

Article

# Mutual Flourishing: A Dialogical Approach to Environmental Virtue Ethics

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**Abstract:** Environmental virtue ethics is about how things (nature) matter, and this is explicated through the virtues (character and dispositions of the agent). It has been suggested that human virtue should be informed by what constitutes our flourishing and by what constitutes nonhuman entities flourishing. Our flourishing, in other words, involves recognising their flourishing and autonomy. My purpose in this paper is to elucidate the notion of mutual flourishing through a study on the relational space that a recognising attitude or disposition of a loving and caring subject creates in its interactions with ‘earth others’.

**Keywords:** mutual flourishing; recognition; autonomy; love (of nature); relational space; relational ontology; dialogical ethics

## 1.

It has been suggested that human virtue should be informed by what constitutes our flourishing and by what constitutes others’ flourishing. As the scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer [1] likes to say: ‘all flourishing is mutual’. This mutual flourishing paradigm is beautifully illustrated in the parable of the Three Sisters [1] (pp. 128–140). The Three Sisters refer to three plants: corn, beans and squash. Together they form a garden, which represents a place of possibilities for mutual flourishing: ‘There are layers upon layers of reciprocity in this garden between the bean and the bacterium, the bean and the corn, the corn and the quash, and, ultimately, with the people’ [1] (p. 134). The parable of the Three Sisters captures the basic intuition of the mutual flourishing approach to environmental virtue ethics that I will outline in this essay. Philosopher John O’Neill [2] formulates the issue nicely:

For a large number, although not all, of individual living things and biological collectives, we should recognize and promote their flourishing as an end itself. Such care for the natural world is constitutive of a flourishing human life. The best human life is one that includes an awareness of and practical concern with the goods of entities in the nonhuman world. [2] (p. 24; see also pp. 78, 153 and p. 155)

I highlight the term ‘recognition’ as a central concept of our enquiry. My suggestion is that a *recognising attitude of nature* creates a *relational space* in which natural beings can be seen as independent, legitimate, others; that is, as free beings with their own ‘projects’ and ‘ends’. It is because there are individuated others that there can be reciprocity, and thus mutual flourishing. I will make the hypothesis that the *recognition of nature’s autonomy* is a necessary condition for an environmental virtue ethics based on mutual flourishing. In arguing for the recognition of nature’s autonomy as the foundation of an ethic of mutual flourishing, I intend to continue Val Plumwood’s [3,4] philosophical project, that is, to elaborate a counter-hegemonic strategy to replace ‘monological relationships with nature by dialogical ones that are responsive to the other on their own terms’ [3] (p. 111). In a dialogical, subject–subject, methodology, ‘the other is always encountered as a potentially



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communicative other' [3] (p. 190). Communicability, then, in Plumwood's view, means respecting 'earth others' as agents, as subjects, viz. 'intentional beings' [3] (pp. 182–183 and *sq.*).

This project, in V. Plumwood's work, takes the form of what she calls 'weak panpsychism', that is, the idea that elements of mind are widespread in nature ([3] (p. 178) and [4] (p. 133)). This thesis, however, raises the following issue, eloquently put by Bryan Bannon [5]: 'if nature is to have properties and agency, then it must be a substantial being with mind-like properties' (p. 44); but, B. Bannon notes, '[a]ttributing certain *properties* [author's italics] to nature without altering how nature is initially defined is not sufficient to overcome the crisis of rationality she [Plumwood] describes so eloquently.' (p. 41). Hence, B. Bannon suggests moving away from traditional *substantial* accounts of nature as a being with teleological properties to *relational* accounts of nature as a web of relations and processes (pp. 40–41)<sup>1</sup>. B. Bannon is right to make the case for a shift in ontology, and like him, I also take a place-based ethics approach. I therefore share the general view, central to the relational framework that I will adopt, that place is a composite of relations between affective bodies [6] (p. 270)<sup>2</sup>.

However, the problem with this, and similar accounts [7], is that they lead to an ontology of events in which, because intentionality is blocked from the start, autonomy and agency become difficult, if not impossible, to conceive. Indeed, in this approach, 'our description of the world can only refer to the state of processes without a subject' [8] (p. 32). What is generally missing here is the question of the subject as 'being-for-oneself [*du pour soi*]; to-be-for-oneself means to be the end of oneself; and this self-finality, at the level of the living, comes with a world of its own, namely the presentation, representation and relation of what is represented in the constitution of a singular world [9] (pp. 196–201) [10]. In other words, the natural world is populated by a multitude of beings who produce their own singular worlds and perspectives [11] (pp. 204–207)<sup>3</sup>. The state of the question of the subject as being-for-oneself is not of immediate importance to our purpose here. Rather, our focus is on the concept of the subject *necessary* for a *dialogical*, subject–subject, ethic. Only then, when this point has been adequately addressed, can we fully appreciate, as an illustration of a mutual flourishing environmental virtue ethic, R. W. Kimmerer's assertion:

Individuality is cherished and nurtured, because, in order for the whole to flourish, each of us has to be strong in who we are and carry our gifts with conviction, so they can be shared with others'. [1] (p. 134)

In the Three Sisters parable, 'each plant does what it does in order to increase its own growth. But as it happens, when the individuals flourish, so does the whole.' [1] (p. 134). Based on this intuition, I will, as a starting point, make the following assumption: the autonomy of nature, that is, conceiving natural entities as subjects, as agents, is a necessary condition for a dialogical methodology and a mutual flourishing virtue ethics.

#### *A Grammatical Approach to the Subject: Toward a Narrative Environmental Virtue Ethics*

We require a concept of the subject that does not lead to a substantial account of nature, and at the same time is compatible with a relational ontology framework. In particular, we need a concept of the subject that allows us to see 'earth others' as agents without conceiving of nature in terms of substances and properties. This concept, I argue, is the concept of the subject as an agent, i.e., the concept of a 'concrete individual endowed with causal powers' [8] (p. 34). I therefore adopt French philosopher Vincent Descombes' [8] grammatical approach in which the subject is defined as a *support*, i.e., a substrate of action and change. As V. Descombes puts it: it is 'the individual such that he can play an actancial role in a story, so that one can ask whether he [/she/it] is the subject of what happens [agent], or if he [/she/it] is the object [patient], or if he [/she/it] is the recipient [beneficiary]' [8] (p. 14; see also pp. 16, 28–29, 121–124). This syntactic model of the subject might hold the key to ground a dialogical methodology for a mutual flourishing environmental virtue ethics in line with V. Plumwood's philosophical project.

V. Descombes' syntactic model of the subject, I argue, can help develop a communicative interspecies ethics in terms of a *narrative ethic*, which does not require the substantiation of nature but still recognises the autonomy of nature. As V. Plumwood [3] puts it: 'narrative ethics, supplying context and identity, can help us configure nature as a realm of others who are independent centres of value' (p. 188). The grammatical approach I take here, following then V. Descombes, allows us to distinguish between two ways of speaking about properties or qualities: one *attributive*, the other *verbal*. He gives the following example: 1. '*L'herbe est verte* [the grass is green]', and 2. '*L'herbe verdoie* [grass green]'. The first sentence is an attributive sentence, and the second is a verbal sentence. The important point here is that 'not everything that is presented as an action is an action, but this means that there is a way of presenting something *as if it were* [author's italics] an action' [8] (p. 73). This is the case in the second phrase '*L'herbe verdoie* [green grass]', where the phrase suggests the notion of an internal active force that is at the origin of the tree's foliage (*ibid.*). This, I think, gives full expression to V. Plumwood's statement that 'intentional *description* [my italics] is in turn crucial to legitimating rich *narrative description* [my italics] of the non-human sphere' [3] (p. 188). In this regard, Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse* [12] is a compelling illustration of this narrative description of the non-human sphere in which natural entities are presented as subjects, or agents, viz. as 'protagonists in their own right, fully capable of generating forms of narrative and meaning' [12] (p. 96). Additionally, I claim that this narrative approach aligns with V. Plumwood's project of establishing continuity within difference in a counter-hegemonic strategy. In the Anthropocene framework, for example, establishing continuity takes the form of overcoming the great divide between natural history and human history [13,14]. Here, again, A. Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse* [12] perfectly illustrates the varied interactions, continuities and 'enmeshments' of human and non-human forms of agency.

The syntactic model of the subject can therefore help determine the intentionality or agency of nature without presupposing a substantial account of nature. In this sense, the narrative approach can help convey the ideas of flourishing and of mutual flourishing, which, I argue, are part of an environmental virtue ethic. Environmental virtue ethics is about the character dispositions that we should have towards nature. As Ronald Sandler puts it: 'Indeed, how one interacts with the environment is largely determined by one's disposition toward it [...] In this way proper character [i.e., the virtues] is indispensable for facilitating right action and behavior' [15] (p. 253). In the context of environmental virtue ethics, narratives can inspire, motivate and help in the transmission of the virtues [16] (p. 371). As Brian Treanor has shown, narratives can help us see things from a different perspective, from a sort of 'virtual' or 'as if' experience [16] (pp. 369–370): 'We use narratives to experiment with possibilities, exploring different situations and different ethical responses' (*ibid.*). In addition, narratives are also central in a dialogical methodology. As V. Plumwood puts it: 'To treat the other as a potentially intentional and communicative being and narrative subject is part of moving from monological modes of encounter [...] to dialogical modes of encounter' [3] (p. 190)<sup>4</sup>. To this I propose to add: the dialogical encounter between human and other-than-human entities necessarily depends on the existence of a *relational space*. It is within this space that humans and 'earth others' relate, interact, as equally agents, patients and beneficiaries sharing common histories and stories. It is within this relational space that virtues can be cultivated, and that flourishing and mutual flourishing can take place as a result of living together in a relational space.

## 2.

I have argued that we do not require a substantial account of nature in order to conceive of nature's agency. Nature's *subjectivity* can be conveyed by a grammatical, syntactic, model of the subject as agent. However, this account is not yet an account of the *recognition* of nature's intentionality, which is how V. Plumwood presents her philosophical project of a communicative interspecies ethics [3] (pp. 182–183). Thus, my purpose now is to elucidate the idea of a recognising attitude of nature. I will argue that a recognising attitude of nature

creates a relational space in which nature can emerge as a legitimate other, that is, as an autonomous being.

### 2.1. A Recognising Attitude of Nature Based on Love as a Form of Adequate Recognition

The idea that we can understand our relationship with nature in terms of a theory of recognition is not generally accepted [17] (p. 276) [18] (p. 61). The reason can be traced back to the *mutual* recognition paradigm as the central explanatory and normative principle of the concept of recognition. This paradigm requires that ‘only recognizers can be recognized’ [19] (p. 320)<sup>5</sup>, which then blocks nature from the start. However, in an *adequate regard* insight, *adequate* (and not mutual or interpersonal) *recognition* is about responding to the normatively relevant features of the other, *any other* [19] (p. 326)<sup>6</sup>. This *unrestricted* view of recognition opens up the way to think of a recognising attitude of nature. Thus, I suggest that we can define this recognising attitude of nature in terms of love (of nature) *as a form of adequate recognition* [20]. I use the term ‘love’ in Humberto Maturana’s sense: ‘love is the domain of those *relational behaviours* [my italics] through which another arises as a *legitimate other* [my italics] in co-existence with oneself’ [21] (p. 55). The particularity of this definition is that, as an embodied characteristic of human beings (of the human bodyhood or body-self), it reveals the self as a relational-self, that is, a self that is constituted by the different kinds of relations (dependencies and interdependencies) it enters into (an embodied and embedded self). A recognising attitude of nature based on love as a form of adequate recognition means then that the other (nature) arises as a legitimate other (read: is recognised), without necessarily being an active participant (read: a recogniser)<sup>7</sup>. In short, the idea of a *recognising attitude of nature based on love as a form of adequate recognition* means the recognition of *nature’s otherness*, viz. of nature’s autonomy or capacity of agency.

### 2.2. The Relational Space of a Mutual Flourishing Environmental Virtue Ethics

Maturana’s concept of love, which I have used to formulate a recognising attitude of nature, holds the key to develop the idea of a *relational space* in which the idea of mutual flourishing can be conceived and serve as a foundation of a dialogical ethic. I propose then to look closer into Maturana’s concept of love. Emotions create relational spaces that constitute ways of living. As Maturana puts it: ‘Emotions as domains of relational behaviours constitute the relational space in which they exist and are conserved’ [21] (p. 56). For Maturana, emotions are realised in themselves in the relational space that constitutes them: ‘[e]motions create the systemic relational dynamics which conserves them’ [21] (p. 55). This is highly reminiscent of Aristotle’s description of the acquisition of virtues: ‘For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them [...] so too we become just by doing just acts [...]’ [22] (*NE* II 1 1103a). In a similar way, then, the emotion of love is realised in loving [21] (p. 55). What is important here is that the emotional dynamic of love as an embodied characteristic of a relational self creates a relational space in which flourishing, the cultivation of virtues, and as we shall see, mutual flourishing and collaboration become possible<sup>8</sup>. In other words, the recognition of nature’s subjectivity is only possible in a relational space that emerges from the recognising attitude of an embodied, relational self. I propose to summarise my purpose so far as follows: a recognising attitude of nature based on love as a form of adequate recognition creates a relational space in which the othering of nature is recognised as an autonomous other living in coexistence with oneself<sup>9</sup>.

### 2.3. Ascription: Conceiving Nature’s Autonomy or Capacity for Agency

I suggested that the recognition of the othering of nature as a legitimate other means the recognition of nature’s autonomy: the recognition of ‘earth others’ as intentional beings, that is, as agents. I claimed that recognising the autonomy of nature is a necessary condition for a dialogical ethic based on mutual flourishing. However, in order to avoid a substantial account of nature that risks prolonging the oppositional definition of nature [5] (p. 41), I have suggested adopting a grammatical, syntactic, model of the subject, which, from a

narrative ethics perspective, allows us to conceptualise nature's agency without endorsing a metaphysical ontology in terms of substances and properties.

Moreover, the introduction of the concept of recognition, reformulated as an adequate response based on love, can not only be used, as we have seen, to conceptualise the relational space of a dialogical ethics, but it can also help elucidate the question of *how* the intentionality and, in general, other capacities of nature can be recognised. The question is this: does the act of a recognising attitude of nature *prescribe* or *describe* (*a priori*) qualities of nature? The question is analogous to the epistemic problem of knowing whether the act of recognition 'attributes' or 'reproduces' *a priori* qualities of the individual's identity (Honeth). In the case of a recognising attitude of nature, the latter seems to imply a substantial account of nature, whereas the former seems to imply a strong anthropocentric perspective.

In order to overcome this difficulty, and to understand in what sense we can speak of nature's agency, I propose to introduce Paul Ricœur's [23] concept of 'attestation', which defines the epistemic mode of assertions having to do with capacities (pp. 91–92). There are two interesting aspects of the concept of 'attestation' that might be relevant to our study here: first, attestation challenges the opposition between description and prescription. As Ricœur puts it: 'Capacities are not observed to be true, but attested [23] (pp. 148–149). Second, attribution, as part of the meaning of intentional action, is called 'ascription', and, as Ricœur notes: 'The term *ascription* [author's italics] points to the specific character of attribution when this has to do with the connection between action and its agent [. . .]' [23] (p. 98). By analogy, then, I propose that, with respect to nature, nature's intentionality is not (theoretically) observed to be true, (much less as an inherent property or quality), but is attested; we therefore *ascribe* intentionality or agency to nature; or: in our interaction with nature, we practically attest nature's capacity of agency. I therefore use ascription and attestation in a similar way to Ricœur: as practical categories that assert capacities, that is, in the case of nature, nature's intentionality or varied capacity of agency. With respect to nature, however, ascription must give up its reflective character. Indeed, we cannot say, as we do when we speak of human agents, that 'ascription is directed to the agent's capacity to designate him- or herself as someone who does or who has done this' [23] (p. 98). Therefore, regarding nature, I will align my interpretation of ascription with the structure of the emotion of love. We have seen that love is unidirectional, other-directed. Similarly, ascription, with respect to nature, is other-directed. It is other-directed because attestation of the varied capacities of nature depends on a recognising stance.

Ascription is the practical act of attesting, in our recognising relationship with nature, nature's subjectivity. In other words, the attestation of nature's autonomy depends on the emotional dynamic taking place in the *relational space* in which nature emerges as a legitimate other in coexistence with oneself through a recognising stance of a relational self. Here, then, I join B. Bannon, who, referring to Neil Evernden, speaks of our relationship to individual beings so as to *let them be* [5] (p. 47). B. Bannon understands letting a being be as requiring that 'we abandon representations of beings in order to free the being from the limitations imposed by the representation' [5] (p. 47). Thus, B. Bannon sees the attribution of intentionality to nature as contrary to the liberating goals at the heart of V. Plumwood's project, implied in the stance of letting a being be. However, as we have seen, the attribution of properties, or rather *capacities* (of which intentionality, or agency), to nature is not a form of 'making nature ours' (Bannon (*ibid.*) quoting Evernden). As a matter of fact, if we understand the attribution of capacities (intentionality or agency) as ascription, in P. Ricœur's sense, then attribution is a *practical act of attesting* how nature, in our interaction with it, just *is*; it self-realises its subjectivity, that is, its varied capacity of agency.

### 3.

We have seen that recognising nature's intentionality means the practical ascription of agency to nature. The ascription of intentionality to nature and, in general, the attestation of the varied capacities of nature's agency, depends on the emotional dynamic of a relational space of interaction brought about by the other-directed recognising stance of a relational

self. In what follows, I propose that this relational space created by the emotional dynamic of a recognising attitude of nature of a relational self can be categorised in two different and complementary ways—as a moral space and as an ontological and ethical place. Interactions with nature in the relational space defined as a moral space allow us to conceive the self-realisation of an ecological or environmental identity; defined as an ethical place, interactions with nature in the relational space allow us to conceive the autonomy of nature and, from there, the idea of mutual flourishing.

### 3.1. *The Relational Space as a Moral Space: Toward an Ecological Identity*

An *ecological or environmental identity* is like any other collective identity: a *social construction* and a *motivating force*, with the difference that it is also the product of an *interaction with nature*<sup>10</sup>. As psychologist Susan Clayton [24] puts it: ‘an environmental identity is one part of the way in which people form their self-concept’ (p. 45). Thus, an environmental identity refers to the idea that nature must be part of the way we form our self-concept, that is, of the way we define what the good life is, since selfhood and the good, as Charles Taylor [25] argues, are intertwined themes (p. 3).

To develop this point, I suggest referring to Charles Taylor’s [25] understanding of modern identity. C. Taylor defines identity as ‘the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand.’ [25] (p. 27). What is interesting here is that C. Taylor conceives identity as having to orient oneself within a ‘moral space’. As he puts it: ‘To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise of what is good or bad’ [25] (p. 28). To these questions, C. Taylor argues, we respond through ‘framework-definitions’, or ‘qualitative distinctions’, of what is good, of what meaningful life is.

I suggest using this definition of identity to interpret the current ecological crisis as a crisis of disorientation within the moral space that provides the frame within which we define our identity. Thus, in this light, the idea of an environmental identity conveys the idea that the self-realisation of personal identity requires that we orient ourselves within a moral space in which nature is valued as a constitutive relation of our self-concept and a qualitative distinction of the good life. However, to understand how nature can be valued as a qualitative distinction of the good, this moral space needs to be coupled with an ontological and ethical place where place is regarded as constitutive of one’s sense of selfhood.

### 3.2. *The Relational Space as an Ontological and Ethical Place: Toward a Mutual Flourishing Environmental Virtue Ethics*

It is at this point that I re-join B. Bannon’s project of a place-based environmental ethics. Indeed, to understand the idea that place is constitutive of one’s self-concept, we need to define place in relational terms as the product of all beings participating through their openness to affection and their affection of other bodies [5] (p. 50). This is more than saying that there is reciprocal influence between self and place; rather, place here is constitutive of the self. As Edward S. Casey [26] puts it: ‘The relationship between self and place is [...] of constitutive coingredience: each is essential to the being of the other [...] there is *no place without self and no self without place* [author’s italics]’ (p. 684). This concept of place allows redefining nature, from a relational ontology perspective, as the common production of relations between bodies [5] (p. 48), and because these are relations of affective bodies, it is then easy to see how place, that is nature, can be constitutive of individual identity.

More importantly, however, a place-based ethic so defined, can help clarify the idea of mutual flourishing: because of this mutual affectivity of bodies, ‘all flourishing is mutual’ [1] (p. 15). Going back to the parable of the Three Sisters, each plant, as an affective body, contributes to the flourishing of the other plants, which, as affective bodies, contribute, reciprocally, to the other plant’s own flourishing. However, here I do not follow B. Bannon’s

interpretation, because the idea of mutual flourishing requires, by hypothesis (*supra* I), the concept of the subject. This does not mean, as we have seen, that we attribute teleological properties to nature defined as a substance, but rather that we ascribe to nature, as practical categories that assert capacities, intentionality, that is, varied capacities of agency.

The plant does what it does *in order to* increase its own growth. This ‘in order to’ is not a teleological quality of the plant as a substance, rather the *practical* attestation of a capacity—e.g., the capacity of the beans plant to produce nutrients from nitrogen necessary for the other plants, whose own individual flourishing contributes to the bean’s flourishing, for example, by providing support (from the corn’s height) and shade (from the squash’s leaves); and we *practically* ascribe this capacity in our interaction, as embodied and relational observers, in the garden defined as a relational space in which the recognition of the plant’s mutual flourishing ultimately means the recognition of their contribution to our own flourishing in terms of the ‘universal language: food’ [1] (p. 129). The idea of mutual flourishing therefore requires the concept of the subject: of individual agency, or autonomy. Indeed, it is the recognition of individuality, that is, of the capacities or, in R. W. Kimmerer words, of the ‘gifts’ of the individual that, when they are cultivated, can be shared in order for the whole to flourish. Based on this idea of mutual flourishing, we can then conceive a dialogical ethics, that is, an ethics of solidarity and collaboration.

### 3.3. *Being(s) Together: An Illustration*

To illustrate the idea of an environmental virtue ethic based on mutual flourishing, that is, a dialogical ethics of solidarity and collaboration, I will draw on the current exhibition at the Ethnography Museum of Geneva (MEG), ‘being(s) together’<sup>11</sup>. The exhibition explores the relationships between humans and nature and, through different portraits of humans, animals, plants, and the relationship between them, tackles the question of communication and understanding among different species. I will present, as one illustration, one portrait that is highly representative of the type of dialogical ethic that I have outlined here, and in particular of the idea of nature’s subjectivity.

The portrait is that of photographer and zoologist Stefano Unterthiner<sup>12</sup>. Stefano looks at the daily life of animals in ‘tales of wildlife’. His documentary work carefully reproduces the individualities and specific moments of each animal. In the Alps he had several encounters with foxes and established a special form of intimacy with them. This is how the curators of the exhibition describe this relationship: ‘Fred, Beauty and Rourounette [names that Stefano gave to the foxes] fed his imagination. For many months, man and the foxes spied on and tamed each other [. . .]’.

[Stefano:] *And these encounters were. . . let’s say a way of deepening knowledge that in this close contact with a wild animal created the desire to learn to get to know a very fascinating animal better. [. . .] In fact, he’s a character. The fox, when you meet him, you understand he has a lot to tell you. What I like doing is getting to know an individual. In this case the fox, not as a species, but as this specific subject, this individual. And so learn its habits, its behaviour, its character, I mean. . . the animal’s personality. Jokingly with my wife, we often say they’re my ‘anima friends’, but we really do become friends. So, in this context, ethics are something natural. I work on the principle that I respect my friends. If a fox is unbelievably beautiful and has a particular attitude, I call it Beauty. If on the contrary, the fox is dominant in its territory with maybe a scar on its nose, I remember, we nicknamed hi the Boss. [. . .] So, these are little nicknames, which in fact enable us, on the one hand, to break down a bit the barrier between me and the other species. For example, I didn’t see a fox, but I saw the Boss who was doing this or that. And so the story begins there.*

This practical relationship between Stefano and the foxes perfectly illustrates the type of dialogical ethic that I have outlined in this essay in terms of an environmental virtue ethic based on mutual flourishing. In particular, it illustrates the idea that for this form of communication ethics to be possible, we need the concept of the subject, of nature’s autonomy—in this case the recognition of the fox’s individuality as a being, a subject, with

a capacity for agency. When Stefano describes his encounter with the fox (*'let's say a way of deepening knowledge that in this close contact [...] created the desire to learn to get to know [...]'*), I am tempted to say that this encounter, as he describes it, was dependent on a participatory attitude that I have called 'a recognising attitude of nature' based on love as an adequate form of recognition. I have argued that this other-directed stance of an embodied relational self creates a relational space in which interaction, coexistence, and dialogical methodologies become possible (*'The fox, when you meet him, you understand he has a lot to tell you'*). This dialogical relationship is narrative in essence (*'For example, I didn't see a fox, but I saw the Boss who was doing this or that'*). Here, the attribution of agency is in terms of ascription: practical categories that assert capacities and explain that we can consider the fox as a subject, as a being with capacity of agency (*'And so learn its habits, its behaviour, its character, I mean. . .the animal's personality'*). Ascription helps then to create the portrait of the animal as an individual, as a subject, in our coexistence with it (*'If a fox is unbelievably beautiful and has a particular attitude, I call it Beauty'*), and to establish continuity (*'these are little nicknames, which in fact enable us, on the one hand, to break down a bit the barrier between me and the other species'*). Moreover, because this relational space as an ethical place is, from a relational ontology, a composite of relations between affective bodies, we can readily see that 'man and the foxes spied on and tamed each other' as a result of their affective interaction. Defined as a moral space, the interaction with nature, with the foxes, in the relational space leads Stefano to consider the foxes as friends (*'but we really do become friends'*): from this we are not far from envisaging the possibility of the self-realisation of an environmental or ecological identity in the form of an ecological ethos: an attitude of respect and care for the environment (*'So, in this context, ethics are something natural. I work on the principle that I respect my friends'*).

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The expression 'substantial account of nature' means, according to B. Bannon's interpretation, that natural entities have mind-like properties (intentionality, agency, etc.); that is, that they have 'teleological purposiveness'. Bannon counters this with a relational account in which it is not intentionality but processes and relations that best explain the basis of non-dualistic environmental ethics.
- <sup>2</sup> In this approach, place, therefore, supplants nature: 'beings all participate in the creation of a place to the extent that they contribute to it through their openness to affection and their affection of other bodies' [5] (p. 50).
- <sup>3</sup> Taking Jacob von Uexküll's example, Virginie Maris [11] illustrates her purpose thus: 'Whereas the world-for-the-bear, stretching for hundreds of kilometres, is made up of rivers, fish, paths, plants and caves, the world-for-the-tick is made up of branches, hair, skin and blood. It is as complete a world for the tick as the world-for-the-bear is for the bear.' (pp. 204–205).
- <sup>4</sup> Today, in the epoch of the Anthropocene, this encounter takes the form of *the uncanny*: 'It is surely no coincidence that the word *uncanny* has begun to be used, with ever greater frequency, in relation to climate change [...] No other word comes close to expressing the strangeness of what is unfolding around us [...] the uncanny and improbable events that are beating at our doors seem to have stirred a *sense of recognition*, an *awareness* that humans were never alone, that we have always been surrounded by beings of all sorts who share elements of that which we had thought to be most distinctively our own: the capacities of will, thought, and consciousness' [12] (p. 35).
- <sup>5</sup> Indeed, 'there always needs to be two-way recognition for even one-way recognition to take place' [19] (p. 319).
- <sup>6</sup> As Arto Laitinen notes, recognition is not only a matter of attitudes: 'It can be a matter of acting, emoting, expressing the attitudes or emotions, a matter of statuses, relations, etc.' [19] (p. 335).
- <sup>7</sup> This is because love, in Maturana's sense, is unidirectional, that is, is other-directed and does not require *mutual* loving: 'the loved one arises as a legitimate other through the behaviour of the lover without necessarily being an active participant in a loving or any other relation with the lover' [21] (p. 55).

- 8 Thus, virtues, I argue, can be cultivated only when a relational space exists that then makes the cultivation of virtues possible.
- 9 At this point, the following question inevitably arises: moral subjectivity entails *responsibility*. If nature's subjectivity involves recognising its capacity for intentionality and agency, then what about nature's responsibility (e.g., when a snake bites me, or a rock hits me on the head. . .)? Is not responsibility an important feature of subjectivity? This is a very important question that deserves a thorough examination. However, I will give the following tentative answers: often responsibility *is* indeed ascribed (on this see the following section) to an animal, as when we attribute to the wolf the responsibility for killing the sheep (and, in most cases, it is hunted to death as a result). More importantly, I think that from a place-based ethics perspective, the question of responsibility is closely linked to the question of limits. First, knowing '*our*' limits: the snake bites me, but did I step into the *snake's place*? The rock hits me on the head, but was I in '*my*' place when I climbed the mountain? Sometimes animals step into '*our*' place. This last point is reminiscent of V. Plumwood's example: in this case, '[f]or example, the ethical perplexities and strategies for dealing with a strange highly venomous snake who has just moved onto your veranda may not be all that different from those involved in dealing with a difficult human stranger who has done the same' [3] (p. 170). Ultimately, as V. Plumwood argues, this is a question of interspecies distributive justice: sharing the earth with other species [3] (p. 117). Of course, sometimes tragedy happens at the crossing of boundaries, at the interface of places. I am very grateful to one attentive reviewer of this essay for raising this important question.
- 10 I use the term 'environmental identity' in a narrower sense than what we might call, following Arne Naess, 'an ecological self', that is, a metaphysical reality in which I participate on the basis of a subjective experience of *identification* with nature. In short, it is the extension and the transformation of the ego into a broader understanding of the self in which ecological dependencies and interdependencies are constitutive of identity ('my' self-realisation is then the self-realisation of an ecological self). This rather (eco)phenomenological perspective, although at the heart of our subject matter here, goes beyond the scope of the place-based approach that I have chosen to develop here. It is for this reason that I will now turn to C. Taylor's understanding of modern identity.
- 11 Available online: <https://www.meg.ch/en/expositions/beings-together> (accessed on 20 November 2023).
- 12 Available online: <https://www.stefanounterthiner.com/> (accessed on 20 November 2023).

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