We learn that we are loved, not through rational study of universal truths, but through particular, partial relationships of love, care, and reciprocity which we experience at significant moments in our lives. And just as we cannot love humanity in general without first experiencing the love of particular persons, and returning that love, so we cannot love nature as a whole, in abstraction from particular places or communities of species which we inhabit.

—Michael Northcott

My son was born in 1984. Beforehand, that would have been my last choice for his birth year, thanks to George Orwell’s influential novel. But the timing of his birth was not my call; although, yes, I did have some upstream influence on it. (What was I thinking?) Be that as it may, like many others I have been thinking often these days about Nineteen Eighty-Four. Everyone focuses on the surveillance prevalent in the society Orwell imagined, or foresaw. The ubiquitous feeling of being watched bespoke a totalitarian double bind in which survival required either a conformity that was deadening to the spirit, or strategies of concealment that, over time, also warped one’s life and relationships. My favorite aspect of the book, however, was not Big Brother watching, but Newspeak talking. Control in the state of Oceania extended well beyond bodies and overt actions to minds and covert thoughts—opinions, feelings, desires, hopes, and conscientious moral commitments. The Ministry of Truth (Minitruth), where the novel’s protagonist worked, was the instrument of a concerted assault on habitats of imagination leading to lexical-diversity loss and a Great Extinction of ideas.

On the surface, it would seem that the real 2017 is just the opposite of the fictional 1984. We are awash in words and images, created and generated with tremendous speed all over the planet. Can amoral power and sinister control lurk in an excess of transient thoughts as readily as in an intellectual desert? No doubt they can. In their abundance our words are cheap, precisely because they are mass produced and designed to neutralize thought. Genuine meaning is scarce. Thus, I believe Orwell’s warning remains pertinent to us: when meaningful words and concepts disappear from our shared linguistic commons, then our capacity to think, act, and even feel in ways linked to those meanings disappears as well. Our capacity to teach, learn, and cooperate is hobbled. All that’s left is either regimented obedience or arbitrary impulse. Concepts like truth, care, friendship, love, trust, and fidelity are all turned inside out and corrupted. The Minitruth censors information and rewrites scientific, historical, and archival evidence. In one scene, workers are described at desks equipped with a large receptacle where books and papers are vacuumed away into a tube leading, presumably, to a vast, unseen shredding machine. I thought of that image the other day when I learned that climate science information has been removed from public access on the website of the Environmental Protection Agency.

Orwell wrote in a post-war world where the principal challenge was to rebuild societies that protected those indi-
individual freedoms and human rights for which the Allied armies had so recently fought and died. In all honesty, it must be said that those goals have not yet been achieved, but now we live in a world with additional challenges. We confront the questions of how to live within safe operating margins of planetary systems, of how to stem biodiversity loss, and of how to transition to a sustainable and renewable energy system. The failure to meet these challenges will pose a future more dire than the one Orwell saw.

What these challenges to right relationships with nature today have in common with the unfinished business of social justice in human communities is that they both require the capacity for care. More precisely, they call for ecological care, by which I mean two things. First, ecological care involves caring about and for the health and integrity of the ecosystemic condition of life. Second, it requires a social, cultural, and political ecology of care-giving practices. Ecological care seeks a natural ecology well cared for and a cultural ecology in which care is well done.

Ethical theories provide a lens through which to understand the world and our place in it. They also provide motivation and will to act upon that understanding. Without value-infused vision and will, no matter how advanced our science and technology becomes, we are unlikely to rise to the occasion of the global environmental threats. Are our ethical systems and theories up to the task? If not, why not, and what can be done about it?

One of the things that makes Aldo Leopold’s essay “The Land Ethic” so enduring and compelling is the fact that he put his finger on the failings of the moral philosophies of his day, and this acute diagnosis has remained pertinent. Most philosophers since the Enlightenment have held that ethical life is a correction for the shortcomings of natural life. Leopold departs from that dualism in a particular way by maintaining that ethical philosophy and evolutionary ecology are essentially the same thing, considered from two different points of view. Their common element is the fact of symbiotic being and doing, which is necessary to human existence. Both ethical philosophy and ecology are essentially about “the tendency of interdependent individuals or groups to evolve modes of co-operation... with an ethical content.”

What Leopold calls the land ethic has two features. First, it is an incorporation of the non-human living world into the moral community that is recognized as the source of survival and flourishing among symbiotic human beings. Second, it is thereby an extension of the moral limits human beings impose in their dealings with each other to encompass as well their dealings with nature as a whole.

The land ethic has continued to be an important organizing focus of work in environmental and conservation ethics. A number of other developments in the humanities and social sciences have emerged in the past two decades that echo some of Leopold’s insights and redirect our thinking about ethics and morality in significant ways. The emergence of care ethics as a distinctive branch of moral and social philosophy can be understood against the backdrop of this broad reorientation of normative or value-oriented theorizing.

There are two principal in-
moral philosophy and political theory. Instead, received understandings of objectivity and impartiality are widely taken to be deficient because they actually undermine the achievement of human goods and ideals that they purport to enable. Among these defects are abstract universality, atemporality, essentialism, and a totalizing, hegemonic logic that is dismissive and perilous to diverse cultures around the world, and particularly so to vulnerable indigenous cultures and ways of life. The conceptual and practical remedies for these defects form a new pattern and new modes of conceptualization and practice. Among these are pluralism, reflexive perspectivalism, and a restructuring of economic and social institutions that would open society to new forms of inclusive, discursive engagement and empowerment. Such practices would provide a better source of normative authority than a search for Archimedean principles and transcendental reason has done. Their goal, ultimately, is to achieve greater epistemic justice and to realize democratic ideals, such as liberty and equality, through concrete praxis, constructive institution building, and the civic and moral learning that grows out of struggle against domination. In this sense, democracy is an experimental process, not an abstract telos or end point.

Begin with new senses of who and where moral communities and their members are. The dynamic here is a way of seeing human beings and doings in and through relationships of recognition, mutuality, respect and concern, need and vulnerability. This is a “relational turn” in which the individualism that has been the starting point of so much work in both moral and political philosophy is being reconstructed in a variety of transactional, ecological, and symbiotic directions. This emphasis puts approaches such as care theory in a good position to bridge the domain of ethical relationality among human beings and groups and the domain of the responsibilities of human conduct for its consequences on the integrity and resilience of ecosystems shared with other species.

Next, under what conditions does ethical agency take place, to what purposes, and in accordance with what kind of knowing? Here the dynamic I see taking shape might be referred to as a “positional turn.” (It might also be termed a “perspectival turn,” if we wish to underscore its epistemological implications.) In it, certain understandings of objectivity and of impartiality—that is to say, a certain understanding of reason, once held to be the foundation of the singular, correct, most reasonable, most enlightened “moral point of view”—are being challenged. Objectivity and impartiality once were not merely particular perspectives among others; they were the perspective of perspectives, transcending plurality and partiality. However, this is no longer a regulative ideal in
the reasons others have for what they do and to interpret the meaning such expressive agency conveys among agents as they interact together.\textsuperscript{5} Care is a special kind of social communication and cultural interpretation. Where does seeing the world through the lens of care leave one? I guess in a condition of plural singularities: multiple selves within each kaleidoscopic individual; communities that are emergent properties of the dynamic configuration of these possibilities of the self.

What is distinctive about the concept of care compared with such concepts as justice, rights, interests, and efficiency, each of which have been applied to both social ethics and to ecological ethics in various ways? Most fundamentally, care shifts the perspective and the starting point of ethical thinking. It is not premised on respect for autonomous, independent selves. It is premised on relationships born out of vulnerability, insufficiency, need, and interdependence.

Can we avoid the seeming skepticism or even nihilism of the positional turn and still have a secure ethical orientation that demands and protects pluralism and diversity? Can we have the holism of the relational turn and yet still talk meaningfully about human beings as subjects who are intentional agents conscious of their own unique individuality, as well as their own interdependence?

The answers to these questions emerge together. A key part of the answer is the concept of care. Care depends on the ability to apprehend waiting to be arrived at. By the same token, care is best seen as a multi-dimensional part of one’s way of life, not as a service to be exchanged or a commodity to be provided.

I believe that these two dynamics are intertwining and mutually reinforcing in many respects. A certain narrative of selfhood—rational, self-interested, competent, virtuous and skilled (in a bourgeois sense), competitive, self-reliant—provides the historical and cultural current against which these two dynamics are swimming. This totalizing individualism stifles thick lives and authentic, non-exploitative individuality. Relational being motivates pluralistic, positional ways of seeing, and the greater discernment of that vision reinforces the positive functioning of the necessary ties of mutuality and interdependence in both social and natural life.

On the other hand, there are important tensions between these two reorientations in ethics. The relational orientation is strongly holistic when it comes to the reality of human being and the human condition. But both the relational turn and the positional turn arise out of a rejection of abstract philosophical essentialism, and this skepticism extends to purportedly naturalistic scientific accounts of “human nature,” as well. The positional perspective especially is sensitive to the ways in which such notions about what is in our nature—what is purportedly inherent and unchangeable in the culture and behavior of a certain time and place—have been used to legitimize structures of power and domination.

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The answers to these questions emerge together. A key part of the answer is the concept of care. Care depends on the ability to apprehend
because it drives too sharp a wedge between motivation and justification and presupposes questionable dichotomies between fact and value and emotion and reason. Thinking through the concept of care challenges these dichotomies head-on. One of the advantages of the concept of care is that it tends to reintegrate motivation and justification. This reintegration is especially important for a moral vocabulary that can have practical impact in politics and public policy.

Compared with justice, duty, and rights, care seems a soft and, well, gendered notion. Notice, for example, how over many years—my entire adult lifetime, pretty much—the caring term “tree hugger” has been used disparagingly by those opposed to environmental conservation and activism. Still, to put it mildly, the hard-nosed among us have not been doing such a great job of environmental protection during this period of time. Perhaps this is because protection unaccompanied by care doesn’t work over the long haul.

Care offers a universalism that is concrete and thick. Care theorists such as Eva Feder Kittay point out that universalism is biologically grounded on the necessity of maternal care. Every living human being has in common the fact that once they were cared for by someone who took on a mothering role and relationship to them. This commonality extends backward in time. All persons who cared as a mother for a child were able to do so only because mothering had been extended to them by a previous generation. Human society fundamentally depends on this structure of care-giving roles and caring relationships. Among persons, Kittay argues, equality is not based on properties that an individual possesses by virtue of who that individual is, but instead on properties that one possesses by virtue of properties that another person has or once had.

Care is often understood as a virtue—tending to the needs and well-being of children or elderly, ailing parents, for example. Since historically, in most cultures, much of the private and personal care work has been performed by women and girls, this tendency to equate care with the private realm of the family and the household has gone more or less unquestioned. Many feminist philosophers are suspicious of care theory because
they feel it pulls women back into the private, domestic realm. (Logically, of course, it could also have the effect of pushing men forward into the domestic realm.)

In one sense, this historical link between care and the domestic sphere of the household, the oikos, could be an advantage for an ecological conception of care, especially to the extent that we are talking about care for ecosystems and webs of life as our natural home. Peter G. Brown, Geoffrey Garver, and Peter Timmerman, for example, have developed notions of ethical householding, thrift, and frugality that flesh out an ethic of ecological care in these ways. Nonetheless, to the extent that we want to develop the civic or public dimension of ecological care—the creation of a cultural ethos and an institutional framework that promotes and supports practices of care not only in the household and family but also in the public sphere and the civil society—then we must link practices of care to forms of democratic political agency that meet unmet need, solve policy problems, and make circumstances more just, equitable, and conducive to health and well-being. Within the broader political economy and social welfare policy of a nation, care practices in private life and in public policy can reinforce one another.

In the literature of care ethics a useful vocabulary for the purpose of extending the concept of care into the public sphere of democratic citizenship and public policy and into the natural environmental domain is offered by the work of Joan Tronto. In collaboration with Berenice Fisher, Tronto defines care as follows:

On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity and includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our “world” so that we can live in it as well as possible. That World includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.

In later work, Tronto built upon this definition by examining different aspects of what should be called “the practices of care.” Before discussing this further, let me clarify what I mean by “practices,” a term of art in ethical theory reminiscent of the perspective of early twentieth century pragmatist philosophers such as John Dewey and more recently developed in important ways by Alasdair MacIntyre.

Practices are not the constructs of a theory but the manifestation of ongoing cultural traditions and experimental or innovative modes of cooperation. They are informed both by tacit knowing and by explicit values and purposes. A practice is a form of activity that is valued in a society and governed by ethical norms. By engaging in these well-defined activities, individuals pursue the attainment of excellence and seek to actualize potential capabilities. In this way, cultures and societies provide pathways for the development of flourishing lives well lived.

When the activity of care is pursued as a cultural practice (for instance, in the professions of medicine, nursing, education, or forestry; in the institution of marriage and parenting; or in the pursuits of gardening, animal protection, or ecological restoration), it is interwoven in a well-defined fabric of cooperation and communication. Such practices already permeate everyday life,
so it is not a question of building pathways for ecological care from the ground up, so to speak. Rather, it is a more situated, practical question of mending or healing broken practices or sending out extensions of existing practices into new domains, like shoots or tendrils growing and intertwining in rhizomic fashion.

Care can sometimes be imperious and domineering. When it realizes its full moral possibilities, though, care is an enmeshed practice of nurture, protection, provision, and support for the other. It does not so much domineer as give the person receiving it a new insight about his or her own life. Since the need for care often follows injury, illness, and loss of various kinds, care offers hope through a new way of seeing the positive possibilities present in a given situation. Care among humans is a transaction among individuals who are the authors of their own acts and lives, despite their need, impairment, or limitations. But they are symbiotic, not solipsistic, authors.

There is a strong connection between the stance and activities associated with the relationality and positionality of care and that of solidarity. With solidarity the fundamental position is standing up beside. In the course of solidarity’s practice, this fundamental position then moves and reshapes developmentally into three modalities—standing up for, standing up with, and standing up as. Tronto offers a similar view of the positionality of care. She distinguishes among caring about, taking care of, care-giving, and care-receiving.

Caring about denotes the initial recognition of another’s need for care. As with solidarity, the “other” in question need not be another individual human being. It can be a human group, individuals or populations of another species, or an ecosystem within which the species activity of many symbiotically related creatures is made possible, and they can live well in accordance with the capabilities of their kind.

Taking care of involves assuming responsibility for the determined need of the other and undertaking steps to meet that need. If caring about
and genetic diversity, are usually seen as objects, not subjects, even before their impairment calls forth the need for human care, let alone afterward.

Thus, care receiving raises ethical issues and applies to care given to non-human species and ecosystems, as well. Here, the difference between wild and domesticated or artificially bred and genetically engineered animals is certainly significant. Care is clearly in place with the latter. But I think this aspect of an ethic of ecological care holds for wild nature, too. Not only those who work with pets, animal training, and agriculture, but also those experienced in conservation biology and restoration work often have the discernment and the ability to listen to and interpret what the natural recipient of caring interventions is “saying” in response. Moreover, very important to this idea on both a personal and a policy level is the difference between interacting with living creatures or systems as objects of study or as resources to be utilized versus interacting with them as subjects of a relationship of mutuality and of care.15

Care begins with the particulars of society, culture, and psychology—its starting point is the latent possibilities of a given place at a given time and with ongoing forms of meaningful agency pressing against structures of power. It builds on senses of historical memory and tradition, and it feeds on the gratitude felt when one recognizes the service and contributions that others have made to one’s way of life. Care begins with the recognition of symbiotic interdependence and then intervenes in—interrupts—an ongoing form of life in order to be present to the need, vulnerability, and suffering it contains, finally winning through to a better kind of species activity and life well-lived.

Care tends to move our ethical attention away from the generic, abstract, and universal toward practical and concrete social, historical, or personal situations. It inherently leads us to view our own lives and agency as bound together with the rights, well-being, health, and dignity of others here and now. That does not mean that ecological care is merely a synchronic perspective—a cross-section of frozen time—that forgets the past or discounts the future. The notion of care would be of little value to us today in the face of earth system challenges if it did.

Nonetheless, a moral discourse that takes ecological care seriously does make a fateful wager. It puts its chips on the bet that the capacity for critical reasoning and moral imagination can grow. It can arise developmentally out of an engagement with the vocation of “repairing,” as Tronto puts it, a needful, vulnerable, responsive world.

This issue of Minding Nature features essays by the lead scholars of the Question for a Resilient Future on What Can Evolution Tell Us about Morality? Jeffrey Schloss reviews debates in evolutionary theory concerning the development of human social cooperation, group identification, and mutual aid. He discusses many current approaches, including an integrative perspective in that field called cultural group selection theory. Apparently, we are not just a naturally selfish and competitive species, but culturally we still have a ways to go. In his essay Christopher Boehm takes up the prehistoric legacy of capital punishment and reflects on its possible evolutionary influence. In his wide-ranging discussion he touches on his own
anthropological and ethological fieldwork and on conceptual issues within evolutionary theory, such as teleology and purpose.

Working in a very different field, human rights theory and the global rights movement, Tom Kerns explores current efforts to deal with threats to group well-being and coherence that take the form of environmentally destructive corporate and technological activities. He reviews the framework of human rights and then considers issues of its enforcement and its extension into ecological protection. Tribunals have developed into effective enforcement and regulatory mechanisms, and he makes the case for strengthening them.

Essays by photographer Mary Peck and writer and poet Matt Miles shift the tone from ethics and law toward more direct and personal encounters with the natural world. Peck discusses the Elwha River on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington state and the lives of the indigenous people there—salmon fishermen who have been struggling against a disruptive dam on the river. She then moves around the world to discuss ecological values and protections in the small Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan. Miles, traveling both in England and in parks and wilderness areas of the United States, provides an eloquent essay on the vision that darkness makes possible and that light pollution has hampered in modern times. Bringing Kerns and Miles together, one might argue for a human right to a starry night sky.

Our Reviews and Reflections are similarly wide ranging, with two essays, two book review essays, and a poem. The essays both grow out of the fields of religious studies and theology. Julia Johnson discusses biblical accounts of right relationships between humans and animals, focusing on the powerful symbol of the calf, golden and otherwise. This frames her uncompromising account of the contemporary veal industry and its animal care and use practices—much use, virtually no true care. From the specific to the broad, Mark Graham provides an appreciatively critical perspective on Pope Francis’s 2015 encyclical Laudato Si. Graham calls upon the Pope to follow that up with a more focused, hard hitting, and prophetic teaching on climate change specifically and the great need for a moral conversion.

Reviewing Mike Shanahan’s book Gods, Wasps and Stranglers: The Secret History and Redemptive Future of Fig Trees, Joan Gibb Engel explores how the fig can build a bridge between science-based and faith-based understandings. What a perfect theme for this issue! Stephen Rutt offers a reflective review of Michael Engelhard, Ice Bear: The Cultural History of an Arctic Icon. Readers of Minding Nature will be familiar with Engelhard’s work from his essay in the May 2016 issue on Knut, the famous captive bear in the Berlin Zoo, and then later a taxidermic exhibit at the Berlin Museum of Natural History.

Rounding out the issue we are very pleased to have a poem by Catherine Young and the Last Word by Richard Bluestein on the restoration of Barreto Point Park in New York City.

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NOTES


4. In a previous essay, I discussed the ways in which Hannah Arendt anticipated this line of positional criticism in her discussion of the concept of universal rights grounded on humanity as such, rather than on humanity as concretely emplaced and lived through individual human beings engaged in worlds of care and love. See “Who(see) Are We?” Minding Nature 9, no. 3 (2016): 4-10, at http://www.humansandnature.org/Who-see-are-we.


6. Dismissed in similar ways are those in the environmental humanities who have been accused of being “romantic” or “sentimental,” as if it were intellectually disqualifying to be influenced by a thinker like Rousseau or Wordsworth. Such critics have perhaps been reading too much Theodore Roosevelt.


10. Tronto, Moral Boundaries, 103.


12. MacIntyre, After Virtue, 187-203.

