

Thinking naturally

John O'Neill

The richness of the debates about the environment has its source not just in the importance of the issue, and the significance for the future of radical politics of dialogues between socialists and greens, but also in the fact that it lies at a point of convergence between a number of other arguments: between realism and constructivism, Enlightenment and its critics, humanism and anti-humanism; on the relation of economy, culture and nature; on the future direction of feminist thought and action. This richness is represented in Tim Hayward's and Kate Soper's recent books.* Both are important contributions. Both are likely to have a wide readership and a large influence on current debates in environmental politics. Both certainly deserve to do so. They combine intellectual clarity and rigour with political commitment and purpose. The arguments amongst socialists and greens about the political and social implications of our current environmental crisis will be the richer for them.

Kate Soper's *What is Nature?* is engaged in a project of reconciliation between two conflicting perspectives on nature to be found in social theory. On the one side stand broadly 'naturalist' or 'realist' approaches which take the concept of nature to refer to a concept-independent reality – a natural world that has been the object of human exploitation and destruction, and which we have good reason to protect from further spoliation. On the other side stand post-modernist and post-structuralist approaches that are standardly anti-realist and relativist in orientation, and that focus upon the ways in which different conceptions of 'nature' are culturally constructed and employed to legitimate a variety of social and sexual hierarchies and cultural norms. As Soper notes in outlining these conflicting perspectives, they do not map directly onto two theoretically and politically self-contained oppositional blocs. Green, Marxist and feminist positions exist which both reject the anti-

realism of postmodernism and accept the significance of the ways in which the concept of 'nature' has been used for ideological purpose.

Soper's own position occupies that political space. Her strategy is to carve out more clearly this position between the 'nature-endorsing' perspectives of naturalists and the 'nature-sceptical' perspectives of constructivists, by exploiting what are taken to be the strengths in one position to highlight the weaknesses in the other. In general, against the postmodernist focus on cultural construction of nature, she insists upon the importance of recognizing the existence of a discourse-independent natural world on which humans have real impacts that have to be addressed, and defends critical realism as the necessary basis for a coherent political project of social change. At the same time, she criticizes the tendency of the nature-endorsing positions for their insensitivity to the ways in which the concept of nature has been historically shaped for ideological effects, some of which have implications for the environmental cause itself. The argument is played out over a wide range of topics, from the use of the concept of nature to exclude or downgrade those associated with the natural – the primitive, corporeal, feminine – through to examination of the ways in which the modern conservation movement appeals to an ideological representation of the 'rural'. In each case the anti-naturalist tendencies in constructivism are set against what is defensible in the ecological naturalist and realist positions.

The discussion is always rich, and much of the argument it will engender will concern the detail. To take just one example, Soper makes a useful demarcation between different levels of nature, pointing out that the source of aesthetic pleasure and value is the 'surface' lay nature of our everyday encounters and not the 'deep' level of causal powers and processes to which the scientific realist refers. The point is an important one and is broadly right. However, the two-way contrast between surface and deep tends to invoke a picture of natural science as physics. There are more layers to the nature we encounter than the division of

*Tim Hayward, *Ecological Thought*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995; Kate Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1995.

surface and deep might suggest: it is not clear to me where the work of the biologist, geologist or ecologist fits. To the extent that their work generates knowledge of the deeper structures, it can transform our ways of experiencing the surface order. For example, when I walk in marshland with one of my botanist friends I am constantly aware of how much more she sees, and am rewarded by the details she can add to my experience: what is initially aesthetically dull becomes a more interesting place.

While part of the strength of the book lies in the detail, its distinctiveness resides in the general project of reconciling the different approaches. Judgements about its success will tend to be different depending upon one's starting point. In a footnote to the first chapter Soper notes that some on the realist side of the divide in radical theory might find the argument too even-handed: 'They will object that postmodernist theory is the vehicle of reactionary forms of neo-liberalism which have nothing to offer a green movement committed to radical social change' (p.13). The passage captures my own initial reaction exactly, and my worries were not entirely allayed by the rest of the book. To some extent, I think postmodernism gets an easy ride. My worry is not what is said but what is left out – in particular, the degree to which some forms of postmodernism have ended up as celebrations of market capitalism and the modes of consumption it fosters, which are incompatible with ecological imperatives. This said, Soper's openness to what is valuable in the specific claims made about the cultural construction of 'nature' from within postmodern theory is to be welcomed.

What is Nature? is a book I would recommend to constructivist friends and colleagues who would be less inclined to listen to realists like myself because we are less inclined to listen to them. It conveys the strong sense of having seriously considered what both sides have to say. Relatedly, while I think there is nothing in realism that rules out an acknowledgement of the ways in which the concept of nature has been historically employed for ideological functions, there has been a fault of omission from within the realist framework which Soper rightly identifies. I suspect that part of the reason for this is that the argument between realists and constructivists is to some extent a sublimated version of an old argument about the relative significance of political economy and culture in understanding the forms of social oppression and ecological crisis that beset us. While there is no reason why one shouldn't be an ontological realist, and hold that the main determinants of social life are cultural

rather than economic, it is the case that those who are realist tend to hold on to materialist explanations of social life, which constructivists tend to reject. Now while I would be in the same camp both in respect of realism against constructivism, and the emphasis on the explanatory importance of the material and economic against the cultural turn in much recent social and political theory, there is a need for more clarity in separating out the different components of the argument.

Ecological humanism

In the terms that Soper uses, Tim Hayward's *Ecological Thought* belongs in the main within the realist camp. However, it also illustrates the complexities in the possible positions that can be taken, and the book occupies a portion of the intellectual and political space between nature-endorsing and nature-sceptical positions. Whilst realist, and conscious of the very substantial damage done to the environment, normatively it develops a sophisticated anthropocentric approach to the natural world. The book defends an ecological humanism according to which the full development of the human good is bound up with the good of non-human nature. Our environmental crisis requires not the rejection of humanism for an ecocentric position, but rather a rejection of the impoverished Promethean forms that humanism has taken. Hayward's ecological humanism attempts to defend the position that humans are at once natural *and* cultural beings. Hayward's book is also in many ways an exercise in reconciliation. It aims to show that the defensible core of the radical ecological critique of modern societies can be stated without abandoning the emancipatory values of the Enlightenment. The proper response to tensions within the Enlightenment project highlighted by the environmental crisis is not to give up on it, but to renew it. In the end the radical ecological critiques of Enlightenment themselves depend upon the emancipatory values of the Enlightenment. The defence of that thesis calls upon and contributes to recent work within the Frankfurt tradition, especially by Benhabib and Habermas. In developing the theme, the book also provides a clear and accessible overview of most of the major recent currents in ecological ethics, economics and politics. To the student and the general reader it will prove an invaluable introduction to recent ecological thought.

The enterprise in which Hayward is engaged is to be welcomed against recent anti-Enlightenment trends in social theory. One of the virtues of his book is that it deals with the Enlightenment in its historic

complexity, and not as a slogan on which a variety of either banal or implausible-looking claims are set up for praise or condemnation. Consider, for example, the question that has long been at the centre of much radical social theory: whether the language of rights is the appropriate discourse in which to express the emancipatory aims of radical politics. Hayward claims that the language of rights is one part of the Enlightenment legacy which we can and ought to retain. We ought to retain 'rights' because they secure protection of individuals from abuse – protection that will always be necessary, in so far as the circumstances of justice cannot be overcome. We can hold on to the rights discourse since, while their specific liberal and individualist form may be open to criticism, it is possible to defend a conception of rights which recognizes with socialist, feminist and communitarian critics that we are embodied beings constituted by relationships to other persons and ecological conditions. However, I remain unconvinced that these kinds of move do justice to the traditional radical worries about the very use of rights language to express basic ethical and political concerns. While the significance of the content of the rights claims can be accepted – they are used, as Hayward notes, to formulate basic requirements of justice – there remain real issues about the normative adequacy of the language employed to express them. While I think the issue is still open, there is a thinness and abstractness to rights discourse and an implicit possessive individualism which lend weight to the traditional radical scepticism.

Where, however, I have the greatest problems with Hayward's position is just where it most explicitly and self-consciously converges with Soper's – that is, in their common criticism of naturalism about the human good. Both Hayward and Soper reject the kind of naturalism defended, for example, by Ted Benton. This insists upon an account of the specific species powers and needs of humans as natural beings that will allow us both to criticize various social practices and structures as incompatible with a flourishing human life, and to recognize that other animals have their own essential species powers and needs, enabling us to criticize conditions and modes of life imposed upon them. Hayward argues against such naturalism that its reproach to non-naturalist theories of human nature – namely, that they lack a determinate characterization of human nature which would provide 'a normative standpoint to criticize late capitalist society and envisage a preferable future' – could be turned against naturalism itself: it fails to provide any clearer guidance for social critique (p.82). The problem is taken

to be particularly acute given the additional claim that human powers and needs have developed in the course of human history. Soper concurs with Hayward's criticism of naturalism. To it she adds an additional point. Not only can we not expect a naturalistic theory of the human good to provide a determinate answer to the question of what the good life should be. Given our ecological constraints, such an answer is not even helpful to an ecological politics: "Flourishing" is what we ought to be re-thinking in the light of current and future resources; it is not an *a priori* given of human nature whose "true" needs nature can be expected to fulfil' (p.168).

A flourishing life

Both Hayward's and Soper's criticisms point to a real difficulty with any universalist conception of human flourishing of the kind offered by the naturalist – that it has to steer a course between vacuity on the one hand, and an implausibly narrow specification of flourishing on the other. Yet that is a difficulty, not an impossibility: a course can be steered. The objections of Hayward and Soper play on an implausibly overdeterministic account of what a naturalistic theory of human flourishing has to deliver in order to avoid vacuity: they assume that a naturalistic account of human flourishing must provide 'determinate' answers to the nature of particular social forms and provisions. However, no account of our human powers and needs could determine an answer to the details of a flourishing life. As Martha Nussbaum has noted, any defensible theory of the human good should be thick, but 'vague in a good sense': it will allow that there are a variety of different specifications of ways in which humans can lead a flourishing life.¹ However, an account of the powers, capacities and needs that make us the kind of being we are does delimit the target of what a flourishing life can be. As such it still has real work to do. For example, to take a standard (and I think true) claim found in naturalistic theories of the human good dating back to Aristotle, as humans we are beings that need intimate relations to particular others. That claim does not determine some particular form such relations have to take: it allows of variability. The relations can take a variety of specific forms in different social and cultural settings. As such it might provide one part of what Michael Sandel calls a substantive justification of homosexual relations, which appeals not just to the value of autonomy, but to the specific goods and virtues of intimate relations that homosexual unions can realize, in contrast to

a liberal-voluntarist justification appealing solely to free choice.²

At the same time, the existence of a variety of specific cultural forms in which intimate relations can be realized does not entail that the account has no negative work to do. If we have a society like our own, in which those who are old and without wealth are excluded from ties of affiliation with others, then there is room for criticism from within a naturalist account of the good. Naturalist accounts of our human powers and predicaments have work to do of both a positive and negative kind, without providing a ‘determinate’ answer to particular questions. Similarly, the indeterminacy of the kinds of historicized naturalism³ that are to be found in Hegel and Marx can be overplayed, by assuming that a theory of the human good has the job of providing ‘determinate’ specification of the human good. There is a danger in any historicized naturalism of setting history against biology, and seeing our powers as completely open, while ignoring those features of our nature as biological beings that are fixed and which put real limits on what counts as the development of our human powers. This said, it might be, as Marx and Hegel have it, that specific powers have developed through human history which entail new needs. For example, the development of certain kinds of power for autonomous choice might be peculiarly modern. Given the beings we are with the history we have, these become necessary for our flourishing; and where the possibility for their exercise is denied, there are needs, and not just wants, that are being denied. This is compatible with the claim that there are a variety of ways in which the powers of autonomous choice can be realized.

It is quite consistent with a naturalist theory to ask what modes of realizing a flourishing human life are compatible with real ecological constraints. In particular, one needs to question theories of the human good that tie it too closely to the high consumption of material goods. The claim that specific modes of flourishing might need reconsideration should be kept distinct, however, from the claim that we can and should redefine the concept of flourishing itself, to fit whatever ecological constraints there happen to be. Taken in the second sense, Soper’s claim that “flourishing” is what we ought to be re-thinking in the light of current and future resources ... not an *a priori* given of human nature’, gets things the wrong way round. If we are considering our relations to future generations, it would be an ethical mistake to think that the concept of flourishing can be redefined to fit any constraints: it is because we know now

that there are givens of human nature – discovered empirically and not *a priori* – that we have room to criticize the consequences of current social arrangements. If we could not say now that a flourishing human life requires clean air and water, topsoil for sustainable agriculture, conditions for literacy and human companionship, and so on, we would have no place from which to criticize the unsustainable nature of capitalist society. Humans may be able to survive amidst poison and natural squalor – witness life in the worst shanty towns in the Third World. They cannot flourish in such conditions. We need an account of flourishing, grounded in our nature, that is able to transcend our immediate place and time, if we are to make sense of our specific obligations to future humans and distant strangers. It is the forms a flourishing life can take that need rethinking, not the concept of human flourishing as such.

None of this is to claim that there isn’t a danger in naturalist theories. Consider Kant, a major source of the historicized naturalism of Hegel and Marx: ‘the history of the human race as a whole can be regarded as the realisation of the hidden plan of nature to bring about an internally ... perfect political constitution as the only possible state within which all the natural capacities of mankind can be developed completely.’⁴ The picture of history as a hidden plan bringing the full realization of human development can and has served as a justification for the colonization of ‘pre-historical peoples’; and the story of inevitable human progress certainly looks much less plausible today than it did in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, the aims of the Enlightenment as a social ideal can be divorced from such progressivism and the generalization of local conceptions of the good. As Hayward notes, it is from within its own emancipatory values that much of the criticism of these features of the Enlightenment can be made.

Notes

1. M. Nussbaum, ‘Aristotelian Social Democracy’, in R. Douglass, G. Mara and H. Richardson, eds, *Liberalism and the Good*, Routledge, London, 1990, p. 217 and *passim*.
2. M. Sandel, ‘Moral Argument and Liberal Toleration: Abortion and Homosexuality’, in G. Dworkin, ed., *Morality, Harm and the Law*, Westview Press, Boulder CO, 1994.
3. I borrow the phrase from Allan Wood, *Hegel’s Ethical Thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, pp. 33–5.
4. Kant, ‘Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose’, in *Political Writings*, edited by H. Reiss, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977, p. 50.

