature, human evolution *is* evolution for all intents and purposes. The emergence of *Homo sapiens* stands for the entire saga of biological adaptation on the planet, so that everything that came before takes its meaning, in Baconian fashion, from this one form.[37]

None of this directionality has any corroboration in the natural world. Rather, it belongs to the rhetoric of Renaissance humanism, even though it has also found its way into environmental ethics. Bookchin, for example, has proudly proclaimed that his philosophy is "avowedly humanistic in the high Renaissance meaning of the term," which he associates with "a shift in vision ... from superstition to reason."[38] It cannot be emphasized enough, however, that, the velleities of humanist philosophers notwithstanding, in nature there simply is no higher or lower, first or second, better or worse. There is only the unfolding of life form after life form, more or less genealogically related, each with a mix of characteristics. To privilege intellect or self-consciousness, as opposed to photosynthesis, poisoned fangs, or sporogenesis, may soothe ancient insecurities about humanity's place in the cosmos, but it has nothing to do with evolutionary theory and does not correspond to observable nature.

In similar fashion, biocentrism brings to bear the science of ecology upon the exclusionary claims about the human subject. From the language of humanism one could easily get the impression that *Homo sapiens* is the only species on the planet worthy of being a topic of discourse. Ecology paints quite a different, humbling, picture. If fungus, one of the "lowliest" of forms on a humanistic scale of values, were to go extinct tomorrow, the effect on the rest of the biosphere would be catastrophic, since the health of forests depends on *Mycorrhyzal* fungus, and the disappearance of forests would upset the hydrology, atmosphere, and temperature of the entire globe. In contrast, if *Homo sapiens* disappeared, the event would go virtually unnoticed by the vast majority of Earth's life forms. As hominids, we dwell at the outermost fringes of important ecological processes such as photosynthesis and the conversion of biomass into usable nutrients. No lofty language about being the paragon of animals or the torchbearer of evolution can change this ecological fact—which is reason enough to reiterate it as often as possible.

[37] Although scientists, of course, are well aware of the difference, and do represent evolution in a more genealogically correct manner, the scientific representation lacks the cultural resonance of the humanized tableau.

[38] Bookchin, "Social Ecology," p. 20.

Mercifully, perhaps, there exist other touchstones for appraising human worth besides ecology and evolutionary theory—philosophy, literature, art, ethics, the legacy of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, for the most part, that Dryzek, Bookchin, and other humanist environmentalists clamor to preserve. When, however, the issue is the silencing of nature by the rhetoric of "Man," we need to find new ways to talk about human freedom, worth, and purpose, without eclipsing, depreciating, and objectifying the nonhuman world. Infused with the language of humanism, these traditional fields of knowledge are ill-equipped to do so, wedded as they are to the monologue of the human subject.

Bill Devall, coauthor of *Deep Ecology,* once suggested that deep ecology involves learning a new language.[39] Indeed, environmental ethics must aspire to be more than just an explicit schema of values proclaimed as "true," for ethics are implicated in the way we talk about the world, the way we perceive it. In an attempt to reanimate nature, we must have the courage to learn that new language, even if it puts at risk the privileged discourse of reason—and without a doubt, it does.

A language free from an obsession with human preeminence and reflecting the ontological humility implicit in evolutionary theory, ecological science, and postmodern thought, must leap away from the rhetoric of humanism we speak today. Perhaps it will draw on the ontological egalitarianism of native American or other primal cultures, with their attentiveness to place and local processes. Attending to ecological knowledge means metaphorically relearning "the language of birds"—the passions, pains, and cryptic intents of the other biological communities that surround us and silently interpenetrate our existence. Oelschlaeger has convincingly argued that such relearning is precisely what "wilderness thinkers" such as Thoreau and Snyder are attempting to do.[40]

Dryzek suggests that rational discourse can make an agenda of this listening to place, its requirements and ways. But, as he himself points out, the discourse of reason is not a private attribute, but a communal endeavor. As such, it is enmeshed in the institutions that have silenced nature through the production of various kinds of knowledge—psychological, ethical, political—about "Man."

I am not advocating here a global attack on reason, as if the irrational were the key to the essence of the human being the way humanists claim reason is. I am suggesting the need to dismantle a particular historical use of reason, a use that has produced a certain kind of human subject that only speaks soliloquies in a world of irrational silences. Unmasking the universalist claims of "Man" must be the starting point in our attempt to reestablish communication with nature, not out of some nostalgia for an animistic past, but because the human subject that pervades institutional knowledge since the Renaissance already embodies a relationship with nature that precludes a speaking world. As scholars, bureaucrats, citizens, and writers, we participate in a

[39] Bill Devall, personal correspondence, 17 October 1988.

[40] Oelschlaeger, "Wilderness, Civilization, and Language."

grid of institutional knowledge that constitutes "Man" and his speaking into the void left by the retreat of animism. Therefore, we have to ask not only how to communicate with nature, as Dryzek does, but *who* should be doing the communicating. "Man," the prime fiction of the Renaissance, will not do.

Perhaps the new language we require can draw upon an earlier practice from our own culture: the medieval contemplative tradition with its sparseness, sobriety, and modesty of speech. Alan Drengson, editor of the deep ecology journal, *The Trumpeter,* has established the Ecostery Project, which hopes to revive a medieval social form: monasteries whose purpose is to promote an understanding of, reverence for, and dialogue with nature. Medieval discourse, for all its absurdities, at times revealed a refined sense of human limitation and respect for otherness, virtues much needed today. The contemplative tradition, too, was a communicating without the agenda of reason.

For half a millennia, "Man" has been the center of conversation in the West. This fictional character has occluded the natural world, leaving it voiceless and subjectless. Nevertheless, "Man" is not an inevitability. He came into being at a specific time due to a complex series of intellectual and institutional mutations, among them the sudden centrality of reason. He could just as inexplicably vanish. To that end, a viable environmental ethics must challenge the humanistic backdrop that makes "Man" possible, restoring us to the humbler status of *Homo sapiens:* one species among millions of other beautiful, terrible, fascinating—and signifying—forms.

As we contemplate the *fin de siècle* environmental ruins that stretch out before us, we can at least be clear about one thing: the time has come for our culture to politely change the subject.

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