Minding nature 8.1

THINK HERE 4

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To act ethically—when we do so not simply out of habit or by accident—human beings draw upon concepts, values, and norms that we have inherited from philosophical thought, among other sources. We reflect and evaluate with and through these concepts. We also reflect critically upon them, re-interpreting, enriching, and extending them in response to changing knowledge and the possibilities that the world presents to us.

Since the Enlightenment at least, the focus of normative philosophy has largely been about right recognition and right relationship between and among human beings. The interactions between humans and other forms of life, ecosystem services and functions, and material resources—in a word, the relations between humans and nature—have not been held to the same, or even analogous, standards. Norms of right recognition and right relationship—rights, the good, and justice—do not apply; nature has not been given full moral consideration.

Here I want to pose a question about the guidance moral and political philosophy offer for environmental and conservation affairs. Are the core concepts of these discourses part of the problem, or can they be part of the solution? Can their anthropocentric heritage be given an ecological re-interpretation?

If right recognition and right relationship were norms covering the treatment of non-human nature—if we were to speak cogently about rights and justice in human dealings with the natural world and the creatures (in addition to ourselves) who dwell within it—then much of our scientific understanding and practical activity regarding nature in the modern era would have to be seen as misrecognition and wrong relationship. This would be a shift of historic proportions and significance in the gestalt of our moral perception—a fundamental re-orienting and enlarging of the human moral imagination.

The possibility of such a shift is not idle speculation. History provides many examples of precisely this expansion of the moral imagination in the evolution of relationships among diverse human groups. It is a record of the inclusion of certain forms of previously forbidden individual human behavior within the zone of moral and legal protection in particular societies, and the banishment of other behaviors—owning slaves, for instance. Still, shifting the norms of human to human interaction is one thing, shifting them radically for humans and nature interaction is another. Is it beyond the limits of moral learning, beyond our ken as a species?

At the root of both environmental pessimism and neoliberal triumphalism lies the belief that such a moral imagination is beyond us. It had better not be. Naomi Klein’s recent book, This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate, essentially warns us that a gestalt shift in the moral imagination guiding humans and nature interactions on a global scale is no longer merely an option, it is a necessity.

Why? Klein, like many others who address global climate change, properly focuses on the dire consequences for biological resilience and social stability if we do not change our perception and the logics governing our institutions. I believe that we should also attend to the moral consequences of such a millennial human
failure. If we fail to expand and extend our norms of right recognition and right relationship to the natural world, we will be forced to contract them in the human world. We will regress in the anthropocentric moral progress we have made historically. If we can’t switch from seeing the image of a rabbit to seeing also the image of a duck—if we can’t move from seeing the face of the human Other, which philosopher Emanuel Levinas considers the ground of all ethics, to also seeing the face of the natural Other, the face of the planet—then will we be able to see any face other than our own, or even any face at all?

Let us then think carefully about how concepts drawn from moral and political philosophy can be interpreted to help meet the fundamental ecological challenges of our time. As a starting point, expanding the scope of the norms of right recognition and right relationship involves consideration of two key concepts that I want briefly to discuss here. These are the concepts of membership and solidarity.

Right recognition involves membership in some kind of common condition or common lot, and it carries with it a claim to what has been called “moral considerability.” This commonality can be invested with particularly human cultural and sociological content, such as kinship or political community, but it can also derive from something more general, such as the condition of being alive. The content of membership recognition is dignity and respect for the integrity of the being—the capabilities and flourishing—of each member. Membership also involves an equity or parity of voice and participation in the affairs of the entire community, insofar as those affect each member in some significant way. Membership is about each and all. The challenge of reinterpreting and expanding the concept of membership by recognizing non-human beings as falling within its norms is to design human activities in such a way as to make voice and participation for the non-human meaningful in decision-making about human behavior that affects the ecological common good.

How can voice be heard and participation be arranged for non-human members of a community of interdependence and shared vulnerability and need? This is not an unprecedented question because it must also be addressed for human members who are infants or young children, or those with serious cognitive impairment. We do not define them as outsiders or non-members of the moral community due to their distinctive capabilities; we instead seek ways to fulfill their right recognition as members in different ways.

The goal in the case of non-human members who are entitled to right recognition and moral consideration is the same. The key is respect for the inherent requirements and possibilities of flourishing being for each member. In other words, respect involves providing the conditions necessary for the capabilities integral to each member to be realized as effective functioning or activity. This can be true for non-human individuals and species, and for living systems as well. (Ontological views such as those discussed by Rachel Tildman in her article in this issue of Minding Nature would have us go further and recognize dynamic systems of living and non-living materiality.)

This requires mechanisms of representation, trusteeship, and stewardship that human
members and decision-makers devise to articulate the voices and respect the interests of non-human members. Such mechanisms are modes of indirect participation. But human responsibility also extends to research and scientific knowledge, including ethological and naturalistic studies in the wild, so that we can learn to hear those voices and witness those participatory actions of non-human members directly. Those voices and that participation are then reflected back into the exercise of human ecological governance as trusteeship when that decision-making is informed—as it so often is not—by sound environmental science and outdoor experience.

If membership is right recognition, solidarity is right relationship. It is constituted by the norms of concern and care in common. Membership and solidarity are closely linked, in my view, despite the fact that the paradigm instance of solidarity is often thought to be the support by a member with power for a non-member without power. But that solidarity relationship inherently carries with it and confers recognition and membership upon the less powerful—membership in the newly enacted, now more inclusive moral community. I am not sure if it is better to regard membership and solidarity as two separate but linked norms, or as two facets of the same norm. Their common ethical ground, I think, is the moral considerability of living being. To be a member in the normative sense is to have standing. To engage in solidarity is to stand up for those who lack standing and for change that will more fully realize the standing of all. Solidarity is the praxis of standing up and standing beside.

The pathway of moral learning within the practice of solidarity that I will sketch below can help us to correct the tendency to see humans as ontologically separate and above nature. Ecological solidarity teaches that nature is the place we live within and not simply the surrounding raw material that we use to fulfill our own desires. Solidarity is essential to counter the desire for control—what Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* referred to as the “perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceases only in death” (ch. 11). Solidarity is the counter-sign of power, life’s answering response. Solidarity is the mutuality of concern and care.

If the characteristic gesture of membership is hearing and empowering participatory voice, even if indirectly and inferentially, the characteristic gesture and stance of solidarity is *standing up beside*. This stance then has three relational dimensions: *standing up for*, *standing up with*, and *standing up as*.

**Standing up beside.** When you stand up beside a person, a group, an organization, a species, a habitat, or even an idea or ideal, you make yourself visible. It is a public gesture: solidarity requires both taking a stand and standing up. This public posture also carries with it a sense of urgency and moral importance. Consider the difference between “standing up” and “standing down” (giving way, backing off). There is a resolve behind standing up beside that will not be deferred or mollified easily. The force of this resolve comes from the fact that one is elevating one’s moral and social awareness and commitment: one is moving upward, toward justice, such as the redress of the oppression or denigration of others, and moving closer, toward their side.
Solidarity cannot be practiced in hiding. Exercising solidarity may put one in harm’s way for the sake of another being, an Other. I use “Other” as a term of art to mean another human being or group; a non-human organism, species, or living system; or a cause, an idea, a cultural way of life, or some other object of value or beauty.

Standing up for. The first relational dimension of solidarity is standing up for. This suggests an intention to assist or to advocate for the Other. Solidarity is help and care for those who cannot defend or help themselves. The Other for whom one stands up in solidarity is someone whose situation presumably is morally problematic either because of their own behavior or because of what is being done to them. Environmental and health conditions, as well as broader forms of social, economic, and political oppression and injustice, provide an occasion for this dimension of solidarity. But this mode of solidarity alone need not overcome the assumption of human ontological separateness and superiority, just as it need not challenge systemic social inequality or the paternalism of noblesse oblige. Standing up for is quite compatible with an attitude of ecological management and resource “yield.”

Standing up with. The second dimension is solidarity as standing up with. It takes another step in the direction of mutuality and recognition of shared moral standing. Moving from a mode of relationality for to relationality with in the practice of solidarity is meant to signal further entry into the lifeworld of the Other. Doing so entails changes in one’s initial pre-judgments and perspectives, and standing with solidarity requires an openness to this possibility. Many community-based conservation and restoration activities provide interesting examples of how this mode of ecological solidarity can affect moral learning and self-discovery.3

There is something in the imaginative dynamic of moving from for to with that transforms the solidarity relationship so that a (supportive) stranger-to-stranger relationship begins to develop into a stronger kind of fellowship and mutual recognition of one’s self in the face of the Other. Again, this need not be limited only to recognition of human individuals, per se. Ethnographic and historical study, as well as personal experience and companionship, allows one to relate to other people or groups in the specificity of their values and vocabularies of self-interpretation, which develops respect for the specific standpoints of others. So does naturalism, observation, and the scientific study of animal and plant behavior and ecosystemic dynamics. Without such understanding, Others cannot truly be treated with respect; they can only be tolerated, neglected, not interfered with.

Standing up as. The third dimension is solidarity as standing up as. Obviously this suggests a yet stronger degree of identification between the providers of solidaristic support and the recipients of such support. For human beings engaged in the practice of solidarity who reach this mode of relationship, it is not a question of doing away with difference. Moreover, the ecological solidarity of humans standing as non-humans is not simply a case of anthropomorphic projection or romantic idealism. The solidarity of standing up as involves finding a kind of covering connection that does not
non-human.

Bringing back lost species through the use of extreme genetic engineering and relocating species immediately threatened with extinction to more sustainable habitats have been addressed by the latest “Question for a Resilient Future” on HumansandNature.org. I also discussed it in my Think Here column entitled “Creatures Who Create,” in September 2014. Now Senior Scholars Ben Minteer and Harry Greene discuss these questions in greater depth in their articles here.

Minteer provides a critical discussion of proposals to bring back lost species using genetic engineering techniques. Should this be seen as in keeping with a conservation ethic? Minteer argues that it is not clear what exactly genetic engineering would bring back. As more active in interventions are used to combat biodiversity loss, he urges us to beware the concomitant loss of respect for nature’s wildness and of a sense of human proportion on the landscape.

In an essay reflecting on his experience as a field biologist, Greene discusses the complexity of species extinction and the notion of the wild. He sees the benefits of bringing back lost species. He also explores how wildness points to co-existence and can encompass a pragmatic attitude about human relations with other species.

The articles in this issue of Minding Nature are wide ranging and diverse. One leitmotif connecting them is a recognition of the interdependencies and links (biological, cultural, historical, and ontological) between the human and the non-human.
The next three articles take us into recent and controversial lines of inquiry in science and philosophy. They are interesting examples of how quite complex and specialized disciplines contain important resources for rethinking the relationship between humans and nature. They may push the edge of the envelope for some general readers who are not familiar with these specialized areas. They certainly do for me. But they repay careful attention and may lead us to explore further the domains they briefly describe.

Robert Drury King addresses political economy from a system theory and thermodynamic point of view. He argues that the capitalist system is entropic and losing its ability to maintain its social structural integrity because its reliance on natural environments has become threatened by the thermodynamic demands it imposes. He illustrates this by a discussion of possible interrelationships among climate change, food production, and the social unrest and violence that high food prices and climate disruptions produce. One way to break out of this pathological system logic is to change from high-output food production (industrial agribusiness) to low-input agricultural methods (“urban agriculture”).

Drawing on recent work in feminism and philosophical ontology, known as the “new materialism,” Rachel Tillman explores the implications of understanding the material world and the behavior of living matter in newly dynamic and vibrant ways. In the traditional Cartesian and Newtonian philosophical ontology that is still predominant in science, matter is passive and inert. The new materialism sees all matter, organic and inorganic, as active and creative in its being. Feminist thinkers have drawn out political and ethical implications of this, and Tillman sees here an opportunity to move away from the deep theoretical divide between the cultural and the natural.

John S. Torday and W.B. Miller, Jr., take us into the realm of innovative thinking in evolutionary biology. They explore the evolution of complex physiology and function as a continuum of basic biological and chemical processes that were present at the beginning of life on Earth. Through detailed biochemical accounts of the transition from anaerobic to aerobic life forms—the revolutionary transformation of Earth’s atmosphere by oxygen emissions, leading to the first great extinction and a chilling precedent to contemplate today—and the emergence of land-based life, they indicate the potential of a cellular perspective on evolution. The action of living matter still takes place at the unicellular level. If we understand this, will we humans, microbiome and all, take what they call a more “ecumenical” approach to life in the future than we have in the past?

Richard Blaustein reflects on the work of William Ruddiman, a geologist who finds that anthropogenic climate change is not a recent phenomenon, but goes back thousands of years. If we could change geophysical thermal dynamics with Neolithic technology and population levels, it is no wonder that we can impact the global climate so drastically today.

Steven M. Sullivan, a leader in the educational efforts observing the centenary of the extinction of the Passenger Pigeon, provides a sobering wake-up call concerning biodiversity loss. Something about the disastrous pace and extent
of what is now happening must somehow catch the attention of our imaginations, capture our conscience, and motivate an effective response. For some, the image and memory of a bird that once darkened North American skies is the trigger; others may find another source of inspiration. But find one we all must.

Finally, I regret to note the recent death of Andrew Henry Weber, whose article “Wildness and Wonder: On Saving the Planet,” appeared in the September 2014 issue of Minding Nature. We are glad that we had the opportunity to share his work with our readers.

NOTES

2. Note that mutuality is not the same as reciprocity. We can have relationships of mutuality with others who cannot engage in the direct equivalence and return that the notion of reciprocity implies.