FREEDOM AND DEPENDENCY IN AN ENVIRONMENTAL AGE*

By Andrew Dobson

I. Introduction: A "Natural History" of Autonomy

Surprisingly little has been written directly about the relationship between freedom and the environment, or freedom and nature. What there is falls into two distinct yet related camps. First, there are debates regarding the degree to which freedoms can be legitimately circumscribed in the name of environmental sustainability—the freedom to travel, for example. Some would argue that the freedom to travel—particularly air travel—should be circumscribed because of its contribution to climate change. Second, there is a series of what we might call ontological debates regarding the human condition in relation to nature, the way in which we understand and conceive it, and the constraints and opportunities it constitutes and provides. This essay will be a contribution to the second of these debates, although reflections of this sort inevitably have a bearing on the more quotidian questions of freedom and autonomy too.

In regard to this second debate, the dominant trope is that nature is a source of unfreedom. Perhaps Immanuel Kant gives the clearest and most influential account of the realm of nature as a realm of unfreedom. Kant's insistence that autonomy is only possible in the human realm, and his determination to contrast this realm with the heteronomous realm of unfreedom, has had a profound effect on our received understandings of the relationship between nature and freedom: freedom, it is believed, consists in overcoming the dead hand of nature.

Kant develops the crucial distinctions between autonomy and heteronomy, the rational will and the nonrational will, the human realm and the realm of nature, and persons and things, in his discussion of the possibility of morality. As far as morality is concerned, his general point is that its principles cannot be derived from empirical experience because this would make them contingent. In order for them to be universal, they must be founded in purely rational concepts. Moral concepts must therefore not be derived from what he calls "anthropology," but must rather

"have their seat and origin entirely a priori in reason."[1] A corollary of this is that "everything empirical is not only wholly unworthy to be an ingredient in the principle of morality but is even highly prejudicial to the purity of moral practices themselves."[2] In other words, any moral obligations derived from particular experiences or generated by particular relationships are impure and cannot be universal.

Autonomy is crucial to the project of deriving universal principles of morality because only the autonomous will can prescribe a law to itself, unprompted by contingent circumstance or desire: "Autonomy of the will is that property of it by which it is a law to itself independently of any property of objects of volition."[3] Under heteronomy, however, "the will does not give itself the law, but the object through its relation to the will gives the law to it."[4] Only what Kant calls "rational beings" possess autonomy of the will, in that the rational being "as an end in himself, [is] destined to be legislative in the realm of ends, free from all laws of nature and obedient only to those which he himself gives."[5] That autonomy of the will is a peculiarly human faculty is made clear by his contention that only rational beings possess it. "Rational nature," in turn, "is distinguished from others in that it proposes an end to itself."[6] Since (as far as we know) only human beings can propose ends to themselves in this fashion, the circle is complete: autonomy can only be possessed by rational creatures; rational creatures are human creatures who propose ends to themselves; autonomy is therefore a human faculty. In this way autonomy serves as a marker of the human.

But it can only serve as a marker of the human as long as there is a nonhuman realm with which to contrast it. Rational creatures are contrasted with nonrational ones in the following way: "Beings whose existence depends not on our will but on nature's, have nevertheless, if they are irrational beings, only a relative value as means, and are therefore called things; rational beings, on the contrary, are called persons, because their very nature points them out as ends in themselves, that is as something which must not be used merely as means, and so far therefore restricts freedom of action (and is an object of respect)."[7] Beings whose existence depends on nature exist in what Kant calls "the realm of nature"—itself made possible "by laws of efficient causes of things externally necessitated."[8] As far as morality is concerned, we already know that laws which are externally necessitated cannot be of a universal character, and

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[1] Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), ed. Robert Paul Wolff (Indianapolis, IN, and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), 32–33.

[2] Ibid., 50.

[3] Ibid., 67.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 61.

[6] Ibid., 63.

[7] Ibid., 53.

[8] Ibid., 64–65.

in such circumstances "it would be really nature that would give the law. As a law of nature, known and proved by experience, it would be contingent and therefore unfit to be an apodictical [i.e., certain] practical rule such as the moral rule must be."[9] Therefore, the realm of nature is a realm inhabited by nonrational heteronomous beings (whom we can properly regard as means to an end) whose moral laws (insofar as we might impute them) are contingent. This realm of nature is contrasted with the human realm inhabited by rational autonomous beings (who are ends in themselves) whose moral laws are universal.

The history of autonomy, then, is bound up with the history of human self-definition and of the construction of nature. Humans are defined by the autonomy of their will over against a heteronomous realm called nature. As far as our relationship with the natural is concerned (and speaking very schematically), humans can see themselves as wholly natural, partly natural, or wholly nonnatural, and it is clear that on a Kantian understanding of autonomy the distance between the human and the natural is maximized. Philosopher Jerome Schneewind has rightly remarked that as far as the moral self is concerned, Kant simply *had* "to think of that self as inhabiting a realm wholly other than the natural."[10] Of course, this is not to say that Kant thought human beings to be entirely nonnatural creatures, but only that as far as morality is concerned their naturalness is irrelevant.

II. Modernity: The Will to Master Nature

Political philosophers Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift write in this connection that once autonomy becomes the basis for morality, one is led implicitly to deny the existence of "an objective order in the universe, for such an order would determine that some conceptions of the good are right and others wrong and thus lead us towards a substantive conception of practical reason. Procedural conceptions of rationality in morals are designed for a disenchanted universe in which subjects are free to choose not only their way of life but also the standards in terms of which they shall measure the worth of those lives."[11] Such procedural conceptions of rationality and the understanding of morality that flows from them are, of course, the mark of the modern mind—partly definitive, indeed, of modernity itself.

The idea that modernity is characterized by the will to master nature in the name of freedom is underscored by an intriguing culture-comparative study by Julia Thomas, examining the work of Japanese political philos-

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[9] Ibid., 71; the bracketed insertion is mine.
[10] Jerome Schneewind, "The Use of Autonomy in Ethical Theory," in Agnes Heller et al., eds., *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986), 69.
[11] Stephen Mulhall, and Adam Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 117.

opher Maruyama Masao and of Frankfurt School theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno.[12] As Thomas writes, all these theorists "made nature an important category in their analysis of the failed hope for freedom"[13]—but with very different rationales and consequences: "Both sets of authors define modernity as the moment when humanity overcomes nature, but Maruyama longs for this triumph while Horkheimer and Adorno deplore its consequences."[14] Thomas notes that while nature (and its nature) have been largely absent from discussions of freedom, it has performed a consistent role as a realm of unfreedom: "Although twentieth-century theories of modernity rarely consider their indebtedness to a conception of nature as the starting point of history and as the antithesis of freedom, it is obvious in the writings under discussion here, at least, that concepts of nature structure concepts of modernity and its promise of liberation."[15] Horkheimer and Adorno themselves bemoan the "denial of nature in man for the sake of domination over non-human nature and other men."[16] They write: "As soon as man discards his awareness that he himself is nature, all the aims for which he keeps himself alive—social progress, the intensification of all his material and spiritual powers, even consciousness itself—are nullified, and the enthronement of the means as an end, under which late capitalism is tantamount to open insanity, is already perceptible in the prehistory of subjectivity."[17]

So modernity's notion of liberation involves maximizing the distance between the human and the natural, and underplaying the extent to which the human being is a natural creature. This disengagement of the human from the natural, in turn, has helped produce and reproduce the belief that there are no natural limits to human activity in respect of the nonhuman natural world. It would take me too far from my brief to outline the arguments over the causes of present environmental dilemmas, but to the extent that some of the blame may be laid at the door of old-fashioned human hubris, and to the extent that this is fueled by the disengagement of human from natural law, and to the extent that the construction of autonomy demanded such disengagement, then autonomy has an environmental case to answer.

III. Intimations of Heteronomy

This process of disengagement, or "disenchantment," contrasts sharply with those cosmologies within which human beings' status as natural crea-

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[12] Julia A. Thomas, "The Cage of *Nature:* Modernity's History in Japan," *History and Theory* 40, no. 1 (2001): 16–37.

[13] Ibid., 17.

[14] Ibid., 16.

[15] Ibid., 18.

[16] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 54.

[17] Ibid.

tures *does* have moral implications, in the sense that a different *kind* of morality comes to be stressed. In her examination of African and European and men's and women's moralities, post-colonial theorist Sandra Harding writes (schematically) that the differences between them are based on different ontologies: On the one hand, "Europeans and men are thought to conceptualise the self as autonomous, individualistic, self-interested, fundamentally isolated from other people and from nature, and threatened by those 'others' unless the 'others' are dominated by the self." On the other hand, "[T]o Africans and women are attributed ethics that emphasise responsibilities to increasing the welfare of social complexes through contextual, inductive, and tentative decision processes." [18] These rather simplistic distinctions are open to a range of objections, none of which can be addressed here, but they do serve to illustrate the fundamental difference between moralities of embeddedness and disembeddedness. Basing morality on autonomy demands that the holder of autonomy is disembedded from contingent and therefore heteronomous circumstances. Once again, it is clear how the development of the notion of autonomy has entailed both the disenchantment of the world and the stretching of what cultural theorist Shane Phelan has called the "intimate distance" between human beings and the natural world.[19] Phelan suggests that as far as nature is concerned, human beings are neither wholly of it nor wholly apart from it—this is the "intimate distance" between humans and nature of which he speaks. In demanding the dislocation of the human and the natural, autonomy seems to belie such an interpretation in stressing, rather, the *gulf* between the autonomous and heteronomous wills and the realms that accommodate them.

One way of putting this is to say that autonomy works with a one-sided interpretation of the human condition. In stressing free activity, the notion underestimates the extent to which we are subject to circumstances that are nonvoluntary and even beyond our control. On some readings, indeed, it is a necessary condition for our doing anything at all that we inhabit a resisting world, always already populated by people, things, and concepts with which we have concrete relationships. A number of philosophers and other theorists have called the "autonomy picture" into question. Hegel, for example, criticized Kant's categorical imperative for being an "empty formalism," involving the doing of "duty for duty's sake," [20] and he went on to argue for the foundational need for concreteness: "a contradiction must be a contradiction of something, i.e. of some content presupposed from the start as a fixed principle." [21]

[18] Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 171.

[19] Shane Phelan, "Intimate Distance: The Dislocation of Nature in Modernity," *The Western Political Quarterly* 45 (June 1992): 385.

[20] Georg Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1967) 90.

[21] Ibid.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, too, provides a reference point for criticism of the Kantian view of the unencumbered and autonomous self in that he "provides strong reasons for thinking that the self cannot be understood independently of society because of the non-contingent link between language, the characterisation of inner experience and social standards."[22] Shared practice is therefore a precondition for social intercourse of any kind, and in this respect we are constitutively heteronomous rather than (or, better, as well as) autonomous beings.

Feminist sociologist and psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow has argued that psychoanalysis, too, works in opposition to the assumptions governing theories of autonomy: "[A]ccording to Freud . . . we are not who or what we think we are: we do not know our own centers; in fact, we probably do not have a center at all. Psychoanalysis radically undermines notions about autonomy, individual choice, responsibility and rationality, showing that we do not control our lives in the most fundamental sense."[23] Freud, of course, wanted to restore autonomy to the traumatized individual, and to a large extent this is what clinical psychiatry is about. But Chodorow points out that there are at least two conceptions of the self available, and which conception one chooses depends largely on how one interprets the human condition. The first interpretation is friendly to autonomy, while the second is inimical to it: "[O]ne is the traditional autonomous self of the pristine individual: the other is to reconstruct *a self that is in its very structure fundamentally implicated in relations with others.*"[24]

IV. Communitarianism: Embeddedness—and Embodiedness

This last comment echoes what has come to be seen as one of the standard "communitarian" critiques of liberal individualism, as articulated by thinkers such as Michael Sandel, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Michael Walzer. The idea is that liberals consider the human being in the guise of a logical abstraction, and that the demands then made by liberals of this logical abstraction (for example that, in Rawlsian terms, it derive principles of justice) are incompatible with it *being* a logical abstraction: the theory attempts "to substitute the standard of moral personality for that of natural humanity: fictitious 'moral persons,' not real human animals, are its subject matter."[25] The very thinly conceived Rawlsian individual needs more information than Rawls grants it (in the original position) to get its own conversation about the principles of justice off the ground (even if the conversation is in the first instance

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[22] Raymond Plant, *Modern Political Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 347.
[23] Nancy Chodorow, "Toward a Relational Individualism: The Mediation of Self Through Psychoanalysis," in Heller et al., eds., *Reconstructing Individualism,* 197.
[24] Ibid., 199 (my emphasis).
[25] John Zvesper, *Nature and Liberty* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 116.

self-referential). In other words, Rawlsian ontology is inconsistent with Rawlsian epistemology, or, as political philosopher Seyla Benhabib has put it: "[W]ithout assuming the standpoint of the concrete other, no coherent universalizability test can be carried out, for we lack the necessary epistemic information to judge my moral situation to be 'like' or 'unlike' yours."[26]

These communitarian critiques tend to stress the way in which human beings are always already members of *human* communities which are constitutive of, rather than contingent to, individual identity. What a "natural history" of autonomy suggests, in addition, is that the "thinness" of the liberal individual underestimates not only the constitutively communitarian aspects of human existence, but its natural aspects too. In other words, it is not only that the human being cannot be considered as unencumbered in respect of its social nexus, but that it cannot be divested of its naturalness either. This observation should prompt an examination of the human condition that caters to our heteronomous, as well as our autonomous, nature. Such an examination would stress the ways in which human moral options are limited by our condition as natural creatures, subject to the laws of nature. As philosopher Roy Bhaskar has put it, what we need is an account of "embodied human agency," and Bhaskar wonders what "responsibility and freedom" would look like within such an account.[27] Whether such an account could or should amount to a determinate morality (i.e., an account of what we *ought* to do, rather than just what we ought *not* to do) is, for now, an open question. Nevertheless, it is clear that autonomy is generated within a very particular ontological matrix, the nub of which is a stressing of the nonnatural aspects of human existence. If our having one foot in the camp of heteronomous nature is of any importance to us, then autonomy as a basis for moral and social prescription may be found wanting.

Of the communitarian theorists mentioned earlier, Alasdair MacIntyre has taken the greatest strides toward considering the implications of taking seriously our ecological as well as our social and cultural embeddedness. Near the beginning of his *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999), and with reference to his earlier work, he writes: "I now judge that I was in error in supposing an ethics independent of biology to be possible."[28] The principal reason for this judgement is his conviction that an ethics that pays no mind to the circumstances of its possibility is an inadequate ethics. More particularly, any reasonable account of an ethics must take into consideration our condition as biological beings:

[26] Seyla Benhabib, "The Generalized and the Concrete Other," in Eva Feder Kittay and Diana T. Meyers, *Women and Moral Theory* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1987), 166–67.
[27] Roy Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 53.
[28] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), ix.

> [N]o account of the goods, rules and virtues that are definitive of our moral life can be adequate that does not explain . . . how that form of life is possible for beings who are biologically constituted as we are.[29]

I believe that this starting point is as relevant for our enquiry into the nature of freedom in an environmental age as it is for MacIntyre's wider (or is it narrower?) enquiry into the virtues of "dependent rational animals." And as MacIntyre says, starting points are very important because, "In philosophy where one begins generally makes a difference to the outcome of one's enquiries."[30]

MacIntyre's central insight is neatly summed up in the expressive title of his book: human beings are dependent rational animals. It will become clear in what follows that while I endorse this description of our condition in its most general form, I believe that MacIntyre's understanding of "dependence" falls short of what is required for a full understanding of our condition as biological (better, "ecological") beings. This is in part because the dependence of which MacIntyre mainly speaks is our dependence on human others—especially at moments of vulnerability in our lives, such as when we are young, old, or sick. We would surely agree that this "social" dependence is indeed a part of the experience of most if not all of us, but MacIntyre's focus on this type of dependence in his book is bought at the cost of a gradual disappearing of a more general form of dependence which the earlier part of *Dependent Rational Animals* brings out clearly and originally. In the earlier pages, MacIntyre is keen to stress the animality of human beings, how it is a mistake to be "forgetful of our bodies,"[31] and how it is important to take our "human animality more seriously."[32]

MacIntyre's interest in remembering all this is that he believes that "in our earliest childhood activities and to some significant extent thereafter we comport ourselves towards the world in much the same way as other dependent animals."[33] Crucially, "[i]n transcending some of their limitations we never separate ourselves entirely from what we share with them."[34] Even more crucially, "our ability to transcend those limitations depends in part upon certain of those animal characteristics."[35] So MacIntyre's book is best read as a theory of the development of the human individual, the terminus of which is the "independent practical reasoner."[36] And this development depends on a recognition of our depen-

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[29] Ibid., 10.
[30] Ibid., 4.
[31] Ibid., 5.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., 8.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid., 81.

dence, particularly our dependence on other humans who are close to us. By the end of the book, the trope that animated the earlier parts of it—the animality of humans—has been all but forgotten, and part of my intention in what follows is to see what would happen if it was kept clearly in focus throughout.

For MacIntyre is surely right to begin his enquiry with the following reminder:

> From its earliest sixteenth-century uses in English and other European languages "animal" and whatever other expressions correspond to it have been employed both to name a class whose members include spiders, bees, chimpanzees, dolphins *and* humans—among others—but not plants, inanimate beings, angels and God, and also to name the class consisting only of nonhuman animals.[37]

As he points out, "It is this latter use that became dominant in modern Western cultures and with it a habit of mind that, by distracting our attention from how much we share with certain other animal species, puts itself at odds both with older Aristotelian modes of thought and with modern postDarwinian evolutionary naturalism."[38]

If modernity has sundered humanity and nature, some will suggest that they need to be put back together again. Law professor Louis Wolcher, for example, has written about the need to think about what nature is, because, "[p]rior to any question about the relationship between necessity and contingency, nature and freedom, lies a more fundamental question that is hardly ever asked: What *is* nature?"[39] Wolcher argues that we need to return to the pre-Socratic Greeks for enlightenment since "long before there was nature there was *physis*."[40] This is important because, for Wolcher, "nature" is always constructed as "other" than the human, and this can lead us to regard it as a set of resources for the enactment of our freedom rather than the ineluctable circumstances within which our very notion of freedom needs to be inscribed: "In the beginning, *physis* was never a realm of the natural, as opposed to man-made, objects interacting with one another in determinate processes occupying space and time. Rather, *physis* was originally conceived as the *self*-generation of all that is."[41] So humans—and their freedom—are *part of* "all that is" rather than *apart from* all that is, and Wolcher's point is that this change of perspective would make a considerable difference to how we conceive the very idea of freedom. He writes: "Modern science and technology are completely, if not obses-

[37] Ibid., 11 (emphasis in the original).
[38] Ibid., 12.
[39] Louis E. Wolcher, "Nature and Freedom," *The Independent Review* 9, no. 2 (2004): 263.
[40] Ibid., 264.
[41] Ibid.

sively, grounded in the idea of nature as *natura.* In *natura,* human needs and wants, including the scientific desire to know, are set against a nature that is an adversary to be conquered and tamed"[42]—and we might add "politics" to Wolcher's reference to science and technology as "obsessively grounded" in the idea of nature as resource.[43]

This modern "forgetting" of ourselves as animals has arguably had a significant effect on a range of our habits and practices, a number of which are relevant to the human condition at this historical juncture. Indeed, as I suggested earlier, it is part of the environmentalists' critique that environmental problems have their roots in what they would regard as the hubristic belief that humans can exempt themselves from the structures that condition life in general. As Bhaskar puts it:

> To fail to see . . . that there are physical (natural) constraints on human social life . . . is a charter for ecological disaster, if not indeed (species) suicide. . . . [T]here may be some absolutes (universals, constants) of significance for human beings—which they just have to accept or "recognize." For example, fundamental laws of nature, the scarcity of some natural resources, upper limits to ecologically sustainable economic growth, aspects of human nature, the fact of the finitude (if not the precise duration) of human existence.[44]

It is also part of the "hubris" critique that this attitude has been buttressed by an intellectual edifice that has sought to emphasize the capacity of human beings to cast off the chains of their "natural condition"—and the benefits of doing so.

All this shows that the development of contemporary dominant understandings of freedom has taken place with reference to nature and to a particular understanding of humans' relationship to it. It is as though if nature had not existed, in the form that Kant, for example, conceived it, something very like it would have had to be invented in order to get "freedom-as-liberty" off the ground. This suggests that if we find we need to reconceptualize our understanding of our relationship to nature, along the lines of a recognition of ourselves as natural as well as cultural creatures, we may find our notions of freedom changing at the same time. Put differently, if the realms of autonomy and heteronomy turn out not to be as distinct as Kant suggested, then what are the grounds for maintaining that the human creature must be regarded, as we saw Kant assert earlier, "as an end in himself, destined to be legislative in the realm of ends, free

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[42] Ibid., 266.
[43] Wolcher is not so naïve as to think that we should *never* think of nature as resource: "No reasonable person doubts that human beings need natural resources in order to live and prosper." Ibid., 266.
[44] Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom,* 73.

from all laws of nature and obedient only to those which he himself gives"?[45]

V. Context-Dependent Liberalism

Thus, the development of our understanding of freedom has taken place alongside—and, indeed, necessitated—a distancing of the human from the natural, or, better, a forgetting that humans are natural as well as cultural or political creatures. Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, one can see a series of moves made during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which maximize the distance between the human and the natural and minimize any sense of the dependence of the former on the latter. We have already seen Kant building his account of autonomy on this rupture, and these moves in philosophy were presaged almost a hundred years earlier by John Locke as he developed a liberal theory of political economy. Liberalism is important to our enquiry into the relationship between freedom and nature because although, as we saw earlier, relatively little has been written about this relationship directly, much more has been written about the relationship between liberalism and the environment—and much of what has been written in this context amounts to a contribution to the debate regarding liberty and environmentalism. Dutch political philosopher Marcel Wissenburg sets out the parameters in stark fashion: "in no respect can liberal democracy and environmental concerns be so much at odds as where liberty is concerned."[46] This is because while we can see ways in which equality and sustainability (and democracy and sustainability) might be compatible objectives,

> things are different for freedom and liberty. The environment puts limits to what people can do—limits to waste production, limits to the use of resources, limits to survival. Recognizing this and translating it into rights and policies, as happens increasingly in our days with the discovery of an ever-increasing number of environmental problems (read: limits), directly implies that there will be new limits to liberty, to what people are allowed to do.[47]

There are four basic fault lines in the debate regarding the compatibility between liberalism and environmentalism. First, as Wissenburg points out above, there are arguments over liberty and freedom. Liberty is central to the liberal creed, and anything that smacks of prohibition (e.g., restrictions on consumption and mobility) will be regarded with suspi-

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[45] Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals,* 61.
[46] Marcel Wissenburg, *Green Liberalism: The Free and the Green Society* (London: UCL Press, 1998), 33.
[47] Ibid.

cion by liberals. Second, there are arguments over autonomy: liberals regard their felt *preferences* as an accurate indicator of their *interests.* Any sign of the state or other agents interfering with preferences will not be looked upon benignly. Environmentalists seem often to be in the business of trying to change attitudes and behavior, and this can bring them into conflict with liberals. Third, we encounter arguments over the "good life." It is debatable whether environmentalism is neutral as regards ethical, aesthetic, and religious ideals, but to the degree that it is not, it is in tension with liberalism's cherished good-life-neutrality objective. (It is also debatable whether liberalism is itself neutral in the required ways, but let that pass for now). Finally, there are disputes over the relative importance of the ends and the means of political association. Liberalism is driven by concern for the procedures of politics rather than trying to secure any particular objectives, and while this commitment has borne welcome fruit—such as support for democracy—it is also, perhaps, in tension with the ecological determination to bring about sustainable ways of living.

Rather than deal with any of these fault lines in detail, I propose to take a step back and consider the broader historical context within which liberalism is inscribed, and which inflects and affects the ways in which terms like "liberty" are apprehended. The underlying idea, as political theorist John Zvesper puts it, is that "[m]odern liberals suffer from an advanced case of *physiphobia,* an unreasonable fear of nature."[48]

What kind of a world did the inventors of liberalism inhabit? It is well documented that the early days of liberalism coincided with the first stages of the European discovery of other cultures—a world that was confirmed to have other people in it, but which was "empty" compared to the way we might conceive it today. Early liberals worked with a state of nature, characterized by two kinds of "emptiness"—in terms of people, and also in terms of our moral relationship with it. This produces a very particular sort of political economy. In a series of well-known steps, John Locke moves from an empty wilderness, without value, to enclosures, landless laborers, and the trading economy.

There are two key moments in this story. First, in Locke's *Two Treatises of Government,* we encounter the labor theory of value, in which land (for example) acquires value through being worked on: "Whatsoever . . . [a man] removes out of the state that Nature hath provided and left it in, he has mixed his labour with it, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby made it his property."[49] The corollary of the labor theory of value is that what we might call "wilderness" is valueless because it has not been worked on. As Locke says, "land that is left wholly to nature,

[48] Zvesper, *Nature and Liberty,* 4.
[49] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government,* ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), *Second Treatise,* section 27.

that hath no improvement of pasturage, tilling, or planting, is called, as indeed it is, waste; and we shall find the benefit of it amount to little more than nothing."[50] The idea that unworked land is next to valueless is nowadays called into question by environmental philosophers on two grounds. First, it is argued that "land left wholly to nature" has an aesthetic, or even a spiritual, value which makes it of benefit to human beings—even if not an economic value in the sense that Locke meant. Second, a smaller number of environmental philosophers will argue that land left wholly to nature has intrinsic value, that is, value in itself, as opposed to value that might be derived from any use to which it might be put by humans. Locke's labor theory of value (i.e., that land only has value when it has been worked) sets up a dynamic that amounts to the progressive "humanization" of the nonhuman natural world. The ideal, for Locke, is a world that has the mark of the human all over it. As it happens, we may have just reached that moment. For the first time in human history, it is possible to claim that the whole planet has the mark of the human on it.

This is certainly the argument of environmentalist Bill McKibben in his book *The End of Nature.* Nature has ended, in his view, because that which defined it—its independence from human influence—has been fatally undermined by climate change. McKibben writes:

> By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial. . . . If you travel by plane and dog team and snowshoe to the farthest corner of the Arctic and it is a mild summer day, you will not know whether the temperature is what it is "supposed" to be, or whether, thanks to the extra carbon dioxide, you are standing in the equivalent of a heated room. . . . [I]f in July there's a heat wave in London, it won't be a natural phenomenon. It will be a man-made phenomenon. . . . A child born now will never know a natural summer, a natural autumn, winter, or spring. Summer is going extinct, replaced by something else that will be called "summer." This new summer will retain some of its relative characteristics—it will be hotter than the rest of the year, for instance, and the time of the year when crops grow—but it will not be summer, just as even the best prosthesis is not a leg.[51]

For the first time in human history, there is not one spot on Earth that does not have the mark of the human on it. As McKibben explains, there have been huge human empires—the Roman Empire and the British Empire—but there has never been a phenomenon with a truly global reach and range.

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[50] Ibid., section 42.
[51] Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Anchor Books, 1999), 54–55.

In a typically florid turn of phrase, McKibben suggests that climate change is a magnificently successful attempt to bring "every inch and hour of the globe"[52] under human jurisdiction. If we take modernity to be a project entailing increasing human influence on the nonhuman natural world, then we truly are—now—at the high point of modernity.

Returning to Locke, the second key moment in his story is when he overcomes a potentially fatal restriction on the humanization and enclosure of land. His starting-point is that the acquisition of land and the fruits thereof should be subject to the stricture that "enough and as good" is left for others.[53] While this proviso might seem to set limits on acquisition, in the "open world" that Locke inhabited ("in the beginning, all the world was America")[54] it amounts to a license to limitless acquisition—since there will always be "enough and as good" for others. Either because Locke was not aware of this line of defense, or because he possessed vestiges of Aristotelian strictures against overconsumption, he notes a potential objection, namely, "that if gathering the acorns or other fruits of the earth, etc., makes a right to them, then anyone may engross as much as he will." "To which," says Locke, "I answer Not so. . . . As much as any one can make use of to any advantage of life before it spoils, so much he may by his labour fix a property in. Whatever is beyond this is more than his share and belongs to others."[55] By this point in his argument, the amount of legitimate possession turns out to be a function of the wastage rate of the natural object in question. This might be regarded as a truly ecological principle of distributive justice: not only does it hold out the possibility of the fair distribution of the fruits of the Earth, but it also apparently sets ecological limits on the acquisition and exploitation of those fruits.

But this edifice of restraint comes tumbling down with the introduction of unperishables into the argument: "if he would give his nuts for a piece of metal, pleased with its colour, or exchange his sheep for shells, or wool for a sparkling pebble or a diamond, and keep those by him all his life, he invaded not the right of others; he might heap up as much of these durable things as he pleased."[56] This turns the "wastage proviso" on its head, and Locke concludes with the sentence that carries the day for the aspiration of unlimited acquisition: "And thus came in the use of money; some lasting thing that men might keep without spoiling, and that, by mutual consent, men could take in exchange for the truly useful but perishable supports of life."[57] Money does not spoil as grain or fruit does, and thus the limits on acquisition contained in Locke's proviso are over-

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[52] Ibid., 46.
[53] Locke, *Second Treatise,* section 33.
[54] Ibid., section 49.
[55] Ibid., section 31.
[56] Ibid., section 46.
[57] Ibid., section 47.

come. This is entirely in keeping with what we might call an "open world" picture, in which ecological limitations on acquisition and use seem entirely inappropriate and unnecessary because there is more than enough to go around.

VI. Beyond Autonomy: History, *Homo Faber*, and the Dialectic

We can summarize the first half of this essay by suggesting that two tropes accompanied the early development of liberal freedom: first, the distinction between the heteronomous realm of nature and the autonomous realm of the human; and, second, the idea of an open world of unlimited resources. Contemporary dominant conceptions of liberty both emerged from this background and depended on it. Arguably, we are now in the presence of changed circumstances, and our tropes need overhauling. What happens if (a) we regard ourselves as "dependent rational animals" and (b) we remember that our world is a limited one that can be covered by a cosmonaut's thumbnail? More particularly, here, what happens to freedom under these "new" circumstances?

One kind of answer could take a very traditional form. We pit individual freedom to do what we want against the harm that this might inflict on others. This kind of thinking in the climate-change context could, for example, give rise to legitimate restrictions on the right to travel as I suggested at the beginning of this essay. But it is also possible that we need to change the terms of enquiry entirely. Just as Locke's proviso was written for a world utterly different from the one we now inhabit, the same could go for the ideas of freedom—and the ontological understandings that underpin them—we have inherited from the birth of liberalism.

Much of this essay has been aimed at canvassing the idea that human beings are embedded and dependent creatures, and that this embeddedness and dependence brings with it constraints on action, in terms of a limiting of the range of possibilities for living good lives. In large measure, then, this is an enquiry into the sort of creatures we are: autonomous or heteronomous, cultural or biological, or ecological, or natural? One possibility has not been discussed explicitly, although it is implicit in the discussion of liberalism that took place above: this is that humans are *historical*, as well as embedded, creatures. This is to say that the human condition is a historical condition, and one implication of this is that social thinking must always be *"a la altura de los tiempos,"*[58] or "abreast of the times." One consequence is the need to hold open the possibility of refashioning concepts and their associated social objectives to bring them into line with the contemporary human condition. The question is: How

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[58] José Ortega y Gasset, *Obras Completas* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1957), vol. 4, pp. 321–22.

far should this refashioning go? The answer to this question turns on just what we mean by the idea that human beings are historical creatures.

In a rather obvious way, it means that we "make history," and this involves action that changes the world around us. Historical action is purposive in a way that differentiates the human being from, say, the beaver: both beavers and humans can make dams, but only human beings can *not* make dams. This is important enough, but we must also entertain the possibility that in making history we simultaneously make ourselves. This is something more than the already striking observations we saw McKibben making above. McKibben's historicism makes it clear that we are at a qualitatively new moment in human history—a moment at which the whole of nature has the mark of the human on it, a moment at which "nature" has become "humanised." This, of course, is of a piece with the modern project of bringing nonhuman nature under (rational) human control, and in these terms we are at the high point of modernity. The key point to add, though, is that the historical process is characterized not only by the humanizing of nature but also by the *naturalizing of the human.* This is not an especially original remark. Political philosopher Shlomo Avineri, for example, has pointed out how "the phrases 'humanized nature' and 'humanism equals naturalism' recur in Karl Marx's writings,"[59] and Avineri also glosses the characteristics of the humanity-nature relationship with which I think we need to work: "To Marx reality is always human reality not in the sense that man exists within nature, but in the sense that man shapes nature. This act shapes man and his relations to other human beings; it is a total process, implying a constant interaction between subject and object."[60] But although not original, this perspective has definitely occupied a theoretical backseat as we have sought to come to terms with the nature and import of our relationship with the nonhuman natural world.

What might "naturalizing the human" mean, and why is it relevant to our topic? In the first place, it might seem counterintuitive that as we exert increasing influence over the natural world, as the story of modernity has it, we might also come under the sway of the natural. Isn't this what we were supposed to be trying to escape? Of course, it has always been part of human experience to be at the whim of nature to some degree or another, yet it is regarded as a mark of modernity that we transcend the limitations nature places upon us. It might be argued, though, that the rise of the modern environmental movement is a sign that all is not going according to modernity's plan. Indeed, the scale and extent of the local, regional, national, and global environmental problems that assail us in the early twenty-first century seem unlike those with which we have

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[59] Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 70.
[60] Ibid., 71.

hitherto been acquainted. Just as we want to believe, at this high point in modernity, that we are emerging from nature's thrall, we find ourselves confronted with evidence on all sides that it still has us in its grip.

Yet it is not really nature, as such, that has us in its grip. Modernity is well on the way to achieving one of its goals: the humanizing of nature. So it is not so much nature that has us in its thrall, but humanized nature. And it is no accident that phrases like "being in thrall" and "in its grip" and "under the sway" make sense here, because what we are experiencing is what premoderns experienced, with the exception that it is not nature that appears as the untranscendable horizon, but humanized nature. We are, to this degree, complicit in our own unfreedom.

One way of describing this unfreedom is to borrow the trope that informed the first part of this essay, where nature was regarded as a source and site of unfreedom. Kant told us that it was natural creatures, not human ones, who were subject to the whims of nature, yet in late modernity we find ourselves in something like the Kantian mode of heteronomy—with the twist that the source of our heteronomy is not nature but humanized nature. This, then, is what it means to be a historical creature: to humanize nature at the same time as we are naturalized. And this "naturalization," when reflected upon, leads to the realization that we can never be free, in the sense of unencumbered by heteronomy.

One philosopher who theorized this to-ing and fro-ing between humanity and nature some time ago was Jean-Paul Sartre. There are two reasons to pay some attention to Sartre: first, because he carried out one of the most extensive inquiries ever into the nature of the dialectic in his two volumes of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason;* and, second, because there are at least two occasions in the first volume where he makes specific references to environmental problems (deforestation and pollution) as illustrations of the working of the dialectic. It must be said, though, that Sartre's overriding ambition in the *Critique* is to demonstrate the intelligibility of the dialectic, which is the same for him as saying that he was seeking to demonstrate the intelligibility of history. There is relatively little direct reflection on the nature of freedom in a dialectical context, even though much of the second volume is dedicated to a discussion of whether Stalinism—and Stalin himself—were historically necessary, or whether the Russian Revolution could have had an outcome other than Stalinism. Nevertheless, it is worth mining Sartre's *Critique* in our context if only because it takes us into the foothills of the kind of enquiry that would need to be conducted if we were to give a full account of the nature of freedom in the dialectical context.

For Sartre, the dialectical character of the human condition is a result of the purposive, labor-orientated basis of human life, which in turn is rooted in the drive to meet needs and to overcome scarcity (another key term in Sartre's account of the relationship between humanity and nature). He writes that, "in so far as body is function, function need and need *praxis,*

one can say that *human labour,* the original *praxis* by which man produces
and reproduces his life, is *entirely* dialectical,"[61] and by "dialectical" he
means "an orientation towards the future and a totalizing preservation of
the past."[62] From an environmental/ecological point of view, it is also
interesting to note that the idea of "scarcity" plays a key role in Sartre's
account: "[T]o say that our History is a history of men is equivalent to
saying that it is born and developed within the permanent framework of
a field of tension produced by scarcity,"[63] so "Scarcity is the basis of the
possibility of human history."[64]

There are two important consequences of the dialectical character of the
human condition that require comment. The first, in line with a theme
that has run throughout this essay, is that as humans work on the world
they constantly "humanize" it (indeed, it is this fact that lies at the foun-
dation of Sartre's conviction that human history is intelligible to human
beings—because it is made by humans). Thus he writes, "we simply note
that for and through man this world cannot be anything but human,"[65]
and that "everything in the world of man is human."[66] The second con-
sequence, though, is the dialectical companion of the first—that, *simulta-
neously,* "Human history . . . is in fact also defined in the present by the
fact that *something is happening to men.*"[67] So the active, labor-orientated
character of human beings produces, and is accompanied by, the experi-
ence of heteronomy—not only is it that "men" make things happen, but
also *things happen to men:* "Thus the human labour of the individual, and,
consequently, of the group, is conditioned in its aim, and therefore in its
movement, by man's fundamental project, for himself or for the group, of
transcending scarcity, not only as the threat of death, but also as imme-
diate suffering, and as the primitive relation which *both* constitutes Nature
through man *and* constitutes man through Nature."[68] This last phrase
captures the way in which humans humanize nature and nature natural-
izes humans, simultaneously and dialectically, in such a way that humans
experience heteronomy at the same time as they experience autonomy.

In the *Critique,* Sartre develops the category of the "practico-inert,"
which he defines as "matter in which past *praxis* is embodied"[69]—and it
is the practico-inert that gives human beings the experience of heteron-
omy; it has the characteristics of "nature" in the sense of being beyond
human control. (I will discuss an example of this—deforestation in 1960s
China—shortly.) Labor, Sartre writes, "transforms human *praxis* into

[61] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (London: New Left Books, 1976), 90.
[62] Ibid., 122.
[63] Ibid., 125.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid., 180.
[66] Ibid., 181.
[67] Ibid., 122.
[68] Ibid., 137.
[69] Ibid., 829.

antipraxis, that is to say, into a *praxis without an author,* transcending the given towards rigid ends, whose hidden meaning is counter-finality." [70] Sartre summarizes this in the following way: "[I]t is correct to present this moment [in the investigation] as the determination of a specific structure of real History, namely the domination of man by worked matter." [71] The idea of "*praxis* without an author" and of "the domination of man by worked matter" is a challenge to the belief that the human being is defined by autonomy; from a dialectical point of view, the human being is more accurately defined as a being that ineluctably creates the conditions for its own understanding of itself as a limited being—limited by its embodied and historical character.

As I noted above, one example of this dialectical process that Sartre gives in volume one of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* is deforestation in China, where the humanizing of nature (clearing trees to free land for cultivation) creates a sphere of the practico-inert which returns to act on humans (now naturalized in the sense of "at the mercy of nature") in the form of floods:

> [D]eforestation as the elimination of obstacles becomes negatively a lack of protection: since the loess [i.e., silt deposits] of the mountains and peneplains is no longer retained by trees, it congests the rivers, raising them higher than the plains and bottling them up in their lower reaches, and forcing them to overflow their banks. Thus the whole history of the terrible Chinese floods appears as an intentionally constructed mechanism. . . . [T]he positive system of agriculture was transformed into an infernal machine. [72]

This example, given by someone not exactly renowned as an environmentalist, at the very beginning of the modern environmental movement, is of striking contemporary relevance. Received wisdom now is that many disasters we call "natural" should not be so regarded: they have an anthropogenic element in which humanized nature returns in the form of Sartre's practico-inert to act upon humans in unexpected and not always benign ways. Climate change is just one example of this dialectical phenomenon. The condition of "being on the receiving end" of humanized nature is the other pole of the dialectic: not the pole at which nature is humanized, but the pole at which humans are naturalized.

This mention of the dialectic is important, especially in the context of our earlier discussion about liberalism. Liberalism was born in an era when analytical reason, in the shape of the physical sciences, was making great explanatory strides, and it thus comes packaged with a form of

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[70] Ibid., 166.
[71] Ibid., 184.
[72] Ibid., 162.

reason that *is* its reason, and any enquiry as to its suitability as an ideology for sustainability has to operate at this level.

A dialectical world is more complex than an analytical world. The vast majority of our thinking takes place using the tools of analytical reason. But what if they are the *wrong* tools for the contemporary human condition? I mentioned, earlier, the modern project of bringing nonhuman nature under rational human control. We might call this the humanization of nature. If the historical process is to be characterized—in our present context—as the humanizing of nature and the simultaneous naturalizing of the human, then this is best described as a dialectical process, to be apprehended by dialectical rather than analytical reason.

If this is the case, then the terms of reference for our discussion about freedom are radically changed. Those terms of reference assume autonomous humans who are defined by their distance and qualitative difference from heteronomous nature—as we saw, this distinction underpins everything that Kant has to say not just about ethics, but about the *possibility* of ethics, for example. In laypersons' terms, the "practico-inert" embodies the unintended consequences of human action. It returns to act upon human beings, in Sartre's analysis, in ways that demonstrate the *lack* of control that humans have over their environment. In this sense, the practico-inert makes us aware of our status as *heteronomous* beings.

If we add all this together, we have a different picture of the world from that inhabited by the creators of liberalism. It is a limited world, not an open world. It is a world in which humans, as they increasingly humanize the natural, come to see that they are increasingly themselves naturalized. In this limited, dialectical world, everything is up for grabs. The way is open to a wave of "conceptual rearmament." What does *freedom* look like in this new world? Once we have answered that question, we might find that restrictions on personal mobility might just make more sense in a closed, dialectical world inhabited by semi-heteronomous beings than in the one designed by and for liberalism. At the very least, we need, perhaps, to understand that freedom, or lack of constraint, and necessity are ineluctable companions. As Sartre puts it, "the first practical experience of necessity occurs in the unconstrained activity of the individual to the extent that the final result, though conforming to the one anticipated, also appears to be radically Other, in that it has never been the object of an intention on the part of the agent."[73] Thus,

> the man who looks at his work, who recognizes himself in it completely, and who also does not recognize himself in it at all; the man who can say both: "This is not what I wanted" and "I understand that this is what I have done and that I could not do anything else,"

[73] Ibid., 223.

and whose free *praxis* refers him to his prefabricated being and who recognizes himself equally in both—this man grasps, in an immediate dialectical movement, necessity as the *destiny in exteriority of freedom.*[74]

In a sense, perhaps, Sartre is offering no more than a sophisticated form of what has come to be known as "social learning." We need to reflect on what we do and how we do it, on our aspirations and the results of our actions. Above all, we need to recognize the infernal nature of our condition: "In so far as, having achieved our own goal, we understand that we have actually done *something else,* and why our action has been altered outside us, we get our first dialectical experience of necessity."[75]

VII. Conclusion

We seem to have two sources of heteronomy. The first derives from our condition as ecologically embedded creatures. We are, as MacIntyre points out, dependent rational animals. It has been the task of modernity to loosen the bonds of this dependence, and to allow us to float free of our dependency on the nonhuman natural world. This project has produced some extreme supporters (those who believe in the virtually total substitutability of human for natural capital), and some important opposition (those who argue for the "re-enchantment" of the nonhuman natural world). Neither of these options is possible at this historical juncture. Human capital can certainly substitute for natural capital up to a point, and human ingenuity can squeeze more out of a unit of natural capital than ever before. But usable natural capital is in finite supply, and there will surely come a time when human capital and human ingenuity will have nothing left to work on. This is the lesson to draw from our ecological embeddedness. At the same time, though, the consequences of our nature as historical beings render impossible any generalized return to an enchanted world, in anything other than isolated pockets of place and experience. This is the context in which contemporary notions of freedom need to be inscribed. It could be that we are at one of those historical junctures where new forms of thinking are required and will emerge. The complex relationship between what we do to and in the world, and what we think about it, occasionally throws up a radical shift in orientation. Liberalism was itself such a shift, and it brought in its train a conceptual apparatus which has accompanied us ever since, and which has defined our normative horizons in significant ways. Could liberalism be born today, in the closed world we are coming to understand we inhabit? If we harbor the suspicion that it could not, then it behooves us to wonder why,

[74] Ibid., 226–27.
[75] Ibid., 222.

and to sketch the contours of a way of thinking and acting that truly is *a la altura de los tiempos.* This may involve fundamental reconstruction of some cherished if weatherbeaten conceptual and normative landmarks—freedom included.

Politics, Keele University