Humanism vs Prometheanism

The entry of ecological considerations into political thought raises new questions about the meaning of human emancipation.1 In particular, traditional socialist conceptions of emancipation as a move from a sphere of necessity to one of freedom are rendered radically problematic from an ecological perspective.1 As usually understood, in the Marxist tradition, for instance, the ‘sphere of necessity’ comprehends both the order of nature-imposed necessity and the order of coercive and exploitative human relations. New ecological socialists should readily affirm the aim of human emancipation in the latter dimension, for this would be something which distinguishes their position from certain other forms of ecological politics.2 But what the ecological perspective casts doubt on is the possibility, and hence desirability, of emancipation from nature-imposed necessity.

However, to appreciate the force of these doubts, and their implications for any project of human emancipation, it is necessary to distinguish at least three different meanings of the idea ‘emancipation from nature-imposed necessity’. For, I shall argue, they are not all equally objectionable from an ecological standpoint.

Firstly, if overcoming natural necessity means engaging in nature-transformative activities to meet human needs for food, shelter, good health and so on, the aim need not be ecologically objectionable so long as the transformation of natural ecosystems involved is sustainable – i.e. is not such as to undermine their capacity to reproduce themselves without an application of non-renewable external energy other than human labour.3 In this way, then, it may be possible, through the application of human ingenuity to nature’s enabling conditions, to ‘push back’ the natural limits to human productivity. We may call this the aim of subsistence, recognising that levels and qualities of subsistence may be socially and historically variable.

However, a second and altogether different aim is that of transcending natural limits. Even if few people would be so foolhardy as to suppose humans can alter the laws of nature, many nevertheless think and act as if they believed those laws were not wholly binding: that is, they cherish the idea that any obstacle nature throws in the way of the expansion of human productive capabilities can and probably will be surmounted by technological ingenuity.4 When this is taken as axiomatic, it amounts to a belief in the possibility of ‘transcending natural limits’. This may be called the Promethean aim.

In principle, then, we can distinguish between the aim of pushing back natural limits and the aim of transcending natural limits: the former may be possible, the latter is not.5 If we turn to consider Marx, it should be noted that, whilst he did not deny the existence of absolute natural limits, he did think they were of little relevance compared to the relative scarcities whose origins lay in the social relations of capital.6 Probably for this reason, he did not in practice draw any clear distinction between the subsistence and Promethean aims. Indeed, it seems that Marx saw the meeting of subsistence needs as just a part of a process of continuous expansion of human needs through which human fulfilment comes to be realized. In this context one can recall his remark that ‘man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom’.7 Now this is just the kind of view which political ecologists find suspect, for it invites a Promethean reading which confirms that Marx was prepared to premise human emancipation on an indefinite expansion of productive forces.

However, whilst this may be a justified reading, both of this quotation and of Marx’s thought in general, it is nevertheless only a partial reading. For when Marx speaks of humans truly producing only in freedom from physical need, he is clearly thinking not only of freedom from constraints of ‘external nature’, but also, and more importantly, of freedom as an ‘internal’ quality of the fully developed human being – a being who produces according to self-chosen ends. Here, then, is a conception of ‘emancipation from nature-imposed necessity’ which is quite distinct from either the subsistence aim or the Promethean

* This is a substantially revised and expanded version of a paper given at a workshop of the Radical Philosophy Conference at the Polytechnic of Central London in November 1990. I would like to acknowledge the contribution of the participants at the workshop, and am especially grateful to Ted Benton for his detailed comments on the text of the earlier version.

Radical Philosophy 62, Autumn 1992
aim: it is the emancipation of human creativity, the realization of freedom in a humanistic sense. So a complete description of Marx’s conception of human emancipation includes, in addition to the aims of freeing humans from coercive social relations and immediate physical want, the aim of fully developing and realizing human potentials – affective, creative, aesthetic, spiritual, cognitive etc. This is what I would call a distinctively humanist aim.

However, this humanist aim, like the Promethean aim, may also be understood in terms of a transcendence of nature-given determinants. Certainly, in the humanist aim, ‘transcendence’ has a different sense – it does not necessarily depend on viewing truly human potentialities as pitted against nature. But it nevertheless does see them as autonomous of the order of natural causality. For this reason, many ecological writers hold the humanist aim to be as ecologically objectionable as the Promethean aim.

A central question is thus: does ecological socialism have to renounce both aims? Reasons for renouncing the Promethean aim are compelling: within a naturally limited world, unlimited expansion of transformative activity is not possible. But what of the humanist aim – is this also vulnerable to criticism from an ecological perspective? I shall argue that the most forceful objections to the humanist aim are those which depend on seeing it as part and parcel of the Promethean aim: but that if the two aims can be kept distinct, the objections to the former may be answerable in a way that objections to the latter are not.

Now it has to be acknowledged that when Marx himself makes explicit the humanist aim, it does appear to be inseparable from the Promethean aim. They are interconnected in his conception of self-realization through productive activity: humans fulfill themselves in the externalization of their species powers, in the medium of their objectified products. This must now be considered questionable – not only to the extent that it implies exorbitant assumptions about the possibility of ‘humanizing nature’, but also because humans fulfill themselves in other ways besides. However, whereas the former point serves as a reason for rejecting the Promethean aim, the latter point is consistent with the humanist aim – and suggests that it may be susceptible of an ecological rather than Promethean interpretation.

Such an interpretation, though, requires taking an explicit critical distance from Marx. For what the ecological perspective reveals is that the possibility of human flourishing can no longer be held to depend on the ability to force nature to conform to human ends. So human emancipation ultimately has to be seen not in terms of an extension of humans’ power over ‘external’ nature, but rather in terms of an attempt to develop human capacities of ‘internal’ development and adaptation. The emphasis shifts to considering the limits and possibilities for transforming human ends.

What is at issue for ecococialist theory is the basis for such a transformation. In this article I focus on a tension which has emerged from recent attempts to theorize the meaning of human emancipation from the perspective of an ecologically reconstructed Marxism.

On one view, it may be argued that, if we conceive of human emancipation in terms of learning to live within natural limits, rather than seeking to overcome or continually push them back, this will mean the development of self-mastery, discipline, and a responsible exercise of freedom such that distinctively humanist ends are pursued in ways which do not depend on the Promethean aim. On this view, the humanist aim is not anti-ecological per se, but only to the extent that it is conceived in Promethean terms; the pursuit of human goods is not intrinsically hostile to the goods of the rest of nature, but only when human goods are conceived in an ecologically ignorant or hostile manner. This would be much the view of Richard Lichtman, who, as will be seen in the next section, advocates the kind of critical humanist approach that I am gesturing towards here – except that he does not distinguish clearly enough between humanist and Promethean aims.

It is this failure, I believe, which makes his position appear particularly vulnerable to the kind of objections made by Ted Benton. A critical appraisal of these objections, and of Benton’s alternative proposal – that ecological socialism should formulate its aims not in a humanistic discourse at all, but in naturalistic terms – occupies the remainder of the article.

Benton argues that humanism is intrinsically at odds with an ecological perspective for a number of reasons, but perhaps most crucially because, in emphasizing the distinctness of humans vis-à-vis the rest of nature, it invokes a distinction between human autonomy and natural neces-
sity. For Benton, this kind of dualist thinking is idealist and anti-naturalist; and, in effectively setting humans over and against 'nature' (including other species), it goes against the ontology of humans in and of nature, which should be indispensable to ecological socialism. He further claims that it cuts us off from sources of knowledge and values which a more naturalistic approach could provide.

However, I shall take issue with these claims. Firstly, because one may accept that the dualistic view is mistaken at an ultimately ontological level (e.g. some kind of emergence account may be true), whilst nevertheless maintaining that there remain good reasons why human beings might hold it – and that these reasons need to be accounted for. On this score, I argue Benton’s approach proves inadequate. This may be because he overestimates the relevance of the ontological issue to questions of value. For whilst, as he rightly emphasizes, humans have to live within ecological constraints, the question how humans are to live, within them, cannot be determined by the constraints themselves. Rather, this is a specifically human question which cannot be fully answered by a naturalistic examination of human nature. Hence I further argue, that his proposed naturalistic description of human nature may not tell us as much as we need to know politically as he supposes. Finally, in response to his uptake of certain ecologistic themes – in particular, the critique of anthropocentrism – which are already problematic in their original context, I reaffirm that the ecological challenge to socialism can be taken seriously without accepting just everything ecologistic thinkers want to argue.

The Maleability of Human Nature: Lichtman

The view that human nature cannot be fully described in terms borrowed from the study of the rest of nature has recently been put by Richard Lichtman. He argues that, although non-human nature is ontologically prior to and independent of human existence, human nature as such is something which we acquire through acculturization. This is the case ontogenetically, since children only develop to maturity under the influence of culture – ‘human nature is self-constituting because we are born incomplete’; and also phylogenetically, for the human species was partly constituted as a species through cultural mediations:

The final stages of biological development occurred simultaneously (for a million years) with the origins and initial stages of cultural history. Society is not a fortuitous addition to individual psychology, but a necessary constituent of its very possibility.

Culture, then, is an intrinsic component of human nature as such; and it is not possible to specify human nature in purely biological terms even in principle, for the human biological organism itself did not reach its final evolutionary form before the introduction of culture. The self-transformations made possible for humans in society, therefore, cannot be treated as derivations of underlying biological or psychological determinants, of an innate human nature:

were the veil of culture removed, we would confront neither a noble nor a brutal savage but a proto-being without definable shape or function, unformed matter to the active potentiality of social definition. ... whatever in our being is not permeated by culture, simple reflexes and primitive responses, is not distinctively human.

Now Lichtman is aware that this might look like leaving human nature as a wholly indeterminate factor, as a tabula rasa even. In order to dispose of this possible interpretation, he points out that:

The very notion of human nature as tabula rasa is self-contradictory. Even a blank slate must have such properties as will permit the acceptance of the chalk, as the wax accepts the stylus, the inscribing tool.

So the issue, he argues, is not whether there is a common human nature – for there is necessarily a structure of capacities, tendencies and sensibilities that humans bring, incompletely formed, to their life world – but rather what kinds of thing we can say about it. Lichtman asks what our common human nature must be like for specific manifestations of it to be possible; and he deduces two general characteristics. The first is the power to complete what is not given in our nature. This works in various ways: for instance, through

relations with other beings; the utilization of symbolic code; the capacity to transform the natural environment for the sake of survival, reproduction and expression; the opportunity to form the social world which forms us; and engagement in a transcendent normative structure to order what would be an otherwise formless and consequently impossible life.

The second attribute of human nature is deduced from the first:

since humans never create or appropriate social existence in general but always some particular, concrete social existence, we must come to understand our species’ capacities as abstract, meta-propensities to enact and transform the presented materials of which we make our life.

These are our self-reflexive capacities; we not only conceptualize our experience, we also reflect on our conceptualization; we have self-consciousness and an awareness of others’ self-consciousness and their awareness of our own. These second-order powers, though, do not determine the specific character of our first-order powers: that is, there is always a specific socio-cultural form to the appearance of human nature.

Lichtman then cites anthropological evidence which indicates how the view of human nature prevalent in contemporary Western societies – as possessive, individualist, and egoistic – reflects only one way that human capacities and propensities may actually develop; and how this particular view itself inverts the real relationship between society and individual. Lichtman’s principal theoretical contention, though, is that we cannot draw general conclusions about human nature directly from a study of the many particular ways of being human. An important corol-
lary of this is that there can be no list of fundamental (that is, first-order, or empirically identifiable) human needs:

All needs are socially mediated and therefore socially constituted, not in the sense that they have no origin in the disposition of individuals, but that what they are dispositions for can only be granted through culture. ... In structuring needs society also prioritises them, so that the basic principles determining human activity cannot be derived from 'needs' but only from the structure of values that confer form and meaning to the needs themselves.16

This is the crucial point of Lichtman's argument, and one at issue in the controversy which ensues. It yields the implication that

The knowledge most necessary to emancipation grasps the openness of our future and our responsibility for its determination.17

Yet the critical import of this affirmation can be mis-read, partly due to the hyperbole that Lichtman allows himself in stating his case against the view that our nature is formed innately - as, for example, when he states:

we collectively elicit, form and educate the possibility of our human existence, creating in the process something that has never before existed.18

Or:

We remain what we make ourselves, except as we are made against our own enlightened self-determination.19

In such passages the reader gets a sense that enlightenment values are pitted against nature, reproducing the Promethean ideology expressed with greatest hubris by the idea that 'Man produces himself'. This view, which seems also to perpetuate the modernist devaluation of nature, is one which political ecologists find fundamentally unacceptable.

My underlying concern in the following sections is to inquire whether such a view is really entailed by Lichtman's central argument that political principles can be derived only from values, which are not reducible to needs.

**Benton's Naturalistic Specification of Human Nature**

Ted Benton has offered a critical response to Lichtman's article, and a consideration of this will provide a useful way into his alternative approach to the question of human nature.

One main objection which Benton levels against Lichtman's account is that he gives little or no elaboration of just what our common human nature consists in.20 Thus, although Lichtman's is not a 'tabula rasa' view of human nature, his emphasis on malleability and cultural variability is nevertheless likely to have comparable consequences to such a view:

if there are no 'given' or 'innate' dispositions of a positive kind, then there would seem to be no grounds for regarding one social or cultural framework for the formation of a specific kind of human nature as more appropriate to human well-being than any other.21

Human nature is left too malleable by Lichtman, and he allows 'no room for the specification of limits to human adaptability to different socio-cultural or environmental conditions...'22 The only limit to cultural relativism which Lichtman appears to admit, says Benton, is the order of external nature. But why, he asks, should we regard this as the only limit to relativism? ... why should it be assumed *a priori* that human development - becoming concretely human - is something possible and even indifferently possible across an indefinite range of socio-natural contexts?23

Lichtman's emphasis on culture, in Benton's view, gives short shrift to the biological component of human nature:

It seems to me that a theory of human nature appropriate to our historical moment - characterised by actual and impending ecological disaster in our relations with 'external' nature, and by a self-destructive consumerist pathology (so well described by Lichtman) - must focus on precisely these questions of the cultural and natural conditions of social and biological sustainability and of the conditions and limits of bodily and psychological adaptability and flourishing.24

Benton also believes that Lichtman's emphasis on the differences between humans and the rest of nature goes against much of what we should be learning from ecology - in particular, that humans are a part of and not apart from nature - in order to overcome the 'domination' of nature, and alienation from our own natural being. As in the by now familiar 'ecological' critique of Western metaphysics,25 Benton argues that various kinds of oppression are implicated in the set of pervasive dualisms which play a foundational, structural role in modern Western thought: for example,

the valuation of mental over manual labour, of masculinity ('cultured') over femininity ('natural'), of reason over sentiment, of 'mind over matter', and of the 'civilised' over the 'savage'.26

This criticism, Benton believes, can be applied to aspects of Marx's work too, as he argued in an earlier article, 'Humanism = Speciesism?'. Central to Benton's project of an ecological reconstruction of Marx is a critique of the latter's perpetuation of a human/animal dualism. This dualism, Benton believes, undermines the promise of other aspects of Marx's thought in which a transformation of our relation to nature is seen as central to the process of human emancipation itself. So where Marx, and Western thought generally, concentrates on what distinguishes humans from (other) animals, Benton wants to highlight their commonality. Thus he notes, for example, how certain supposedly human-specific characteristics are also to be found in the animal world: in particular, the capacity for and disposition to social coordination of their activities. Moreover, he also notes, there are many significant differences *between* animal species. Recognising such points
should encourage us to look at humans as one species among many others, not as an ontologically distinct and privileged entity.

Perhaps, however, the most telling arguments against the dualist aspects of Marx’s early work, writes Benton, ‘relate to the dualism within human nature which follows from the external dualism of the animal and the human’.27

It is characteristic of the dualistic tradition, Benton remarks, to accept that the human is an animal, but an animal with a special ‘something’ extra (soul, will or reason, for example). Among the consequences of this is that some human needs are then seen as ‘truly human’ and others as ‘merely animal’. Benton believes that the supposed differences between humans and other animals need to be seriously qualified – and here a naturalistic perspective commends itself:

a naturalistic approach begins with the common predicament of natural beings and moves from that basis to render intelligible their specific differences in constitution, structure and modes of life.28

A naturalistic specification of ‘human nature’ must start from a recognition of the ‘natural beinghood’ which we share with other living creatures; it would then proceed by differentiating out and elaborating what is specific to humans. If this differentiation is not to slide into the dualistic mode, though, it will not present the powers, potentials, requirements etc. of humans as something they possess ‘over and above’ those they share with animals. Thus, without denying that there are certain things which only humans do (e.g. composing symphonies or constructing weapons of mass destruction), Benton argues that those things which only humans can do are generally to be understood as rooted in the specifically human ways of doing things which other animals also do.29

Here we have the key idea which perhaps most clearly distinguishes Benton’s approach from Lichtman’s.

So what kinds of things does this approach specify about human nature? Benton suggests that, as natural beings, there are three interconnected features which humans share with other natural beings:

First, they have natural needs whose objects lie outside themselves, independent of them. .. Second, all living beings have natural powers which enable them to satisfy these needs. .. Third, this need-satisfying activity in relation to external objects is essential to the ‘confirmation’ or ‘manifestation’ of the essential powers of the species.30

Once it is granted that any species has its own distinctive ‘species-life’, it is possible – and possible for any living species (plants as well as animals), not only for humans – to distinguish between conditions necessary for mere organic survival and conditions for flourishing.

This distinction between survival and flourishing, Benton then argues, will allow an ecological re-reading of Marx’s theory of alienation which avoids the tendency of Marx himself to speak, at times, of the alienated condition as one where humans are reduced to the level of ‘merely animal’ needs or activities. Benton puts it thus:

Under regimes of private property, conditions which enable the survival of workers are provided but the conditions for them to confirm their powers and potentials in the living of their characteristic ‘species-life’ are denied to them.31

He then argues that precisely the same framework of analysis can be applied in the critique of the mode of life imposed upon many of the other living species caught up in this distorted mode of human life.32

This extension, he believes, involves no loss at all of the ethical force of Marx’s original critique, but involves a significant gain in allowing the ‘human’ to be understood as a qualification or specification within the natural, rather than its opposite.

I shall return to evaluate this re-reading of Marx in the final section. Before that, though, I want to draw attention to some difficulties internal to Benton’s naturalistic alternative to Lichtman.

Critique of Benton

One difficulty with Benton’s proposed naturalistic approach to human nature is that, whilst it may allow illuminating comparisons between humans and other animals, it may not provide an adequate treatment of aesthetic, cognitive, normative – in other words ‘cultural’ – dimensions of human needs. Indeed, if his interpretation were taken to involve the strong claim that all natural beings have similar fundamental needs and all that distinguishes them is the specific way in which they are satisfied, then it would look decidedly vulnerable to a charge of reductionism. Benton recognises this:

Surely not all of human cognitive and aesthetic activity is displayed in the practices through which physical needs are met, nor yet even in those practices through which we meet the whole range of needs which we share with (some) other animal species? What of those needs – self-realisation needs – which appear to be peculiar to self-conscious and historical beings?33

The response he offers, though, while making clear that he is not committed to a strong reductionist claim, seems to weaken quite considerably the potential of his position as a distinct alternative to Lichtman’s. Not wishing to deny the ‘self-realisation’ needs, he says:

the commitment is to viewing them as in some sense consequential upon those needs which are common to natural beings, or upon the species-specific ways in which those common needs are met.34

However, nobody but the most extreme idealist would attempt to deny that ‘higher’ human needs are in some sense consequential upon ‘animal’ needs; and I am not sure that a dualist would need to. At any rate, the point would be, precisely, to spell out that sense.35
If ‘in some sense consequential’ is to mean something more than the uncontroversial point that certain basic biological needs (e.g. eating) have to be satisfied before other (cultural) needs (e.g. composing symphonies) can be satisfied, or can even arise, then it might be interpreted in one or other of the following ways. (a) The fulfilment of a ‘higher’ (or, as Benton calls it, ‘supervenient’) need is *eo ipso* the fulfilment of a ‘more fundamental’ need – e.g. a kind of sublimation. But if this were so, presumably the basic need could also be directly fulfilled without such a mediation; in which case, there would be nothing left of the ‘higher’ need which really has the impelling quality of a ‘need’ at all. If alternatively (b), it is consequent on the fulfilment of basic needs that higher needs arise, as *qualitatively new* needs, then it would not appear to be possible to explain the latter in terms of the former, since they would no longer be specific ways of meeting some more general need, but entirely irreducible, ‘autonomous’ needs.

Now presumably Benton would not wish to draw either of these conclusions, since the former would be reductionist (and he distances himself from it in the passage cited above), while the latter is dualist (severing the connection he is anxious to maintain between human and animal needs). Apparently, then, he has in mind some third way, perhaps thinking in terms of complex needs which retain elements of more basic simple needs, but also incorporate a further, ‘higher’, element such that the whole need is something more and other than the sum of its parts – an emergent need which is neither reducible to the simple basic need nor entirely autonomous of it. That is, higher needs might be thought of as, or on analogy with, ‘emergent properties’.

However, promising as this line of reasoning might at first appear, it will not resolve the problem. One reason is that on Benton’s own account it would appear to be the species *powers* which are emergent properties, not the needs. Thus, for example, whilst it makes sense to say that the human species has developed the power to compose symphonies or construct weapons of mass destruction, it cannot be said that the species, or even many (if any) individuals or groups, have *a need to do so*. So even if one allows, with Benton, that species powers develop as a response to need, nevertheless, at least in the human case, once these powers are developed, they are not necessarily directed to need-fulfilment. This, in fact, is precisely the reason why Benton wants to develop a theory of needs in the first place – in order to distinguish, in the critical evaluation of human practices, between those directed to need-fulfilment, on the one hand, and the ‘pathological’ or at least in some way infelicitous exercise of human powers, on the other.

However, it seems to me that Benton expects more from a theory of needs than it will be able to yield, and is seeking to hold together an unsustainable set of claims: that the development of human species powers gives rise to new needs; that only some of these needs are ‘real’; and that a naturalistic account of how powers develop new needs will tell us which of these are *really* needs. The question this leaves us with is how any (normative) distinction between real and apparent needs can be generated from an account which would show that all new needs are produced by the development of species powers.

So, whilst one might accept that species powers are emergent properties which may be accounted for naturalistically, this does not tell us what uses they might or ‘ought to’ be put to. This is the kind of point I take Lichtman to be making when he speaks of human potentialities as ‘meta-propensities’. The particular way in which such potentialities may be actualised in the future is, for Lichtman, a question of specifically human practice – practice guided by values. His view is that a normative critique cannot be based on an account of needs, and that one must recognise the irreducibility of values as humanly, culturally, created. Now it is on this score that Benton criticises Lichtman for a tendency towards cultural relativism. However, I am not convinced that Benton offers a satisfactory alternative; and, as I shall argue in the next section, his attempt to do so on the basis of an ontology of needs simply disguises how talk about needs is shaped by prior value commitments not derived from within the theory.

Nature, Value and Political Standpoint

The possibility of drawing normative distinctions between needs delineated on a naturalistic basis is central to Benton’s project, and is advanced as a major advantage of his approach over Lichtman’s. Benton criticises Lichtman’s theoretical standpoint for its insufficiently determinate or positive characterisation of our common human nature, and argues that such indeterminacy is particularly problematic in a political context – that is, if one wishes ‘to criticise one’s own, late capitalist civilisation from the standpoint of a future possibility that would be *preferable*’. Benton’s claim that his naturalistic approach promises clearer guidance on this will now be critically examined.

Because he wants to avoid a biology/culture dualism, Benton is committed to the view that biological sciences will yield knowledge which will give unequivocal guidance as to the appropriate kinds of preference in the cultural sphere. However, he does not want to make the reductive suggestion that one can simply read off what is ‘preferable’ in a normative sense from biological data. Indeed, within biology, the term ‘preferable’ might reasonably be taken to mean something like ‘more apt for survival’; and, as we have already seen, to avoid reductionism in his account of the full range of human needs, and to accommodate their normative dimension, Benton wants to distinguish between ‘survival’ and ‘flourishing’ – so that judgements as to what is preferable would refer not to mere survival but to conditions for *flourishing*. To maintain the naturalistic character of his account, though, he argues that this distinction holds for non-human beings too.

His position, then, hinges on the possibility of offering a naturalistic account of flourishing. But there is room for scepticism regarding this idea, and I shall instead suggest; firstly, that we can only know what flourishing means in the *human* case, since such knowledge depends on an intersubjective relation; secondly, that knowledge of flourishing cannot be had naturalistically even in the human case, because the meaning of flourishing has irredubly
cultural determinants; and finally, that the kind of naturalistic knowledge Benton is interested in would give no clear or unequivocal guidance regarding political desiderata.

Firstly, then, I would dispute the possibility of learning anything about human flourishing from comparisons with other species, and suggest, on the contrary, that, insofar as we can talk about flourishing in other species at all, it is only to the extent that we can draw an analogy with what flourishing means in the human case. Thus, for example, it may be plausible enough to speak of non-human flourishing in cases where particular animals are so directly caught up in the purposivity of industrial production as to evoke clear parallels with humans — e.g. the animal victims of factory farming or laboratory experimentation. But outside such relatively clear and narrow bounds, wherein human sympathies are quite easily transferable, it seems doubtful whether the concept of ‘flourishing’, as something distinct from survival, will be at all practicable or helpful. This does not entail denying that non-human beings can flourish, but simply points to the limits of possible human knowledge regarding what flourishing can mean for them. Flourishing, in any sense adequate to the purpose Benton assigns it, has an irreducibly subjective dimension. Knowledge related to flourishing, therefore, can only be had of beings with whom some kind of intersubjective relation is possible.

It is not necessary here to enter into controversy concerning the range of beings with whom intersubjective relations are possible for humans, because even such relations are only a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for knowledge of what others’ flourishing means. Hence, perhaps more important is the second point: that even between beings who relate intersubjectively (and here we need only consider humans), there is not necessarily agreement as to what flourishing means. We know that conceptions of human flourishing, or of the ‘good life’, vary quite considerably according to time, place, social location etc. Now of course Benton does not deny the existence of cultural differences, but he does want to contest the view that they are in principle unresolvable: the aim of his naturalistic project is to undercut cultural relativism, to restrict the range of possible conceptions of flourishing whose fulfilment would be acceptable in a future which was preferable.

But does Benton mean (a) preferable for anyone at all, or (b) preferable for those committed to ecosocialist aims and values? This makes a difference, since (b) is clearly the less ambitious aim: to measure a preferable future against ecosocialist principles is obviously less problematic than having to measure it against any possible set of principles. If we assume that ecosocialist aims are given, then naturalistic knowledge will undoubtedly assist in formulating the politics to realise them. If, more realistically, ecosocialist aims are not straightforwardly given, but rather are incompletely formed, contested or in some way mutually inconsistent, naturalistic knowledge may still assist in reforming them and moving towards a consensus. But in either case, the naturalistic knowledge is helpful because the values are, essentially, presupposed. The knowledge does not dictate the values, it informs us as to conditions for their realisation.

But this kind of knowledge is insufficient in principle for judging what (real) future is preferable unless what is (ideally) preferable is already agreed. This, I think, is Lichtman’s point. However, given that Benton wants to differentiate his position from Lichtman’s precisely on this point, we must assume that his claim is the more ambitious one, (a), mentioned above: that his naturalistic approach will yield knowledge of what would be a future preferable for anyone at all, which entails that naturalistic knowledge helps formulate the values themselves. Only if he makes this stronger claim would he be justified in asserting an advantage over Lichtman in terms of determinacy. However, this stronger claim is vulnerable to Lichtman’s countercriticisms to the effect that this is not possible in principle, and that the attempt is liable to mean imposing one culturally-specific conception in the guise of a naturalistic specification. For on Lichtman’s view, conditions of flourishing are essentially contested. To say this is not to advocate cultural relativism, but to recognise that if a cultural consensus is to be arrived at it will be through a cultural process whose unfolding can be neither predicted nor prescribed in advance.

This is perhaps the core of Lichtman’s, and my, disagreement with Benton:

Benton seems to believe that if we could specify human nature and its needs, we could then determine ‘what it needs’, that is, what is good for it. But this naturalistic view of value seems to me a fundamental mistake that has plagued Marxism from its inception.
In an understandable attempt to avoid transcendental idealism, Marxism has too often collapsed into a narrow, reductionist search for the ‘really existing’ foundations upon which normative theory can be securely constructed. Discover what is basic in human nature and you will know how to deal with it – that is the unfortunate contention.\(^{37}\)

Benton puts much weight on the role of the kind of positive knowledge sought by sciences such as ethology and ecology. Lichtman does not deny the necessity of this kind of knowledge. But he does deny that it would be sufficient for thinking through future possibilities, for this involves other necessary conditions: in particular, distinctively human values, such as justice. As he writes in his rejoinder to Benton:

> Nothing in my position precludes definite social-psychological laws of human development. Social life and, therefore, human life would be impossible without them. But laws do not determine their own instantiation and that is what makes human creativity and freedom possible.\(^{38}\)

Thus, he observes:

> Societies can exist without justice, for example; large numbers of them have. For justice is not a want that must be satisfied if humans are to survive, but a transcendent value that determines what in the social order is worth surviving.\(^{39}\)

Here Lichtman has restated one of the distinctive points of ecological socialism, in contrast to some other forms of ecologism: that ecological sustainability is not necessarily incompatible with social injustice. For this reason ecological and ethological knowledge can not inform us directly as to which future possibilities will be preferable.\(^{40}\)

Benton thinks that Lichtman’s view of the future as ‘a completely open possibility space’ is no use at all. But there is an issue of democracy here, and a risk in Benton’s wanting to close down some of the possibilities in advance. Lichtman does not say much about human nature, but we should not lose sight of the (political) importance of the little he does say – that its fulfilment depends on transcendent normative and institutional structures, such as freedom and justice. As concepts, these are essentially contested; in practice the contest can only be decided by the participants. In this sense, ‘completely open possibility spaces’, so useless in Benton’s view, may be seen as necessary conditions for continuing the contest.

**Ecology, Marxism and Critical Humanism**

If Benton is right that a distinction between survival and flourishing is important for a political project of human emancipation, then I think he is mistaken in supposing that a humanist discourse can or should be ousted in favour of a naturalistic discourse.

In humanistic traditions, including Marxist humanism, the distinction between survival and flourishing has been presented in terms of subsistence and dignity – the two ‘non-Promethean’ aims of emancipation from nature-imposed necessity which, I argued in the opening section, give content to the aim of social emancipation. This is the sort of distinction Lichtman draws in the passage cited above – between survival and those transcendent values for which it is worthwhile surviving. In making this point, though, he is making a strong distinction between *needs* and *values* which Benton finds objectionable on account of its dualism. Such dualism may indeed be vulnerable to criticism, but in this final section I want to make the point that criticism which acknowledges the relative force of the distinction is to be distinguished from an abstract rejection of the distinction itself. For a resistance to the very distinction is characteristic of a now quite familiar ecological objection to humanism. In effectively restating this objection, Benton leaves himself open to the kind of counter-criticism which can be levelled at many environmental ethicists: in particular, that their emphasis on *ecological* limits is not matched by an appreciation of the limits of human *knowledge*.

The view objected to is given particularly clear expression by Kant when he states that only rational beings can be considered ends in themselves, while all other beings in nature can be considered as means only. Some ecological critics see this as the epitome of anthropocentric arrogance. But such an interpretation misses the point that if other beings are ends in themselves it will be in ways of which we can have no knowledge. For, whilst we, as rational beings, can know our own ends subjectively, we cannot know other beings’ ends in this way. On the one hand, such natural ends as are posited or inferred by biological sciences are known, if at all, only *objectively*; on the other hand, positing subjective ends in nature, on analogy with our own, not only proceeds without any assurance that the analogy holds, but, furthermore, may introduce a more insidious anthropocentrism. This is a familiar irony of critiques of ‘anthropocentrism’. So, when Benton wants to take up criticisms of anthropocentrism, and use these as a central aspect of his re-reading of Marx, this is, I think, a mistake. This brings me to my underlying worry about Benton’s understanding of what an ecological reconstruction of Marxism amounts to.

It appears that what Benton seeks is a synthesis of environmentalism’s normative anti-humanism with a Marxism which is understood as a theoretical anti-humanism. For this reason, the provocative question which provides the title of Benton’s article, ‘Humanism = Speciesism?’, warrants a considered answer.\(^{41}\) There are ecological writers who equate humanism with anthropocentrism and with speciesism; and Benton himself does not appear to observe any clear distinction between the three terms. So it is worth emphasising that ‘anthropocentrism’ need not always be ‘speciesist’;\(^{42}\) and it is arguable that actually to purge anthropocentrism would be at the same time to remove anything recognisable as ethics.\(^{43}\) But, however that may be, the suggestion that ‘humanism’ might necessarily be ‘speciesist’ is more contentious still. For placing an affirmative valuation on humanity does not entail any particular value commitment (negative or otherwise) as regards the rest of nature.

It is true that humanism sees humans as something more than just a biological species – as cultural, *enlightened*
beings – and it is this which lays it open to criticisms concerning dualism. Yet speciesism does not necessarily follow from dualism; and it would only follow if dualism automatically entailed the domination of one pole over the other. Benton appears to follow a dominant trend in contemporary ecological thinking in assuming that it does. But, given that difference and domination are two separate aspects of dualism, it cannot simply be assumed – on pain of fallacious reasoning – that this ontological distinction entails a specific evaluative preference.\textsuperscript{44} To the extent that domination does go along with the difference it is due to social or cultural mediations – something emphasised by Lichtman, like Marx before him.

Benton criticises Marx, when writing in a humanistic vein, for presenting the realisation of true humanity in terms of raising itself above its ‘merely animal’ mode of existence. To the extent that this means attributing positively valued potentialities to our ‘truly human’ nature, and negative potentialities to our ‘merely animal’ nature, this is, as Benton rightly objects, an indefensible form of ‘speciesist’ special pleading. Yet this particular objection might be met by conceding that Marx’s conception of animal existence may simply be wrong, while nevertheless maintaining that this only means recognising that other animals might do something humans do, not that humans do not do it;\textsuperscript{45} and what it is that humans do, among other things, is formulate their own ends. These ends must include reference to needs, but cannot, I think, be reduced to them.

So, whilst sympathising with Benton’s concern to avoid cultural relativism, I would resist the view that the way to do so is by ousting humanism in the name of naturalism. For it seems that any account of human needs elaborated on a naturalistic basis will stop short of being an adequate account of human emancipation. This is because, at root, there is a fundamental difference of baseness between needs related to survival and those related to flourishing. A theory which focusses on the insufficiency of survival for flourishing, rather than on its necessity, is of limited relevance to an appreciation of the needs of the poorer four-fifths of humans in the world who are struggling even to survive. The question of what need-fulfilment means for them is quite different from what it means in affluent parts of the world where there is a superfluity of ‘needs’ of a quite different order to sort out. Here, by contrast, an appropriate political objective is to seek to scale down the material dimension of needs, to siff out ‘compensatory’ needs, and enrich their ‘spiritual’ or ‘truly human’ aspects. But how useful would a naturalistic theory of needs be here? It might lead us to state that many of our perceived needs – e.g. for three colour TVs in the house – are not really needs and do not help one flourish. But merely stating this will not remove the ‘need’. To transform needs means undertaking how they are formed in the first place. For this, I would suggest, you need a cultural theory of how needs are constructed. This would seem to be the task which follows from Lichtman’s approach to human nature, and is also more consonant with Marx’s anti-essentialist view of human nature as realised via the ‘ensemble of social relations’.

So, in conclusion, I would also suggest that the reasons for socialism’s traditional scepticism about the political uptake of theories of human nature are not wholly obviated by ecological concerns. Whether or not the ‘ecological’ critique of anthropocentrism is, as I believe, something of a red herring, it is surely an error insofar as it means neglecting how what is wrong with anthropocentrism can be specified in Marxist terms. ‘Anthropos’ – or ‘Man in general’ – is an abstract category which can be used to deny differences of race, gender and class. The radical critique of this category is crucial, and any attempt to find a unified theory of general needs which disregards it risks playing down the various kinds of social differentiation and their causes. Benton’s approach, it seems to me, may precisely risk rejecting the one aspect of a ‘critique of anthropocentrism’ which has a sure validity.

Notes

1 The present article is concerned with the question as to what conception of human emancipation is most commensurable with a commitment to the aims of ecological socialism. It thus presupposes that, though problematic, the possibility of a discourse of emancipation is not fatally undermined by ‘postmodernist’ considerations: cf. Kate Soper, ‘Feminism, Humanism and Postmodernism’, \textit{Radical Philosophy} 55 (1990), pp. 11-17.


3 The ideas in this sentence are presented in extremely compressed form – and as such may appear to beg a number of questions. For one thing, the meaning of ‘sustainability’ may be more complex and problematic than is apparent here: see e.g. Michael Redclift, \textit{Sustainable Development} ( Methuen, 1987). For another, I have used the idea of ‘nature-transformative activities’ in a very broad sense, where a more differentiated account of the kinds of practical relation between humans and nature would use the term in a narrower sense: see e.g. Ted Benton’s ‘Marxism and Natural Limits’, where the term ‘transformative’ is reserved for activities which tend not to be ecologically benign, whilst for more sustainable activities other descriptions such as ‘eco-regulation’ are employed; and Linda Nicholson’s ‘Feminism and Marx: Integrating Kinship with the Economic’, in S. Benhabib and D. Cornell (eds.), \textit{Feminism as Critique} (Polity, Cambridge, 1987), which further distinguishes various kinds of productive and reproductive activity. However, my theoretical aim here is limited to marking a straightforward distinction, also drawn by Benton in ‘Ecology, Socialism, and the Mastery of Nature: A Reply to Reiner Grundmann’, \textit{New Left Review}, forthcoming, between the ‘Promethean project, on the one hand, and the much more readily defensible notion of mastery of, or control over our human interchange with nature, on the other’.

This Promethean assumption was virtually taken as axiomatic within orthodox Marxism, but it is now generally recognised, at least by ecological socialists, to be untenable. Surprisingly,
though, Reiner Grundmann, in 'The Ecological Challenge to Marxism', New Left Review 187 (1991), pp. 103-20, effectively reaffirms that assumption (see p. 108) — and on this issue I would wholly side with Benton. Elsewhere in this article, Grundmann makes some salutary points about how the ecological case against Marx is sometimes overstated: but the basic problem, it seems to me, is that, whereas Benton rejects humanism along withPrometheanism, Grundmann appears to think it necessary to defendPrometheanism in order to save humanism. In the present article I seek to offer an alternative to both these positions by distinguishing humanism from Prometheanism.

In practice, of course, it may be very difficult to draw a hard and fast line between sustainable and unsustainable practices, for the amount of ecological knowledge required would be formidable. However, between the two aims there is a very clear distinction — and so there is good reason to think that the trajectories of practices guided by these aims will be vastly different.

This was briefly discussed in Tim Hayward, 'Ecoculturalism: Utopian and Scientific', Radical Philosophy 56 (1990), pp. 8-10; for a fuller discussion see Benton’s ‘Marxism and Natural Limits’.


The objections to humanism are not always as explicit as in David Ehrenfeld, The Arrogance of Humanism (Oxford University Press, 1978), but it is widely assumed, by ecologist writers, that humanism must be anti-ecological, or ‘speciesist’, due to an association of ideas which runs something like this. In starting from perceptions of the distinctiveness of human beings, humanists overemphasise their uniqueness vis-à-vis the rest of nature, and this leads them to see humans as apart from rather than a part of nature; a corollary of this is to view humans as ends in themselves, and the rest of nature as means only; and this in turn serves as a legitimation for the Promethean project of ‘mastering’ nature. Still, it is not obvious that any of these ideas necessarily follow from the starting point. It might also be noted that seeing human beings as ‘ends in themselves’ does not preclude moral consideration of non-human beings (see, e.g., W. K. Frankena, ‘Ethics and the Environment’ in K. E. Goodpaster and K. M. Sayne (eds.), Ethics and the Problems of the 21st Century (University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1979); and as regards ‘mastery of nature’ one can distinguish, as Leiss, following Marcuse and Benjamin, does, between Promethean, or ‘repressive’, domination of nature and a liberatory mastery of the relationship between nature and humanity (William Leiss, The Domination of Nature, George Braziller, New York, 1972).

It might be queried whether socialists, especially Marxists, would necessarily subscribe to the humanist aim as I have described it either. However, it seems to me that this can only be avoided if it is assumed to be obviated by the accomplishment of social emancipation. But for sustainable social justice to be possible, conflict over scarce resources must be resolved — and a non-coercive resolution could occur only through production of abundance (the Promethean aim) or through a more or less spontaneous limitation of pressure on them (the ecologically-tutored humanist aim). So to the extent that Marxism can avoid reference to a humanist aim, it is because of a commitment to the Promethean aim — hence the problem discussed in the text.


Benton does not pursue this question further in the article under discussion. Nevertheless, in his conclusion he affirms his belief that 'explanatory strategies in relation to such supervenient needs would be to make them intelligible in terms of the (ontologically) more fundamental common needs' (p. 15). He claims that this broad naturalistic approach would provide the beginnings of a methodological defence for some already existing explanatory strategies and offer a promising direction for future developments. He cites, for instance, Gould’s notion: ‘that biological modifications which are adaptive may bring in their wake a train of consequences which are non-adaptive is an important concept for this strategy’ (ibid.). However, as I go on to argue in the text, I think Benton’s uptake of this point might depend on confusing needs with powers.

'The Limits of Malleability’, p. 69.


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Ibid., p. 22.

Ibid., pp. 24-25.

Ibid., p. 23.


Ibid., p. 45.

Ibid., p. 50.

Ibid., p. 50.

Ibid., p. 25.

Benton, ‘On the Limits of Malleability’, Capitalism, Nature, Socialism 4 (1990), pp. 68-71, points out that ‘human nature’ is used in two distinct senses in Lichtman’s account. It refers, on the one hand, to a single set of potentialities common to all human beings; and, on the other, to a multiplicity of actualities (human nature as manifested differently in different cultures).

Benton objects that, since Lichtman says little about the former, it remains a subordinate moment with respect to the latter, so that the emphasis on multiplicity ends up hardly distinguishable from cultural relativism.

Ibid., p. 69.

Ibid., pp. 69-70.

Ibid., p. 70.

Ibid.


Ibid., p. 12.

Ibid., p. 13.


Ibid., p. 13.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 15.

Ibid., emphasis in the original.

Ibid., p. 74.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid., p. 74.

Ibid.

For this reason Lichtman sees the treatment of this question as a subordinate moment in the delineation of human nature. As Lichtman observes regarding the contention that 'nature grounds value': 'In truth, the opposite is closer to the truth: know what is good and you will better know what human nature is, since to be human is to be capable of recognising and realising value. Value determines what is human in human nature, and which needs are therefore worthy of being realised and which are not' (ibid., pp. 73-74).

The question mark did not appear in the title of the original Radical Philosophy article: this was due to a typographical oversight, I understand, and was rectified in the reprint of the piece in S. Sayers and P. Osborne (eds.), Socialism, Feminism and Philosophy (Routledge, London, 1990), pp. 235-274.

Among the reasons why anthropocentrism is not necessarily speciesist are those provided by Bryan G. Norton, 'Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism', Environmental Ethics 6 (1984), pp. 131-48.
A striking illustration is provided by the notorious conclusions of members of the Earth First! group that the AIDS virus should be welcomed as nature's solution to overpopulation, while Mexican immigrants should be chased out of the US for the same reason.

A theoretical point is that moral consideration of individuals (human or non-) can be incompatible with moral consideration of supra-individual entities (e.g. ecosystems). Goodpaster, for instance, articulates this problem, saying we require a new understanding of what it is to be a bearer of moral value (K. E. Goodpaster, 'From Egoism to Environmentalism' in Goodpaster and Sayle (eds.), Ethics and the Problems of the 21st Century) – but such an understanding has not yet been forthcoming. Meanwhile, as Attfield, for instance, acknowledges, we have to make some assumptions about the value of humans, and reason by analogy to non-humans, in order to get environmental ethics off the ground (Robin Attfield, A Theory of Value and Obligation, Croom Helm, London, 1987).

Apparently less mindful of the dilemma – anthropocentrism or arbitrariness – are those who rhetorically distance themselves from anthropocentrism, and enlightened human self-interest, only to end up appealing to it: see e.g. Callicott, 'The Metaphysical Implications of Ecology', or Holmes Rolston, 'Is There an Ecological Ethic?', Ethics 85 (1975), pp. 93-109, who argues to the effect that we have a duty to preserve the natural world because we are one with it.

On difficulties which emerge in attempts to establish an intrinsic connection between dualisms and evaluative hierarchies see Val Plumwood, 'Ecofeminism: an Overview and Discussion of Positions and Arguments', Australian Journal of Philosophy, Supplement to Vol. 64 (1986), pp. 120-38.

In 'Humanism = Speciesism?', at p. 11, Benton makes the stronger claim that Marx must deny capacities in the animal case to sustain his ethical critique of human estrangement – but I am not convinced that textual references to the human-animal contrast in Marx suffice to show that precisely this contrast grounds his critique. Thus one might simply speak of 'less than truly human existence' in more neutral terms; or one could say that in an alienated condition humans are reduced to a 'machine-like' existence, for example, thereby admitting the possibility of speaking about exploited or ill-treated animals in the same way.