Ecological reconstruction : pragmatism and the more-than-human community

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Ecological Reconstruction:
Pragmatism and the More-Than-Human Community

by

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Ecological reconstruction challenges the historical chasm between culture and nature by using the normative implications of ecology to assert a primacy of relations in experience. Drawing upon the framework of John Dewey and classical American Pragmatism, I sketch out an experimental method for thinking about environmental philosophy that follows this reconstruction, moving beyond both applied ethics and dogmatic values. Central to this move is the possibility of opening up ecotonal spaces, literal and theoretical cites of intensified interaction between cultural and natural systems. These spaces furnish reconstruction with the experiences necessary to generate new concepts that set human communities on the course towards greater ecological attentiveness.
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Chapter 1

Introduction: Shattering and Remaking

The environmental crisis facing us extends beyond logistics of policy and ethics. It is, as Anthony Weston puts it, “a crisis of the senses, of imagination, and of our tools for thinking—our concepts and theories—themselves.” This crisis marks a falling out between intelligence and sensuous experience, between systems of information and ecosystems, between people and the land. It has been boldly assumed, even among many environmentalists, that closing each of these chasms will consist merely in applying and adapting old concepts and theories to new problems. The possibility of developing an environmental philosophy is then hindered by the bias towards applied ethics, as if environmental problems were simply one isolated kind of ethical concern.

We see this reflected in the classroom curriculum, where environmental ethics occupies either a chapter in an anthology or merely

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1 Anthony Weston, An Invitation to Environmental Philosophy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), vii.
functions as a standalone course. Much like other broad developments within the discipline, such as feminism, there is a tension between the institutional tendency to divide and the philosophical demand to integrate. Consequently, many professional philosophers turn to a straightforward application of old ethical paradigms to emergent environmental problems. We find an abundance of environmental literature written from this “extensionist” approach, retaining the well-trodden lines of argument found in utilitarianism, deontology, and other classical paradigms. Conversely, environmental problems have also incited more practice-based approaches that avoid this kind of aloof academic theorizing. These approaches are often tied concretely to particular issues and activist movements, ranging from radical ecoterrorism to petitions for government-sponsored recycling initiatives. With both extensionist and non-extensionist approaches there is a hasty disjointing of theory and practice, assuming on the one end that environmental problems can be ameliorated by simply occupying the proper ethical stance, and on the other by assuming that the crisis only amounts to a call for specific social and political actions.²

Accommodating environmental problems in this polarized way fails to appreciate the depth of the present crisis. In either case there is a deficiency of critical engagement, of reevaluating the cultural and intellectual

² Weston makes a generalized distinction between “extensionist” approaches to environmental ethics and “non-extensionist,” practice-based approaches. He provides a nuanced criticism of this polarization, arguing for more integrated conceptualizations of environmental philosophy. Ibid, 10-13.
background formative to our thinking and behavior. In reaching this chasmal moment of crisis, we begin to fundamentally alter our perspective on history, on what it means to be human and on what it means to belong to the natural world. Rather than extend old theories to new problems or bypass theory entirely, the crisis calls for a focused reconstruction of theory in light of the novel perspectives surrounding ecological problems. That is, we must find new paths for theorizing where ecological insights and experiences find traction. This entails a dramatic reinterpretation of our historical narratives about humans and the environments they inhabit.

It is only with the modern ecological sciences that intricate patterns of relational cohabitation come into focus. And it is only when held against the so-called postmodern condition, when the entire planet can be glimpsed at as a “blue marble,” that these patterns revolutionize our inquiries into nature, as well as into human nature.\(^3\) If human intelligence represents a kind of self-penetration of the world, a crisis of belonging to that world seems to follow: we are reflexively in and of nature, and that abstraction of self-awareness, even at the collective level, lends itself easily to arrogance. But self-awareness also affords the tremendous adaptive and transformative power characteristic of the human intellect. When finally we begin to see that

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\(^3\) The “Blue Marble,” a photograph taken by an Apollo 17 crewmember in 1972, was the first clear, fully illuminated perspective of our entire planet from space. The significance of this moment was soon followed by the “Pale Blue Dot” photograph taken by Voyager 1 in 1990, which depicts a finite Earth against the vastness of space from the perspective of a few billion miles away. See Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (New York: Random House, 1994).
our bodies, our communities, and our history belong to what David Abrams calls “a more-than-human world,” the cultures that have historically set us in opposition to our environment are shaken. For this reason the crisis at hand is more than just a practical enterprise of conservation or an exercise in ethical theory. It poses completely new questions about what it means to share the planet’s surface with other organisms and with each other. It must redefine conservation by calling into question the normative structure of our historical relationship to nature.

The contemporary period of integrated mass consumerism, technocapitalist globalization, and transnational corporate hegemony has increasingly anaesthetized us to our dependence upon the earth’s regenerative powers. The experience of nurturing, healthy landscapes needs to be reclaimed from these commodifying and exploitative structures before we suffer the totalizing consequences of further ecological degradation. But becoming an ecologically responsible society first asks that human culture grow conversant with its sustaining biotic and abiotic relations, that it understand the meaning of ecology. These relations root our everyday activities in an expansive field of living interdependency. We turn then not to a singular ethical theory, but to a general philosophy of the environment.

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4 David Abrams uses the term “more-than-human” in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996). Although not ideal, I employ this term, as distinguished from other related terms (such as “non-human”), to emphasize both the extension of a natural world beyond the human domain as well as the implication of the human domain in that world.
Ethics is often presented in philosophy as consisting of discrete problems to be sorted out by value-driven principles. Peter Singer perhaps represents the most popularized contemporary example of such a method, extending utilitarian principles to issues such as the treatment of nonhuman animals and global climate change.⁵ Although there are discrete problems that environmental philosophy should concern itself with, and although applied ethical approaches (a la Singer) enact real influence upon how humans address ethical problems, we must be attentive to the more general relationships among these problems.

Questions about how to regard our more-than-human surroundings should not be restricted to a single philosophical domain. Inquiry should instead be free to explore the larger philosophical, cultural, and experiential territory in which ethics is positioned. If we are to learn something about how ecological problems actually arise in the course of experience and how to go about responding to them, we must look to a pluralistic moral approach, one that is perceptive of intersecting domains of thought, feeling, and value.

Traditional theories of ethics, bound by rules and fixed ends, are ill-suited to the contextual, situational, and ambiguous nature of our environmental troubles, and so “inevitably [lead] thought into the bog of disputes that

cannot be settled.” Environmental philosophy, lest it prefer to only muddle about in ethical argumentation, requires the tools of an environmentally attentive methodology throughout, one that is capable of opening possibilities for both thought and action, instead of closing them off.

My framework for constructing a method of doing environmental philosophy will draw mainly from sources borne by American landscapes. Because place is an often ignored, yet crucial feature of community, there is an ecological importance to working with ideas that have historical currency in American life, society, and geography. Within one of America’s most predominant contributions to philosophy, classical Pragmatism, we find a wellspring of important insights to guide environmental thinking. Of course, the fact that our country’s rich history comprises diverse experiences and multicultural roots gives us reason to also find tremendous value in conversing with philosophical traditions that fall beyond American soils. As we shall see, one of the more noble qualities of American Pragmatism is its pluralistic, democratic, and metaphilosophical outlook. More than simply extending old paradigms to new problems, the ability to creatively draw in ideas from across different traditions and cultures is a valuable tool for addressing the universality of the environmental crisis. So, while American intellectual history will remain at the forefront of my framework,

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environmental philosophy should not shy away from taking on a varied, integrative, and comparative perspective.

In what follows, I suggest a general ecological Pragmatism as one viable method of conceiving environmental philosophy. I see Pragmatism as a valuable resource for environmental philosophy precisely because it does not purport to have the final say in the matter. It instead offers tools for working with a plurality of philosophical, scientific, and traditional wisdoms. Pragmatic thinking does not depend upon the inculcation of a settled ethical paradigm, but rather it describes a method by which new prescriptive paradigms can come into being. Pragmatism reconstructs from the materials furnished by criticism, ideological subversion, and cultural engagement novel avenues for moral and aesthetic growth. Taking up the Pragmatic method of reconstruction, environmental questions become questions about community, about habits, about relationships, about our past, and about our future. Additionally, throughout the various traditions of American environmentalism and environmental writing we find useful approaches to ecological thinking that can inform Pragmatic reconstruction.

Classical American Pragmatism, associated chiefly with Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead, is a distinctly Darwinian philosophy—a philosophy of biology that emphasizes process, continuity, relationality, and an organic understanding of experience. Furthermore, and especially in the case of Dewey, philosophy
becomes contextualized in terms of the social, communal, and political nature of human life. Out of these Pragmatic strands emerges a method of philosophizing focused on practical relevance and a model of criticism rooted in our social nature. The Deweyan flavor of Pragmatism that I will focus on also takes up an ecological temperament, privileging biological and social structures in constant interaction with an environment. Pragmatism views human beings as embodied, social creatures endowed with an intellectual capacity for solving problems and for redirecting habits. Thus, the role of philosophy is that of reconstruction, creating novel possibilities for growth through imaginative, critical engagement with habits, culture, and society. Reconstruction utilizes communal intelligence to solve communal problems.

This reconstructive method is most fully developed with Dewey,\(^7\) for whom understanding the mutually formative relationship between ideals and experience becomes a creative process. For Dewey, the metaphor of the artist or craftsperson captures a dynamic view of philosophical criticism as imaginative, constructive, and open-ended. As we shall see, experience, and especially experience of our emplacement in the natural world, becomes important for developing a method of environmental philosophy. Dewey suggests that “the value of experience is not only in the ideals it reveals, but

in its power to disclose many ideals, a power more germinal and more significant than any revealed ideal, since it includes them in its stride, shatters and remakes them." Reconstructing our ideals can lead us on the path towards such experiences, which will in turn yield new ideals. Pragmatism is not a straightforward push towards an already envisioned utopia. It is an intelligent and creative experiment in which future possibilities are constantly discovered and re-imagined within the course of experience. Ideals are shattered and remade by their own temporal and contextual nature in the course of adaptive situations, always unfolding unanticipated potentialities. This view of experience as a thick, complex, and transactive process renders the full range of organismic functions—emotion, sensation, habit, intelligence, laziness, imagination, etc.—as socially and morally relevant phenomena.

Thinking about ecology in terms of a Pragmatically reconstructive method in this way recognizes that moral intelligence is not separate from ordinary modes of feeling and thinking. Our experience of the environment is always shot-through with a breadth of complex values and habits not easily sifted out from each other by principles or ethical formulae. Rather, appreciation of the ecologies of which we partake depends upon a sharpened awareness of the lived-in meanings and diverse experiences that captivate our moral sensibilities. For ecological thought, the wisdom we bring to bear

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upon relationships with our surroundings is saturated with the felt character of belonging to, perceiving, and having presence within an environment. For this reason, environmental philosophy must attend to the commingling of the aesthetic and the ethical in experience. We ought not discount feeling in moral reflection. Siding with Dewey, let there be more feeling, not less. Pragmatic ecological thinking understands that human consciousness is immanently involved in natural and social environments. Self is continuous with world, confluent with it in the way that a tree is confluent with a forest: rooted, coextensive, and integrated at the most basic level.

Through ecology we come to see that landscapes are not surfaces: we do not move across them, we move through them. We see that, as Edward S. Casey says, “bodies inhabit places; there are places only as lived by bodies. If the body is at stake in knowing the landscape, then place is equally at stake—and one because of the other.” A sense of place can only emerge through the interaction of embodied subjects and environing objects. The codependency of organism and environment in experience yields much broader implications for metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics.

This insight finds a strong ally in the social and biological framework of the classical American Pragmatists. Felt, embodied experience of the

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environment is primordially entwined with the way in which we make sense of belonging to a landscape and to a community of other living organisms. The urgency with which we must incorporate ecological thinking into the entire spectrum of human culture calls foremost for practical philosophical questions and critical methods that adequately attend to our embodiment, to our inclusion in the environment and to its inclusion in our existence. We need ways of thinking about environments that are perceptive of aesthetic and moral potential; we need to allow space for an ecology that does not stop with the life sciences, but informs a culturally and socially meaningful ontology of relations; and we need an ecological way of thinking that can remedy our attitudes towards human and nonhuman communities. Only by evaluating, restructuring, and synthesizing concepts can this crisis be adequately addressed.

It is to this end that ecology functions as a “subversive science,” as a domain of inquiry that cannibalizes the techno-scientific culture from which it originates. Ecology turns in upon itself to devour the desire for domination, control, and power that has historically accompanied the prevailing mechanistic schemas of the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions, as well as the spread of capitalism. By virtue of disclosing the relations of balance and mutual support inherent to life, ecology points to not only "the costs of progress, the limits of growth, the deficiencies of technological decision

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making, and the urgency of the conservation and recycling of natural resources,” but also to the histories that structure our society and ourselves.11 Ecology necessarily topples the Great Chain of Being, favoring a horizontal, multilateral integration of life forms over that of vertical hierarchy. Simultaneously subversive and creative, ecology becomes the ongoing study of ever-changing relationships. It challenges disproportionate systems and supplants them with adaptive readjustments. Ecology is, by the nature of its own field of inquiry, reconstructive.

Because the reconstructive process is creative and open-ended, it is not my intention here to produce a conclusive outcome for ethical theory. The goal in sight of this project is to begin to outline a possible philosophical space for doing the sort of work that is imperative to creating a culture of ecological responsibility. I will begin in the first section by considering the possibility of taking the environment as a metaphysical starting point for philosophizing and setting up Pragmatic reconstruction alongside American environmentalism as a methodological prospect. This will entail mapping a general environmental ontology by treating ecology as a theory of experience, of what it means to be an organism living in a relational environment. In the second section I will situate the idea of reconstruction in relation to environmental ethics, fleshing out some parameters to this method. The third

11 Carolyn Merchant raises these ecological questions and presents an important eco-feminist challenge to such structures (the masculine and patriarchal history of scientific thought, in this case) in *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), xxi.
section will explore ways in which a reconstructive method dovetails with ecological practice, overcoming the brutal dualities of modernist thought by interfacing cultural and natural systems. And the final section will discuss the primacy of the local and the aesthetic for incorporating the more-than-human into our sense of community.

This sketch of ecological reconstruction will attempt to find a possible philosophical and ethical schema that is attentive to environment and place as mediators of living relations. Following a Pragmatic, reconstructive method, philosophy is given sufficient theoretical ground to call attention to habits, inculcated by human culture and history, that violently disturb the balance of these living relations. Our perceptiveness of these disturbances depends greatly on the effectiveness with which our culture can bring us into ever more intimate familiarity with the more-than-human.
Chapter 2

Reconstructing Metaphysics: A Ground-Map of Relations

What can we learn from interpreting the environment as a starting point for philosophizing? Finding ourselves "embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us," rather than groping "among the dry bones of the past," provokes us to enliven our concepts, not simply by turning outward to the natural landscape but also by drawing it in.\(^\text{12}\) Natural philosophy, then, turns away from the metaphysical relics of the tradition and tries to rediscover itself as a useful and creative enterprise, more responsive to the immanent world. While Emerson is taken by the spiritual immersion of the individual in the floods of life, ecology envisions the wider immersion of collective human culture, a cooperative and social adventure into field and forest.

The reimagining of nature and culture has enjoyed special attention in American intellectual history, partly as a result of this emphasis upon

experience over tradition. Even beginning with the Puritan “errand into the wilderness,” it seems that the allure of a wild landscape meant the necessity of throwing out much of the cultural clutter of the past. Thoreau defines this reconstruction as a western-moving phenomenon, away from the cultural baggage of the Continent, towards the wild uncertainty and hope of a new frontier. In this regard, we see that the encounter with wild landscapes becomes tied to a highly Pragmatic reconstruction of societal norms. Since Frederick Jackson Turner declared the closing of the Frontier, however, wild spaces have more or less given way to enclosures of wilderness. We dedicate parks not as frontiers but as preserved remnants of a wild past. While to a certain extent we might speculate that the Frontier has imprinted the image of wilderness upon the American consciousness, the ontological assumptions about how human beings stand in relation to wild landscapes are nevertheless starkly dualistic, characterized by the drive towards domination, control, and exploitation. To design new reconstructive methods that address these problems we must call into question the normative structure of how we have historically thought ourselves to exist with respect to our environment.

Western philosophy has for so long recoiled at the vulgar taint of the material world upon the human mind, and so has taken pains to keep them apart. The legacy that we have inherited, and from which environmental

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philosophy departs, is that of the Gnostics, our pneumatic selves objectifying
the somatic, wanting to return to a truer, purer, and more transcendent
world. Kant makes very clear this tension between the impurities of the
senses and the purity of reason. Although much post-Kantian philosophy,
including Pragmatism, has given up the foundationalism and absolutism that
dominated the early Enlightenment, we discover the old prejudices still alive
and well in mainstream Western culture. Consequently, our metaphysical
separation of the human and the nonhuman is at the very basis of the
mechanistic techno-capitalist system, mirroring the separation and
opposition of natural ecology and human economy.

The opening of the twentieth-century, however, found new ways to
philosophize that denounced both the epistemological and classical substance
dualisms that set mind and body, spirit and flesh, and human and nature in
opposition. The classical American Pragmatists, as well as many
philosophers on the Continent, avowed Darwinian science and
simultaneously rejected the scientism and logicism championed by their
empiricist contemporaries. The dissolving of traditional epistemologies and
philosophies of nature represents an important transition towards
metaphysics as a conceptual tool that empowers ameliorative reflection.
Metaphysics can no longer maintain an interest in discovering and defining
reality in any foundational sense—it instead becomes interested in
understanding the possibilities of our interactions, in building platforms that
afford novel avenues for thought and action. It begins to see experience as being indissoluble from nature as a discrete category.

For Dewey’s Pragmatism, there is a significant reinterpretation of metaphysics accompanying the adoption of biology as a primary model coupled with the denunciation of foundationalist science. Dewey audaciously privileges the aesthetic over the scientific on the basis of fundamentally naturalistic and empiricist assumptions. For Dewey, the metaphor of the craftsperson emphasizes the creative role of the human agent in experience. Moreover, his metaphysics remains affixed to an empirical and scientific methodology by presenting the psychological continuity between feeling, thought, and action. Phenomenology makes a similar move in its understanding of perception and ontology. Martin Heidegger, in a mood very much parallel to Dewey, calls environment “a structure which even biology as a positive science can never find and can never define but must presuppose and constantly employ.”

The presupposition of an environment and an organism becomes synonymous with the metaphysics of experience for Dewey. The instrumentalism of Pragmatism grants ontological weight to this presupposition as a postulate of primary experience, not because it is foundational, but because it is a practical starting point for human projects.

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15 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 84.
As biological creatures, we find that the general nature of experience is that of interaction between an embodied agent and its environing conditions. Dewey sees such “biological commonplaces” as practical starting points for philosophy because they get at the vital relations that hold between self and other. They also provide a dynamic and integrated empirical basis for understanding the living organism:

The first great consideration is that life goes on in an environment; not merely in it but because of it, through interaction with it. No creature lives merely under its skin; its subcutaneous organs are means of connection with what lies beyond its bodily frame, and to which, in order to live, it must adjust itself, by accommodation and defense but also by conquest. At every moment, the living creature is exposed to dangers from its surroundings, and at every moment, it must draw upon something in its surroundings to satisfy its needs. The career and destiny of a living being are bound up with its interchanges with its environment, not externally but in the most intimate way.\(^{16}\)

While Dewey’s use of the word “conquest” seems somewhat antithetical to an ecological reconstruction of environmental history, it describes the most basic vital functions of the live creature in a way that is profoundly attentive to the commonplaces of biology. But for Dewey, it is the transformative power of collective human intelligence that allows the human community to adapt in such ways as to systematically create security and balance against these baser functions. What this means in terms of understanding our ecological entailment of more-than-human communities is precisely the job of environmental philosophy to discern. What is crucial about this organic,

\(^{16}\) Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 12.
biological schema is that it departs radically from the mechanistic dualities of much of classical epistemology and metaphysics, and subsequently provides an interesting framework for beginning to rethink environmental ontology.

But rethinking ontology in light of environmental values is an affair that requires caution. Deciding which values should be privileged and how to express them is an open question. In opposition to Dewey’s Darwinian framework, some movements against the classical Western tradition become highly compensatory in trying to defend environmental values. These forms of environmentalism, often associated with neo-paganism, deep ecology, animism, pantheism, mysticism, animal rights, etc., revert to vanquishing brash anthropocentrism through a sort of neo-Stoic metaphysics, as Jim Cheney has called it.\(^\text{17}\) That is, the dualistic metaphysics of Western philosophy and the Abrahamic tradition is replaced with a more monistic cosmology, often employing some form of essentialism or spirituality to safeguard non-anthropocentric values. Identifying nature in this grand and abstract way, Cheney argues, becomes a theoretical stand-in for the pluralities and actualities of ecological experience.\(^\text{18}\)

Borrowing from a Pragmatic approach to reconstructing metaphysics, we might be less hasty to radicalize environmentalism in such ways. For one


\(^{18}\) Anthony Weston argues that “neo-Stoicism” has a psychological appeal in a thoroughly anthropocentric culture, but that it runs against this problem of becoming too abstract as a result of that same cultural bias. See “Before Environmental Ethics” in *Environmental Pragmatism*, ed. by Andrew Light and Eric Katz (New York: Routledge, 1996), 142.
reason, there is a practical and descriptive component to conceptual reconstruction as a psychological process. As Dewey points out, reconstruction is a creative and experimental adventure, not a race towards fixed ideals. Since the continual exchange of ideality and experience gives way to novel possibilities in an unfinished universe, the best we can do is to conceive of metaphysics instrumentally. That is, metaphysics purports to detect and define the “generic traits manifested by existences of all kinds” in a manner that at first seems neutral to philosophy insofar as it is concerned with wisdom. But Dewey’s insight is that metaphysics is intermixed with political, social, ethical, aesthetic, epistemological, and psychological systems of value. Metaphysics then becomes “a ground-map of the province of criticism, establishing base lines to be employed in more intricate triangulations.”  

The project of repairing the lacerations caused by Western dualism might not be accomplishable in a single, totalizing reversal of metaphysics (a la neo-Stoicism) because this would itself be the reification of a different series of values. Such compensatory moves, while perhaps helpful initially to some extent, effectively shift from one form of dogmatism or absolutism to another by refusing to acknowledge the general contingent and relational character of metaphysical systems. That is, making metaphysical claims that are not accompanied by a self-awareness of the values justified or imported

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into other philosophical domains betrays a longing for the purported stability of foundationalism. Anthony Weston addresses this urge among environmentalists to ground intrinsic, natural values in his reply to Eric Katz, titled “Unfair to Swamps,” criticizing Katz for being uncomfortable with the swampy ground of pragmatism’s seeming “subjective relativism.”

Weston points out that this concern for objectivity versus subjectivity is only a problem if one assumes that metaphysics or ethics could ever develop a coherent notion of truth. Pragmatism is simply uninterested or skeptical of this prospect, and is in fact wary of the dangers that follow from simplifying metaphysics to an absolute ground.

The point here is that if metaphysics can accommodate a swampy notion of truth, we are able to both carry out serious moral philosophy and allow for an open and unfixed pluralism, thereby avoiding dogmatic foundations entirely. This is accomplished by turning metaphysics into a tool—in Dewey’s case, a map—for engaging philosophy. Granted, the tool is never perfected nor is it totally unbound from the particularities of experience and temporality. It is swampy: neither totally solid nor totally liquid, and thus malleable. Pragmatism in this way takes a meta-stance towards metaphysics, making alterations and forming hypotheses to see how the various changes cash out.

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Dewey’s instrumentalism helps avoid committing metaphysical reifications by beginning with experience as a practical tool for making sense of the world and also for challenging it. Dewey is neither concerned only with ideal objects nor with theories about how reality actually is. Rather, Dewey’s metaphysics is a postulate of the primary connection that joins the conscious and bodily creature to the medium of its natural surroundings and to other living creatures. Within this medium the creature engages in a perpetual tug-of-war between equilibrium and discord, occasioned by moments of growth and realized potential, or else a falling out that ends in harm. When life tends more on the side of growth than passivity or “accommodation”, experience is rendered with significance. The importance of these biological commonplaces of the organism-environment interaction is such that they provide a conceptual ground-map of experiential processes that penetrate nature. We are never outside of nature, however, nor is it ever fully apprehended as a unified reality—we merely course through nature as organisms in and of our environments, adapting and readjusting as experience presents us with different ways of being.

Perhaps because of this instrumental approach, the significance of Pragmatism for environmental philosophy is in avoiding the traditional

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21 Dewey states that theories “...are not supposed to prove anything about experience and nature for philosophical doctrine; they are not supposed to settle anything about the worth of empirical naturalism. But they do show that in the case of natural science we habitually treat experience as starting-point, and as method for dealing with nature, and as the goal in which nature is disclosed.” *Experience and Nature*, 1.

bifurcation of theory and practice. Although ultimately the ameliorative outlook of Pragmatism is practice-oriented, there is a mutual integration of the two poles. The Pragmatic method, mirroring the scientific method, is spiral and ever-in process. Postulating a metaphysics of experience serves to structure our adventurous inquiries, our adventurous ways of knowing, and make sense of being emplaced within nature. Intelligent inquiry, guided by an ecologically informed metaphysics, opens up ameliorative courses for thinking about environmental values and practices. Even before beginning to consider how ethics and policy should be developed, we must map out the traits of existence that are ecologically significant.

Creating concepts that pull our attention towards the relational features of ecosystems provides a strong basis upon which to enable environmentally sensitive practices. Pragmatism’s metaphysics of experience, depicting the dynamic interaction of organism and environment, is supportive of this ecological sensibility. If we take seriously the idea of mapping relations, we might start to discover different possibilities for thinking environmentally that do not succumb to a hypostatized division of humans and nature. What becomes important to map out, then, is that which has escaped our previous mappings, that which has been left out of traditional metaphysics.

One way to think about the implications of shifting from what we might consider an atomistic ontology towards a relational ontology is in
looking at the historical relationship between how we divide up the world and what we value in our human communities. This marks the interface of metaphysical claims and axiological habits. What we value depends in a large part upon how we portray ourselves in relation to the world, and vice versa. If we begin to map out relations, we may begin to learn something about the normative structure of our concepts of community and our concepts of environment. We may begin to ask how to redraw the lines that divide culture from nature.

The present crisis has most commonly been construed as a disjunction of human interests from ecological consequences. In the name of industrial expediency and economic growth, we have produced excessive levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, overfished the oceans, dumped pesticides into our groundwater, removed the tops of mountains in search of coal, deforested large expanses of the most lush and biologically diverse habitats on the planet, and doomed countless species to extinction. While the mounting speed in the movement of capital, alongside the development of intensified industrial processes, has indeed afforded unprecedented levels of material wealth (at least among the privileged few), we have all suffered a devastating loss in terms ecological wealth. Additionally, as Alan Durning points out in
It seems the correlation between personal fulfillment and material consumption remains at best dubious. Environmental philosophy is then charged with the task of finding ways of pulling the psychological, social, and natural aspects of the many kinds of ecologies that we inhabit (and take for granted) into the forefront of our sense of community. Following the charge of ecologists like Aldo Leopold and others, a Pragmatic ecological reconstruction seeks to understand community with a richer and more encompassing sensibility. Viewed in this way, Pragmatist ecology can be used to read the American environmental tradition not as merely an attempt to illuminate the impact of human activity upon ecosystems, but to undermine the separation of human community from the natural world, to view ecology as the medium of human activity. This requires that we re-envision the world in some primary, ontological way.

American Pragmatism can be considered as “a philosophy of environments,” a way of understanding community by first understanding how organisms are situated in relation to each other and to their surroundings. Humans do not differ from other animals and plants in this way; there is no boundary that separates the human community from the rest of the ecological community. Relations abound between the world and human cognition in the most primal sense. Dewey’s Pragmatic constructivism

provides us with a view of culture and nature as being continuous and interrelated. Both terms refer to experiences that are constructed from personal and collective histories, from conditions of both social and physical environments. As Larry A. Hickman says of Dewey’s Instrumentalism, human knowledge of nature is “a multifaceted construct that has been slowly and laboriously built up over thousands of years of human history by means of various tools of inquiry, including the arts, religion, magic, hunting, manufacture, and experimental science, to recall just a few.” All the same, for Dewey humans are in and of nature, not outside of or against it. Culture is a naturalized, evolutionary phenomenon, and our understanding of and attitudes towards nature are cultural artifacts. Nature and culture are therefore co-constitutive and interwoven.

Understood as a product of evolution, culture affords humanity an intense capacity to transform environments, overcome encountered problems, and collaborate with one another to an extent unsurpassed by other organisms. Furthermore, this capacity carries with it the necessity of ethics, of systematic limits on conduct for the sake of social interests. However, the overall implication of culture is ameliorative for Pragmatism: culture allows for collective, accumulated, and more refined knowledge that benefits a flourishing community. That is to say, the human organism is endowed with

a means to partially create and recreate the sort of world that they wish to live in.

This capacity for philosophical reconstruction allows us to reinvent the conditions by which we relate to others. As Val Plumwood suggests in her essay “Paths Beyond Human-Centeredness: Lessons from Liberation Struggles,” the project of ecological reconstruction, of reconstructing a sense of community that is fundamentally attentive to the more-than-human, might be viable in the same way that overcoming racism or sexism is viable. The othering of a particular group of people, and subsequently the discounting of shared meaning and value, seems partially analogous with the othering of nonhuman nature. Plumwood premises the deflation of this othering upon the need to “reconceive the human self in more mutualistic terms, as a self-in-relationship with nature, formed not in the drive for mastery and control of the other but in a balance of mutual transformation and negotiation.”26 The emphasis here lies with contextualizing our selves and our communal lives in light of an ecological ontology, highlighting relations and interdependencies. This consideration of community is the ethical trajectory of Dewey’s metaphysics: a Pragmatic method whereby life is always understood in the context of an environment, and more specifically, an environment formed and shared by other living things.

This same analogy is famously drawn at the outset of Aldo Leopold’s “Land Ethic”, in which Odysseus’s slave-girls, bound as objects of property rather than subjects of ethical relevance, parallel our current and historical valuing of land as property. Just as morality has overcome the idea of human chattel, Leopold favors the impetus to expand circles of moral inclusion in the case of the environment as well. What it means to value “land” for Leopold also entails a shift away from geographical propriety as a matter of personal rights and economic commodity towards a moral community that is definitively more-than-human: “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.”

Leopold’s prescription for a broader community, for democratizing an awareness of the land, its inhabitants, and the relational web of sustenance and regeneration that supports them, stands largely as the centerpiece of a Pragmatic ecological reconstruction. Through interpreting Leopold by way of the reconstructive method, this sense of moral inclusion, being more than simply a new attribution of our inherited understanding of moral value, reconfigures morality in an important way, refocusing on mutually defining relations rather than solely collective or individual factors.

So, what are the contents of this metaphysical reconstruction, of bringing ecological relations into moral theory by creating new environmental ontologies? What are the targets of criticism in building a

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27 Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac (New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1966), 239.
more robust ecological community? What can we learn from the American environmental movement, in conjunction with a reconstructive method, for posing a serious challenge to the inherited conceptual violence of American culture against ecosystems, both locally and globally? Since reconstruction is an ongoing process of inquiry and evaluation, the result of considering such questions will not offer an easy and concrete solution to the crisis. Rather, it will require a varied and experimental approach. But, by engaging in reconstructive work, environmental philosophy can open up spaces for empowering ecological sensibilities and experiments. In Pragmatism’s integrated and nuanced understanding of theory and praxis, recontextualizing and reconstructing the cultural artifacts that comprise popular attitudes regarding the environment can chart a course towards more flourishing communities. Within this Pragmatic ground-map of criticism is a practical importance for ethics and policy-making, for challenging oppressive political and economic structures, and for cultivating values that guide people towards becoming better citizens of the earth.
Chapter 3

Reconstructing Ethics: Towards a Philosophy of Environments

To set out upon the ethical territory that Pragmatism uncovers in an ecological ontology, the relevant histories of environmental and philosophical discourse ought to get taken up under its reconstructive method. The idea of Pragmatic ecology will necessarily entail more than what is traditionally meant by applied ethics: the examination of particular sets of problems in light of theoretical applications. Although there are distinctive, concrete problems that benefit from the application of ethical theories, a genuine philosophy of environments calls into question the broader cultural background of those problems, of how they emerge and how we think about them. The reconstructive method shatters and remakes the boundaries of problematic situations in order to discover new possibilities for culture. I will identify three interrelated features of this sort of ethical reconstruction that may prove particularly useful to environmental philosophy: a doctrine of relations, a metaphilosophical orientation towards ethics, and the integration of intrinsic versus extrinsic value.
In the first feature, much like with the reconstruction of metaphysics, there is an emphasis on the relational over the atomic. If we are willing to grant that environmental ethics cannot be reduced merely to conservationism, we discover this relational emphasis simply by asking about its general critique of human conduct. That is to say, the ethical temperament of environmental philosophy could be conceived as a multifaceted attempt to reassert the primacy of relations into the logic of human culture and economy. For example, we notice that many of the basic problems of liberalizing the global market have resulted from a tendency towards greater, more ambiguous, and farther-reaching interconnectivity (namely, evolving patterns of exploitation, production, consumption, waste relocation, and power, as well as new avenues of informational and technological exchange) coupled with the nearsighted atomism of the Western tradition. This atomism or blindness to relations, to a large extent, is the central target of environmental ethics, and has incidentally grown out of the very same tradition that classical Pragmatism revolts against.

This is in part a problem of ontologies, as we have seen, but there is also an epistemological and ethical component to the tendency towards atomism. The dualism of the moderns, in separating mind from body, has numbed epistemological theory to many of the continuities of experience. William James is acutely aware of this problem, and attempts to revise classical epistemology by employing a doctrine of relations in his “radical
empiricism.” Dewey later expands this reconstruction of experience, admitting to it the phenomenological and metaphysical significance outlined above and providing a much more complete social and political framework. James’s epistemological insights are important for environmental philosophy because they address an often-ignored feature of moral thinking: our attentiveness, and especially our attentiveness to experience as an integrated and interconnected field of organic goings-on. We too quickly parse up the world into habitual and ready-made fragments, eclipsing the relations and consequences that traverse the field. One approach to remedying our habitual preference for a “block-universe” is to search out vagueness as sites of forming novel connections. James thinks it is in these vague parts of the experiential field that we discover new possibilities for understanding the stream of consciousness, what enters into immediate focus, and what remains beyond the reach of intelligible phenomena:

It is, in short, the re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life which I am so anxious to press on the attention. ...What must be admitted is that the definite images of traditional psychology form but the very smallest part of our minds as they actually live. The traditional psychology talks like one who should say a river consists of nothing but pailsful, spoonsful, quartpotsful, barrelsful, and other moulded forms of water. Even were the pails and the pots all actually standing in the stream, still between them the free water would continue to flow. It is just this free water of consciousness that psychologists resolutely overlook. Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead. The significance, the value, of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it,—or rather that is fused
into one with it and has become bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh; leaving it, it is true, an image of the same thing it was before, but making it an image of that thing newly taken and freshly understood.\textsuperscript{28}

Why is it important for environmental philosophy to formulate an epistemology that is attentive to the penumbra of consciousness? Perhaps it is because ecology tends to pursue the vague, following leads that might yield greater connections, entertaining the field of experience as a focus that is always surrounded by a substantive “more.” Because the experience of a “more” is both cognitively and ontologically substantive, the vague and penumbral occupy a moral dimension in philosophical reflection. On this view, our consciousness is not of discrete objects of knowledge, divorced from each other. It is always of a content-rich world, tangled, continuous, and ever shifting. If ecological relations elude our attention by remaining nebulous, our moral thinking cannot adequately digest them. From understanding experience in this broad way, we can develop a phenomenology of ecological relations to guide moral philosophy. If we can get better at pursuing the vague, we can arrive at richer ecological and ethical theories. John J. McDermott observes this correlation between re-instating the vague in experience and our capacity for attentive reflection in James’s psychology:

\begin{quote}
Experience as such is potentially pedagogical, if we but pay attention. Everything we perceive teems with relational leads, many of them novel, and therefore often blocked from our experience by the narrowness and self-defining, circular character of our inherited conceptual schema. The human task
\end{quote}

is to let our experiences speak to us in all of their manifold vagueness. Naming, defining, cataloging, quantifying are activities of a last resort and have justification only for purposes of organization—necessary for enabling us to move on to still richer fields of experience—or of survival.29

Paul Shepard’s famous call for an ecological paradigm shift in the introduction to *The Subversive Science: Essays Toward An Ecology of Man* marks an interesting point of comparison for establishing a connection between the psychology of experience and the way in which we understand and think about the world. Shepard’s declaration that the “relationships of things are as real as the things” directly echoes James’s doctrine of relations.30 Shepard is of course interested in the ontological status of relationality within ecosystems. But he is not unaware of how our theories of knowledge, the whence and whither of consciousness, and our language itself structure perception of conjunctive or disjunctive relations. Like James, he understands consciousness in an embodied, biological way, maintaining the interconnection of experience and world such “that the world is a being, a part of our own body.”31 It is on this empirical basis that consciousness of relations becomes ethically relevant.

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31 Ibid.
Targeting embodiment and phenomenological attention is only the first piece of ethical reconstruction. Related to the continuity of experience and the doctrine of relations is the antifoundational nature of Pragmatism. If we want to develop an ethical theory of Pragmatic environmental stewardship, how do we measure values, set criteria, and choose between competing interests without recourse to some kind of foundational knowledge? How do we make sense of all of these ecological and experiential relationships from our specific, embodied point of view and subsequently mediate environmental dilemmas?

This brings us to the second feature of Pragmatic reconstruction, its metaphilosophical orientation. To the dualist, Pragmatism has the unfortunate disposition of sounding at the outset to be a sort of human-centered utilitarianism of land management when viewed in connection with environmental ethics. Distinguished from the colloquial use of the term (as indicated by its capitalization), Pragmatism, and particularly Dewey’s instrumentalism, “was never the vulgar sort that valorizes bald expediency.”32 Rather, Pragmatism is a complex philosophical position that sees solutions to problems not as correspondences with Truth, Reason, or the Good, but as fallible, communally agreed upon possibilities, worked out through the particularities of experience, that afford moral and aesthetic growth. The test of good philosophy is not measured by criteria of certainty,

according to Dewey. Instead, Pragmatism asks whether philosophical projects “end in conclusions which, when they are referred back to ordinary life-experiences and their predicaments, render them more significant, more luminous to us, and make our dealings with them more fruitful? Or [do they] terminate in rendering the things of ordinary experience more opaque than they were before…”33

A central virtue of Pragmatic thought lies specifically in its metaphilosophical capacity to leave aside certain kinds of questions, especially those that have traction only in theoretical discourse and are never cashed out in experience. Questions about certainty become acquiescent to the more contextual theoretical demands wrought by phenomenal experience and lived problems. For environmental ethics, a relatively young field that addresses timely societal issues, this can be an advantage for achieving what Anthony Weston characterizes as enabling environmental practice.34 Rather than muddle about in theoretical disputes, Pragmatism aims to enable values that will have an anticipated practical upshot.

But the Pragmatic method is always experimental. Subsequently, understanding problems as being “practical” versus “theoretical” can be misleading, and Pragmatism is wary of the separation of the two. To think of

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34 “A central part of the challenge is to create the social, psychological and phenomenological preconditions—the conceptual, experiential or even quite literal ‘space’—for new or stronger environmental values to evolve. Because such creation will ‘enable’ these values, I call such a practical project enabling environmental practice.” Weston describes this Pragmatic approach in “Before Environmental Ethics,” 142.
something as being practical is to presuppose some fixed aspect to its circumstances. But for Pragmatism, ameliorative ideals are always conditional posits, subject to constant change. As one set of ideals comes into view, already another set has begun to peak above the horizon. Additionally, these posits are unpredictable in many ways. We can never totally envision how certain values will play out or what novel ideals will follow from them. By making slight alterations to complex and dynamic systems in hopes of producing something better, “every thinker puts some portion of an apparently stable world in peril and no one can wholly predict what will emerge in its place.”\textsuperscript{35} Pragmatism does not look for ready-made solutions to our problems, but for opportunities for growth, even given by the hand of chance and uncertainty.

For this reason, Pragmatism’s metaphilosophical position with regard to ethics is a revitalization of that Greek ideal, a search for the good life. Aesthetic concerns tend to override other kinds of concerns, and the value of an ethical decision is always weighed across a multitude of scales. Another way to think about this position is to characterize it as a kind of playfulness. Pragmatism allows us to dress up in many different (perhaps even contradictory) ethical outfits, to try on different theories, and to imaginatively engage them in new and changing contexts. Ethics, as a social enterprise, seeks out ways of thinking about conduct that warrant general

\textsuperscript{35} Dewey, \textit{Experience and Nature}, 172.
consensus but that also answer to a desire for more fulfilling, more meaningful experiences—experiences that lead to growth. Pragmatism remains intentionally uncommitted in this stage because defining fulfillment and growth must be particular to the situations at hand, whereupon more refined ethical theories may be employed. At the metaphilosophical level we are positioned well to make sense of these contingencies and to facilitate the arrival of new insights and possibilities. We cannot calculate growth or know for sure what it will look like, but we understand that it is an intuitive organismic drive, and in the case of human beings, it leads us to the intensities and delights that comprise the full range of meaning in our lives.

As McDermott points out, Dewey organizes his moral philosophy around this aesthetic ideal and melioristic outlook:

Dewey is adamant in his conviction that nothing will go totally right in either the short or the long run. He is equally convinced that all problems are malleable and functionally, although not ultimately, resolute, even if they are sure to appear in another guise at another time. I refer to this as a metaphysics of transiency, in which human life is seen as a wandering, a traveling, a bemusement which rocks from side to side, comedy and tragedy, breakthrough and setback—yet, in all, a purposive, even progressive, trip, in which the human endeavor makes its mark, sets its goals, and occasionally scores, an event which Dewey calls a “consummatory” experience, as in “that was an experience.”

Truly, then, meliorism is a salutary human approach, despite its lacking the drama of either pessimism or optimism. It takes no captives, makes no excessive claims, nor bows out in frustration at the opposition. Dewey evokes the deepest sentiments of human life, too often unsung and too often derided: that the nectar is in the journey, that ultimate goals may be illusory, nay, most likely are but a gossamer wing. Day by day, however,
human life triumphs in its ineluctable capacity to hang in and make things better: not perfect, simply better.\textsuperscript{36}

And so goes Pragmatism’s concern for ecological thinking: it asks not merely how to settle our problems, but how to transform them into possibilities for growth and flourishing. What this will mean for environmental philosophy is an open question, but we can nevertheless speculate that the possibilities for resolving the environmental crisis will require that we collapse many of the chasms of Western history that have kept us blind to the fulfillment made possible through ecological experiences. This fulfillment is not premised upon an interest in ecology as a science, but by the diverse and varied objects of that science, by the relations that bind us to other lives, including those beyond our own species.

We need not argue for the intrinsic value of ecological experiences, because ecology describes an encompassing category that fundamentally qualifies the content of all the experiences that are already meaningful to us. We want to become attentive to ecology not simply for its own sake, but because it describes the basic function of experience in furnishing us with better and more varied ways of knowing and behaving, which in turn lead us to other goods. On the other hand, the knowing is itself good as a kind of wandering or journey, as McDermott points out. The aggregate of meanings that follow from and shape lived experience is the starting point for Pragmatic ethics. This brings us to its final relevant feature.

\textsuperscript{36} McDermott, “A Relational World: The Significance of the Thought of William James and John Dewey for Global Culture,” 157-158.
The third leg of the tripod upon which this reconstruction of ethics is situated is the idea that means and ends, intrinsic and extrinsic value, can be integrated. Just as the other two features are interrelated, this third element complements and completes them. We have contrasted ecological ways of thinking with atomistic ways of thinking, and articulated a metaphilosophical outlook rooted in a robust concept of experience. From these features, how does Pragmatism deal with ethical analysis, with the prioritization of values, and with creating a philosophy of environments that avoids reified distinctions?

The picture of Pragmatism that we have so far, as a break with the absolutes of the Enlightenment, as being anti-foundationalist, and most importantly for ecology, as being anti-dualist, generates a powerful conceptual tool for undercutting the selfsame Western tendencies that have led to ecological violence. Inherently, the urge to divide the world, to impose hierarchy and dichotomy where there is naturally mutuality and continuity, is an anti-ecological sentiment. Dewey offers an elegant dictum for this kind of Pragmatic thought: “Wherever continuity is possible, the burden of proof rests upon those who assert opposition and dualism.”\textsuperscript{37} Taken to its full implications in American culture, where the ideology of liberty tends to be a kneejerk withdrawal from responsibility to others, there occurs a radical challenge to the Western tradition, to Lockean individualism, Cartesian

\textsuperscript{37} Dewey, \textit{Art as Experience}, 28.
dualism, moral absolutism, colonialist racism, etc. This sort of culture-criticism, as Richard Rorty calls it, is the reconstructive work that Pragmatism deems necessary in order to create new ecological paradigms.38

Applying a Pragmatic reconstructive method to environmental ethics demands that many inherited conventions of philosophical analysis be reevaluated and redrawn through this method of culture-criticism. But how do we engage in a culture-criticism that is precisely concerned with those places where culture comes into contact with something other than itself, places where culture and nature are interlocked? Under such conditions, how do we decide what to value and why? We see throughout debates about environmental ethics a central concern with how to properly value and prioritize nature in relation to human society, especially at the level of policy-making. These disputes are among the oldest in the American environmental movement. Even as early as the famous conflict between the preservationist stance of John Muir and the conservation ethic of Gifford Pinchot, we discover a fundamental question about how to correctly manage wild landscapes, either as intrinsically valuable or as sources of extrinsic and commercial value.39

Philosophers since then have rendered the debate more nuanced, taking pains to argue for the merits of various forms of anthropocentrism, biocentrism, and ecocentrism respectively. That is, much attention has historically been given to whether we can truly value nature apart from our own interests. We have also begun asking to what extent we can value systems as wholes, and in what way the terms of these valuations relate to the individual. The problem with many of these debates is that they more often than not reify the basic division of human values from natural values and of instrumental values from intrinsic values.

Pragmatist ecology, however, attempts to circumvent this problem. Because the Pragmatic lens is always focused on context, continuity, and interrelatedness, these narrow distinctions become unnecessary and usually hindering. If we want to seriously concern ourselves with the circumstances in which we engage our surroundings and our community, in which self and world, individuals and systems, are implicated by and co-constitutive of each other, we need more careful ways of thinking about ethics. To the extent that the ideas of physical, biological, and cultural environments are intimately interwoven, constructing theories of value that boil down to notions of intrinsic versus extrinsic, means versus ends, or individual versus collective can be overly simplistic and problematic.

So what of the value of nature, or of culture for that matter? For Pragmatic theory, a categorical separation of value distorts the way our
psychology and our experience actually interact in the phenomenal world. What would it mean to value an ecosystem for its own sake, apart from any human interests? Likewise, it makes little sense to suggest that we could value only human interests, apart from the environments that nourish them. The valuer and the valued are locked into a mutually defining relationship. Sandra B. Rosenthal and Rogene A. Buchholz explain this Pragmatist integration of means and ends in “How Pragmatism is an Environmental Ethic”:

At no point can pragmatic ethics draw the line between human welfare and the welfare of the environment of which it is a part. Here it may be objected that to value nonsentient nature in terms of its potentiality for yielding valuing experiences is to say that it has merely instrumental value, and if nature is merely an instrument, then no real environmental ethic is possible. Yet, within the above framework, the entire debate concerning instrumental vs. intrinsic value is wrong-headed from the start. Everything that can conceivably enter into experience has the potential for being a relational aspect of the context within which value emerges, and any value, as well as any aspect of the context within which it emerges, involves consequences and is therefore instrumental in bringing about something further. Thus, Dewey holds that no means-end distinction can be made, but rather there is an ongoing continuity in which the character of the means enters into the quality of the end, which in turn becomes a means to something further.⁴⁰

It becomes easy to mistake this reluctance towards such distinctions for being naively idealistic unless we are careful to see the overarching importance Pragmatism places with interrelatedness as a hard empirical fact

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of experience and practice.\textsuperscript{41} Pragmatist metaphysics begins with a rejection of what Kant calls the noumenal, the world as it is in-itself, as that which is beyond knowledge and experience. For both Kant and Pragmatism, all knowledge is taken as phenomenal knowledge. Pragmatism sees “the concept of a world, entity or property existing apart from the ordering influence of mind [as] strictly \textit{meaningless}. To speak of the world at all is to be capable of entering into experience; a thing’s effects, its relations to other phenomena, are thus \textit{all} there is to be known about the thing.”\textsuperscript{42}

In reconstructing ethics as an ecological enterprise, it is apparent that effects and relations are all encompassing. Our experience of things and the relations between them is thus a function of our living consciousness. We see with William James’s radical empiricism that for phenomenal experience taken as a whole, the relations experienced are as real as the things related. He likens consciousness to a bird’s life, consisting “of an alternation of flights and perchings.”\textsuperscript{43} The resting-places of consciousness, when dealing with ecological systems, carry a certain metaphysical significance. They either withhold or disclose the vital relations by which the system is formulated.

Physical, biological, and cultural environments are \textit{not} necessarily unified in reflective experience; but they are \textit{are} pre-reflectively interfaced in the

\textsuperscript{41} Both James and Dewey are careful on this point in critiques of their idealist interlocutors. For a comparative account of past and contemporary misconstruals of Pragmatist epistemology, see David L. Hildebrand, \textit{Beyond Realism & Antirealism} (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003).

\textsuperscript{42} Kelly A. Parker, “Pragmatism and Environmental Thought,” 24.

\textsuperscript{43} William James, \textit{The Principles of Psychology}, 243.
most profound way. That is, our immediate felt, aesthetic experience is of a world marked by continuity of relations and continuity between the world and ourselves. Our conceptual tendency to think of human beings as separate from nature is solely an instrumental convention that allows us to readily make sense of experience given our particularly human purposes. These purposes, however, are always fully implicated by complexly interpenetrating systems. This can lead to another mischaracterization: thinking of Pragmatism as a kind of ecocentrism, concerned more with collective systems than with individuals. This too eclipses the nuanced contextualism with which Pragmatic ethics is conceived, as Rosenthal and Buchholz note:

> Sometimes the system is more important, sometimes the individual, and this is dependent on the contexts in which meaningful moral situations emerge and the conflicting claims at stake. Further, no absolute break can be made between the individual and the system, for each is inextricably linked with the other and gains its significance in terms of the other.  

The significance of Pragmatic contextualism for ethics at large and environmental ethics especially, lies in its capacity to interpret the transformative potential of problematic situations. In effect, by remaining open to the connections and relations native to experience, we are free to see emergent values and possibilities for further ethical reflection. Because ecology must be sensitive to the portions of experience towards which cultures have become anaesthetized, to the vague and penumbral sense that our activities extend into circles broader than our own, we must be careful

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44 Rosenthal and Buchholz, “How Pragmatism is an Environmental Ethic,” 46.
not to shut down our ethical machinery too soon. Environmental ethics should not be charged with refining a single and all-encompassing theory of values to govern conduct. Reconstructing the cultural background of our ecological problems requires a more integrated, pluralistic, and experimental approach. We do not want to simply settle our problems; we want to destabilize the preconditions from which they emerged. The practical side of Pragmatism’s ethical reconstruction is a method of trying out new ways of engaging culture so as to enable the cultivation of environmental values.

So environmental ethics, on the Pragmatist view, cannot be assigned at the outset a definitive rubric guiding deliberation since to do so would only reify a static impression of what constitutes individuals or systems without taking up the very relational qualities that give these ethical concerns meaning. Reconciling conflicting values and interests with respect to the dynamic relations of ordinary experience is always carried through contextually and is always subject to revision in light of new experiences. Rather than defaulting to a calculated set of normative philosophical doctrines, ethical inquiry for Pragmatism entails an imaginative appraisal of the particularities of any given situation, pregnant with subtle connections, analogies, and histories, drawing upon all resources available to moral intelligence. When our habits of conduct are posed against moral growth, it is philosophy’s job to leave no stone unturned in divulging insights through which they might best be reoriented. Pragmatism reconstructs ethical theory
by moving it from the purview of abstract foundational principles to that of actual human psychology and ordinary experience, to our imaginative and adaptive intellectual capacities.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{45} For Dewey’s reconstruction of ethics in terms of “moral imagination,” see Steven Fesmire, \textit{John Dewey & Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics} (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003).
Chapter 4

Ecotonal Thinking

The locus of ecological reconstruction, the literal and theoretical space that Pragmatism wants to open up for ecological thinking, is realized precisely with the interpenetration of natural and cultural environments. As Neil W. Browne points out, Pragmatist ecology is situated at the interface of the various natural and cultural domains that structure life. It is there that habits and actions come into contact with a larger community, with other subjectivities, both human and more-than-human, and with shared systems of regeneration tied to particular geography and resources that make life possible. In short, just as biodiversity furnishes ecological richness, places of concentrated interaction between diverse systems, cultures, and relations furnish significant ethical and aesthetic potential. Browne employs the metaphor of ecotonal regions to describe this interface:

Pragmatist ecology looks at the relations among art, science, politics, intelligence, and the physical world, rendering the artificial boundaries separating them porous—ecotonal. An ecotone is a transitional zone between ecosystems, such as the tidal zones or the edges between a field and forest. These are
places of intensified energy, where genetic exchange and evolutionary potential are initiated. This heightened potential exists also in cultural ecotones.\textsuperscript{46}

Pragmatism sees the ecotonal territories between abiotic, biotic, and cultural relations, and between individuals and systems, as fertile grounds for imaginative moral cultivation. These territories are most interesting to ethical discussion because they contain the intersecting and divergent “interests” of various systems. Our ethical and philosophical tools discover at these sites an interdependency of aesthetic, moral, scientific, and economic values, an inseparability of the various systems that constitute our environment. Since everything is partially constituted by something else, the continuity of systems precludes truly isolated functions. The sustainability of any given system is codependent upon the sustainability of the other systems with which it is entangled.

Anthony Weston points to the work of Wendell Berry as an exemplar of exploring domains of interaction between culture and nature, or between the human and the more-than-human.\textsuperscript{47} Wendell Berry writes of a similar phenomenon to that of the ecotone: the margin or edge, a space where domesticity touches wildness. In “Getting Along with Nature,” Berry suggests


that the human eye is drawn to margins because they are “biologically rich, the meeting of two kinds of habitat.”

Berry tells us that in Thoreau’s famous proclamation, “in wildness is the preservation of the world,” we might find a spiritual truth, but that it is a “practical fact” as well. Values that drive us towards becoming familiar with our entangled position as ecological organisms are empowered by our interactions with the wild. The more comfortable we become with spaces where wildness is transversally integrated into society, the more intimate our attentions towards ecosystems and environments. This is particularly true with regard to our food production systems and the history of domestication. Our very means of subsistence are balanced upon the intersection of the domestic and wild throughout the various traditions and cultures of growing and raising food.

Michael Pollan, a leading proponent of agricultural reform, illustrates this sort of intermingling of nature and culture in his interpretation of the American mythos surrounding John Chapman, better known as Johnny Appleseed. Pollan takes Chapman, envisioned as a “Christianized version of some pagan wood god,” to be the American Dionysus. Chapman’s role as a profiteer of the American wilderness, planting apple orchards along the Ohio

49 Thoreau, Excursions, 177.
50 Berry, “Getting Alone with Nature,” 11.
River in order to satisfy the demand for hard cider on the Frontier, holds an obvious similarity to Dionysus’s association with wine. But moreover, Chapman was viewed as an unusual and quasi-mythological character in a way that also strikes a rather Dionysian chord. Barefoot, satyr-like, and feminine, stories of Chapman describe him sleeping on the bare earth, communing with animals, and having a playful and untamed nature. Chapman was, on the one hand, truly wild, always moving to the vanguard of the Frontier, spreading the sweetness and intoxication of his prized crop, and on the other hand, truly domestic, converting the forest into the apple tree plots that would give birth to the most American of fruits. Pollan explicates this Dionysian spirit as a point of contact between the wild and the domestic:

Like Johnny Appleseed, Dionysus was a figure of the fluid margins, slipping back and forth between the realms of wildness and civilization, man and woman, man and god, beast and man. I found Dionysus depicted variously as a wild man with foliage sprouting from his head, a goat, a bull, a tree, and a woman. Friedrich Nietzsche paints Dionysus as a figure able to dissolve “all the rigid and hostile barriers” between nature and culture...Nothing better captures the paradox of Dionysus's double role, as a force for domestication and wildness, than his involvement with grapes and wine. Wine itself is a peculiarly liminal substance, poised on the edge of nature and culture as well as civility and abandon.\(^{52}\)

Increasingly, we find countless examples of these ecotonal categories in contemporary culture as well. In many urban areas we find community gardens, rooftop gardens, “guerrilla” gardening initiatives, greenways, and open space parks—all serving as interfaces between artificial and natural

environments. Small-scale, local food production reminds the urbanite of a concrete reality of subsistence eclipsed by the mass-consumerism of the supermarket. The local foods movement in general, while certainly an attempt to simplify and undercut avenues of wastefulness, exploitation, and corporate control, is also an aesthetic and epistemological endeavor, concerned with reconnecting communities to felt experiences and basic knowledge of bioregions. It is particularly in these spaces, where the more-than-human has been allowed to encroach upon our daily routines and our traditionally artificial affairs that the greatest potential for enabling environmental values seems to occur.

In contemporary art, too, we find prime examples of ecotonal thinking. In *Earth-Mapping: Artists Reshaping Landscapes*, Edward S. Casey observes the various ways in which the relationship between art, especially forms of “earth art,” and cartography can function as an expression of place. Understanding art as a way of mapping the land departs from the current specialized usage in which cartography is employed, and it dissolves both mapping’s privileging of a view from above as well as the idealizing of perspective found in traditional landscape paintings. Instead, earth art becomes an intensely ecotonal affair that “seeks to re-embody integral parts of the planet (e.g., mountains, rivers, deserts) in singular paintings and earth works—to re-present and re-implace the earth in artworks that map.”

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Interestingly, we find ecotonal art in both natural and cultural settings, in places where the artificial has in some way been imported into the wild and in places where the wild has been brought into contact with the artificial. The situational land art of Andy Goldsworthy seems an example of this former possibility. Goldsworthy’s work discloses to us certain qualities of art and nature precisely because it is a site of contact between human imagination and the more-than-human environment. We learn about the pervasiveness of change through the impermanence of his work and about a kind of continuity between art and nature in the materials he uses: twigs, leaves, streams, rocks, shells, etc. Our eyes attend to the margins. We seek out artificial patterns and see them dissolve into natural patterns. There is a purposive conflation of categories that produces ecotonal thinking. Likewise, in urban settings, when we see “moss graffiti” or environmental architecture, we are reminded of an immanent wildness, not outside of and in contrast to the city, but in confluence with it.

The intermingling of domains, of culture and nature, represents the intermingling of human lives and the rest of nature. Where we begin to see the forces of domesticity and wildness along margins, we also begin to see conflicts emerge, and ethical reflection is eventually called into play. Notice, however, that we begin with the ecotonal margins and proceed towards imaginative ethical engagement. Perceiving these margins as rich and

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54 See Rivers and Tides: Andy Goldsworthy Working with Time [DVD], Directed by Thomas Riedelsheimer (Berlin, Germany: Mediopolis Film und Fernsehproduktion, 2002).
complex portions of experience is the baseline for further reflection. Pragmatic thinking does not begin with an already determined ethical principle and impose it upon experience from without. Dogmatic thinking, on the contrary, eclipses the nuanced and unpredictable forces that bind us to particular places in the world, places comprised of very particular intersecting systems. At no point of intersection can we assume the systems to be identical.

The materials of ethical concern occur at these intersections of complex systems. It is with respect to this fact that developing a centralized-value approach (i.e., through anthropocentrism, biocentrism, or ecocentrism) is more limiting than it is helpful. Traditional environmental ethics fails to shore up a more integrated ecology in this way because its commitment to pre-established patterns of value places blinders on experience. That is, we are confronted, prior to the lived textures of experience and the particularities of encountered problems, with different patterns of valuation that assume an either/or bifurcation. Either we privilege intrinsic value or we privilege extrinsic value.

Andrew Light and Eric Katz, worried about philosophy’s ability to significantly influence policy, point out that the homogenizing efforts of ethical theorists have actually hindered discussion by dogmatizing such theoretical commitments as radical non-anthropocentrism (a la deep ecology, animal rights, etc.), holism, moral monism, and the preoccupation with
intrinsic versus extrinsic value. Pragmatism’s remedy for this narrowing of discourse, they say, is to adopt a moral, theoretical, and meta-theoretical pluralism. That is, by opening up to a multitude of expansive discussions at the metaphilosophical level, concepts of environmental value undergo a reconstructive process in which they can be engaged creatively, imaginatively, and pluralistically.

Although much of the nature writing and environmental tradition in America has been historically committed on some level to assumptions about non-anthropocentrism, intrinsic value, etc., we find with more ecologically minded writers a sensitivity to the interdependency of environmental problems and human society. Folks like Wendell Berry and Aldo Leopold seem to be an obvious interest for Pragmatist ecology because they understand ethics in an empirically and ecologically nuanced way. They evaluate ecological concerns contextually, prior to taking on rigidly principled theoretical commitments. Though much of Leopold’s early writings fall into a familiar non-anthropocentric bent, he seems to formulate a highly dynamic understanding of ethics not unlike that of Pragmatism, emphasizing the continuity between human-centered and nature-centered values in experience. Bryan G. Norton argues that Leopold, in developing his land ethic, draws directly from American Pragmatism, picked up from Arthur

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Twining Hadley while Leopold was a student at Yale University.\textsuperscript{56} Hadley, a great admirer of William James, held that "Truth is that which prevails in the long run," inspiring Leopold’s mature formulation of a land ethic based on concern for future generations.\textsuperscript{57} While the extent to which Leopold was directly or indirectly influenced by the classical Pragmatists is contested, most notably by J. Baird Callicott, his mature environmental ethic at least offers the potential for fertile dialogue when considered alongside this Deweyan strain of Pragmatism.\textsuperscript{58}

Leopold as field ecologist works within ecotonal spaces. That is, ethics for Leopold is not separable from ecology; it is a bridge between human conduct and the web of relations in which it is always situated. The "land ethic" constitutes the territories in which all human constructs grow out of the earth, nurtured by the interrelations and shared life-support systems of a healthy ecology. Leopold sees this ecotonal space as grounds for a more robust sense of community, one that premises itself on ethics as an \textit{ecological} category:

This extension of ethics, so far studied only by philosophers, is actually a process in ecological evolution. Its sequences may be described in ecological as well as in philosophical terms. An ethic, ecologically, is a limitation on freedom of action in the

\textsuperscript{56} For his reading of William James and other intellectual contemporaries, see Arthur Twining Hadley, \textit{Some Influences in Modern Philosphic Thought} (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1913).
\textsuperscript{58} For an inroad to the Norton-Callicott debate, see Norton's "Why I Am Not a Nonanthropocentrist: Callicott and the Failure of Monistic Inherentism." \textit{Environmental Ethics} 17 (Winter 1995): 341-58.
struggle for existence. An ethic, philosophically, is a differentiation of social from anti-social conduct. These are two definitions of one thing. The thing has its origin in the tendency of interdependent individuals or groups to evolve modes of cooperation.\textsuperscript{59}

This broadly naturalized ethics, the idea that cooperative limitations on behavior can promote greater collective flourishing than an anti-social disposition, is a highly Pragmatic approach to understanding morality. Constructing theories that bear on ethics and policy, then, becomes a democratic endeavor. For most of our social discourse, Pragmatism sees the mark of an advanced ethical system as one which best improves the human situation, namely through inclusivity, plurality, and creativity. Extending this democratic or cooperative process to the more-than-human world, as Leopold prescribes, entails a reconstructive methodology.

Where it has been easy for traditional ethics to assign nature either full democratic agency (i.e., through “rights” or intrinsic value) or to relegate nature to mere resources and commodities available for human use (i.e., as utilitarian land management), Pragmatism reconstructs ethics and ecology in a less dichotomous fashion, along ecotonal lines. That is to say, philosophy becomes refocused upon the intersection of ethical and ecological concerns as they inhere in our ordinary experience. Ideas of cooperation and community are crafted out of a practical ecological attentiveness to the inexhaustible ways in which we are bound up with other each other, with other organisms,

\textsuperscript{59} Aldo Leopold, \textit{A Sand County Almanac}, 238.
and with the landscapes we inhabit, as well as with the emergent global systems of political and economic exploitation.

This reconstruction is a marriage of ideas about healthy communities with ideas about healthy ecosystems. For example, biodiversity is characterized by conditions that Pragmatism sees as communal virtues: inclusivity, plurality, and creativity. The regeneration of biota through circuits of broadly diverse interconnections has a strong parallel in the communal sustainability afforded by cooperative intelligence, borne simultaneously by diversity and shared interests. The ethical significance of these natural interactions brings into focus the ecological context in which human activity occurs. Human community is built in a thicket of other kinds of communities, not always appreciated by our theoretical considerations. As Dewey contends, the cultural and the natural are inextricable properties of communal life, of society itself:

Nature is the mother and the habitat of man, even if sometimes a stepmother and an unfriendly home. The fact that civilization endures and culture continues—and sometimes advances—is evidence that human hopes and purposes find a basis and support in nature. As the developing growth of an individual from embryo to maturity is the result of interaction of organism with surroundings, so culture is the product not of efforts of men put forth in a void or just upon themselves, but of prolonged and cumulative interaction with environment.\(^{60}\)

The radical disjunction of human from animal, cultural from natural, is a vulgar oversimplification wrought by a violent intellectual history and

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the luxury of exclusivity that it affords. Writers such as Dewey and Leopold lay a foundation for becoming attuned to the violence of exclusivity, as it exists in our philosophical and cultural heritage. Just as strains of white, male, and religious exceptionalism have resulted in unthinkable oppression still widespread in the present day, the related exceptionalism of humanity over and against nature has resulted in tremendous ecological degradation. And just as liberation movements have dismantled racist and sexist myths, ecology has dismantled the myth that there is a division of humans from nature.

The question of wilderness then remains. On this view, how can we value and justify the preservation of landscapes undisturbed by humans? Rather, how can we value natural places with which we have no significant immediate contact? Larry A. Hickman suggests that, for Pragmatism, the value of an ecosystem having a minimal human presence lies in its potential expressive power as an experiment in all that wildness can be. In other words, we need not turn to transcendent or radically idealized non-anthropocentric values of wilderness. Even concerning remote and wild landscapes, our understanding of what wildness means is borne by culture. Hickman points us to this passage from Aldo Leopold: “A science of land health needs, first of all, a base datum of normality, a picture of how healthy land maintains itself as an organism. ...Wilderness, then, assumes

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unexpected importance as a laboratory for the study of land-health.”\textsuperscript{62} The existence of wilderness is an investment in a secure future, a future where undisturbed ecosystems are part of our cultural heritage, available as a mainstay of our understanding of nature.

Moreover, ecotonal spaces provide us with a window into the depths of wilderness. Although portions of nature extend far beyond what is familiarly human, we perceive these depths as possessing an outward significance. They remind us of our finitude, our fragility, and our continuity with the natural world. Wilderness, when we marginally encounter it, furnishes us with aesthetic and therapeutic value. Even in the most alien of landscapes, we perceive some mystery that tugs at our curiosities towards that which is beyond ourselves. We need only think of Barry Lopez’s compelling reflections in \textit{Arctic Dreams} to illustrate such alien encounters. To preserve wilderness is to preserve this mystery. Consider Edward Abbey, that gruff voice of remote and desolate landscapes who champions the American desert in all of its subtle complexity and stark beauty. Abbey suggests that, though we need not think of wilderness in terms of transcendent or idealized value, we nevertheless cannot help but feel moved by its grandeur as constituting some crucial part of the human drama:

\begin{quote}
Suppose we say that wilderness invokes nostalgia, a justified not merely sentimental nostalgia for the lost America our forefathers knew. The word suggests the past and the unknown, the womb of earth from which we all emerged. It means
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{62} Aldo Leopold, \textit{A Sand County Almanac}, 274.
something lost and something still present, something remote and at the same time intimate, something buried in our blood and nerves, something beyond us and without limit. Romance—but not to be dismissed on that account. The romantic view, while not the whole of truth, is a necessary part of the whole truth.\(^{63}\)

From this perspective the value of wilderness is simply dominated by a kind of geo-piety that is part and parcel of human experience. While we should be wary of defining this value as fundamentally intrinsic or extrinsic, we can at least posit moments of valuation that implicate both nature and culture. The point here is not to think of nature as an absolutely nonhuman domain, but to perceive the extremities of the more-than-human through its intersections with human consciousness. These extremities do not constitute a division from civilization. Rather, we experience them as roots that reach deep into the earth, as a basic connection to our evolutionary prehistory.

In place of traditional ideological disjunctions, experience reveals the continuity of our cultural constructs and the environments out of which they emerge. There is a sense of belonging that is carried by interaction between self and world, organism and environment, and culture and nature. In shared watersheds, foodsheds, and bioregions, just as in shared cultures, historical narratives, and regional identities, our personal belonging to a community is predicated upon relationships held in common with others, relationships of place. As Gary Snyder says, “Recollecting that we once lived in places is part of our contemporary self-rediscovery. It grounds what it means to be ‘human’

(etymologically something like ‘earthling’). To understand what it means to be human is to know something about the ways in which we belong to a landscape and our various interactions with natural and cultural encounters.

The ethical significance of these interactions ultimately falls back upon a Pragmatic emphasis on imagination and on the felt, aesthetic sense of a landscape community. Philosophy, by locating opportunities to explore these ideas through reconstruction and subsequently creating an ecological discourse that is confluent with our sense of community, recovers a very primal function of ethics. With this, we move closer to what Leopold has in mind when he posits “ethics are possibly a kind of community instinct in-the-making”. We allow our community instinct to extend its branches into the more-than-human environment, to grow into ecotonal soils.

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65 Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 239.
Chapter 5

Coming Into More-Than-Human Communities

The possibility of coming into more-than-human communities hinges upon whether or not ecological relations can be brought into contact with the felt attentions and habits of ordinary experience. As Aldo Leopold says, “We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in.”66 That felt relation is an aesthetic kind of experience, a way of feeling based on how the world ordinarily comes to us. Pragmatism sees aesthetic experience of ecology as being primary to a large extent, preceding other kinds of experience, though also enhanced and modified by them. Only as a felt, sensuous presence can the land-community, in all of its regenerative potential, be given serious ethical consideration.

To put it succinctly, we cannot heal what we cannot feel. As science, art, philosophy, policy, and other segments of human intelligence are granted the freedom of prolonged interaction and a problem-oriented focus, aesthetic experience becomes more pointed, more attentive to that which we may have

66 Leopold, A Sand County Almanac, 251.
previously overlooked. Annie Dillard captures the sentiment upon learning to see praying mantis egg cases: “Suddenly I see them everywhere. ...I’m embarrassed to realize how many I must have missed all along.”67 Seeing is an apt metaphor here because it implies that things also go unseen. Because so many of the relationships between human society and the more-than-human world remain hidden, learning to see them is the first step in growing broader ecological communities. When we allow these sensuous encounters to interact liberally with other modes of knowing our intellectual abstractions become anchored in the salience and vibrancy of experience. Erecting an ecological culture and a public sense of regeneration, sustainability, and biodiversity, means recovering the sensuous immediacy and beauty of thriving landscapes from anaesthetizing techno-consumerist forces. This anaesthetization has cut us off from basic understanding of the diverse systems that sustain us. As Bill McKibben observes:

We believe that we live in the “age of information,” that there has been an information “explosion,” an information “revolution.” While in a certain narrow sense this is the case, in many important ways just the opposite is true. We also live at a moment of deep ignorance, when vital knowledge that humans have always possessed about who we are and where we live seems beyond our reach.68

Systems of sustenance that once were ritualized, localized, and visible to communal life have become impersonal, dispersed, and industrialized. Thus, on the consuming end of things we have no felt sense of production

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systems or of the environmental and human relationships that are invisible to economic interests. Knowledge of local ecologies needs to be relearned and global systems radically re-envisioned if we are to achieve a sustainable culture. The first step in reconstructing knowledge of ecological communities is to feel out that which we have excluded and to attend to its felt presence in our living spaces. The security afforded by thriving ecological experiences is what Vandana Shiva calls “our most fundamental security; ecological identities are our most fundamental identity. We are the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe.”

Dewey helps us make sense of feeling our relatedness in this way. Alongside his Pragmatic theory of aesthetics and its biological emphasis on continuity, process, embodiment, and transaction, environmental philosophy takes on a decidedly ecological framework. Drawing our environment into felt awareness accentuates the backdrop of relationships and systems that envelop us. The problem is that our aesthetic attention is rarely given to the environment in any meaningful way. We are distracted and anaesthetized by mass media, by the frantic rush of modern life, by the cycles of consumerism that dull any ecological intuitions we may have had. We are too wrapped up in the flurry of human affairs to grasp the interconnections that fix humanity to the earth and sustain our projects. The great insight of twentieth-century

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ecology has been that nothing happens in isolation. The challenge for the twenty-first century will be to incorporate this fact into public intelligence.

“Eco,” derived from the Greek “oikos,” or “home,” suggests that the human organism is always implicated in an ecosystem, that we dwell in it, that ecology cannot be understood apart from our own position as ecological beings. Reasserting intellectual engagement and practical involvement in the ecologies that we are rooted in begins with experiences that are distinctively aesthetic. We become aware of relationships through our felt apprehension of them. As David Abram suggests, “A genuinely ecological approach does not work to attain a mentally envisioned future, but strives to enter, ever more deeply, into the sensorial present. It strives to become ever more awake to the other lives, the other forms of sentience and sensibility that surround us in the open field of the present moment.”

The first step closer to an ecological culture is towards the immanent and vital connections that inhere between our surroundings and our selves.

In *Art as Experience*, Dewey reclaims the study of aesthetics from its lot as narrow art criticism, establishing a profound continuity between embodied, biological existence, human psychology, and our felt experience of the world. Understanding the organism-environment transaction, for Dewey, is an understanding of the biological commonplaces that “reach to the roots of

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the esthetic in experience.”71 What is radical about Dewey’s work is that it
turns away from the historical divorcement of the human world and the
natural world. For Dewey, there is but one world and it consists of living
beings enfolded into an intricate web of relations and meanings. In “The Live
Creature” we see that the conceptual separation of the self from the world or
of humans from nature is only a product of secondary reflection, after the fact
of experience. That is, primary experience is taken as a whole, in whatever
way it comes to us, and is postulated as a method by which we trace our
interactions as they reach down into nature’s depths; “experience is of as well
as in nature.”72 More than a flat notion of sense-data passing from the
objective world into a receptive spectatorial subject, experience for Dewey is a
robust conception of the organic structure through which all doings and
undergoings take place. Experience had is always of the cultural and natural
interactions and interconnections of which we are organically participants.
The dualisms that philosophy has been historically ridden with are
reifications that arise out of this.

There is to some extent an overt parallel between this
“phenomenological sense” of Dewey and the philosophy of body found in such
works as that of later French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty.73

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73 See Victor Kestenbaum, *The Phenomenological Sense of John Dewey* (Atlantic Highlands,
NJ: Humanities Press, 1977). See also Mead’s work on the problem of embodiment in *The
Philosophy of the Act*, edited by Charles W. Morris, John M. Brewster, Albert M. Dunham,
Since life is always lived through an environment, it is wrongheaded to conceptually abstract and cut off experience, aesthetic and otherwise, from the context in which it occurs. Similar to Merleau-Ponty’s idea of perception originating with the body-subject, Dewey’s philosophy of environment is decidedly somaesthetic. That is, experience is always that of a feeling body, in constant transaction with an environment. Dewey wants to rework historical notions of experience away from sharp metaphysical divisions between self and world, mind and body, subjectivity and objectivity. Dewey understands all of human life and experience to be that of an intelligent, socially constructed, embodied organism, struggling and partaking in the drama of its surroundings.

In a practical way, the idea that experience is embodied dissuades us from withdrawing from the world. Breaking down the image of the atomistic self gives way to a self that is inextricably connected to its surroundings—what George Herbert Mead calls the “social self”, and what for our purposes we might think of as an ecological self. As Shannon Sullivan says, Dewey provides a context for thinking of human beings as corporeal and transactional:

The boundaries that delimit individual entities are permeable, not fixed, which means that organisms and their various environments—social, cultural, and political as well as

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74 In *Experience and Nature* this is perhaps most evident in such chapters as “Nature, Life and Body-Mind”, where Dewey discusses the idea of “body-mind” as a metaphysical description that does not ground itself in the reification of a dualism.

75 See *Mind, Self, and Society*. 
physical—are constituted by their mutual influence and impact on each other.\textsuperscript{76}

Sullivan draws from Dewey’s assertion that organisms live “as much in processes across and ‘through’ skins as in processes ‘within’ skins.”\textsuperscript{77} In contrast with a history of stark separation of self from world, this idea that our skins and sense organs are permeable, that we come into direct transaction with the world, that our vitality depends upon such transactions, holds radical implications for rethinking environmental ethics.

In conjunction with Leopold’s land ethic, with building a more-than-human or land community, Pragmatism turns to our modes of aesthetic experience as the material that gives content and depth to environmental values. A felt sense of ecology is the foundation upon which communal reconstruction rests. Making ambient ecological relationships available to focused, co-operative intelligence is an explicit function of democracy for Pragmatism. As Browne suggests, Dewey’s tools for generating cultural transformation are forged out of ecological meaning:

Effectively rethinking and reimagining what a culture underpinned by environmentally sound and respectful values might look like in the United States in particular will draw from within U.S. culture itself, and the investigation of public intelligence has become an important task of the American philosophical tradition of pragmatism, especially in Dewey’s work. This idea of public intelligence becomes not only important to the understanding of what an environmentally principled culture might look like, but also essential to the


\textsuperscript{77} Sullivan takes this seldom quoted passage from John Dewey and Arthur Bentley’s \textit{Knowing and the Known} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949), 139.
continuity of our imperiled democratic system of government. So in this sense, a substantial link can be drawn between ecology and democracy... At his core, Dewey was deeply concerned with democracy and with creating a public—and in turn a public intelligence—prepared to participate meaningfully in a democratic culture. He often calls this public intelligence the “art of knowing,” and the art of knowing depends on interrelationships between individuals and various ways of meaning.78

In the overlap between ecological and democratic intelligence, paralleling the ecotonal interface between nature and culture, relationships become the focal point for directing knowledge. Environmental aesthetics comprises a primary component of this “art of knowing” because aesthetic experience gets at the joints of ecological connections. To become aesthetically perceptive of relationships is to gain some vantage on one’s own situation as an organism that is inextricably rooted in an environment and is participant in such relationships. Dewey shows us that the guiding intelligence of our democratic and deliberative actions is consumed by such aesthetic quality. To the extent that we are in and of an environment, that we transact with it, that our lives are transversally involved with all other lives contained by it, human culture and civilization are carried by sensuous engagement with the land.

Pragmatism concludes that community, for ecological thinking, is largely rooted in aesthetic experience in a very broad sense. All other ecological endeavors presuppose a feeling of place as the medium of relations.

The aesthetic ground for community is a felt apprehension of who or what constitutes our living environment, of who or what matters. The realization that the spaces through which we live extend outward, in concentric wavelets, each marking a distinctly ecological presence, occurs foremost as a bodily, aesthetic intimation, a somaesthetic experience. Without the bodily feeling of connectedness and emplacement, community cannot be sustained.

Of course, this does not suggest that aesthetic experience occurs in isolation from other portions of experience, and Dewey certainly does not want a rigid epistemological hierarchy. His point is quite the opposite: he wants to explode older conceptions of experience into something fuller, something that has ontological as well as epistemological import. That is, he provides a phenomenology of the basic interactions that structure an organism’s encounters in the world. The passage of knowledge from experience into memory is not a linear, one-way sequence. Rather, it is an active and creative encounter, an artistic act. Moreover, the art of knowing is primitively a somaesthetic matter. Our different ways of knowing are characterized by the interplay of an imaginative human body with the complexity of experience. For example, Dewey describes how our basic intuitions of space are converted to systematic knowledge via creative acts: “The first groping steps in defining spatial and temporal qualities, in transforming purely immediate qualities of local things into generic
relationships, were taken through the arts. The finger, the foot, the unit of walking were used to measure space.”

This “art of knowing” is a dynamic exchange between intelligence, imagination, and feeling. Identifying and interpreting ecological relationships begins with basic feeling and attentiveness, but its course as a reconstruction of personal and communal habits depends heavily upon other resources, such as science, history, philosophy, and art. While the importance of aesthetic values and embodied experience always accompanies these other resources, it is only in conjunction with collaborative knowledge, such as science and culture that our primary experiences can connect up with ameliorative ends.

Environmental philosophy, as a guiding tool for the art of knowing, aims to cultivate general ecological literacy in the collective public sphere. In his book of the same name, David W. Orr refers to Garrett Hardin’s definition of “ecological literacy” as the ability to ask “What then?” We ask “What then?” by tracing our common moral genealogy from its biological, ecological, social, and cultural roots towards ameliorative possibilities. The future-oriented nature of normative theory also causes us to ask “What then?” in looking to extended ecological implications and consequences. In this way, ecological thinking begins with the individual, in the course of experience, and terminates at the communal level. We find here another ecotonal region, a place where the individual and the collective are integrated into a practical

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unity. To be ecologically literate means that we not only become aware of our individual, felt, ecosystemic bearing, but that we also see that position as part of a historical human narrative and a broader cultural context.

May Theilgaard Watts’s classic *Reading the Landscape* also provides a context in which the natural sciences, aesthetic experience, and the narratives of human history and community enter into a fruitful exchange. By “reading” environmental features as they interrelate with other organisms, with society, and with human experience, the objects of focus are understood dynamically and relationally. Knowing about place, about ourselves and the ecology around us, becomes an *adventure* into nature. Complementary to Dewey’s “art of knowing,” our ability to read the landscape, to engage the liminal and uncertain margins where nature and culture intersect, to explore the frontier where human narratives collide with ecological narratives, is a kind of adventurous knowing. Watts’s method relies upon this assumption that an effective ecological education cannot be passive:

As we read what is written on the land, finding accounts of the past, predictions of the future, and comments on the present, we discover that there are many interwoven strands to each story, offering several possible interpretations.

Interpreting this reading matter, in place, on the land, seeing living things in their total environment, is an adventure into the field that is called ecology.81

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Ecologist Tom Wessels carries forth the idea of reading landscapes as a pedagogical tool. In the introduction to *Reading the Forested Landscape*, Wessels expands on Watts’s method of navigating the tangles of human history and natural ecosystems:

Most people who share a love of nature have been taught to see the landscape in a piecemeal way. They know how to identify plants, birds, amphibians, and fungi. They may even know quite a bit about the ecology of these organisms, but they have not learned to see nature in a larger context. It is wonderful to know nature through one-on-one encounters with other organisms, but it is perhaps more empowering to gain a fuller understanding of the patterns that have shaped its landscapes. Through some knowledge of history and the broader view of seeing a forest and not just its trees, we begin to see the forces that shape a place. This new way of seeing creates reverence, respect, a sense of inclusion, and accountability. Reading the landscape is not just about identifying landscape patterns; more importantly, it is an interactive narrative that involves humans and nature.82

This kind of focused ecological training is a refined and specialized tool designed precisely for doing ecotonal work. Wessels’s students have described the method of learning to read forested landscapes as a “link between thinking in categories and thinking in terms of connectedness.”83 When we begin to focus on connectedness we are able to incorporate difference, plurality, and mutual co-dependence into our conceptions of community. This ecological perspective is a radical challenge to traditional conceptions of community, but there seems to be an analogous psychological component. The *otherness* of nature can only be overcome by growing more intimate with

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83 Ibid, 21.
the points of interaction between our lives and the more-than-human world. That is, an education emphasizing ecotonal thinking strips away categories of otherness because our primary mode of conceptualizing relationships becomes that of interconnection.

This may parallel different communal problems regarding otherness as well. Merely changing laws and policies does not defeat racism, for example; the *immorality* of racism is only fully assimilated through sustained diversity, through understanding oppression, through the acknowledgment of privilege in contrast to disenfranchisement, and through the felt inclusion of other races into a communal living space. Perhaps in a similar way a sense of ecological responsibility is only procured by direct contact with ecological relations, with the causes and effects of ecological degradation. Supermarket consumerism, for example, does not demand any ecological or bioregional food knowledge, whereas local farmer’s markets, food co-ops, and community-supported agriculture are all attempts to reassert relational knowledge into the food production-consumption system. That is, such local food initiatives bring the consumer into a broader awareness that farmers grow food, that specific foods grow in specific seasons, and that only specific foods can be grown in any given locality. The consumer thus enters into an acknowledged ecotonal relationship with the grower, the change of seasons, and the bioregion.
If community depends in some part upon this kind of felt awareness and close interaction, how do we reconcile the contemporary problems of globalization, of having communal obligations to the planet and to people on the other side of the planet? How do we bring the exploited global South into felt relation with the citizens of affluent, exploitative nations? This question is raised out of serious ecological concern for instances where the causes of environmental or social violence are separated from their effects by geographical distance, by engaging a global domain which is abstracted from everyday goings-on. Additionally, large-scale, cumulative environmental phenomena such as global climate change are removed from the immediacy of particular experiences.

The relationship between the local and the global demarcates another ecotonal territory in which interlocking cultural and natural systems need further ethical attention. An ecologically reconstructive approach to globalization believes discrete, regenerative ecosystems to be a foundation for political actions that undermine exploitative economic entities. Vandana Shiva alludes to the image of a tree as a model for what she terms “Earth Democracy,” a system of democratic power exercised from the bottom up. Our global economies, extended as branches from centralized trunks, are rooted in and grow out of particular ecosystemic localities.

84 Vandana Shiva, Earth Democracy, 10.
That is, individuals living in close contact with the land, dependent upon the ecological systems of sustenance and regeneration, should be given the political authority to manage the welfare of such ecosystems against the commodifying efforts of corporate consumerism. Sustainable global economies must ultimately depend upon healthy bioregions. This globalization “from below,” set against its hegemonic counterpart of globalization “from above,” is an attempt to replace systems of transnational, corporate, mass-production with local sustenance economies that can support fair global trade.

Within Aldo Leopold’s famous story of wolf population management, the injunction to “think like a mountain” perhaps holds an appropriate theme for questions about the global community. Living communally, by its very nature, requires a kind of ecological thinking. To suspend narrow interests for the sake of communal interests is at the heart of ethics. In the case of globalization, transnational organizations and corporate interests have been allowed to industrialize and dominate public resource distribution and land management at the cost of ecological health and human welfare like the unrestrained hunters, eradicating the last wolves out of greedy bloodsport.

To give voice to ecological thinking demands that the people who are most familiar with our planet’s nourishing landscapes defend them from the shortsighted interests of exploitative economic systems. It demands a population that is ecologically literate. People must become reacquainted

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with belonging to a place, and with a concern for the future of that place. Widespread education, political empowerment, and challenges to existing policy, all hallmarks of thriving democracies, then, are tethered to knowledge about existing communities and the localities in which they occur. Aesthetic experience is definitive of the awareness that we bring to our sense of belonging to a place and to a community.

In summary, the continuity between the aesthetic and other domains of human affairs provides a strong basis for arguing that the proliferation of a sustainable culture begins with changes to our modes of perception—with a reconstruction of metaphysics and ethics in light of ecology. A Pragmatic reconstructive approach to ecology refocuses philosophy upon felt relations rather than atomic individuals, notions of the intrinsic value of nature, or principle driven theories. By understanding embodied experience as a general postulate of the particular ontological features associated with being an organism in and of an environment, insight into our unique and multitudinous ecological situations can be lifted and held against ethical deliberation. As Dewey says, “The enemies of the esthetic are neither the practical nor the intellectual. They are the humdrum”\(^\text{86}\)—this is the main obstacle for ecological education. Individual and societal anaesthetization to the more-than-human is at the heart of the environmental crisis. We must relearn our places in the ecological landscape if we are to respond to its

\(^{86}\) Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 42.
quickening destruction. The aesthetic potential of living in ecotonal spaces, of participating in multiple complex systems, and of belonging to the land must be activated in the lives of the population before they can become perceptive of environmental problems.


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