

Multi-Centrism: A Manifesto

Anthony Weston

Anthony Weston teaches philosophy and environmental studies at Elon University in North Carolina. His most recent book is *Jobs for Philosophers* (2004). He has been honoured by the wild companionship and the critical contributions of many friends and co-conspirators: David Abram, Tom Birch, Jim Cheney, Bob Jickling, Irene Klaver, and especially Val Plumwood, whose work most fully develops the many themes here only sketched. A slightly different version of this paper appeared in *Environmental Ethics* 26, 2004, pages 25–40. <weston@elon.edu>.

Introduction

The familiar “centrisms” in environmental ethics aim to make ethics progressively more inclusive by expanding a single circle of moral consideration. This paper proposes a radically different kind of geometry. Multi-centrism envisions a world of irreducibly diverse and multiple centres of being and value—not one single circle, of whatever size or growth rate, but many circles, partially overlapping, each with its own centre. Moral consideration necessarily becomes plural and ongoing, and moral action takes place within an open-ended context of negotiation and covenant. Much critical and constructive work, both in environmental ethics proper and in many related fields, is already multi-centric in spirit and sometimes even by name. This paper aims to draw it together into an explicit, alternative environmental-ethical “platform.”

Instead of “the expanding circle”

Environmental ethics is often framed in geometrical terms. We are invited to ask how big the circle of moral consideration can or should get and where to draw the line between what counts and what doesn't. Historically, according to this view, ethics began by

stretching the circle of the self first to include some other humans (family, community, etc.) and then, eventually, to a “universal” view on which all humans count. The familiar extensionist argument insists that we cannot justly draw the line at the boundary of the human species either. Why should the species border be any more impenetrable, truly any more natural, than the boundaries of human clan or nation? Other animals present themselves—first only some, then arguably all. The “expanding circle,” as Peter Singer famously called it,¹ keeps pushing outward: to all living things next, including plants and trees for example, which may not be conscious subjects but are clearly self-organized and responsive systems; then to the land—the community of life. A little farther and we may have to consider the rivers, mountains, the air as well, and perhaps even the Earth as a whole.

This familiar geometry I will call “con-centric.” Each new circle of moral consideration is supposed to enclose the previous circles neatly, evenly, and totally, all the way back to the single original centre, just like the concentric ripples from a single stone dropped into a still pond.

Con-centrism is a natural and indeed generous way of framing environmental ethics. Yet it cannot be said to be the only possible approach. Even in purely geometrical terms, there is an obvious alternative: a multi-centred vision according to which more-than-human others enter the moral realm on their own terms, rather than by expansion from a single centre—a vision according to which there are diverse centres, shifting and overlapping but still each with its own distinctive starting-point. For a multi-centred ethic, then, the growth of moral sensitivity and consideration does not proceed through an expanding series of con-centric realms, each neatly assimilating or incorporating the previous stage within a larger and more inclusive whole. No: instead we discover a world of separate though mutually implicated centres. Moral growth consists in experiencing more and more deeply the texture of multiplicity in the world, not in tracing the wider and wider circles set off from one single centre.

Such a multi-centric vision reflects our experience of the difference of more-than-human others, without, on the other hand, wholly denying commonality either. Real experience is just not so uni-centric: not out there with the bugs and the lightning, the mountains and the stars, and maybe not even with each other. Moreover, even the barest sketch of a multi-centred vision quickly reminds us of

many themes that have occupied certain rich lines of alternative environmental philosophizing for years: of feminist and phenomenological critiques of the sameness-versus-difference construction of so many ‘others,’ both human and other-than-human; of the possibility of a relational ethic toward nature intimated both by these postmodern kinds of philosophizing as well as by certain premodern or indigenous thoughtlines; and of certain other suggestive, but as yet unassimilated concepts in the field, such as “universal consideration,” environmental “etiquette,” and the first sketches of a possible “communicative ethics for the biosphere.”

Many hands are already doing this work. My aim is not to add another specific piece to it here. I am concerned instead with its overall visibility, particularly as a shared program fundamentally alternative to the prevailing Western paradigm. Of necessity it does not fit readily into the prevailing model of what a theory in environmental ethics must look like. All the same, this work, considered together, has a coherent and shared direction of its own. This essay proposes that the theme of a multi-centred ethic represents a new paradigm or unifying “platform” in environmental philosophy, and offers a rough and provisional sketch to that end.

Con-centrism questioned

At the very least, con-centrism cannot be taken for granted as if it were the only possible model of a larger-minded ethic. There may be more attractive alternatives—most of this paper is devoted to advancing one. I begin with a (very) brief and more direct challenge.

On the con-centric vision, each previous circle, each previous set of moral considerations and each previous moral stage, is wholly nested within the next. We are invited to see the claims of the self in the context of, and as an instance of, the claims of humans as such. We are invited to see the claims of humans in the context of, and as an instance of, the claims of animals as such; and so on. This has long been a source both of deep-rooted objections to the whole picture—distinctiveness is lost, say the critics, “there is nothing special about X (me, humans, animals, etc.) anymore” —but also, for the same reason, is a point of pride for many environmental philosophers. This is supposed to be our latter-day universalism, the cutting edge of ethics. Everything is to be valued under the aspect of

wider and wider categories: sentience, or life, or creative dynamism, or sheer being.²

The suggestion is that what we have in common, even with tigers and trees and probably even with rocks and bacteria, is more important than that which divides us. And there are surely commonalities to be found, “identifications” that, apart from this procedure, we would no doubt overlook. The implicit monism, though—arranging our argument so that the commonalities alone ground the ethic—is more troublesome.

For one thing—the simplest point—an approach based purely on commonality necessarily slights difference. Specific modes of life or styles of consciousness, or ultimately even the fact of life or consciousness itself, may no longer count at all. As the circle becomes wider and wider, commonalities become thinner and thinner.³ The search for a single, inclusive criterion of moral standing ultimately washes out nearly everything.

It is arguable, though, that despite its veneer of egalitarianism, the usual con-centric argument is profoundly human-centred underneath. Since “the expanding circle” expands by finding commonalities with what lies within the already-accepted circle, the self and its essential character—and, a little farther out, the human and its essential character—still sit as ultimate arbiter. The suffering of others, human or nonhuman, for example, comes to count in the utilitarian argument because I can connect it to my own, because I recognize that suffering is bad for me and therefore, unable to draw any morally relevant distinction between me and a wider range of others, I must conclude that it is equally bad for them. All commonality refers back to the already-given centre, and in fact it is guaranteed that whatever commonality drives any given “expanded” ethics, I have got to have it—indeed par excellence.

In short, a kind of ego-centric and species-centric model, so familiar from the ethical tradition generally, has not been deeply challenged but in fact is almost unconsciously imported into the ethics of “the expanding circle.” As Val Plumwood puts it in a memorable line, Singerian moral extensionism “does not really dispel speciesism; it only extends and disguises it.”⁴ A workably radical environmental ethic may have farther to go than we thought—and perhaps in less familiar and less comfortable directions as well.

Multi-centrism

Many alternative lines of thinking, I believe, now converge on a view that calls all the existing con-centrism into question—an alternative, systematic, multi-centric project. Something bigger and more dramatic is afoot than a mere set of offbeat complaints. The parts connect, augment each other, synergize. We can sketch this emerging multi-centric vision in four main points.

Decentring the human

We begin by insisting that neither one's own self nor the human/species self is the only model of being or presence or the only possible touchstone for moral consideration. Others have their own stories, not to be "measured by man." Only understanding our place in this way, indeed, is it possible for us to honour our distinctiveness as essential to our particular mode of being and (in part) to what we take to be our consequent moral standing, and yet not impose ourselves as models for everyone and everything else's being and moral standing.

Philosophers may hear this as nothing more than the typical rejection of anthropocentrism. The typical assumption, however, is that anthropocentrism must be replaced with some other, bigger centrism. Multi-centrists strive for decentring instead: we reject any uni-centrism. The conceptual apparatus for this de-centring emerges from a number of related critical fields: in feminist and post-colonial work, for instance, where the aim is to decentre the "male subject" (andro-centrism) or the colonizers' identities (Euro-centrism), respectively. A recent anthology linking both of these areas is even titled *Decentering the Center*.⁵ Ecofeminists draw out the parallels between the construction of oppressive self-other dichotomies in human spheres such as these and similarly oppressive dichotomies beyond the human sphere ("(hu)man versus 'animal'," for instance, and "(hu)man versus nature").⁶

In all of these cases, the danger is what Plumwood labels "hegemonic" centrism: establishing one's own (or one's groups') centrality by systematically reconstructing all otherness either as some version of the One Centre's dynamic, or by marginalizing and radically devaluing it in relation to that Centre, or both, reducing it

to orbit and periphery.⁷ Indeed the hegemonic type of centrism is so pervasive, and perhaps seems so natural, that we may become uneasy with characterizing a (hopefully) non-hegemonic alternative as any form of centrism whatsoever—although words like “polycentric” and “multipolar” are in the air too. Still, there is at least no question that decentring is the necessary starting point. We must resist the dynamic of assimilation and marginalization that ecofeminists identify so clearly, and thus recognize a world of multiple voices and beings that do not reduce to a single type and do not naturally fall into the orbit of one single sort of being’s centre.

A diversity of centres: or, the multiverse

Drop a single stone in a pond and you create a concentric set of ripples. Toss in a whole handful of pebbles, and ripples set off from many points at once, each its own “centre,” each soon intersecting and intermingling with others without losing its distinctness, its own place of origin and its own way of “making waves.” This, multi-centrism insists, is what the world is actually like. A de-centred world is not (need not be) an a-centred world. Instead we envision a many-centred world, a diversity of centres, a world of thick and polynodal texture. Each of a thousand human and more-than-human presences organizes a certain part of the world around itself, forms a distinctive local pattern, a certain organic completeness and cohesion. David Abram proposes Van Gogh’s painting “Starry Night” as an illustration: each star is its own vortex or spiral of energy, not somehow drawing all the rest into its orbit, but surely and visibly a presence in its own right.⁸

The very first example of an “I and Thou” relation that Martin Buber offers in his book of the same title involves a tree. We can experience a tree as a “picture,” Buber says, or as an invitation to botanizing or chemistry or in many other ways. We can also “be drawn into a relation” with “the tree itself,” he says, as it stands “in conversation with the elements and with the stars” as well as with ourselves.⁹ Here we enter a world of difference that is nonetheless not alien—of separate identities that somewhat intermingle. Always there are other stories being unfolded, right here around us; always other “force-fields” (Neil Evernden’s term¹⁰) within which we move.

Intentional consciousness is one kind of “centring,” then, but not the only one.¹¹ Around us are not merely a multitude of humans or of conscious centres, and not merely a multitude of other mid-sized and discrete “force-fields” like rocks and trees, but a multitude of other kinds of “force-fields”—rhizomes, tectonic plates, bacteria, nebulae—at many different levels of organization too, from species and ecosystems to individual cells. Indeed, in place of the notion of “universe” itself, it is high time to speak instead, following William James, of the “multiverse.”¹² To speak of multi-centredness, then, is to invoke a world thick with many sorts of presence, in which we move amidst and within other or larger force-fields or centres of gravity.¹³ It may even be that this is the root intuition for which environmental ethics from the start has tried to speak—only in a uni-centric language unsuited to a world brimming not just with life but with shifting and self-organizing energies of many different kinds.

The multiverse calls forth etiquette

In a diverse world of unsuspected depths, we are called to a kind of attentiveness much wider and much less pre-structured than the existing uni-centrism suggest.

Tom Birch lays out certain essential arguments for what he calls “universal consideration.” Nothing, says Birch, is to be pushed aside without a thought—not, however, because we have or can find some universal criterion of moral standing, but because the very process of paying attention, even to devise or apply such a criterion, already has to be universal, already has to take in everything. What is required, in short, is moral consideration in what Birch calls “the root sense”: the process of actually, carefully, considering all things. All things. It is a process, open-ended toward the other creatures, toward whatever lies on the other end. In fact, universal consideration requires us to reverse the usual burden of proof as we approach others in the world. “Others are now taken as valuable, even though we may not yet know how or why, until they are proved otherwise.”¹⁴

The practice of universal consideration, moreover, requires a new kind of comportment. An open-ended world of multiple, diverse, and always somewhat opaque centres requires us to move with *caution, attentiveness, circumspection*. Ethics is no longer

constituted by a merely abstract respect, but demands something far more embodied: a willingness and ability to make the space, not just conceptually, but in one's own person and in the design and structure of personal and human spaces, for the emergence of more-than-human others into relationship. Here, multi-centrism embraces a leading theme in the larger environmental literature that so far has only barely percolated into philosophical ethics: what Gary Snyder, echoed by many others, calls "etiquettes of freedom and of grace."¹⁵

Moreover, this is not a merely one-way practice. Many postmodernisms converge with the claim that the world we think we know is profoundly shaped by our approach to it, by our established ethics and ways of knowing. The attitudes and comportment with which we approach other centres partly determine the ways in which they respond or show up. Thus, as Jim Cheney and I have argued, we can no longer think of ourselves as merely responding to a world considered to be given and fixed.¹⁶ If our very mode of approach shapes that world in turn, then ethics itself must be a form of invitation or welcoming, sometimes of ritual invocation and embodiment and sometimes of literally creating the settings in which new possibilities might emerge. On the usual view of other animals, for instance, we must first know what animals are capable of and then decide on that basis whether and how we are to consider them ethically. On a more open-ended view, we will have only inadequate ideas of what other animals are actually capable until we already have approached them ethically: that is, until we have offered them the space and time and occasion to enter into relationship. Ethics both implies and is implied by etiquette, in this sense, itself.

Ethics as a co-constituted process

Uni-centrism extends and disguises a kind of uni-lateralism in ethics as well. If there is but one circle of moral consideration with ourselves at the centre, it is natural to suppose that we can and perhaps must make moral decisions by our own lights. One kind of consideration remains, though perhaps operating over a wider sphere. One kind of actor—ourselves—remains essential and central, even if our deliberations must take account of more-than-human others as well.

Multi-centrism undercuts the very possibility of this sort of unilateralism. We cannot practice ethics on our own. Once other centres are acknowledged, always somewhat opaque to us as we are to them, there is no alternative but to work things out together, as far as is possible, when all are affected by the decisions taken. The key to ethical life in the multiverse becomes what Paul Shepard calls “the elaboration of covenants and negotiations with the Other.”¹⁷

Such an alternative vision of ethics is evolving as a wide range of thinkers challenge the traditional conception of ethics as a principle-based decision-making method for resolving ethical quandaries. Many feminists argue for a concept of ethics as, in Margaret Walker’s lovely words, “a collection of perceptive, imaginative, appreciative, and expressive skills and capacities which put us and keep us in contact with the realities of ourselves and specific others.”¹⁸ A persistent strand of writing both in and out of this journal is patiently exploring the theme of dialogue beyond—sometimes way beyond—the human sphere.¹⁹ Carolyn Merchant elaborates a “partnership ethics” in which “both humans and nature are active agents.”²⁰ In the work of musicians, such as Jim Nollman, we catch glimpses of unimagined possibilities of cross-species connection.²¹ From another angle, ethicists in the Habermasian line have worked out a model that locates key ethical features—impartiality, mutual recognition, freedom from deception and self-deception—not in specific principles or outcomes but rather in the procedures by which such decisions are made, and recent writers, such as John Dryzek and, again, Val Plumwood, are bringing that tradition into environmental thinking to sketch what Dryzek calls a “communicative ethics for the biosphere.”²²

I shall say more on this below. The point for now is just that, however difficult or unfamiliar, this is multi-centrism’s mandate, and in fact a great deal of ongoing work is already in this key. Ethics is an ongoing, co-constituted process, indeed co-constituted far beyond the human sphere, and recognizing, sustaining, and enriching that process is itself ethics’ deepest requirement.

Questions and contrasts

Val Plumwood challenges the use of any kind of “centrism” label for a positive alternative. In several detailed works, Plumwood lays

out a systematic theory of centrism as such, including egocentrism, androcentrism, and Eurocentrism, as well as anthropocentrism and the transhuman centrisms. In each case, one centre claims priority and superiority, devaluing and consequently opening the way for exploitation of all other poles, reducing them to feeble, inferior, and deficient reflections of itself.²³ This, again, she calls “hegemonic” centrism. And here is the rub: any centrism, in Plumwood’s view, is at least implicitly hegemonic. At the very least, using the term in the way I propose may confuse and dilute the critique of hegemonic centrism. Moreover, the multiplication of centres by itself does not guarantee that the multiple centres will not themselves be hegemonic, as colonialism’s record suggests.²⁴

Plumwood’s preferred responses are “counter-hegemonic” or “counter-centric” strategies: foregrounding interdependence rather than independence, for instance; emphasizing within-group differences and cross-group commonalities rather than vice versa; affirming rather than devaluing the distinctive characteristics of non-human Others.²⁵ The aim, she says, is to “attain solidarity with others in their difference,” rather than either incorporating and ultimately subsuming difference or making difference radical and absolute.²⁶ Solidarity’s demands are through and through practical and political, adapted to the demands of particular struggles and our own culture’s peculiar burdens and pitfalls.

It is certainly true that we do not want to find ourselves rejecting the familiar hegemonic centrisms only to erect a new one of exactly the same type. Despite the stereotypes, few feminists want to simply replace patriarchy with matriarchy. Few Afro-centrists want to devalue everything European in favour of a new African hegemony. On the other hand, many (not all) philosophers and activists working in these areas continue to speak of their projects as “centric.” Indeed, the project of creating a new kind of centrism seems to them essential, as it does to me. What they offer is not really a rejection of centrism as such, but rather a new understanding of centredness, a new understanding of power, opening the possibility of a genuine kind of centrism free from the hegemony, so to say, of hegemonic centrism itself. In this sense we call a person “centred” when they have a focus, an equilibrium, some balanced sense of self to fall back upon: it does not preclude other similar or not so similar “centres.” Plumwood herself speaks eloquently of defending nonhuman earth others as “independent centres with potential needs, excellences, and claims to flourish of their own.”²⁷ Leading African philosophers and activists write of

Afrocentrism as making Africa “subject, not object”—not, however, to exclude other “subjects”—and of “placing Africans at the centre of knowledge about themselves.”²⁸

The critical words here are “empowerment,” “self-definition,” “inclusion”—and, once again, “centre.” These thinkers are not looking for an “a-centred” world but rather a polycentric world, centred many times over, only without a dominant centre. I believe that Plumwood is right that any centre, defined too readily by simplistic self-conceptions and the exclusion of others, slides toward a kind of self-aggrandizement. Contemporary international politics offers all the examples one needs. On the other hand, on a genuine pluralistic vision, what is excluded is not devalued but is instead revalued in terms of its own dynamic self-centring, and the exclusions are never total. Separate centres may be both sharply different in some ways and similar in others. There is both overlap and heterogeneity. Plumwood is surely right that these points must be continually insisted upon—but that is true regardless of what terms we adopt.²⁹

Consider several other brief contrasts.

Multi-centrism obviously can be called pluralistic, but it has only an oblique connection with the “pluralism debate” that has unfolded over the past decade or so in environmental ethics. The advocates of this sort of pluralism have typically defended the usefulness of multiple ethical theories rather than just one. J. Douglas Rabb speaks of “polycentrism,” for instance, but his multiple “centres” turn out to be different types of ethical theories.³⁰ Correspondingly pluralism’s critics have mostly contested just this point.³¹

Multi-centrism, by contrast, implies a much more radical and polymorphous pluralism. Multiplicity and variety, as on James’ view, are fundamental to the world itself: to things themselves, in short, not just to values. A multi-centred ethic need have no investment in “theories” whatsoever, as opposed to diverse articulations or manifestations of values that do not claim universality, and it need not propose that the reconciliation of apparently competing values is somehow a theoretical activity at all, but rather a form of integrative practice and on-the-ground (there’s “grounding” for you!) negotiation.³² It calls upon a rather different set of philosophical, and more-than-philosophical, skills.

Multi-centrism might seem to imply a form of environmental “holism” or “biospheric egalitarianism.” Contra holism, though, multi-centrism does not assert a single ecological “whole” that is somehow the natural and prior ethical centre. This verges on hegemonizing once again. The multiverse consists of individuals, of various sorts and “levels,” in flux and flow: it is more particular, varied, knobby. “Biospheric egalitarianism” is a little closer, maybe, but it is too formal, abstract, unworkable, and above all unilateral: it seems to suggest that once rights or values are appropriately (“equally”) distributed, human decision-makers can figure out what to do without any need to consult or negotiate. Multi-centrism, once again, proposes a different kind of decision-procedure: a procedural model based on open-ended dialogue and negotiation.

Multi-centrism also suggests a rather unexpected critical angle on familiar mega-centrisms such as Bio-centrism or Eco-centrism. It begins to seem that these views are emboldened to call themselves “centrisms” in the first place only because they are—implicitly—wholly oppositionally defined. The aim is to “centre” on something bigger than humanity. Both of these views, though, to put it crudely, are too big for “centres” in the sense being advanced here. They are not nodes of a matrix but the matrix itself. It is certainly not clear how we can “centre” on the Earth as such: this is more like a-centrism than any actual centrism whatsoever.³³ I suspect, then, that such mega-centrisms really represent only a form of resistance or refusal of the usual anthropocentrism. To “go beyond” anthropocentrism, on a multi-centric approach, what we must really challenge is not the “anthropo-” part but the implicit (con)centrism.

Multi-centrism in practice

Multi-centrism asks us to “take care” with respect to everything, and the sort of mindfulness thus implied can only be called polymorphous too. That animals must suffer if we eat meat is certainly a point in favour of vegetarianism, for instance, but then again, the whole universe “suffers,” as a Buddhist might put it—there are wide-ranging effects both subtle and not so subtle—no matter what we eat. We must simply be self-conscious and extraordinarily careful about whatever we eat. We must “take care” to walk as lightly as we can—which may have quite different and even unexpected implications in different places and times—and in the spiritual sense of thankfulness and awareness of communion:

care for example not to waste food, to share it generously and prepare it with an eye to retaining its particular gifts. A further step would be to begin to recover First Nations/Native American practices of negotiating food with the beings we consume (and, logically, with those who might consume us).³⁴

These are not the kinds of implications one probably expects for what is after all, in part, a practical ethic. That such an ethic must essentially offer a principle-based decision-making method, however, is not the only possible practicality one might ask of it. We might do better to see certain quintessentially ethical features precisely in multi-centrism's "universal carefulness"—a kind of honour, for example, and an overriding commitment to attentiveness. Its practicality is only of a different kind—fully engaging a complex practical question, for instance, rather than insisting on a more or less final, arguable, conclusive answer.

To conceive ethics along the lines of etiquette—opening of the “space” for interaction, for the re-emergence of a larger world—also calls for a kind of particular, embodied exploration. Anthropologist Henry Sharp writes that for the Chipewyan Indians, “all animate life interacts and, to a greater or lesser degree, affects the life and behaviour of all other animate forms,” and draws a telling contrast.

The Chipewyan interact with all life in accordance with their understanding, and the animate universe responds. White Canada does not come silently and openly into the bush in search of understanding or communion, it sojourns briefly in the full glory of its colonial power to exploit and regulate all animate being . . . It comes asserting a clashing causal certainty in the fundamentalist exercise of the power of its belief. It talks too loudly, its posture is wrong, its movement harsh and graceless; it does not know what to see and it hears nothing. Its presence brings a stunning confusion heard deafeningly in a growing circle of silence created by a confused and disordered animate universe.³⁵

Graceless movement, a jarring presence, even just talking too loud: this innocent clumsiness reflects a failure to carry in our very bodies an understanding of ourselves as living in a larger animate universe, and failure too, crucially, to draw out, to co-participate with, that universe. “Environmental etiquette,” then, is no small matter. It has none of the trivial connotations of mere manners. It calls for a visibly enacted openness to the world. It also goes far beyond individual comportment. We need to design neighbourhoods specifically for darkness and quiet, building a world that invites animal dwelling and migration. We might time new holidays to

animal migrations or the Aurora Borealis, turn out all the lights on the solstices and equinoxes and nights of meteor showers or for the next comets, teach gardening and bird identification in schools, go on walkabouts for class trips.³⁶

Multicentrism's most striking implication is its move toward a "communicative ethics" that ranges far beyond the human sphere. The root intuition is profoundly simple, though enormously difficult for us late moderns: it is to recognize the larger world itself as a communicative realm. All animate life interacts, as Sharp puts it. David Abram writes:

For the largest part of our species existence, humans have negotiated relationships with every aspect of the sensuous surroundings . . . All could speak, articulating in gesture and whistle and sigh a shifting web of meanings that we felt on our skin or inhaled through our nostrils or focused with our listening ears, and to which we replied—whether with sounds, or through movements, or minute shifts of mood . . . Every sound was a voice, every scrape or blunder was a meeting—with Thunder, with Oak, with Dragonfly . . .³⁷

"We are never alone," native peoples say—not even in seemingly most wild, most transhuman of places. As Abram makes clear, this is at once a basic experience and the upshot of the latest science. The last decades have seen a proliferation of research and narrative writing on animal cognition and the subtle flows of communication involving everything from cetaceans to insects to the Earth itself.³⁸

So we live and move, always, among other "centres." A certain etiquette is implied—again in part as a means simply of knowing such a world, of actually getting in touch—but also more. Solipsism in co-inhabited spaces is not merely a factual error but a moral failure.³⁹ To act responsibly in such settings requires a sense of reciprocity and mutual accommodation. I would like to say: acknowledge that "we are never alone," and no other way of acting is even imaginable.

In many specific ways, often below the cultural radar, a kind of more-than-human mutuality is in play already. Sometimes it is even in plain-as-day words.

In the 1950s, Western anthropologists visiting the [Kalahari Desert] noted the eyes of many lions glowing just beyond the [Bushmen's] cooking fire; the animals would cease their roaring when a hunter sauntered off to the edge of camp and asked them to keep the noise down so the children could sleep. Human and lion shared a watering hole, one using it by day and the other by night . . .⁴⁰

Parks throughout the United States and Canada routinely instruct back-country visitors how to negotiate encounters with bears (Speak firmly but not threateningly; Back away but don't turn or run; Don't stare . . .⁴¹). Abram writes of the little rice offerings by means of which ants (yes, ants) and people in Bali negotiate the borders of their respective living spaces.⁴² On the level of policy, Arne Naess, Bob Jickling, Val Plumwood, and others highlight ways in which wild, other-than-human populations can and do systematically negotiate boundaries and other practices with adjacent human communities.⁴³ Entire new schools of architecture and city design are based on what Ian McHarg famously called "design with nature"—very much with the emphasis on the word "with."⁴⁴

When we begin to make a systematic practice of "negotiation" in this sense, further and entirely unexpected possibilities will open up.⁴⁵ Think of negotiation in much longer time-frames, too—even stretching over centuries, perhaps—and we can imagine a kind of "dialogue" in which we even put questions to nature, in the form perhaps of a variety of small and slow experiments, carefully attended to, in which alternative forms of suburban development or farming or even genetic engineering are tried out. Nature responds to such things: the land languishes or flourishes, we and the ants or the lions live together in peace—or not. And there are other forms of direct presence as well. Rivers and mountains aren't going to enter Congress themselves, for example, but why not expect Congress to meet on their terms—for example, in the Grand Canyon or in the Great Smoky Mountains? Would the votes on Alaskan oil drilling look the same if they were actually held in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge?

Christopher Stone points out that the law has long admitted nonhuman participants—ships, bridges, and the like as well as colleges, municipalities, and corporations—who take part in litigation and negotiation through their representatives.⁴⁶ The same is true for individual humans who are unable to participate in their own voices; it is now becoming true for future human generations as well. At the very least, then, other "centres" should be able to take part in decisions that affect them through spokespeople and representatives. Gary Snyder famously imagined having Senators for the forests and mountains, reinvoking and enriching an already-ancient practice of the commons.⁴⁷ "Who speaks for wolf?" is a question that Native Americans asked and were able to answer, evolving practices and institutions in order to stay in effective negotiation with the larger spirits of the land.⁴⁸ Imagine, as well, a

kind of priesthood of cross-species emissaries, an extension of John Seed and Joanna Macy's ritual of the Council of All Beings, perhaps, or of the "ecosteries"—ecological monasteries—under development by Alan Drengson and others, where people can devote their lives to achieving an attunement with nature that would allow them to take part in human councils as genuine representatives of the more-than-human.⁴⁹

Ethics so imagined will not always produce the quickest and most efficient decisions. This is true of any ethic that values process: the very constitution of relationship in process is part of the point. We might even learn to mistrust the quick and efficient: perhaps part of the practical function of ethics sometimes is to slow things down. Still, there may also be times when certain questions and challenges cannot wait. For such times we may need a provisional, temporary, even "emergency" multi-centric ethic: go light, preserve what's left, rebuild where we can, minimize big risks. Much of this, as Plumwood notes, is what good ecological activism is already geared to accomplish. It is a (conceptually) minimal, basic kind of environmental ethic that backgrounds anything deeper. What multi-centrism adds is the wider and wilder vision: a sustainable, participatory, multi-vocal ethics for the Multiverse. The more-than-human world not merely protected, but—rejoined.

Endnotes

¹ Peter Singer, 1981, *The Expanding Circle*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

² Singer's *Animal Liberation* (Random House, 1990) and Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights* (University of California, 1983) make the case for animals; Paul Taylor's *Respect for Life* (Princeton, 1986) and Albert Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought* (Johns Hopkins, 1998) make the case for the considerability of all life; Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* (Oxford, 1949) is often read as a form of "eco-centrism." Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, in *The Universe Story* (Harper, 1994), celebrate the being of absolutely everything.

³ This way of putting it I owe to a reviewer for *Environmental Ethics*. In regard to human affairs the concern that universality has its costs, especially to the culturally particular, has been voiced by critics from Marx in "On the Jewish Question" to contemporary communitarians.

⁴ Val Plumwood, 2002, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, Routledge, p. 148.

⁵ Edited by Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding (Indiana University Press, 2000). These themes are developed by a wide range of thinkers: for other representative anthologies see Nancy Duncan, ed., *Bodyspace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and*

Sexuality (Routledge, 1996) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Indiana University, 1993).

⁶ See Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Routledge, 1993) and *Environmental Culture* as well, again, as a wide range of other writers such as Susan Griffin's classic *Women and Nature* (Harper and Row, 1978) and Carol Adams' *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (Continuum, 1990).

⁷ *Environmental Culture*, Chapter 5. I return to this theme in section IV below.

⁸ In discussion, Spring 2002. Abram also suggested the lovely term "polynodal."

⁹ *I and Thou* (W. Kaufmann trans., NY: Scribner's, 1970), pp. 57–59.

¹⁰ In *The Natural Alien* (University of Toronto, 1985), pp. 40–1 and 98–9.

¹¹ "Does the tree then have consciousness, similar to our own? I have no experience of that. . . . What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself." (*I and Thou*, pp. 58–59).

¹² Or "pluriverse," as James also said. "Things are 'with' one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything or dominates over everything The pluralistic world is . . . more like a federal republic than like an empire or a kingdom. However much may be collected, however much may report itself as present at any effective centre of consciousness or action, something else is self-governed and absent and unreduced to unity . . ." *Essays in Radical Empiricism and A Pluralistic Universe* (Dutton, 1971), pp. 274–5.

¹³ They move within us too, for the self is a kind of multicentric "federal republic" as well. Multicentrism goes all the way down. I am indebted to Bob Jickling for this point.

¹⁴ Tom Birch, "Moral Considerability and Universal Consideration," *Environmental Ethics* 15 (1993): 313–332.

¹⁵ Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (North Point, 1990), pp. 3–24. Grizzly tracker Doug Peacock insists upon "interspecific tact," Wendell Berry speaks of an "etiquette" toward nature, Calvin Martin of "courtesy" between very different beings. I develop this theme in Chapter 7 ("Transhuman Etiquettes") in my *Back to Earth* (Temple University Press, 1994).

¹⁶ Jim Cheney and Anthony Weston, "Environmental Ethics as Environmental Etiquette: Toward an Ethics-Based Epistemology in Environmental Philosophy," *Environmental Ethics* 21 (1999): 115–34.

¹⁷ *Nature and Madness* (Sierra Club Books, 1982), p. 38.

¹⁸ Margaret Walker, "Moral Understandings: Alternative 'Epistemology' for a Feminist Ethics," *Hypatia* 4 (1989), p. 21. See also her book of the same title (Routledge, 1998). A classic source for revisioning ethics in this key is Eva Kittay and Diana Meyers, eds., *Women and Moral Theory* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1987).

¹⁹ See Scott Friskics, "Dialogical Relations with Nature," *Environmental Ethics* 23 (2001): 391–410; Christopher Manes, "Nature and Silence," *Environmental Ethics* 14 (1992): 339–350; and Christopher Preston, "Conversing with Nature in a Postmodern Epistemological Framework," *Environmental Ethics* 22 (2000): 227–240.

²⁰ In *Reinventing Eden* (Routledge, 2003), Chapter 11: the citation is from p. 228.

²¹ Jim Nollman's *Dolphin Dreamtime* (Bantam, 1987) is subtitled "The Art and Science of Interspecies Communication." Rich and wide-angled treatments are David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (Pantheon, 1996) and Derrick Jensen, *A Language Older Than Words* (Context Books, 2000).

²² Dryzek, "Green Reason: Communicative Ethics for the Biosphere," *Environmental Ethics* 12 (1990): 195–210, and his book *The Politics of the Earth* (Oxford, 1997); Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, Chapters 5 and 8.

²³ The "Otherised" group, as she calls it, is first of all marked out as radically separate (women from men; colonized from colonizer; animals from humans). Differences within the Otherised group are then denied and submerged (all women are radically distinguished from all men; all animals from all humans . . .). Mutual dependence is denied and the Other is construed as inessential or defective, and made invisible. Finally, the Other is viewed as valuable only as means to the One's ends (nature for human ends, etc.). *Environmental Culture*, Chapter 5; see also her essay "Paths Beyond Human-Centeredness: Lessons from Liberation Struggles," in my collection *An Invitation to Environmental Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

²⁴ Plumwood has urged this concern upon me as part of an extensive and energetic correspondence since I began this project in the summer of 2002. I am grateful for her persistence and insight, which have immeasurably improved my thinking on this and many other points. I regret that it is not quite improved enough for her on this one.

²⁵ See *Environmental Culture*, Chapter 8, and a brief summary in "Paths Beyond Human-Centeredness," pp. 91–94.

²⁶ "The choice these two frameworks offer us, of valuing nature either as Same or as Different, is ultimately an anthropocentric one, since to base value exclusively on either sameness or difference from the human implicitly construes the human as the centre and pivot of value." *Environmental Culture*, p. 201.

²⁷ *Environmental Culture*, p. 167.

²⁸ Molefi Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Temple University Press, 1987), p. 3, and C. Tsehloane Keto, *Vision and Time: Historical Perspective of an Africa-Centered Paradigm* (University Press of America, 2001), "Vulindlela" (Preface). The term "polycentric" is adopted by Samir Amin, in *Delinking* (Zed Books, 1990), which he defines as "subjecting the mutual relations between the various nations and regions of the planet to the varying imperatives of their own internal development and not the reverse" (p. xii). Keto explicitly speaks of a "multicentred scholarship" and of a "non-hegemonic African-centred analysis"—as well as a non-hegemonic Europe-centred analysis (*Vision and Time*, pp. xii and 25). Though he carefully distinguishes an "Africa-centred paradigm" from "Afro-centrism," this, he says, is a reaction to certain unscholarly excesses by some writers who use the latter label, not a conceptual difficulty with "centrism" itself (p. xvii).

²⁹ Still, in the end, why "centrism"? Why not some other descriptive and less risky label? Apart from the difficulty of actually coming up with such a label (OK, you try it), the fact remains that the debate between "centrisms" still claims the spotlight in the teaching anthologies and in journals such as *Environmental Ethics* and *The Trumpeter*. The rest of us, then—the many and varied alternative voices I have tried to draw into this essay—must enter the lists in a way that is as obviously and constructively as possible engaged with the dominant range of views. In my view this requires advancing a view under the heading of "centrism" itself. No list of centrisms,

I would hope, can now be considered complete without multi-centrism—but at the same time the very concept is a kind of Trojan horse, for multi-centrism offers an alternative to the entire centric project as so far understood. In time it may be better to go back to James and label the new view something more like “multiversalism”—or embrace Irene Klaver’s lovely pun and call ourselves “ex-centric.” But only in time.

³⁰ J. Douglas Rabb, “From Triangles to Tripods: Polycentrism in Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics* 14 (1992): 177-83, and Peter Wenz, “Minimal, Moderate, and Extreme Moral Pluralism,” *Environmental Ethics* 15 (1993): 61-74.

³¹ J. B. Callicott, “The Case Against Moral Pluralism,” *Environmental Ethics* 12 (1990), esp. p. 104.

³² Ibid.

³³ David Abram made this point in discussion, Spring 2002.

³⁴ On this theme, see Plumwood’s *Environmental Culture*, pp. 225-7. Once again she is way out in front.

³⁵ Henry S. Sharp, *The Transformation of Bigfoot: Maleness, Power, and Belief among the Chipewyan* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), p. 144-45.

³⁶ Along with our joint paper cited above (n. 16), commentaries by Jim Cheney and myself on Birch’s concept of universal consideration expand this theme (“Universal Consideration: A Epistemological Map of the Terrain” (Cheney) and “Universal Consideration as an Orinary Practice” (Weston) both appear in *Environmental Ethics* 20 (1998)). The celebratory note is especially important to me: just think of the attractiveness of what we could call “celebratory environmentalism” as opposed to (just an) “environmentalism of threats.” There are implications for teaching as well: see my essay “What if Teaching Went Wild?,” in Scott Fletcher, editor, *Philosophy of Education 2002* (Urbana, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 2003): 40-52.

³⁷ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, p. ix.

³⁸ For three chapters of summary that are still far too brief, see my *Back to Earth*, Chapters 2-4.

³⁹ That is, solipsism (either individual or as a species) in co-inhabited spaces (not just by other humans but by other “centres” of all sorts) is not merely a factual error (it gets the world itself wrong) but a moral failure (it does the world itself wrong, in part by making just such a reduced world a self-fulfilling prophecy). There are fertile parallels to Kant’s Categorical Imperative here.

⁴⁰ Jim Nollman, in *Utne Reader*, March/April 98, p. 100. There is more to this story, though: “When ranching was introduced . . . cattle began to share the watering hole without regard to schedules. At first lions kept their distance, as if cattle were an extension of the human family. But eventually they attacked. Ranchers reciprocated by shooting the lions, and within a few years lions had killed several Bushmen . . .” Notice that this is still a communicative form—just a very different and more lethal one.

⁴¹ Notice the change of key—a new etiquette. As Bob Jickling puts it, “warnings that were once posted and created images of bears as fearsome and dangerous creatures have been replaced by the message that, ‘You are entering bear country’—you are the intruder, so be careful and respectful.”

⁴² Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Chapters 1 and 5. Remember Shepard's phrase, "the elaboration of covenants . . . with the Other." As Abram notes, many native cultures tell stories of humans becoming animals, and vice versa, creating the covenants that later generations (of both) can enter. See also Gary Snyder's lovely essay "The Woman Who Married a Bear," in *The Practice of the Wild*, pp. 155–174. "Covenant" is a precise word, too. The kinds of mutual obligations and expectations that arise from such species-border-crossings are not entirely voluntary, can be renewed or broken, but are not constantly created anew (a point emphasized by Jim Cheney).

⁴³ Arne Naess, "Self-realization in Mixed Communities of Humans, Bears, Sheep and Wolves", *Inquiry* 22 (1979): 231-241.

Bob Jickling and Paul Paquet, "Wolves, Ethics, and Epistemology," Paper presented at "Culling Mammals," A symposium organized by The Mammal Society and the International Fund for Animal Welfare, London, November 24–25, 2000. See also Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden*, pp. 233–5.

⁴⁴ Ian McHarg, *Design with Nature* (Doubleday, 1969). For examples, see Merchant, pp. 236–9.

⁴⁵ See my essay "Self-Validating Reduction: Toward a Theory of Environmental Devaluation," *Environmental Ethics* 18 (1996): 115-132. Now in the Naess, *Trumpeter Special Festschrift Issue*, Winter 2006.

⁴⁶ Christopher Stone, *Should Trees Have Standing?* (Wm. Kaufmann, 1974).

⁴⁷ See *The Practice of the Wild*, pp. 25–47. "In the old ways, the flora and fauna are part of the culture . . ." (p. 37).

⁴⁸ Vine Deloria, *Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria Reader* (Fulcrum Publishing, 1999), especially pp. 40–60.

⁴⁹ See John Seed, Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming and Arne Naess *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings* (New Society Publishers, 1988) and the "Workshop Manual" at <www.rainforestinfo.org.au/deep-eco/cabcont.htm>. For ecosteries, see the website for the Ecostery Foundation of North America at <www.ecostery.org>.