

An alternative hedonism

TB: I've been influenced by your work over many years, and one of the things that has impressed me is the way that your writings have always seemed timely. Re-reading your work for this conversation I was struck by the continuities running through it. You're not just responding to intellectual fashions; you are developing a coherent philosophical perspective, through all the shifts of focus and topic. How do you view your intellectual development?

KS: My work is centred around certain core commitments, which have been preoccupations from the start. These relate to certain tensions, or conflicting perspectives, which I've continued to worry at and attempted to theorize, although they've been revised and recontextualized in response to changes in the political and intellectual situation. I have focused on issues of hedonism and consumption, the question of human needs and pleasures. For instance, in the early work on Marx, I felt that what was missing from Marxism was a coherent thematic about needs. Or perhaps it's better to say that what interested me in the Marxist position was its juxtaposition of two conflicting perspectives on needs. One of these is relativist: all needs are culturally relative and historically developed. The other offers a perspective on post-capitalist society which seems to require some kind of commitment to and knowledge of the true conditions of human flourishing. That tension has continued to engage me into my most recent work. I'm still thinking about an alternative hedonism from within an ecological perspective. So that's one ongoing thematic. Another has been a concern with the subject – with thinking through the tension between constructivist and humanist conceptions of subjectivity. That's reflected in both *On Human Needs* and *Humanism and Anti-humanism*. It's also there in the essays in *Troubled Pleasures*, and in *What is Nature?* I'm trying to defend a realist position on nature and subjectivity, while also acknowledging the importance of more anti-humanist, constructivist approaches and the key role of discourse in constructing subjectivity.

TB: In both cases, however, there are significant shifts in the literatures through which you address these questions. Would you agree that these changes are explained in part by shifts in your political engagement, and the range of social movements whose concerns you're addressing?

KS: There have definitely been shifts. I've always been on the Left, and I think of myself as having been some kind of socialist since I was about eleven. It was partly my political sympathies that led me to take up the MA in Marxist philosophy at Sussex in the early seventies. But even at that point, I was sensing a need for the more orthodox Marxist framework to be opened up to the arguments coming out of social movements – particularly

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feminism and environmental thinking. In fact, the ecological issue is already there, even if only in a minor key, in the argument of the *Needs* book. The engagement with feminism came later, but it's there in *Troubled Pleasures*.

TB: There are also shifts that come from changes in the literatures being read by philosophers, and in other disciplinary contexts – cultural studies, for example – the work of thinkers like Foucault and Derrida, with whom you increasingly engage.

KS: That's been particularly true of Foucault, although I've also been quite critical of him. I've been less influenced by Derrida, though one has to recognize the importance of his work. As feminists started to move away from the assumption of a single, homogeneous category of women as a collectivity, the deconstructive perspective was very important. But there is a sort of Derridean delicacy, an over-caution about being committed to any political position, which I find unsympathetic. And there's the problem, too, that a lot of what is written in the name of respect for democracy is written in ways which are inaccessible and too exclusively directed at academics.

TB: You have sustained a position as a public intellectual, as someone who has unmistakable political commitments; yet at the same time, when you engage with questions of deep controversy, one has a sense of your being pulled in both directions at once. So it's not simply a matter of being generous to positions that you're opposed to, but of internalizing the tension between opposed positions in your own work.

KS: It's probably the most idiosyncratic aspect of my work. It's necessary to register opposed but equally cogent positions where there is something 'dialectical' or irresolvable in the tensions between them. But I'm also aware of the unsatisfactory nature of that, because people prefer to engage with a position that is strongly disposed towards one or other pole of key divides: humanism/anti-humanism, structuralism/post-structuralism, and so on. So what you say is true, but it's also been a bit of an obstacle for me. It's a feature I respect in other writers too. One of the influences on my thinking has been Merleau-Ponty. But it's interesting that Merleau-Ponty doesn't get quite the sort of attention that he deserves, precisely because he doesn't think from one side or the other – he's thinking in that tension-ridden way. In recent literatures, what has been important is that somebody has gone to an extreme – as Foucault does, for example. People find ways of relating to that, and it provides a route into a certain kind of critique.

TB: One could argue that your approach is more appropriate now, given the collapse of certain received wisdoms, both on the Left and the Right. The possibility of new coalitions and alliances, and the requirement on all of us to rethink our politics, might mean that a more open intellectual work that lives with tensions, and doesn't seek a premature resolution of them, is more suited to our current political moment.

KS: Some would say that this is partly what postmodernism has been about: getting people – particularly people on the Left – who have been happy to use a paternalist and collectivizing discourse to be more reflective, more open, both to the ways in which people experience their own needs, and to the ways in which needs have been politically diversified. So we should be ready to embrace uncertainty. But one cannot go on doing that indefinitely. I've always wanted to qualify what's sometimes called 'respect for plurality' because democracy is not compatible with respect for any and every sort of morality, or with endless prevarication about commitment. This bears on the point about Derrida and my reservations about his refusal to commit himself politically. Intellectually, one can afford to be more sensitive to the sorts of tensions and uncertainties of commitment that you're talking about, than when actively involved in some campaign. But I certainly think that what's going to be needed for the politics of the future is more openness.

From Marxism to feminism

TB: I'd like to discuss your engagement with the dispute between humanist and structuralist readings of Marxism in the 1970s. Could you say more about what you saw as problematic in those debates, and the questions you were trying to address in your early works, *On Human Needs* and *Humanism and Anti-humanism*?

KS: The *Needs* book emerged out of the studies I undertook after completing the MA in Marxist philosophy at Sussex. The MA was dominated by an Althusserian Marxist framework, but I had very strong reservations about the Althusserian position. I could see the justice of certain kinds of Althusserian critique of the humanist readings of Marx, and the difficulty of adopting any theory of alienation, for example, which claimed to deliver truths about the gratifications that would be needed to realize species-being. I saw all those problems. But at the same time I couldn't understand, if one took a very radical anti-humanist perspective, what there was in it for human beings: what was the importance of the transformation of the social structures?

TB: So it was the absence within Althusserian Marxism of any explicit attempt to deal with normative questions? Althusser and Balibar were concerned with reworking the categories of historical materialism as an explanatory theory, within which it was assumed that the characteristics of personality, of subjective life and so on were going to be strongly shaped by the structural conditions and institutions through which people passed and in which they were formed. In that sense, one might think that you could accept large parts of the explanatory theory, within a normative humanist framework. Certainly in some of the posthumous writings we find Althusser endorsing humanism as a normative position, but criticizing humanism in the sense of voluntarism, which was, I think, his reason for opposing the humanist Marxists for having given up on the explanatory project. Do you see problems inherent in the way explanatory theories and normative positions pull together? I'm thinking of your subsequent involvement with CND, and links with E.P. Thompson, whose critique of structural Marxism was grounded in his insistence that for all the limitations of our individual and collective agency, any emancipatory project must depend on some notion of individual or collective powers to comprehend and intentionally transform social life.

KS: Thompson's argument is comparable with what Sartre says on some of these questions. The Althusserian framework was probably the most sophisticated elaboration of the idea that 'circumstances make men' – that side of the Marxist dialectic. But it was inadequate in failing to register the possibility of collective understanding and transformative political action. Thompson misunderstood some of the Althusserian project in *The Poverty of Theory*, and he wasn't aware of the whole context out of which Althusser was writing. Nevertheless, whilst acknowledging the conditioning role, and the limitations on what people do and think and mean stemming from social structures, he insisted that we need to be cautious about adopting a theoretical framework that allows such an all-encompassing role for ideology. Thompson had difficulty with the concepts of ideology and alienation, because they suggest that experience is always socially constructed. The question is: where does the element of individual transcendence or resistance arise? How do we theorize that? This is part of what I meant by the difficulty I had seeing why politics matters if one adopts the Althusserian point of view. If there is not something at the level of the human subject which is not constructed, but is suffering and experiencing, and in a position to come to know that, then it's not clear why one's committed to an emancipatory project at all.

TB: Presumably, this is connected to your engagement with feminism. You and your sisters were the first generation in your family to enter higher education, and you

were very much encouraged by your parents to succeed educationally. Clearly, there was a significance attached to being a woman in higher education, and becoming involved in radical politics, which were male-dominated, in the early 1960s. Then there was your marriage, its breakdown, and your return to a more satisfactory experience of philosophical work in the early 1970s at Sussex. In view of the gender dimensions of those experiences, it's interesting that your engagement with feminism occurred somewhat later than for other women on the Left.

KS: My parents were very keen to allow us to have the kind of education that they would themselves have benefited from, and that meant encouraging us to think that we could have access to, and succeed in, higher education. As a part of that, I think, there was a way in which we were almost discouraged from thinking about the fact that we were female. Maybe not having brothers had something to do with it. Looking back, I'm aware that I had an unhappy time in my teenage years, and that I had my share of harassment and chauvinist treatment, both during that period and at Oxford. But – maybe there was a touch of arrogance in me – I didn't see myself as a victim. I've never seen myself as a victim of patriarchy, although at a subsequent stage I came to understand how intransigent these structures are for a lot of women who haven't had the kind of opportunities that I have. I also came to an awareness that I had been living various kinds of tension without



registering that they were to do with patriarchal structures that could and ought to be transformed. The tension, for example, that Simone de Beauvoir expresses, and which comes out so well in Toril Moi's book on Beauvoir, about wanting to be received as both a sexual person and an intellectual.

I was very aware from an early stage that that is much easier for men than it is for women. So I had experiences which I resented, and which bruised and hurt, and in response to which I even had some neurotic symptoms. But the discourse wasn't there for me to make the connection. When it came with the emergence of second-wave feminism

in the 1970s it took me some time to assimilate it, to sort myself out in relation to it, and to develop a confidence about what I wanted my own position to be. Part of the problem was that I was fairly certain that I didn't want – and I still don't – to be pulled into too exclusive a focus on feminist issues. I wanted to be able to engage with them, but I didn't want them to be the only area in which I was working. There was quite a lot of pressure to do that. Indeed, it is part of the problem of the culture that it pressurizes women to confine themselves to a feminist mode of self-assertion.

I've always sensed that the feminist movement, and engagement with feminist issues in the academy have to proceed from within a women's studies perspective, while at the same time remaining alert to the problems of that form of ghettoization and of the extent to which academic disciplines are willing to think that the gender issue has been accommodated if some course is being devoted to it. For example, I developed a module on gender and philosophy, because I thought it was crucial that the department took on some sort of gender critique in philosophy. But I was nervous that it might provide the excuse for not engaging in feminist issues within other philosophical courses. The task of feminism is to undo the necessity for it to figure as a specialist study. So while I wouldn't want to suggest that it hasn't been absolutely important that some women have had feminism as their focus, I also think it's been a good thing that some of us have also wanted to work in other areas, injecting a feminist perspective into them as we do so.

TB: Nonetheless, it does seem to me that you have a distinctive voice in the feminist debates. You have undertaken a series of engagements with the ways in which post-structuralist and postmodernist approaches have been taken up in support of certain feminist positions, in ways which appear to you to be problematic. This seems to have been the outcome of your earlier concern with materialist and realist elements of Marxist thought. It also links up with what you were saying about the limits to pluralism.

KS: I draw on the legacy of Marxist and materialist thinking to suggest that Foucauldian feminist positions have an unanchored concept of power, and I've argued that there are limits to which one can pursue a post-structuralist logic, without sacrificing the normative coherence of feminism. Taken to its conclusion, the logic of difference justifies a hyper-individualist perspective of a kind which undermines collective emancipatory projects. So, yes, I've developed a certain line of thinking within feminist theory, but I'm not the only one to adopt it.

TB: Another aspect of your writing on feminism which I find attractive is your maintenance of the possibility that the emancipation of women might also be emancipatory for men, might also lead to mutual enrichment in relations between men and women. Some feminist writing paints such an unremittingly bleak picture of gender relations that one wonders what the basis for an aspiration to a better settlement between the genders might be.

KS: Again, I would say that I'm not the only one who's been doing this kind of thing – recalling currents in nineteenth-century feminism which suggest that the emancipation of women is in part to be thought in terms of how it can enhance life for both sexes, and lead to improved relations between them. But that part of the agenda came to be damned by its association with heterosexuality. There was a rather glib and dismissive rhetoric which suggested that all heterosexual engagements were in some sense patriarchally forced, and that women who were involved in them were colluding in their own oppression, without being fully aware of it, and so on. What went missing here was any sense of feminism as a project of collective emancipation. What I and some others wanted to keep in sight was the project of reconciliation as a counter to separatist utopian conceptions of the feminist agenda. I also thought that quite a lot of thinking about gender alternatives was confined to rather narrow and narcissistic conceptions of self-styling. So, while appreciating the interest in some circles in promoting a separatist, lesbian sensuality, I felt that feminism needed to say more about its impact and potential in respect of relations between men and women. Not enough attention has been paid to what feminism can achieve in the way of transforming the nature of heterosexual engagement, in quite heady and radical ways. Personally, I've been very fortunate to have had a sense of this in my partnership with Martin Ryle. I suspect this experience has been shared by lots of others. It's a new erotic, and needs to be celebrated a bit more than it has been.

These experiences, which reveal what is possible in the way of communication and cooperation, could be used for pushing harder on policy issues, which are critical to the furtherance of the socioeconomic side of the feminist programme. For example, we need more co-parenting, which means less obsession with the work ethic, more provision for job-sharing and part-time jobs, more ways of enabling men and women to divide time in fulfilling ways between the domestic and the public or work sides of their existence. So the 'utopian' talk about the potential of feminism to realize different forms of happiness does also have a directly political, social policy aspect to it as well, because it becomes the basis for people to say: 'yes, we want to live differently in these kinds of ways, and these are the structures that are pre-empting our doing so'. The co-parenting, part-time work issue is important in resisting the current work-ethic culture. We need to emphasize the importance

of more idleness, of more free time being released as a condition of improvement in the ecological situation.

Politics of pleasure

TB: Hedonistic politics is an interesting flag to wave at the moment, given the way that a number of lefties of our generation look back on their early political engagement as in some sense, if not puritanical, at least self-sacrificing. Crudely put, the sixties can be broadly divided between those who had an instrumental and disciplined work-ethic-oriented approach to politics, and a subcultural set who were into rather more self-indulgent forms of pleasure-seeking, which the politicians were reluctant to endorse. In many cases, that generation of the Left now seems to be looking again at the politics of pleasure.

KS: I wave a flag, and I haven't really gone much further yet. I want to do more around this notion of an alternative hedonism. There are several ways into it. One is through the possible means of transition to a more eco-friendly kind of existence, since we are no longer thinking in terms of proletarian class struggle. I'm not terribly optimistic, but it is clear that some affluent consumers within the Western nations are beginning to recognize the down side of their modes of consuming. We can see this in the rethinking of the use of the motor car, of air transport, and so on. If this is the embryonic source of a more constructive way of thinking about consumption in the affluent nations, then it is important for it to have an alternative political imaginary to draw upon. Intellectuals might here figure as visionaries of how things might otherwise be. That's one aspect of it. It comes out of my sense that I can't argue for an ecosocialist case in the abstract and say: 'this is a rational way to behave'. I've always got to be looking at what might be the possible sources of transformation: who would be the agents? Where is the will, the desire, the political mandate, coming from? And for me, at the moment, one possible source is people beginning to want to live differently – partly because of their concern about the long-term global consequences of current modes of consumption and partly because the existing ways are increasingly at odds with their own pleasures. I'm not a particularly puritan person. For me the point of political emancipation has to be thought in terms of the pleasures it can provide, and the forms of happiness which it might enable. As someone who's concerned with the question of ecological crisis, I've been keen to avoid associating the green perspective with a new puritanism. It's so easy for the opponents to say: they want to take us back to a primitive, unsexed mode of existence. I want a political imaginary that highlights the sensuality, the almost baroque pleasures that we might otherwise indulge in. For example, in a column on 'bike dreams' I wrote for the journal *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, I speculated on the development of multi-lane cycle tracks. You could have covered and uncovered lanes, the pop and the classical lanes, the lane of silence, and all the rest of it. It seems wild and utopian, but it would be perfectly possible to do these things for a very small percentage of the money that goes on expanding motorways.

TB: You were involved in CND and subsequently in END, the European Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which links back to your interest in the work of E.P. Thompson and humanist Marxism, and forward to your concerns with the environment. Did your concern about exterminism and the threat of nuclear holocaust feed into your concern with ecology, or was that there from an earlier stage?

KS: They were closely related. During the resurgence of the peace movement in the 1980s the anti-nuclear campaign came to encompass not just weapons, but nuclear power, which it hadn't done in the earlier phase. And the question of alternative green ways of living was linked into the peace movement culture in a way that it hadn't been before. That was not, however, the issue for me as far as END was concerned, although one of the things END

did was to cement close links with groups like the German Greens. What attracted me to END was that it opened up a space for thinking beyond the problem of the hardware. Up to that point CND had been focusing its campaign very much on the destructive effects of the weaponry – the nuclear winter, the absurdity of the Civil Defence procedures, and so on. END provided a space for thinking about the politics of getting rid of the things. A further attraction was that it was so firmly non-aligned, and it didn't lend itself to the charge of being Moscow-oriented. The 'plague on both your houses' position that END represented, the focus on politics rather than hardware, and the linking of disarmament with democratization, were the critical features for me. The non-aligned position, the across-the-blocs citizens' detente, dialoguing with unofficial similarly minded groups in central and eastern Europe – all that seemed to be the right way to go at that point. It's almost as if that moment has been forgotten. It needs somebody to do some serious historical work on it.

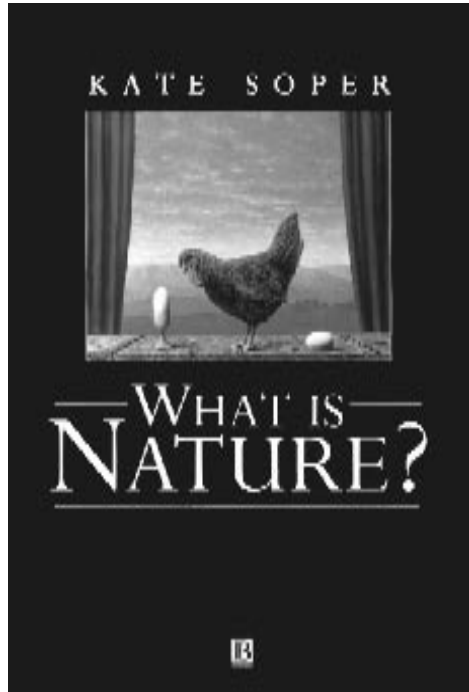
Naturalism and anti-naturalism

TB: Your most recent book, *What is Nature?*, displays a broader engagement with the politics of nature. Again, we have this familiar pattern in your thinking, where you're identifying with two tendencies of thought, two lines of argument, which seem to be in tension with each other: a cultural studies, postmodernist or poststructuralist-derived approach – what you describe as 'nature scepticism' – which wants to emphasize the extent to which normative orientations to nature are socially, culturally and historically constructed, and a more materialist and realist view of ourselves and our place in the world. You clearly have very strong sympathies with both of these tendencies. Could you say more about how your argument develops?

KS: I was struck by the way those working on issues of gender and sexuality were presuming that they had some kind of common ground, politically, with the green movement. Yet they often seemed to be talking about nature in very different ways. I wanted to make the two sides of this aware of those differences, but also aware of the limitations of their own respective discourses. Putting it rather crudely, I felt that often green discourses, especially those associated with deep ecology, were offering a rather unthinking endorsement of nature. They were calling on us to restore forms of community, or to revere it, or to respect its intrinsic value, or to cease to interfere with, or contaminate nature with ourselves, and so on, in ways that were impossible to observe politically. They also connect to discourses about nature which are potentially extremely reactionary. Equally, I felt that the more nature-sceptical agenda had its limitations. I argued that the sort of constructivist positions on gender and the body associated with feminist theorists such as Judith Butler, and to some extent Foucault, lent themselves to positions which were potentially idealist, and failed to register the otherness of nature – the material conditions and contexts, and both constraints and enabling conditions implied by this. So it was an attempt to get both sides – who appeared to have some sort of *political* affinity – to think more clearly about what their respective discourses about nature might be denying and politically repressing.

TB: You draw a very clear distinction between adopting a *realist* view about nature and the material, and having a *naturalistic* approach to understanding the relations between human and non-human nature. You assert the necessity for both strands of this emancipatory project to adopt a realist position, but you seem to be sceptical of a naturalistic position. I'm not sure whether 'dualism' is the right term, but you want to draw a very strong boundary, to insist on a qualitative differentiation, between the human and the non-human. You also argue against the common green assumption that we need a naturalistic metaphysic to underpin a more responsible politics of nature. Can you elaborate on that?

KS: I was in part arguing my position in relation to yours. I wanted to sustain a position that respected what I thought to be important in the green project, which was the sense of the difference of humans from non-human beings, in terms of their capacity to do a whole range of things, but importantly, I think, to monitor and reflect on their progress, to value aesthetically, to set standards in relation to which they could feel that they had or had not succeeded, to have knowledge of their own mortality – plus, of course, the more usual one that gets emphasized, namely language, without which none of these things would



be possible. I was wary of naturalism getting into a biological perspective that wasn't sufficiently alert to those important differences. You say my position is dualist, but I'm uncertain whether I actually need to be committed to that, or whether I can't just be undecided about whether the break between humans and animals is absolute, or a gradation. But what I do think is that it isn't critical to the adoption of more ecofriendly perspectives that people have a naturalistic position which emphasizes their commonality with non-human creatures. This is the more important argument that I was trying to promote. Related to that is the argument that our theories at a metaphysical level are not as determining as we sometimes think that they might be. I have been struck by the extent to which people can hold quite diverse positions around this issue, while having very similar responses to what needs to be done, in relation to ecological crisis. Tim Hayward and I might count as dualists, while you adopt a more naturalist position, but I suspect that the way we think animals ought to be treated, for example, would be very similar. I'm not saying that theories don't have some influence, but we need to understand that our attitudes to nature are not as fully determined by them as is sometimes thought.

TB: I agree. There isn't a one-to-one connection between one's metaphysical and ontological position, on the one hand, and the normative political stance that one takes, on the other. However, it does seem to me that there are relationships of affinity which have a certain rational content. It is more difficult to argue from some ontological positions to certain moral conclusions than it is from others. I would think in terms of a variety of relations, such as facilitation, obstruction and so on, rather than strict implication, between normative and ontological positions. Like you, I want to preserve a strong sense of the species-specific qualities that human have, which I see as emergent powers. So, I would agree with you that, whether or not human beings are the *only* species that have this, we certainly do have symbolic, linguistic, intentional capacities and powers which make a profound difference to the way in which we're able to think about our relationship to nature and modify it. That's the underpinning of all ecological politics: that we recognize that. What seems to me a hallmark of a dualist position is not so much the mere *recognition* of those differences, as a tendency to *counterpose* the human-specific characteristics to the characteristics that are held to be true of both humans and animals, to assign exclusive value to the former, and in virtue of that, to humans themselves. In relation to humanist morality, for example, one of the problems for me would be whether the focus of the value of human individuals and human powers and creations was inclusive or exclusive. Is humanism an inclusive moral framework, which can assign value to all those things, but without excluding as possible subjects of inherent value also non-humans, who don't possess these distinctively valued traits and capacities like rationality and morality? That makes a difference to one's moral orientation to the rest of nature. I mean, in virtue of what can we see non-human beings as part of a wider moral com-

munity, if we assign uniquely valued properties to the human side of this divide, but deny them to the non-human?

KS: I wouldn't want to be associated with a dualist position which says all the value lies on the human side, and none on the animal side. I would not want to count it as a morally successful human world that treated animals in entirely instrumental ways, had no concern for their well-being, and so on. No one got me thinking about this more than you. But there were two main reasons why I wanted to emphasize the distinctiveness – which isn't necessarily the same thing as the superiority – of human capacities. One was that I was worried about nailing myself to a form of naturalism which suggests that our conditions of flourishing are as naturally fixed as they are for other animals. We are unlike other creatures in being consciously adaptive, and able to rethink our pleasures. If I'm wrong about that, the project of ecology may be a problematic political aspiration, because if we *are* that fixed, it seems quite possible that nature will not be in a position to meet our requirements.

TB: But don't we have enough evidence of cultural difference, and of historical transformation, to conclude that there is this immense flexibility in our capacity to adapt to different kinds of environments?

KS: Yes there is evidence of that. All I'm saying is that it was that sense of flexibility that I wanted to emphasize. The other reason for my emphasis on human distinctiveness is that I think there's one way in which we can't assimilate ourselves to non-human animals, which is what has got us into the mess in the first place. It's to do with the fact that we are like animals in the sense of being dependent on nature, and in a sense within it – we are both immanent, as it were – but we're also creatures who seem to be constantly seeking transcendence and innovation, to escape a merely cyclical reproductive existence. So at the most abstract level, I see both the ecological crisis and its resolution in terms of whether we can find ways to meet the ecological demand to live in a more immanently natural mode, whilst continuing to gratify the more distinctively human needs, or urges, for transcendence and cultural innovation. I have a sense of us being rather fraught creatures, unlike other animals, torn between the fact that in biological and material terms we are in the condition of other animals in our reliance on nature, but also having this creative but often very destructive urge to transcend.

TB: Regarding the poverty of a view of human fulfilment which involves us treating other animals as mere instruments, there is a departure from an important influence in your moral thinking: the Kantian ethic, which sees a very strong connection between moral agency and the having of moral standing. It seems to me that it's implicit in what you said that you are prepared to recognize at least some other non-human beings as – as Tom Regan would say – 'subjects of a life', who deserve moral consideration in their own right, even though (as I want to agree with you) they have no moral agency. It wouldn't make any sense to blame the tiger for attacking its prey.

KS: Or its keeper!

TB: Nevertheless, we would both want to see the tiger as a moral subject, in the sense that one would want to rule out certain kinds of human behaviour in relation to it as morally improper. Is that right?

KS: Yes. I'm not sure that is as incompatible with a Kantian position as you're implying. At least, it seems to me that the Kantian position is one that is perfectly compatible with an injunction against cruelty to animals.

TB: Well, within the animal rights literature, most of the commentary on Kant sees him as an upholder of an indirect duty view. That's to say, that we shouldn't be cruel to animals, but we shouldn't be cruel to them because of the implications for our

own moral standing, and not in virtue of the suffering that would be imposed on the animal itself.

KS: Right. I might depart from the Kantian view in that sense, but I go along with that aspect of the Kantian picture which is a warning against too much anthropomorphic thinking about animals. It may be that we are not in a position to speak for them to quite the same extent as is sometimes implied in some of the anti-Kantian parts of the animal liberation movement. I'm quite wary of assuming that we can have that kind of knowledge of their being.

TB: Of what their needs and requirements are?

KS: Yes. I certainly have been resistant to the attempt to bring primates within some sort of moral community, as if they could be treated as quasi-human beings, because to do that may be to project onto them identities or modes of flourishing that would not be sufficiently respectful of their difference.

TB: I agree with that. But it seems to me that there is a parallel here to your critique of the deconstructive, pluralist mode of thinking within feminism. If you are, in the last resort, wanting to say that non-human animals are morally considerable, at the same time as wanting to insist on their difference, it seems to me that, in order to do that, there has to be some wider commonality that you're implicitly acknowledging, across those differences – admittedly in this case very profound differences – for their moral considerability to come up as an issue at all. This might be something like our shared vulnerability to various kinds of suffering, our shared mortality, sentience – those kinds of things.

KS: The question is: 'what's included within that moral universe?' It seems to me that it's almost impossible to think these questions in relation to other than the more developed life forms. So you are bringing a conception of human identity to bear in the selection of the morally relevant creatures.

TB: We only accept as morally considerable those sorts of beings that are sufficiently like us?

KS: Putting it crudely. It may be on that basis that we're including them, rather than because there is some objective commonality of a kind that you were implying earlier. There is a tension there, anyway.

Ethics or aesthetics of nature?

TB: You criticize certain forms of deep ecological thinking, in your book. But do you feel any pull towards acknowledging, for the wider variety of living and non-living beings, some sense of moral obligation towards them, in the way we treat them? Or would your ecological sensibility be more of an aesthetic than a moral one? I am thinking, for example, of biological diversity, in the sense of species of flowers, or species of insects, perhaps ones that we don't have any particular human use for. Do you have a sense of moral obligation to protect them or not to harm them unnecessarily?

KS: I certainly want to promote biological diversity, so I suppose the answer is 'yes'. But this is another example of the problem of relating responses of an immediate, personal kind to the adoption of some sort of theoretical position. I find it much harder to arrive at a theoretically coherent position from which that kind of moral sensibility would automatically follow than I do simply to say 'yes' to your question. You can have certain forms of sensibility, both morally and aesthetically, which, as someone thinking theoretically or philosophically about these things, you may find it almost impossible to say would be

prescribed by adopting a particular intellectual position. So, the answer is 'yes', but I'm not at all certain that I've theorized it for myself in a way that I find satisfying. As for the aesthetic aspect, I argue in the *Nature* book that we should not overlook our dependency on nature as a source of aesthetic solace and gratification, and that a purely instrumental relationship to nature as a set of resources has to be balanced against the need that we have for nature as an aesthetic source. But I also recognize that it's quite problematic to call this a need, because it gets blunted in the failure of fulfilment. It's not like the need for food, which leads to death if it's not fulfilled. The aesthetic need for nature is one that many people suffer deprivation of, but the deprivation actually means that they no longer experience their lack.

TB: In calling it a need, do you want at least to intimate the possibility that it is universal as distinct from its being a legacy of certain very specific cultural traditions? As a field naturalist, who often visits other countries, I find enormous differences between different cultures, even within Europe, in the extent to which they value the natural environment as an aesthetic source.

KS: If need simply means something universal, we shouldn't talk about a need here, because there is such an incredible cultural diversity. Green discourses overlook how culturally shaped our aesthetic responses to nature are. This is one of the questions which fascinates me, and which I hold on to as a topic to address in the long term, through a historical engagement with the aesthetics of nature. What I want to explore is whether it is only a culturally relative response, or whether we can speak of some more universal aesthetic. That involves two further questions. One is, what *counts* as an aesthetic response to nature? I do talk a bit about that in *What is Nature?* but it's not clear-cut. The other is a question about what would count as evidence for claiming there to be some *universal* response. Part of the problem here is that the discourses on the aesthetics of nature are very partial – they're often produced by cultural elites. We may have very little record of how people at other times and cultures actually related to nature. I don't think we can conclude that people who did not articulate their responses to the natural world had no delight in it. In any case, within our own culture here and now, it would be a mistake to overlook the importance of a nature-aesthetic, and of allowing more people to get back into touch with that. This project, however, is always going to be in tension with the need we have for nature as material resource.

Interviewed by Ted Benton, May 1998

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