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# Uncomplicating the Idea of Wilderness

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I identify and respond to four persistent objections to the idea of wilderness: empirical, cultural, philosophical and environmental. Despite having dogged the wilderness debate for decades, none of these objections withstands scrutiny; rather they are misplaced criticisms that hinder fruitful discussion of the philosophical ramifications of wilderness by needlessly complicating the idea itself. While there may be other justifiable concerns about the idea of wilderness, it is time to move beyond the four discussed in this paper.

## KEYWORDS

Wilderness, otherness, culture, environmental dualism, environmentalism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Providing a generally satisfying definition of the wilderness has long been a contentious affair. Max Oelschlaeger put it best:

Typically ... those concerned with the idea of wilderness offer either a stipulative definition that suits their purposes or, more characteristically among scholars, a potpourri of positions. This second approach, though it sometimes achieves a near exhaustive listing, suffers from a lack of rigor and clarity. The idea of wilderness is whatever anyone or group cares to think (Oelschlaeger 1991: 281).

Be that as it may, elaboration of some commonly accepted features of wilderness is a necessary first step towards a meaningful philosophical discussion of its ramifications. This task is complicated by the fact that a meta-debate has dominated the philosophical literature on the idea of wilderness for the past

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thirty years. Though all parties to the debate express respect and admiration for those places that conventionally fall under the rubric 'wilderness', a generation of scholars has found the idea of wilderness problematic, even objectionable, on a number of fronts (cf. Callicott and Nelson 1998, 2008). While some observers have found the debate to be stale, or misguided or unimportant (e.g., Rolston 1998, Orr 2008), problems concerning the idea of wilderness are now an imposing feature of the environmental ethics landscape such that any author wishing to discuss wilderness must first take a position on this debate.

Several times in the past eighteen months I have presented a paper on an emerging moral difficulty associated with wilderness preservation. At the conclusion of my talk, the first question has inevitably been some variant of: 'But there is no such thing as wilderness'. I explain that by wilderness I simply mean something like the 'untrammelled land' of the Wilderness Act definition, parts of nature that are largely, if not entirely, free from human interference. If told this is too imprecise, I say I mean something like a condition of the natural world distinguished by a relative absence of human activity (past or present, intentional or unintentional, conspicuous or inconspicuous, perceived or unperceived). I say that on the basis of ordinary language and much technical and legal language, 'wilderness' seems an appropriate, if not perfect, term to capture this concept and to enable conversation about what to do with and how to feel about the parts of the world to which it is appropriately applied. But rather than returning to the subject of the paper, I am challenged on a specious human/nature divide, or told that this idea of wilderness is culturally arrogant, or that the term has no referent or asked why I think idle philosophical speculation is going to help wild places and wild animals. It appears the wilderness debate does indeed rage on, and that a formal, albeit partial, response to some persistent objections could be helpful.

My goal in this paper is to uncomplicate the idea of wilderness, in however small a way, such that it will be easier to discuss philosophical issues pertaining to areas of the natural world conventionally, and not unreasonably or arbitrarily, picked out by the term 'wilderness'. Moreover, seeing our way past some of the misguided complications pertaining to the idea of wilderness will make it easier to attend to the legitimate complications – particularly the normative variety – that *do* merit continued scrutiny. My method of uncomplication is to explain and respond to four objections to the idea of wilderness that, in addition to popping up in Q&A sessions, pervade the literature. These objections are (1) empirical, (2) cultural/ethnic/racial, (3) philosophical and (4) environmental, I argue that none of these objections constitutes a serious problem for the received idea of wilderness such that a philosopher wishing to, say, explore the value of wild places and consider the import of moral problems accompanying their existence, need be concerned that the project is sandbagged by a conceptual impasse. To be clear: the idea of wilderness has difficulties, and I do not claim otherwise. What I do claim is that it is not nearly as complicated

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as some thinkers have made it out to be, and not for some of the reasons they give. The objections to the idea of wilderness discussed in this paper should no longer merit serious attention.

## 2. WILDERNESS AND NATURE

Much of the criticism of the idea of wilderness has been criticism of the idea as expressed in the US Wilderness Act:

A wilderness ... is hereby recognized as an area where the Earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. [It is] land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable (Wilderness Act 1964).

Indeed, it is the Wilderness Act definition that has been impugned as 'the received wilderness concept'.<sup>1</sup> Craig DeLancey takes it for granted that 'it has been recognized that the concept of a wilderness as a region 'untrammelled' by human beings has a number of intractable difficulties', and as a consequence 'there has been no consensus on how we should understand wilderness' (DeLancey 2012: 25). I agree that there is a lack of consensus, but lack of consensus does not imply intractable difficulties, especially when much of the difficulty is a function of misplaced criticism.

To be sure, there are imperfections with, and legitimate concerns about, the language of the Wilderness Act definition; for example, to the extent that to trammel something is to damage or misuse it, 'untrammelled' is an unavoidably evaluative term requiring a cultural, historical and value-laden interpretation (this general point about the potential evaluative dimension of conceptions of wilderness is brought out nicely in Kirchhoff and Vicenzotti's historical survey of European conceptions of wilderness – see Kirchhoff and Vicenzotti 2014). Whether or not it should (or could) be optimised for the purposes of academic philosophy, there is a workable and useful idea adequately captured by the Wilderness Act definition as it stands, and it is this idea rather than the exact language of the Wilderness Act definition that often is, and may continue to be, suspected of intractable difficulties.

The objections I face when discussing wilderness are the same whether or not I use the language of the Wilderness Act or a functionally semantically equivalent variant, and the objections always pertain to the idea of wilderness as the natural world distinguished by a relative absence of human activity (past

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1. It was Callicott who first spoke a 'received wilderness concept' in order to refer to, and criticise, the understanding of wilderness found in the 1964 US Wilderness Act. See Callicott 1998: 339, 349.

or present, intentional or unintentional, conspicuous or inconspicuous). This is what is meant by the phrase ‘land retaining its primeval character’. It is a factual statement, not a value judgement, that some areas of the Earth have been shaped by human forces (rather than natural) to a greater extent than others, regardless of whether one takes this to be good, bad, or indifferent, and despite the fact that land often appearing as ‘primeval’ to some observers turns out to have been walked on, worked, and altered by humans a great deal (more on this later). This idea of wilderness is present in, if not optimally articulated by, the Wilderness Act definition, and it is this idea – not the value-laden, potentially misanthropic, historically conditioned idea of ‘untrammelled’ land as morally desirable or spiritually uplifting – which many who work with the received wilderness idea, including myself, are actually interested in.<sup>2</sup> I am responding to objections aimed at the facet of the Wilderness Act definition concerned with land ‘primarily shaped by the forces of nature’. If successful, I will not have satisfied all concerns about the idea of wilderness or the Wilderness Act definition, but I will have uncomplicated the idea of wilderness in at least four ways such that it becomes easier to discuss topics like, say, the fundamental value associated with preserving areas of the natural world largely shaped by natural rather than human forces, or the moral difficulties such areas present for human and animal populations.

Given that the idea of wilderness makes use of the idea of nature, let me briefly state how the latter term is used in this paper. I follow a distinction between two senses of ‘nature’ drawn by J.S. Mill. In the first sense – call it ‘Nature<sub>1</sub>’ – ‘nature’ is taken to mean:

the aggregate of the powers and properties of all things. Nature means the sum of all phenomena, together with the causes which produce them; including not only all that happens, but all that is capable of happening; the unused capabilities of causes being as much a part of the idea of Nature, as those which take effect (Mill [1874] 2000: 224).

The only way for an entity or a state of affairs to avoid being natural in this first sense is for it to be supernatural. When people point out that everything is natural, often to discredit the distinction between the natural and the unnatural utilised in environmental philosophy, they mean everything is part of Nature<sub>1</sub>. In the second sense, Mill writes, ‘Nature is opposed to Art, and natural

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2. John Nagle’s study of the legislative debate leading up to the passage of the Wilderness Act provides evidence for this interpretation. A primary reason given in support of the Act was to preserve land as it was created by God. While there is an explicit theistic dimension to this reason that may raise another kind of concern about the Wilderness Act definition, ‘land as created by God’ was meant to capture the idea of land retaining its primeval character, that is, land as it was or could be prior to and free from human interference. See Nagle 2005: 979. In ‘The Value of Nature’s Otherness’, Simon Hailwood aptly draws attention to the fact that it is nature’s otherness – its other-than-human quality – that is a source of interest and value. Distinction from, not continuity with, best explains some of our valuable encounters with the natural world. See Hailwood 2000.

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to artificial' (Ibid.). Call this 'Nature<sub>2</sub>'. Nature<sub>2</sub> does not contradict Nature<sub>1</sub>, nor does it imply that art and the artificial are supernatural. All artefacts are natural in the first sense of the term. Iron worked by a blacksmith does not take on essentially different properties than iron left in the ground, though its natural properties and powers may have been manipulated or harnessed such that it now exhibits dispositions that the unworked metal does not have. As Mill writes, 'Phenomena produced by human agency, no less, than those which as far as we are concerned are spontaneous, depend on the properties of the elementary forces, or of the elementary substances and their compounds' (Ibid., 224–225). Going forward, I use the terms 'nature', 'natural', and 'natural world' to refer to the non-artificial, or Nature<sub>2</sub>.

## 3. THE EMPIRICAL OBJECTION

'The empirical objection to the wilderness idea', writes Keeling, 'is straightforwardly simple: the wilderness idea is a non-issue for environmental ethics because there is no place left anywhere on the face of the Earth that is completely free of human agency' (Keeling 2008: 506). If wilderness is to be understood as some kind of untrammled land, or as the natural world absolutely unaffected by human activity, and if no such places exist, then there is no wilderness about which to debate. Without an actual referent, the term 'wilderness' is of no more consequence to environmental ethics than the islands of Avalon and Atlantis. Bill McKibben advances the empirical objection in *The End of Nature* (McKibben 1990).<sup>3</sup> Humans have eradicated wilderness in conventional ways: fishing, farming, mining, settling, and the like. But, McKibben argues, now that we have irreversibly interfered with the planetary climate, we can claim, without exaggeration, to have interfered with the entire Earth to such an extent that wilderness is no longer possible.

## 4. RESPONSES TO THE EMPIRICAL OBJECTION

Dale Jamieson takes issue with McKibben's proclamation that nature, and wilderness, are no more. Even if 'it is true that human interference with the climate system is affecting every part of the planet...it doesn't follow from this that we are at the 'end of nature'' (Jamieson 2008, 163). First, as Jamieson points out, such a claim is trivially false 'since there is virtually no human influence on most of the universe' (Ibid.). More important, however, is to recognise that the strength of empirical objections like McKibben's dissolves

3. McKibben uses the term nature rather than wilderness, though what he means by nature is equivalent to what I mean by wilderness. Thus we can, without confusion, understand him as speaking of the end of wilderness.

once we acknowledge that there is no reason why we cannot (and in fact do) understand nature and wilderness as existing by degree (cf. Birnbacher 2014).

It is possible for a place to be more or less of a wilderness depending upon the degree of past or present human influence that it has undergone. There are probably very few absolute wildernesses left on Earth, but even if this is true talk of wilderness does not become meaningless. The Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge is wilderness to a greater degree than Walden Pond; Walden Pond is wilderness to a greater degree than the Boston Common; and the Boston Common is wilderness to a greater degree than Logan Airport even though none of these places is entirely free of human influence.

Finally, Scott Friskics has convincingly argued that those who criticise the received wilderness idea, and who point to the 1964 US Wilderness act as the idea's paradigmatic example, are guilty of misreading. If one is troubled by an understanding of wilderness that enshrines an idea of pristine, never-touched-by-the-hand-of-human nature, then one need not be troubled by its definition in the Wilderness Act. 'This understanding of wilderness is not the one reflected in the Wilderness Act of 1964 or subsequent wilderness legislation' (Friskics 2008: 397–398). Not only is the idea of purity not built into the paradigmatic example of the received wilderness idea, but, as Friskics goes on to say, only 'the most inattentive or unreflective wilderness visitors' would claim that absolute purity and a pristine natural condition are what they expect or experience when visiting the wilderness (Ibid., 398).

The empirical objection should not concern us because, even in the absence of an absolute nature, we can meaningfully and usefully employ the term wilderness to refer to areas of the natural world characterised by a relative absence of human activity and influence, areas comprised of natural things and shaped by natural processes relative to those areas comprised of human artefacts and shaped by human activity. Furthermore, criticism of the received wilderness idea may be targeting a straw man, given that neither wilderness legislation nor ordinary usage of the concept of wilderness relies on an absolute conception.

## 5. THE CULTURAL/ETHNIC/RACIAL OBJECTION

The cultural/ethnic/racial objection to the idea of wilderness (hereafter referred to simply as the cultural objection) claims that the received wilderness idea is a dangerous fiction emanating from Western ethnocentrism, racial insensitivity, and cultural myopia. It is potentially more damning than the empirical objection because, in addition to saying that wilderness does not exist, it says that the idea itself is pernicious inasmuch as it perpetuates the ethnocentrism and cultural insensitivity from which it arose.

Guha draws attention to the fact that it is American environmentalism, rather than simply environmentalism, that focuses on wilderness preservation



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(Guha 1998). His argument (to which I return in the discussion of the environmental/political objection) largely concerns the economic and political ramifications of trying to export American environmentalism to the so-called Third World (what today we might better refer to as the Global South). At the same time, however, he highlights the extent to which a 'preoccupation with wilderness preservation' is a Western, first world, and in the words of Roderick Nash, a 'full stomach' phenomenon (Ibid., 241, 238). Guha is chafed at the suggestion of some Western biologists that they and only they should decide what happens to tropical ecosystems and who, if anyone, gets to live there (Ibid., 235). To his ear, the idea of wilderness, and the drive for wilderness preservation, smacks of a new kind of imperialism (a more charitable reaction on Guha's part would have understood the biologists to be saying that decisions about the future of tropical ecosystems should be made by experts, whatever their racial and national origins).

In 'Taming the Wilderness Myth' (Gomez-Pompa and Kaus 1998) Gomez-Pompa and Kaus advance a related claim. They write: 'the concept of wilderness as an area without people has influenced thought and policy throughout the development of the western world' despite the fact that 'recent research indicates that much wilderness has long been influenced by human activities' (Ibid., 295). Moreover, '[the] concept of wilderness as the untouched or untamed land is mostly an urban perception, the view of people who are far removed from the natural environment they depend on for raw resources' (Ibid., 297). In support of this claim, they cite an informal survey in which 15 inhabitants of rural Mexico claim not to know what is meant by 'conservation', despite, presumably, being good conservationists (Ibid., 306). Gomez-Pompa and Kaus go further than Guha, however, in suggesting that Western biologists who advocate wilderness preservation are wrong to privilege science over traditional wisdom. 'Scientific findings', they tell us, 'are often accepted as if they are gospel word. But a scientific truth is really a conclusion drawn from a limited data set' (Ibid., 295).

J. Baird Callicott adds to the cultural objection by claiming that the received wilderness idea rests on the mistaken belief that North America was a wilderness prior to 1492; as such the idea becomes woefully ethnocentric by ignoring the presence and effect of aboriginal people (Callicott 1998: 339, 348–349). Early European visitors to North America only conceived of the land as a wilderness because they were ignorant of what previous people had done to change the land, or, more nefariously, because they refused to recognise the earlier inhabitants as people having a culture. Similar to Callicott, William Cronon laments the way nineteenth-century European Americans removed Indians 'to create 'uninhabited wilderness' – uninhabited as never before in the human history of the place' (Cronon 1998: 480). And in line with Gomez-Pompa and Kaus, he contends that 'The dream of an unworked natural landscape is very much the fantasy of people who have never themselves had

to work the land to make a living' (Ibid., 482). For Cronon, 'there is nothing natural about the concept of wilderness' (Ibid., 481).

## 6. RESPONSES TO THE CULTURE OBJECTION

Responding to the cultural objection is a delicate matter for two reasons. First, critiquing the cultural objection opens the critic up to charges of ethnocentrism and cultural arrogance. But more importantly, it is possible (and I think necessary) to accept the charge that a cultural bias often motivates concern for the wilderness while rejecting the relevance of that motivation to philosophical questions concerning the essence and value of wilderness.

Guha is right to point out that radical American environmentalism places a higher value on wilderness preservation than, say, environmentalism in his native India. As he explains, environmentalism in the developing world has, and should have, a greater focus on cleaning up rivers, slowing deforestation and improving air quality. Likewise, Gomez-Poma and Kaus are correct to suggest that Western biologists should consult with, and seek to learn from, indigenous populations in the places they wish to study and save. But these reasonable points do not, in any way, threaten the idea of wilderness as the natural world characterised by a relative absence of human activity and influence.

If the cultural objection means to suggest that the received wilderness idea is flawed simply because it was developed in the West, by Europeans and white Americans, then it commits the genetic fallacy: the veracity and value of an idea cannot be assessed solely on the idea's origin. Moreover, even if the idea of wilderness and conservation is foreign to some indigenous people, as Gomez-Pompa and Kaus maintain, I fail to see how that makes the idea problematic. Presumably the fifteen inhabitants of rural Mexico cited by Gomez-Pompa and Kaus were also ignorant of *modus tollens* and the law of the excluded middle, yet this neither makes the rural Mexicans illogical nor the elementary rules of logic unreal and ethnocentric.

Callicott and Cronon are in the same boat as Guha, Gomez-Pompa and Kaus: their cultural critique of the wilderness idea is apt without being philosophically damaging. It is true that North America was not an uninhabited, absolute wilderness in 1492, and it is true that white Europeans and Americans have often applied the term 'wilderness' in ways that are culturally and racially arrogant. Notice, though, that the tendency to miss or discount the influence of certain groups of humans does not in any way indicate that there is something wrong with the idea of wilderness as a place largely uninfluenced by people. It just means one ought to be very careful before labelling someone else's land a wilderness for the purpose of furthering one's own aims (whatever they might be), and that one should look more carefully at the way other people, in other cultures, have transformed nature.

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No one can reasonably deny that racism and cultural arrogance were hallmarks of European exploration and colonisation in North America. Yet, as Rolston argues, this fact alone does not mean that the ascription of wilderness conditions to the new world by Europeans is an unjustified act of racism. The North American continent was wilderness to a greater degree than Britain, France, Spain, Portugal and The Netherlands given the limited cultural capacity of American Indians to remake nature (relative to the capacity of Europeans at the same time); to point this out slights neither their character and racial quality, nor 'disparages aboriginal Indian culture' (Rolston 1998: 377–379). As we know, some European settlements, despite their advanced technology and supposedly superior cultures, would have not made it past their first few years in the New World without the practical wisdom and generosity of some indigenous peoples.

I grant that, historically, some have taken factual claims about American Indian culture as grounds for making evaluative judgments about the people themselves – both positive and negative. What I am pointing out is that one can and really should separate the factual from the evaluative. To say that fifteenth-century Europeans had a greater power to remake nature than the inhabitants of what became fifteenth-century New England does not logically entail a positive evaluation of one group and negative evaluation of the other; a further argument is needed, and I, for one, see no reason to give it.

One other feature of the cultural objection deserves comment, namely, the anti-scientific stance it sometimes adopts. Gomez-Pompa and Kaus write: 'Scientific findings are often accepted as if they are gospel word. But a scientific truth is really a conclusion drawn from a limited data set' (Gomez-Pompa and Kaus 1998: 295). It is a common tactic among those who favour the cultural critique to go beyond the reasonable claim that many Western environmentalists are guilty of cultural arrogance and implicit bias when dealing with non-Western people in developing nations, and to then begin attacking science and reason *qua* science and reason as yet another example of ethnocentric imperialism. This is a worrying tactic, and it must be resisted.

To claim that scientific findings are accepted as if they are gospel is to badly misunderstand both science and the gospels. In fact, one could not choose a worse analogy. Gospel is accepted as if it is gospel – no evidence, no verification, and no falsification is needed or desired. Scientific knowledge, to the contrary, warrants all three. And so long as scientists are operating in good faith, they will be the first to admit that their conclusions are never absolute and only one experiment or one field survey away from revision.

It is not inaccurate to say that a scientific truth is a conclusion drawn from a limited data set, but how is that a criticism? Again, this circumstance is what makes a scientific conclusion so pointedly different from a conclusion accepted as if it were gospel truth (the gospel being, for believers, a complete data set that requires no revision and admits no falsification). Western

environmentalism and conservation biology deserve to have their cultural and racial biases exposed as much as any other human endeavour. But let us not throw the baby out with the bath water and begin dismissing science as naught but Western arrogance, or like Gary Snyder, put the term ‘enlightenment’ in scare quotes to indicate that we ought not take the European emphasis on reason too seriously (Snyder 2008: 552). Nor, to revive a point made by John Passmore more than four decades ago, should we suppose that a turn to mysticism or spirituality – Western or Eastern – will provide a panacea for looming environmental crises. Environmentally deleterious applications of reason and science do not constitute an argument for the abandonment of these traditions; in fact, global environmental problems call for more reason and better science (Passmore 1974). There is also something unintentionally demeaning in coupling a rejection of reason and science with an admiration for (and dubious appropriation of) of non-Western or indigenous traditions.<sup>4</sup>

## 7. THE PHILOSOPHICAL OBJECTION

The idea of wilderness depends upon a distinction between humans or the human world and nature or the natural world. The philosophical objection to the idea of wilderness is, as Keeling expresses it, ‘that its idealization of pristine, untrammled nature enshrines an untenable human/nature dualism. To say that a wilderness area protects the ‘forces of nature’ by excluding ‘human works’, is to presuppose that nature and human artefacts belong to mutually exclusive ontological categories’ (Keeling 2008: 506). If the wilderness idea does depend on a human/nature dualism, and if this dualism is philosophically untenable, then the idea of wilderness is untenable.

For Cronon the philosophical objection is the ‘central paradox’ of the whole issue, because the received idea of ‘wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural’ (Cronon 1995: 482). Moreover, ‘[the] dualism at the heart of wilderness encourages its advocates to conceive of its protection as a crude conflict between the ‘human’ and the ‘nonhuman’...’. (Ibid., 486). For Callicott, the wilderness idea relies on a pre-Darwinian Western metaphysical dichotomy of man and nature (Callicott 1998: 348). But since we know that ‘man is a natural, a wild, an evolving species, not essentially different in this respect from all the others ... then

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4. Guha understandably bemoans the alacrity with which Western environmentalists have appropriated disparate Eastern religions to justify radical environmental goals, supposing that Eastern thought can succeed where Western rationalism has failed. Implicit in this move is the suggestions that these non-Western traditions are valuable *because* they are less rational. Typically, he writes, the Western environmentalist ‘reading of Eastern traditions is selective and does not bother to differentiate between alternate (and changing) religious and cultural traditions; as it stands it does considerable violence to the historical record’ (Guha 1998: 237).

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the works of man, however precocious are as natural as those of beavers, or termites' (Ibid., 350). From this Callicott concludes that human interference in the natural world cannot be anything other than natural, and the concept of wilderness, relying as it does on a distinction between the human and the natural, cannot be maintained.

Steven Vogel is perhaps the staunchest advocate of the philosophical objection. For him, 'the sharp distinction between nature and artefact doesn't hold up', rendering the idea of wilderness as the natural world minus the influence of man a mere 'stipulative definition' (Vogel 2003:152). He calls our attention to the human acts of 'digging, planting, weeding, and burning' – 'when looked at carefully', he writes, 'all the processes these actions put into place themselves are wild' (Ibid., 162). For Vogel this phenomenon raises an unanswerable question: 'why are those processes called natural ones, while the ones we initiate are not' (Ibid., 152)? Finally, Vogel advises that 'if we begin to think even more carefully, we might come to see that the wild is always there in all our acts, and in all our artefacts' (Ibid., 163).

## 8. RESPONSES TO THE PHILOSOPHICAL OBJECTION

As with previous objections, the philosophical objection takes a partial truth and draws a specious conclusion. Contrary to Callicott, the wilderness idea does not rely on a peculiar metaphysical dualism, nor does it stand in opposition to a Darwinian account of the evolutionary origin of *Homo sapiens*. And contrary to Vogel, we can explain why certain processes are called 'natural' or 'wild', while others are not. Furthermore, the fact that the distinctions between wild and non-wild, nature and artifice, are not always 'sharp' is not an insurmountable difficulty; rather, it means wilderness is a gradual concept not unlike many other terms meaningfully explored and employed by philosophy.

Rolston is adamant that the philosophical objection presents 'no cause for being negative about wilderness', given that 'One hardly needs metaphysics or theology to realise that there are critical differences between wild nature and human culture' (Rolston 1998: 367, 268). Animals, on the one hand, 'are what they are genetically, instinctively, environmentally, without any options at all'. Humans, on the other hand, 'have a myriad of lifestyle options, evidenced by their cultures; and each human makes daily decisions that affect his or her character. Little or nothing in nature approaches this' (Ibid., 368). Animals may have 'freedom within ecosystems', but humanity is uniquely distinguished by having 'freedom from ecosystems'. No longer part of biological evolution by means of natural selection, humanity adapts ecosystems to meet its needs; animals, however, must adapt to their ecological niche (Ibid., 368).

Animals do not hold elections and plan their environmental affairs; they do not make bulldozers to cut down tropical rainforests. They do not fund development

projects through the World Bank or contribute to funds to save the whales. They do not teach their religion to their children. They do not write articles revisiting and reaffirming the idea of wilderness. They do not get confused about whether their actions are natural or argue about whether they can improve nature (Ibid., 369).

None of this requires a metaphysical or theological belief in an immaterial soul or the intrinsic separateness and superiority of humankind from all creation. If these differences, and the countless left unnamed, are not justification for drawing a distinction between humanity and wild nature, then it is hard to know what could count, short of strict logical necessity, as a justification for drawing distinctions of any kind between any things.

If by saying that we are not ‘essentially’ different from other creatures, Callicott simply means that humans too are carbon-based life forms, subject to the laws of physics, comprised of the same elemental materials as the rest of the universe, then he is correct: we are all, as Mill pointed out, part of nature<sub>1</sub>. But this is a fact that no one, least of all proponents of the wilderness idea, would deny. Rolston is right: ‘If there is metaphysical confusion in this debate’ it lies in the belief that affirming the aforementioned scientific truths creates a metaphysical problem for those wishing to draw a distinction between the wild and the not wild given that the distinction between nature<sub>1</sub> and nature<sub>2</sub> is tenable (Ibid., 369).

It might suggest that the philosophical problem disappears if, drawing on social constructivism, we admit that ‘wilderness’ must be understood as meaning given to natural phenomena rather than as an objective condition obtaining in the natural world (Callicott 1998, Cronon 1998, Evernden 1992, Kirchhoff and Vicenzotti 2014). Perhaps this is correct; the social constructivist position is nuanced, comes in several varieties, and merits more attention than I can give here. Still, I feel that a turn to social constructivism would cause more problems than it solves (Orr 2008, Crist 2004, Dombrowski 2002). As Eileen Crist has argued, ‘the idea that knowledge is socio-historically situated seems trivially true’ and in no way precludes the possibility of identifying wilderness as ‘an essential reality independent of human presence’ (Crist 2004: 6, 22). John O’Neill adds:

For the strong constructivist, once we are made aware of the cultural origins of our responses we realize that there is no ‘nature’ there, that we are surrounded by a world of cultural objects. That strong constructivism is mistaken.... There is a clear distinction to be drawn between the sources of our attitudes, which are economic, political and cultural, and the objects of our attitudes which can still remain non-cultural (O’Neill 2008: 539).

Part of what we want to talk about when we talk about wilderness is not just various meanings we attach to natural phenomena, but whether, and to what extent, certain objective conditions of the natural world elicit (or should elicit) particular moral and affective responses, and how and why we do (and should)

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attach various meanings to these objective conditions of the natural world. This task is not possible if we start with the view that ‘wilderness’ *just is* meaning attached to natural phenomena. But as I said, the social constructivists position is varied and nuanced. I mean only to explain why social constructivism will not help us *evade* the philosophical problem inasmuch as social constructivism is metaphysically and epistemologically aligned with an objection I aim to rebut.

Keeling employs a different strategy to rebuff the philosophical objection. Appealing to Wittgenstein’s notion of language games, he argues that the terms ‘wild’ and ‘wilderness’ perform a particular, perfectly understandable function. The terms only become problematic if we seek to break or change the rules of the game we are playing. According to Keeling, the wilderness idea is committed to the following proposition:

P1 – No human artefacts are natural.<sub>2</sub>

Callicott and Vogel worry that P1 contradicts ecological holism – the view that human kind and human works are evolutionary phenomena no less natural than the works of beavers and termites. If ecological holism is correct, then Callicott and Vogel feel they must endorse a different proposition:

P2 – All human artefacts are natural.<sub>2</sub>

Thus the philosophical objection appears to leave us with a contradiction, Cronon’s ‘central paradox’. Keeling sees the objection as a red herring, one that ‘relies on unexamined assumptions about language, and on specific assumptions about what the word ‘nature’ means’ (Keeling 2008: 508). Ecological holism needn’t dissolve into ecological monism.

Rather than trying to intuit the essential meaning of ‘wilderness’ and ‘nature’, Keeling believes we should seek out the function of the terms. ‘It would be more profitable’, he writes, ‘to approach this intractable problem by treating language not just as a way of referring to things ... but also as ... a kind of rule-guided practice’ (Ibid., 508). Like Wittgenstein, he wants us to accept that ‘highly ramified abstract nouns (like ‘nature’) should be thought of in terms of their purpose rather than their “meaning”’ (Ibid., 508). The question ‘Is *x* wild?’ or ‘Is *x* natural?’ lacks the context needed for us to have much idea what is being asked or how to answer.

Keeling encourages us to put the question in context, and then provides several examples to illustrate his point. Consider the following utterances (all quoted from Ibid., 510):

- ‘We are using a natural process to trigger these avalanches’ (announcing a proposal to trigger avalanches with explosive)
- ‘This is a natural lake’ (pointing to a lake formed by a hydro-electric dam)



- 'What a stunning place, isn't nature beautiful?' (from within the inside of a cathedral)
- 'It's amazing what nature can do' (pointing to a computer)

The proper response to these utterances would be confusion, something like: *'What are you talking about?'* One who hears them would assume that either the speaker is making mistakes, or that he lacks an elementary understanding of the language. The utterances are meaningful, but only if you accept some sort of natural/not natural distinction. As it happens, this distinction is already present, and constantly employed, in the language game we are playing.

Vogel's question, (imagine him referring to plate tectonics and beavers building dams) 'why are these processes called natural one, while ones we initiate are not?' is, as Keeling puts it, akin to asking 'Why do we say that black is darker than white?' There is no answer we can give beyond trying to explain that this is simple how the words are used. 'There is no way to justify empirically the fact that human artefacts are not natural objects' (Ibid., 511).

Keeling aptly notes that Vogel's attempt to deny or radically change the meaning of wilderness 'is (not unlike poetry) simply to invent a new context for the word 'wild' where there are no established rules for its use' (Ibid., 512). Rolston makes a similar complaint about Callicott: 'Poets like Gary Snyder perhaps are entitled to poetic license. But philosophers are not, especially when analysing the concept of wildness' (Rolston 1998: 369). If one does not like using the term 'wilderness' to designate specific parts of the natural world characterised by their lack of human activity, one is free to suggest another term. Terms change all the time for various political, cultural, and scientific reasons. For example, 'African-American' replaced 'black', which replaced 'collared', and so on. But whether we use the term 'wilderness' or some other combination of shapes and sounds, we can still meaningfully speak and think of the natural world free, or relatively free, from human activity. What we cannot reasonably do is begin playing a new, spontaneous language game such that a term generates paradox, and then fault others for falling prey to this new paradox.

There is clearly a sense in which human beings are just another part of nature (we are biological organisms descended from the same tree of life as every other creature), yet this lineage does not mean that it is unreasonable to talk about a human/nature divide. Indeed, the entire project of environmental ethics depends upon our ability to conceptually distinguish ourselves from nature, so that we can reflect upon the norms that ought to guide our relations with the non-human world. By some accounts, sex and gender are also vague concepts that get fuzzy at the edges, but this property does not mean we should not engage with feminist ethics or queer theory simply because, in some sense, all human beings are the same. If one truly believes that there is no meaningful distinction between humans and the rest of nature, then the project



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of environmental ethics should be abandoned – and serious ethical problems would arise within societies because there would no longer be something like responsibility or legal liability.

## 9. THE ENVIRONMENTAL OBJECTION

The final objection I want to consider, the environmental objection, is distinguished from the previous three in that it does not necessarily claim that there is something erroneous about the idea of wilderness. Instead, this objection opposes any further debate on the idea of wilderness on the grounds that the debate, at best, does not contribute to the achievement of environmental goals, and, at worst, because it actually inhibits the political action to which true environmentalists should be attending. On this view, the only role for environmental philosophy is to further the goals of environmental activism by cogently attacking the environmentalists' foes and offering apologia for environmentalists' agendas. Rather than debate the nature, meaning, and value of wilderness, we should get out there and save what wilderness is left. This, I take it, is what some audience members have meant when they claim that my attention to a moral problem associated with wilderness isn't actually helping wilderness.

Gary Snyder begins his essay 'Is Nature Real?' in the following way: 'I'm getting grumpy about the slippery arguments being put forth by high-paid intellectuals trying to knock nature and knock the people who value nature and still come out smelling smart and progressive' (Snyder 2008: 351). Later he suggests that academic work in the humanities and social sciences on, *inter alia*, the extent to which nature is a part of culture and culture just a part of nature, might be 'just a strategy to keep the budget within their specialties' (Ibid., 353).

David Orr, a critic of the wilderness debate, writes: 'The question is whether environmentalists can offer practical, workable, and sensible ideas – not abstractions, arcane ideology, spurious dissent, and ideological hair-splitting reminiscent of nineteenth-century socialists' (Orr 2008: 430). He asks us to put aside ideas that will 'not be particularly useful for helping us create a sustainable and sustaining civilization', however useful such an idea 'may be as a reason to organise conferences in exotic places and for keeping postmodernists employed at high-paying indoor jobs'. We have no more need for 'ivory tower' environmentalism (Ibid., 431).

Callicott contributes to the environmental objection by arguing that the received wilderness idea prioritises wilderness as the environmental ideal, when in fact, some version of sustainable development or 'land health' would be both easier to enact *and* better for the environment. He writes: 'And if the concept of land health replaces the popular, conventional idea of wilderness as the

standard of conservation, then we might begin to envision ways of creatively reintegrating man and nature' (Callicott 1998: 355).

Guha's main argument is that the wilderness idea is either inexpedient or inapplicable when exported to the so-called Third World. Thus in addition to criticising the wilderness idea for being culturally insensitive and racially imperialistic, he is criticising it for failing to help us meet the environmental goals that most need to be met (Guha 1998).

## 10. RESPONSES TO THE ENVIRONMENTAL OBJECTION

As with the cultural objection, the environmental objection makes some undeniably accurate claims that remain, nonetheless, irrelevant to the challenge of developing a philosophical conception of wilderness. For the sake of argument let us concede that academic debates on the meaning and value of wilderness have failed to advance the practical, political conservation goals of environmentalism. But so what? Such a criticism could only be a mark against the wilderness idea if the sole function of discussing such an idea was to advance a particular environmental agenda. Environmental philosophy should not necessarily be the servant of environmental activism, and to the extent that we have scholars asking hard questions rather than merely pushing a political message, the field is arguably moving in the right direction. Even if these hard questions foster a debate that fails to immediately save an endangered species, or protect an old growth forest, I fail to see the problem for a *philosophical* investigation of the idea of wilderness.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the objection is really a critique of philosophy and the supposedly 'high-paid' intellectuals it employs.

While irrelevant to my argument, the claim that philosophical speculation about nature does not advance the environmentalist's cause is, it bears adding, false. It is straightforward intellectual history to trace the philosophical ruminations about the meaning and value of nature in, say, Emerson and Thoreau, to the political environmentalism of Muir, Pinchot and Leopold. Nevertheless, my point remains: *qua* philosopher, Emerson's reflections on the meaning and value of nature are not properly judged by the extent to which Muir put them to use in the service of Yosemite.

Not only must environmentalists accept the fact that philosophy is not – and should not be – activism by other means, they must also be open to the possibility that philosophical analysis of the natural world may result in conclusions that actually *are* inimical to the goals of mainstream environmentalism. Crucially, this fact alone should never be used to assess the quality or value of the philosophy in question. Take the case of Jeff McMahan's article, 'The

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5. In *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger makes a similar point on Marx's last thesis on Feuerbach. Even if it is true, as Marx claims, that the point of philosophy is not to understand the world but to change it, everything hangs on what one takes to be 'the world'. See Heidegger 1949.

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Moral Problem of Predation', in which he argues, *inter alia*, for the potential desirability of germline genetic modification to transform carnivores to herbivores so that, one day, the lion may truly lie down with the lamb (McMahan 2014). Whatever one thinks of McMahan's conclusion (I myself am wary), the article itself is a superb piece of philosophical reasoning; it makes an admirable contribution to environmental philosophy; and the contribution is not in any way diminished by the fact that, if McMahan's argument is sound, it will entail undesirable consequences for much mainstream environmentalism.

Finally, Orr's accusation that the wilderness debate is too much like nineteenth-century socialism is itself troubling. Implicit in this characterisation is the idea that a worthy movement is being hamstrung by academic discourse and in-fighting, and what we really need is to throw off the thoughtfulness of Marx and Engels and find ourselves an environmental Lenin or Trotsky or Stalin to take charge, keep the intellectuals in place, and start getting things done at any cost. To repeat: such action *may* be desirable from the standpoint of an environmental activist, but it is likely to be damaging to the purposes of environmental philosophy.

## 11. CONCLUSION

I have tried to partially uncomplicate the idea of wilderness by responding to four objections that are, in some respects, misguided, irrelevant, and inaccurate. I have not come close to uncomplicating the idea of wilderness in its entirety. For example, certain versions of social constructivism must still be reckoned with in full. It may also be worth considering whether the term wilderness is now so burdened with unwanted historical, political and moral associations that we'd be better off without it; in other words, even though 'wilderness' does not present intractable difficulties such that philosophers cannot usefully employ the term, perhaps there are sufficient reasons to why we should not.<sup>6</sup> Though I do not favour abandoning the term, the conversation is worth having. What is vital is that it becomes easier to engage with philosophical problems associated with evaluating, preserving, augmenting, managing, and eliminating areas of the natural world that remain (relative to other parts of the natural world) largely shaped by natural forces and not human forces. In 1984 Mark Sagoff was able to meaningfully discuss the moral plight of animals living in the wilderness and the extent to which environmental ethics and animal liberation are necessary at odds (Sagoff 1984). Should his article have come out today, a provocative and perceptive argument may well be obscured by empirical, environmental, cultural and philosophical objections to his use of the term 'wilderness'. The idea of wilderness is sure to become complicated for new,

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6. My thanks to Derek Turner for raising this question in conversation.

unexpected reasons. But before the new complications arrive, we should let go of the four addressed in this paper.<sup>7</sup>

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