

Relational ethics for a world of many worlds
An ecosocial theory of care, vulnerability, and sustainability

by

Didier Zúñiga

B.A., Université de Montréal, 2013

M.A., Université de Montréal, 2015

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ABSTRACT

The dissertation attempts to do two things: First, to move political theory and philosophy from a humancentric to an ecocentric worldview. This entails thinking about justice and equality—and hence about reciprocity, solidarity, and cooperation—in both ecological and social terms. Second, I argue that the shared conditions of interdependency and vulnerability allow us to bridge the gap between the social and the ecological, and thus to reconnect politics with nature.

As little attention has been paid to ecology and sustainability in democratic theory, my work's ambition is to demonstrate the transformative potential of a relational ethics that is not only concerned with human animals, but also with the multiplicity of beings that inhabit the earth, and the relations in which they are enmeshed. The purpose is to think about ways of cultivating and fostering the kinds of relations that are needed to maintain human and more than human diversity, and therefore to sustain life on earth.

In order to accomplish this task, I begin by critically examining the scholarship on pluralism and diversity, and by pressing the limits of the prevailing frameworks within which these themes are generally approached. The argument I attempt to put forward is that most of the literature bounds the scope of diversity and plurality to the worlds of human animals, which constrains our understanding of difference and why it matters. Such scholarship remains largely confined to phenomena such as culture, religion, and legal authority at the collective level, as well as to epistemic diversity at the individual level. These forms of diversity and plurality are not only exclusively concerned with humans, but they are also underpinned by a problematic conception of human animality.

As feminism, care ethics, disability studies (among other critical approaches) have shown, much theorizing about reasoning, dialogue, collective action, and other fundamental concepts in democratic theory were conceived in the image of the Enlightenment *man*, and hence in opposition to embodiment, affectivity, and empathy. Moreover, political theory in general, and democratic theory in particular, have been built on a presumption of able-bodiedness and able-mindedness that excludes many forms of being human from political participation. And it is my contention that reflecting critically on our own condition of human animality—and on the ways in which it has been portrayed in political thought until relatively recently—will inevitably prompt us to

reconsider the relations we entertain with each other and with more than human forms of life on earth.

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INTRODUCTION:

Towards a relational ethics with nature

1. Diversity and pluralism in a world of many worlds

Diversity and pluralism and the problems they pose have been ongoing concerns for political theory and philosophy.¹ It is only relatively recently that the terms became the object of direct and systematic study, but the discipline has always been preoccupied with difference and the question of how to address it. Suffice it to think of Plato's and Aristotle's respective responses to the problem of the plurality of competing and incommensurable goods. Plato and Aristotle formulated different responses to the same problem: the question of how to find a standpoint from which correct ethical and political judgments can be made. This is a persistent theme in political theory, one that has benefited from a long and complex philosophical history. The object of difference has changed over time and place, but the subject has, if anything, become more important and more firmly established in the academic literature. This is reflected in epithets used to describe today's politics as pertaining to an 'age of diversity' (or 'of pluralism'), as well as in the irruption of the language of identity, minority rights, recognition, multiculturalism, and so on. These political matters are underpinned by ontological and epistemological assumptions about reality, and about how we can have access to such reality. And these assumptions have also been the subject of intense philosophical debate, a debate to which this dissertation attempts to contribute by putting forward a pluralist yet profoundly relational conception of ontology, and of the epistemologies

¹ Note that I use the terms 'political philosophy' and 'political theory' interchangeably. For an interesting discussion, see James Tully, "Public philosophy as a critical activity," in *Public Philosophy in a New Key Vol. I: Democracy and Civic Freedom* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 15-38.

through which the many worlds that coexist on earth seek to understand themselves and the worlds around them.

This dissertation's overriding concern, then, is with diversity, plurality, and difference, or however else we may describe the heterogeneous worlds that constitute reality, and especially with the ethical and political implications of the various ways in which these worlds relate to one another. My argument is therefore directed in the first instance against what it is possible to refer to as a 'one world' ontology, but also against a particular understanding of pluralism whose theoretical commitments entail practical effects that are similarly problematic. What I have in mind here is a view of plurality that conceives of groups as self-contained, self-sufficient, and, as a result, as independent from one another, as we will see in detail later.

The theme I will be concerned with throughout these pages has been approached from multiple angles, but these have for the most part reproduced a pernicious feature that Western political thought inherited from modernity. Such a feature resonates with what Charles Taylor has called "excarnation," which denotes the disengaged understanding of ourselves from the worlds around us that has become prevalent in North Atlantic societies.² This move has involved, among other things, the relocation of agency from 'natural' dynamics and bodily forces to the minds of individual actants. This is part of the Enlightenment's project of delineating a pure form of rationality with the purpose of achieving "clear and distinct knowledge."³ As is well-known, the result was the separation of the material from the ideal, as well as the positing of a hierarchical relationship between the two. Personhood was defined in the light of such a picture, and it also gave rise to the emergence of distinctively human realms of thought and action, such as 'the political', 'the moral', 'the economic', and so on. This went hand in hand with the relegation of

² See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 614.

that which was regarded as different from the human—and hence, not worthy of acquiring the status of ‘person’—to the inferior realm of ‘the natural’.

In this dissertation, I will take issue with both problems described above: the atomistic conception of reality, in the eyes of which phenomena are deemed to occupy clear-cut, definite spaces—which are understood to be bounded and independent from one another—as well as with the broader dissociation of ‘nature’ from ‘culture’, where political concerns are seen as disconnected from ecological ones. Indeed, much work in political theory and philosophy that deals with difference, diversity, and pluralism seems to be confined to reproducing these categories. And what is harmful about this is that they reinforce the arbitrary allocation of degrees of ethical and political importance to whatever matter is under investigation. Such a way of adjudicating matters of importance is arbitrary because it is contingent, and it is contingent because it is possible to situate it historically and contextually. For this reason, it is also possible to better attune it to the ecosocial worlds that constitute reality. And given that this is one of the dissertation’s tasks, it will be necessary to engage with a variety of traditions, texts, and themes both inside and outside the main field within which this project was conceived.

The most influential works of political thought presuppose a bounded notion of ‘the political’, which hinges on an oppositional understanding of nature and culture and determines what is included and what is excluded from politics. Nowhere is this more evident than in contemporary liberal thought, an Anglo-American tradition that was mainly shaped by the writings of John Rawls, and the scholars who responded to his work.⁴ Even though the purported point of departure of Rawls’s political liberalism is the ‘fact of pluralism’, the purpose of his argument is

⁴ For a history of liberal political philosophy since the second half of the twentieth century, see Katrina Forrester’s *In the Shadow of Justice. Postwar Liberalism and the Remaking of Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

to contain such plurality and to eliminate the possibilities of disagreement and misunderstanding from democratic practice. In other words, the Rawlsian framework circumscribes what counts as legitimate political matters by assigning objects of concern to particular spheres, which are more or less relevant depending on how they fare when confronted by his doctrine of public reason. On this view, the ‘political’ is a restricted domain that not only deals with a very limited set of questions, but also establishes the ways in which such questions ought to be tackled. It comes as no surprise, then, that outside of liberalism, Rawlsian scholarship (and liberal thought more generally) is regarded as a circular and idiosyncratic form of political theorizing.

Rawls’s place in the canon is uncontested, but political thought is divided as to whether his work is useful or not for discussing issues of justice/injustice and equality/inequality beyond the liberal tradition. There are, on the one hand, those who think that working with Rawls’s texts is inimical to critical thought because it is too constrictive, and it therefore impedes more radical voices to be expressed. On the other hand, certain scholars argue that using a Rawlsian approach can be helpful, even though a critical distance with the apparatus that comes with it needs be maintained. But where both views tend to overlap is in the way in which they take for granted that politics is one clearly defined thing, which can be studied separately from other things that may or may not be as significant. In addition, political theory and philosophy predominantly conceive of politics as a domain where *certain* beings engage in *specific* practices, such as those that draw people together to deliberate and find common ground. Democratic theory provides a case in point: scholars in this subfield claim to study collective self-rule, but they largely assume that the *demos* is constituted by able-bodied and able-minded human animals. This is evident in how the activities of democratic thought and practice presuppose that citizens have the physical and cognitive abilities—as well as the necessary material support—to participate in collective deliberation and

action. Although this is changing, particularly due to the growing influence of feminist approaches, disability studies, care ethics, and animal rights theories, among others, the field remains wedded to the disconnection between ‘politics’ and ‘nature’ that I take issue with in the dissertation. And I will argue that it is because we rely on a mistaken understanding of personhood that we end up conceiving of nature as something that is apart from our social realms.

Having said that, I take heed of the hunch of critical scholars like Linda Zerilli and Charles Mills that there is something worth retrieving in Rawls’s work.⁵ I especially agree with Zerilli about the importance of engaging with Rawls’s perspective on judging as a democratic practice, and more generally with his attempt to provide the basis for deliberating about politics in contexts of deep plurality. Despite the several criticisms it has received, the Rawlsian project’s aim of bridging the gap between incompatible but ‘reasonable’ worldviews is laudable, and discussing it from a perspective that is not itself liberal opens up channels of communication between literatures that seldom cross-reference each other. This, I suggest, contributes to a larger project of dialogue and understanding between and among different voices and traditions of political thought.

2. Nature, vulnerability, sustainability

One of the dissertation’s main goals is to bring together a range of separate literatures and to arrange them in a way that allows the reader to see them as stepping stones on a path from social coexistence to ecosocial relations of interdependency. I begin with an analysis of Rawls’s political

⁵ See Zerilli’s *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).; and Mill’s *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). It is important to note Zerilli and Mills engage to different degrees and in different ways with Rawls’s work: Zerilli is more critical, and limits her engagement with contemporary liberal democratic theory to a couple of specific discussions, whereas this preoccupation occupies much more space in Mills’ research agenda.

liberalism, and more precisely of his idea of ‘overlapping consensus’, in which I stake out the limits of the liberal framework for thinking about diversity and pluralism. I then devote attention to Alasdair MacIntyre’s work, which provides useful connections between the mainstream contemporary political theory and the more radical approaches that remain largely disregarded by the former. It is important to note here that if such approaches have been (and continue to be) neglected by dominant forms of political theorizing, the reason is that the field is embedded with assumptions about human independence, autonomy, and self-sufficiency, which are not only false, but also seriously misleading. Hence the need to work our way through the particular conception of the ‘individual’ that underpins the prevailing view of agency in Western traditions of political thought. On this view, human personhood is defined in terms of certain capacities of the mind, such as the capacity to reason, while disregarding our corporeal reality and the conditions of existence of our animal bodies. These include biological, social, and environmental factors that pose human life in continuity with nature, and show that contrary to the prevalent picture, we are dependent and vulnerable beings who are partly defined by our needs and incapacities.

Given that where and how we begin makes a considerable difference to the ways in which we do political theory, revising the point of departure of our enquiries about justice and equality will have a significant effect on their outcome. In the following pages, I argue that putting into question the main subject of political thought (that is, the human animal) will disclose unexamined assumptions about its normative legitimacy. The dissertation’s central task will be to show that an adequate understanding of human animality—that is, one that is attuned to our bodily realities—throws into question mind-body and nature-culture dualisms, and hence prompts us to reject the ontological separation of the social from the ecological. This in turn raises awareness of the harm and destruction that is brought about by the political and economic structures that are premised on

such binaries, and therefore calls us to reflect critically on the ongoing violence, exploitation, and oppression that founds and upholds the dominant social orders.

This is why I consider MacIntyre's work to be such a valuable contribution. What he achieved in his *Dependent Rational Animals* provides a telling example of what happens when we expose and confront deep-seated beliefs about who we are and where we stand in relation to the rest of the earth's inhabitants.⁶ It is interesting to read in the preface of his book that he is "engaged in a work of correction," and that he is "chiefly anxious to correct" what he now sees as a profound error in his previous work.⁷ The error in question is twofold: failing to recognize the importance of understanding what we have in common with other animals, and failing to attend to the nature and extent of vulnerability and disability. MacIntyre conceives of these as interrelated problems, which means that supposing that human animals are somehow 'exceptional', and, as a consequence, that we are superior to other animals, will lead to neglecting our condition of embodied existence—and vice versa. I think this is a very powerful argument, and one that is possible to expand upon and push further, which is something that the dissertation aspires to do.

With this in mind, it is important to indicate the limitations and drawbacks of MacIntyre's political thought, which are mainly due to the fact that his argument does not go far enough in the direction of his own critique. This is to say that, at least in some way, he does not practice what he preaches, given that he reproduces the problem he identifies by displacing it onto another dualism between higher and lower beings. We will delve into this in what follows, but it is worth mentioning at this point that although MacIntyre's work moves a significant step forward in the direction of a relational ethics, it is still undergirded by an anthropocentric bias, and hence contributes to the widespread neglect of nature that pervades political theory.

⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001).

⁷ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, pp. ix-x.

Before embarking upon the task of providing the basis for a normative guideline with which to respond to injustices and inequalities in human and more than human worlds, some conceptual clarification is required. The dissertation will attempt to contribute to some philosophical debates over the meaning of nature, vulnerability, and sustainability, among other terms that are central to the project. Without going into great detail here, it is worth mentioning that my aim is to provide ways of thinking about these concepts that can help us transcend the disconnection between politics and ecology that I call into question in this project.

The discussion on the nature of ‘nature’ that the dissertation offers seeks to reconnect human animals with the more than human beings, things, forces and relations that constitute reality. My intention is to counter the predominant view that conceives of humanity as pertaining to a different realm of existence than that of ‘nature’. This assumption underpins the instituted epistemologies of mastery that are at the root of the objectification—and, consequently, of the commodification—of that which exceeds the human. It is also at the basis of colonialism and imperialism, and related practices of extraction, accumulation, and dispossession. But to argue that it is problematic to separate humanity from the environment in which it is embedded does not entail that there is no such thing as *nature* in the sense of something that exists outside of and independently of our human worlds. On the contrary, I put forward the view that it is ethically and politically necessary to recognize structures and processes that are not subject to human control, but whose effects and forces provide the condition of possibility for human life. Moreover, and this is most significant for my purposes, such an understanding of nature brings awareness to the fact that there are clear limits to human activity, limits that are inherently linked to our own limits as human animals, as well as to the limits of the earth as a whole to generate resources. Finally, and in line with feminist and postcolonial theory, it is important to note that an unqualified

reference to ‘humanity’ is problematic, and that an appropriate understanding of ‘anthropocentrism’ must include a critical reflection on the morphology of the anthropos in question.

Moving on to the question of vulnerability, the dissertation will attempt to clarify the meaning of the concept, and put forward a distinctive definition with the aim of providing a basis for offsetting the entrenched division between ecological and political concerns. Following phenomenology and disability studies, among others, I argue that our embodied existence places us on a spectrum of vulnerability on which we all find ourselves, even though we need to be aware of the nuances and specificities that exist among the different ranges on the scale. But I will push this argument further throughout these pages and suggest that there is no reason to suppose that vulnerability is distinctive of and unique to human bodies. This involves taking issue with the presumption that normative judgments about interhuman relations are independent from those regarding nonhuman animals, plants, ecosystems, and all other beings and relations that constitute that which we refer to as ‘the environment’. This takes us back to the question of mastery and the ways in which forms of oppression and domination in human and more than worlds are deeply interconnected. Failing to perceive the vulnerability of nature necessarily leads to its disregard, which opens the door to its exploitation and degradation. Hence the need to extend the scope of vulnerability in order to elicit meaningful responses to the unsustainable practices that are destroying life on earth.

This takes us to the question of sustainability and why it is important to retrieve the notion from its current association with developmental frameworks. Sustainability has generated much enthusiasm from the spokespersons of the dominant structures of power, to the point of becoming a buzzword in the neoliberal vocabulary. This usage of the term ‘sustainability’ is particularly

problematic because it allows for business-as-usual under the cover of eco-friendly capitalism. And given that the hegemonic ideology of development has acquired an aura of inevitability, adding the adjective ‘sustainable’ to the formula allows the political and economic status quo to masquerade as ecologically aware. However, critical scholarship must be careful not to hastily dismiss the relevance of the notion. Sustainability without ‘development’ can take the form of a radical and transformative ideal, one that is put into practice every day by Indigenous peoples who carry the living heritage of their traditional ecological knowledges. It is also exemplified by Western human-soil relations such as permaculture and other agricultural practices that seek to cultivate and nurture reciprocal and caring relations with the lands and waters of the earth. In sum, an appropriate understanding of sustainability enables us to draw normative contrasts between ways of relating to nature, and therefore to oppose the dominant relations that are destroying the conditions of life.

Taken together, these discussions will attempt to provide a basis for reexamining our relations with one another, nonhuman animals, and the rest of the earth’s inhabitants, and for thinking about the obligations and responsibilities these relations generate. Despite the idealist tones of the normative picture I will offer, what is perhaps most relevant about a relational ethics as I envision it is its potential to encourage reflection about the harm and domination to which living beings are exposed, and to point the finger at the political and economic structures that are responsible for the objectification and exploitation of human and more than human forms of life.

3. Posthumanism, new materialisms, and the question of life

To return to the disconnection between politics and ecology, I want to emphasize the need for mainstream political theory to enter into conversation with points of view that problematize such an ontological divide. Recent scholarship now referred to as posthumanism and new materialisms has imploded the traditional disciplinary boundaries that underpinned the oppositional understanding of nature and culture. This scholarship has therefore much to contribute to ethical and political debates about ecosocial justice and equality.

Posthumanism and new materialisms consist of two different but related schools of thought. The former emerged in opposition to the philosophical tradition that aspired to a universal conception of the person. This tradition bequeathed to political theory a picture of ‘human animality’ that assumes there are shared characteristics in the light of which the difference between humans and nonhuman becomes evident and indisputable. Whether we think of the Cartesian ‘thinking subject’, the Kantian ‘autonomous being’, or, more recently, the Rawlsian ‘reasonable person’, it is clear that humanism has not only denaturalized philosophy—given the gulf it created between nature and culture—but it has also put forward stringent criteria for what counts as proper human animality. This is because such criteria were defined in the image of the Enlightenment *man*, and as a result, in opposition to embodiment, affectivity, and empathy. Posthumanism is thus a deconstructive exercise, but it also plays a positive role in imagining possibilities of coexistence that are not rooted in anthropocentrism, speciesism, and other projects of mastery.

New materialisms are particularly concerned with disrupting ontological splits between mind and body, ideality and materiality, nature and culture, among others, which are at the basis of the modern conception of nonhuman matter as passive and inert. They take issue with ‘classic’ political theorizing and its adherence to a restraining ontological picture, one that has given rise to an impoverished understanding of the entanglements between and among the multiple forms of

existence that dwell and act together. Against this perspective, new materialisms counterpose a conception of ontology that extends agentic capacities beyond the human towards interdependent matter. This understanding of materiality—which is referred to as ‘flat ontology’ in the literature—posits that matter is active, self-creative, self-organizing, and fully agential. We can see this clearly in Karen Barad’s well-known observation that “[m]atter feels, converses, suffers, yearns and remembers.”⁸ In displacing the dominant anthropocentric and humanistic language of agency, new materialists have identified more variegated forms and qualities of agentic capacities, showing that the latter are diffused across many different types of material entities. This has profound consequences for our understanding of the nature of biological life, and raises questions about the place of human animals in the natural world, as well as about the normative status of animate existence.

There are different variants of posthumanism and new materialisms, which uphold different degrees and levels of ontological flattening. In this regard, it is helpful to make a rough distinction between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ versions of ontological flattening. On one end of the spectrum are those (Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, and William Connolly, among others) who blur the distinction between the organic and inorganic, whereas on the other end, scholars such as Eduardo Kohn and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing insist on differentiating the animate from the inanimate.⁹ There are of course many nuances to this rough picture, but I propose that we keep it in mind for the purposes of the argument I wish to put forward, which is directed specifically

⁸ Karen Barad, “Interview with Karen Barad,” in *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, ed. R. Dolphijn and I. van der Tuin (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Open Humanities Press, 2012), p. 59.

⁹ See Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Kohn, *How Forests Think* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

against the ‘strong’ version of ontological flattening that posthumanists and new materialists uphold.

The point of view I will argue here is that while posthumanism and new materialisms have been successful in eroding the harmful division between the realm of human affairs and that of nature, the ‘strong’ variant prevents us from asking important questions about the structural conditions that are at the basis of our destructive and unsustainable relations to nature. Distributing agency horizontally across a flattened ontological world complicates—and sometimes even impedes—the articulation of qualitative distinctions that allow us to adjudicate value differences between matters of concern. And the main idea that I intend to put forward is that we need evaluative criteria that can help us determine which beings, relations, and things are worthier of our concern and care than others.

More specifically, the worry I have about ontological flattening is the conflation of the worlds of biological life and those of technology. A perspective that puts all phenomena on an equal footing loses the normative grip that is needed to judge critically the relations we have with the living earth. Such a viewpoint fails to recognize the qualitative differences that exist between the natural and the built environments, and hence fails to specify the obligations and commitments that are owed to each respectively and why. Similarly, the relations we have with the worlds around us need to be informed by an awareness of the kinds of entities that are brought into being through the relational processes themselves.¹⁰ Our interventions in nature can bring much harm and devastation, which is why we must be held accountable for our actions, and why we need to determine suitable norms for increasing human responsibility.

¹⁰ I am referring to Marilyn Strathern’s distinction between relations that involve entities that pre-exist the relations, on the one hand, and relations that bring entities into being, on the other. See Strathern, *Kinship, Law and the Unexpected. Relatives are Always a Surprise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 63. See also her *Relations. An Anthropological Account* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

Anthropogenic climate change is an obvious example, one that raises important ethical and political questions about how to address it. And the fact that dominant economic and political orders prescribe technological innovations such as climate engineering as a solution to the environmental crisis illustrates the problem I have in mind here. Technological interventions generate hegemonic practices of mastery with nature because they entail relations of power, oppression and exploitation with more than human forms of life. We can also think of extractivism, which is a key tool for ‘development’ within the globalized capitalist paradigm. Extractivism refers to large-scale mining and drilling, agroindustry, and other forms of accumulation by dispossession that involve land grabbing and the purposeful disembedding of non-modern relations to the lands and waters of the earth, such as the cyclical and sustainable lifeways of Indigenous peoples. And as Glen Coulthard reminds us, although the struggles of Indigenous peoples are primarily oriented around land, it would nevertheless be a mistake to understand the term in the material sense. Rather, what Indigenous peoples are struggling for is “the land” understood as “as *a system of reciprocal relations and obligations*.”¹¹ Seen in this light, Indigenous anticolonialism is deeply informed by what the land “can teach [them] about living [their] lives in relation to one another and the natural world in nondominating and nonexploitative terms.”¹² This is of fundamental importance because it draws a stark contrast between vicious and destructive forms of interaction, on the one hand, and symbiotic ecosocial lifeways, on the other.

Moreover, the examples above (to which we will return) illustrate what is lost from view when no distinctions are made between ways of relating to the different entities that comprise the worlds we inhabit. This is why we need a normative framework that allows us to evaluate the types

¹¹ Coulthard, *Red Skin White Masks. Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. 13. Emphasis in original.

¹² Coulthard, *Red Skin White Masks*, p. 13.

of relations we have with nature, so that we can determine which are harmful and which are beneficial to life. But this presupposes that we begin by establishing judgments of worth between that which is alive and that which is not, which in turn motivates ethical investigations into what counts as life, and what is owed to that which is alive.

In order to accomplish such a task, it is necessary to engage with the literature that has most deeply reflected upon shared matters of concern that are distinctive to living beings. Although diverse and sometimes divergent, feminist theory has been at the forefront of research and writing about nature, embodiment, and life.¹³ In addition, it has foregrounded awareness of the vulnerability and interdependency of living beings, which in turn has established the need for ethics and politics to devote serious attention to the topic of care. Although the term connotes a variety of meanings, care is generally used to describe the obligations, affections, physical work, and other activities directed at maintaining, continuing, and repairing the beings and relations that co-sustain life on earth.¹⁴ In this vein, I will follow feminist theory's assertion that reflecting on the principles and practices of care ought to play a central role in political theorizing. This is so because the practices of caring provide the conditions of possibility for the existence and flourishing of living beings. In line with feminist thinking, therefore, the dissertation will draw out connections between the nature of biological matter, the existential condition of vulnerability, and the networks of care that are needed to sustain living systems.

4. Outline of the argument

¹³ In this regard, Sharp and Taylor's edited book is exemplary. See Hasana Sharp and Chloë Taylor, eds., *Feminist Philosophies of Life* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ See Fisher and Tronto, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring," in *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives*, eds. Abel, Emily K., and Nelson, Margaret K. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), pp. 35-62; María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care. Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

The dissertation attempts to do two main things: First, to move political theory and philosophy from a humancentric to an ecocentric worldview. This entails thinking about justice and equality—and hence about reciprocity, solidarity, and cooperation—in both ecological and social terms. Second, I argue that the shared conditions of interdependency and vulnerability allow us to bridge the gap between the social and the ecological, and thus to reconnect politics with nature. As little attention has been paid to ecology and sustainability in democratic theory, my work’s ambition is to demonstrate the transformative potential of a relational ethics that is not only concerned with human animals, but also with the multiplicity of beings that inhabit the earth, and the relations in which they are enmeshed. The purpose is to think about ways of cultivating and fostering the kinds of relations that are needed to maintain human and more than human diversity, and therefore to sustain life on earth.

The dissertation’s argument proceeds as follows. Chapter one provides an analysis of John Rawls’s contribution to the debate about diversity and pluralism, and more precisely of how he conceives of reasonableness (that is, what counts as *public* reason) and his idea of overlapping consensus. I argue that reasonableness in the Rawlsian sense is a boundary concept that is used to define the limits of pluralism. I will defend the claim that the picture of reasoning that is offered in Rawls’s work suffers from a monological dimension. I therefore attempt to show that we are better equipped to achieve the Rawlsian goal of reconciliation if we rethink the idea of overlapping consensus from a radically dialogical conception of reasoning. Ultimately, I will suggest that such an activity provides the conditions of possibility for capturing a plurality of ways of being and of relating to one another, as well as for fostering the ongoing cultivation of solidarity and friendship within a political community.

In chapter two, I proceed to push my criticism of Rawls further and, by way of an examination of Alasdair MacIntyre's later work, I attempt to defend an approach to ethical reflection that reasserts the animality of humans and pays attention to our bodily being-in-the-world. I argue that the shared vocabulary that is needed to inform the determination of a suitable conception of flourishing and well-being ought to start with a strong commitment to care for one another—or, to take Rawls's vocabulary, with an overlapping consensus on care. However, I will also show that MacIntyre's thought is concerned with the flourishing of human animals as an independent species. I will put forward the contention that practices of care and cooperation ought to be extended in order to cultivate relations of giving and receiving with all human and nonhuman animals, as well as with plants, ecosystems, and the living earth as a whole.

This brings me to a more in-depth exploration of the ontological claim of interdependency. Chapter three engages mainly with disability studies and care ethics, which emphasize the importance of situating human animals in relationship to particular environments that enable and disable us, as well as include and exclude us, in a variety of ways. But most disability and care ethics scholars focus their attention on the built environments that surround human animals, thus neglecting the natural world. I therefore address this problem and provide tentative first steps towards sketching an account of ethics that is structured around the interdependent nature of human and more than human life. I argue that our embodied existence places us in a shared condition of vulnerability with all forms of life on earth. This allows us to conceive of caring as an essential condition of the sustainability and well-being of social and ecological life systems. To this end, I discuss the notion of anthropocentrism—and the attendant notion of Anthropocene—and argue that the conception of human animality that underwrites it posits a disembodied and homogenous 'anthropos' that is equally responsible for and equally affected by unsustainable

social systems. Further, I examine the debate that opposes realist and constructivist accounts of nature, and argue that it is inadequate to look at nature through the lenses of the predatory social systems that are responsible for ecological injustices in the first place.

I then begin chapter four with a conceptual clarification of the notion of vulnerability. The philosophical literature is divided between universal and dispositional accounts of vulnerability. I attempt to provide a definition that is broad enough to incorporate both universal and dispositional accounts, while being narrow enough to rule out both vitalist and biocentric approaches. This allows me to use the notion to examine recent debates on political pluralism, and to take issue with the fact that pluralists are mainly concerned with one single manifestation of vulnerability: that is, the vulnerability of minority groups. I also argue that, as they currently stand, pluralist approaches are ill suited for understanding the struggles of indigenous peoples against colonialism. I defend the view that the normative case for pluralism needs to be grounded in an ecologically aware ethics that can respond to the vulnerability of animate beings who sustain life.

Chapter five argues that political theory and philosophy need to widen their view of the space in which what matters politically takes place, and suggests that integrating the conditions of sustainability of all affected—that is, all living participants in nature’s relations—is a necessary first step in this direction. Posthumanists and new materialists have challenged how nature and politics have been traditionally construed. While acknowledging the significance of their contribution, I critically examine the ethical and political implications of their ontological project. I focus particularly on how the decentering of human agency that they advocate for raises a set of concerns that need to be addressed in developing an appropriate ecological ethics. The chapter argues that the latter must be attuned to the vulnerability of living beings who co-sustain life on earth. This brings me to conclude that qualitative distinctions between the worlds of *bios* and the

worlds of *techne* are necessary. This is because we need to think critically about ways of evaluating types of relations, such that we can assess them and establish which are worth nurturing and protecting and which are not.

Finally, the aim of chapter six will be to indicate some shortcomings in democratic theorizing. I will argue that democratic theory relies mostly on a problematic conception of what counts as mutual understanding. This is because it is wedded to an exclusive and excluding conception of human animality, which has consistently neglected and marginalized those human animals that are defined against a horizon of ‘normal’ functioning. This is clearly reflected in democratic theory’s emphasis on both the space in which deliberations ought to take place, and on the frame of communication that is taken for granted as the main medium of citizen participation. Further, democratic theory fails to consider nonhuman forms of life altogether, thus neglecting their voices, concerns, and interests when discussing matters that affect them. In this chapter, I will examine multi-species forms of communication and interaction in order to help pave the way towards an ecosocial conception of mutual understanding for a world of many worlds. Paying attention to the pragmatics of semiotic common grounds between human and more than human lifeforms responds to the need to find more radically democratic ways of listening, giving voice, and caring for neglected beings and their relations. I will argue that the kind of transformative ethics that is needed to address ecosocial injustices and inequalities must be guided by a reciprocal concern for contributing to the well-being of all forms of life—which includes beings, the relations that constitute them, and the spaces in which they are embedded. To this end, will I draw a contrast between forms of interaction and coexistence that seek to maintain the entanglements of life, on the one hand, and relations of mastery that objectify life processes and living spaces, on the other.

I will ultimately argue that rejecting developmental frameworks and their extractivist agendas is a necessary first step in making the world a better home for all beings and relations that sustain life.

CHAPTER ONE:

Bound by Reasonableness

Rawls's idea of an overlapping consensus is an important contribution to debates about diversity and pluralism. The purpose of an overlapping consensus is to provide for a public basis of justification that citizens can endorse without abandoning their moral, philosophical, and religious commitments. It serves as a heuristic device to obtain social unity given what Rawls calls the fact of "reasonable pluralism," and hence to secure the stability of a "well-ordered democratic society."¹⁵ The aim of political liberalism, therefore, is to find fair terms of social cooperation in the face of *human* diversity.¹⁶

The main virtue of Rawls's idea of an overlapping consensus is its potential to forge bonds between the plurality of beliefs that persons and communities profess. But those bonds ought to align with principles of justice that are likely to be accepted by each and every member of the political community. In this regard, political liberalism is primarily concerned with legitimacy in that it aims to provide a shared basis for public agreement. The merit of such an approach is that it enables a political community to evaluate its social and political institutions from a common point of view, that is, one that is publicly recognized as acceptable.¹⁷ For Rawls, we reach this general agreement by narrowing the range of disagreement in order to obtain the terms of cooperation that no "reasonable" citizen could possibly reject. As Rawls puts it, "[w]e collect such settled convictions as the belief in religious toleration and the rejection of slavery and try to

¹⁵ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 133.

¹⁶ The scope of this chapter's approach is restricted to human diversity and pluralism. Although the rest of the dissertation's chapters argue that the latter ought to encompass more than human forms of life, it is important to begin with a contribution to 'standard' debates about diversity and pluralism.

¹⁷ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 9.

organize the basic ideas and principles implicit in these convictions into a coherent political conception of justice.”¹⁸ In other words, the idea is that people who normally disagree about the nature of the good, the foundations of morality, the ends of human life, and so on, are nevertheless expected to come to share a normative space in order to reason together and reach agreements on how they ought to relate to one another. In addition, Rawls conceives of political liberalism as forming part of the more general project of reconciliation, and claims that the idea of an overlapping consensus is integral to such an endeavor by virtue of its capacity to “uncover a sufficiently inclusive concordant fit among political and other values.”¹⁹

In what follows, I will argue that if we want to take Rawls’s claim seriously—as I think that we should—then it is necessary that we abandon the framework within which the idea of overlapping consensus is worked out in his theory. I will suggest that Rawls’s notion of overlapping consensus needs to be taken beyond the boundaries of political liberalism in order to preserve human plurality, rather than impose uniformity and regularity. The chapter begins by explaining Rawls’s so-called “political turn” and indicating what it consists in and what its implications are for political theory and philosophy. Here I argue that Rawls’s idea of overlapping consensus attempts to solve an important problem for political theory, which is the question of how to determine and sustain fair terms of cooperation that are mutually acceptable to human beings who live together. I proceed by addressing what I think are the most important shortcomings of Rawls’s formulation of an overlapping consensus. I devote significant attention to the way in which Rawls conceives of reasonableness, as well as illustrate why I think it is problematic. I then turn to examining and then putting into question the stark distinction that Rawls operates between the political domain and the comprehensive realm. Finally, I argue that although Rawls provides

¹⁸ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 8.

¹⁹ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 158.

a solid theoretical underpinning for thinking about the possibility of establishing a common ethic, the framework within which reasoning is understood to operate in Rawls's theory ought to be rejected. Drawing especially on the work of James Tully, Anthony Laden, and Charles Taylor, I attempt to show that thinking the idea of overlapping consensus from a more radically dialogical conception of reasoning is better able to capture the plurality of ways of being-with and of relating to one another within a political community.

1. After *A Theory of Justice*

In the first pages of *Political Liberalism*, Rawls begins by recognizing that the philosophical project he envisioned in *A Theory of Justice* is unrealistic.²⁰ More precisely, Rawls writes that “the idea of a well-ordered society of justice as fairness” is “inconsistent with realizing its own principles under the best of foreseeable conditions.”²¹ The reason that Rawls gives in the introduction of *Political Liberalism* to justify this transition is twofold: First, he came to recognize that modern democratic societies are characterized by “a plurality of reasonable yet incompatible comprehensive doctrines.”²² And second, he realized that this “fact of reasonable pluralism” undermines the account of the stability of a well-ordered society as expounded in *A Theory of Justice*.²³ According to a prevalent narrative, Rawls ended up conceiving of his own “theory of justice” as one “reasonable comprehensive doctrine” among many others, and hence he accepted that it was a mistake to assume that a multiplicity of citizens could endorse his understanding of

²⁰ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. xvii. See also Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

²¹ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. xvii.

²² Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. xvi.

²³ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. xvii.

justice on the basis of their own comprehensive moral, philosophical, and religious doctrines.²⁴ Although this narrative is disputed,²⁵ there is considerable textual evidence to suggest that Rawls's recognition of the "fact of reasonable pluralism" motivated his political turn.²⁶

It is true that there is continuity between *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism*, but one of the distinctive features of the latter is that Rawls offers what he calls a "political conception of justice."²⁷ The meaning of 'a political conception' has to be understood in contrast to 'a comprehensive doctrine'; that is to say, the adjective 'political' denotes a domain that is supposed to be free of reference to ultimate value. More precisely, Rawls attributes three characteristics to the idea of a political conception of justice: First, a political conception applies to what Rawls calls the "basic structure of society," which refers to "the framework of basic institutions and the principles, standards, and precepts that apply to it, as well as how those norms are to be expressed in the character and attitudes of the members of society who realize its ideals."²⁸ In other words, the political conception of justice is primarily concerned with the institutions of a particular society, and only subsequently with its members.

Second, Rawls presents his political conception as a "freestanding view," that is, as existing independently of any particular idea of the good.²⁹ This means that while the political conception is justified by reference to certain comprehensive doctrines, it is "neither presented as, nor as

²⁴ See, in particular, Bruce Ackerman, "Political Liberalisms," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 91, no. 7, 1994, pp. 364-386, and Charles Larmore, "Political Liberalism," *Political Theory*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1990, pp. 339-360.

²⁵ See Paul Weithman, *Why Political Liberalism? On John Rawls's Political Turn* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

²⁶ Consider this quote: "The fact of a plurality of reasonable but incompatible comprehensive doctrines—the fact of reasonable pluralism—shows that, as used in theory, the idea of a well-ordered society of justice as fairness is unrealistic." Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. xvii.

²⁷ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. xvii.

²⁸ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. 11-12.

²⁹ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 12.

derived from” such doctrines.³⁰ As Rawls puts it, it is a “module,”³¹ that is, a self-contained, discrete, and independent unit that forms part of and can be supported by a plurality of “reasonable” comprehensive doctrines.

What is important to note here is the distinction operated by Rawls between moral and political philosophy. To Rawls, the only way to circumvent the problem of “reasonable” pluralism is to relegate moral philosophy to the “non-public” realm,³² where persons and groups of persons share the same conceptions of what is of ultimate value in human life. In contrast, political philosophy has the capacity to offer a public basis of justification that is to be shared by everyone and involves no wider commitment to any comprehensive doctrine beyond the political conception itself.³³

And third, Rawls argues that the political conception must be generally intelligible to the common sense of citizens living in societies that are characterized by a tradition of democratic thought.³⁴ The content of a political conception, therefore, must be “expressed in terms of certain fundamental ideas seen as implicit in the public political culture of a democratic society.”³⁵

To restate Rawls’s argument, the shift from conceiving of his theory of justice as a rival and competing comprehensive doctrine to presenting it as a modular structure that can be supported by each (‘reasonable’) comprehensive doctrine is the result of the emphasis that is now given to the inevitable existence of ‘reasonable pluralism’. But what exactly, then, is meant by ‘reasonable’?

³⁰ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p.12.

³¹ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 12.

³² Notice that Rawls emphasizes that “non-public” doesn’t mean private. See Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. xix.

³³ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 13.

³⁴ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. 13-14.

³⁵ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 13.

Rawls uses the adjective ‘reasonable’³⁶ as a way to mitigate what he perceives to be the potentially controversial and negative effects of whatever domain is under investigation, whether one is focusing on citizens, doctrines, institutions, or principles of justice, among others.³⁷ More specifically, even though it applies to various domains, the reasonable is defined primarily by reference to citizens (that is, to individuals). Indeed, Rawls begins by giving a general definition of the reasonable that emphasizes two key aspects: it is a virtue associated with the willingness to engage in “social cooperation among equals,” and with the willingness to “recognize the burdens of judgment and to accept their consequences.”³⁸

According to Rawls, reasonableness is achieved when citizens are “willing to govern their conduct by a principle from which they and others can reason in common.”³⁹ This means that they must be prepared to offer reasons to—as well as to be open to reasons offered by—fellow citizens in a spirit of mutual respect and good will. Rawls stresses the importance of distinguishing the reasonable from the rational, and argues that the rational applies in the first instance to “a single, unified agent,” and so is necessarily shaped by considerations of self-interest; whereas the reasonable denotes a disposition to seek fair terms of cooperation between agents, which implies the idea of reciprocity.⁴⁰ In this sense, rationality is understood as the faculty that enables human beings to engage in the qualitative evaluation of motivations, interests, and ends. According to this view, rationality is hence integral to our awareness of the good.⁴¹ On the other hand, Rawls says

³⁶ Rawls speaks of reasonable citizens, reasonable pluralism, reasonable comprehensive doctrines, reasonable disagreement, reasonable institutions, reasonable principles of justice, reasonable overlapping consensus, reasonable beliefs, reasonable societies, and so on and so forth. For a complete list of Rawls’s “reasonable” terms in *Political Liberalism*, see Leif Wenar, “Political Liberalism: An Internal Critique,” *Ethics*, vol. 106, no. 1, 1995, p. 34.

³⁷ This mitigation strategy is part of what Rawls calls a “method of avoidance.” See his “Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1985, p. 231. See also Linda M.G. Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), pp. 145-152, 158-160, 162.

³⁸ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 48; see also note 1, p. 49.

³⁹ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 49, note 1.

⁴⁰ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. 50-51.

⁴¹ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 52.

that reasonableness refers to our capacity to acquire a sense of justice, and that, as such, it is an inherently social attribute.

Now, Rawls complicates matters by writing that if we were deprived of reasonableness, we would “fail to recognize the independent validity of the claims of others.”⁴² He then adds that “[t]his is not to deny that given special loyalties or attachments, [agents lacking reasonableness] would recognize others’ claims, *but not as having validity independent of those bonds.*”⁴³ So, even though the reasonable is essentially social, it nevertheless enables us to apprehend the validity of claims made by other agents without regard to the social context within which those claims are formulated. Rawls’s discussion of rationality and reasonableness attempts to carve out a distinction between an understanding of reasoning as a reflective activity that takes place among agents, on the one hand, and the idiosyncratic validity of their respective ends, on the other. This seems to suggest that, for Rawls, ends are specific to particular agents, and that deliberation about those ends is necessarily an individual activity.

The second key aspect of the reasonable, that is, the willingness to recognise the ‘burdens of judgment’, is also of considerable importance to this chapter’s enquiry. The notion of the ‘burdens of judgment’ is offered as an explanation as to why similarly informed reasonable and rational persons may come to disagree about fundamental moral, philosophical, and religious matters.

As mentioned above, Rawls conceives of ‘reasonable pluralism’ as a problem, and one that is bound to occur in the societies of modernity that benefit from the “free institutions of a constitutional democratic regime.”⁴⁴ And it is an unavoidable problem because human beings who

⁴² Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 52.

⁴³ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 52, note 6. My emphasis.

⁴⁴ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 54.

exercise their faculties of judgment and evaluation in the “ordinary”⁴⁵ course of life within such societies will turn out to sharply disagree with one another.

So, for Rawls, the nature and extent of ‘reasonable pluralism’ is determined by deep disagreement among ‘reasonable’ persons. And the sources of such disagreement are what Rawls refers to as “the burdens of judgment.”⁴⁶ Rawls then goes on to provide a list of what he thinks are the more obvious sources of ‘reasonable disagreement’, which include: conflicting and complex evidence, differences in the weight assigned to the same considerations, the vagueness of our concepts, the diversity of our total experience or course of life, the difference of normative considerations, and the limited social space that entails that our priorities and adjustments sometimes have to issue from radical choice.⁴⁷ What is instructive here is to notice that disagreement is to a large extent a matter of perception, hence the subjective character that Rawls attributes to its sources. As he puts it, “[d]ifferent conceptions of the world can reasonably be elaborated from different standpoints and diversity arises in part from our distinct perspectives.”⁴⁸ Therefore, the function of the idea of the ‘burdens of judgment’ is to show that comprehensive doctrines cannot “serve as the basis of lasting and reasoned political agreement.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, to recognize and accept the ‘burdens of judgment’ is, for Rawls, the condition of possibility for toleration.

2. From the one to the many and beyond the many

⁴⁵ I will return the implications of Rawls’s conception of ordinary persons and ordinary courses of life in subsequent chapters.

⁴⁶ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 55.

⁴⁷ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. 56-57.

⁴⁸ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 58.

⁴⁹ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 58.

So far, I have discussed the way in which the problem of pluralism is conceived of and addressed in Rawls's *Political Liberalism*. We have seen how Rawls operates a distinction between moral and political philosophy, which allows him to expound the idea of a 'freestanding' conception of justice, that is, one that can be presented independently of any reference to comprehensive doctrines. Such a conception, according to Rawls, is limited to what he calls "the domain of the political and its values," and in so far as the political conception applies to this narrow range of subjects, then it is possible to expect it to serve as a shared basis for public justification. This is how Rawls attempts to resolve 'reasonable' disagreement among 'reasonable' persons.

Now, Rawls's *Political Liberalism* goes further and tries to provide an answer to the question of how a pluralist society may come to share a political ethic in order to "establish and preserve unity and stability."⁵⁰ In other words, after narrowing down the range of disagreement, Rawls's theory attempts to explain how the political conception may be supported by the plurality of 'reasonable' comprehensive views that citizens endorse within a given society. Rawls argues that political conceptions can be grouped into two main categories: on the one hand, those according to which human ends can be harmonized with each other in such a way that fully rational and reasonable agents would necessarily come to recognize the validity of this one conception of the good. This corresponds to what Isaiah Berlin has described as "monism," that is, the idea that human beings have one overarching purpose and that, provided they engage in proper rational activities, they will inevitably realize that the values they cherish can be unified into a coherent system.⁵¹ On the other hand, Rawls claims that there is another way of understanding political

⁵⁰ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. 133-134.

⁵¹ See Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 166-218.

conceptions, one that avoids the problem of paternalism that is inherent to monistic ideals. According to this view, it would be unreasonable to expect citizens to recognize univocally a conception of the good that is purportedly more objective and rational than rival and conflicting accounts of justice. Rawls claims that such an understanding of the political conception allows for a plurality of “reasonable” comprehensive doctrines to co-exist with one another.⁵²

Before explaining the possibility of this “reasonably” plural conception of justice, Rawls notes that a crucial characteristic of the political relationship in a constitutional regime is the role and status of public power, that is, “the power of free and equal citizens as a collective body.”⁵³ This in turn raises important questions about legitimacy and public reason, questions that require interpretation of what political power entails,⁵⁴ but also that give expression to the need for a common ground for reasoning with each other. This is because the public exercise of political power must be justifiable to all “reasonable” citizens if it is to be legitimate. To this Rawls adds that the justificatory structure of his argument implies that an agreement must be reached on “principles and ideals” that are acceptable to the citizens’ “common human reason.”⁵⁵

After establishing that citizens must be expected to acknowledge and abide by a political conception of justice that is ‘reasonably’ plural, one that can “serve as a basis of public reason and justification,”⁵⁶ Rawls sets forth his account of the stability of a well-ordered democratic society. It is here that he introduces the idea of an overlapping consensus, whose main purpose in his theory is to show how the citizens of a well-ordered society, each of which endorses a plurality of

⁵² Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 134.

⁵³ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 136.

⁵⁴ See Marilyn Friedman, “John Rawls and the Political Coercion of Unreasonable People,” in *Autonomy, Gender, Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 163-179.

⁵⁵ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 137.

⁵⁶ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 137.

‘reasonable’ though opposing comprehensive views, can nevertheless support a single political conception of justice.

Recall that Rawls assumes that it is always possible to separate comprehensive doctrines and purely political conceptions, and that the views of ‘reasonable’ citizens can be distinguished in the same way. Furthermore, Rawls asserts that “questions about constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice are so far as possible to be settled by appeal to political values alone.”⁵⁷ In addition, he adds that when conflicts emerge over rival answers to these fundamental questions, so-called political values have the normative force to outweigh other kinds of values. This is because the category of the political in Rawls’s theory functions as a domain where ‘reasonable’ citizens are able to persuade each other of the objectivity of particular convictions in the light of mutually recognized criteria for reasoning.⁵⁸ This is why the principles and ideals that ought to regulate the basic institutions and constitutional essentials of a democratic society must be grounded in purely political values, given that these can serve as “the basis of public reason and justification.”⁵⁹

It is worth noting here that Rawls is not saying that due to the nature of purely political values, dilemmas resulting from the conflict between political values on the one hand, and moral, philosophical, or religious values on the other are theoretically impossible.⁶⁰ That is to say, even though political liberalism seems to entail the a priori precedence of the political domain over the comprehensive realm, Rawls recognizes that the possibility of conflict between political and other values can never be wholly eliminated. Hence the mediating role of the idea of overlapping consensus.

⁵⁷ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. 137-138.

⁵⁸ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. 119-120.

⁵⁹ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 140.

⁶⁰ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 140.

Having said that, it is important to understand that the role given to the idea of overlapping consensus in Rawls's theory is relegated to the second stage of the justificatory structure.⁶¹ This means that citizens are already expected to agree on the distinction between political conceptions and comprehensive doctrines. Indeed, in the first stage of the justification, a freestanding political conception is worked out from the citizen's overall views. This conception is expected to address "each citizen's reason," and, therefore, each citizen must be able to endorse it "within its own framework."⁶²

Rawls's account of the legitimacy of political authority implies that the 'reasonable' citizens who make up a democratic society must be able to endorse the political conception from their own perspectives—even if the conception is itself independent of the various moral, philosophical, and religious doctrines that citizens profess. As mentioned above, the primary role of the idea of overlapping consensus in Rawls's theory is mediational: it is a device whose function is to bring about the reconciliation of the comprehensive realm with the political domain. And the achievement of reconciliation, according to Rawls, constitutes the very condition for the stability of a just society.

In the first stage of justification, the political conception is developed by drawing on what Rawls refers to as familiar and basic ideas that are implicit in the public political culture of a well-ordered democratic society. Once the political conception takes shape, Rawls introduces the second stage of justification, the purpose of which is to secure the stability of the political conception in the face of 'reasonable' pluralism. It is important to note here that the political conception is not to be confounded with a liberalism that aspires to neutrality; on the contrary, the political conception is itself moral, and Rawls describes its intrinsic political ideal as "expressed

⁶¹ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 141.

⁶² Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 143.

by the criterion of reciprocity.”⁶³ Therefore, according to the scheme of social cooperation that Rawls expounds, stability requires that comprehensive doctrines endorse the political conception “for the right reasons.”⁶⁴ In other words, it is insufficient to accept the political conception as a mere *modus vivendi*, which would entail a precarious compromise between opposing views.⁶⁵ And it is wrong to suppose that the idea of an overlapping consensus implies the convergence of self- or group- interests on certain structures of authority.⁶⁶ Instead, the citizens are expected to be wholeheartedly committed to the democratic framework because it provides the conditions of possibility for social cooperation and mutual respect.⁶⁷ And according to Rawls, this wholehearted commitment can only be obtained if the citizens are able to see connections between their comprehensive doctrines and the political conception.

The idea of an overlapping consensus in Rawls’s theory therefore strives to explain how the multiplicity of citizens who already endorse the public political conception of justice could relate their respective comprehensive views to the values of the political domain.⁶⁸ Indeed, in an overlapping consensus, the plurality of ‘reasonable’ doctrines that citizens endorse converge on one and the same public political conception, but each converges “from [their] own point of view.”⁶⁹ The first step ensures social unity and the second one makes stability possible, since the citizens agree on a public political conception, on the one hand, and the basic requirements of justice are adjusted to the citizens’ non-political commitments and attachments, on the other.

This is why Rawls understands the idea of an overlapping consensus as a means of reconciliation, given that its purpose is an attempt to make these two aspects of the citizens’ moral

⁶³ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. xlv.

⁶⁴ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. xli.

⁶⁵ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. xli.

⁶⁶ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 147.

⁶⁷ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. xxxviii.

⁶⁸ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 140.

⁶⁹ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 134.

identities accordant or compatible with each other. Once the citizens manage to reconcile their final ends and attachments to the political conception, then, according to Rawls, they will have been brought into harmony with one another. Consequently, an overlapping consensus obtains and the public political conception can accommodate the citizens' deepest moral, religious, and philosophical convictions—as long as these are 'reasonable', of course—and hence contribute to attenuate the sources of potential conflict and strife.

3. Rawls's project of reconciliation

We have seen how the idea of an overlapping consensus is worked out in Rawls's thought, as well as the manner in which he conceived of the problem of pluralism and how his theory attempts to solve it. In the pages that follow, I will argue that if we are to take the spirit of Rawls's project seriously, then we must revise his account of overlapping consensus as developed in *Political Liberalism*.

To begin with, let us remind the reader that, for Rawls, political philosophy plays an integral role in a society's public political culture. And among the fundamental roles that Rawls assigns to political philosophy is that of reconciliation.⁷⁰ Drawing on Hegel's project of reconciliation, Rawls claims that when properly understood, political philosophy can enable us to come to be truly at home within the social space in which we live our lives together.⁷¹ This is what he has in mind when writing that the purpose of his account of public reason is to provide us with the means to overcome conflicts and divisions within society.⁷²

⁷⁰ Rawls, *Justice as Fairness. A Restatement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 3.

⁷¹ Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*. See also Michael O. Hardimon, *Hegel's Social Philosophy: The Project of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁷² Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 157

In other words, to borrow Anthony Laden’s way of putting it, Rawls uses political philosophy to draw a picture that “invites [us] to adopt an ideal.”⁷³ This is how we should understand what Rawls calls the “realistically utopian” character of political philosophy—that is, the idea according to which political philosophy is a reflective activity defined by its capacity to probe “the limits of practicable political possibility.”⁷⁴ In this sense, Rawls’s project is best understood as offering a possibility towards which we might aspire, rather than as delineating the contours of what ought to be done in light of something that is necessary or obligatory.⁷⁵

So, if we are to sketch an attractive possibility of how we could live together, I want to argue that we should set our political ambitions higher than the political liberalism recommended to us by Rawls. The idea of an overlapping consensus has the potential to offer us a way of thinking about social interactions as directed towards harmony or conciliation. But in order for it to constitute a truly attractive ideal, the notion of overlapping consensus must help us find common ground and mutual attunement within a truly inclusive framework. This is why I would suggest that if the goal of the overlapping consensus is that of reconciliation,⁷⁶ then we ought to conceive of it as a means to foster the ongoing cultivation of solidarity and friendship among the members of a political community. Thinking about the overlapping consensus in this way will necessarily involve putting into question Rawls’s conception of ‘the reasonable’, as well as the stark

⁷³ Anthony S. Laden, *Reasoning. A Social Picture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 43.

⁷⁴ Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, p. 4.

⁷⁵ I am drawing on Anthony Laden’s illuminating discussion of “pictures” in political philosophy. See *Reasoning*, p. 44.

⁷⁶ There are different ways of understanding the notion of ‘reconciliation’. Given the context within which this dissertation has been written, which is a settler-colonial one, it is important to emphasize that I reject those approaches that use ‘reconciliation’ as a way of reinforcing the status quo and business-as-usual structures that foster injustices and inequalities (such as dispossession, assimilation, and so on). I understand reconciliation as “an existential mode of being with one another and” (as it will become clear in the following chapters) with “the living earth”—that is to say, as a “process of ongoing relationality.” See John Borrows and James Tully, “Introduction,” in *Resurgence and Reconciliation. Indigenous-Settler Relations and Earth Teachings*, eds. J. Borrows and J. Tully (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), p. 4.

distinction that Rawls operates between political and comprehensive doctrines. It will also entail a reconsideration of Rawls's assumption that the overlapping consensus should be relegated to the second stage of the argument.

At its best, Rawls's project maintains that the political conception identifies "the terms of fair social cooperation consistent with mutual respect," and the overlapping consensus expresses a "sufficiently inclusive concordant fit" among the values, goods, and ends that free and equal persons uphold.⁷⁷ However, I want to argue here that the first step of the argument is considerably more complicated than Rawls indicates. He asserts that justification must proceed from whatever fundamental ideas are a matter of agreement in the public political culture of society. But if the dialogue is bounded by what is already held in common among interlocutors, two major problems arise: First, restricting speech acts to what has already been said prior to the democratic act of speaking itself is self-contradictory. Indeed, if this first step is taken to its logical conclusion, there is then no point in engaging in a second step, given that the latter's outcome is already determined by the former. And second, even if we ignore the first difficulty, Rawls still leaves us with an impoverished understanding of what the activity of conversing stands for. This is so because the citizens' conversation is steered by a set of political values and principles that are not open for debate. Although Rawls seeks to find bases for agreement between all members of society, his theory nevertheless excludes those persons who do not accept the values and principles in question. Linda Zerilli is right to point out that Rawls's approach is puzzling precisely because he simultaneously claims that public reason has the capacity to encompass a diversity of worldviews, while pointing out a series of restrictions that end up constraining the content and shape of the dialogue that is to take place.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 158.

⁷⁸ See Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, p. 145.

What I am hinting at here is that instead of beginning with a predetermined set of values and then developing from them a political conception that could gain agreement in judgment, the point of departure should rather be the attempt to disclose the diversity of forms of life that inhabits the political space in question. Only then can we truly enter into a conversation that could make way for “responsive engagement”⁷⁹ with others in circumstances of plurality. So, the first argument that I would like to make is that the picture of reasoning that is painted in Rawls’s work suffers from what it is possible to describe as a monological dimension. Reasoning, on this view, is an activity that is circumscribed by a settled understanding of what is of value to a particular polity in a given moment. And even though it is directed towards simultaneous exchange, this conception of reasoning is problematic precisely because of the fixed space of meaning that it seeks to impose.⁸⁰ Whatever the merits of such a “central organizing idea”⁸¹—which is posited as the basis of the conception of justice—Rawls’s theory would be best served by a depiction of the activity of reasoning in terms of dialogical processes of “reciprocal elucidation.”⁸² On this view, the activity of responsive and reciprocal interactions makes room for interpretive questions and alternative understandings of what political cohabitation entails. In other words, this dialogical picture that I am describing is sensitive to the irreducible plurality of modes of being in the world, and it therefore allows for comparison and contrast between the forms of life that are interacting with one another.

⁷⁹ See Laden, *Reasoning*, p. 8.

⁸⁰ This resonates with Zerilli’s point about Rawls’s theory, according to which the “tethering of the capacity to judge to [the external authority of public reason] comes at a cost: it focuses our attention on the rules of judgment or criteria of public reason, rather than inspiring us to speak and judge with reference not to universal rules but to particular contexts and interlocutors.” See Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, p. 159.

⁸¹ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 14.

⁸² I am referring to James Tully’s account of relationships of “reciprocal elucidation.” See James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key, Two Volumes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

This in turn opens up a diversity of potential ways of thinking and acting and, more importantly, it can lead to the purposive transformation of oneself that is required for sustaining ongoing relationality with others.⁸³ We can get a sense of this by considering Charles Taylor's observation that "[i]t may not just be that to understand a certain explanation one has to sharpen one's intuitions, it may be that one has to change one's orientation—if not in adopting another orientation, at least in living one's own in a way which allows for greater comprehension of others."⁸⁴ It is by taking to heart this idea according to which one must sometimes "change oneself" that a dialogical conception of reasoning allows for a spirit of conviviality. And this is something that the Rawlsian picture fails to capture.

The dialogical conception of reasoning that I sketched above forces us to reconsider Rawls's use of 'the reasonable'. As previously discussed, Rawls uses the adjective 'reasonable' in order to bound pluralism from the outset. It is true that in liberal political philosophy, 'the reasonable' is often synonymous with 'the moderate' and its purpose is to restrain the threat of so-called 'illiberal' views—for instance, norms or values that are deemed sexist, racist, exclusionary, discriminatory, domineering, fundamentalist, and so on. But more precisely, for Rawls, an 'illiberal' or 'unreasonable' person is someone who does not fall within the basic definition of the reasonable as outlined in the first section of this chapter. Recall that the unreasonable person is characterized by two main features: first, it is someone who rejects the very idea that citizens within a political community share a common grammar, the purpose of which is to make justification between free and equal members of society possible. And second, it is someone who rejects the burdens of judgment—that is to say, someone who refuses the principle according to

⁸³ And hence, for achieving reconciliation in John Borrows' and James Tully's sense. See Borrows and Tully, "Introduction," p. 4.

⁸⁴ Taylor, "Interpretation and the sciences of man," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences. Philosophical Papers Vol. II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 54.

which persons may disagree about fundamental matters related to morality, religion, and philosophy. In other words, ‘reasonableness’ in the Rawlsian sense is a boundary concept that serves to define the limits of pluralism.⁸⁵ It is therefore levelled against relativism in the first place, but also against subjectivism, emotivism, scepticism, nihilism, and so on. But reasonableness is also directed against some forms of pluralism—in particular, those whose understandings of the term go beyond the initial acknowledgement of diversity as a fact. Indeed, it is clear that we will have a radically different version of pluralism if the starting point of our inquiry is not that human diversity is a problem to be managed, but rather that it is something desirable, a good that should be valued in itself.

To return to the two features that Rawls ascribes to reasonableness, we can begin by noting that Rawls is unclear with respect to the role of each requirement, as well as to whether one trumps the other in the case of conflicts. For instance, as Marilyn Friedman points out, what if someone upholds the first feature of reasonableness but refuses to abide by the constraints that come with the idea of the burdens of judgment (or vice versa)?⁸⁶ Rawls leaves us without much elucidation as to how stringent the criteria should be for assessing whether the requirements of reasonableness are satisfied. In any case, I would want to argue that the need to accept the burdens of judgment is particularly problematic for many religious believers for whom the tradition to which they belong is not a matter of contingency. As I alluded to in the first section, Rawls conceives of the burdens of judgment as the sources of disagreement, that is, as the reasons why people navigate the world while relying on different categorizations of that same world. But the problem is that religious traditions often present themselves as providing sets of goods the pursuit of which necessarily

⁸⁵ As Zerilli puts it, “the burdens of judgment function [...] to set limits on what can be discussed politically.” See Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, p. 145.

⁸⁶ Friedman, “John Rawls and the Political Coercion of Unreasonable People,” p. 166.

overrides the claims of any other. And as Leif Wenar has argued, if we think about this in light of Roman Catholicism, it becomes evident that asking believers to accept the burdens of judgment is tantamount to asking them to abandon the framework through which they experience their faith. This is so because “the burdens of judgment explain religious diversity by stressing the difficulty of finding the truth even under the best conditions, while universalistic religions [such as Catholicism] present themselves as accessible to all clear minds and open hearts.”⁸⁷

It is possible to suggest here that it is ‘unreasonable’ of Rawls to insist that people ought to adopt a metatheory of truth in order to be considered ‘reasonable’. Indeed, Rawls’s thesis of the burdens of judgment—which is presented as the condition of possibility for pluralism to flourish—excludes people who stand in relation to traditions of thought and action to which the burdens of judgment appear to be none other than a rival and competing comprehensive doctrine, in Rawls’s very own sense of the term.

4. Overlapping consensus after Rawls

I have indicated some shortcomings in Rawls’s portrayal of reasoning, and have argued that we would benefit from a dialogical understanding of the activity. Such a picture—one that draws on Anthony Laden’s “responsive engagement” and on James Tully’s “reciprocal elucidation”—sheds light on the social and ongoing nature of reasoning. The emphasis on these two points makes us reconsider Rawls’s episodic and fixed conception of reasoning, which bounds human plurality by imposing predetermined restrictions on what is to count as ‘reasonable’.

⁸⁷ Wenar, “Political Liberalism: An Internal Critique,” *Ethics*, vol. 106, no. 1, 1995, p. 46.

If the defining feature of political liberalism is the claim that the fair terms of cooperation are only legitimate when deduced from 'reasonable' conceptions and justified to 'reasonable' people, then political liberalism seems to face a serious problem of exclusion. This does not entail that limits to pluralism are illegitimate in principle, nor that there are no good reasons for excluding certain comprehensive doctrines from a political agreement. The question should not be about whether we draw the line or not, but rather about the nature and scope of such a line. And this is required for us to see if we need to agree provisionally on where to draw it.

A similar claim can be made with regard to the way in which moral and political philosophy are viewed as two separate endeavours in the Rawlsian project. Indeed, before even introducing the idea of overlapping consensus, Rawls's distinction between comprehensive doctrines and political conceptions already presupposes a narrowing down of the range of disagreement, since it entails a prior agreement on an understanding of 'the political' as a domain where negotiations could take place without reference to rival and incompatible accounts of the good. This is not to say that we should be opposed to distinguishing the political from the moral, the religious, and the philosophical, but rather that such categories should be conceived of as porous and overlapping. Important traditions of thought have established themselves through a constant interaction between these domains. One can think of the Gandhian tradition, for instance, whose political project relies on religious and philosophical arguments, which taken altogether can be regarded as presupposing a moral theory. The examples are many and wide-ranging.

Now let me return to my hunch that an overlapping consensus has the potential to provide for a common ground that could help us forge and maintain reciprocal relationships. If my analysis so far is convincing, then I should be able to sketch the outlines of an account of overlapping consensus that is pluralistic in a stronger sense than what Rawls proposes.

To begin with, I want to suggest that the overlapping consensus should be conceived of as the integral component of a process of reasoning. The Rawlsian view that the overlapping consensus ought to mark the last stage of the structure of justification is problematic because it not only assumes that the society in question agrees on fundamental political principles, but also that it is unlikely to disagree in the future. Here, the purpose of the overlapping consensus is to reconcile the already agreed-to public conception of justice with the citizens' private comprehensive doctrines. I argue instead that the process of reaching an overlapping consensus should be understood as a continuous activity of conversational interactions.⁸⁸ This allows us to put into question the starting point of Rawls's theory—that is, “the shared fund of implicitly recognized basic ideas and principles” and “our most firmly held convictions,”⁸⁹ which Rawls takes for granted. An overlapping consensus that is sensitive to the plurality of forms of life cannot begin with a settled account of the fundamental ideas and governing principles that are to regulate a given society. Any agreement obtained through an overlapping consensus must be provisional and open to ongoing review and revision, and so viewed as part of the continuous course of living and reasoning with others.⁹⁰

What such an understanding of overlapping consensus offers is a richer view of the way in which we deliberate about ends, one that pays attention to the background against which we live our lives—and hence that is at odds with Rawls's account that emphasizes the “independent

⁸⁸ This is Wittgenstein's point in his *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and J. Schulte, eds. P.M.S. Hacker and J. Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), §§241-242; as well as in *On Certainty*, eds. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1974), §§204, 205, 509. The agreement is “in” a way of life, not on opinions within it. I thank James Tully for drawing this to my attention.

⁸⁹ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 8.

⁹⁰ Again, I limit my discussion of diversity in this chapter to the human animal realm, and more or less take the Rawlsian conception of the person for granted. I will criticize the latter in subsequent chapters and argue that certain features of animality (such as vulnerability and dependency) justify overriding commitments to care, nurture, and protect the beings and relations that sustain life on earth. Of course, different animals have different needs, and there are multiple ways of caring, nurturing and protecting—hence the importance of engaging in dialogues that help create and sustain the kind of relationality that is needed to respond to specific needs in appropriate ways.

validity of the claims of others.”⁹¹ Contrary to the Rawlsian picture, the view that I am proposing here holds that our claims make sense in so far as they are placed in relation to other claims. Indeed, our moral ideals and commitments acquire meaning only within a pre-existing and common space of social practices. And when we see that it is such a context that confers intelligibility to our lived experience, we are forced to part ways with a framework that conceives of human ends as separated or disembedded from the locus of human activity.⁹² This entails that the reaching of a common ground in understanding and engagement makes little sense outside of the constant and ongoing activity of conversing and living with one another. What I want to suggest is that we should rule out a purely punctual understanding of the idea of overlapping consensus, one which denotes contingent and coincidental occurrences that are bracketed in time and space. On this view, not only are the areas of overlap understood as meeting in finite and self-contained episodes, but they must also be “presented as freestanding and expounded apart from, or without reference to, any such wider background.”⁹³

Furthermore, an overlapping consensus that takes pluralism seriously makes room for change, because its participants must be open to being moved by what their conversational partners say, and hence to being changed by the process of reasoning itself. The approach I have been describing is conducive to reconciliation by virtue of its emphasis on the transformational character of what Charles Taylor has called “other-understanding”—that is, the “move towards a wider understanding which can englobe the other undistortively.”⁹⁴ This is not to say that we should not

⁹¹ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 52.

⁹² Recall that Rawls’s account of ‘the reasonable’ holds that reasonable agents are able to recognize the claims of others as having validity independently of the bonds that tie them together. See *Political Liberalism*, p. 52.

⁹³ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 12.

⁹⁴ Taylor, “Comparison, History, Truth,” in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 151.

take the challenges raised by the problems of incommensurability and untranslatability seriously.⁹⁵ The possibility is always open that interlocutors taking part in a dialogue might fail to find a common language. But if we take the notion of overlapping consensus as being directed towards the ideal of reconciliation, then our goal is better interpreted as the process of striving to reach a shared normative space whereby we can “reason in common,”⁹⁶ as Rawls put it, even if we do not succeed in reaching a substantive agreement in the attempt.

Here, I want to draw again on the work of James Tully to stress this particular aspect of “reciprocal elucidation,” which refers to the idea that the value of the activity of reasoning lies in the process itself, and not only in the agreements that it can potentially produce.⁹⁷ In this vein, an overlapping consensus on norms of conduct must be seen as “one link in an endless chain,”⁹⁸ one which is always open to further interpretation and discussion. It is in upholding such a spirit and attitude towards our reasoning with others that we can better embody “mutual understanding, accommodation and conciliation.”⁹⁹

Finally, what I hope to bring to the reader’s attention is that the relationship between the diversity of ways of being in the world and the question of the unity and stability of a political community can—and indeed must—be considered beyond the pale of Rawls’s ‘reasonable pluralism’. In order to be able to accommodate the plurality of forms of life within a political community, an inclusive overlapping consensus must appeal to a conception of reasoning that

⁹⁵ See, for instance, Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), esp. pp. 370-388.

⁹⁶ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 49, note 1.

⁹⁷ See Tully, *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Tully, “A new field of democracy and civic freedom,” in *Public Philosophy in a New Key, Volume 1: Democracy and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 291-316; see also Laden’s piece on Tully’s approach to deliberation and public philosophy: “Engagement, Proposals and the Key of Reasoning,” in *Freedom and Democracy in an Imperial Context: Dialogues with James Tully*, ed. Robert Nichols and Jakeet Singh (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 13-31 (esp. p. 27).

⁹⁸ Tully, *Strange Multiplicity*, p. 135.

⁹⁹ Tully, *Strange Multiplicity*, p. 135.

makes room for the sort of continuous conversational interactions that I have been attempting to sketch in these pages. This entails that the tasks of finding fair terms of cooperation with others and securing the possibility of an overlapping consensus on norms of justice requires a commitment on our part to enter and to remain engaged in a dialogical process that is primarily aimed at understanding and attuning ourselves to one another.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that Rawls's ambition is to reach an agreement that sets the ground for a political conception of justice whose aim is to establish fair terms of cooperation for mutual benefit. I have also shown that the purpose of the idea of an overlapping consensus is to achieve reconciliation. I believe that Rawls's preoccupations are valid and that his attempt to motivate a compromise that has the potential to accommodate a certain version of pluralism while still being able to maintain a 'well-ordered society' is important—particularly given that they emanate from a liberal point of view.

I also attempted to show that there are considerable limits to Rawls's project. The stark distinction he operates between comprehensive doctrines and a political conception poses significant problems, among other things because it postulates the existence of a freestanding domain, one in which justification becomes possible because of the purportedly independent status of the political. I have argued that political liberalism is bound to fail in its attempt to justify its legitimacy from a tradition-transcendent vantage point. As Alasdair MacIntyre has put it, "there is no access to any subject-matter which is not conceptualized in terms that already presuppose the

truth of one set of claims rather than the other.”¹⁰⁰ But Rawls is guilty of doing just this for trying to keep political liberalism away from controversial accounts of the nature of ‘truth’ and moral validity, on the one hand, while setting forth the framework of political liberalism as the correct, morally permissible conception of justice, on the other.

Moreover, I have argued that Rawls relies on a monological conception of reasoning, one that conceives of the activity in terms of moments of exchange between static and self-contained individuals. I suggested instead an alternative framework, one that draws on Anthony Laden’s and James Tully’s respective conceptions of reasoning. Such an account enables us to grasp a richer picture of the interactive activities of mutual attunement because it brings into view the properly dialogical character of such interactions. On the other hand, it also allows us to appreciate the ongoing nature of the activities of conversation, and this in turn deepens our understanding of the value of the process of engaging with one another—instead of placing value in the agreement that such conversations can potentially produce.

To conclude, I hope to have shown that although the introduction of the idea of an overlapping consensus is an important contribution to political theory and philosophy, the way in which it is worked out in Rawls’s theory raises significant challenges to the project of reconciliation. I have also argued that the idea of an overlapping consensus must be revised if it is to take pluralism seriously. Indeed, I suggested that an overlapping consensus that is inclusive of the plurality of forms of life within a political community must remain open to retraction and revision. It is better understood as forming part of the course of an ongoing conversation among citizens who live together and are willing to share a political space together. Only then will we be

¹⁰⁰ MacIntyre, “Relativism, Power and Philosophy,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 59, no. 1, 1985, p. 10.

able to come closer to bringing a plurality of forms of life into conversation with one another, and hence reconciling seemingly incompatible traditions of thought and action.

CHAPTER TWO:

An overlapping consensus on care?

In the previous chapter, we saw how Rawls's introduction of the idea of overlapping consensus into political philosophy's debates about pluralism is of pivotal importance. Two main reasons may be adduced for this: First, the idea of overlapping consensus attempts to solve an important problem in political philosophy, which is the question of how to proceed in order to discern what justice requires in circumstances of fundamental disagreement about the good. What I have taken to be the spirit of overlapping consensus is the attempt to construct bonds between persons and communities who pursue different goods and who are committed to different moral sources, but who nevertheless live together and are enmeshed in ongoing relations with one another. And second, the purpose of the idea is also to depict how an irreducible plurality of human beings would come to an agreement on norms of justice from within—rather than apart from—their own allegiances and commitments. One of the virtues of such an approach is that it conceives of the process of finding fair terms of social cooperation as a practical and intersubjective dialogue, rather than as an imposition of theoretical reason.

Now, the prevalent view holds that persons and communities would strive to reach a common ground in order to construct a way of being together despite the tragedy of the human moral predicament, which is characterized by the deep plurality of Wittgensteinian forms of life. Recall that central to Rawls's account is the assumption that "reasonable pluralism" is "a permanent feature of the public culture" of "modern democratic societies."¹⁰¹ But Rawls is not the only one to hold such a view. Indeed, according to Charles Taylor's narrative of "secularization,"

¹⁰¹ John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness. A Restatement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 33-34.

given that it's not possible anymore for the societies of the North Atlantic world to ground their "philosophy of civility" on a substantive view about the ends of life, their inhabitants are therefore "condemned to live an overlapping consensus."¹⁰² The distinctive trait of modern societies, then, is that they have given up on the idea of a shared common good. And so, if the possession of a set of claims held in common on the nature of justice and of human ends is no longer justifiable in the particular contexts described by both Rawls and Taylor, then it would seem that those societies are confined to a deprived form of existence. The reason for this is that such societies are unable to provide their members with a shared vocabulary through which they can articulate a distinctive account of what human flourishing and well-being consist in.¹⁰³ In the absence of such an account, so the argument goes, those societies will inevitably fail to reckon with fundamental aspects of the human condition, such as our vulnerability and dependence on particular others.¹⁰⁴ This is a powerful argument, and it must be carefully examined by anyone engaged in debates about reasoning and mutual understanding in contexts of diversity and pluralism.

One major objective of this chapter, then, is to confront the idea of overlapping consensus with Alasdair MacIntyre's contribution to moral and political philosophy. In the following pages, I seek to reframe the way in which the field commonly conceives of the conditions of possibility for establishing a common ground on which to stand together. Such a task requires that we first of all pay attention to MacIntyre's critique of modernity, which throws light on the failure of the Enlightenment project of vindicating 'morality' understood as an independent and isolable area of

¹⁰² Taylor, "How to Define Secularism," in *Boundaries of Toleration*, eds. A. Stepan and C. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 70.

¹⁰³ This argument has been defended by Aristotelian philosophers such as G.E.M. Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre. See, in particular, Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," in *The Is-Ought Question*, ed. W.D. Hudson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1969), pp. 175-195; and MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), among others. In this chapter, I will concentrate on MacIntyre's thought.

¹⁰⁴ This point has been stressed and developed by MacIntyre in his *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001).

enquiry. I open with a discussion of MacIntyre's portrayal of the debate between expressivism, which he considers to be the inevitable outcome of the dominance of 'morality', and a neo-Aristotelian standpoint in ethics and politics. This serves as an illustration of the impoverishment of a philosophical theorizing that is disengaged from the life of practice. I proceed to develop MacIntyre's conception of the relational and embodied self and defend his view of human animality. I wish to indicate that the recognition of the facts of human animal vulnerability and dependence introduce strong commitments and motivations to care. This provides the first step in transforming the way we think about reasoning and how to relate to one another, and undermines those accounts that hold on to bounded understandings of community and common goods. Ultimately, I argue that the shared vocabulary that is needed to inform the determination of a suitable conception of flourishing and well-being ought to start with an overlapping consensus on care. And while I agree with the main conclusions of MacIntyre's analysis, my purpose in this chapter is to push his argument further and suggest that practices of care and cooperation ought to be extended in order to cultivate relationships of giving and receiving with human and nonhuman animals, as well as ecosystems, and the living earth. This is because the flourishing of each specific form of life cannot be conceived of in isolation from—or independently of—the well-being of all others.

1. Alasdair MacIntyre and the predicament of modern moral philosophy

In debates about pluralism and diversity, it has become a norm that we identify MacIntyre as a 'communitarian' philosopher, and that we think of his work as a scathing critique of liberalism. While the latter is certainly true, it is also true that the 'communitarian' label has resulted in a

reductive categorization of MacIntyre's thought. Indeed, it is often that we see his name appear in the work of scholars who wish to draw a contrast between approaches that emphasize the importance of the individual, on the one hand, and those that lay stress on community, on the other.¹⁰⁵ And even though this view is not incorrect, it is nevertheless misleadingly incomplete. In what follows, I will invite the reader to not only explore MacIntyre's condemnation of modernity, but also consider his conceptions of reasoning and of mutual dependence, as well as show how his positive work enables us to respond to human vulnerability and disability.

MacIntyre sums up modernity's predicament by asserting that social life is sustained by the assumption that "we have agreed to disagree about a wide range of questions about goods and that politics is one thing and morals quite another."¹⁰⁶ This diagnosis is reminiscent of Rawls's assumption of the "fact of reasonable pluralism" as the natural result of freedom and democracy.¹⁰⁷ For MacIntyre, however, this picture of modernity seems to suggest that moral and political life in highly centralized and bureaucratized capitalist societies can no longer amount to anything more than the arbitrary and contingent grouping of individuals who negotiate punctual agreements between themselves. On this view, the citizens of modern societies do not and cannot have common principles and shared standards that could serve as premises for practical reasoning and deliberation.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre traces this "distinctively modern standpoint" to the emergence of a form of rational justification that operated distinctions between realms that were beginning to be understood as separate and distinctive—such as the moral, the theological, the legal, the

¹⁰⁵ See, in particular, Amy Gutmann, "Communitarian Critics of Liberalism," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1985, pp. 308-322; Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), esp. p. 209; Daniel A. Bell, *Communitarianism and Its Critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and S. Mulhall and A. Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), among others.

¹⁰⁶ MacIntyre, "Rival Aristotles: Aristotle against some modern Aristotelians," in *Ethics and Politics. Selected Essays, Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 39.

¹⁰⁷ Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. xl.

economic, the aesthetic, and so on.¹⁰⁸ According to MacIntyre, this development can be traced to the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the Enlightenment project attempted to provide the intellectual foundations for the grounding of ‘morality’ as an independent and isolable area of enquiry. The central thesis that MacIntyre puts forward is that the attempt to liberate ‘morality’ from the teleological and theistic frameworks within which moral enquiry was traditionally undertaken was a complete failure. And it is MacIntyre’s contention that the Enlightenment project had to fail because of two interrelated reasons: First, the “deliverance” of morality from theism and teleology went hand in hand with the novel conception of the individual as sovereign in their moral authority.¹⁰⁹ Second, the consequences of putting the autonomous and self-sufficient individual at the center of moral enquiry were devastating for the project of giving a rational vindication of morality—that is, the Enlightenment’s search for universal principles that can and ought to be held by each and every rational agent.¹¹⁰ The reason for this is that, in the absence of an individual-transcending schema that provides a set of norms of justifications to which agents can appeal, moral enquiry acquires a purely instrumental significance.

To explain this, we need to look more closely at the framework of modern moral theory that MacIntyre criticizes. Within such a framework, the nature of the activity of reflectively arriving at conclusions about what ought or ought not to be done in such and such situation is purely inward and monological. MacIntyre refers to this doctrine as emotivism¹¹¹—or, more recently, as expressivism¹¹²—and describes it, in its most general formulation, as the belief that

¹⁰⁸ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 39.

¹⁰⁹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 62.

¹¹⁰ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 62.

¹¹¹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 12. See also chapters 2 and 3.

¹¹² MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). It is important to note that MacIntyre’s usage of the term ‘expressivism’ is not the same as that of Charles Taylor. In the tracing of the modern identity he offers in his *Sources of the Self*, Taylor famously describes what he calls ‘the expressivist turn’. However, Taylor’s notion of expressivism refers to the notion of “nature as an inner moral source,” which is something that transcends individual agents. On this

moral reasoning can be reduced to expressions of personal feelings and attitudes. More precisely, emotivism denotes an account of normative and evaluative utterances that understands choice in terms of an expression of preference that is determined by a particular agent's fiat of will.

In *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, MacIntyre engages with expressivism, which he considers to be a more sophisticated form of emotivism.¹¹³ And the reason why MacIntyre takes this doctrine seriously is that expressivists offer an incisive portrayal of the failure of the Enlightenment's project of justifying morality. Indeed, he argues that expressivists have identified the right problem, which is that moral philosophy has been dominated by the objective of discovering what reason entails, and yet the field remains in a climate of unresolved disagreements and unsettled conflicts about the nature and scope of reason's requirements.¹¹⁴ For MacIntyre, expressivism has the merit of pointing out the inherent flaw of 'Morality' as understood by most contemporary academic practitioners of moral philosophy—that is to say, as “a set of impersonal rules, entitled to the assent of any rational agent whatsoever.”¹¹⁵ Here, MacIntyre has in mind the various accounts of the rules, maxims, and justifications that emanate from those attempts made by consequentialists, deontologists, and contractarians to provide evaluative and normative standards that would hold true in all times and all places. In this sense, 'Morality' is spelled with a capital M, as opposed to 'moralities' in the plural, which are embedded in particular social and cultural orders.¹¹⁶

view, expressivism denotes a search for moral principles that is simultaneously inner, because nature resonates within ourselves, but aims at the outer, given that it reflects a meaning that is expressed in 'natural' phenomena, in God, or in a world spirit. The premise of Romantic expressivism is that human animals need to “turn within” in order to immerse themselves in the force nature, which runs through the world. See Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 1989), p. x, 301, 368-390.

¹¹³ MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, p. 17.

¹¹⁴ MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, p. 67.

¹¹⁵ MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, p. 65.

¹¹⁶ MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, p. 65.

MacIntyre asserts that the defenders of ‘Morality’ have set themselves the task of “climbing the wrong mountain.”¹¹⁷ Instead, we should embark upon a philosophical path that explores the conflict between two views that have taken the plurality of moralities seriously: expressivism and neo-Aristotelianism. In the beginning of *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, MacIntyre’s aim is to bring to light a dilemma: the philosophical impasse that results from the confrontation between expressivism and neo-Aristotelianism on the relationship between desires and practical reasoning. According to expressivism, MacIntyre argues, our reasons for acting so as to satisfy a given desire can only be justified by reference to our “prerational endorsements,”¹¹⁸ or to our “state of mind.”¹¹⁹ Put differently, evaluative judgments cannot be assessed in the light of normative criteria that are not conditioned by a particular agent’s expression of affections. On this view, the activity of moral reflection corresponds to an attitude of approval or disapproval based on the agent’s ordering of the desires with which they identify. This is not to say that their normative and evaluative utterances are completely arbitrary. Indeed, expressivists frame moral enquiry in terms of a confrontation between mutually exclusive goods, each claiming a status of importance (perhaps even of urgency) to the agent. So, the choice is between incommensurable ends that are good for the agent to pursue—and not between, say, burning a car or helping a disabled person cross the street. But the problem, for MacIntyre, is that expressivists confound what is pleasing to the agent with what is good as such—that is, the good as agreed to by shared standards of practical reason. Moreover, the way in which the expressivist situates themselves in relation to the goods that they deem worth pursuing is thoroughly monological. This is because they think of the relationships

¹¹⁷ MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, p. 35. Here MacIntyre borrows Derek Parfit’s metaphor, who has attempted to reconcile deontology, consequentialism, and contractarianism in a book that claims that these theories have been “climbing the same mountain on different sides.” See Parfit, *On What Matters. Volume 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 26.

¹¹⁸ MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, p. 39.

¹¹⁹ See MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, p. 42.

through which they interact with others in first-person singular. Consequently, how those relationships come to exist for them is somewhat a matter of idiosyncrasy. Even though the agent does not think of themselves as isolated, unconnected to other human beings, they nevertheless conceive of their life story as a story in which they are the main protagonist. Indeed, the individual subject is the starting and end point of their story, and the language through which they articulate what is meaningful to them is inner. And even though they are responsive to others, the yardstick by which they express normative and evaluative judgments is provided by the question “What is it to which *I* am committed?”¹²⁰

For neo-Aristotelians, on the other hand, desires are necessarily understood in relation to the goods that furnish us reasons for desiring whatever it is that we presently desire. And our judgments about those goods, as well as our disagreements about what is to count as good, are determined by appeal to standards that are “external to and independent of” our “feelings, concerns, commitments, and attitudes.”¹²¹ Now, that does not mean that those standards are universal among humankind, as the defenders of ‘Morality’ would claim. Rather, they are embedded within the narratives of our practical histories. And such narratives, according to MacIntyre, are relational narratives. This means that they are constituted through the particular roles and functions that human beings fulfil—roles that shape and are shaped by their interactions with one another—within the structured social and political worlds that they inhabit.¹²² On this view, the standards against which moral evaluations make sense to an agent are shared and, therefore, the activity of formulating what is of value to them is genuinely common.

¹²⁰ MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, p. 61. Emphasis in original.

¹²¹ MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, p. 23.

¹²² MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, p. 52. This is, of course, reminiscent of the relational conception of the self as developed by Jennifer Nedelsky, Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, among others. See Nedelsky, *Law's Relations. A Relational Theory of Self, Autonomy, and Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Mackenzie and Stoljar, eds., *Relational Autonomy. Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

But what is interesting about the way in which MacIntyre depicts this debate is that, contrary to what we would expect in moral philosophy, he does not attempt to refute the arguments advanced by the most eloquent expressivists (Simon Blackburn's in particular, as well as Alan Gibbard's, and Harry Frankfurt's). Instead, MacIntyre wants to emphasize that what we have here is a theoretical conflict in which neither party is able to convince the other of the soundness of their arguments. The purpose of the portrayal of such an impasse is to show that philosophical theorizing about morality is bound to miss fundamental aspects of our lives: our engagement as moral agents—and not only as professional philosophers—with the everyday facts of practice.¹²³ For MacIntyre, the impasse becomes irrelevant from a standpoint that distinguishes the forms of justification that emanate from theoretical positions from those that are grounded in practical agency.¹²⁴ Now, this does not mean that we ought to reject theoretical stances altogether; instead, the point is that proper justification in moral enquiry involves paying attention to the relationship between theory and practice, and that moral commitments must be evaluated in the light of the social contexts in which they are to make sense. This echoes Anthony Laden's view that on a dialogical picture of reasoning, the distinction between theoretical and practical reason appears to be much less important than in standard conceptions of reasoning.¹²⁵ This is because proper philosophical justification and enquiry needs to move beyond the limitations of the standard conception that isolates theory from practice. As Laden puts it, reasoning is “something we do”¹²⁶—it is an activity of reciprocal interaction that is shaped by the kind of relationships of which

¹²³ MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, p. 71

¹²⁴ MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, p. 111.

¹²⁵ Anthony S. Laden, *Reasoning. A Social Picture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 12. As I argued in the previous chapter, the standard picture of reasoning suffers from a monological dimension and is, in MacIntyre's way of putting it, purely theoretical. This conception of reasoning appeals to abstract standards of rationality and aims at reaching conclusions concerning the requirements of Morality.

¹²⁶ Laden, *Reasoning*, p. 12.

we are a part. In other words, an adequate understanding of reasoning must necessarily be grounded in the particularities of the social space in which we live our lives together.

MacIntyre's strategy is to reproach expressivism for failing to take this social insight seriously, just as the defenders of 'Morality' do. But MacIntyre goes beyond the claim that reasoning is social and ongoing and argues that an adequate account of evaluative and normative judgments ought to recognize the teleological structure of human lives—something that can be discerned only from a standpoint informed by the contexts of practice. To return to the debate about desires and their relationship to practical reason, the purpose of MacIntyre's argument is to show that desires are intelligible in virtue of the good towards which they are directed. Our goal, as human agents, is to become reflective in our choice making, and thus to identify the appropriate standards in light of which we are to evaluate the objects of our desires. And those standards are to be accorded authority only insofar as they are conducive to human—and not merely personal—flourishing.

2. The vulnerability of animals and the animality of humans

What we have to grasp from the previous discussion is that if philosophical enquiry and justification fails to engage with the particularities of practice, it will be unable to reckon with important aspects of our human condition, such as our ongoing relationships and the social space that provide the context in which it makes sense to strive for and realize what is good for us. Most importantly, failure to acknowledge this will blind us to certain facts of our identities that not only shape and define our interaction with others, but also determine to a great extent that which conduces to flourishing or failing to flourish qua human beings. But in order to show the

importance of MacIntyre's contribution to the debate, we need first to develop his account of dependence and vulnerability.

In *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre begins by recognizing that his attempt in *After Virtue* to give an account of the place of the virtues understood in Aristotelian terms but independent of Aristotle's biology was mistaken.¹²⁷ In fact, he now claims that it is not only wrong, but also impossible to conceive of ethics as separate from and unconditioned by the biological constitution of human beings.¹²⁸ This is because an essential feature of the nature of the human condition is that “[w]e remain animal selves with animal identities.”¹²⁹ And the most salient characteristic of such identity is the fact that our bodies are animal bodies, and that “we do not merely have, but are our bodies.”¹³⁰ MacIntyre argues that moral philosophers (and he includes himself in this category) have by and large proceeded as if the latter was either false or insignificant.¹³¹ The point here is that the differences between human animals and nonhuman animals have been exaggerated, and as a result we have underestimated the extent to which the commonalities we share as animals cast light on the conditions required for flourishing.

MacIntyre's argument runs as follows: First, he contends that the prevalent view of what makes human life distinctive attributes excessive importance to the human animal's capacity to use a developed language. This has obscured the fact that social nonhuman animals such as wolves,

¹²⁷ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. x.

¹²⁸ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. x.

¹²⁹ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 49.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6. See also MacIntyre, “What is a human body?”, in *The Tasks of Philosophy. Selected Essays, Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 86-103.

¹³¹ Of course, there are exceptions to this—but it remains true within the narrow field of “moral philosophy.” Fortunately, the work of feminist philosophers has reminded the male-dominated discipline that human biology is crucial to understanding ourselves. See, among others, Alison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Brighton, Sussex: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983). For a more recent example, see Elizabeth Barnes, *The Minority Body: A Theory of Disability* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Also, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's thought immediately comes to mind, and MacIntyre acknowledges that Aristotelians have much to learn from phenomenology in this respect. See Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945). According to MacIntyre, though, the connection between the premise that “we are our bodies” and the ethical prescriptions that necessarily follow from it is to be found especially in Aristotelian philosophy.

elephants, gorillas, chimpanzees, and especially dolphins, interact with one another and are constituted by networks of relationships.¹³² This is not to deny that the way in which human animals communicate with one another (in most cases) is more complex and sophisticated than is the case with social nonhuman animals. But what matters to MacIntyre is that in both cases, the “communication of beliefs and intentions” is “embedded in forms of social practice.”¹³³ And those cooperative social practices in which social nonhuman animals engage are as complex and sophisticated as the Wittgensteinian forms of life that are characteristic of human ways of being. A considerable part of *Dependent Rational Animals* is devoted to showing that dolphins (bottlenose dolphins in particular) “excel at vocal learning,” and that they “live together in groups and herds with well-defined social structures.”¹³⁴ Dolphins—as well as dogs, gorillas, chimpanzees, and others—are responsive beings who are “prelinguistic rather than nonlinguistic”.¹³⁵ And just like human animals, Dolphins communicate with each other on a background of shared social practices, which allows them to acquire the “social knowledge” that determines their ability to identify what their specific goods are, as well as to understand how to direct their actions towards the achievement of those goods.¹³⁶

The transmission of social knowledge in dolphin herds is structured through patterns of giving and receiving, from the maternal care that female dolphins provide to each of their calves to adult dolphins who care for the elder dolphins who protected them and taught them skills for various types of rewarding activities (such as hunting). This is the second part of MacIntyre’s argument, that is, that Dolphins are vulnerable and dependent beings, and hence that practices of

¹³² MacIntyre accuses philosophers as varied as Descartes and Heidegger of focusing on moths, crabs, lizards, woodworms, and so on, instead of studying nonhuman animals that actively engage in social activities. See *Dependent Rational Animals*, pp. 13-14, 46.

¹³³ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 31.

¹³⁴ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 21.

¹³⁵ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 37.

¹³⁶ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 22.

care are crucial to sustaining their shared forms of life.¹³⁷ And apart from a variety of threats against which there is little they can do to protect themselves—such as diseases and injuries, but particularly the threats caused by human animals—dolphins not only survive but flourish due to the practices of care that they have learned from each other through the social relationships in which they are embedded. What this makes clear is that the facts of vulnerability and dependence in dolphin lives, as well as the relationships of care that are constitutive of their well-being, throw light on our bodily being-in-the-world—something that we human animals often fail to acknowledge.

We can thus learn from MacIntyre’s discussion of nonhuman animals a crucial feature of our own nature as human animals. This is not to ignore that the flourishing of dolphins and their specific vulnerabilities are of a different order from those that characterize human animals. But it is the case that we are embodied beings who are susceptible to a variety of afflictions and disabilities, and how we cope is determined by the relationships that support us and enable us not merely to live or to survive, but to live well.¹³⁸

What MacIntyre wants us to understand is that ethical reflection ought to start from the most elemental level of practice, which concerns our bodily experience and hence our material and social needs.¹³⁹ An immediate consequence of acknowledging this insight is that illness, injury and other disablements are no longer treated as exceptional circumstances that affect only a minority of us. As MacIntyre reminds us, we human animals are vulnerable beings and this is most obviously evidenced by our dependence in early childhood and old age, when we must rely on

¹³⁷ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 82.

¹³⁸ I am of course referring to Aristotle’s conception of the end of a political community. See Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. C. Lord (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1252b 27-30.

¹³⁹ This is also one of the central insights of Jennifer Nedelsky’s relational conception of the self. See Nedelsky, *Law’s Relations*, p. 28.

others to look after and provide for us.¹⁴⁰ And as we encounter longer or shorter periods of unexpected affliction between these two stages of our lives, we also depend on particular others for sustenance and protection.¹⁴¹ Moreover, some among us are permanently disabled and therefore wholly dependent on care for their entire lives; and yet, some may be less dependent but face physical disablements that constitute serious obstacles to the responsiveness that they can hope to receive from others. The latter is in part due to the way in which modern societies place an excessive importance on physical appearance. Indeed, the culture of such societies fosters an intermingling of what is uttered and who uttered it, resulting in absurdities such as the poll finding reported by *The Times* of London in 1998 that “in Britain (...) one person in three believes that those in wheelchairs are less intelligent.”¹⁴² More recently, a 2017 survey in Canada found that half of disabled Canadians are unemployed, that “only 23 per cent of respondents feel comfortable disclosing their disability to a potential employer before the interview process gets under way,” and that “about 19 per cent (...) said they had no intention of discussing such information at all, with half of them citing fear of discrimination as the reason for their silence.”¹⁴³

It is unsurprising to learn these facts about the attitudes that people hold towards the disabled and the social roles that the disabled occupy in modern capitalist societies. The dominant economic mode of production and exchange and its underlying conception of prosperity—understood as a never-ending quest for ever greater profits—has little room for the networks of giving and receiving that are integral to the achievement and sustenance of common goods.

¹⁴⁰ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 1.

¹⁴¹ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 1.

¹⁴² MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 137.

¹⁴³ Michelle McQuigge, “Only half of disabled Canadians are employed, poll finds,” *The Globe and Mail*, January 17, 2017. There is a plethora of surveys that could be mentioned here. Among the most worrisome is the poll to which Amber Knight calls attention, which found that “fifty-two percent of Americans would rather be dead than disabled.” See Knight, “Disability as vulnerability: redistributing precariousness in democratic ways,” *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 76, no. 1, 2014, p. 15.

Because although the political and social structures that are needed to realize such communal practices can take various forms, they overlap in their rejection of the capitalist promotion of economic growth and consumption, as well as in their need of protection from unregulated competition and free markets.¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, the account of what it is to be a rational agent that is instilled by market-driven economies is that of a maximizer of preference satisfaction, and it is deeply incompatible with the sort of rationality that is needed to sustain mutual relationships of caretaking. MacIntyre argues that such a form of rationality must be a neo-Aristotelian one, that is to say, one that is constituted by ongoing social relationships and friendships and that aims at shared deliberation about common needs and about the achievement of common goods.¹⁴⁵

The taking into consideration of the contribution of others is fundamental to a neo-Aristotelian conception of the rational agent, and this is why participants must ensure that no voice is excluded or ignored from the deliberation. But this is only possible to the extent that caretaking obligations are established and maintained in order to provide a space for those who are unable to speak for themselves. Hence the importance of what MacIntyre calls the role of “the proxy.”¹⁴⁶ Indeed, human vulnerability and affliction require that we sometimes act as “second selves” for those of us who are radically disabled.¹⁴⁷ And given the facts of our embodied nature and of our consequent vulnerability, the flourishing of human animals necessarily involves the nurturing of relationships between disabled persons and those who are able to speak for them. The idea of ‘speaking for them’ may sound problematic because of its paternalistic connotations, particularly to a strong strand in the disability rights movement that rejects dependency in favor of self-

¹⁴⁴ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 145.

¹⁴⁵ See MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, pp. 49-59.

¹⁴⁶ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 139.

¹⁴⁷ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 139.

determination and autonomy.¹⁴⁸ It is nevertheless true that in the case of persons suffering from extreme and long-lasting forms of affliction, there will sometimes be no alternative but to replace those persons' judgments with one's own when it comes to what is good for them.¹⁴⁹ But we ought to make it our aim that we identify and strive to achieve the good of the persons whose affliction and disability constitute an obstacle to their participation in political deliberation. And this is only possible in the context of collaborative networks of support and assistance among persons with a range of different capacities and ways of being-in-the-world. This resonates with Amber Knight's observations concerning people with profound cognitive disabilities and the way in which their contributions to social and political life have been ignored or dismissed.¹⁵⁰ As she puts it, "speaking for oneself" may not always be possible, and therefore we ought to recognize that "in certain contexts, practices of guardianship, surrogacy, and collaborative communication have the potential to be politically empowering for severely impaired individuals."¹⁵¹ But in order for those practices to bridge the communicative divide between disabled people and to empower those who need it the most, a political community needs well-defined structures whose aim is to bring to life and to sustain the sort of relationships of giving and receiving that are required for human flourishing.

3. Embodied reasoning

¹⁴⁸ See James I. Charlton's *Nothing About us Without Us: Disability Oppression, and Empowerment* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), as well as Linda Martin Alcoff, "The problem of speaking for others," *Cultural Critique*, no. 20, pp. 5-32. Both are cited in Amber Knight, "Democratizing disability: achieving inclusion (without assimilation) through 'participatory parity,'" *Hypatia*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2015, p. 100.

¹⁴⁹ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 140.

¹⁵⁰ Knight, "Democratizing disability: achieving inclusion (without assimilation) through 'participatory parity,'" *Hypatia*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2015, p. 107. See also Knight, "Disability, paternalism, and autonomy: rethinking political decision-making and speech," *Res Philosophica*, vol. 93, no. 4, 2016, pp. 865-891.

¹⁵¹ Knight, "Democratizing disability," pp. 107-108. Here, Knight draws on the work of Eva Feder Kittay. See Kittay, "When caring is just and justice is caring: justice and mental retardation," *Public Culture*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2001, pp. 557-580.

So far, I have attempted to show that Alasdair MacIntyre's contribution to moral and political philosophy is crucial to understanding our condition of shared vulnerability. Against the subjectivism that expressivists uphold (as well as the false universalism promoted by the advocates of 'Morality'), MacIntyre opens the possibility of establishing the central dimension of our animal existence as the point of departure for moral reasoning. According to MacIntyre's analysis, it is because the responsibilities of caretaking are indispensable to human flourishing that they are to be accorded a moral authority that is external to and independent of the desires, feelings, emotions, attitudes, commitments, and choices that an agent or group of agents may appeal to for the justification of their actions.

Such a picture raises serious challenges to the way in which the notion of overlapping consensus is used, as well as to how reasoning and deliberation are conceived of in moral and political philosophy. As Amber Knight and Barbara Arneil point out, the starting point of Rawls's argument entails the exclusion of people with disabilities from the activity of reasoning about how to live together.¹⁵² Indeed, Rawls begins his theory by indicating that "we assume that persons as citizens have all the capacities that enable them to be cooperating members of society."¹⁵³ Now, a very generous reading could point out that depending on what we mean by "capacities for cooperation," it would be possible to argue that Rawls is not a priori precluding disabled citizens from participating in common endeavours. Suffice it to mention capacities that are both necessary for cooperation and reciprocity with others and that transcend the abled/disabled binary, such as the capacity for love, for compassion, for understanding, for creativity, and for play, among others.

¹⁵² Knight, "Democratizing disability: achieving inclusion (without assimilation) through 'participatory parity'," p. 100; Barbara Arneil, "Disability, Self Image, and Modern Political Theory," *Political Theory*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2009, p. 227.

¹⁵³ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 20.

However, such interpretation falls to the ground when we consider the rest of Rawls's prefatory remarks. Indeed, he goes on to assert that the fundamental question of political justice concerns the determination of fair terms of social cooperation between citizens regarded "as normal and fully cooperating members of society over a complete life."¹⁵⁴ Then, he warns us that "given our aim, I put aside these temporary disabilities and also permanent disabilities or mental disorders so severe as to prevent people from being cooperative members of society in the usual sense."¹⁵⁵ Furthermore, Rawls's analysis presupposes an understanding of "the citizen" as someone who has the "intellectual and moral powers appropriate to that role,"¹⁵⁶ which means that they must possess "the capacity to form, to revise, and rationally to pursue a conception of one's rational advantage or good."¹⁵⁷

These remarks are flagrantly at odds with the sort of account that I have been sketching, one whose starting point is the nature of our animal body and hence our vulnerability. And there are three main reasons for this. First, Rawls is blatantly saying that disabled persons are abnormal, that they should be regarded as exceptional cases, and that they cannot possibly be considered as fully cooperating members of society. Moreover, he does so without even considering an enquiry into the different meanings and implications of social cooperation and mutual support. This is not only surprising but deeply problematic for a philosophical project that purports to provide an inclusive reflection on the need for cooperation in bringing about and maintaining a just society. Second, Rawls's discussion of the normative conception of the person—that is, a "conception suitable for the basis of democratic citizenship"—posits that a deserving citizen is someone who

¹⁵⁴ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 20. My emphasis.

¹⁵⁵ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 20.

¹⁵⁶ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. xlv.

¹⁵⁷ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 19.

is able to engage in schemes of socially coordinated action “over a complete life.”¹⁵⁸ But this is to neglect MacIntyre’s insight that our specifically human animal condition exposes us equally to unpredictable injuries, illnesses and disabilities. Rawls also shows little concern for the different stages of life, such as infancy, childhood and old age, when human animals are most clearly dependent on particular others and hence are not able to give as much as they need to receive. Finally, the association between rationality (as understood by Rawls) and citizenship is problematic because such a view entails that cognitively impaired persons can be deemed insufficiently rational and therefore face exclusion from deliberation about the achievement of common goods. Even more worryingly, Rawls’s view entails that the severely disabled are excluded from personhood altogether. Indeed, if “a person is someone who can be a citizen,”¹⁵⁹ and that the requirements for citizenships are the moral powers to which I have alluded, it follows that those of us with severe impairments stand at the edge of what it means to be a person.

It is clear from these observations that Rawls’s ideas of the person¹⁶⁰ and its corresponding conception of social cooperation are inadequate. Two points matter particularly for my argument here. The first is that moral and political philosophy ought to abandon the prevalent view that what defines us as uniquely human is our internal cognitive capacity for rationality. Following MacIntyre, I want to argue that we should concern ourselves with attending to our animality—that is to say, to our bodily being-in-the-world—instead of seeking to establish a common ground of distinctively human experience in certain capacities of the mind. As MacIntyre reminds us, we

¹⁵⁸ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 18; see also note 20.

¹⁵⁹ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 28.

¹⁶⁰ It should be noted that Rawls is no exception in this regard. As Barbara Arneil reminds us, Charles Taylor also grounds his moral theory in the Kantian principle of dignity, but emphasizes the “potential” for rationality as the basis of what makes us distinctively human. See Arneil, “Disability, Self Image, and Modern Political Theory,” p. 225. See also Taylor, “Atomism,” in *Philosophical Papers Volume 2: Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 191. However, it would be a mistake to assume that Taylor’s conception of cooperation is as restrictive as Rawls’s.

present ourselves to each other and to the world as “specifically human bodies, that is, [as] embodied minds.”¹⁶¹ Therefore any attempt to ground human specificity purely in terms of cognitive properties is bound to be a radically insufficient account, since “the particularity of the mind is initially the particularity of the mind’s body.”¹⁶² And in order to understand animal functioning, and hence the importance of the body and of its contingencies, we have to abandon Rawls’s conception of the rational and reasonable person in favour of one that emphasizes vulnerability. My claim is that the recognition of our shared vulnerability ought to be the starting point of a more promising conception of reasoning and mutual interdependence. From such a standpoint, the fact that it is part of our nature to be dependent on particular others becomes clearly visible. As a result, the appeal to a shared condition of vulnerability gives rise to our collective responsibility to care for others.¹⁶³ Indeed, instead of relegating the disabled to the margins of moral and political philosophy, and therefore to treat them as anomalies for a theory of justice, philosophers ought to ask themselves what can we learn from them?¹⁶⁴ How could moral and political philosophy be enriched by considering the disabled as our teachers, and not as the subjects of our benevolence, that is, as “recipients of *our* giving”?¹⁶⁵ The consequences of such a reversal amount to a transformative account of reasoning, one in which the first step to conceiving of how we ought to relate to one another is settled by the shared recognition of our needs.

¹⁶¹ MacIntyre, “What is a human body?”, p. 100.

¹⁶² MacIntyre, “What is a human body?”, p. 89.

¹⁶³ This point is emphasized in Knight, “Disability as vulnerability: redistributing precariousness in democratic ways,” see esp. pp. 21-25. It is also put forward by MacIntyre in *Dependent Rational Animals*, as well as by Judith Butler in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009). Both are discussed in Knight, “Disability as vulnerability.”

¹⁶⁴ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 138.

¹⁶⁵ MacIntyre, “The need for a standard of care,” in *Americans with Disabilities: Exploring Implications of the Law for Individuals and Institutions*, eds. L. P. Francis and A. Silvers (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 84. Emphasis in original.

The second point that I want to highlight concerns the nature of social cooperation. Rawls's political liberalism puts forward stringent criteria on what is to count as proper cooperation, something that prevents his theory from capturing the variety of ways in which people cooperate in their daily lives. But once we abandon the Rawlsian conception of the person and become aware of the plurality of rationalities and of ways of determining what is reasonable,¹⁶⁶ the activities of responsive engagement and mutual attunement that I sketched in the previous chapter become possible. And this allows us to see a wider range of practices of cooperation, reciprocity and mutual aid than the Rawlsian picture allows. This position parallels James Tully's approach to practice, which urges us to become aware of the variety of on-going ways of thinking, acting and being-in-the-world that constitute fundamental and often unnoticed activities of cooperation.¹⁶⁷ But in order to perceive this, we must begin by understanding that the condition of possibility for genuine dialogue lies in our "openness and receptivity to the otherness of others."¹⁶⁸ Put differently, we must strive to make sense of and "appreciate the concerns of others as they experience and articulate them," that is, in their own terms and "without inclusion, assimilation or subordination."¹⁶⁹ And it is instructive to notice the way in which Tully defines practices, beginning his outline with "the embodied, sensuous, emotional, reasonable and unreasonable human beings in dialogical relationships to themselves, each other, the living earth and the spiritual realm."¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁶ Such an endeavor is at the heart of MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

¹⁶⁷ See Tully's "Public philosophy as a critical activity," in *Public Philosophy in a New Key, Volume 1: Democracy and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 15-38.

¹⁶⁸ Tully, "Deparochializing political theory and beyond: a dialogue approach to comparative political thought," *Journal of World Philosophies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2016, p. 52.

¹⁶⁹ Tully, "Deparochializing political theory and beyond," p. 52.

¹⁷⁰ Tully, "Deparochializing political theory and beyond," p. 58.

This brings us back to the central thesis that I want to draw out of MacIntyre, which is that there's an elemental level of practice that is not being accounted for in much moral and political philosophy. I am referring to the discrepancy that I noted earlier between philosophical theorizing and fundamental aspects of our everyday existence, the consequence of which is the isolation of the ethical from the practical life. The relational narratives through which we come to understand the lives of human animals make sense insofar as we begin with an account of the human body. And the first step towards an adequate account of the human body is the observation that "human bodies are essentially, not accidentally social."¹⁷¹ And this is because "human bodies are intelligible only as potentially and actually in relationship with others."¹⁷² A necessary second step, then, is the recognition that our animal bodies are susceptible to suffer from a range of illnesses, injuries, and impairments that interfere with what most of moral and political philosophy presupposes to be normal functioning. Hence the importance of the activities of caretaking that are formed and sustained in the networks of giving and receiving in which we all participate in a variety of ways and to a diversity of degrees.

4. Common goods beyond community

To return to where we started our enquiry, I want to argue that the sort of shared vocabulary that is needed for human animals to articulate their distinctive account of what human flourishing and well-being consists in ought to start with the recognition of our vulnerability and dependence—or interdependence—on particular others.¹⁷³ This is a minimal condition of mutual

¹⁷¹ MacIntyre, "What is a human body?", pp. 100-101.

¹⁷² MacIntyre, "What is a human body?", pp. 100-101.

¹⁷³ James Tully and Barbara Arneil speak of "interdependence" instead of "dependence," in order to avoid the negative connotations that have been associated with the term "dependence" throughout the history of Western political

understanding and reciprocity that cannot be overlooked if we are to have a conversation about how to live well together. Of course, this is only a starting point, but one that is crucial for any conception of justice that attempts to determine and to justify fair terms of cooperation among persons. Indeed, an account of reasoning and mutual interdependence that takes vulnerability to be the starting point to any discussion about justice and well-being will necessarily find an appropriate place to the care that we owe to one another. It should be clear that this concerns all animal bodies, and not only—even though priority must be granted to—those of us who have been put aside for too long by moral and political philosophy, such as women, children, the old, the disabled, and nonhuman animals, among others. But there is no doubt that our activities of caretaking ought to be extended to non-animal life forms as well, and that we ought to engage in forms of responsive engagement with the deep diversity of ecosystems and with the living earth as a whole.¹⁷⁴

And it is this last point that marks the distinction between the so-called “communitarian” interpretation of MacIntyre and the one that I have been sketching throughout this chapter. According to the former, which draws on MacIntyre’s prescriptions at the end of *After Virtue* that in order to resist the dominant economic, moral and political order of modernity we ought to seclude in closed communities within which the cultivation of the kinds of virtues that are needed for human flourishing can be insulated from outside forces.¹⁷⁵ On this view, an overlapping consensus on care would be restricted to our duties and obligations towards those who are part of

thought. I agree with them, but I also think that what MacIntyre attempts to make us realize is very similar to what Tully and Arneil are seeking to do as well. Indeed, MacIntyre wants us to recognize that we are *all* mutually dependent on each other, and hence that we ought to reflect critically on the liberal ideals of independence and autonomy as put forward by Locke, Kant, and Rawls, among others. In other words, I think that MacIntyre, Tully, and Arneil are using these two terms to refer to the same idea.

¹⁷⁴ This is a point I take from James Tully’s political thought. See, among others, Tully, “Deparochializing political theory and beyond: a dialogue approach to comparative political thought,” p. 63.

¹⁷⁵ See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 263. For a prominent defender of such an interpretation of MacIntyre’s work, see Rod Dreher’s *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (Sentinel: New York, 2017).

‘our’ local community. But nothing could justify a moral claim to the just nature of our relations with those outside of the communities that we are part of. In addition, such a view is restricted to an understanding of justice and cooperation that is primarily concerned with human beings—and, correspondingly, the notions of flourishing and goodness are conceived of as applying exclusively to human animals.

We already noted that MacIntyre revised some of the central arguments of *After Virtue*, the most important of which being his recognition in *Dependent Rational Animals* that any adequate conception of the nature of human beings must have a biological grounding. Consequently, as we have seen, MacIntyre provides the basis for an account of ethics that is grounded in the commonalities we share with members of other animal species—that is, the fact that human and nonhuman animals are first and foremost animal bodies. And such an account is at odds with “exclusive humanist”¹⁷⁶ positions in ethics and politics, and therefore with ‘communitarian’ approaches for which the common good is restricted to human animals as well. I take it that the fundamental lesson to learn here is that the activities of caretaking and the cultivation of networks of giving and receiving make sense insofar as they extend beyond the boundaries of our communal ties and attachments. This is not to deny the fact that we are intuitively drawn to pre-eminently care for those who are closer to us, such as those with whom we are intimately connected, our loved ones (including our domestic non-human animals), our friends, our neighbours, our colleagues, and so on. But what the ‘communitarian’ argument fails to consider, and this is something that MacIntyre emphasizes in his later work, is that we do not belong to *a* community, nor are we embedded in *a* network of relationships but, rather, we are most commonly members

¹⁷⁶ I borrow the term “exclusive humanism” from Charles Taylor. See Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

of a multiplicity of communities and are part of a plurality of networks of relations that overlap and criss-cross in a multiplicity of ways.¹⁷⁷

Furthermore, political philosophy's answers to the question of how to delineate the contours of what constitutes a community have often misconceived the fact that the boundaries of such communities exist in interactive and dynamic processes of (both internal and external) interpretation, negotiation, and transformation.¹⁷⁸ This is why any attempt to draw a line demarcating the limits of our inclinations and dispositions to care for and to cooperate with—and hence our duties and obligations towards—others must be rejected. MacIntyre justifies this by drawing on the virtue of *Misericordia* as understood by Aquinas, which he describes as a “grief or sorrow over someone else’s distress... just insofar as one understands the other’s distress as one’s own.”¹⁷⁹ And MacIntyre gives special importance to Aquinas’s lesson that the recognition of the other’s affliction, and hence of their needs, requires of us that we care about them just as we care about those with whom we share pre-existing ties: “Extreme and urgent necessity on the part of another in itself provides a stronger reason for action than even the claims based upon the closest of familial ties.”¹⁸⁰ The point is that our inclinations and motivations to care for one another ought to be proportional to our vulnerability and our needs, and not to our communal relationships. In other words, we must always remain open to extending our networks of giving and receiving to those outside the community as delineated in time and space.

The ideal of mutual understanding that is required for reasoning about how we ought to live together within and beyond the communities that we are a part of not only involves the

¹⁷⁷ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, pp. 122-123. See also James Tully, *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹⁷⁸ Here I draw on James Tully’s analysis of “cultures.” See Tully, *Strange Multiplicity*.

¹⁷⁹ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 125.

¹⁸⁰ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 125.

cultivation of just generosity as implied by the virtue of *Misericordia*, but also the awareness of the need for empathy, and hence of the power of imagination.¹⁸¹ The recognition of our common needs and the determination of our common goods presuppose the creation of shared spaces of meaning through which the activity of mutual attunement can take place within our conversations and interactions. But the achievement of such an experience of genuine dialogue requires empathy for the conversation partners to be able to truly listen to each other, and therefore to “speak with and not merely past one another,” as Laden puts it.¹⁸² Empathy and imagination generate the conditions of possibility for intersubjective mediation, which allows us to engage in the conversations and practices through which we and our partners can be “mutually instructed about what our common good is.”¹⁸³ The latter is a crucial point because even though I have argued that the shared recognition of our vulnerability must be the starting point to any discussion about ethics and politics, it is in itself insufficient to determine what our common goods are and how we are to achieve them. MacIntyre is clear about this, as he claims that even though a shared allegiance to a standard of care is a moral requisite for the well-being of any society, he argues that we are nevertheless unable to spell out in detail what such an account would look like in practice.¹⁸⁴ I take it that this is precisely because of the plurality of forms of life and of ways of thinking, acting and being-in-the-world, that there is not a single, morally permissible way in which human animals, nonhuman animals, ecosystems and the living earth ought to interact with each other.

And the idea of empathy brings me to the last point I would like to make in this chapter, which concerns the importance of translation for an ethics and politics of the common good. This

¹⁸¹ See MacIntyre, “The need for a standard of care,” and Tully, “Deparochializing political theory and beyond: a dialogue approach to comparative political thought.”

¹⁸² Laden, *Reasoning*, p. 114.

¹⁸³ MacIntyre, “The need for a standard of care,” p. 84.

¹⁸⁴ MacIntyre, “The need for a standard of care,” p. 84. Of course, we can agree on a couple of general standards, such as “raising the wages paid to and enhancing the status and prestige enjoyed by those who give their lives to such caregiving.”

is something to which I already hinted at towards the end of section 2, when discussing the role of the proxy in the work of MacIntyre and Knight. In the same way as it is crucial to embrace practices of translation in order to engage in collaborative endeavors with those of us who communicate in alternative ways,¹⁸⁵ these practices also allow us to participate in dialogical processes of elucidation and responsiveness within and between human and nonhuman animal communities, as well as across all the ecologically interrelated forms of life.¹⁸⁶ And the latter is an insight that MacIntyre fails to take seriously enough. Indeed, even in his later writings, the understanding of flourishing that is presupposed by his conception of common goods is primarily concerned with human animals. On this view, our aim as human animals is to achieve the ends to which we are by our biological nature directed to, and, consequently, our courses of action ought to be evaluated by virtue of their contribution to (or frustration of) the flourishing of our species. Moreover, MacIntyre asserts that human flourishing can only be understood in relation to the context within which such flourishing makes sense, but I think that MacIntyre is not explicit enough about the fact that the flourishing of human animals depends on and is part of the flourishing of the earth as a whole.

It is true that it is important to distinguish between the flourishing of, say, plants, dolphins, and human animals, because what each of these need as members of their particular species will be specific to their nature.¹⁸⁷ However, I would like to qualify MacIntyre's claims and argue that their flourishing is only *partly* specific to their being a member of the particular species to which they belong. Indeed, as I have tried to show in this chapter, living beings do have something in

¹⁸⁵ See Knight, "Democratizing disability: achieving inclusion (without assimilation) through 'participatory parity,'" p. 108.

¹⁸⁶ See Tully, "Deparochializing political theory and beyond: a dialogue approach to comparative political thought," pp. 64-68; and "The negotiation of reconciliation," in *Public Philosophy in a New Key, Volume 1: Democracy and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 223-256, among others.

¹⁸⁷ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 64; MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, p. 24-29.

common that could serve as a basis not only for coexistence but also for thinking about how to inform our relations of cooperation: I am referring to our common condition of vulnerability, which ought to be extended to more-than-human living beings. The recognition of such a shared condition of vulnerability throws light on the fact that the flourishing of particular species and ecosystems cannot be disentangled from one another. The flourishing of humans, as that of other animals, rests entirely upon the flourishing of ecosystems and of the earth as a whole. And in the same manner, it is not possible to conceive of the flourishing of ecosystems and of the living earth independently of the flourishing of human and nonhuman animals.

Consequently, I would like to conclude with the suggestion that a suitable usage for the idea of overlapping consensus must begin by establishing the importance and shared nature of the vulnerability of living beings. This entails that even if our practices of cooperation and caretaking as well as our relationships of giving and receiving will inevitably take various forms, they will nevertheless be informed by a shared concern for our overlapping and criss-crossing common goods. Indeed, this understanding of overlapping consensus is consistent with the MacIntyrian insight that we are relational selves, whose practical lives are embedded in particular narratives and whose courses of action can only be understood in light of such a background. And I would argue that this is a picture that is true to the spirit of reconciliation that I sketched in the previous chapter, the realization of which Rawls takes to be political philosophy's fundamental goal.¹⁸⁸ Such a project of reconciliation must embrace the multiplicity of forms of life, which coexist, interact and relate to each other in a variety of ways. This is why the prescriptions of 'Morality' are unsuitable for our reconciliatory endeavor, since they fail to take what Tully calls "diversity

¹⁸⁸ Rawls, *Justice as Fairness. A Restatement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 3.

awareness” seriously.¹⁸⁹ But our shared condition of vulnerability does introduce strong commitments for sustainable, nonviolent and solidary relationships with each other and the living earth.¹⁹⁰ Hence the centrality of an ethics and politics of care for the determination and attainment of our common goods.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I started our discussion with Rawls’s notion of overlapping consensus, which depicts the idea of finding common grounds in the face of the multiplicity of forms of life. And as I argued in chapter one, even though Rawls’s contribution to political philosophy is crucial, his conception of reasoning and therefore the idea of overlapping consensus that is worked out in his theory need to be substantially modified in order to preserve plurality and be true to the spirit of reconciliation. But underlying the idea of overlapping consensus is the aspiration to reach a shared normative space whereby we can interact with one another and deliberate together about what our flourishing consists in and how to achieve our common goods. The argument that I have attempted to defend throughout this chapter is that vulnerability can provide the first step towards a basis for grounding the cooperative relationships and practices of care that are needed for sustaining the well-being of human and nonhuman animals, but also of more than animal living beings such as ecosystems and the living earth.

In order to arrive at this conclusion, I focused on the ethical and political thought of MacIntyre, particularly on his later work, and began by examining his rebuttal of the monological

¹⁸⁹ Tully, “Reimagining belonging in diverse societies,” in *Public Philosophy in a New Key, Volume 1: Democracy and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 179.

¹⁹⁰ Tully, “Reconciliation here on earth,” in *Resurgence and Reconciliation*, eds. M. Asch, J. Borrows, and J. Tully (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming).

framework of reasoning put forward by expressivists. Moreover, MacIntyre's discussion of the predicament of modernity throws light on the impasse on which theoretical debates in moral and political philosophy tread, and reminds us of the inadequacy of characterizing the practical life from a standpoint that is itself external to practice. This brought us to MacIntyre's defence of neo-Aristotelianism and allowed us to analyse the revisions he made to his account of the virtues as developed in *After Virtue*. The lesson to be drawn from this enquiry is that ethical reflection ought to reassert the animality of humans and pay attention to our bodily being-in-the-world. Indeed, if we are to reckon with fundamental aspects of our human animal condition, we ought to put the facts of disability and affliction at the center of our moral and political deliberations. In order for the activity of reasoning as I have been depicting it to make sense, we must abandon the prevalent understandings of personhood and citizenship—and of what makes human animals worthy of respect—which attach moral value to the internal capacities of the mind. Instead, we ought to begin ethical and political enquiry with the shared recognition of our vulnerability and (inter)dependency. This is of paramount importance because the awareness of our common needs introduces the kind of commitments, motivations and inclinations that have to inform our practices of care.

Furthermore, I argued that the networks of giving and receiving required to achieve and to sustain our goods must not be limited to our pre-existing relationships and communities. On the contrary, the processes of cooperation that are needed for us to flourish give rise to responsibility and solidarity between and among interrelated forms of life. This is not to deny the MacIntyrian insight that we human animals are relational selves, who are embedded in particular social and cultural orders. Indeed, MacIntyre is clear about the importance of extending the scope of just generosity and hence of our caretaking activities to those in need irrespective of communitarian

bonds. Finally, I defended the view that MacIntyre's argument needs to be pushed further, and that an overlapping consensus on care ought to be extended to more than animal living beings, such as ecosystems and the earth as a whole. This is because the flourishing of a particular species cannot be conceived of in isolation from the flourishing of all other vulnerable forms of life.

CHAPTER THREE:

To think and act ecologically: the environment, human animality, nature

The conclusion I drew from the preceding discussion of the idea of overlapping consensus is that the kind of agreement that could set the ground for an ethics appropriate for establishing fair terms of cooperation and achieving reconciliation ought to begin by recognizing the vulnerability of living beings. Furthermore, I argued that the practices of cooperation that are needed to foster such an ethics entail the nurturing of relations of care among the living beings that sustain life on earth. And although I suggested that MacIntyre's work on dependence provides important resources to cultivate the virtues required to flourish and to respond to vulnerability, I also indicated that his approach suffers from a significant shortcoming: MacIntyre's vision is concerned with the flourishing of human animals as an independent species. And as we will see, this deficiency is not restricted to MacIntyre's work alone; apart from a few notable exceptions, it is indeed prevalent in disability studies and in the ethics of care literature.

This chapter addresses this problem and attempts to offer an alternative account that may point us toward another step in sketching a relational ethics structured around the interdependent nature of human and more than human life. My aim is to contribute to the larger project of moving political theory and philosophy from a humancentric towards an ecocentric worldview, and thus of reconnecting politics with nature. In order to accomplish this task, I begin by briefly reasserting the significance of the contribution of the scholarship on disability and care to political and philosophical enquiry, which has illuminated the urgent need to acknowledge human animal vulnerability and our consequent need for relations of reciprocity and assistance. In addition, such contribution has emphasized the importance of situating human animals in relationship to

particular environments that enable and disable us, as well as include and exclude us, in a variety of ways. But most disability and care scholars focus their attention on the built environments that surround us, often neglecting the natural world. I thus proceed to extend the argument and show that the existential modality of vulnerability is not a distinctive peculiarity of the human animal realm. Drawing on phenomenology, I argue that our embodied existence places us in a shared condition of vulnerability with all forms of life on earth. This allows us to conceive of caring as an essential condition of the sustainability and well-being of social and ecological life systems. One of my goals in this chapter is to challenge the purported independence of normative questions about interhuman relations from those regarding nonhuman animals, ecosystems, and the living earth. For this reason, an ethics attuned to interdependency must cultivate our ecological awareness and prompt us to think and act in ways that address the various forms of oppression and injustice that affect both the human and the natural worlds.

The chapter suggests that in order to lay the groundwork for a reflection on how to uproot the unsustainable patterns of exploitation that characterize destructive social systems, we must begin by putting into question the picture of mastery that is holding us captive. Only then will we be able to expand our imaginative possibilities and thus make room for a variety of sustainable responses to the destructive relations that our dominant social systems generate. Consequently, I examine the ways in which the hegemonic imaginary produces and upholds conceptions of personhood and citizenship that are colored by a particular understanding of human animality, one which defines the independent, rational and self-reliant person in opposition to the vulnerable, affective and dependent other. This leads me to argue that anthropocentrism as such may not necessarily be the problem; rather, the problem lies in how we conceive of ‘anthropos’. The failure to critically examine the disembodied subject that underpins it entails the positing of a homogenous

human animal that is equally responsible for and equally affected by unsustainable and destructive social systems. And to ignore this is to ignore the processes of imperialism and colonialism that are responsible for the problem that the notion of ‘anthropocene’ is attempting to capture in the first place. I draw on Anna Grear’s work to argue that this conception of ‘anthropos’ was constructed to satisfy the imperatives of profit maximization, accumulation, and expansion that are at the heart of the liberal juridical order. I then proceed to engage with the debate that opposes realist and constructivist accounts of nature, and ultimately argue that we must reject the view that looks at nature through the lenses of the dominant imaginary of mastery. This entails maintaining a certain separation between society/culture and nature, because it allows us to carve out contrastive distinctions between different ways of relating to the nonhuman world, and hence to articulate alternative political possibilities.

1. Bodies in-relationship-to environments

In the previous chapter, I argued that in order to respond to vulnerability we needed something like a Rawlsian overlapping consensus on care. Following disability studies and the ethics of care literature, as well as feminist thought more generally,¹⁹¹ the approach I have been sketching attempts to ground political philosophy on the human facts of vulnerability and interdependency. In this respect, MacIntyre’s *Dependent Rational Animals*¹⁹² is exemplary in that it urges political philosophy to escape the captivity of the ideal of independence, which is built

¹⁹¹ See Bowden, Peta, *Caring: Gender-Sensitive Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1996); Eva F. Kittay, *Love’s Labor: Essays on Equality, Dependence and Care* (London: Routledge, 2018); Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*; Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, eds., *Vulnerability. New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*; among others.

¹⁹² Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001).

around a conception of the ‘normal’ person as a rational, self-reliant and needless individual, and to recognize instead our dependence on particular others. As Jennifer Nedelsky puts it, “at the material level of physical need (infancy, disability, sickness, and old age) that MacIntyre focuses on, human dependence is as justifiably phrased in the language of truth as the claim that plants need sun and water to grow.”¹⁹³ Far from merely pointing out that we human animals are fragile beings, the idea is to revise and rethink our political, moral, and philosophical commitments in light of our corporeal condition. This allows us to begin our philosophical reflection by recognizing that we are prone to a variety of illnesses and disabilities. To understand ourselves primarily as bodily beings is to pose a radical challenge to prevalent understandings of cooperation and reciprocity, and of the role they play in our well-being. Moreover, it is also to put into question dominant liberal models of justice and to reconfigure social structures and institutions so that they may embody the networks of giving and receiving that are needed to respond to our shared vulnerability.¹⁹⁴

A crucial point towards which my argument is directed is that we ought to decenter our ontological grounding and abandon the centrality of individuals in favour of a focus on environments. There is much we could learn from phenomenology in achieving a robust shift from an atomistic to a holistic understanding of the world. One of the important lessons of phenomenology is that we cannot make sense of individuals in themselves, but only of individuals-in-relationship-to their environments.¹⁹⁵ This is because our experience of reality is one of embodied coping with the surroundings in which we are embedded. As Havi Carel puts it, “a

¹⁹³ Jennifer Nedelsky, *Law's Relations. A Relational Theory of Self, Autonomy, and Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 34.

¹⁹⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, “The need for a standard of care,” in *Americans with Disabilities: Exploring Implications of the Law for Individuals and Institutions*, eds. L. P. Francis and A. Silvers (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 81-86.

¹⁹⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945).

human being is a perceiving and experiencing organism, intimately inhabiting and immediately responding to her environment.”¹⁹⁶ It is in the interactions of our bodies with other bodies and the conditions in which those bodies are sustained that our perceptions, feelings, and ways of thinking and acting in the world take shape. These bodily practices of attunement that define the loci of social meaning are constitutive of our existence as interdependent beings. Phenomenologists have described this fundamental dimension of experience as “intercorporeality”—that is, as the shared corporeal existence of our animal selves as bodies who continually engage with other bodies.¹⁹⁷

So, let us begin by asserting that human animals exist within particular backgrounds, and that their lives have the meaning they do by virtue of being embedded in webs of intercorporeality, to adapt Taylor’s formulation¹⁹⁸. But once we have shifted our attention away from the individuals themselves and focused, instead, on their surroundings, we then need to analyse more closely the ways in which ‘environments’ are understood in care and vulnerability scholarship.

In her work on disability, Barbara Arneil argues that those of us who do not conform to the norms of able-bodiedness shouldn’t be understood as suffering from an “individual deficit.” The aim of her approach is to reconstruct disability as “an interdependent product of disabled individuals’ physical/mental limitations *in relationship to* the physical, social, and political environment they must navigate on a daily basis.”¹⁹⁹ Two important elements stand out in this passage: the centrality of relationships, and the fact that these should not be thought of as limited

¹⁹⁶ Havi Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 29.

¹⁹⁷ See Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness*, p. 53; Thomas J. Csordas, “Intersubjectivity and Intercorporeality,” *Subjectivity*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2008, pp. 110-21; Charles Taylor and Hubert Dreyfus, *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 118; and Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (London: Routledge, 1998).

¹⁹⁸ Taylor’s formulation is “webs of interlocation.” See his *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 36.

¹⁹⁹ Barbara Arneil, “Disability, Self-Image, and Modern Political Theory,” *Political Theory*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2009, p. 234. Emphasis in original. See also Barbara Arneil and Nancy Hirschmann, eds., *Disability and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

to connections and relations between individual human animals. We are always situated in relationship to particular environments with which we must negotiate, and which facilitate or hinder our coping with the world. Arneil cites disability advocate Audrey King as capturing these concerns with her analogy of the astronaut: if we consider how an astronaut deals with the circumstances of life in space, it is evident that how they fare is entirely up to a particular environment that accommodates them.²⁰⁰ This takes the form of assistive devices and structures that enable them to “function, stay alive and breathe in that unfriendly world.”²⁰¹ Astronauts are profoundly dependent on others for their survival and well-being; and yet, we never think of them as “‘disabled’, ‘deficient’, or in need of intensive medical attention.”²⁰² However, it is true that we often think differently when it comes to the recognition and accommodation of able-bodied differences here on earth, where we fail to put into question the built environments that are inhospitable to many of us.

In the same vein, Tom Malleon has underscored the significance of the physical infrastructures, support networks, and other social environments that are needed to foster and sustain our flourishing and well-being.²⁰³ Our bodily engagement with the things surrounding us is shaped by ubiquitous structures of dependence and interdependence that mediate our capacity to navigate the world. Malleon argues that these environments are also “powerstructures,” given that they configure our “abilities and disabilities.”²⁰⁴ Indeed, if we think of an everyday object such as stairs, it is evident that for some of us these are simply a means of ascending from one level to the other, something that facilitates our body movement. But for many others, stairs

²⁰⁰ Arneil, “Disability, Self-Image, and Modern Political Theory,” p. 237.

²⁰¹ Aubrey King, cited in Arneil, “Disability, Self-Image, and Modern Political Theory,” p. 237.

²⁰² Arneil, “Disability, Self-Image, and Modern Political Theory,” p. 237.

²⁰³ Tom Malleon, “Interdependency: The fourth existential insult to humanity”, *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2017, pp. 160-186.

²⁰⁴ Malleon, “Interdependency,” pp. 176-177.

constitute an unsurmountable obstacle. This illustrates how seemingly innocuous aspects of our social environments actually “empower or disempower us in various ways.”²⁰⁵

Moreover, Malleon distinguishes between four kinds of environments: first, the built environments, or physical infrastructure of particular places; second, the political and legal environments, or the rights and legal constraints that people face in those places; third, the cultural environments, which correspond to the norms and social expectations that frame and regulate the possibilities of our bodies; and fourth, the technological and economic environments, which refer to the productive capacity and the division of wealth and income in distinct areas.²⁰⁶ Central to Malleon’s analysis is the implication that we are in constant interaction with these overlapping environments that affect us in different ways and to different degrees, and which ultimately determine our ability to engage with or to be at grips with the world.

Now, what the environments that Malleon identifies have in common is that they all belong to the ‘social’ realm. In other words, they all are human-made environments. And the same can be said concerning the sorts of environments that are of interest to Arneil, as well as to other disability scholars such as Elizabeth Barnes,²⁰⁷ Susan Dodds,²⁰⁸ Peter Handley,²⁰⁹ Eva Kittay,²¹⁰ and Susan Wendell,²¹¹ among others, who focus on ‘socially constructed’ environments and how people have to cope with them. The contribution of these scholars has been of vital importance to our understanding of disability. They have shown that disability should be conceived of in terms of the interactions between our bodies and the social structures that our bodies must confront. More

²⁰⁵ Malleon, “Interdependency,” pp. 176-177.

²⁰⁶ Malleon, “Interdependency,” p. 177.

²⁰⁷ Elizabeth Barnes, *The Minority Body: A Theory of Disability* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

²⁰⁸ Susan Dodds, “Depending on care: recognition of vulnerability and the social contribution of care provision,” *Bioethics*, vol. 21, no. 9, 2007, pp. 500-510.

²⁰⁹ Peter Handley, “Theorizing Disability: Beyond ‘Common Sense’,” *Politics*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2003, pp. 109-118.

²¹⁰ Eva F. Kittay, “When caring is just and justice is caring: justice and mental retardation,” *Public Culture*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2001, pp. 557-580.

²¹¹ Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (London: Routledge, 1996).

precisely, disability is the way in which those structures continuously disadvantage, oppress, stigmatize and marginalize some of us because certain intrinsic features of our bodies do not fit within the parameters of what counts as ‘normal functioning’. But I want to argue that a more adequate picture of vulnerability requires a broader scope so that our understanding of the environments to which we relate is not restricted to the built environments that surround us. Instead, the natural environment needs to be considered in our reflections, so that we can exercise our critical judgment on the kinds of relations that are worth nurturing and protecting in order to sustain life on earth.

2. Care and our relationship to the earth

I have attempted to show that an ontological grounding based on interdependency enables us to rethink the ways in which we conceive of the interactions between our human animal selves and the environments within which we are embedded. Disability studies has raised awareness of the fact that disability is better understood as an interactive process of bodily features and “environmental barriers.”²¹² The practical implications of this observation are transformative, for two main reasons: First because it allows us to see disability as a dimension of human difference like any other,²¹³ and hence to study disability as part of diversity and pluralism. Second, understanding disability as an interactive process instead of a matter pertaining to individual bodies entails that questions of access and accommodation ought to have a central place in our definitions of citizenship and democracy.

²¹² Arneil, “Disability in Political Theory versus International Practice,” in *Disability and Political Theory*, eds. B. Arneil and N. Hirschmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 39.

²¹³ Arneil, “Disability, Self-Image, and Modern Political Theory,” p. 237.

What I want to argue in this section is that the aforementioned insights should not prevent us from considering our relations with nonhuman nature, nor from thinking of these in a light other than purely negative. While it would be a mistake to say that the entire scholarship on disability and care disregards the natural environment, it is nevertheless true that it is predominantly studied in terms of the ways in which it exacerbates or mitigates human animal vulnerability. As a result, the natural environment ends up being exclusively conceived of as presenting “barriers”²¹⁴ and “hazards”²¹⁵ to human animal functioning. And even if the constraints and obstacles that emanate from our natural surroundings are caused by human animal activities, the interest we take in the natural environment is proportional to the interest we take in its impact on our vulnerable selves.²¹⁶ Martha Fineman, for instance, writes that “[t]here is the constant possibility that we can be injured and undone by errant weather systems, such as those that produce flood, drought, famine, and fire. These are ‘natural’ disasters beyond our individual control to prevent.”²¹⁷ She then adds: “Environmental disasters are not always beyond society’s influence: Human actions can exacerbate environmental threats, as we see with global warming, water pollution, and war. Human-induced environmental catastrophes, as well as institutional failures more generally, raise additional questions about the ability of institutions to mitigate vulnerability.”²¹⁸

²¹⁴ Arneil, “Disability in Political Theory versus International Practice,” p. 39.

²¹⁵ Amber Knight, “Disability as vulnerability: redistributing precariousness in democratic ways,” *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 76, no. 1, 2014, p. 20.

²¹⁶ See, for instance, Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, “Introduction: What is Vulnerability and Why Does it Matter for Moral Theory?”, in *Vulnerability. New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, eds. C. Mackenzie, W. Rogers, and S. Dodds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 1. Similarly, Susan Wendell is concerned with how human-induced environmental degradation can damage people’s bodies. See Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*, p. 37.

²¹⁷ Martha A. Fineman, “The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition”, *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2008, p. 9.

²¹⁸ Fineman, “The Vulnerable Subject, note 26. See also Fineman, “Equality, autonomy, and the vulnerable subject in law and politics,” in *Vulnerability: Reflections on a New Ethical Foundation for Law and Politics*, eds. M.A. Fineman and A. Gear (Routledge: London, 2013), p. 20.

As the preceding passages make clear, the principal preoccupation here is with how the natural environment affects us. Indeed, the attention devoted to environmental issues revolves around how it “profoundly influence[s] our needs,” “shape[s] the circumstances of our wellbeing,”²¹⁹ and sometimes even “cause[s] people to become disabled.”²²⁰ This is a strong strand in disability studies that, even though it considers the natural environment, it does so only in terms of the potential harm that it can inflict upon human animals.

Although these are important concerns, the profound anthropocentricity that underpins them is striking. However, what is troubling about this is not human centrality as such, but rather the fact that we seem to pay attention to the living world only in so far as it causes adversity and prejudice to human beings. And this is at odds with the ontological claim of interdependency that disability studies defend, which is why it is important to push the argument further and show that vulnerability as an existential modality is not limited to human animals.

I want to start off from the intuition put forward by Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto,²²¹ Virginia Held,²²² and Jennifer Nedelsky²²³ that an ethics of care necessarily extends to those vulnerable forms of life that coexist with human animals. Fisher and Tronto, Held, and Nedelsky, mention this but do not explore what implications this line of thought could have for the ways in which we conceive of our relationships to the natural world. Held, for instance, writes that “[t]he care that is valued by the ethics of care can—and to be justifiable must—include caring for distant others in an interdependent world, and caring that the rights of all are respected and their needs met. It must include caring that the environment in which embodied human beings reside is well

²¹⁹ Fineman, “Equality, autonomy, and the vulnerable subject in law and politics,” p. 23.

²²⁰ Elizabeth Barnes, *The Minority Body: A Theory of Disability*, p. 68.

²²¹ Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring,” in *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women’s Lives*, eds. Abel, Emily K., and Nelson, Margaret K. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), pp. 35-62.

²²² Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²²³ Nedelsky, *Law’s Relations. A Relational Theory of Self, Autonomy, and Law*, p. 12.

cared for.”²²⁴ Notice that caring for the environment remains a secondary consideration here, since the reason behind the need to nurture our natural surroundings is for human animals to be able to flourish. I will discuss the question of anthropocentrism in more detail later in this chapter, but it is nevertheless possible to say that Held’s claim of interdependency introduces a commitment to engage in caring relations not only with one another, but also with the living world around us. More robustly, Nedelsky begins *Law’s Relations* by recognizing that “the very concept of ecology is relational,” since it is “about fundamental interdependence,” and that the “most basic interdependence” is “our relationship to the earth.”²²⁵ Despite that, Nedelsky’s work (to my knowledge, at least) is restricted to relations between human animals—even though she is hopeful that her argument has the potential to contribute to reorient “how we see the world and our place in it.”²²⁶ Finally, Fisher and Tronto suggest that “*caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible.*”²²⁷ They then add that “[t]hat world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.”²²⁸

Fisher and Tronto’s definition of caring as an ongoing process whose aim is to “keep life going”²²⁹ is integral to ecologically aware practices of cooperation and mutual aid that form part of the normative relations of interdependency that sustain and care for the living world. Such a conception provides the conditions of possibility for decentring human animals in relation to other animals, ecosystems, and the living earth, and thus for reorienting our attention to the encompassing diversity of forms of life that interact in co-sustainable ways. However, despite

²²⁴ Held, *The Ethics of Care*, p. 66. It is interesting to note that she goes on to say that “[t]he ethics of care will strive to achieve these transformations in society and the world non-violently and democratically but with persistence.”

²²⁵ Nedelsky, *Law’s Relations*, p. 12.

²²⁶ Nedelsky, *Law’s Relations*, p. 12.

²²⁷ Fisher and Tronto, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring,” p. 40. Emphasis in original.

²²⁸ Fisher and Tronto, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring,” p. 40.

²²⁹ Fisher and Tronto, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring,” p. 40.

Fisher and Tronto's claim that caring comprises those efforts and activities that contribute to "sustaining life on earth,"²³⁰ their work is also limited to relationships among human care-givers and care-receivers. In what follows, I want to develop these intuitions and argue that an adequate relational ethics of interdependency needs to go beyond human-human interactions. This is because such a pluralist view is necessary for responding to the shared vulnerability of living beings here on earth.

3. The anthropos in anthropocentrism

If we take the ontological claim of interdependency seriously, as I have argued in favor of so far, then we have to put our embodied existence as human animals—and therefore our vulnerable nature—at the heart of our ethical reflection on the ways in which we ought to relate to the forms of life with whom we share the world. As Pope Francis put it in his *Encyclical on Climate Change and Inequality*, "our body itself establishes us in a direct relationship with the environment and with other living beings."²³¹ On this view, recognizing the vulnerability of our bodies and learning to accept them and to care for them are the very conditions for an adequate approach to ecology.²³² This is a necessary first step towards the acknowledgment of the shared vulnerability of biological beings and of the environments that sustain them. Further, we have to raise awareness of the fact that our social systems are dependent on the eco-systems to which they are interconnected, and thus that our well-being is conditioned by the well-being of the lands and waters on which we live. This is why one key question an ethics of interdependency has to address

²³⁰ Fisher and Tronto, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring," p. 40.

²³¹ Pope Francis, *Encyclical on Climate Change & Inequality. On Care for Our Common Home* (London: Melville House, 2015), p. 95.

²³² Pope Francis, *Encyclical on Climate Change & Inequality*, p. 95.

is how to uproot the unsustainable patterns of exploitation that are deeply engrained in the relations that we entertain with the living earth. But before laying the groundwork for a tentative response to this, I will begin by trying to elucidate some contentious terms that are of fundamental importance in our discussion.

First, the question of the anthropocentric character of our discourses in the study of nature is something that is worthy of consideration. As I pointed out earlier, the primary focus on human experience is predominant throughout much work in the ethics of care and disability studies. There are obvious reasons for this, particularly when it comes to the latter, but this must not prevent us from acknowledging what is at the foundation of environmental ethics, namely “the recognition of the intrinsic value of nature and other beings, which enables us to respect them for themselves, and not because they are useful to us, nor because such a recognition would mirror back to us an aggrandized image of ourselves.”²³³ According to this line of thought, even when human animal disability is the primary focus of analysis, we should nevertheless “think ecologically” about these issues, to use Lorraine Code’s formulation.²³⁴ This entails the acknowledgement that all living beings on earth stand in a relationship of reciprocity towards one another and are therefore equally important; no species is entitled to use, abuse or plunder other species, much less the earth, its waters, its lands, its air, and its life.

Moreover, this gravitational pull in our understanding of the world and the ways in which we have conceptualized such representations of reality have raised a number of epistemological questions. The idea of the Anthropocene and the plethora of critiques levelled against it illustrate the state of the debate, and show the contested character of the distinction between human animality and nature, the relationship between the two, as well as their specific role in the overall

²³³ Corine Pelluchon, *Éthique de la Considération* (Paris: Seuil, 2018), p. 38. My translation.

²³⁴ Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking. The Politics of Epistemic Location* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

functioning of the earth system.²³⁵ According to an influential view, there is a direct link between ‘anthropocentrism’ as the standpoint that human beings are the central concern in whatever is under consideration, and the fact that we entertain exploitative relationships to our environments. What is called for, then, is the decentering of the human subject from our philosophical inquiries in order to unsettle the hierarchical arrangements through which we perceive the world, and to reconfigure our “modes of engagement with knowledge, subjectivity, politics, ethics, science, citizenship, and agency.”²³⁶ This is why Code’s work invites us to cultivate ecologically sensitive epistemic practices that can help us “denaturalize the instituted imaginary of mastery” that is at the basis of the hegemonic epistemology underlying our relations of oppression to the natural world.²³⁷

But such concerns also lead us to seriously reconsider *what*, precisely, is meant by ‘anthropos’, and *who* exactly is the ‘anthropos’ in anthropocentrism? These questions are at the heart of Anna Gear’s work, which urges us to challenge the prevalent trope of Anthropocene responsibility and to “problematize unqualified references to ‘humanity’ as a species category and complicate totalising references to ‘anthropocentrism’.”²³⁸ A close examination of our conception of human animality and the role it has played in the construction of the categories and

²³⁵ The concept of the ‘Anthropocene’ was popularized by Paul Crutzen. See Crutzen, “Geology of mankind,” *Nature*, vol. 415, no. 23, 2002. It has since been discussed and criticized by multiple scholars, including: Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *L’évènement Anthropocène: La terre, l’histoire et nous* (Paris: Seuil, 2013); Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2009, pp. 197-222; Anna Gear, “Deconstructing *Anthropos*: A critical legal reflection on ‘Anthropocentric’ law and Anthropocene ‘humanity,’” *Law Critique*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2015, pp. 225-249; Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climate Regime* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017); Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, “The geology of mankind? A critique of the Anthropocene narrative,” *The Anthropocene Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2014, pp. 62-69; Jason Moore, ed., *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016); Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Hasana Sharp, “Not all Humans: Radical Criticism of the Anthropocene Narrative,” *Environmental Philosophy*, Online First: February 8, 2020; among others.

²³⁶ Code, *Ecological Thinking*, p. 24.

²³⁷ Code, *Ecological Thinking*, p. 51.

²³⁸ Gear, “Deconstructing *Anthropos*: A critical legal reflection on ‘Anthropocentric’ law and Anthropocene ‘humanity,’” p. 231.

classifications under which we subsume experience reveals that anthropocentrism as such may not necessarily be the problem. Rather, the problem lies in the particular understanding of ‘humanity’ that has had a prevailing influence upon Western moral, political, and legal philosophy. Such understanding corresponds to the image of ‘man’ that was constructed in opposition to the animality of humans, and hence to our corporeal existence.²³⁹ This notion of human nature has served to define the independent, rational and self-reliant person in contrast to the dependent and vulnerable other. And it has produced the exclusion of women, disabled people, Indigenous people, and other peoples whose forms of life don’t fit the monological mould imposed by a conception of human experience whose defining feature is the rational mind.

If we understand the *anthropos* as a rational, disembodied agent, the result is an idiosyncratic conception of personhood and citizenship, one which ignores the facts of vulnerability, affectability, and interdependence. As Grear has put it, the “disembodiment of reason” serves to conceal the actual morphology of the *anthropos*, since it “rests upon the *privileging* of a particular kind of body.”²⁴⁰ And as feminists have shown, the archetypal subject of reason in Western thought has been covertly inscribed in a male body.²⁴¹ For Grear, more specifically, the privileged morphology in question is one that corresponds to “the construct of a white, property owning, acquisitive, broadly Eurocentric masculinity.”²⁴² The assumptions that underlie this paradigmatic idea of the human being are embedded within a capitalistic agenda, as is clear from the nature of the liberal conception of legal personhood.²⁴³ According to Grear, the

²³⁹ See chapter 2 of this dissertation.

²⁴⁰ Grear, “Deconstructing *Anthropos*,” p. 235. Emphasis in original.

²⁴¹ See, for instance: Sara Ahmed, “Deconstruction and law’s other: towards a feminist theory of embodied legal rights,” *Social & Legal Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1995, pp. 55-73; Marilyn Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Alison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Brighton, Sussex: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983); among others.

²⁴² Grear, “Deconstructing *Anthropos*,” p. 236.

²⁴³ Grear, “The Vulnerable Living Order: Human Rights and the Environment in a Critical and Philosophical Perspective,” *Journal of Human Rights and the Environment*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2011, pp. 23-44; Grear, “Vulnerability,

latter was constructed in the image of the corporate form with the purpose of operationalizing the pursuit of profit, expansion, and accumulation.²⁴⁴ This liberal construction of legal personality gave rise to the business corporation as “the ultimate instantiation of disembodied *anthropos*.”²⁴⁵ The corporation is an artificial and interchangeable entity that divests the specific bodies it purports to represent of all vulnerability and interdependency, which results in its disregard for the biomaterial locations to which those bodies are interrelated.²⁴⁶ This juridical structure, which serves to advance economic and political imperatives, has not only been a mechanism of exclusion in the definition of the liberal subject of rights, but has also legitimated the mastery and domination of vulnerable life on earth, as well as the spaces in which it dwells.²⁴⁷

Grear’s distinctive contribution to recent critical reflection on vulnerability is consonant with the idea that our embodied condition connects us to the material location of our existence, both in terms of our intercorporeal relations with other animal bodies (human and nonhuman) and of our co-constitution with “the ‘landscapes’ or ‘spaces’ that we inhabit’.”²⁴⁸ This idea is fundamental to an ethics of interdependency, as I have been suggesting throughout these pages. But Grear’s insights also give us critical leverage with which to begin rethinking some deep-seated assumptions about the picture of human animality that animate our relationships to the natural environment. Although all human animals share in common the fact that they are embodied and hence vulnerable beings, it is important to bear in mind the plural character of such *anthropos*. Following Marxist and postcolonial analyses, Grear’s work brings to light the “patterns of

advanced capitalism and co-symptomatic injustice: locating the vulnerable,” in *Vulnerability: Reflections on a New Ethical Foundation for Law and Politics*, eds. A. Grear and M. Fineman (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 41-60.

²⁴⁴ Grear, “Deconstructing *Anthropos*,” p. 237.

²⁴⁵ Grear, “Deconstructing *Anthropos*,” p. 239.

²⁴⁶ Grear, “Deconstructing *Anthropos*,” pp. 240-241.

²⁴⁷ See, for instance, Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature. Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

²⁴⁸ Grear, *Redirecting Human Rights. Facing the Challenge of Corporate Legal Humanity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 171.

differentially distributed vulnerability”²⁴⁹ that are often overlooked in critiques of anthropocentrism. The latter are often presented in the form of blanket denunciations that ignore the dynamics of possession and dispossession that are crucial to understanding “the climate crisis (and the Anthropocene itself) as being a crisis of *human hierarchy*—and—as relevantly—a crisis of *human hierarchies of being*.”²⁵⁰ It is therefore necessary that in any attempt to reflect on anthropocentrism we don’t create a homogenous subject, nor that we lose sight of the fact that complexly different human animals are responsible for and injured by the ‘Anthropocene’ in a multiplicity of ways.²⁵¹

4. The realist/constructivist debate over the nature of ‘nature’

As I alluded to in passing, another contentious issue that needs to be addressed is the distinction between society and nature, as well as the question of whether it is possible to separate the one from the other. Indeed, there is a powerful trope according to which the relationship between humans and nature has reached a new stage, one in which it makes no sense anymore to speak of nature qua nature, since we now live in a world where nature and society are inextricably intertwined.²⁵² Or rather, to follow Bruno Latour, nature and society have never existed as two separate entities, and yet only now do we realize that it is no longer possible to maintain this modernist fiction.²⁵³ Whether the impossibility of dissociating society from nature is due to recent

²⁴⁹ Gear, “Deconstructing *Anthropos*,” p. 228.

²⁵⁰ Gear, “Deconstructing *Anthropos*,” p. 230. Emphasis in original.

²⁵¹ I am indebted to James Tully for this.

²⁵² See, for instance, Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989); Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature. A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Marilyn Strathern, *After Nature. English Kinship in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Steven Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall. Environmental Philosophy After the End of Nature* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015); among others.

²⁵³ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. C. Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

human activities that have transformed the entire environment into a built environment, or to the fact that nature has always been constructed by us human animals, the point is that the demarcation between nature and society that I have thus far assumed does not actually go without saying. Hence the importance of stating clearly where the ethics of interdependency that I am defending stands on these questions.

There is a prominent view, which is best expressed in the work of Latour, that posits that “humans have adjusted their environment to suit their needs,” and therefore that “the nature in which they live is artificial through and through.”²⁵⁴ Indeed, as Arturo Escobar has put it, proponents of such a view assume that “since there is no nature outside of history, there is nothing natural about nature.”²⁵⁵ The idea here is that nature is socially constructed, and hence that what we have been referring to as ‘natural’ is in fact none other than the product of culture.²⁵⁶ In Donna Haraway’s words, we human animals have “invented nature,” and we continually reinvent it through stories and narratives that have served—and continue to serve—to perpetuate hierarchies of domination.²⁵⁷ Take contemporary technoscience, for instance: when seen in the light of “the development of the polymerase chain reaction, the human genome project, biological modeling, nano-biotechnologies, cloning, transgenic foods,”²⁵⁸ and so on and so forth, it becomes difficult to understand the relationship between the social and the natural while ignoring the ways in which human animals not only control but also artificially produce nature.²⁵⁹ Here, Escobar talks about political ecology in terms of the weaving together of biology and history, and of the ways in which

²⁵⁴ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, p. 98.

²⁵⁵ Arturo Escobar, “After Nature. Steps to an Antiessentialist Political Ecology,” *Current Anthropology*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1999, p. 2.

²⁵⁶ Escobar, “After Nature,” p. 3.

²⁵⁷ Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

²⁵⁸ Escobar, “After Nature,” p. 11.

²⁵⁹ See also Strathern, *Reproducing the Future* (London: Routledge, 1992). Cited in Escobar, *Ibid.*

the one has been incorporated into the other.²⁶⁰ This is the kind of reasoning that has led Haraway to argue that “biology has ceased to exist and that the organism has been replaced by cybernetic systems.”²⁶¹ And yet, the fact that ‘nature’ has been theorized and constructed by human beings does not mean that its referent is purely discursive.

In his work, Escobar seeks to offer a middle ground between social constructivism and a realist conception of nature. He agrees with Kate Soper that there “are features of the world which we cannot afford to ignore,”²⁶² such as the “existence of an independent order of nature, including a biological body.”²⁶³ This idea that there is a “biophysical basis to [nature’s] constitution,” one which is necessarily “prediscursive and presocial,”²⁶⁴ is in accordance with the realist notion that there are features of the world that are always prior to society and culture. Moreover, Escobar has suggested that it is possible to distinguish between at least three kinds of ‘natures’, each referring to a particular articulation of the biological and the historical: organic nature, capitalist nature, and technonature.²⁶⁵ What matters here is that political ecology has to pay attention to these constructions of nature in order to understand ecological, social and cultural practices and attachments to certain territories, as well as the ways in which they are used to resist against the dominant modes of producing and of relating to the land. Without going into the detail of Escobar’s distinctions, it is important to take note that his view posits that there is a plurality of natures, all of which are constructed—even organic nature (that is, the “natures of the local native

²⁶⁰ Escobar, “After Nature,” p. 4.

²⁶¹ Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, p. 57.

²⁶² Kate Soper, “Nature/’nature’,” in *FutureNatural*, eds. G. Robertson et al. (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 22.

²⁶³ Escobar, “After Nature,” p. 3.

²⁶⁴ Escobar, “After Nature,” pp. 1 & 2.

²⁶⁵ Escobar, “After Nature,” p. 5.

communities”²⁶⁶) in the sense that it is embedded in historical and cultural processes, and that there are no essential characteristics to organic life.²⁶⁷

So, there is an obvious gap between a scholar like Latour, who denies the existence of nature qua nature altogether,²⁶⁸ and Escobar, who strives for a more balanced position that considers both the biophysical and the constructed aspects of nature. Here, it is also interesting to mention the anti-constructivist account put forward by Andreas Malm in his recent book *The Progress of this Storm*.²⁶⁹ Malm argues against the views defended by Latour, Haraway, and others who deny the existence of biophysical reality, and who claim that there is no such thing as ‘nature’. He takes issue in particular with Noel Castree,²⁷⁰ who goes as far as saying that global warming is merely “an *idea*.”²⁷¹ In his work, Castree seeks to draw our attention to the fact that nature is “made sense of for us” by epistemic communities who shape the way we apprehend the world.²⁷² In Malm’s construal of Castree’s contribution, what the reader gets from the text is that ‘nature’ is an ideological device, one which exists exclusively in the human mind. Malm offers a rebuttal to such a perspective and suggests that it is not because our perception of phenomena like global warming is mediated by concepts and ideas that the phenomena themselves can be reduced to those concepts and ideas.²⁷³ According to this line of reasoning, there is a slippery slope between acknowledging the fact that we use language to describe an entity, and inferring that the ontological status of the entity in question is ‘merely’ a matter of discourse. Now, an obvious reply to Malm is that it is not

²⁶⁶ Escobar, “After Nature,” p. 7.

²⁶⁷ Escobar, “After Nature,” p. 5.

²⁶⁸ See Latour, *Facing Gaia*, p. 107: “... we are not hoping to live at last ‘in harmony with nature’. There is no harmony in that contingent cascade of unforeseen events, nor is there any ‘nature’.”

²⁶⁹ Andreas Malm, *The Progress of this Storm. Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London: Verso, 2018).

²⁷⁰ Noel Castree, *Making Sense of Nature: Representation, Politics and Democracy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014). Cited in Malm, *The Progress of this Storm*, p. 23.

²⁷¹ Castree, *Making Sense of Nature*, p. 236. Emphasis in original. Cited in Malm, *The Progress of this Storm*, p. 24.

²⁷² Castree, *Making Sense of Nature*, p. 282.

²⁷³ Malm, *The Progress of this Storm*, p. 23.

because something is a matter of discourse that its effects are not ‘real’. As Karen Barad puts it, discourse “constrains and enables what can be said,” and “define[s] what counts as meaningful statements.”²⁷⁴ In that sense, it is possible to say that discursive practices “produce, rather than merely describe, the subjects and objects of knowledge.”²⁷⁵ But what Malm would retort is that in order to produce ‘nature’, human animals must come in contact with something which at least at some point was not mediated by cultural discourse and representation. When the British Empire started setting fossil fuel on fire in the early nineteenth century, which in turn generated a “sustained growth in CO₂ emissions,” they first had to find “untouched” coal in order to then burn it.²⁷⁶ What this means is that ‘nature’ cannot be understood solely through the prism of culture, because otherwise we risk overlooking the processes through which forms of social organization transform biological life into extractable resources.

Malm’s discussion of coal is again helpful here:

we know that [coal] formed when vegetation slumped into bogs, whose water protected it from oxidation; as the dead plants sank deeper, temperatures and pressure rose; slowly, gradually, the matter solidified into coal, mostly during the Carboniferous era some 286-360 million years ago, when no humans could possibly have assisted in the process.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁴ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 146.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

²⁷⁶ Malm, *The Progress of this Storm*, p. 20.

²⁷⁷ Malm, *The Progress of this Storm*, p. 36.

Malm also puts into question the sort of social constructivism defended by Steven Vogel in his book *Thinking like a Mall*, which claims that “the environment we encounter and live within is always already a built environment.”²⁷⁸ Vogel assumes that since “we cannot be in-an-environment without acting in it, and cannot act in it without changing it,” the entire environment is then “always already socially constructed.”²⁷⁹ This view then presupposes that all life on earth has always been subject to human contact. More importantly, it fails to account for the plurality of ways in which human animals relate to the environment, and therefore hinders our capacity to establish the sort qualitative distinctions that are needed to judge critically. When the British found coal in the jungle of Labuan in 1837, to continue with Malm’s example, they did not produce nature, nor did they construct it. They encountered a natural environment where an Indigenous population coexisted with it and related to it in reciprocal and sustainable ways, which allowed for the thriving of both social *and* natural systems.

It is thus necessary to acknowledge that at an elemental level, natural processes and structures exist and operate independently of human animals.²⁸⁰ Kate Soper refers to this, which she considers to be the condition of possibility of culture and society, as “nature in the realist sense.”²⁸¹ That is, the nature “to whose laws we are always subject, even as we harness it to human purposes, and whose processes we can neither escape nor destroy.”²⁸² To deny this is to fall back into a crude form of anthropocentricity. This is because to suggest that ‘nature’ has been completely made over by human animals amounts to looking at the whole biosphere through the lenses of our dominant and dominating social systems.²⁸³ It therefore abstracts analysis from the

²⁷⁸ Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall*, p. 58.

²⁷⁹ Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall*, p. 58.

²⁸⁰ See Soper, “Nature/’nature’,” p. 29.

²⁸¹ Soper, “Nature/’nature’,” p. 29.

²⁸² See Soper, “Nature/’nature’,” p. 29.

²⁸³ I thank James Tully for this.

power relations that are responsible for the abuse of ecosystems in the first place, and leaves us with an approach to ecological ethics that is conducive to political inertia.

5. Ecological awareness

The preceding discussion has hopefully dispelled some of the confusion besetting the notions of ‘anthropocentrism’ and ‘nature’. What matters for our purposes is that the ethics of interdependency that I am beginning to outline is able to draw meaningful connections between care and disability studies, on one hand, and ecology and environmental thinking, on the other. I attempted to show that it is necessary to engage with anthropocentrism in order to provide a nuanced perspective that allows us to decenter our analysis from an exclusive focus on human animals, while avoiding the pitfalls of a blanket rejection of anthropocentric thinking which entails the reinforcement of the universalist fiction of a homogenous humanity. Such a decentering prompts us to reflect on the ways in which we relate, and ought to relate, to our natural surroundings. Consequently, it is also indispensable to think about the value of an appeal to ‘nature’ as an independent realm of existence, and whether it is needed to evaluate our relationships with the more-than-human world.

In line with the ontological claim of interdependency that I have been trying to delineate, an ecologically aware ethics therefore needs to maintain some sort of distinction between society/culture and nature if we are to make qualitative evaluations of the relations that we entertain with the nonhuman world. More specifically, such a distinction serves as a ground for challenging the unsustainable patterns of exploitation that characterize the way most societies relate to the lands and waters of the earth. In this regard, and as we will see in subsequent chapters,

there is much to learn from the traditional ecological knowledge and wisdom of indigenous peoples. But for now, and to return to our initial phenomenological remarks, let us just say that the most urgent questions that we must ask ourselves are about perception and experience, rather than about the existence of an empirical, objective reality.²⁸⁴ A phenomenological approach brackets the realism/constructivism debate, and directs our attention instead towards our immediate apprehension of the world. Such an understanding of our grasp on particular things, of our bodily awareness, can be used to describe the ways in which we come into contact with the multiple forms of life that surround us. It also discloses to our senses the complexly interwoven and interconnected environments that enfold human and nonhuman beings.

David Abram, who works within the field of eco-phenomenology, has argued that we human animals in the West have found ourselves alienated from this perceptual dimension and have therefore become deeply inattentive to the more-than-human life-world.²⁸⁵ According to Abram's contention, it is precisely this disconnection that is at the root of the ostensible separation of culture and nature that we discussed above. As he puts it, in Western industrial societies "[w]e consciously encounter nonhuman nature only as it has been circumscribed by our civilization and its technologies." He then goes on: "'Nature', it would seem, has become simply a stock of 'resources' for human civilization."²⁸⁶ Seen in this light, it is no surprise that we seem to be held captive by a picture of our sensuous involvement with the world which has led us to be oblivious to the animate and inanimate shapes and powers that surround us. This has resulted in the current commodification of the nonhuman life-world, and hence in the entanglement of nature and society/culture, which is now commonly taken for granted by much theorizing in environmental

²⁸⁴ See Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness*, p. 20.

²⁸⁵ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language in a More than Human World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996).

²⁸⁶ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, p. 28.

thinking and ecological ethics. Abram's hunch is that "a renewed attentiveness to this perceptual dimension" can disclose the reciprocal and interdependent nature of the living world, and can therefore "rejuvenat[e] our carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land that sustains us."²⁸⁷

Relearning to perceive the world that surrounds us has the potential for cultivating our ecological awareness—something that resonates with Code's call for an ecologically oriented way of thinking—and thereby for disclosing different possibilities of relating to each other and to the rest of nature. And I want to argue that integrating this ecological awareness to our reflections on care and cooperation is fundamental to addressing the various forms of injustice and oppression that affect not only human animals, but the rest of nature as well. If we are to take the facts of vulnerability and interdependency as the indispensable starting points to any discussion about justice and well-being, as I argued for in the previous chapter, then we must reflect critically on how we conceive of our relations to the natural environment. It is important to recall what Nedelsky says about ecology, namely, that it is about interdependence and that the most fundamental interdependence is the way in which we are connected to the earth.²⁸⁸ This is crucial to understanding how goodness and well-being are inevitably mutual and reciprocal between human and nonhuman forms of life and the natural ecosystems that sustain them. But an ethics that takes this insight as foundational must also acknowledge that we human animals have particular responsibilities to care for our common world. Indeed, the point of departure of our ethical outlook is the ecologically aware human animal, since it is by transforming ourselves and learning to think and act differently that we can transform unsustainable relations into sustainable ones.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁷ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, p. 69.

²⁸⁸ Nedelsky, *Law's Relations*, p. 12. I mentioned this in section 2 of this chapter.

²⁸⁹ See Pelluchon, *Éthique de la Considération*, p. 248; and James Tully, "Reconciliation here on earth," in *Resurgence and Reconciliation*, eds. M. Asch, J. Borrows, and J. Tully (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019).

What this means for our picture of interdependency is that just as disability studies and the ethics of care have demonstrated that we are corporeal beings who are embedded in networks of (human-human) reciprocity to which we owe our flourishing, we also need to integrate the ecological insight that such embodied location goes beyond human bodies and their built environments. However, our ecological awareness does start with our experience as bodily beings, since it is through our bodies that we encounter and navigate the world. This is why Corine Pelluchon argues that we cannot nurture and preserve the lands and waters that we inhabit—and hence, engage in practices of reconciliation with each other and the living earth—without first reconciling ourselves with our bodies.²⁹⁰ Echoes of Pope Francis’ emphasis on the importance of caring for our own bodies as a precondition to caring for the ecosystems and the living earth are audible here. It is because we have been conditioned to be oblivious to this aspect of our existence that we must reawaken our bodily experience and self-understanding in order to perceive the indissociable unity of our bodies and the rest of nature, which is the very condition of human animal life. Consequently, an integral ethics must aim at bringing about harmony and concord to our relationships to the world, to each other, and to ourselves.

One central task of a relational ethics of interdependency, therefore, is to bring into being the cycles of conciliation and reciprocity that are needed if we are to achieve the sort of conviviality that “ecosocial”²⁹¹ solidarity and peaceful coexistence entail. It is our responsibility to work towards the transformation of the patterns of exploitation, domination and dispossession that hegemonic relations of production have set forth. The sustainability of ecosocial diversity, which

²⁹⁰ Pelluchon, *Éthique de la Considération*, p. 222.

²⁹¹ I borrow the term from James Tully. See his “Life Sustains Life 2: The Ways of Reengagement with the Living Earth,” in *Nature and Value*, ed. Akeel Bilgrami (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), p. 185. Arturo Escobar uses the term “socionatural,” See his *Designs for the Pluriverse. Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2017).

refers to the interdependence and inter-penetration of our social systems and ecological systems, rests entirely on relationships of cooperation and mutual aid.²⁹² And I have been arguing that the practices of ecosocial reconciliation that aim at repairing our world begin with a deep decentering of our philosophical enquiries, one which integrates the disability studies and the ethics of care insights that we ought to be attentive to the ways in which our social environments constrain us, but that also moves our analysis towards our interconnections with the nonhuman world. But in order to get there, an appropriate ecological ethics must foster the deployment of a language of qualitative evaluations, one which enables us to characterize our relationships to each other and to the environment contrastively.²⁹³ If we are to judge critically the dominant conceptions of the person, and of the ways in which we relate to other human and nonhuman animals and to the environment, then it is important that we are able to contrast these to more favourable alternatives. For this reason, I want to reassert the significance of grounding our views of these relations on the basis of qualitative distinctions between ways of living together and with the lands and waters of the earth. It is the duty of human animals that inhabit dominant and exploitative socioeconomic systems to learn from place-based practices of care for the lands and waters, practices that are deeply informed by what the lands and waters as modes of “*reciprocal* relationships... ought to teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and our surroundings in a respectful, nondominating and nonexploitative way.”²⁹⁴ But this can only be achieved by pluralizing our respective understandings of the environment, human animality, and nature.

²⁹² See Tully, “Life Sustains Life 1: Value, social and ecological,” in *Nature and Value*, ed. Akeel Bilgrami (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), pp. 163-180; and 2.

²⁹³ I am referring to something like Charles Taylor’s notion of strong evaluation. See, in particular: Taylor, “What is human agency?”, “Self-interpreting animals,” and “The concept of a person,” all in *Philosophical Papers Volume 1: Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 15-44; 45-76; and 97-114.

²⁹⁴ See Glen Coulthard’s conception of “grounded normativity”: Coulthard, *Red Skin White Masks. Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. 60.

6. Conclusion.

As I noted in the beginning of this chapter, the contribution of the scholarship on disability and care is twofold: it has provided incisive critiques of the ideals of independence, autonomy and self-sufficiency that are at the heart of liberal individualism, and it has brought into view our bodily vulnerability and interdependence. Both aspects have received insufficient attention, and their importance is still to be fully appreciated within political and philosophical enquiry. Throughout these pages, as well as in the previous chapter, I have insisted that our existential condition of vulnerability, one which we share with all other living beings on earth, ought to occupy a central place in our reflections on how to live together. My main aim in this chapter has been to show that an appropriate way of thinking and acting in this world needs to reject the conventional division between the realm of human affairs and that which pertains to ecology. I have argued that a prominent strand of disability studies and the ethics of care conceives of the environment in a unilateral way. Indeed, such scholarship is mainly concerned with how the built environments and the social structures that produce them severely restrict and exclude disabled people. And as I have mentioned, this line of research is crucial for illuminating how power is exercised over those of us who do not fit the imposed norms of able-bodiedness. But I do think that this work needs to be complemented by a consideration of the ways in which we affect, and are affected by, the natural world. This is why I have defended an integral ethics of interdependency, whose main goal is to help orient ourselves towards sustainable forms of living together, and whose scope is necessarily ecosocial—namely, that it includes human and nonhuman animals, streams, rivers, mountains, seasons, ecosystems, and the living earth as a whole.

Moreover, I have tried to show that thinking and acting ecologically is vital to cultivating the kinds of networks of co-sustainability that are required for interrelated forms of life to flourish. In order to rework our current relations with the lands and waters of the earth, we need first of all to be conscious of the imaginary that generates unsustainable patterns of exploitation, as well as of the assumptions that inform and uphold it. To this end, I began by discussing the notion of anthropocentrism and, more precisely, the particular conception of human animality that underwrites it. I argued that the imaginary that is holding us captive relies on a false—because gendered, raced and classed—picture of humanity. The result is a partial and one-sided view that posits a homogeneous human animal that is equally responsible for and equally affected by unsustainable social systems. And this is to blatantly ignore Western imperialism and colonialism—as well as the relations of production that allowed them to develop—which are at the root of the vicious and dominant social system that exploits and destroys both the ecosphere and marginalized social systems. Furthermore, this led me to examine the debate over the society/culture and nature distinction, which is characterized by the opposition between realist and constructivist accounts of nature. Even though I reject the view that construes realism and constructivism as mutually exclusive, I have nevertheless argued that it is inadequate to look at nature through the lenses of the predatory social systems that are responsible for ecological injustices in the first place. If we want to avoid political inertia, then it is important that we establish evaluative distinctions between ways of relating ourselves to the lands and waters of the earth. For this reason, I argued that a major aim of a relational ethics of interdependency is to foster our ecological awareness, which refers to the process of relearning to think and act in sustainable and caring ways with each other, nonhuman animals, ecosystems, and the earth as a whole. This is the

condition of possibility not only for peaceful coexistence, but also for the cultivation of relationships of solidarity, reciprocity, and cooperation between interdependent forms of life.

CHAPTER FOUR:

What vulnerability entails: sustainability and the limits of political pluralism

Pluralism and diversity²⁹⁵ have been extensively discussed in political philosophy and political theory, from the literature on minority rights, multiculturalism and identity politics²⁹⁶ to debates about the normativity and legitimacy of authority and the interactions between different sources of authority.²⁹⁷ However, and apart from a few notable exceptions, the mainstream literature has been exclusively concerned with the sort of diversity and pluralism that emanates from the relations between persons and groups of persons. It is indeed striking that pluralist scholarship is largely bound to a humancentric conception of law, one which fails to consider the plurality of ontologies that constitute reality—including those through which we relate to nature.²⁹⁸ This is reflected in how pluralism approaches difference, which is often reduced to resolving jurisdictional conflicts and recognizing the authority of groups of people to adjudicate political matters. Nowhere is this more evident than in the way in which pluralists approach the struggles of Indigenous

²⁹⁵ It is important to mention that even though there is no consensus on whether the two concepts refer to the same thing or not, it can be generally said that ‘diversity’ is more commonly used to describe ethnic and cultural matters, whereas ‘pluralism’ usually refers to ‘political pluralism’. See, in particular, Avigail Eisenberg, *Reconstructing Political Pluralism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995); and Victor Muñoz-Fraticelli, *The Structure of Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

²⁹⁶ See Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Avigail Eisenberg, *Reasons of Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Ayelet Schachar, *Multicultural Jurisdictions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Sarah Song, *Justice, Gender and the Politics of Multiculturalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. A. Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 25-73; James Tully, *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); among others.

²⁹⁷ See Yann Allard-Tremblay, “The Modern and the Political Pluralist Perspectives on Political Authorities,” *The Review of Politics*, vol. 80, no. 4, 2018, pp. 675-700; Mark Bevir, ed., *Modern Pluralism: Anglo-American Debates Since 1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Robert Cover, “Nomos and Narrative,” *Harvard Law Review*, vol. 94, no. 4, 1983, pp. 4-68; Eisenberg, *Reconstructing Political Pluralism*; Muñoz-Fraticelli, *The Structure of Pluralism*; Nicole Roughan, *Authorities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); among others.

²⁹⁸ For an alternative account of law, one which includes the laws of the ecosystems and ecosphere that sustain life on earth, see Tully, “Sustainable democratic constitutionalism and climate crisis,” *McGill Law Journal Annual Lecture*, forthcoming.

peoples against colonialism. Pluralists tend to frame Indigenous claims in terms of autonomy or freedom, thus overlooking the most significant reasons for their struggles: to protect the lands and waters, and to maintain their own ways of engaging in sustainable relations with the living earth.

The result has been the confinement of the subject of justice to social spaces, and hence the reinforcement of the dichotomous understanding of humanity and nature. Such a picture, which is inherent in anthropocentric projects of mastery, relegates the natural realm to the status of mere object for the use of humanity. Yet, as I have argued in the previous chapter, there are good reasons to maintain a distinction between “what is humanly instituted and what is naturally ordained,” to use Kate Soper’s terms.²⁹⁹ But to hold that nature and society refer to distinct domains of reality is not to say that they are disconnected, mutually exclusive, or that the one can be exploited by the other. On the contrary, my purpose in undertaking this discussion has been to draw attention to the networks of interdependence within and between the plurality of interrelated social and ecological lifeways. In other words, I intend to demonstrate the importance of integrating ecological ethics into debates about pluralism, and to show how an appropriate account of vulnerability allows us to decenter political theorizing, and hence to approach difference and relationality beyond merely human worlds.

The concept of vulnerability underscores the interactions and overlaps between the deep diversity of ecosocial systems. It is because species, organisms, ecosystems, human and nonhuman animals are vulnerable that their involvement in relations of cooperation and of care-giving and care-receiving is warranted. Vulnerability is therefore at the basis of the relations of interdependency and mutual aid that sustain life on earth. Now, this raises a number of questions, first of all due to the fact that there is no consensus on what the term ‘vulnerability’ refers to.

²⁹⁹ Kate Soper, “Nature/’nature’,” in *FutureNatural*, eds. G. Robertson et al. (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 28.

Indeed, is the vulnerability that is ascribed to ecosystems similar in kind to the one that characterises human animals? Can we speak of an ‘object’ as vulnerable, regardless of whether it is alive or not? Further, are all living organisms vulnerable in the same way? Also, if vulnerability generates care-taking obligations, an adequate theoretical account must be sensitive to the way in which different moral obligations and duties are to be conceived of, considering *who* or *what* the care-receiver and care-giver are. Moreover, the relationship between vulnerability, interdependency and sustainability must be specified. And finally, as in any account that takes diversity and pluralism seriously, attention must be paid to the sort of conflicts that may result from the interactions and overlaps between and among ecosocial systems.

In what follows, I attempt to move forward in the development of a relational ethics that is attuned to vulnerability, one which rejects the conventional division between normative concerns regarding our relationships with each other, with nonhuman animals, and with the natural environment. My aim in this chapter is twofold: first, to engage with the philosophical debate over the meaning of vulnerability, as well as to contribute to the conceptual clarification of the notion by offering a distinctive definition that seeks to transcend the main divisions that pervade much of the literature. And second, to examine the moral and political implications of my revised account of vulnerability by confronting it with pluralist theories, and by examining how vulnerability affects the study of plurality. The reason why pluralism must pay attention to more abstract discussions about what vulnerability entails is that it can help us clarify who the subjects of plurality are and why. This, in turn, throws light on the purpose and value of pluralism, given that it helps reveal how pluralism can better foster and cultivate relations of reciprocity and care between and among a plurality of beings—human and other than human.

The chapter is divided into three parts. I begin my analysis by identifying three ways in which vulnerability has been conceived of in the literature, which correspond to different connections between embodiment and vulnerability. I then show that the metaphysical opposition that divides the literature between universal (or ontological) and dispositional (or relational) accounts of vulnerability hinders the formulation of moral and political responses to the unsustainable relationships that are destroying life on earth. In the second part of the chapter, I argue that the main philosophical work on vulnerability is mistakenly restricted to an exclusive focus on human animals. In order to address this, I propose a broader definition of vulnerability: ‘something’ ought to be considered vulnerable if ‘it’ is alive, and if ‘it’ co-sustains life on earth. I argue that my suggested definition is broad enough to incorporate both ontological and relational elements, while being narrow enough to rule out both vitalist and biocentric approaches. Finally, in the third part of the chapter I examine recent debates on political pluralism and show that pluralist theorizing is largely concerned with one single manifestation of vulnerability: that is, the vulnerability of minority groups. This leads me to conclude that pluralism needs to widen its scope in order to integrate ecological inequalities and injustices into its political agenda. I also argue that, as they currently stand, pluralist approaches are ill suited for understanding the struggles of Indigenous peoples against colonialism. Ultimately, I defend the view that the normative case for pluralism needs to be grounded in an ecologically aware ethics that can respond to the vulnerability of animate beings who sustain life.

1. Three meanings of vulnerability

The concept of vulnerability has become increasingly salient in a wide variety of moral, political, and philosophical debates, including bioethics, disability studies, the ethics of care, feminist theory, and human rights, among others.³⁰⁰ But as Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds argue, the same concept is used to refer to multiple sources of vulnerability, and philosophers and other theorists who work on the subject have failed to provide a compelling reflection on the manifold meanings that the idea carries.³⁰¹ In the previous chapters of this dissertation, I have attempted to ground an ethical outlook on what I have assumed to be the facts of vulnerability and interdependency. It is therefore important for my purposes to spell out what exactly is meant by the latter, and to take a clear position in the debate between competing views of vulnerability.

I introduced the idea of vulnerability with Alasdair MacIntyre's discussion of the relationship between our animal condition and our embodiment.³⁰² Despite disagreement about the nature of vulnerability, scholars are generally in agreement with the contention that it is by virtue of our corporeal condition, as well as because our body is a biological entity with essential physical needs, that we are exposed to a variety of afflictions and disabilities, and that we are fundamentally dependent on each other for flourishing and survival.³⁰³ This resonates with social reproduction theory, and Marxist feminist thought more generally, which takes the human body as central to

³⁰⁰ For recent edited volumes on vulnerability, see Martha A. Fineman, and Anna Grear, eds., *Vulnerability: Reflections on a New Ethical Foundation for Law and Politics* (Routledge: London, 2013); and Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, eds., *Vulnerability. New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

³⁰¹ Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, "Introduction: what is vulnerability and why does it matter for moral theory?," in *Vulnerability. New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, eds., Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, pp. 33-59.

³⁰² Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001).

³⁰³ See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Politics of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2006); Martha A. Fineman, "The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition," *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2008, pp. 1-23; Amber Knight, "Disability as vulnerability: redistributing precariousness in democratic ways," *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 76, no. 1, 2014, pp. 15-26; MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*; Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, "Introduction: what is vulnerability and why does it matter for moral theory?"; among others.

understanding the structures of political and economic life. The fundamental premise of such an approach is that our ‘natural’ bodies determine the “basic, non-negotiable human needs that must be met to survive.”³⁰⁴ These biological needs minimally include caloric intake, hydration, and shelter, which constitute the precondition for bodily functioning.³⁰⁵ Human beings fulfill these needs through specific social practices that take a variety of forms in different cultures, but they all share the same purpose: the survival and reproduction of the human species.³⁰⁶ According to this line of thought, the nature of human vulnerability is determined by the nature of the human body. Now, this of course implies an essential and universal notion of what a human body is, since social reproduction theorists ascribe to the latter a “foundational, transhistorical character,”³⁰⁷ one that is shared by each and every human being. But social reproduction theorists are aware that different bodies are differently affected by social and material forces of production. Indeed, the particularities of the body we inhabit establish specific relations of power and exploitation. As Sue Ferguson and David McNally put it, the fact that the biological processes of reproduction are specific to women entails the control and regulation of female bodies by the apparatuses of capitalism in order to “secure the reproduction of the working class.”³⁰⁸ In addition, Sébastien Rioux directs our attention to the importance of the specificities of our bodies with regard to our

³⁰⁴ Sébastien Rioux, “Embodied contradictions: Capitalism, social reproduction and body formation,” *Women’s Studies International Forum*, vol. 48, 2015, p. 195.

³⁰⁵ Karl Marx, “The German Ideology,” in *Selected Writings*, ed. D. McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 181. See also Alison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Brighton, Sussex: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), p. 54; and Joseph Fracchia, “Beyond the human-nature debate: Human corporeal organisation as the ‘first fact’ of historical materialism,” *Historical Materialism*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2005, p. 49.

³⁰⁶ It is worth underscoring the anthropocentric character of much theorizing in social reproduction and Marxist thought more generally. It is important to keep in mind, following MacIntyre, that the aforementioned biological needs are in no way exclusive, or even particular, to human animals. The same is true of social practices: the lives of bees, gorillas, wolves, horses, elephants, and so on, are structured by networks of relationships as well. See chapter 2 of this dissertation.

³⁰⁷ Rioux, “Embodied contradiction,” p. 195.

³⁰⁸ Sue Ferguson and David McNally, “Capital, labour-power and gender relation: introduction to the Historical Materialism Edition of Marxism and the Oppression of Women,” in *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, ed. L. Vogel (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. xxix, quoted in Rioux, “Embodied contradiction,” p. 198.

capacity to work, and reminds us that age, skill, literacy, health, and disability, among others, are crucial factors to understanding the embodied nature of labor exploitation.³⁰⁹ Finally, there is another level of analysis in social reproduction theory that integrates more deeply the relationship between the biological body and the social and cultural conditioning of that body. This refers to the ways in which difference is naturalized and inscribed on human bodies, and how these processes of body classification are inseparable from relations of power and the production of social hierarchies.³¹⁰

What the preceding analysis indicates is that even if we agree that the human body is the source of our vulnerability, it is nevertheless possible to draw different kinds of connections between embodiment and vulnerability. This is at the heart of the recent debate about the meaning of the notion, which has bifurcated the literature into two seemingly opposing approaches that can be referred to as universal (or ontological, and therefore intrinsic) and particular (or dispositional, and hence extrinsic) accounts of vulnerability.³¹¹ As the discussion of social reproduction theory illustrates, the point of view that vulnerability is a constant and universal feature of the human condition posits that there is an elemental level of existence at which all bodies share the same condition of inherent vulnerability. This is the position defended by MacIntyre,³¹² and it is also the assumption underlying the views of Judith Butler, Martha Fineman, Anna Grear, Amber Knight,

³⁰⁹ Rioux, “Embodied contradiction,” p. 200. See also Susan Ferguson, “Canadian Contributions to Social Reproduction Feminism, Race and Embodied Labor,” *Race, Gender & Class*, vol. 15, no. 1-2, 2008, pp. 42-57, quoted in Rioux, “Embodied contradiction,” p. 200.

³¹⁰ Rioux, “Embodied contradiction,” p. 201.

³¹¹ See Frédérick Armstrong, “An extrinsic dispositional account of vulnerability,” *Les Ateliers de l'Éthique/The Ethics Forum*, vol. 12, no. 2-3, 2017, pp. 180-204; Susan Dodds, “Depending on care: recognition of vulnerability and the social contribution of care provision,” *Bioethics*, vol. 21, no. 9, 2007, pp. 500-510; Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, “Introduction: what is vulnerability and why does it matter for moral theory?,” pp. 4-7; Rogers, Mackenzie, and Dodds, “Why bioethics needs a concept of vulnerability,” *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2012, pp. 11-38; and Joan Tronto, “Disability and Violence: Another Call for Democratic Inclusion and Pluralism,” in *Disability and Political Theory*, eds. B. Arneil and N. Hirschmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 257; among others.

³¹² See chapter 2 of this dissertation.

Martha Nussbaum, Corine Pelluchon, Paul Ricœur, and Margrit Shildrick, among others.³¹³ This ontological account of vulnerability posits that it is the constitution of our bodily being that reveals our vulnerable nature to us and to the world. As Butler puts it, it is because bodily lives are ‘injurable’ that they expose us to dependency, precariousness and need.³¹⁴ This is the condition of shared vulnerability that I described in chapter 2, which is based on a conception of the body as always susceptible to being affected by “a range of physical, cognitive, and psycho-emotional impairments.”³¹⁵ According to this view, our ontological condition of vulnerability generates unqualified commitments to care for one another. This in turn introduces strong reasons for political change, and for the kind of change that requires a shift from a privatized, individualistic, and free-market driven political framework to one in which care is conceived of as a collective responsibility.³¹⁶ Yet, as I have argued in the previous chapters, it is necessary to expand this overly anthropocentric perspective by underscoring the fact that vulnerability is constant and universal not only among human animals but among all living beings, and hence that our collective responsibility for care extends to all vulnerable forms of life with whom we share the earth.³¹⁷

The second approach to understanding the notion of vulnerability conceives of it in terms of particular circumstances in which human animals actually—and not only potentially—encounter physical or emotional harm, find themselves in situations of dependency or of loss of

³¹³ See note 9 above, as well as Anna Grear, “The Vulnerable Living Order: Human Rights and the Environment in a Critical and Philosophical Perspective,” *Journal of Human Rights and the Environment*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2011, pp. 23-44; Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Corine Pelluchon, *Éthique de la Considération* (Paris: Seuil, 2018); Paul Ricœur, *Le Juste 2* (Paris: Esprit, 2001); Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London, SAGE, 2001); and Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, “Introduction: what is vulnerability and why does it matter for moral theory?”, p. 4.

³¹⁴ Butler, “Precarious life, vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2012, p. 147.

³¹⁵ Knight, “Disability as vulnerability: redistributing precariousness in democratic ways,” p. 16.

³¹⁶ See Tronto, *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice* (New York: NYU Press, 2013).

³¹⁷ Note that of the above cited authors who work on vulnerability only Grear, MacIntyre, Nussbaum, and Pelluchon extend the ‘inherent vulnerability’ thesis to other-than-human living beings.

agency and powerlessness. The main reason for restricting the concept to specific instantiations of vulnerability is that in order to be normatively salient, so the argument goes, we better use the notion to refer to particular cases, because if it is generalized, then it loses its significance.³¹⁸ In short, the idea is that if everyone is vulnerable in the same way and to the same extent, it is therefore no longer possible to identify especially fragile persons and groups of persons. Moreover, another argument that has been put forward revolves around a realist account of the body, one which echoes social reproduction theory's depiction of the 'natural' body, and that stresses the concrete physical and biological realities of embodied existence.³¹⁹ This is the view expressed by Havi Carel in her work on illness, where she provides a phenomenological account of embodied experience and argues that "a deep and permanent change to the body, such as takes place in serious chronic illness, would lead to far-reaching changes to one's embodied experience."³²⁰ What this entails is that the experience of physiological dysfunctions and psychiatric disorders transform the ill person's body and capacities, which in turn "modify her existence globally."³²¹ This is because illness alters "one's being-in-the-world, including one's relationship to the environment, social and temporal structures, and one's identity."³²² The pervasive and systematic nature of the way in which illness affects our "sense of embodiment, bodily possibilities, and bodily feelings,"³²³ has important implications for our understanding of the intrinsic properties of the ontological condition of animal vulnerability. Indeed, a view that pays close attention to

³¹⁸ See Armstrong, "An extrinsic dispositional account of vulnerability," p. 184; Carol Levine et al., "The Limitations of 'vulnerability' as a protection for human research participants," *The American Journal of Bioethics*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2004, p. 46; Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, "Introduction: what is vulnerability and why does it matter for moral theory?" p. 6.

³¹⁹ See, for instance, Tobin Siebers, "Disability in theory: from social constructionism to the new realism of the body," in *The Disability Studies Reader. Second Edition*, ed. L.J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 173-184.

³²⁰ Havi Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 40.

³²¹ Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness*, p. 14.

³²² Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness*, p. 37.

³²³ Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness*, p. 74.

particular experiences of illness, impairment, disability, aging, and so on, allows a more detailed analysis of the ways in which we are distinctively vulnerable. This is to say that there is an ontological spectrum of vulnerability on which we all find ourselves, but that the various ranges that compose the spectrum are considerably different from one another. This perspective could easily be expanded to integrate nonhuman animals and more than human beings and the relations in which they are enmeshed, but the discussion is again restricted to the question of human vulnerability to harm, illness, disability, and old age.

Finally, the third meaning of vulnerability refers to the idea that the institutions, discourses, and other sites of social power produce and regulate particular types of bodies, some of which are categorized as abnormal, impaired, disabled, and so on. On this view, vulnerability is a historically specific phenomenon that is contingent on its social and cultural contexts rather than a natural or a biological attribute that some of us possess.³²⁴ This, in other words, calls into question both the determinism that is assumed by ontological accounts of vulnerability, as well as the drawing of a distinction between nature and society/culture, such as I defended in chapter three. With this in mind, Shelley Tremain challenges what she identifies as the dominant cluster of assumptions that underpins the study of disability in philosophy, and which, according to her, ends up reifying disability into a “prediscursive, transcultural, and transhistorical ... objective human defect.”³²⁵ Tremain argues that social and political inequalities do not stem from biological properties, as mainstream philosophy has so far taken for granted, but rather the other way around: it is social and political inequalities that produce biological differences.³²⁶ In order to denaturalize our

³²⁴ See, for instance, Shelley L. Tremain, ed., *Foucault and the Government of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015); and Tremain, *Foucault and Feminist Philosophy of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

³²⁵ Tremain, *Foucault and Feminist Philosophy of Disability*, p. 2.

³²⁶ Tremain, *Foucault and Feminist Philosophy of Disability*, p. 4.

understanding of vulnerability, social constructivist accounts like that of Tremain's aim at exposing how discourses that "may seem to innocently describe the phenomena of the human body" actually "contribut[e] to the constitution of that body, its materiality, bodily constraints, corporeal vulnerabilities" and so on.³²⁷ The idea is that we ought to disentangle our conceptions of the body's materiality, its biological functioning, and the significance we attribute to these from their social and historical conditions of possibility.³²⁸ The purpose for this is to "identify, resist, and transform the ways in which these phenomena have material-ized" the vulnerable body.³²⁹ In sum, this third approach seeks to critically examine the ways in which discursive practices produce vulnerability (and related notions of impairment, disability, etc.) through the imposition of structural constraints on socially disadvantaged bodies. This argument could be applied to the ways in which the reductionist language used to describe nonhuman worlds—for instance, referring to them in terms of resources for the use of humans—deeply influences our relationships with nonhuman animals, and thus has a deteriorating impact on ecological wellbeing. However, constructivist approaches to vulnerability are still mostly focused on human worlds, and hence do not engage with how the framing of 'nature' can also produce specific ecosocial inequalities and vulnerabilities.

2. Beyond human animal vulnerability

This characterization in broad strokes of the main accounts of vulnerability is of course non-exclusive and incomplete, but its purpose is to help us guide our discussion and provide an

³²⁷ Tremain, *Foucault and Feminist Philosophy of Disability*, p. 120.

³²⁸ Tremain, *Foucault and Feminist Philosophy of Disability*, p. 119.

³²⁹ Tremain, *Foucault and Feminist Philosophy of Disability*, p. 119. Emphasis in original.

entry point for extending the concept to nonhuman forms of life. What is missing so far is an explicit focus on relationality, which is something that occupies a central place in the work of Frédérick Armstrong, Angela K. Martin et al., Catriona Mackenzie et al., and Wendy Rogers et al., and more recently, Judith Butler.³³⁰ A relational approach to vulnerability is particularly sensitive to the ways in which a person (or group of persons) is affected by connections, associations and relations with other people and things, which are all factors that shape the vulnerability of that person (or group of persons). Ontologically, relational accounts usually adopt the second or third meanings of vulnerability as discussed above, in the sense that they either posit that there is a spectrum of vulnerability on which we all find ourselves, or they reject the ascription of the intrinsic vulnerability of human bodies.

In the first case, Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds have put forward a taxonomy that attempts to capture “distinct but overlapping kinds of vulnerability.”³³¹ Their taxonomy distinguishes between inherent, situational, and pathogenic sources, as well as between dispositional and occurrent states of vulnerability.³³² Without going into detail, their aim is to ground the normative debate on the recognition of both the inherent ontological condition of human animals and the context-specificity of certain forms of vulnerability. Similarly, Martin, Tavaglione, and Hurst claim that the view that we are all vulnerable—albeit to different degrees—is not only compatible

³³⁰ Armstrong, “An extrinsic dispositional account of vulnerability”; Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence. The Ethical in the Political* (London: Verso, 2020); Angela K. Martin, Nicolas Tavaglione, and Samia Hurst, “Resolving the conflict: clarifying ‘vulnerability’ in health care ethics,” *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2014, pp. 51-72; Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, “Introduction: what is vulnerability and why does it matter for moral theory?”; Rogers, Mackenzie, and Dodds, “Why bioethics needs a concept of vulnerability.” See also Robert Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); and Florencia Luna, “Elucidating the concept of vulnerability: layers not labels,” *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2008, pp. 121-139.

³³¹ Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, “Introduction: what is vulnerability and why does it matter for moral theory?”, p. 7.

³³² See Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, “Introduction: what is vulnerability and why does it matter for moral theory?”, pp. 7-9.

with the idea that human vulnerability manifests itself in our interactions with other people and with our surroundings, but that the two views actually depend on each other.³³³ As they put it, “there is only one type of vulnerability encompassing everyone,” but “[d]epending on the context and the individuals involved, it has different likelihoods of manifestation.”³³⁴

In contrast, Frédérick Armstrong argues that it is not possible that vulnerability be both ontologically universal *and* relational. This is because the same concept cannot ostensibly denote an intrinsic property while at the same time refer to an extrinsic disposition.³³⁵ According to this line of thought, extrinsic dispositions are necessary for an intrinsic property to manifest itself. Armstrong illustrates this point with the example of vulnerability due to racism and sexism. He argues that the reason why some people suffer from racism and sexism is because they live in racist and sexist societies—that is to say, they are currently vulnerably because of external dispositions, and not because of particular features that are intrinsic to them.³³⁶ In short, if the structures and social relations that discriminate against or oppress certain people were different, then “some of the reason” why people are currently vulnerable to racism and sexism would “simply not exist.”³³⁷ Now, Armstrong does recognize that certain intrinsic properties, such as our embodiment, “may underlie or *ground* our propensity to be harmed,” and therefore that there is some connexion between intrinsic and dispositional properties.³³⁸ But his main claim is that extrinsic and circumstantial properties are somehow normatively superior to intrinsic ones, or at least more compelling from a moral standpoint.³³⁹

³³³ Angela K. Martin, Nicolas Tavaglione, and Samia Hurst, “Resolving the conflict: clarifying ‘vulnerability’ in health care ethics,” p. 53.

³³⁴ Angela K. Martin, Nicolas Tavaglione, and Samia Hurst, “Resolving the conflict: clarifying ‘vulnerability’ in health care ethics,” p. 62.

³³⁵ Armstrong, “An extrinsic dispositional account of vulnerability,” p. 186.

³³⁶ Armstrong, “An extrinsic dispositional account of vulnerability,” pp. 193-194.

³³⁷ Armstrong, “An extrinsic dispositional account of vulnerability,” pp. 193-194.

³³⁸ Armstrong, “An extrinsic dispositional account of vulnerability,” p. 194. Emphasis in original.

³³⁹ Armstrong, “An extrinsic dispositional account of vulnerability,” p. 195.

Interestingly, Armstrong posits that reducing our understanding of vulnerability to its ontological properties—just like many phenomenologists, feminists, care theorists, and bioethicists (among others) do—restricts the concept to an exclusive focus on human animals.³⁴⁰ According to him, if we want to extend the use of the concept of vulnerability to include “objects like groups, institutions, and ecosystems,” then we have to abandon the universal ontological view.³⁴¹ This is because those “objects” do not necessarily share the same intrinsic properties that make human animals vulnerable in the first place—indeed, they “are not embodied in the same way,” and “they do not hold close relationships with care-givers and dependents.”³⁴² So, even if we agreed that human animals are universally vulnerable, the argument goes, we would still be unable to regard other-than-human objects as vulnerable from an ontological perspective.

The philosophical literature on vulnerability remains profoundly anthropocentric, and in this respect, Armstrong’s contribution is especially welcome. Take, for instance, Martin et al.’s work, which is at the centre of Armstrong’s discussion, where they assert that even though “plants need water, ... they surely are not intrinsically vulnerable.”³⁴³ The authors’ assumption is not only contradictory—because if plants need water, they are therefore intrinsically vulnerable to dehydration³⁴⁴—but it is also a paradigmatic example of the objectification of the living world and of the drawing of contingent boundaries between vulnerable and nonvulnerable forms of existence. But having said that, Armstrong’s analysis does not go far enough in its consideration of other-

³⁴⁰ Armstrong, “An extrinsic dispositional account of vulnerability,” p. 197.

³⁴¹ Armstrong, “An extrinsic dispositional account of vulnerability,” p. 197.

³⁴² Armstrong, “An extrinsic dispositional account of vulnerability,” pp. 197-198.

³⁴³ Martin, Tavaglione, and Hurst, “Resolving the conflict,” p. 65.

³⁴⁴ The authors defend what they call an ‘interest-based’ rather than a ‘needs-based’ definition of vulnerability, so one could respond that their assertion is not contradictory. However, the authors argue that the problem with ‘needs-based’ approaches is that these cannot “entirely encompass all the facets which are crucial for a definition of vulnerability.” So, if the problem is that needs are necessary but not sufficient to talk about vulnerability, it follows that ‘needs-based’ definitions could be incomplete, albeit not erroneous. Therefore, even according to the author’s reasoning, to say that plants need water is to say that they are intrinsically vulnerable, even if we fail to capture the entirety of the nature of their vulnerability. See Martin, Tavaglione, and Hurst, “Resolving the conflict,” p. 65

than-human forms of life. Indeed, his arguments for rejecting intrinsic accounts are not decisive, and they also fall prey to a similar form of anthropocentrism.

First, it is worth noting that using the noun ‘object’ to refer to an ecosystem is problematic because it implies that ‘it’ is inanimate matter. It is true that Armstrong seems at times to include human animals in the category of ‘objects’ as well, using the term in its most general sense.³⁴⁵ But at other times he does draw a distinction, such as when he explains that “we use the term ‘vulnerability’ for human beings *and* for a wide variety of objects for analogous purposes.”³⁴⁶ As a result, the ethos of Armstrong’s text, as well as that of much work on vulnerability, is rooted in an ontological confluence of human animality and animacy that ends up reducing nonhuman beings to mere ‘things’. Similarly, Martin et al. write that “vulnerability can be ascribed to objects such as ecosystems, computers, economic systems or entire countries,” and then add the proviso that in their article, however, they “restrict [themselves] to the vulnerability of living beings.”³⁴⁷ In other words, the authors imply that ecosystems cannot be regarded as alive, and place them on an equal footing with computers and other objects, thus overlooking their life sustaining role as well. This objectification of ecosystems prompts us to address them as commodities and prevents us from seeing their animacy, and therefore the kinship we share with them.³⁴⁸

This brings me to the second issue I wish to raise concerning Armstrong’s dismissal of the conception of vulnerability as an intrinsic property, which goes hand in hand with the sort of anthropocentrism that regards nonhuman entities as devoid of life. But it is important to begin by

³⁴⁵ See Armstrong, “An extrinsic dispositional account of vulnerability,” p. 199, when, after talking about human beings, he writes that “the ontological account of vulnerability prevents us from consistently applying vulnerability to *other kind of objects*” (my emphasis).

³⁴⁶ Armstrong, “An extrinsic dispositional account of vulnerability,” p. 181. My emphasis.

³⁴⁷ Martin, Tavaglione, and Hurst, “Resolving the conflict,” p. 54.

³⁴⁸ See Robin Wall Kimmerer, “Learning the Grammar of Animacy,” *Anthropology of Consciousness*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2017, pp. 128-134; and Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

mentioning that I distance myself from those forms of theorizing that claim that all objects have the same value merely by virtue of ‘being’, or from those accounts that ascribe animacy to every ‘thing’ that exists. These approaches are underpinned by the sort of ontological flattening that attributes vitality and agency to artifacts and commodities,³⁴⁹ thereby refusing to establish qualitative distinctions between the living systems of the natural world and the property systems that presuppose that the earth belongs to humans.³⁵⁰ As I have indicated in the previous chapter, this hinders our capacity to evaluate courses of action and ways of relating to the earth because it impedes us to characterize them contrastively.

Take Robin Wall Kimmerer’s illustration of what she calls the “grammar of animacy,” that is, of the fact that language is a “mirror for seeing the animacy of the world,” which, she argues, can be used as a “restraint on our mindless exploitation of the land.”³⁵¹ Indeed, Kimmerer shows that one of the main differences between English and other European languages, on the one hand, and Potawatomi and most other Indigenous languages, on the other, resides in the fact that the former are noun-based languages, while the latter are verb-based languages.³⁵² In Potawatomi, nouns are used to refer to things that are determined by the speaker; it is therefore not possible to speak of animacy in such cases. On the contrary, verbs denote animacy and dissociate the speaker from the referent in such a way that the selfhood and kinship of the latter are always acknowledged by the former. As Kimmerer puts it: “A bay is noun only if water is *dead*. When *bay* is a noun, it

³⁴⁹ See, for instance, Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); and Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature*, trans. C. Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); among others.

³⁵⁰ These approaches refuse to establish any kind of distinction between nature and society/culture as well. See also chapter 3 of this dissertation.

³⁵¹ Kimmerer, “Learning the Grammar of Animacy,” p. 131 and 133.

³⁵² Kimmerer, “Learning the Grammar of Animacy,” p. 130: “Only 30% of English words are verbs, but in Potawatomi that proportion is 70%.”

is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb *wikegama*—to *be* a bay—releases the water from bondage and lets it live.”³⁵³

So, in Potawatomi, as in other Indigenous languages, the distinction between what is alive and what is not is crucial. Kimmerer does not provide unambiguous criteria on how to establish such a distinction, but she does indicate that “the list of the inanimate” is “filled with objects that are made by people.”³⁵⁴ Kimmerer writes: “Of an inanimate being, like a table, we say ‘*What is it?*’ And we answer *Dopwen yewe*. Table it is. But of apple, we must say, ‘*Who is that being?*’ And reply *Mshimin yawe*. Apple that being is.”³⁵⁵ Speaking of our nonhuman neighbours in such a way serves as a reminder of the sorts of relationships we ought to entertain with them, and lays emphasis on the obligations which they involve. When we refer to an animate being, say, a tree, as an *it*, instead of as a *who*, we reduce the living tree to the status of a natural resource, therefore putting “a barrier between us, absolving ourselves of moral responsibility and opening the door to exploitation.”³⁵⁶

I think we can pin down what seems intuitive in Kimmerer’s distinction between the animate and the inanimate by throwing light upon the role played by intrinsic vulnerability, whether we’re talking about the “*living order*”³⁵⁷ itself or of the kinds of entities that sustain it. The fact that Kimmerer does not regard commodities as worthy of moral concern tells us something about the nature of objects from a Potawatomi perspective. Contrary to Armstrong, who discusses the disposition of glasses to shatter,³⁵⁸ or to Martin et al., who talk about the vulnerability

³⁵³ Kimmerer, “Learning the Grammar of Animacy,” p. 131. Emphases in original

³⁵⁴ Kimmerer, “Learning the Grammar of Animacy,” p. 132.

³⁵⁵ Kimmerer, “Learning the Grammar of Animacy,” p. 132. Emphases in original.

³⁵⁶ Kimmerer, “Learning the Grammar of Animacy,” p. 133.

³⁵⁷ I am borrowing Anna Gear’s term. See Gear, “The Vulnerable Living Order: Human Rights and the Environment in a Critical and Philosophical Perspective.”

³⁵⁸ Armstrong, “An extrinsic dispositional account of vulnerability,” p. 189.

of computers to viruses,³⁵⁹ Kimmerer is interested in objects in so far as they acquire meaning through the creation and sustenance of an ongoing relationship between beings.³⁶⁰ The particular kind of objects Kimmerer has in mind here are those that are given as gifts, “from the earth or from each other,” because they “establish a particular relationship, an obligation of sorts to give, to receive, and to reciprocate.”³⁶¹ But when we conceive of those objects as commodities, as the private property of some individual, then there is nothing inherent in the objects themselves that renders them vulnerable, and therefore worthy of esteem and care. According to this view, then, what is intrinsically valuable and vulnerable are the bonds of reciprocity that are created and sustained through the giving and receiving of gifts. The question of the vulnerability of objects *per se* is not a relevant ethical concern here. On the other hand, what is significant from a moral perspective is the fact that the human and nonhuman animals, and the living ecological systems that sustain themselves and the entire living order are intrinsically vulnerable precisely because they provide the condition of possibility for life on earth.

Now, to return to the ontological-relational debate about the sources of vulnerability, I want to argue that what matters is not the question of whether something is intrinsically or dispositionally vulnerable. Rather, the concern for an ecologically aware ethics is the question of what kinds of commitments and obligations are required for animate beings to flourish and to maintain habitable conditions on earth. And I have tried to show that, contrary to Armstrong, it is not necessary to reject intrinsic accounts of vulnerability in order to expand the use of the concept beyond the human animal realm. The metaphysical opposition between different accounts of vulnerability hinders rather than facilitates the formulation of moral responses to the unsustainable

³⁵⁹ Martin, Tavaglione, and Hurst, “Resolving the conflict,” p. 54.

³⁶⁰ Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, p. 26.

³⁶¹ Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, p. 25.

ecological and social relationships that are destroying life on earth. This is why I propose a broader definition of vulnerability, one that incorporates both ontological and relational elements: ‘something’ ought to be considered vulnerable if ‘it’ is alive, and if ‘it’ co-sustains life on earth. The first condition is in line with Kimmerer’s “grammar of animacy,” which teaches us to “know the world as a neighborhood of nonhuman residents.”³⁶² And the second condition complements the first: as Kate Soper notes, the argument that all life forms are equally valuable faces serious problems when it tries to answer questions regarding the status of some participants in the ecosystem—or of certain relationships that result from particular interactions—which are sources of danger to the health and well-being of others.³⁶³

In this sense, a certain degree of anthropocentricity is inescapable. It is important to acknowledge that theoretical work is one of the ways through which we human animals make sense of the world. We are embodied beings who engage with the world and experience it through our bodily encounters with reality. Therefore, as Soper puts it, “we cannot ‘speak for’ inorganic nature, or interpret the being and needs of nonhuman creatures other than in the light of our own identity.”³⁶⁴ Moreover, it is disingenuous to pretend that it would be morally suitable or desirable to entirely abstract ourselves from considerations of human animal welfare and to defend the equal value of all forms of life even if this means overlooking our biological needs, concerns and qualities.³⁶⁵ This begs the question of the moral justification of, say, the rejection of the use of antibiotics in the prevention of children’s’ infections, or of the use of chemotherapy in the treatment of cancers.³⁶⁶ As Soper insists, biocentric approaches that posit that every possible

³⁶² Kimmerer, “Learning the Grammar of Animacy,” p. 132.

³⁶³ See Kate Soper, “Nature/’nature’,” pp. 25-26.

³⁶⁴ Kate Soper, “Representing Nature,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, vol. 9, no. 4, 1998, p. 63.

³⁶⁵ See Soper, “Nature/’nature’,” p. 25; and Soper, “Representing Nature,” p. 63.

³⁶⁶ Soper, *What is Nature?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 257.

source of life on earth has a good of its own that ought to be preserved seem self-defeating. Indeed, biotic relations are ambiguous, conflictual, and involve equivocal compromises. For this reason, it is necessary to be cautious against “the temptation to suppose that human relations to nature can be resolved from a position of moral absolutism.”³⁶⁷ Hence the importance of stressing the co-sustainability condition, since it allows us to understand ecosocial relations of interdependency against a background of distinctions of worth, without thereby positing an overarching hierarchy of value.

To conclude this section, I want to emphasize once more the significance for moral theory and ethical reflection of working with a notion that can unite the vulnerability of animate beings and therefore help us shape a political response to ecosocial injustices. This entails a commitment to both intrinsic and dispositional sources of vulnerability, as well as an awareness that we human animals are situated both within and outside of ‘nature’. Because just as we have the capacity to impose unsustainable and destructive ecological and social systems, we have a moral duty to undermine them.

3. Ecosocial diversity, vulnerability, and the limits of political pluralism

Pluralism emerged as an approach to politics driven by the idea that social heterogeneity is the “very life pulse of a healthy polity,” and that the strengthening of plurality is required as a condition of justice.³⁶⁸ On this view, questions about the recognition of socio-cultural diversity and difference are crucial to addressing inequality and achieving political stability within a particular political community. Moreover, recent debates about pluralism have focused on

³⁶⁷ Soper, *What is Nature?*, p. 258.

³⁶⁸ Eisenberg, *Reconstructing Political Pluralism*, p. 2.

normative questions regarding the existence and legitimacy of authority, and therefore the way power is exercised by political entities such as groups and associations. Pluralist theories, which focus on the conflicts between different sources of authority, have emerged as a more radical alternative to the multicultural model that seeks to secure justice and equality through state coordination.

In this section, I will indicate that what is missing in the literature is an explicit engagement with the areas of overlap, conflict, and coordination between and within ecosocial spaces. The point that I want to make here is that if these approaches are to be pluralistic in a stronger sense, then they need to begin by reunifying social/cultural and ecological concerns in order to integrate sustainability and ecological resilience into the pluralist agenda. The way in which I propose to do this is to focus on vulnerability, and, more precisely, on how it can help us both foster an awareness of and respect for deep diversity, as well as to point out the potential drawbacks of pluralism as it is standardly defended.

I will begin by drawing in broad strokes the general picture of contemporary political pluralism, as well as the main problems that pluralist theorizing sets itself to solve. Since the publication of Avigail Eisenberg's *Reconstructing Political Pluralism*, there has been a revival of interest in theoretical debates on pluralism that have underlined the importance of distinguishing between liberal multiculturalism and the more radical pluralist conception of group authority. The former refers to the philosophical justification for a variety of policies adopted by Western liberal states in the second half of the twentieth century. The main purpose of multiculturalism is the state's recognition of claims that emanate from ethno-cultural diversity, as well as the state's accommodation of differences as a means to integrate minorities within a liberal-democratic

polity.³⁶⁹ In contrast, political pluralism posits that political life is characterized by a multiplicity of groups, communities, and associations whose authority and power do not derive from the state, nor do they depend on its recognition. The defining features of political pluralism are twofold: first, the idea that groups possess distinct, formal identities that go beyond a mere aggregation of individual interests; and, second, the claim that sovereignty does not reside in a single ultimate authority, but rather that sovereignty is shared by the multiplicity of groups that compose a given polity. Furthermore, as Víctor Muñiz-Fraticelli has argued, pluralism entails that groups cannot be legitimately constrained by an external arbiter: “nothing in pluralism per se argues that autonomous associations are bound by certain minimal standards of decency,” and “an injustice in one association does not by itself justify interference by the state or any other group.”³⁷⁰

The multicultural paradigm has come under increasing scrutiny, and among the most compelling critiques of state-based recognition and accommodation have been put forward by Indigenous scholars such as Glen Coulthard and Audra Simpson.³⁷¹ According to them, multiculturalism is a colonial and assimilative form of governance that is oriented towards achieving “the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority.”³⁷² Coulthard and Simpson advocate for Indigenous resurgence instead, which they argue is a “political and ethical stance that stands in stark contrast to the desire to have one’s distinctiveness as a culture, as a people, recognized.”³⁷³ They reject multiculturalism’s framework of cultural difference management, in the eyes of which Indigenous peoples become a problem “to

³⁶⁹ See Muñiz-Fraticelli, *The Structure of Pluralism*, pp. 34-38.

³⁷⁰ Muñiz-Fraticelli, *The Structure of Pluralism*, p. 58.

³⁷¹ See Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin White Masks. Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); and Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

³⁷² Coulthard, *Red Skin White Masks*, p. 25.

³⁷³ Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, p. 11.

be administered to by the state.”³⁷⁴ Indigenous resurgence, therefore, refers to decolonial practices of self-determination—which take place outside of state structures—and to the “reclaiming and reconnecting with traditional territories by means of Indigenous ways of knowing and being.”³⁷⁵

Despite the parallel here, most proponents of political pluralism are not directly concerned with Indigenous peoples, but rather with the authority of formally organized groups such as churches, trade unions, universities, cities, and other federal and sub-federal units to pursue whatever collective goals they set themselves to achieve.³⁷⁶ However, the strongest normative case for a pluralist approach ought to integrate the struggles of Indigenous peoples to overcome colonialism. In this respect, the work of Avigail Eisenberg as well as that of Yann Allard-Tremblay stand out as being among the few to do so. Indeed, Eisenberg’s recent work on relational pluralism pays particular attention to the jurisdictional authority of Indigenous communities over decision making within their territories.³⁷⁷ Also, Allard-Tremblay defends a pluralist theory that is committed to securing the freedom of citizens to sustain the normative orders that are constitutive of the political entities to which they belong.³⁷⁸ He connects pluralism with the Indigenous critique of colonialism and ultimately argues that Indigenous peoples ought to have the same normative standing as churches and other associations if political pluralism is to be true to itself.

³⁷⁴ Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, p. 21.

³⁷⁵ John Borrows and James Tully, “Introduction,” in *Resurgence and Reconciliation. Indigenous-Settler Relations and Earth Teachings*, eds. J. Borrows and J. Tully (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), p. 4.

³⁷⁶ This is the case of Víctor Muñoz-Fraticelli, as well as that of other pluralists whose main concern is to defend corporate rights in debates about religious freedom. See, for instance, Richard W. Garnett, “‘The Freedom of the Church’: (Towards) An Exposition, Translation, and Defense,” *Journal of Contemporary Legal Studies*, vol. 21, no. 33, 2013, pp. 33-57; Paul Horwitz, “Churches as First Amendment Institutions: Of Sovereignty and Spheres,” *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2009, pp. 79-132; Nathan B. Oman, “Doux commerce, religion, and the limits of antidiscrimination law,” *Indiana Law Journal*, vol. 92, no. 2, 2017, pp. 693-733; and Steven D. Smith, *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 2010); among others.

³⁷⁷ Eisenberg, “Pluralism and the Authority of Groups to Discriminate,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, forthcoming. It is worth mentioning that Nicole Roughan’s work on relative authority and legal pluralism pays attention to Indigenous peoples, but I leave it aside here because she does not conceive of pluralism in the same terms as the ‘political pluralist’ tradition.

³⁷⁸ See Allard-Tremblay, “The Modern and the Political Pluralist Perspectives on Political Authorities.”

Now, what I want to argue here is that even these approaches that take the political claims of Indigenous peoples seriously need to be pushed further in order to go beyond human-human interactions in their analyses of plurality. Human animals are not the exclusive concern of justice and equality, and there is no reason to bound diversity to the social, cultural, and political realms. And what is remarkable is that this is a fundamental lesson taught by Indigenous conceptions of belonging and citizenship.³⁷⁹ To take one prominent example, we can think of John Borrows's notion of "landed citizenship," whose purpose is to capture the ways in which the Anishinabe relate to the deep diversity that characterises the lands on which they dwell. This land-centered conception of citizenship depicts the "loyalties, allegiances, and affection" that define the relationships between the participants in such political communities, which include "[t]he water, wind, sun, and stars," as well as "the fish, birds, plants and animals."³⁸⁰ Borrows has consistently shown that Indigenous legal systems "imbue the natural world with legal personhood," and has insisted that "Indigenous laws are best revitalized when they are rooted in a people's longer-term relationship with the earth."³⁸¹ In the recent debate about resurgence and reconciliation, which is often framed in terms of the contrast between two schools of thought in Indigenous-settler relations that are necessarily opposed to each other, Borrows has argued that the resurgence of Indigenous laws and forms of life requires the revitalization of Indigenous peoples's relationships with the natural world, and hence that their reconciliation with the earth is a necessary first step for their

³⁷⁹ See, for instance, Jace Weaver, ed., *Defending Mother Earth: Native American Perspectives on Environmental Justice* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996); Ron Trosper, *Resilience, Reciprocity and Ecological-Economics, Northwest Coast Sustainability* (London: Routledge, 2011); Nancy Turner, *The Earth's Blanket: Traditional Teachings for Sustainable Living* (Vancouver: Douglas & MacIntyre, 2005). All cited in Borrows, "Earth-Bound: Indigenous Resurgence and Environmental Reconciliation," in *Resurgence and Reconciliation. Indigenous-Settler Relations and Earth Teachings*, eds. J. Borrows and J. Tully (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), p. 76.

³⁸⁰ John Borrows, *Recovering Canada: The Resurgence of Indigenous Law* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press: 2002), p. 138.

³⁸¹ Borrows, "Earth-Bound: Indigenous Resurgence and Environmental Reconciliation," p. 56.

reconciliation with other peoples.³⁸² What is important to note here is that, on Borrows's view, plurality should be approached through the lens of sustainability. That is to say, our connection to the lands and waters and to the diversity of interdependent animate beings who compose this "landed citizenship" demands the nurturing of relationships of cooperation and of care-giving and care-receiving. This is because these relationships constitute the ecological conditions of life itself.

For these reasons, the normative case for pluralism needs to be grounded in an ecologically aware ethics whose main purpose is to provide a basis for responding to ecosocial vulnerability. From this perspective, the political pluralist emphasis on the authority of formally organized groups to cultivate their normative orders becomes less important—and can sometimes even become problematic—as one starts widening the scope of pluralism and focusing on the vulnerability of animate beings and the relations that co-sustain life on earth. Further, from the perspective of the kind of ethics that I'm sketching here, the pluralist emphasis on groups as self-contained and self-sufficient political entities who ought to be protected from external influence is as atomistic as the liberalism it purports to counter.³⁸³ And here, it is important to mention that Eisenberg's approach to pluralism attempts to address these two issues, even though it does not extend its scope to include ecological diversity. Concerning the first point, Eisenberg recognizes the vulnerable position of minorities within minorities, and argues that a "reconstructed theory of political pluralism is primarily committed to offering individuals the means to a healthy personal development."³⁸⁴ This is to say that, for Eisenberg, there is no inherent value in pluralism itself;

³⁸² Borrows, "Earth-Bound: Indigenous Resurgence and Environmental Reconciliation," p. 50.

³⁸³ Political pluralism is defined by its proponents in contrast to liberalism. Indeed, pluralism's defense of group authority is opposed to the atomistic nature of liberalism's conception of freedom of conscience. See Eisenberg, "Pluralism and method at the turn of the century," in *Modern Pluralism. Anglo-American debates since 1880*, ed. M. Bevir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 60-80. Muñiz-Fraticelli, "The distinctiveness of religious liberty," in *Mapping the Legal Boundaries of Belonging*, ed. R. Provost (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 99-120.

³⁸⁴ Eisenberg, *Reconstructing Political Pluralism*, p. 171. See also Eisenberg and Jeff Spinner-Halev, eds., *Minorities within Minorities. Equality, Rights and Diversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

rather, the value of pluralism lies in its capacity to foster self-development, and the limits of pluralism become clear when it stops fulfilling its task properly. Secondly, Eisenberg's relational account of group pluralism avoids the charge of atomism since it posits that group membership is plural and overlapping (that is, that persons do not exclusively belong to one group), and therefore that the legitimacy of group authority depends upon the relations in which the authorities of different groups are enmeshed.

In the same vein, I want to defend an instrumental account of pluralism, but one that conceives of plurality as beneficial to the extent that relationships of care, reciprocity, and sustainability are generated and maintained between and among forms of life. With this end in view, it is necessary to attune the manner in which we approach pluralism to an ecological model of citizenship and collective responsibility in order to develop adequately informed personal, social and institutional responses to the vulnerability of the living order. In this way, my analysis's ultimate aim is to provide a theoretical foundation from which to consolidate the struggles for social oppression *and* ecological oppression. As I suggested earlier, what is needed is an account of pluralism that is premised on the moral demands of vulnerability and interdependency, and therefore on the significance of reciprocity and cooperation. This runs counter to the "billiard-ball"³⁸⁵ conception of groups that is inherent in pluralism, which not only posits that groups are independent of each other but also values such purported independence.³⁸⁶ Moreover, we also need an analysis of vulnerability that explains why we have obligations to care for the conditions of

³⁸⁵ I borrow the term from James Tully, who uses the notion to describe the view of 'culture' that developed with the formation of modern constitutionalism, according to which "a culture is separate, bounded and internally uniform." See Tully, *Strange Multiplicity*, p. 10.

³⁸⁶ See, for instance, Muñiz-Fraticelli's claim that "the authority of formally constituted associations is foundationally independent of any other authority." In Muñiz-Fraticelli, *The Structure of Pluralism*, p. 4. See also Allard-Tremblay's pluralist representation of society as "made up of individuals with various significant normative commitments to distinct groups" that "function as independent 'nodes of governance'." In Allard-Tremblay, "The Modern and the Political Pluralist Perspectives on Political Authorities," p. 690.

sustainability of life on earth, and not only for vulnerable groups and identities, as some forms of pluralism would have it.

An appropriate pluralist approach needs to be supplemented by an awareness of the unsustainable patterns of environmental and human exploitation that lie at the root of the dominant social orders. This requires that we reorient the pluralist reflection that is mainly committed to securing freedom and self-determination towards the construction of sustainable spaces. Let's take an example: an Indigenous community called Unis'tot'en, which is affiliated to the Wet'suwet'en Nation, has established a resistance camp on the shores of the Wedzin Kwah and mouth of the Gosnell Creek, in a territory of interest to private companies and the Canadian state who are seeking to build pipelines to connect northeastern British Columbia to LNG Canada's export terminal on the coast.³⁸⁷ In short, the Unis'tot'en have built a cabin in Wet'suwet'en territory along the path of the proposed pipelines in order to block the planned construction work. Further, the nation's hereditary clan chiefs have asserted that the project is illegitimate without their consent.³⁸⁸ Now, a pluralist argument in defence of the Unis'tot'en would conventionally take the following form: the Unis'tot'en group is a self-governing entity that possesses its own inherent right to exercise jurisdictional authority.³⁸⁹ This constitutes a source of legitimate authority that is independent of the state, and therefore the latter has no right whatsoever to intervene in the internal affairs of the Unis'tot'en without its consent. In addition, the individual members of the group are free to commit themselves to—and to preserve—the distinctive “normative order” that structures and defines the Unis'tot'en's form of life, whatever that entails.³⁹⁰

³⁸⁷ See “About,” *Unist'ot'en. Heal the People, Heal the Land*, accessed February 5, 2019, <https://unistoten.camp>.

³⁸⁸ Amy Smart, “More than a ‘protest camp’: Unist'ot'en camp residents on life on the land,” *The Star*, February 2, 2019, <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2019/02/03/more-than-a-protest-camp-unistoten-camp-residents-on-life-on-the-land.html>.

³⁸⁹ Muñiz-Fraticelli, *The Structure of Pluralism*, p. 25.

³⁹⁰ Allard-Tremblay, “The Modern and the Political Pluralist Perspectives on Political Authorities,” p. 677.

I think this is an unsatisfactory argument, and I want to suggest that the kind of ecologically aware pluralism that I'm attempting to sketch provides a more adequate picture of what's at stake here. A necessary first step is to integrate a relational perspective, such as that developed by Eisenberg, in order to capture a finer grain picture of the sites of interaction and overlap between groups and among the members of those groups, and therefore to complexify the question of the legitimacy of authority. Indeed, plurality entails the contestation of the sources of authority as well as its boundaries by different persons and groups of persons, as the case of the Unis'tot'en shows. For instance, and without going into details, it is worth noting that there is a division in terms of Indigenous support for the construction of the pipeline route that has opposed hereditary chiefs and elected council members on the question.³⁹¹ That is to say, groups are not static and self-contained entities whose identity and authority are settled once and for all; rather, their identity and authority are continuously contested and negotiated through dense and complex relations within and between persons and groups of persons. A relational perspective is required to capture this dimension of internal contestation.

But what is crucial for my purposes is that there is yet another aspect that is missing from the picture offered so far, which corresponds to the ecological situations and interconnections of the persons and groups of persons involved in the case at hand. And this is something that is integral to the way in which the Unis'tot'en conceive of their campaign. As they state on their website: "Heal the land. Unis'tot'en traditional territory remains relatively intact. The forests are still there, wildlife prospers, and the water is still pure."³⁹² And as the house group's hereditary spokesperson, Freda Huson, has asserted: "Our people's belief is that we are part of the land. The

³⁹¹ Amy Smart, "Why some elected Wet'suwet'en councils signed agreements with Coastal Gaslink," *Vancouver Sun*, January 20, 2019, <https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/why-some-elected-wetsuweten-councils-signed-agreements-with-coastal-gaslink>.

³⁹² See "Home," *Unist'ot'en. Heal the People, Heal the Land*, accessed February 5, 2019, <https://unistoten.camp>.

land is not separate from us. The land sustains us. And if we don't take care of her, she won't be able to sustain us..."³⁹³ It is then clear that the Unist'ot'en's claims are not merely about jurisdictional authority, nor about the freedom of the group to pursue whatever good it has set itself to achieve. The meaning and rationale of the good they are pursuing is precisely what matters here, and these are directly related to the ecological awareness of the interdependency that is essential to the flourishing and well-being of vulnerable beings. The pluralist claim that the Unist'ot'en's reasons for action are solely a matter of resistance against the state's sovereignty, or about an assertion of autonomy, is thus radically incomplete. The Unist'ot'en's connection to the lands and waters and to the other living beings with whom they strive to co-sustain life constitutes a significantly higher reason to resist.

In sum, when pluralist approaches deal with Indigenous conflicts against the state and private companies they fail to capture the most fundamental aspect of Indigenous struggles against colonialism, that is, the fact that these struggles are deeply informed by their relationship to nature. But this applies to other cases as well, even if the groups in question do not assert ecological claims. This is so because an adequate political approach to pluralism must be guided by the normative obligations involved in responding to the plurality of manifestations of vulnerability. And as I have shown, pluralism is only concerned with one specific form of vulnerability, namely with minority groups within larger polities and the risks of oppression that they face. But if we want to move pluralism towards a more promising direction, we therefore need to be attentive to vulnerable minorities within those groups as well, but also to the nonhuman animals that dwell in and around human settlements, and to the more-than-human participants in the ecological relations that sustain life. There is of course a practical dimension that is inherent in what those normative

³⁹³ See "Background of the campaign," *Unist'ot'en. Heal the People, Heal the Land*, accessed February 5, 2019, <https://unistoten.camp/no-pipelines/background-of-the-campaign/>.

obligations entail, which means that it is not possible to establish them theoretically. We also need to be aware that these normative obligations may take multiple forms, and that they will most likely vary from context to context, depending on who the care-giver and the care-receiver are. However, they will necessarily be directed towards maintaining, continuing, and repairing that which is alive and which co-sustains the conditions of life on earth.³⁹⁴

4. Conclusion

Vulnerability has emerged as a specific moral problem, and is now being studied as a fundamental descriptive and normative concept in interdisciplinary approaches to ethics and politics. As I have shown, vulnerability is central to a wide variety of theoretical enquiries that use the notion as an action-guiding principle, but there is no agreement concerning its meaning or scope. The literature is broadly divided into three approaches: ontological, or intrinsic, accounts; dispositional, or extrinsic, accounts; and those that combine the two. In this chapter, I have attempted to defend a version of the latter, given that the one is needed for the other to make sense in the first place. That said, Armstrong's critique of ontological vulnerability is important, among other things because he attempts to extend the scope of the concept in order to include a wide variety of objects. I also agree with his (and Levine et al.'s) claim that if *everyone* is vulnerable, then the concept loses some of its normative force. But this does not mean that we need to drop the ontological insistence that vulnerability and dependency are universal features of living beings;

³⁹⁴ I am rearticulating Joan Tronto's and Berenice Fisher's general definition of caring in light of my concerns about ecosocial vulnerability. See Fisher and Tronto, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring," in *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives*, eds. Abel, Emily K., and Nelson, Margaret K. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), p. 40. See also María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care. Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

rather, it means that we need to pay attention to the different levels and degrees at which vulnerability expresses itself. Furthermore, I have argued that it is a mistake both to suppose that the notion should be restricted to human animals exclusively, but also to assume that we ought to conceive of *everything* as vulnerable, or as potentially vulnerable. This is why I have suggested a definition of vulnerability that is broad enough to capture both ontological and relational features, but narrow enough to exclude both vitalist and biocentric approaches, which attribute equal value to everything, in the first case, and to everything that is alive, in the second, without qualification. In my view, if it is to be politically salient, a normative account of vulnerability ought to be correlated with sustainability.

Moreover, the chapter has pushed the political implications of vulnerability further by focusing on recent debates about pluralism. I argued that pluralist arguments for group authority and freedom are not properly suited to Indigenous struggles against colonialism, because they fail to capture what is central to them: that is, the fact that their struggles are not merely about exercising jurisdiction over a particular territory, but especially about what it means to be connected to the land and about the kinds of engagements that are needed to nurture adequate relationships with humans, nonhumans, and other-than-human beings over time. This allowed me to show that a significant weakness of pluralism is that it is exclusively concerned with one aspect of vulnerability, which corresponds to the vulnerability of minority groups within larger polities. I then indicated that a relational account, such as developed by Eisenberg, provides important steps for incorporating other kinds of vulnerable persons and groups of persons into pluralism. Having said that, even relational pluralism presupposes that equality and justice are human-only matters, and therefore disregards other-than-human manifestations of vulnerability. My aim in this chapter, therefore, has been to sketch out how pluralist approaches could begin to integrate an ecological

ethics into their political agenda. This entails developing a sensitivity to the diverse ways in which the vulnerability of living beings that sustain life embodies itself. Also, it requires generating empathy and mutual understanding so that pluralism is not merely a matter of individual groups fighting for freedom and autonomy, but is instead about persons and groups of persons striving to maintain and repair the world so that animate beings can live in it in co-sustainable ways.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Nature's relations: ontology, vulnerability, agency

The previous chapters have laid the groundwork for a philosophical inquiry aimed at sketching a pluralist ethics based on the interdependency and vulnerability of animate beings who co-sustain life on earth. It is therefore necessary to provide a robust account of the ways in which our previous discussions of anthropocentrism, nature, vulnerability, and animacy make sense within a broader framework of ethical enquiry. In line with the normative claims I have made so far, I argue that political theory needs to widen its view of the space in which what matters politically takes place, and I suggest that integrating the conditions of sustainability of all affected—that is, *all* participants in nature's relations—is a necessary first step in this direction. My argument rests on the assumption that a basic requirement for this is that we articulate qualitative distinctions among types of relationships, such that we can assess better and worse relationships and hence determine which ones are worth nurturing and protecting and which ones are not. But I haven't yet provided a detailed justification for the necessity of these qualitative distinctions, nor have I given a complete account of the ethical framework that is needed to respond to the vulnerability of interdependent animate beings.

Much recent scholarship on new materialisms and posthumanism is dedicated to decentering critical analyses of agency, power, and causation away from a humancentric worldview to the more-than-human worlds of technoscientific and naturecultural entanglements of objects, organisms, ecosystems, and matter.³⁹⁵ This chapter addresses the ethical and political

³⁹⁵ See: Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Diana Coole, and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Elizabeth Grosz, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Donna Haraway, *Staying with*

implications of such work in the light of the dissertation's concern for the co-sustainability of all vulnerable life. Even though political theory needs to be self-reflective and critical about its gravitational pull towards human exceptionalism, I argue that this should not entail the absence of normative criteria for adjudicating matters of importance. The main claim I will defend here is that the ontological flattening in the strongest sense that comes with the new materialist and posthumanist project is problematic in three interrelated respects. First, it posits a monistic outlook that ends up imposing uniformity and unity on a reality that is manifestly heterogenous and plural. I explore the implications of this for the study of social and natural reality, notably in relation to what Laura Ephraim has called the 'two-sciences settlement'. Second, it can prevent us from asking critical questions about power, and hence about inequality and vulnerability. I argue that this is so because of the atomized responses it prescribes to ethical and political issues. And finally, it stretches the notion of agency to the point where it risks losing the normative grip that allows us to evaluate beings and their relations in light of the extent to which they sustain life on earth. Hence the need to offer a picture of why agency matters, and in particular why it is normatively salient from an ecological point of view.

In what follows, then, I draw out the significance of maintaining evaluative judgments concerning why we should or should not care about beings and things and the ways in which they relate to one another. I begin by examining the relationship between the natural and the social sciences, and more precisely how they came to be characterized as incommensurable and mutually unintelligible. This caused the ontological opposition between nature and politics that new

the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Eduardo Khon, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care. Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Anna L. Tsing, Nils Bubandt, Elaine Gan, and Heather A. Swanson, eds, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); and Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); among others.

materialists and posthumanists rebuke. Although I agree with the spirit and the political necessity of their critique, I argue that it rests on a mistaken view of the ‘natural sciences’—because it fails to situate them historically and contextually—and that it is too quick to dismiss the distinction between the study of nature and the study of social reality. I also problematize the assumption that scientific experts are nature’s proxies and can therefore speak on its behalf for democratic purposes. Underlying this view is an uncritical acceptance of authority, which is characteristic of a broader tendency to dilute issues of power and inequality. Moreover, I problematize the new materialist and posthumanist uncritical acceptance of the hegemonic power of natural science. This contributes to the marginalization of other forms of knowledge and epistemic practices by the dominant voices of our masterful politics, and hence prevents us to ask relevant questions about the structural conditions that are at the basis of our destructive relations to nature. I then consider the work of Hasana Sharp and María Puig de la Bellacasa, which enables us to think with and against new materialisms and posthumanism, since they both challenge human exceptionalism while recognizing the practical necessity of line drawing between significant and less significant matters. This brings me to conclude that while I agree that the ontological opposition between nature and politics is harmful—particularly when it results in an apolitical conception of nature and a denaturalized notion of the political—we nevertheless need to articulate scalar distinctions of worth between the worlds of *bios* and the worlds of *techne*. This is because we need to think critically about ways of evaluating types of relationships, such that we can assess them and establish which ones are worth fostering and cultivating and which ones need to be transformed or curbed in the interests of ecosocial coexistence. I ultimately argue that these distinctions of worth ought to be grounded on the extent to which they respond to the vulnerability of nature.

1. The ‘two-sciences settlement’ and the ‘two-worlds ontology’

As we saw in chapter three, the work of science and technology scholars such as Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour has thrown into serious question the distinction between nature and culture, a distinction that was and still is taken for granted by many in the social sciences and the humanities.³⁹⁶ What these scholars and those they have inspired take issue with is the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of what Laura Ephraim calls the “two-sciences settlement.”³⁹⁷ The latter refers to an intellectual paradigm that is premised on a discrepancy between the realm of ‘politics’ and that of ‘nature’, and which has taken hold of much political theory and philosophy. This oppositional view of nature and politics presupposes a bounded notion of the ‘political’, which implies that social spaces are the exclusive sites for democratic politics—or for politics *tout court*—and therefore relegates the ‘natural’ spaces to an apolitical sphere, one that is also seen as irrelevant as a site for ethical or moral reflection.³⁹⁸ Moreover, from a methodological point of view, the practical consequence of the “two-sciences settlement” is a strict separation between the social and the natural sciences, which are conceived as operating according to distinct and incompatible conceptual and procedural schemes that are imposed by their different objects of study.³⁹⁹ In short, the divide can be captured by the opposition between two sets of methodological imperatives: on the one hand, those that seek to discover regularities in natural phenomena and to achieve predictability because they are purported to analyze empirical matter, and hence be

³⁹⁶ For two seminal contributions, see: Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991); and Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. C. Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

³⁹⁷ See Laura Ephraim, *Who Speaks for Nature? On the Politics of Science* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

³⁹⁸ For a criticism of the separation of politics from ethics and morality, see chapter one, this dissertation.

³⁹⁹ Ephraim, *Who Speaks for Nature?*, p. 11.

verifiable. On the other hand, those that strive to understand forms of social life by considering inter-subjective and common meanings, which are by definition not extractable as “brute data.”⁴⁰⁰ Charles Taylor’s work has been particularly prominent in the discussions that have contributed to the production and reproduction of the “two-sciences” settlement.⁴⁰¹ His writings on interpretation have attempted to delineate the criteria of judgment for understanding and navigating reality in a way that has foregrounded radically different structures of meaning between these two types of sciences.⁴⁰² But before elaborating further on these competing visions, it is necessary to stress that Taylor’s critique is directed specifically at what he calls “naturalism,” which corresponds to the view that holds that “the nature of which [human animals are] a part is to be understood according to the canons which emerged in the seventeenth-century revolution in natural science.”⁴⁰³ In other words, Taylor is not advocating for an ontological separation between nature and society, but rather is emphasizing the contextual, historical and contingent character of the assumptions that underlie a particular orientation to the study of political life. Such an orientation involves reductive and mechanistic accounts of human agency, given that it requires that explanations of social phenomena be formal and decontextualized in order to yield invariant results that are supposed to make sense independently of the wider spaces within which these phenomena are embedded.

⁴⁰⁰ See Charles Taylor, “Interpretation and the sciences of man,” in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences. Philosophical Papers Vol. II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 19.

⁴⁰¹ Along with that of other philosophers and political theorists who opposed behaviourism. Ephraim mentions Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, Sheldon Woldin, Jürgen Habermas, and Hannah Pitkin; see *Who Speaks for Nature?*, p. 11; see also Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991). For accounts that emphasize the influence of Taylor’s work on the subject, see Mark Bevir and Jason Blakely, “Naturalism and Anti-Naturalism,” in *Routledge Handbook of Interpretive Political Science*, eds. M. Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 31-44; Bevir and Blakely, “Why Political Science is an Ethical Issue,” *Political Studies*, vol. 66, no. 2, 2018, pp. 425-441; and Bevir and Blakely, *Interpretive Political Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁴⁰² See, in particular: Taylor, “Self-Interpreting Animals,” in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers Vol. I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 45-76; “Interpretation and the sciences of man,” in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, pp. 15-57; among others.

⁴⁰³ Taylor, “Introduction,” in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, p. 2.

One of the features of ‘naturalism’ that Taylor identified and criticized is its ontological atomism, namely, the propensity of natural science inspired political theorists and philosophers to conceive of reality in terms of self-contained, disaggregated units of analysis. Even though behaviourism offers the classical example, Taylor showed how certain strands of political philosophy reflect atomistic outlooks as well, particularly what he calls “primacy-of-right” doctrines.⁴⁰⁴ Taylor’s main targets in his 1985 book are those theories that rest on the premise that human animals are metaphysically independent of society, and that in order to understand the functioning of a particular society—and therefore to make normative claims about it—one needs to start from the ostensible self-sufficiency and autonomy of the individuals who comprise it.⁴⁰⁵ This reverse Aristotelianism leads naturally to a crude understanding of society, one that conceives of the political community as an aggregation of individuals who happen to be there at the same time in the same place. Seen in this light, human animals are deprived of the meaningful bonds that would hold a society together in the first place. A further, perhaps more recent, example of atomism in social theory is the trend to frame political struggles (whether it is in the media, academia, or even by the protesters themselves) in terms of “moments.”⁴⁰⁶ As Patchen Markell points out, this inclination to think of politics as “fleeting or momentary surges of horizontal power” is nowhere more evident than in the usage of the word “occupations” to designate political movements that are depicted as “a matter the sudden and dramatic interruption of ordinary life.”⁴⁰⁷ In addition to being sociologically false, since it overlooks the complex organizational structure of the movements in question, this picture of politics also promotes an impoverished notion of

⁴⁰⁴ See Taylor, “Atomism,” in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, pp. 187-210.

⁴⁰⁵ Taylor, “Atomism.” See in particular pp. 189-191.

⁴⁰⁶ See Patchen Markell, “The moment has passed: power after Arendt”, in *Radical Future Pasts: Untimely Political Theory*, eds. R. Coles et al. (University Press of Kentucky: Lexington, 2014), pp. 114-143.

⁴⁰⁷ Markell, “The moment has passed,” pp. 113 & 130-132.

agency, one that conceives of will, decision and intent in punctual terms.⁴⁰⁸ This is so because it inclines us to think about political action as spontaneous and episodic—that is, as occurring in finite time, in a bounded region of space, and constrained by its own termination.⁴⁰⁹ This of course begs the question of the duration of political action, and hence of its sustainability.

But let's return to Taylor's critique of the influence of modern conceptions of science on the study of the social world. The fact that his assessment is aimed at a specific intellectual development that had enormous influence across disciplinary boundaries at a particular time is crucial: given that it is possible to situate it within a specific framework of discourse and ideas, it is also possible to undermine it. For just as it is a mistake to apply the standards that emanate from seventeenth century developments in natural science to try to understand social phenomena, so it is a mistake to reduce all intellectual endeavors that claim to study 'nature' to such versions of scientific enquiry that have proven to be terribly implausible. We can therefore argue that, from Taylor's perspective, at least part of the chasm arises from a misunderstanding of the philosophical problem we are dealing with. This is due to the hasty assumption that to rebut a scientific outlook for its failure to capture the interpretive and self-interpretive character of social life entails what Ephraim calls a "two-worlds ontology."⁴¹⁰ This is to say that Taylor's appeal for an approach to meaning that is free of 'naturalist' commitments does not require the disconnection between the natural and the political that Ephraim associates with interpretive theories. On the contrary, Taylor's aim here is to caution us against the seventeenth century scientific outlook that "shows us as capable of achieving a kind of disengagement from our world by objectifying it."⁴¹¹ And this

⁴⁰⁸ Markell, "The moment has passed," p. 116.

⁴⁰⁹ See also Anthony S. Laden's discussion of ongoing vs episodic conceptions of reasoning, in Laden, *Reasoning. A Social Picture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 24-31.

⁴¹⁰ Ephraim, *Who Speaks for Nature?*, p. 11.

⁴¹¹ Taylor, "Introduction," p. 4.

objectification of material reality has destructive consequences for both human and non-human worlds, irrespective of a purported ontological division between the two.

It is then clear that the struggle against atomism and objectification is not inconsistent with the blurring of the dividing line between the natural and the human sciences. In this regard, James Tully's work is exemplary as it draws from Western natural and human sciences, as well as from the traditional ecological knowledges of Indigenous peoples.⁴¹² Concerning the former, Tully is wary of the pitfalls indicated by Taylor but also of their connection with European global imperialism, which is at the root of much of our destructive and unsustainable relationships to the earth.⁴¹³ Hence, Tully complicates the 'two-sciences, two-ontologies' picture since he shows that the separation between politics and nature is not just the product of an epistemic mistake, but rather is constitutive of the extractivist agenda of capitalist imperialism. Yet, Tully argues that in order to bring about an integral project of reconciliation that aims at both reconciling ourselves "with each other in all our diversity" and "with the living earth in its diversity," a multi-tradition dialogue between forms and ways of knowing and being is needed.⁴¹⁴ Such a dialogue of reciprocal elucidation can provide the kind of common ground on which to stand together if we are to engage with one another in mutually sustainable ways. The reunion of and reconciliation between this plurality of forms of knowledge that were pitted against each other and framed hierarchically by Western traditions of thought is thus a requirement for developing forms of thinking and acting that pose serious challenges to the binary divide between the natural and the social worlds.

⁴¹² See, in particular, James Tully, "Reconciliation Here on Earth," in *Resurgence and Reconciliation*, eds. M. Asch, J. Borrows, and J. Tully (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), pp. 83-129; see also Tully, "Life Sustains Life 1. Value: Social and Ecological," in *Nature and Value*, ed. Akeel Bilgrami (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019, forthcoming); Tully, "Life Sustains Life 2. The ways of re-engagement with the living earth," in *Nature and Value*, ed. Akeel Bilgrami (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019, forthcoming); and Tully, "Deparochializing political theory and beyond: a dialogue approach to comparative political thought," *Journal of World Philosophies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2016, pp. 51-74; among others.

⁴¹³ Tully, "Reconciliation Here on Earth," p. 85.

⁴¹⁴ Tully, "Reconciliation Here on Earth," pp. 83-86. See also Tully, "Deparochializing political theory and beyond."

As Tully's work suggests, attending to our alienated relationships to the living earth involves overcoming the 'two-sciences settlement' and the 'two-worlds ontology', but not in order to prescribe a "single world," as Ephraim does,⁴¹⁵ but rather to negotiate the coming together of a plurality of heterogenous yet interdependent worlds.⁴¹⁶ Indeed, the blurring of the dividing line between those worlds—and of the various of ways of thinking about and being with those worlds—does not entail that we merge them into a single material and meaningful entity, nor that we come up with a master science to systematically study them in toto. For this would be to reproduce the imperious attempts to impose uniformity and homogeneity that we set ourselves to fight against in the first place.

2. Ethical inquiry in more-than-human worlds

Now, much of what I have been discussing hints at a specific direction, which, while largely overlooked by political theorists and philosophers, has been explored by posthumanists, new materialists, and by some variants of science and technology studies. Although there are differences among these approaches, their common aim is to challenge the presumed boundaries that define the realm of human nature. The latter has not only been construed against those human animals who are regarded as abnormal, but also in contrast to everything that is other-than-human and which is subject to the purported superiority of the normalized human being.⁴¹⁷ Considering this line of work is indispensable for anyone interested in developing ways of disentangling human and nonhuman relations and displacing political thinking by opening it up to nonhuman worlds.

⁴¹⁵ Ephraim, *Who Speaks for Nature?*, p. 17.

⁴¹⁶ See Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*; and Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser, eds., *A World of Many Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

⁴¹⁷ See Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, p. 12.

Indeed, thinkers affiliated to these approaches have disrupted the anthropocentric and humanist discourses that are at the basis of the ontological splits between mind and body, ideality and materiality, nature and culture, and which are responsible for the rendering of nonhuman matter as passive and inert.⁴¹⁸

This ever-growing body of literature takes issue with the fact that ‘classical’ political theory and philosophy have been held captive by a restraining ontological picture, or, to put it more starkly, following Elizabeth Grosz, by a privileging of the epistemological over the ontological.⁴¹⁹ The latter has resulted in an impoverished understanding of “what things are, how they connect with each other, what relations exist between them,” and, consequently, of the attendant ethical and political questions that are posed by the intertwinements between the multiple forms of existence that live and act together.⁴²⁰ The project of replacing such a picture can be traced back to the lifting of what Ephraim jokingly refers to as the “informal travel ban” that prevented political theorists and philosophers from wetting their toes in natural scientific waters.⁴²¹ But the mingling of political theory and natural science that new materialists advocate for does not go without saying, and as Ephraim’s work demonstrates, it is crucial to complicate it. Indeed, Ephraim argues that new materialist approaches are asymmetrical, because, while strongly critical (and rightly so) of political theory’s dominant voices, they tend to rely uncritically on hegemonic scientific discourses.⁴²² And this has consequences for our understanding of the ways in which natural science matters for politics, because if we follow this path, we risk failing to interrogate the

⁴¹⁸ See Samantha Frost, “The implications of the new materialisms for feminist epistemology,” in *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science*, ed. H.E. Grasswick (London: Springer, 2011), pp. 69-83.

⁴¹⁹ Grosz, *The Incorporeal*, p. 3.

⁴²⁰ Grosz, *The Incorporeal*, pp. 3-4.

⁴²¹ Ephraim, *Who Speaks for Nature?*, p. 19. According to Ephraim, the most influential ‘political’ scholars to have “visited the journals and labs of natural scientists” are Bruno Latour and William Connolly. See Latour, *Politics of Nature. How to Bring the Sciences Into Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); and Connolly, *Neuropolitics. Thinking, Culture, Speed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

⁴²² Ephraim, *Who Speaks for Nature?*, pp. 20-24.

processes by which scientific narratives have been set in place, the professed authority that they came to possess, and the legitimacy of their own claims to such authority. In Ephraim's words: "Without greater sensitivity to the political origins and outcomes of the authority exercised by Bohr or Prigogine, we risk distorting their postclassical onto-stories into next-generation ontological dogmas, narrowing instead of widening the stories that can be told about how matter matters in politics."⁴²³

Conferring authority to natural-scientific experts is a political question that is depoliticized in certain frameworks of representation, such as in Bruno Latour's idea of an association of humans and nonhumans, where scientists are given the role of "spokespersons of the nonhumans."⁴²⁴ The problem with introducing this taken for granted conception of scientific authority into the realm of politics is threefold: first of all, underlying this view is a restricted understanding of democracy, one in which governance is under the jurisdiction of experts and professionals who speak for the collectivity.⁴²⁵ Secondly, this view accepts existing inequalities as inevitable—and hence "naturalizes" them—since it stops short of asking how is it that some of us are better able to speak on behalf of beings and entities who ostensibly cannot speak for themselves.⁴²⁶ This begs the question of the conditions of possibility of the practices of deference and referral that serve to recognize and institute the political constitution of scientific authority. And thirdly, western science and technology is complicit with global imperialism and ongoing settler colonialism, as evidenced by its implication in geoengineering and extractivist operations such as mining and

⁴²³ Ephraim, *Who Speaks for Nature?*, p. 20.

⁴²⁴ Latour, *Politics of Nature*, p. 64, cited in Ephraim, *Who Speaks for Nature?*, p. 22.

⁴²⁵ This restricted view of democracy corresponds to the modern mode of civil citizenship, which James Tully contrasts to the civic practices of democratic participation. See Tully, "On local and global citizenship: an apprenticeship manual," in *Public Philosophy in a New Key, Volume 2: Imperialism and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 243-309; and Tully, "On Global Citizenship," in *On Global Citizenship. James Tully in Dialogue* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 3-100.

⁴²⁶ Ephraim, *Who Speaks for Nature?*, p. 23.

agrofuel production. These practices create and maintain power relations and forms of mastery that are most often ignored by dominant natural scientific discourses. For this reason, it is necessary to challenge this model of science, and to think carefully about how to open spaces for other forms of knowledge, such as the traditional ecological knowledges of Indigenous peoples.

The failure of some new materialists and posthumanists to attend to structural inequalities requires that their contribution to political theory be complemented by a robust consideration of vulnerability. This is why the most compelling approaches on the subject come from the sort of feminist thinking that is attentive to vulnerability. The latter has been at the forefront of exposing the normalizing and exclusionary ethos that underlies the thought and practice of the purported champions of freedom and democracy in the Western tradition. As Hasana Sharp puts it, the feminist tradition in political thought “entails attention to inequalities, power relations, and the different capacities and vulnerabilities proper to differently situated subjects.”⁴²⁷ Feminism’s attentiveness to the various ways in which vulnerability manifests itself makes it essential for thinking about the ethical and political implications of this broadening of our ontological scope as advocated by posthumanists and new materialists. Hence Sharp’s suggestion of approaching the latter through a feminist lens, which calls us to reflect critically on the possibilities of life on earth amid the destructive forces that have been brought about by an ethos of mastery and dominance.⁴²⁸ It also makes us sensitive to the differentiated patterns of vulnerability that I alluded to in chapter three, and thus complicates the unqualified reference to human activity as the source of the destructive reconfiguration of the earth’s systems.⁴²⁹

⁴²⁷ Hasana Sharp, “Endangered Life: Feminist Posthumanism in the Anthropocene?”, in *Feminist Philosophies of Life*, eds. H. Sharp and C. Taylor (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2016), p. 277.

⁴²⁸ Sharp, “Endangered Life,” p. 274.

⁴²⁹ Sharp, “Endangered Life,” p. 274.

Sharp's invocation of posthumanism is part of her project of "renaturalization," whose purpose is to redefine human existence beyond the dualism between nature and culture.⁴³⁰ She argues that her position is posthumanist "if by humanism we understand a philosophical tradition that aspires to a universal union of humanity on the basis of a shared characteristic that is not exhibited by nonhumans, like reason, moral sensibility, or a capacity for autonomy."⁴³¹ Her notion of 'renaturalization' therefore strives to place politics in an ecological perspective, in the sense that it integrates human agency into a web of interdependent beings and things and reorients ethical thinking towards our embeddedness in nonhuman nature. This entails challenging the prevalent ways in which we understand terms such as 'environment' and, to a lesser extent, 'surroundings', namely, those terms that presuppose a conception of 'nature' as that which gravitates around human animals. This is not to say that we should stop using those terms; but rather, it means that we ought to question the status of the particular subjects whose environing reality is being studied. Indeed, it is because of our widespread belief in human exceptionalism that we have managed to think of ourselves as outside of nature. And, according to Sharp, "acting as though the laws of nature do not apply to us enables us to deplete the biosphere's resources, poisoning and annihilating many living beings and eventually undermining the habitability of the planet for humanity."⁴³² For this reason, we need to revive a philosophical landscape that allows us to experience a sense of connection, involvement, and intimacy with other beings and things, and thus to widen the meaning of relational thinking in order to consider the interdependences between and among the multiplicity of members that form part of the biosphere. But this needs to be

⁴³⁰ Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Sharp's notion of 'renaturalization' is of course different from the kind of 'naturalism' that I discussed earlier.

⁴³¹ Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*, p. 5.

⁴³² Sharp, "Endangered Life," p. 277.

accompanied by a sensitivity to the agonistic interplay between powers and counterpowers in the constellations of agencies that coexist in and are constitutive of nature.

Sharp's posthumanism stresses the importance of power and vulnerability for understanding inequalities and injustices in a world that comprises both human and nonhuman nature. Following Spinoza, she suggests that if we want to "facilitate social harmony and political emancipation," then we ought to understand "humanity as vulnerable to the same determinations as beasts, rocks, and vegetables."⁴³³ Seeing ourselves as an integral part of nature allows us to rethink both how we relate to each other and how we relate to more-than-human beings and things. And, as we saw in the last chapter, this is a lesson taught by the traditional ecological knowledges of Indigenous peoples, who insist that it is a fundamental mistake to dissociate political concerns from environmental ones.⁴³⁴ This is because the very viability of political organization requires the well-being of the ecosystems on which living processes depend. In addition, these ecological conditions that sustain life disclose normative relationships of cooperation and mutual aid that are often not readily apparent to us, given the dominance of our unsustainable and destructive social systems.⁴³⁵ Hence Sharp's attempt to both rebuke the masculinist anthropocentric imagination and to cultivate our receptivity to nonhuman forms of life by "expand[ing] the possibilities for new connections and relations," and hinting at potential directions for "maximiz[ing] the possibilities for tenderness, collaboration, and joy."⁴³⁶

⁴³³ Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*, p. 7.

⁴³⁴ See John Borrows, "Earth-Bound: Indigenous Resurgence and Environmental Reconciliation," in *Resurgence and Reconciliation. Indigenous-Settler Relations and Earth Teachings*, eds. J. Borrows and J. Tully (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), pp. 49-81; and John Borrows, *Recovering Canada: The Resurgence of Indigenous Law* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press: 2002); Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013); Nancy J. Turner, *The Earth's Blanket. Traditional Teachings for Sustainable Living* (Vancouver: Douglas & MacIntyre, 2005).

⁴³⁵ See Tully, "Life Sustains Life 1"; and Tully, "Life Sustains Life 2."

⁴³⁶ Sharp and Cynthia Willett, "Ethical Life after Humanism: Toward and Alliance between an Ethics of Eros and the Politics of Renaturalization," in *Feminist Philosophies of Life*, eds. H. Sharp and C. Taylor (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2016), p 82.

So far, I have been discussing approaches that point towards the importance of considering nonhuman nature in ethical reflection, as well as of problematizing taken for granted categorical structures that classify the world into matters of significance and insignificance. What we learn from these critical interventions is that decentering human agencies should not be merely taken as a metaphysical exercise, but rather as a necessary condition of ethical and political life. As María Puig de la Bellacasa shows, engaging with more-than-human worlds raises a different set of questions than those posed by our encounters with other-than-human beings.⁴³⁷ Even though these two terms are often used interchangeably in the literature, there is a difference that is worth noting: while the latter denotes otherized humans, nonhuman animals, organisms, and other living beings, the former refers—in addition to those already mentioned—to physical forces, spiritual entities, as well as things, objects and other “posthumanist constituencies.”⁴³⁸

I argued in chapter four that from an ethical point of view, it is problematic to assign value unqualifiedly, particularly when that implies placing ‘things’ and ‘objects’ on an equal footing with mountains, rivers, forests and other beings who co-sustain life on earth. Yet, this is precisely what thinkers such as Sharp and Puig de la Bellacasa are criticizing, namely, the assumption that ethics must rely on a conception of agency that hinges on exceptionalism—the sort of exceptionalism that fuels the dominant and domineering imaginaries of our predatory social systems. According to Sharp’s project of ‘renaturalization’, for instance, “[n]ot only do cats and dogs join with humans in agential communities, but so do software systems, power grids, and sewage systems.”⁴³⁹ This is why new materialists and posthumanists have clear affinities with science and technology studies, given their willingness to “observe and represent technoscientific

⁴³⁷ Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, p. 2. See also Marisol de la Cadena, “Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections beyond ‘politics’,” *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2010, pp. 334-370.

⁴³⁸ Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, p. 2.

⁴³⁹ Sharp and Willett, “Ethical Life after Humanism,” p. 72.

agencies, things, and entities in ways that do not reobjectify them.”⁴⁴⁰ By calling into question the dominant picture that presumes clear hierarchical orderings between different types of entities, this ontological flattening poses significant challenges to ethical inquiry as traditionally understood in political theory and philosophy. For this reason, Puig de la Bellacasa writes that her reflections are “speculative” instead of normative—that is, they are “open-ended,” and they require “a speculative opening about what a possible involves.”⁴⁴¹ What she means is that to classify something in such categories as ‘better’ or ‘worse’ is not something that we do in the light of a normative theory that “would serve us as a ‘recipe’ for our encounters.”⁴⁴² In this sense, Puig de la Bellacasa does not seem to be so much opposed to establishing qualitative distinctions as she is concerned with being reflective about the ways in which we come to make such distinctions. Similarly, Sharp and Willett recognize that the activity of “line drawing” is inescapable in our thinking and acting, because it is unavoidable to consider “some relations, some beings, and some models of life as more valuable than others.”⁴⁴³ A prominent contender for the drawing of such lines is the distinction between the animate and the inanimate, as I argued for in the previous chapter. Without rejecting it, Sharp and Willett urge us to question this connection between animacy and moral standing and to ask why it seems so important to distinguish between relevant and less relevant others in this light—particularly given “our effort to challenge human exceptionalism and to appreciate the vast network of beings necessary to our subsistence.”⁴⁴⁴

According to Puig de la Bellacasa, an approach that aims at decentering ethics from its humanistic pole must unsettle the view of what counts as life, and more precisely of that which is

⁴⁴⁰ Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, p. 28.

⁴⁴¹ Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, p. 6.

⁴⁴² Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, p. 90.

⁴⁴³ Sharp and Willett, “Ethical Life after Humanism,” p. 80.

⁴⁴⁴ Sharp and Willett, “Ethical Life after Humanism,” p. 80.

worthy of concern and care.⁴⁴⁵ Indeed, much theorizing remains bounded to a restricted understanding of *bios*, one which conceives of human flourishing and well-being independently of the flourishing and well-being of the Earth's other beings.⁴⁴⁶ However, the question that begs to be asked is whether conceiving of ethics in nonanthropocentric grounds entails the devolving of agency to all beings and things and their mutual entanglements. Further, if we are to "stretch received concepts of agency,"⁴⁴⁷ as Jane Bennett would have it, we have to ask ourselves whether the nature of the agency we ascribe to beings and things is the same, or if there are differences between, say, robots and microchips on the one hand, and human animals, nonhuman animals, ecosystems, and the rest of the Earth's beings who co-sustain life, on the other.

3. Caring for the worlds of nature

According to the line of argument I have been trying to present, there is an important difference between beings and things such that it is not possible to speak of agency, autonomy, or freedom in the same sense in the two cases. There are indeed nuances between diverse types of entities within each category as well, but these are not as significant from an ethical point of view as the stark contrast between the categories themselves. This argument rests on the "grammar of animacy" as put forward by Potawatomi scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer, whose gift-reciprocity outlook relies on a distinction between what is alive and what is not.⁴⁴⁸ The idea of course is to begin by extending the realm of animacy in such a way as to become aware of the life that pulses through all beings, with particular attention to those who have been objectified by the imaginaries

⁴⁴⁵ Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, p. 140.

⁴⁴⁶ Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, p. 140.

⁴⁴⁷ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. x.

⁴⁴⁸ See Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*. See also chapter four, this dissertation.

of mastery of our dominant social systems. Kimmerer illustrates this by showing how Indigenous languages “remin[d] us, in every sentence, of our kinship with all of the animate world”—which is defined in contrast to the world of human-made objects and things, as we saw in chapter four.⁴⁴⁹

There is, therefore, a considerable distance between Kimmerer’s position and the general ethos of the strong variant of new materialist and posthuman approaches that I discussed above, whose aim is precisely to disrupt ontological distinctions between the animate and the inanimate, or between organic and inorganic matter.⁴⁵⁰ In this respect, Puig de la Bellacasa’s thought offers a kind of compromise between the two, because although she takes the naturecultural ontological continuum as a starting point for her own reflections, she nevertheless seems to be working with and against it. She begins by cautioning us about using the category of the “nonhuman” as an umbrella term that encompasses a plurality of entities, given that such a broad understanding will cause the conflation of beings and things that are radically different from each other.⁴⁵¹ She then draws a distinction between the worlds of *bios* (or *phusis*) and *techne*, which refer respectively to biological modes of life and to technological assemblages.⁴⁵² Her argument is that decentering agency from its humanistic roots will have different implications depending on whether we are concerned with dis-objectification in the one or in the other. Moreover, particular configurations of human and nonhuman entities will vary from each other in ways that reflect the distinct nature of the things (or “artifacts”) and beings (or “animal/organic entities”) under consideration.⁴⁵³

Puig de la Bellacasa wants to draw our attention to the fact that the concrete problems that emerge in practice raise different ethical concerns which are contingent upon the specificities of

⁴⁴⁹ Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, pp. 60-61.

⁴⁵⁰ See, for instance, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “Introducing New Materialisms,” in D. Coole and S. Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 9. See also Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. x.

⁴⁵¹ Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, p. 143.

⁴⁵² Note that the Greek translation of *techne* is craft or art, which evokes the idea of human-made objects.

⁴⁵³ Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, p. 143.

whatever it is that we are looking at. In this respect, it is possible to argue that her argument relies on the importance of vulnerability, since she recognizes that living bodies have an organic propensity to being affected by disease, sickness, impairments, injuries, and suffering—which is just not the case when it comes to technological matter. In addition, it is important to note that living bodies in Puig de la Bellacasa’s sense are not exclusively human animal bodies, but any vulnerable alterity. And the ethical implications of human-induced “pain, death, and even extinction”⁴⁵⁴ of vulnerable alterities are incommensurable with the sort of damage or mistreatment that machines and other artefacts could be said to suffer in some relevant sense.

This is not to say that we should be entirely indifferent to how technological assemblages fare. However, the value that ought to be conferred to the latter must be instrumental, which means that our normative concerns should not be about the objects themselves, but rather about the vulnerable lifeforms who relate to these objects in some way or another. There are of course different levels of consideration, which entail varying degrees of commitment and obligation to care. And I want to argue that these levels and degrees of consideration and caring for the worlds of *techne*, to use Puig de la Bellacasa’s terminology, must always be subject to the well-being and sustainability of the worlds of *bios*. Now, it could be argued that caring for computers, phones, and other things that contribute to the well-functioning of (most of) our societies as they are currently structured ought to be integral to an appropriate ethical outlook. The reason, one might say, is that attaching importance to these objects is required to fight against the compulsory obsolescence that is endemic to capitalist economic processes of production and consumption. Furthermore, one might conceive of caring for artifacts as forming part of an ecological ethics,

⁴⁵⁴ Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, p. 143.

since it could help us counter the waste of consumerism and therefore lessen the environmental damage that results from economic expansion.

While not entirely wrong, this way of framing the question is misdirected and impedes us to look beyond mere band-aid solutions that attempt to mitigate climate change without confronting upfront the predatory paradigm that is responsible for the problem. At its worst, a perspective that insists on the importance of caring for artifacts may be a cloak for business as usual, and hence for collective disempowerment and political inaction. In fact, such a perspective resonates with the atomistic outlooks that I criticized in the first section of this chapter. This is evident in how it postulates that stabilizing the currently disruptive relationship between human animals and more-than-human beings and things takes place at the individual level. In other words, it prescribes an atomized response to a structural problem.

It is nevertheless true that the entanglements between the worlds of *bios* and *techne* are intensifying and that life itself is increasingly reliant on technoscience as a solution for all kinds of issues, including “climate change, economic recessions, food crises, infertility, or access to health care or information.”⁴⁵⁵ It is therefore not surprising to witness a growing interest on the part of governments, transnational corporations, and private think tanks (among others) in using technological development as a strategy to tackle environmental ‘externalities’, to use their own language. This is the impetus behind the coalescence around geoengineering as a purported solution to the ‘climate change crisis’. Broadly speaking, geoengineering refers to the deliberate technological intervention into the worlds of nature in order to alleviate the anthropogenic transformation of the ecosystems. As Tina Sikka explains, geoengineering schemes are divided into two main categories: the first one comprises solar management technologies, such as the

⁴⁵⁵ Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, p. 17.

injection of sulfate aerosols into the stratosphere in order to reflect sunlight to cool down the earth. The second one corresponds to carbon dioxide removal and its objective is to capture and store CO₂ emissions directly from the atmosphere.⁴⁵⁶

The use of geoengineering is extremely attractive to those with vested interests in the current unsustainable modes of production because it purports to address some of the effects of the economic system without changing its overall structure. It is with no surprise to see the names of billionaire entrepreneurs such as Bill Gates and Elon Musk as the leading investors in geoengineering research, as well as think tanks such as The Cato Institute, The Hudson Institute, and The American Enterprise Institute as prominent supporters of the project.⁴⁵⁷ The idea of geoengineering as a possible solution to environmental harm is not only directly in line with neoliberal reason, but is also constitutive of the ethos of mastery and objectification that has led to the destruction of the interdependent relationships that sustain life on earth. Although multifaceted, geoengineering is inherently extractivist: the use of technology to perpetuate the acquisition of territories and to expropriate natural resources under the justification of what economists take to be ‘economic growth’ is but an expression of colonial expansion.⁴⁵⁸ As such, the political struggle against anthropogenic climate change calls for the rejection of technoscientific fixes like geoengineering that are premised on a mistaken understanding of the worlds of nature and of the ways in which we ought to relate to them.

Indeed, and to come back to the first section of this chapter, the fact that something like geoengineering has even become a serious option is telling of the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the hegemonic scientific outlook. The particularity of the latter is to have

⁴⁵⁶ Tina Sikka, *Climate Technology, Gender, and Justice: The Standpoint of the Vulnerable* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018), p. 19.

⁴⁵⁷ Sikka, *Climate Technology, Gender, and Justice*, p. 23.

⁴⁵⁸ For a discussion of extractivism, see de la Cadena and Blaser, eds., *A World of Many Worlds*, p. 11.

achieved what Taylor has called a “disengaged modern consciousness,” whereby we come to see the world as a “neutral environment” and ourselves as outside of it, which leads us to adopt an objectifying stance towards it.⁴⁵⁹ An immediate consequence of this is the blurring of the distinction between *techne* and *bios*, which is fundamental to account for vulnerable beings and the relations they entertain, and thus to make the qualitative evaluations on which an appropriate ecological ethics ought to be built. Moreover, the existence of a consensus among the global elite around something like geoengineering resonates with Ephraim’s argument that the domain of ‘nature’ has been sequestered by experts and professionals whose purported legitimacy rests on the “aura of inevitability” that is conferred to the natural sciences’ appeal to authority.⁴⁶⁰ These experts and professionals end up not only speaking on behalf of nature, but also prescribing a treatment that is no better than the disease they are responsible for in the first place. A fundamental rejection and critique of such authority—which is made possible by the politicization of ‘nature’—is therefore in order.

Contrary to some strands of new materialist and posthumanist thinking, then, I want to argue that a certain degree of separation between organic and inorganic worlds is required so that we are able to articulate forms of caring that sustain life. It is precisely based on this separation that biomimicry activities such as permaculture are possible. However, it is important to note that this separation should not be understood as an ontological split that entails unintelligibility, such as the one prescribed by the ‘two-sciences, two-ontologies’ settlement. The latter is pernicious to nature because it produces an ethical gap between social systems and ecosystems, and posits that such unintelligibility can be overcome when mediated by those who are supposedly able to do so.

⁴⁵⁹ Taylor, “Introduction,” p. 5.

⁴⁶⁰ Ephraim, *Who Speaks for Nature?*, p. 2.

Ephraim's call to democratize this role of mediator is urgently needed in order to contest the political and economic order that ventriloquizes the voices of nonhuman constituencies.⁴⁶¹

4. The nature of vulnerability and the vulnerability of nature

To return to permaculture, I want to briefly focus on Puig de la Bellacasa's argument for an ethics that draws on the observation of natural ecosystems and attempts to reproduce their symbiotic patterns. Permaculture ethics are premised on the transformation of existing relations between and among human animals and more-than-human beings such that our unsustainable and self-destructive relationships can be replaced by sustainable forms of interaction.⁴⁶² The idea is to embody an ecology of practices of care that are attuned to the needs of a community of heterogenous beings, whose embeddedness in relationships of interdependency warrants nurturing and protection. Now, Puig de la Bellacasa argues that the cultivation of ongoing practices of giving and receiving based on permaculture presupposes that we human animals are participants like any other in the "web of Earth's living beings."⁴⁶³ This resonates with the posthumanist and new materialist urge towards moving our picture of agency, causation and power away from a humancentric to a more-than-humancentric perspective.

Yet, the fact that human animals are not independent of, or superior to, the worlds of nature does not mean that we don't have specific obligations and responsibilities—towards nature and towards each other.⁴⁶⁴ As Sharon Krause argues, given that we human animals can evaluate our courses of action and make distinctions between those that are of higher and those that are of lesser

⁴⁶¹ Ephraim, *Who Speaks for Nature?*, p. 7.

⁴⁶² See also Tully, "Life Sustains Life 2."

⁴⁶³ Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, p. 129.

⁴⁶⁴ Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, p. 129.

value—as she puts it, we “stand in reflective relationship to [ourselves]”—it is therefore possible to attribute responsibility for our actions.⁴⁶⁵ And this of course is not the case with more-than-human beings because they are not answerable or responsible in the ways that can be required of human animals, and hence they cannot be held accountable to others in the matter of their doings. There is even less ground for imputing this to inanimate things, and Puig de la Bellacasa and Sharon Krause seem to be well aware of this.⁴⁶⁶

But this is not an uncontroversial claim in the literature that I am dealing with in this chapter. Some of the scholars who propose an alternative way to think materiality have put forward a conception of agency that ascribes “directedness” to matter.⁴⁶⁷ Indeed, they understand materiality as “active, self-creative, productive,” and as “exhibiting immanently self-organizing properties.”⁴⁶⁸ An important part of this revision of the notion of agency is to challenge taken-for-granted philosophical assumptions about ‘the subject’ which rely on a particular view of the nature of personhood, one which equates agency with the capacity for intentional action. This perspective therefore defines agency in contrast to mere impulses, involuntary action, or even first-order desires.⁴⁶⁹ Seen in this light, agency is connected to autonomy, authenticity, and responsibility,⁴⁷⁰ which are capacities that serve to distinguish between agential beings and non-agential entities, given that they are necessary prerequisites for someone to qualify as an agent. On this view, then,

⁴⁶⁵ Sharon Krause, “Bodies in Action: Corporeal Agency and Democratic Politics,” *Political Theory*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2011, p. 310.

⁴⁶⁶ Or at least this is how I read her work.

⁴⁶⁷ Coole and Frost, “Introducing New Materialisms,” p. 10.

⁴⁶⁸ Coole and Frost, “Introducing New Materialisms,” p. 9, 13.

⁴⁶⁹ Taylor’s conception of human agency is grounded in the distinction between first-order and second-order desires. On this view, full human agency consists in someone’s power to evaluate their desires—or, in other words, in someone’s capacity to have desires about desires. See Taylor, “What is human agency?,” in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers Vol. I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 15-44. See also Natalie Stoljar, “Informed Consent and Relational Conceptions of Autonomy,” *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2011, pp. 375-384.

⁴⁷⁰ Stoljar, “Answerability: A Condition of Autonomy or Moral Responsibility or Both?,” in *The Social Dimensions of Moral Responsibility*, eds. K. Hutchinson, M. Oshana, and C. Mackenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 233.

to exercise agency is to be able to participate in ongoing activities such as “planning, intending, developing long-term projects,” as well as to have the capacity to engage in “imaginative projection.”⁴⁷¹

There is no doubt that such a conception of agency is constrictive, since it relies on the presumption that the ‘normal’ person is ‘able-minded’ and ‘able-bodied’. This is so because agency is construed in terms of the mental capacity to conceive of ways of acting (as well as to evaluate competing courses of action) and of the physical ability to act according to one’s deliberate goals. And this seems to be the case even within those relational frameworks that take issue with the traditional conception of the ‘rational agent’—and which focus on the social nature of someone’s capacities and abilities or on the ways in which relationships impede or enhance those capacities and abilities.⁴⁷² Relational approaches have replaced the picture that holds that rational agents are those human animals who are capable of autonomous and independent action with an account that conceives of agency as socially embedded and deeply tied to a person’s embodiment and affectivity. This is a considerable step forward, but I think that some variants of the relational approach still hold on to a view that posits ableist norms as ideal standards towards which we have a responsibility to strive. In this sense, social relationships constitute the condition of possibility for the full exercise of human agency, since it is through them that people who are situated at different points on a spectrum of ability and disability can “formulate life plans and act

⁴⁷¹ Catriona Mackenzie, “Embodied agents, narrative selves,” *Philosophical Explorations*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2014, p. 154.

⁴⁷² See, in particular, Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, eds., *Relational Autonomy. Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Nedelsky, *Law’s Relations. A Relational Theory of Self, Autonomy, and Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

in accordance with their values and goals.”⁴⁷³ The idea, then, is to bring people as close as possible to realizing their full agentic ‘potential’.⁴⁷⁴

So, the significant contribution of new materialisms and posthumanism is to have pushed the critique of the rational subject even further and developed an account of agency that avoids the problem of ableism altogether. However, such an account goes too far on the opposite direction: not only does it entail that human animals have no special standing whatsoever—which is something I agree with—but it also places agency “at the mercy of forces, energies, practices,”⁴⁷⁵ and distributes it horizontally across a flattened ontological world.⁴⁷⁶ A problem that emerges with this understanding of agency is that we end up stripping the concept of its normative grip. In a parallel argument to the one I made about vulnerability in the last chapter, it is possible to argue that if everything has agency in the same sense, then nothing exercises agency in a meaningful way. The question that immediately comes to mind, then, is why agency matters? If we ascribe agency to the chair on which I am sitting right now, then we ought to radically differentiate it from the agency of the tree from which the chair was made and to that of the people who built it. Otherwise we will fail to capture what is normatively salient about agency, which is that it helps us recognize matters of importance. And neglecting the latter contributes to the atomization problem I referred to earlier, since it obscures the structural apparatuses of power that are at the basis of our unsustainable relationships to the earth. To put it differently, if we want to call attention to ecosocial injustices and inequalities, then we need to direct our concern for agency towards the vulnerable beings who are embedded in particular relations. To be ethically concerned

⁴⁷³ Nedelsky, *Law's Relations*, p. 166.

⁴⁷⁴ This resonates with Barbara Arneil's critique of Taylor's 'Politics of Recognition'. See Arneil, "Disability, Self-Image, and Modern Political Theory," *Political Theory*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2009, pp. 218-242. See also chapter two, this dissertation.

⁴⁷⁵ Grosz, "A Politics of Imperceptibility. A Response to 'Anti-racism multiculturalism and the ethics of identification'," *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2002, p. 468.

⁴⁷⁶ See also Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, pp. 9-10.

with the agency of a commodity distracts our attention away from the relations of power, oppression, dominance and subordination that are constitutive of its production.

This brings me to the last point I want to make here. Central to care ethics is the idea that relationships of giving and receiving are fundamental to respond to the facts of dependency and vulnerability. But a concomitant insight is that we need to maintain “a critical distance towards those relations”⁴⁷⁷ so that we can determine which ones are worth nurturing and protecting and which ones are not. And in order to be able to distinguish between better and worse relationships we need to ground our ways of thinking and acting on an understanding of the nature of vulnerability that is attuned to the vulnerability of the worlds of nature. This is the sort of teaching we can draw from permaculture and from the ways in which it responds to the existential necessities of a plurality of interdependent beings who seek to co-sustain life. As Puig de la Bellacasa shows, an ethics of care based on permaculture not only enables us to integrate ecological principles into our social worlds, but also cultivates our awareness of the normative significance of our daily engagements with the multiplicity of worlds around us. In particular, it draws our attention towards ensuring the subsistence of the community of living beings of which we are a part, and hence of the plurality of communities that are interrelated and depend on each other.

But permaculture is just one example, and it is important to understand it in light of its historical and contextual specificities.⁴⁷⁸ There are of course many other sources from which to draw the kind of ethical principles I am trying to describe here. I mentioned in the previous chapter

⁴⁷⁷ Fiona Robinson, *Globalizing Care: Ethics, Feminist Theory, and International Relations* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), p. 30. Cited in Mihaela Mihai, “The Caring Refusenik: A Portrait,” *Constellations*, vol. 26, no 1, 2019, p. 5.

⁴⁷⁸ Without going into detail, it is important to note that even if it is based on ancestral practices, the development of permaculture as a systematic set of principles has strong roots in Western worlds.

how Kimmerer shows that for Indigenous peoples, certain objects can acquire meaning when they are constitutive of relations between beings.⁴⁷⁹ And this complicates the picture I am offering in these pages, which relies on a fundamental distinction between beings and things—or between *bios* and *techne*. For Anishinaabe, as for most Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island, a canoe is more than a mere ‘object’; it may not be a being, but it certainly is not a commodity.⁴⁸⁰ There are many reasons for this, but the one I want to explore here illustrates Kimmerer’s point. In Lindsay Borrows’ narrative of Indigenous resurgence, she recounts the building of a birchbark canoe and tells us about the role this activity plays in her community: from the children who collect the raw materials for its construction, those who carry buckets of water to ensure that it remains wet, to the adults who craft the canoe, and the grandparents who sing songs and share their teachings.⁴⁸¹ The value of the canoe lies clearly in the way in which it fosters interactions between human beings and their more-than-human relatives and cultivates an awareness of their condition of interdependency. And this connection to each other and to the lands and waters that Indigenous peoples nurture since time immemorial constitutes what Tully calls “pedagogical relationships.”⁴⁸² Indeed, as Borrows concludes her account of canoe building: “Our stories and our land are our scriptures. They provide precedents for how we should live.”⁴⁸³ In this sense, the canoe is not just a vessel, but is rather an opportunity for a community of beings to learn from each other and to participate in the living cycles of gift-gratitude-reciprocity.⁴⁸⁴ Understanding the canoe as a gift of the birch forests, as well as the crafting of the canoe as a something that is taught to us by nature,

⁴⁷⁹ See Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, p. 26; see also chapter four, this dissertation.

⁴⁸⁰ I thank James Tully for pointing this out to me.

⁴⁸¹ Lindsay Keegitah Borrows, *Otter’s Journey Through Indigenous Language and Law* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018), p. 155.

⁴⁸² Tully, “Reconciliation Here on Earth,” p. 87.

⁴⁸³ Borrows, *Otter’s Journey*, p. 155.

⁴⁸⁴ See Tully, “Reconciliation Here on Earth,” p. 87.

gives us an opportunity to rethink who our other living relatives and kin are, and hence encompass the forests, rivers, streams, mountains, seasons, ecosystems, and the living earth as whole.⁴⁸⁵

What we can learn from this for an ecological ethics attuned to the vulnerability of beings is that our more-than-human relatives give us countless gifts that are at the basis of the interdependency of life forms and of their co-sustainability. And this is something that many of us living within unsustainable social systems that are disembedded from nature fail to realize. Thus, stretching received concepts of agency needs to be done carefully in order not to obscure the relationships that are constitutive of that which ought to be considered as matters of importance. The objects to which new materialists and posthumanist seek to ascribe agency, vitality, and animacy have to be evaluated in the light of the kinds of relationships they are a part. And the criteria used to determine whether such relationships are better or worse ought to be the degree to which they are integrated in symbiotic webs and cycles of gift-gratitude-reciprocity, and hence the extent to which they respond to the vulnerability of nature.

5. Conclusion

Recent critical work has aimed at decentering political thought from a humancentric to a more-than-humancentric perspective. This has resulted in a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between ontology and political theory and, consequently, of the ‘matter’ to which we assign normative importance. New materialisms and posthumanisms are at the forefront of this theoretical paradigm shift, at least when it comes to the growing influence they have had on the field in recent years. Drawing on science and technology studies, and hence challenging traditional

⁴⁸⁵ See Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, p. 335; and Tully, “Reconciliation Here on Earth,” p. 87.

disciplinary boundaries, these approaches have launched an incisive critique of the oppositional view of nature and politics. The latter entails an ontological dualism and implies mutual unintelligibility between the realms, which is why it prescribes two incommensurable scientific paradigms to study each of them separately. Moreover, it relegates the natural ontological world to an apolitical sphere that is to be investigated by scientific experts whose authority lies in their professed understanding of nonhuman matter. Concomitantly, the realm of human affairs is conceived of as disembedded from nature, and hence this view assumes that nonhuman concerns are not immediately relevant for ethical reflection. As we saw, this ‘two sciences, two ontologies’ picture has been brought under serious scrutiny by new materialists and posthumanists, who suggest that it ought to be replaced by an ontological monism that enables us to politicize the realm of nature, as well as to naturalize the political. This is the idea behind the naturecultural ontological continuum, whose postulate is that the existence of matter on this planet is unavoidably entangled.

In this chapter, I examined important ethical and political implications of the new materialist and posthumanist challenge to how nature and politics have been traditionally construed. I began by discussing Ephraim’s critique of the new materialist rejection of the ‘two sciences, two ontologies’ settlement, and argued that she is right to put into question the fact that some of them take natural scientific authority for granted. Despite the new materialist critique of the dissociation of the political and the natural worlds, a number of its proponents fail to problematize the imperious assumption that experts and professionals should speak on behalf of nature. And this forecloses the possibilities for other forms of knowledges to have a say in the charting of paths towards sustainable futures. But I pushed Ephraim’s argument further and questioned her monistic ontological outlook, which is a premise that she shares with new materialist and posthumanist approaches. The rejection of ontological dualism need not entail a

‘one world, one science’ perspective—which posits that it is possible to understand matter as a single undifferentiated object of study. I argued instead that a pluralistic approach is needed in order to capture the multiplicity of the heterogenous yet interdependent worlds that constitute reality. This is so because on a pluralistic view, identifying and rejecting the imperialist imposition of uniformity and homogeneity is the condition of possibility for intelligibility and critical mutual understanding.

Furthermore, even though new materialist and posthumanist contributions to political theory are valuable for having challenged human exceptionalism, it is nevertheless important to cast a critical eye upon the ethical and political implications of their ontological project. I focused particularly on how the decentering of human agency that the strong variant advocates for raises a set of concerns that need to be addressed in developing an appropriate ecological ethics. My argument is that the latter must be attuned to the vulnerability of living beings who co-sustain life on earth. Seen in this light, the stretching of the notion of agency can be problematic, given that if we extend it too much it can lose its normative grip. Hence the importance of paying attention to differences between kinds of entities, and between the types of interactions they have with one another and to the larger environment in which they are embedded. Following María Puig de la Bellacasa’s distinction between *bios* and *techne*, a first fundamental step towards highlighting the normative significance of such differences is to recognize that beings and things cannot be tarred with the same brush. And the problem with the notion of agency that a particular strand of new materialism and posthumanism puts forward is precisely that it undermines the sort of vocabulary of worth that enables us to ascribe different levels of importance to whatever is under consideration.

Finally, I argued that an adequate picture of why agency matters ought to capture a dimension of concern for the relations that constitute and sustain the entity in question—instead of conceiving of ‘it’ as a ‘thing’ with a distinct and separate existence. Otherwise we will fail to establish the sort of qualitative distinctions that are needed to see what is wrong with projects such as geoengineering. Indeed, the atomistic view that characterizes the latter overlooks the structural ordering that is responsible for the problem that technological fixes are purportedly set to solve in the first place. What is required is that we assess relationships between beings and things in the light of the extent to which they respond to the vulnerability of nature. Only then will we be able to learn to live in solidarity and complementarity with the plurality of more-than-human worlds that sustain life.

CHAPTER SIX:

The democracy of the neglected:

Mutual understanding and sustainability in a world of many worlds

There is an aura of purity about democracy. A great deal of political theory revolves around the assumption that democratic practices constitute the ultimate source of legitimacy of whatever is agreed upon and instituted. Theoretical disagreements are usually situated at the level of the meaning and method of implementation of democratic processes, ranging from Habermasian communicative theory to the ‘radical’ democracy of Chantal Mouffe.⁴⁸⁶ And as we saw in chapter one, John Rawls’ work is also underpinned by such logic, given that the main idea behind his notion of ‘overlapping consensus’ is the attempt to reconcile the diversity of moral, philosophical, and religious commitments that a plurality of citizens hold. The aim of democratic thought is therefore to find ways of making sense of plural claims, and to reach agreements on fundamental questions of justice and equality. Dissent, disobedience, and resistance are also important aspects of democratic activities, albeit to different degrees, depending on the particular approach adopted. There is of course a great variety of strands and variants of democratic theory, but it is nevertheless possible to assert that what unites them is a shared emphasis on the significance of citizen participation, which includes proposing, engaging, and exchanging with each another. Hence the importance of interpretation, translation, and representation in establishing on-going relations of mutual understanding and seeking to reach certain agreements over disputed norms within a social system of cooperation.

⁴⁸⁶ See, for instance, Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society, Volume 1* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), and Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (New York: Verso, 2006).

There is no doubt that one of the most crucial challenges facing democratic thought and practice is the specter of climate change and ecological crisis. And no matter how anthropocentric political theory may be, it has become quite difficult to ignore the relationships between human animals and their surroundings. But the connection between democracy and ecology remains ambiguous, and especially so because of the primacy that the former has been given by Western traditions of political theory. Further, it is also true that there are myriad approaches to ecological thought, which often conflict with one another. The most obvious discrepancy is that between ‘sustainable’ development and other forms of ‘green’ capitalism, and the view according to which our mode of production is itself the source of the problem. There are many other nuances in between, but this point of contention illustrates the problem I want to address in this chapter. Indeed, most of the debate about environmental justice within democratic theory assumes that public discussions and deliberations will produce an appropriate solution to the problem. In other words, the spirit underpinning this outlook is that contrastive mutual understanding would somehow result in forms of decision-making that are accountable to the environment. While I agree with this contention from an idealized theoretical perspective, I believe that most developments in democratic theory as they currently stand do not point towards this direction.

In the following pages, then, my aim is to contribute to the discussion of these questions by indicating some shortcomings in democratic theorizing, and more precisely in the ways in which diversity and pluralism are conceived of in the field. I will argue that the latter relies mostly on a problematic conception of what counts as mutual understanding, and this for two main reasons. One is that it is wedded to an exclusive and excluding conception of human animality, which has consistently neglected and marginalized those human animals that are defined against a horizon of ‘normal’ functioning. This is clearly reflected in democratic theory’s emphasis on both

the space in which deliberations should take place, and on the frame of communication that is taken for granted as the main—and sometimes sole—medium of citizen participation. Further, it fails to consider nonhuman forms of life altogether, thus neglecting their voices, concerns, and interests when discussing matters that affect them both directly and indirectly. This last point poses serious challenges to political theory’s profound anthropocentricity, but it is not my intention to offer any definitive way of resolving these issues. Rather, the chapter will attempt to provide a series of reflections on the study of democracy and diversity in political theory with the purpose of adding to the conversation by engaging in the kinds of comparative and critical dialogues that James Tully’s approach invites us to be attentive to.⁴⁸⁷ It is in this spirit that I discuss the work of Eduardo Kohn on multi-species forms of communication and interaction, which helps pave the way towards a truly ecosocial conception of mutual understanding for a world of many worlds. Kohn’s attention to the pragmatics of semiotic common grounds between human and more-than-human lifeforms responds to María Puig de la Bellacasa’s call for “a more radically democratic way” of attuning ourselves, listening, and giving voice to neglected beings and their relations.⁴⁸⁸ This then brings me to a discussion about the meaning and implications of sustainability, and about its conditions of possibility. I argue that the kind of transformative ethics that is needed to address ecosocial injustices and inequalities must be guided by a reciprocal concern for contributing to the well-being of all forms of life—which includes beings, the relations that constitute them, and the spaces in which they are embedded. To this end, I draw a contrast between forms of interaction and coexistence that seek to maintain the entanglements of life, on the one hand, and relations of mastery that objectify life processes and living spaces, on the other. I ultimately argue that rejecting

⁴⁸⁷ See, in particular, James Tully, “Deparochializing political theory and beyond: a dialogue approach to comparative political thought,” *Journal of World Philosophies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2016, pp. 51-74.

⁴⁸⁸ See María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care. Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p. 58.

developmental frameworks and their attendant extractivist agendas is a necessary first step in making the world a better home for all beings and relations that sustain life.

1. Whose democracy? Which diversity?

Diversity and its relation to democracy has been a central concern in the previous chapters of this dissertation. One of my aims was an attempt to destabilize conventional understandings of these two terms by broadening the purview of what political theory commonly takes ‘diversity’ to mean, and therefore by interrogating who is included and who is excluded from democratic life. However, I haven’t yet provided a comprehensive alternative account of how it could be possible to conceive of diversity and pluralism, nor of what could be the proper role of a democratic ethics.

This is why I want to begin by pressing the limits of the idea of “deep diversity,” which was put forward by Charles Taylor in the 1990s and has now become paradigmatic in the field.⁴⁸⁹ Most of the scholarship on multiculturalism and pluralism—which sets itself to respond to the problems brought about by ‘deep diversity’—binds the scope of diversity and plurality to a study of ‘forms of life’ in a restricted sense. Indeed, diversity and plurality remain confined to phenomena such as culture, religion, and group authority at the collective level, as well as to epistemic diversity (e.g. diversity of perspectives, moral disagreement, and so on) at the individual level. However, not only are these forms of diversity and plurality exclusively concerned with human animals, but they are also wedded to a particular conception of human animality. As we have seen in the previous chapters, feminism and disability studies have shown that much theorizing in participatory and deliberative democracy has consistently neglected marginalized

⁴⁸⁹ Taylor, “Shared and Divergent Values,” in *Reconciling the Solitudes*, ed. G. Laforest (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993), p. 155.

persons and groups of persons, thus excluding those who are deemed incapable of ‘normal’ cooperation.

The virtues associated with political decision making have been molded by compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness. This is especially clear in the theories of Rawls and Habermas, both of which exclude persons with cognitive and physical impairments from democratic participation.⁴⁹⁰ Without delving into an exhaustive review of the literature in democratic theory—which is not the purpose of this chapter nor of the dissertation—it is nevertheless possible to assert that some of the main requirements of democratic politics are framed by problematic expectations about what constitutes proper human animal functioning. As I argued in the previous chapter, the notion of agency defined in terms of certain capacities for action provides a powerful illustration of the sort of expectations that are attributed to being a citizen. This is reflected in the requirement that people congregate to deliberate, or in certain conceptions of political action as ‘bodies acting in concert’, as well as in the call to ‘occupy’ public spaces, all of which rely on strong assumptions about what the citizens’ corporeal reality ought to correspond to. Different accounts of democratic enactments produce different degrees of exclusion, but most of them share the view that citizens ought to be physically present at a particular place at a particular time. Whether it is to deliberate about the outcome of a specific policy, or to generate power collectively by joining together in contestation, it is clear that the prevailing model of democratic action is premised on norms that favor certain types of bodies over others.⁴⁹¹ Democratic theory is beset by a failure to critically examine the relationship between

⁴⁹⁰ See Stacy Clifford, “Making disability public in deliberative democracy,” *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 211-228; Barbara Arneil, “Disability, Self-Image, and Modern Political Theory,” *Political Theory*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2009, pp. 218-242; among others. See also chapter two, this dissertation.

⁴⁹¹ And this not only concerns disabled persons, but also able-bodied women, black persons, working-class and poor people, among others. See, for instance, Jane Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversarial Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); and Amy Gutmann, *Liberal Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). Both

differently-abled bodies and political spaces that remain inaccessible to many persons, hence silencing their voices and stifling their possibilities for activism and change.

Moreover, the way in which the deliberations ought to be conducted in political spaces are bound to a particular conception of what forms of communication are considered relevant and which ones are not.⁴⁹² There are of course important differences among the varieties of approaches to democratic theory, but the prevalent ethos privileges speech as the primary form of citizen participation.⁴⁹³ This focus on spoken language as the articulate expression of thought and feeling denies various persons and groups of persons access to democratic processes. The democratic exclusions in question concern those citizens presumed incompetent due to their inability to enunciate preferences and normative commitments in conventionally expected ways. The result is a notion of democracy that undermines the interests, concerns, and determinate conceptions of the good that are held by human animals whose modes of communication are unrecognizable by the larger societies to which they belong. Aside from the fact that this ignores the voices and experiences of all citizens who are actually affected by the decisions of the ‘demos’, it also fails to challenge ableist assumptions about how bodies look, move, and communicate, and hence reinforces the view that able-bodied and able-minded norms provide the standards towards which human lives must aspire.

What I am putting into question here is both the institutionalization of ableist oppression and the prevailing ethos which assumes that temporarily-able-bodied persons have nothing to learn from different bodily realities. This is particularly true about those bodies that are regarded as

texts are cited in Iris Marion Young, “Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship,” *Ethics*, vol. 99, no. 2, 1989, p. 258.

⁴⁹² Not to mention the distinction between ‘reasonable’ and ‘unreasonable’ claims—see chapter one, this dissertation.

⁴⁹³ See Clifford, “Making disability public in deliberative democracy”; and Toby Rollo, “Everyday Deeds: Enactive Protest, Exit, and Silence in Deliberative Systems,” *Political Theory*, vol. 45, no. 5, pp. 587-609.

‘vulnerable’, ‘dependent’, and ‘heteronomous’. I put these terms in quotation marks because I defend the view that all living bodies are vulnerable and dependent, and that the ideal of autonomy is committed to a problematic conception of personhood. This is so because ‘autonomy’ reinforces the idea that human animals ought to strive towards separateness—and towards a solipsistic conception of self-government—in order to flourish. My aim in the previous chapters has been to attempt to dismantle such an idea and to replace it with the recognition of the inherent interdependency of living bodies. And this is an insight that has not been taken seriously by much work in democratic thought, which seems to proceed as if politics was the prerogative of some human animals and not others. Such a picture of value underlying conventional theorizing in democratic theory determines which human animals are worthy and which ones are less so (or not at all), and it permeates through politics and ethics and into established understandings of reasoning, cooperation and reciprocity.

Those established understandings are problematic precisely because they obfuscate the deep diversity that characterizes human animality, and restrain the plurality of ways in which human animals interact together and are responsive to one another. And this not only constitutes an epistemic injustice, but also results in harm and loss to temporarily-able-bodied persons who fail to acknowledge fundamental aspects about themselves—that is, about their animal nature, their vulnerable bodies, and the fact that their flourishing and well-being depend on the flourishing and well-being of other human and nonhuman animals, ecosystems, and the living earth as a whole. In other words, it is my contention that a critical reassessment of human animality will inevitably prompt a critical reassessment of our relations with other living beings.

But this argument also works the other way around. In her work on the environmental politics of disability, Alison Kafer shows how historically and culturally grounded conceptions of

‘wilderness’ depict ‘nature’ as that which ought to be overcome or conquered.⁴⁹⁴ This is especially clear in the case of national parks and other public lands, where we are able to appreciate ‘nature’ by wandering through hiking trails and dams. It should come as no surprise that national parks and public ‘natural’ sites are often inaccessible to physically disabled persons—as well as to older people, pregnant women, families with young children, and so on. As Kafer argues, the design of trails and park materials are infused with ableist assumptions, which are in turn embedded in a logic of mastery that has long governed the way in which domineering societies relate to nature.⁴⁹⁵ And this is particularly true when we think of mainstream advertising for wilderness equipment and excursions, whose modus operandi is to sell the idea that the purported gap between ourselves and nature is bridgeable by “rugged, masculine individualism.”⁴⁹⁶ Not only does this reproduce the view that human animals and nature belong to separate domains of existence, but it also reinforces the prejudice that outdoor activities are only suited to certain types of bodies.⁴⁹⁷ We find this motivating spirit in the long-standing assumption that in order to experience ‘true nature’ we ought to climb a mountain or engage in vigorous rough activity, almost in order to prove ourselves and our peers that we are capable of making it out there in ‘the wild’. This is paradigmatic of the deeply rooted ideal of independence, which is theoretically wrong and practically prejudicial to ourselves, to each other, and to the rest of nature.⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹⁴ Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), pp. 129-148.

⁴⁹⁵ See Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, p. 136, in particular. See also Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking. The Politics of Epistemic Location* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Julietta Singh, *Unthinking Mastery. Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

⁴⁹⁶ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, p. 134.

⁴⁹⁷ See the interesting claim in Kafer *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, p. 130: “Nature writers such as Carolyn Finney and Evelyn White explain that African Americans are much less likely than whites to find parks and open spaces welcoming, accessible, or safe...”

⁴⁹⁸ Not to mention the relation between ‘national parks’ and settler colonialism, which adds yet another layer to the pervasive picture of mastery that shapes Western ways of relating to ‘nature’.

I want to contrast all this to the ecological principle of the interdependency of life on earth, which prompts us to interrogate our relationship to nature, as well as the way in which we conceive of ‘nature’. Concomitantly, it urges us to call into question the predominant picture of democracy and diversity, which so far has been tailored to certain minds and bodies—and this despite political theory’s pretention to deepen the sense of human animal plurality.

The ontological claim of interdependency, to which I have been drawing attention in the previous chapters, refers to the idea that all living beings are mutually dependent. It is therefore a universally shared feature that is inherent to every living being. But it is important to understand that ‘living beings’ are not conceivable in individual terms here. The notion of interdependency implies relationality, and therefore living beings are to be grasped as part of the web of relations of which they are a part. In this regard, Anishinaabe scholar Aaron Mills’ notion of “radical interdependence”⁴⁹⁹ is illustrative, since it throws light on this notion of ‘being’ as being-in-relationship-with-other-beings. As Mills conceives of it, “radical interdependence” denotes the ongoing and dynamic character of relationality understood in terms of practices.⁵⁰⁰ And although these practices are constituted by participants, they are nevertheless not reducible to their participants. On this view, the value of living beings is tied to the kinds of relations they entertain with one another. This is not to say that there is something like an intrinsic hierarchy of beings, some more valuable than others, but rather that the value of personhood⁵⁰¹ is itself tied to the relations that constitute the beings in question.⁵⁰²

⁴⁹⁹ Aaron Mills, *Miinigowiziwin: All That Has Been Given for Living Well Together. One Vision of Anishinaabe Constitutionalism* (Victoria, BC: PhD Dissertation, University of Victoria, 2019).

⁵⁰⁰ Mills, *Miinigowiziwin: All That Has Been Given for Living Well Together*, p. 121.

⁵⁰¹ Which is of course not exclusive to human animals. See chapter 4, this dissertation. See also Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013). Mills draws extensively on Kimmerer in his own work.

⁵⁰² See Mills, *Miinigowiziwin: All That Has Been Given for Living Well Together*, pp. 79-82.

What this means, according to my understanding, is that not all relations are equally worthy of protection and nurturance. This is so because the essence of interdependency as an ontological reality is life and the sustaining of life, and some relations are better than others at sustaining life. Again, Mills' analysis is illuminating here because it brings to our attention the fundamental role that sharing plays in keeping life going.⁵⁰³ As he puts it: "Each of us was given certain gifts and not others; none of us was given all of the gifts we would need to be self-sustaining. Radical interdependence arises from the simple fact that each of us has need of gifts we don't possess."⁵⁰⁴ And as Mills is quick to point out, these gifts are not only material, but also intellectual, spiritual, and emotional.⁵⁰⁵ The latter are especially important in our thinking and acting interdependently with each other—in *all* our diversity—and with other-than-human beings. Empathy, in particular, allows us to understand the interests and needs of other living beings, and hence prompts us to attend them in appropriate and meaningful ways.⁵⁰⁶ And empathetic dispositions such as kindness, compassion, and concern call us to be responsive to and responsible for the different forms of life with whom we are entangled in co-constitutive relationships.

The alternative democratic ethos I am laying the groundwork for must therefore be informed by what Lori Gruen calls "empathetic engagement," which requires that participants in the deliberations acknowledge and attune themselves to the entanglements that are constitutive of

⁵⁰³ See Mills, *Miinigowiziwin: All That Has Been Given for Living Well Together*, pp. 82-84.

⁵⁰⁴ Mills, *Miinigowiziwin: All That Has Been Given for Living Well Together*, p. 82. This of course resonates with Alasdair MacIntyre's networks of giving and receiving, and with James Tully's cycles of gift-gratitude-reciprocity. See MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001); and Tully, "Life Sustains Life" 1 & 2, in *Nature and Value*, ed. Akeel Bilgrami (Columbia University Press, 2019, forthcoming); Tully, "Trust, Mistrust and Distrust in Diverse Societies," in *Trust and Distrust in Political Theory and Practice: The Case of Diverse Societies*, eds. D. Karmis and F. Rocher (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019, forthcoming).

⁵⁰⁵ Mills, *Miinigowiziwin: All That Has Been Given for Living Well Together*, p. 82.

⁵⁰⁶ See Lori Gruen's important work on empathy: in particular, Gruen, *Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic for our Relationships with Animals* (New York: Lantern Books, 2015); and Gruen, "Empathy," in *Critical Terms for Animal Studies*, ed. L. Gruen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), pp. 141-153. Note that Gruen conceives of empathy as "an experiential process involving a blend of emotion and cognition." See also Tully, "Deparochializing political theory and beyond: a dialogue approach to comparative political thought."

their agency as beings-in-relationships-with-other-beings.⁵⁰⁷ This is because dependence is differentially distributed, which implies that some participants in nature's relations need more help, care, and attention than others. Just like in the case of vulnerability,⁵⁰⁸ it is important to recognize that there is a spectrum of dependence on which all living beings find themselves, and that where they stand on the spectrum fluctuates in the life course of each being. For this reason, an appropriate conception of democratic relations privileges an understanding of reasoning and deliberation that is attuned to diversity and plurality in a sense that goes well beyond what we normally mean by those terms in political theory.

As I hope I made clear above, opening up new avenues of dialogue requires more than just bringing different worldviews to the table. What is needed is a thorough rethinking of what is usually understood by sites or spaces of collaborative democratic practice. This entails confronting deep-seated assumptions about bodily and cognitive capacities, as well as challenging other-than-human exclusions in mainstream democratic theorizing. All of this in turn leads us to raise questions about interpretation, the role and scope of representation, and about the overall aim of democratic politics. It is often taken for granted that the solution to the problem of environmental degradation and destruction lies in the strengthening of democratic procedures—such as implementing robust deliberative systems. On this view, the mantra is ‘let’s have democracy, and sustainability will follow’. But what I want to argue is that this should be thought of the other way around. The reason for this is that the outcomes of democratic life do not necessarily lead to the sustaining of life—particularly when it comes to diverse forms of life that are especially vulnerable and dependent. In other words, conceiving of democracy and deliberation in procedural terms will

⁵⁰⁷ Gruen, “Empathy,” p. 151. She puts it this way: “Our agency at any particular time is an expression of entanglements in multiple relations across space, species, and substance.”

⁵⁰⁸ See chapter 4, this dissertation.

not guarantee that we attend to each other and to all living beings in adequate ways. Hence the need to ground democratic politics on the kind of ethical commitments that can define what it means to cultivate and sustain relations of care in more-than-human living ecologies.

2. Mutual understanding in a world of many worlds

In his book *How Forests Think*, Eduardo Kohn argues that contrary to phenomenology (and hence to much of what I have been claiming throughout this dissertation), what we human animals have in common with the rest of nature is not our embodiment, but the fact that all living organisms use signs to represent the world in one way or another.⁵⁰⁹ According to Kohn, then, given that representational processes are intrinsic to life, what distinguishes the animate from the inanimate is that the former create and interpret signs to communicate with other forms of life. As he bluntly puts it: “there is something unique to life: life thinks; stones don’t.”⁵¹⁰ Building on his study of how the inhabitants of the Upper Amazon interact together (which includes the Quichua-speaking Runa, ants, parakeets, catfish, jaguars, and all other forms of life that make up the rain forest), Kohn suggests that living beings not only represent and interpret the world around them, but also the ways in which other forms of life represent and interpret their own worlds. Moreover, Kohn holds that “all beings, and not just humans, engage with the world and with each other as selves, that is, as beings that have a point of view.”⁵¹¹ This means that it is in principle possible to understand beings different from ourselves, and thus to have access to their intentions and goals.

⁵⁰⁹ Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think. Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), p. 9.

⁵¹⁰ Kohn, *How Forests Think*, p. 100.

⁵¹¹ Kohn, *How Forests Think*, p. 132.

The reason why Kohn's conjectures about multi-species communication are important for my purposes is that they speak directly to the issues I am raising about democracy and diversity. His work gives us insights into what radical interdependence looks like and provides illuminating glimpses of how ecosocial relations work in practice. Now, because his theoretical framework disregards vulnerability, I want to begin by arguing that there is no reason to set embodiment and representation against each other: living beings have in common both the facts that they are vulnerable *and* that they communicate with one another. In fact, communication is what allows beings to direct attention to their needs, and therefore the kind of care they may require. This is precisely why it is fundamental for democratic theory to extend the debate beyond traditional accounts of diversity and to pay attention to the lived experience of all affected—humans and other-than-human beings alike.

Living beings are necessarily embedded in and depend on the relationships that constitute and sustain them. An individual rock removed from its geological context may indeed not be animate, nor vulnerable, and hence does not elicit responses of care from other beings who are in a position to provide it. But when conceived of from an ecological point of view, the world appears to us in a different light. We become aware of the myriad ways in which beings are connected to one another, and how those connections establish the sort of channels of communication that are the subject of Kohn's book. But as I hinted at in chapter four, human animals cannot escape a certain degree of anthropocentrism, which means that our corporeality is determinative of what we know and how we come to know it. We cannot break free of ourselves in order to grasp reality from the point of view of other selves that inhabit the world—even less from the point of view of nowhere. But that does not entail that we should not listen to these beings in order to strive to understand them and to attune ourselves as much as possible to their points of view. And the same

is true in the case of human animals: different bodies and minds experience the world in different ways, some of which may be inaccessible to those of us to whom the world is disclosed otherwise. Think of Havi Carel's work on chronic illness and the ways in which it affects our embodied existence.⁵¹² She shows how illness alters one's experience of the world, and therefore how ill persons negotiate and cope with the world in ways that temporarily healthy persons have trouble imagining.⁵¹³ And although she is clear that there are serious limits to an "outsider's perspective" on illness," she is nevertheless convinced that phenomenology can be used to both describe and explain such experiences.⁵¹⁴ Indeed, seeing things from another human animal's point of view may sometimes be difficult, perhaps even impossible—particularly when viewed through lenses that are oblivious to corporeality and vulnerability—but the activity is just not the same as that of attempting to see the world from the perspective of an other-than-human being.

One of the main reasons why this is so, still according to Kohn, is that even though representation is a semiotic propensity that is shared between species, human animals have unique representational modalities: we are symbolic creatures, which means that we represent the world by way of signs that are based on convention.⁵¹⁵ Contrary to icons and indices, which are modes of reference that are intrinsic to all life, symbols denote something that is not there in actuality by virtue of their embeddedness in a set of representational signs that make up the context for the meaning of whatever is being uttered.⁵¹⁶ Symbolic reference is therefore what allows human animals to develop abstract thought and to reason about hypothetical problems. In Kohn's words, it enables us to "momentarily distance ourselves from the world and our actions in it to reflect on

⁵¹² Havi Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁵¹³ Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness*, pp. 137-140.

⁵¹⁴ Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness*, p. 133.

⁵¹⁵ Kohn, *How Forests Think*, p. 8.

⁵¹⁶ Kohn, *How Forests Think*, p. 37.

our possible modes of future conduct—conduct that we can deem potentially good for others that are not us.”⁵¹⁷ In other words, symbolic reference forms the basis of ethical thinking, which is also a distinctively human characteristic. That is to say that ethics is not constitutive of nonhuman realms, in the sense that normative and evaluative judgments are not applicable in the same way to other-than-human forms of life and to the relationships in which they are entangled. However, it does not follow that there is no better or worse outside of human animal minds. What it means is that it would be a mistake to project human qualities to other-than-human worlds, and hence to evaluate courses of action that are initiated by nonhumans by the same standards that apply to humans.

This contrast of moral evaluation in human and other-than-human worlds is well captured by Kohn’s distinction between ethics and value.⁵¹⁸ Recognizing the intrinsic value of nonhuman nature is what allows us to make and express moral judgments about the ways in which other-than-human living beings relate to one another. Indeed, one doesn’t need to draw on first-person accounts of other-than-human flourishing in order to realize that there are things that are good or bad for them.⁵¹⁹ Moreover, as speciesism and the exploitation and destruction of ecosystems (among others) attest to, much of the things that are bad for nonhumans are caused by humans. Given the profound implications that our actions have on other-than-human beings, it is our responsibility to find ways of attuning ourselves to such radical otherness within reciprocal relationships, and to make our words and deeds answerable to those beings with whom our lives are entangled. This is why it is imperative that we integrate in our ethical reflections a robust consideration of what is valuable, what is less so, and what is harmful to the rest of nature. Because

⁵¹⁷ Kohn, *How Forests Think*, p. 133.

⁵¹⁸ Kohn, *How Forests Think*, p. 133.

⁵¹⁹ Kohn, *How Forests Think*, p. 134.

even though the overall purpose of an ethics grounded in interdependency points toward the sustainability and well-being of life, ethical enquiry needs to be differently sensitive to the deep diversity of human and other-than-human beings and their respective kinds of flourishing. Such sensitivity is what allows us to cultivate an awareness of the conditions of sustainability of life in its manifold forms, and hence prompts us to nurture and preserve the relationships that keep life going.

And this brings me back to questions of interpretation and representation, and about how these pose significant challenges to prevailing conceptions of democratic theory and practice. I began by putting into question the assumption that spoken word ought to be political deliberation's main channel of communication, given that it excludes differently-abled human animals—and those temporarily able-bodied/minded human animals who are unwilling to participate in deliberation⁵²⁰—as well as nonhuman animals and other-than-animal forms of life. Distinctively human modes of communication such as language are therefore of limited use if we are to defend a truly pluralistic conception of democracy. They are of course necessary and the intent here is not to diminish their importance, but rather to complement them by paying attention to a fuller spectrum of communication. Thus, in order to engage with and respond to the needs of diverse human and other-than-human beings, democratic theory needs to be receptive to a variety of modalities of expression. But there is no single method or way of going about this task that can be prescribed from above; that is, there are no theoretical frameworks that could be grasped abstractly and then applied in practice, nor is there any determinate criteria for evaluating how well or poorly are democratic activities implementing diverse modes of communication. The multi-species sets of interactions that Kohn observed and studied in the Ecuadorian Amazon pertain to a specific

⁵²⁰ See Rollo, "Everyday Deeds."

environment, embody distinct ecological features, and may therefore not be observable elsewhere.⁵²¹ And if similar relationships cannot be found in other types of ecosystems, then what we might learn about interpretation in such semiotic networks will doubtfully apply in other contexts. This also means that there are no universal guidelines for adjudicating among forms of interpretation, given that the range of meanings of particular interpretive strategies will be bounded by the specific features of the environment within which such strategies makes sense.

I am not suggesting that we should stop at the contemplation of incommensurability and untranslatability as such. Instead, conceiving of democracy from a pluralist perspective entails that we find ways of making sense of the deep diversity of human and other-than-human forms of life and the plural ecologies of which they are a part. This is no easy task, and as I have been contending, it is sometimes an impossible one. But recognizing the limits of interpretation is a fundamental first step towards dismantling the hold of the excluding and exclusive ethos on democratic theory. The second step, which builds on my critique of the single-world ontology,⁵²² requires that we relocate epistemic inquiries at the level of everyday encounters between and among a diversity of selves and the complex ecologies to which they belong. Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser refer to this process as the “negotiated coming together” of “heterogeneous(ly) entangled worlds.”⁵²³ Their emphasis on worlds in the plural is crucial, since it captures the idea that inhabiting someone else’s point of view necessitates the transposition of one’s being-in-the-world into a different existential reality, one whose ontological boundaries are difficult to overcome. But the coming together of many worlds need not bring about dissonance and discord.

⁵²¹ See Philippe Descola, “All too human (still). A comment on Eduardo Kohn’s *How Forests Think*,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2014, pp. 267-273.

⁵²² See chapter five, this dissertation.

⁵²³ Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser, “Introduction: Pluriverse,” in *A World of Many Worlds*, eds. M. de la Cadena and M. Blaser (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 4.

On the contrary, it should be taken as an opportunity to open up a “dialogue of knowledges”⁵²⁴ oriented towards the construction of sustainable relations between and among those heterogenous worlds.

The precondition for such dialogues of knowledges is the decentering of science in order to provide space for multiple forms of knowledge, such as the traditional ecological knowledges of Indigenous peoples,⁵²⁵ and other types of epistemic practices and techniques that are marginalized by the dominant voices of our masterful forms of politics. Moreover, the complicity of the institution of so-called ‘natural science’ with extractivism and global imperialism more generally must be exposed and rebuked. The implication of science and other hegemonic forms of knowledge in relations of exploitation and oppression raises important questions about how to mitigate such power disparities, as well as about whether all worlds should have equal voice in the dialogues that aim at sustaining life. As Isabelle Stengers puts it, the extractivist machinery of the global West is “world-destroying” and hence “cannot fit with other worlds.”⁵²⁶ However, as she is quick to point out, there is a distinction to be made between “the agents of modernization” and “the modern practitioners” of science—or between the institution of science and scientific practices.⁵²⁷ A dialogue of knowledges must include the latter, but must be directed at opposing the former. This is in line with what we saw in chapter five concerning the disengaged reason of the seventeenth century scientific outlook and its instrumental stance towards the world: modern science has objectified and mechanized ‘nature’, emptied it of all purpose, and transformed it into

⁵²⁴ Enrique Leff, *Racionalidad Ambiental. La reapropiación social de la naturaleza* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2004); and Leff, *La Apuesta por la Vida. Imaginación sociológica e imaginarios sociales en los territorios ambientales del sur* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2014). See also Tully, “Deparochializing political theory and beyond: a dialogue approach to comparative political thought,” esp. p. 63.

⁵²⁵ See, for instance, Melissa K. Nelson and Dan Shilling, eds., *Traditional Ecological Knowledge. Learning from Indigenous Practices for Environmental Sustainability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁵²⁶ Isabelle Stengers, “The challenge of ontological politics,” in *A World of Many Worlds*, eds. M. de la Cadena and M. Blaser (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 86.

⁵²⁷ Stengers, “The challenge of ontological politics,” p. 86.

a resource for production and consumption. But the particular forms of knowledge that are generated within this scientific hegemony can in principle be separated from the world-destroying machinery, allowing for the possibility of initiating a conversation with life-sustaining forms of life.

Furthermore, the figure of the proxy⁵²⁸ has a role to play in the ongoing dialogues of knowledges that I am advocating for. Given that interpretation and translation are necessary to hold out the possibility of mutual intelligibility, speaking on behalf of other beings may sometimes be inevitable. Despite the admonition I offered in the previous chapter concerning the imperious nature of such claims, it is nevertheless clear that in some cases certain forms of political representation are unavoidable. The first thing we need to do in understanding the limits and scope of representation is to see that speaking on behalf of another being will always involve loss. Failure to do this leads to the sorts of problems I have raised in the previous pages, such as obliviousness to various manifestations of vulnerability and dependency, or to the facts of embodiment and animality altogether. It also leads to the prevalent assumption that the needs of the rest of nature are subordinate to those of humans. Ultimately, we need to come to grips with the fact that the transposition of a given relational experience to another scale cannot proceed without remainders of all sorts. However, in ensuring that all voices are given their due, an adequate democratic ethos must guarantee that particularly vulnerable forms of life—as well as those that don't communicate in socially expected ways—have a say in deliberations. And the latter must be given enough weight so that they can surmount the disabling barriers that prevent their participation. But the surmounting of such barriers is necessarily a collaborative endeavor, which is why standing proxy

⁵²⁸ See chapter two, this dissertation. See also Amber Knight, “Democratizing disability: achieving inclusion (without assimilation) through ‘participatory parity’,” *Hypatia*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2015, pp. 97-114; Knight, “Disability, paternalism, and autonomy: rethinking political decision-making and speech,” *Res Philosophica*, vol. 93, no. 4, 2016, pp. 865-891; and Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001).

for someone should not entail the replacement of that being's point of view. Instead, what it means is that that some points of view need more collaborative work than others in order to both reach a wider audience, and to try to be understood by that audience. The sort of collaborative work that I have in mind here includes practices of guardianship, surrogacy, and stewardship, among other ways of attempting to voice and meet the needs and interests of those forms of life that don't have a seat at the political table.⁵²⁹

As I have been arguing, in most cases the political table is itself the problem. This is why the role of the proxy must include coalition building of the sort that can transform unjust political structures, instead of reinforcing them by including more beings within their ranks.⁵³⁰ Such coalitions are the result of the deep diversity of forms of life who "join hands" and "work together" in mutually supportive ways to reform those political structures from within.⁵³¹ The call to "join hands" is of course directed at human animals, since we are responsible for the world-destroying social systems that subjugate and exploit marginalized social systems, nonhuman animals, and the rest of nature. In addition, we have much to learn from the ways in which ecological systems already work together to sustain themselves and the forms of life they interact with. And given that we human animals "stand in reflective relationship to [ourselves]," we can therefore be held accountable for our actions.⁵³² This is why it is our role to create spaces in our political structures for those marginalized voices to be heard, because listening to those points of view will enable us

⁵²⁹ See Knight, "Democratizing disability," and "Disability, paternalism, and autonomy"; see also Jennifer Welchman, "The virtues of stewardship," *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1999, pp. 411-423, and "A Defense of Environmental Stewardship," *Environmental Values*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2012, pp. 297-316.

⁵³⁰ See Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, p. 156.

⁵³¹ I take the "joining hands" metaphor from James Tully. See "On local and global citizenship: an apprenticeship manual," in *Public Philosophy in a New Key Vol. II: Imperialism and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 243-310; and "On global citizenship," in *On Global Citizenship*. James Tully in Dialogue (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 3-102.

⁵³² See Sharon Krause, "Bodies in action: Corporeal agency and democratic politics," *Political Theory*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2011, p. 310. It is worth noting that Krause adds that "[t]his reflexivity need not imply rational autonomy or personal sovereignty...".

to think differently and thus shed light on sustainable ways of being and acting in and with the world.

3. Sustainable life

So far, I have argued that an appropriate ethics must be guided by sustainability, and that adequate political action must be directed towards creating the different conditions that sustain the multiplicity of beings who inhabit the world. It is therefore now necessary to push the argument further and to provide an analysis of the meanings that ‘sustainability’ holds, and of its conditions of possibility.

Sustainability has become a trendy buzzword in recent years, and its meaning is far from unambiguous. The concept was popularized in the West between the 1970s and 1980s, particularly when the United Nations offered a definition of ‘sustainable development’ as part of a global agenda for reaching what they understand as political and economic stability.⁵³³ Today, the term is widely used by governments, multinational corporations, NGOs, and others, to indicate that their practices and objectives are ‘environmentally friendly’. Although green labeling began as a badge of honor, a shift towards an active ‘sustainable’ policy-making stance and ‘positive impact’ branding is now standard practice. In other words, ‘sustainability’ is “big business,” as Dan Shilling puts it, given that it has become a sanction for powerful political and economic actors to continue indulging in mass production, exploitation, and resource depletion.⁵³⁴ And while this is

⁵³³ See Nelson and Shilling, *Traditional Ecological Knowledge*; and Jeremy L. Caradonna, *Sustainability: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁵³⁴ Dan Shilling, “Introduction: The soul of sustainability,” in M. K. Nelson and D. Shilling, eds., *Traditional Ecological Knowledge. Learning from Indigenous Practices for Environmental Sustainability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 7.

not the entire story, it is safe to say that a considerable part of it is that “sustainability” and in particular “sustainable development” have become “superficial terms that mask ongoing environmental degradation and facilitate business-as-usual economic growth.”⁵³⁵ On this view, sustainability has been co-opted into the language of consumerism, commodification, waste and destruction.

But again, it would be wrong to reduce the notion to what the dominant political and economic structure has made of it. This is why it is important to provide a conceptual clarification of sustainability and its normative horizon, one that can allow us to get a better grip of sustainability’s moral foundations and ethical commitments, as well as of the kind of problems it could possibly respond to. Here, it may be helpful to begin by pointing out what sustainability is not. First, there is no doubt that all those usages of the term that falsely categorize predatory economic and political policies as ‘sustainable’ or ‘green’ should be discarded outright. I am referring here to ‘greenwashing’ and other forms of fabricating environmental benefits by governments, corporations, and other actors of capitalism, when their practices are clearly destructive.⁵³⁶ However, the question gets trickier when looking at ways of producing, consuming, and exchanging that may not appear as straightforwardly exploitative. This is the case of widespread western conceptions of sustainability that conceive of the notion within a developmental framework, one which posits profit making as its ultimate value and goal. In this perspective, the capitalist structure underpinning the relations of production that have brought about exploitation, dispossession, and oppression of human and other-than-human worlds is left intact. There are nuances in how advocates of ‘sustainable development’ conceptualize its role and function, which range from blatant marketing ploys to subtler forms of justification of profit-driven

⁵³⁵ Caradonna, *Sustainability*, p. 2.

⁵³⁶ See Caradonna, *Sustainability*, pp. 248-251.

market transactions and their attendant modes of production.⁵³⁷ All in all, such perspectives rely on an instrumental view of sustainability that enables them to buttress economic growth and resource productivity with the presumption of an “environmentally responsible” capitalism.⁵³⁸ Even though this view begins by identifying a problem with the way in which capitalism is practiced, it is nevertheless unreflective of its understanding of the environment and of the relations that human animals entertain with the rest of nature, which leads it to overlook the sources of unsustainability.

A case in point is *Natural Capitalism*, a manifesto that situates capitalism’s deficiency in the fact that it “neglects to assign any value to the largest stocks of capital it employs,” that is, “the natural resources and living systems.”⁵³⁹ The ethos of such a program rests on the assumption that if the agents of capitalism “reinvest in” and “expand stocks of natural capital,” the biosphere will be able to “produce more abundant ecosystem services and natural resources.”⁵⁴⁰ Put differently, what this perspective suggests is that if only we could open our eyes to the fact that we are not making the most out of ‘our assets’, we would have greater economic growth for longer periods of time. It is no wonder that this sort of view is a favorite of those with vested interests in the global order of production, as it promises to allow them to increase productivity without material sacrifice nor any transformation of the political and economic institutions that they profit from.

I want to argue that those conceptions of ‘sustainability’ that are structured around development are therefore misguided, given that they force us to see the world through the set of conceptual lenses that led us to the ecological crisis in the first place. It is clear from the remarks

⁵³⁷ Paul Hawken is a good example of the latter. See *Blessed Unrest* (London: Penguin, 2007) and *The Ecology of Commerce. A Declaration of Sustainability* (New York: Collins Business, 2010). See also Amory B. Lovins, L. Hunter Lovins, and Paul Hawken, eds, *Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1999).

⁵³⁸ See Lovins, Lovins, and Hawken, eds, *Natural Capitalism*, p. xiii.

⁵³⁹ *Natural Capitalism*, p. 5.

⁵⁴⁰ *Natural Capitalism*, p. 11.

above that they fail to interrogate two fundamental premises that underlie their ethos: the ontological and moral status of human animals, and their relationship to the lands, waters, and other inhabitants of the earth. Consequently, they reproduce practices of human mastery over nature, and as such cannot be extricated from other processes of oppression and exploitation of human and other-than-human forms of life.⁵⁴¹ Indeed, ‘sustainable development’ is wedded to the imperatives of capitalist growth and globalization, and for this reason forms an integral part of the “history of human concentration of wealth” that has made “both humans and nonhumans into resources for investment.”⁵⁴² This history, as Anna L. Tsing puts it, is one in which beings and things are imbued with “alienation,” in the sense that they become mobile assets that are separated from their livelihood processes, and whose main purpose is to be exchanged at market value.⁵⁴³ Tsing contrasts this destructive process with sustainable forms of interaction, such as when living beings “us[e] others as part of a life world—for example, in eating and being eaten.”⁵⁴⁴ The reason why these interactions can be regarded as sustainable is because “multispecies living spaces remain in place,” whereas processes of alienation obviate such entanglements of life.⁵⁴⁵ This is because these processes modify landscapes so as to produce exchangeable commodities, which entails conceiving of living beings and the environments in which they are embedded as divided into either ‘assets’ or ‘waste’. Hence the imperial nature of ‘sustainable’ development, whose framing assumptions—dissimulated under the lineaments of ‘progress’—are oblivious to the ecological and thermodynamic conditions of life, and whose goal is to spread a modular form of business

⁵⁴¹ See Code, *Ecological Thinking*; and Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*.

⁵⁴² Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 5.

⁵⁴³ Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, p. 5.

⁵⁴⁴ Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, p. 5.

⁵⁴⁵ Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, p. 5.

organization on a worldwide scale. And this is ultimately the case even with those developmental models that claim to be attuned to ecosocial diversity.

Sustainability in the strong sense of the term does not respond to the commands of growth, productivity, and accumulation, nor does it serve the interests of investors, markets, and financial systems. The dominant political and economic institutions of global capitalism are quite simply incompatible with the kinds of relations that sustainability requires we entertain with the deep diversity of beings and the living spaces they inhabit. This raises a series of practical challenges, since most of us live in and on these institutions. The unavoidable question that begs to be asked, then, is what is the point of providing a conceptual framework for something that does not have a global application, and whose ‘effectiveness’ is not ‘measurable’?

This brings us back to the question of the role and tasks of political theory, and to its scope and limits. It would be vain to pretend that a theoretical contribution to a pressing and critical set of issues such as climate change and the ecological crisis has the power to effect immediate structural change. On the other hand, it would likewise be a mistake to undervalue the importance of philosophical reflection and inquiry in addressing these problems and other forms of injustice and oppression in human and other-than-human worlds. In this respect, James Tully’s approach to the study of political thought is exemplary, as its goal is to enter into “pedagogical relationships of reciprocal elucidation” between theory and practice in order to attempt to both better understand the problems in question and to shed light on possible ways to address them.⁵⁴⁶ On this view, the purpose of theory is to put into question the different conceptual lenses through which we see the world, and hence to disclose the contingent conditions that produce them.⁵⁴⁷ This form of

⁵⁴⁶ See Tully’s *Public Philosophy in a new Key*, volumes I and II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁵⁴⁷ See, in particular, Tully, “Public philosophy as a critical activity,” in *Public Philosophy in a New Key, Volume 1: Democracy and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 15-38.

theorizing is not only a critical activity in the sense that it problematizes existing relations of governance and shows that these can be subject to change, but also in the sense that it seeks to open up a dialogue of contrastive evaluations with the aim of considering different possible ways of thinking and acting otherwise.⁵⁴⁸ Exploring theoretical problems therefore allows us to work through the various conceptual frameworks we use to make sense of reality, given that the latter may occlude certain things or distort others, and hence hamper our grasp of the situations we face and the ways in which we could respond to them. Thus, the work of “conceptual optometry” (to borrow Anthony Laden’s term)⁵⁴⁹ is not only abstract, it is also very pragmatic: analyzing the various dispositions of a concept like sustainability, and laying out how they fit within particular pictures can get us to appreciate alternative courses of action that are marginalized by the lenses that are imposed on us by the hegemonic structures of power.

This is the case with traditional ecological knowledges of Indigenous peoples, which have been ignored by the dominant Western discourses that claim the mantle of objectivity about what constitutes the right amount of environmental well-being (balanced, of course, against economic growth). There is much we could learn from Indigenous peoples’ ways of relating to nature, especially considering that they have maintained healthy interactions for thousands of years with the lands, waters and nonhuman animals they coexist with. The same cannot be said about Western narratives of ‘development’. However, as John Borrows reminds us, it is also important to keep in mind that asserting that all Indigenous peoples are “natural environmentalists” can “be a damaging stereotype.”⁵⁵⁰ The point Borrows wants to emphasize is that it is dangerous to claim that caring

⁵⁴⁸ Tully, “Public philosophy as a critical activity,” p. 17.

⁵⁴⁹ Laden’s work has been deeply influenced by James Tully. Laden discusses the term in his “Two concepts of civility,” in *A Crisis of Civility? Political Discourse and its Discontents*, eds. R.G. Boatright, T. J. Shaffer, S. Sobieraj, and D.G. Young (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 9-30.

⁵⁵⁰ Borrows, “Earth-Bound: Indigenous Resurgence and Environmental Reconciliation,” in *Resurgence and Reconciliation. Indigenous-Settler Relations and Earth Teachings*, eds. J. Borrows and J. Tully (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), p. 49.

for the earth comes naturally: Indigenous peoples, like any other peoples, “consume to survive” and can therefore “place great stress on ecosystems.”⁵⁵¹ Nonetheless, as Dan Shilling explains, while Indigenous peoples “did exploit and sometimes spoil parts of the land, they continued for 13,000 years or more in North America without damaging the place *too* badly, compared to what westerners have done in one-hundredth of that time.”⁵⁵² This is because contrary to Western societies—whose disembeddedness from nature has enabled them to achieve the technologically engineered control of nature—most Indigenous peoples have managed to live harmoniously in ecosocial collectives because they commune with the rest of the earth’s beings in ways that most of us in the West are entirely unaccustomed to. And although it would be a mistake to pretend to be able to identify a single attitude towards nature that the great variety of Indigenous peoples would hold, it is nevertheless possible to point to common threads that are characteristic of Indigenous relations with nature.

Above all, Indigenous relationships to the worlds of nature are shaped by “restraint” and “reverence”⁵⁵³: the former echoes the principle of interdependency, which brings awareness to the fact that we owe our flourishing to other beings and to the networks of relations that constitute the basis for life. And the latter denotes this idea of communion that I indicate above, which refers to both their spiritual ties to Creation, and to their attendant conception of personhood, which grants equal moral standing to all of the earth’s inhabitants.⁵⁵⁴ Additionally, a series of corresponding principles are derived from restraint and reverence, such as the need to cultivate bonds of reciprocity and respect within and between the relations that bring together human and other-than-

⁵⁵¹ Borrows, “Earth-Bound,” p. 49.

⁵⁵² Shilling, “Introduction: The soul of sustainability,” p. 4. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁵³ Shilling, “Introduction: The soul of sustainability,” p. 12.

⁵⁵⁴ See Nelson and Shilling, eds., *Traditional Ecological Knowledge. Learning from Indigenous Practices for Environmental Sustainability*; Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*; and Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth-Beings. Ecologies of Practice Across Andean Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); among others.

human beings; the commitment to build relationships to the lands and waters of the earth on moral grounds, which entails the rejection of technological ‘fixes’ and other ways of altering our environments for profit-driven purposes; and the obligation to take into account the needs and interests of future generations of living beings; to name a few.⁵⁵⁵

Seen in this light, the conditions of possibility for the construction of a sustainable world rely on a conceptual paradigm shift from a consumptive materialist to an ecological view of nature, one through which we understand ourselves and our relationships as contributors to the well-being of life on earth.⁵⁵⁶ As Robin Wall Kimmerer argues, this would entail “[c]oupling ‘taking’ to the moral responsibility for ‘giving back in equal measure’” in both our relations with one another and with the rest of nature.⁵⁵⁷ And this is something that is currently being thwarted by the instrumental relations to nature that are fostered by the geopolitics of ‘sustainable’ development. Additionally, the ambition to breathe life back into the world through techno-scientific innovations reproduces colonial relations of power and mastery by objectifying nature, given that it is based on the appropriation and transformation of life processes. In contrast, the sustainability of life begins with an awareness of *limits*: that is, both the self-awareness of our limits as human animals, and the awareness of the limits of the rest of nature. Extractivist logics and the scientific paradigm they are predicated upon are premised on thrusting the limits of our animality, and of the capacity of the earth to generate resources for our consumption and accumulation. No matter how skillfully presented as ‘green’, this hegemonic model is at the basis of the degradation of the ecosphere, and hence of the unsustainable social worlds that are destroying the conditions of life on earth.

⁵⁵⁵ See Shilling, “Introduction: The soul of sustainability,” p. 12.

⁵⁵⁶ See Kimmerer, “*Mishkos Kenomagwen*, the Lessons of Grass: Restoring Reciprocity with the Good Green Earth,” in Nelson and Shilling, eds., *Traditional Ecological Knowledge*, pp. 27-56.

⁵⁵⁷ Kimmerer, “*Mishkos Kenomagwen*, the Lessons of Grass, p. 35.

Sustainability as an end in itself refers to the diverse ways through which life nurtures life processes and the beings that are brought into existence through those processes. There is not a single way of thinking and acting sustainably; on the contrary, there are multiple ways of caring for nature, just as there are multiple ways of caring for one another. Different living beings relate to the particular environments in which they are embedded in distinct ways, depending on the territories in which they are located, as well as on the cultures, representations, and knowledge systems through which they mediate reality. But there is no doubt that some beings and life processes are better at sustaining life than others, which is why engaging in ‘dialogues of knowledges’ is necessary to bring together, contrast, and evaluate biocultural entanglements and the ways in which they work differently towards the construction of sustainable forms of existence. This leads us to rethink human forms of organization, and particularly our modes of production and other ways of relating to nature. When the aim is to sustain life, production takes on a significantly different meaning than it does in a capitalist context, where the relations that constitute the conditions of life are under imminent threat. Producing in sustainable ways entails building a non-profit-driven economy⁵⁵⁸ that is based on the diversity of sources of energy and food and on the land-based knowledges and practices that aim at maintaining their integrity.⁵⁵⁹ In this sense, it is the exact opposite of the industrial monocropping that capitalism fosters.

Examples of sustainable production abound, but we can think of the particularly interesting example of milpa systems in what is now Mexico and other parts of Mesoamerica.⁵⁶⁰ Through

⁵⁵⁸ This echoes Aquinas’s view of the market, according to which the “pursuit of profit for its own sake is unjust.” The point and purpose of exchanging in markets is to “serve common goods”; therefore, “financial gain is to be valued only for the goods for which it can be exchanged and for the needs that it thereby enables us to meet.” See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 91.

⁵⁵⁹ See Leff, *La Apuesta por la Vida*; and Corine Pelluchon, *Les Nourritures. Philosophies du corps politique* (Paris: Seuil, 2015).

⁵⁶⁰ In short, milpa refers to “an open-field polyculture centered on maize (*Zea mays*) that rotates with woodland vegetation in a cycle of around 10 to 25 years,” and which is “[e]mbedded in a diverse forest environment.” Moreover,

millenary “practices *with nature*,” the ‘corn peoples’ of Mexico have achieved a delicate ecosocial balance that has allowed them to thrive and flourish through interspecies modes of cohabitation in the diversity of biocultural landscapes in which they are embedded.⁵⁶¹ Their forms of life are built upon the cultural creation of milpa systems as life-sustaining habitats, that is, upon relations of production and ways of being-in-the-world that generate and maintain modes of existence in the immanence of life. As Leff puts it, “‘la milpa’ is a living laboratory of biocultural production in which the autopoiesis of the ‘pueblos’ manifests itself.”⁵⁶² This is so not only as a result of the harvest that allows them to subsist, but also because of the moral relationships with more-than-human beings that the activities of milpa farming bring about. The milpa is a sacred space, and hence is at the center of the ‘corn peoples’ ceremonies that honor the land and its inhabitants’ connection with it throughout agricultural cycles. This in turn forms the basis of their cosmogonies, which are intimately linked to the creation and sustenance of the agrobiodiverse farming systems that make possible the sustainable relations between and among naturecultural worlds.⁵⁶³

It is therefore possible to inhabit the world in ways that entail human modification of soils without being destructive. As the example of milpa shows, the activities of the ‘corn peoples’ have had a sustainable impact on nature for thousands of years through intricate multispecies networks of giving and receiving. In this regard, I agree with Olga Cielemecka’s and Christine Daigle’s contention that “practices of caring for the forest through cultivating it” constitute “an inter-

“[m]ilpa is more than a system of cultivation. By rotating annual crops with tropical secondary forest in a successional cycle..., milpa moves beyond successful food production and becomes the central axis of a resource management system that upgrades woodlands with species useful to humans, accelerates succession, and constructs an anthrosol (soil that has been heavily modified by human activities) of ever increasing fertility...” See Ronald Nigh and Stewart A.W. Diemont, “The Maya milpa: fire and the legacy of living soil,” *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, vol. 11, no. s1, pp. e45-e46.

⁵⁶¹ Leff, *La Apuesta por la Vida*, p. 341. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁶² Leff, *La Apuesta por la Vida*, p. 345. My translation.

⁵⁶³ Leff, *La Apuesta por la Vida*, p. 344.

generational, truly pluri-temporal practice of sustainability,”⁵⁶⁴ one that is at odds with the developmental framework I take issue with. Cielemecka and Daigle emphasize the importance of being accountable not only to future generations of human and more-than-human beings, but also for their pasts, including the past relations that brought them into existence. What this means is that the human transformation of nature is not itself the problem; rather, the destructive force of human animality inheres in the terms on which such transformation takes place. And as I have been arguing, those terms correspond to the atomistic, humancentric picture of sustainability that is underpinned by the abiding structure of mastery, exploitation, and oppression that is at work in capitalist relations of production, accumulation, and expansion.

4. Conclusion

As a way of conclusion, I want to bring back the discussion to democratic theory, and more precisely to the problem of the legitimacy of authority.⁵⁶⁵ There is a growing consensus on the idea that when properly deliberative, democratic procedures are binding, whatever outcome is achieved by the activity of thought alignment—which is itself the ultimate source of value and justification of political action. But as I hope to have shown, this theoretical and institutional privileging of consensus as a way to resolve political conflicts is problematic in a number of ways. Indeed, even though democratic theory is intimately tied to questions about diversity, it largely relies on a flawed conception of what ‘diversity’ entails. This is because ‘diversity’ is taken to refer exclusively to what has been conventionally put forward as relevant sources of difference, which are mainly

⁵⁶⁴ Olga Cielemecka and Christine Daigle, “Posthuman sustainability: an ethos for our anthropocenic future,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, forthcoming.

⁵⁶⁵ See also chapter four, this dissertation.

restricted to ‘cultural’, ‘religious’, and epistemic phenomena. Even though perceived as radical at the time, the notion of ‘deep diversity’ as it has been construed in political theory falls short of accounting for those forms of life and ways of being-in-the-world that don’t fit the mold prescribed by the dominant voices of Western political thought. And as we have seen, the latter are the voices of a construct: the unencumbered, autonomous, and preference-maximizing individual. Such a view of personhood rests on a mistaken understanding of human animality, one that neglects fundamental aspects about ourselves. In this respect, feminist thought and disability studies have convincingly shown that canonical theories of democracy disregard the corporeal, vulnerable, and dependent nature of human animals.

Contrary to what its proponents claim, then, most democratic thought in Western political theory has consistently failed to fulfill its promise of inclusion. This is because it is underpinned by a picture of dialogue and mutual understanding that reproduces norms of compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness. The result is an impoverished conception of communication, one which circumscribes political thought and action to a view that posits spoken language as the authoritative form of intelligible interaction. And this not only excludes those human animals who either cannot communicate in conventionally expected ways, or simply refuse to do so, but also all other nonhuman beings and the relationships to which they participate, and which bring them and ourselves into existence. Following Eduardo Kohn’s discussion of representational processes that are intrinsic to life, I have argued that democratic theory has not paid sufficient attention to multi-species forms of communication, therefore precluding the possibility of considering the experience of all affected by political action—that is, human animals, nonhuman animals, more-than-human beings, and the relationships that sustain them. These exclusions are symptomatic of the instituted epistemologies of mastery and possession that structure our relations with one

another and with the rest of nature. And this logic of mastery is what makes us see nature as providing exploitable resources for our human populations.

This is what is at stake in the view that posits exercises in democratic deliberation as the ultimate source of political legitimacy. Take, for instance, the recent implementation of the mechanism of ‘free, prior, and informed consent’ (FPIC) in conflicts between the Canadian state and Indigenous peoples over access to lands and waters. What matters here is for my purposes is that the insertion of a consent principle has taken place in the particular context of resource extraction. This means that debates about the purported virtues of such a principle are framed within a developmental background that takes the discourses and structures of colonial power for granted. Seen in this light, the question of whether Indigenous communities are enabled to express their consent or not to extractivist practices is irrelevant, given that capitalist frames of oppression and exploitation determine the terms of the debate. There is nothing “transformative” about consenting to the destruction of nature, and even less about being able to slightly change those practices so as to hold corporations and the state accountable to ‘sustainable’ development.⁵⁶⁶

Finally, I hope to have convinced the reader that such an instrumental conception of ‘sustainability’ is conceptually mistaken, and that it contributes to the practical reproduction of the profit-driven vicious cycles that are at the basis of the objectification of nature. The unsustainable should not be sustained, and thus extractivism and other practices of mastery should be opposed both in theory and on the ground, with or without the consent of a select few human animals.

⁵⁶⁶ See, for instance, the work of Cathal M. Doyle, such as his *Indigenous Peoples, Title to Territory, Rights and Resources: The Transformative Role of Free Prior and Informed Consent* (London: Routledge, 2014).

CONCLUSION:

Retrieving Nature

1. Theory, tradition, liberalism.

This dissertation has engaged in critical and contrastive dialogues with a variety of perspectives working inside and outside the field of political theory and political philosophy. The most explicitly direct engagements with the field are the discussions of Rawls and MacIntyre in chapters one and two. The subsequent chapters are less clearly situated in relation to political theory and philosophy, but that reflects the identity crises in which the field has been caught up since the second half of the twentieth century.⁵⁶⁷ Both the attempt to construct and reproduce a hermetic canon of political theory *and* philosophy, and the belief that ‘political theory’ and ‘political philosophy’ are distinct and separate intellectual endeavours, are ultimately irrelevant.

Disciplinary gatekeeping in its various forms is particularly harmful because it produces hierarchical oppositions, and thus not only divides systems of thought into separate categories, but also ascribes positive value to one and negative to the other. The so-called analytic and Continental divide—on which the division between political theory and philosophy is built—is also a case in point: proponents of one tend to rebuke the other, hence increasing the gap between the two and stifling the possibilities for dialogue. This is not to say that there are no distinctions to be made between different traditions of thought, but rather that the drawing of distinctions should not be aimed at discrediting those frameworks that are not one’s own. It is my hope that this dissertation can be read in this light, and that the philosophical reflections that I developed throughout can

⁵⁶⁷See, for instance, Katrina Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice. Postwar Liberalism and the Remaking of Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

contribute to theoretical and practical conversations about politics without reinforcing such dissociations or falling into niche thinking.

As stated in the introduction, one of the reasons why I think it is important to engage in critical dialogue with the work of John Rawls is because of its prevalence in Western political philosophy, particularly in Anglo-American worlds.⁵⁶⁸ But it is also true that working with Rawls, even from a critical point of view, can be seen as yet another way of reinforcing the framework that his corpus and the scholarship around it have imposed upon political theorizing. This objection is one that is usually raised by those voices that belong to more ‘critical’ or ‘radical’ traditions, and whose aim is precisely to disrupt the centrality of liberalism in political thought. I partly subscribe to such a viewpoint, and this is why I limit my direct engagement with Rawls’s thought to one chapter of the dissertation only. I am indeed convinced that liberalism in general, and political liberalism in particular, occupy a dominant position in academic philosophy, and hence exert too much power over the terms in which the debates are framed. I also find especially problematic liberalism’s capacity to dismiss certain arguments, notably historical ones, and to prioritize others, thus setting the agenda for what we ought to think and argue about.⁵⁶⁹ Liberalism’s power of trapping political debates in its own conceptual structures is clearly expressed in the usage of the adjective ‘illiberal’ as a synonym for ‘unreasonable’. As discussed in chapter one, both of these terms are used to designate that which falls beyond the boundaries of decency—boundaries that are, of course, defined and perpetuated by liberalism itself. In other words, there is a strong degree of idiosyncrasy in liberalism’s argumentative structure, given that it suppresses the normative relevance of those points of view that do not take that structure’s basic

⁵⁶⁸ See Charles Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Linda Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

⁵⁶⁹ See Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice*, pp. ix-xxii.

tenets for granted. This circularity not only hinders liberalism, but also political theory and philosophy more generally.

Having said that, I also acknowledge the importance of those attempts at rereading liberalism in a critical light, without however prescribing its rejection.⁵⁷⁰ This line of argument has been advocated by scholars like Charles Mills, for instance, who argue that if we begin by recognizing that liberalism's exclusions are central to its theoretical framework, it then becomes possible to "redeem" and "reclaim it as a liberatory political philosophy."⁵⁷¹ In order to do this, Mills posits that liberalism's normative structure of exclusion should be seen as "contingent" rather than necessary: that is, that the apparatuses of subordination that once appeared as constitutive of liberalism are but a consequence of European imperialism and colonialism.⁵⁷² In short, Mills thinks that by placing liberalism's histories of oppression and exploitation at the center of its workings, it can be retrieved for "radical purposes."⁵⁷³ Now whether Mills's project is successful at circumventing liberalism's way of consistently rejecting historical processes and structures and to redirect its conceptual tools towards alternative pathways or not is outside of the scope of my argument. What I will say here, though, is that there are good reasons to be skeptical of any theoretical and practical project that effaces or normalizes difference, and that no matter how fervently we attempt to unsettle liberalism's constitution, it will always contain mechanisms of prescription and proscription that assume and enact a single world ontology.⁵⁷⁴ This is why I

⁵⁷⁰ See, for instance, Ruth Abbey, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of John Rawls* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013); Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*; and Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); among others.

⁵⁷¹ Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, p. xiv.

⁵⁷² Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, p. xv.

⁵⁷³ Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, p. xv.

⁵⁷⁴ For critiques of the 'single world ontology', see Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser, eds., *A World of Many Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse. Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); and María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care. Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); among others.

argued in chapter one that critical engagements with and against Rawls's work and the conceptual tools it offers should take aspects of his theory beyond the framework within which they were built. Otherwise we will fail to do justice to the heterogeneity and relationality of the ontologies that underlie the worlds of human animals—not to mention nonhuman animals,⁵⁷⁵ and the assemblages of life in which all living beings are embedded.

Ultimately, the purpose of a responsive and transformative practice of political theory and philosophy is to engage in meaningful dialogues among and across traditions of thought.⁵⁷⁶ But preparing the ground for such dialogues entails that we begin by taking other traditions' internal commitments seriously, which includes the problematics and the questions that their adherents set themselves to resolve. According to MacIntyre, traditions provide the contexts within which particular modes of reasoning are developed and sustained through time.⁵⁷⁷ A tradition, therefore, is always partly composed of a continuous argument over what is and ought to be central to it, and about what it means to stand in relation to it. As he puts it, a "living tradition" is "an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition."⁵⁷⁸ Moreover, MacIntyre contends that a tradition is a movement of thought "in the course of which those engaging in that movement become aware of it and of its direction."⁵⁷⁹ The problem with liberalism, however, is that most of its adherents do not conduct their enquiries in a self-aware fashion, nor do they adopt a critical and reflective understanding of

⁵⁷⁵ In this respect, it is crucial to mention the important work of Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka work on animal citizenship within liberal theory. See Donaldson and Kymlicka, *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animals Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵⁷⁶ This echoes James Tully's view. See, in particular, Tully "Deparochializing political theory and beyond: a dialogue approach to comparative political thought," *Journal of World Philosophies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2016, pp. 51-74.

⁵⁷⁷ See MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), esp. chapter 15: "The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life and the Concept of a Tradition", pp. 204-225; and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

⁵⁷⁸ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 222.

⁵⁷⁹ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 326.

the doctrine they preach. Much contemporary liberal theory is premised on the belief that developing the appropriate conceptual tools to solve social and political problems ought to proceed without reference to the conditions and circumstances that gave rise to these problems in the first instance. Nowhere is this more evident than in Rawls's distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory, and the normative theorizing that it gave rise to.⁵⁸⁰ This is characteristic of liberalism's tendency to operate *as if* the search for fundamental principles of justice could not possibly take place outside of liberal standards of rational justification. And given that these standards purport to provide privileged access to moral truths, liberal theorists conceive of their enquiries as able to escape the contingencies and particularities of their own tradition.⁵⁸¹

As Katrina Forrester has shown in her history of postwar liberalism, the only challenges to the liberal tradition that have been taken seriously by its mainstream adherents are those that already agree with its own internal premises, and which can be easily accommodated within the given paradigm.⁵⁸² She argues that political theorists who attempted to criticize Rawls and Rawlsian liberalism “by appealing to distinctive intellectual traditions” consistently failed to achieve any form of prominence in the elite institutions where liberalism was being concocted—especially Harvard, Princeton, and Oxford.⁵⁸³ The only challenges that liberals considered were those that “provided mirror images” of their own tradition, which is not surprising given that most

⁵⁸⁰ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). In this regard, G.A. Cohen is an exception. See Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). While Cohen self-identified as an analytical Marxist, his work engages the liberal ‘distributive’ framework without undermining it. It is interesting to note that he even suggested that Rawls and Dworkin should be called ‘social democrats’ instead of ‘liberals’. See his “Self-ownership, world ownership, and equality,” *Social Philosophy & Policy*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1986, p. 79. Cited in Kymlicka, “Liberalism and Communitarianism,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1988, p. 182. See also Katrina Forrester’s discussion in Forrester, Knatz, and Schult, “‘We’ll need more than Rawlsianism can offer’: Katrina Forrester on John Rawls and Anglo-American Political Philosophy after 1945,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, December 18, 2019.

⁵⁸¹ This is why MacIntyre argues that liberalism presents itself as attempting to provide a “tradition-independent moral standpoint.” See his *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, esp. p. 334.

⁵⁸² Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice*, p. 242.

⁵⁸³ Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice*, p. 242.

were written by Rawls's "close colleagues who worked at the same universities."⁵⁸⁴ Hence Forrester's point that by the late twentieth century, Anglophone political theory operated "in the shadow of the theory of justice."⁵⁸⁵ It is therefore crucial to emphasize here that despite liberalism's self-proclaimed attack on concentrated forms of political and economic power, its history is one of complicity with the status quo. And this not only due to the fact that liberalism's center of gravity is found in the most prestigious, affluent, and influential universities, but especially because liberal ideas do not carry enough weight to undermine the power of the institutions that gave rise to it, such as the institutions of war and empire.⁵⁸⁶

2. Plurality, consensus, embodiment.

The portrait of liberalism I sketched above is a rough picture, one which hides nuances that could potentially shed a different light on liberal theorizing. As Forrester explains, many scholars read Rawls's idea of 'overlapping consensus' as an attempt at adjusting liberal theory to the objections levelled against it by critics who opposed the universalizing vision of *A Theory of Justice*.⁵⁸⁷ In this regard, the work put forward by Aristotelian philosophers like MacIntyre and Charles Taylor in the 1980s is among the most eloquent.⁵⁸⁸ The core of their critique is directed at the liberal positing of 'true' justice and the correlate claim to have discovered the path towards it. Such an understanding of justice suggests that it can be grasped abstractly and reduced to a set of principles, rules, and judgments about duties and obligations. And as Linda Zerilli argues, Rawls's

⁵⁸⁴ Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice*, p. 242. Just war theory is a notorious example of the liberal tradition's failure to undermine the very limits it sets itself.

⁵⁸⁵ Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice*, p. 242.

⁵⁸⁶ See Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice*, pp. 72-104.

⁵⁸⁷ Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice*, p. 259.

⁵⁸⁸ See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*; and Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences. Philosophical Papers Vol. II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

bold move within the liberal tradition was to “recogniz[e] the dangerously coercive character of the claim to the truth of one’s beliefs when it comes to shared political life,” and thus to argue that “[w]hat matters is not whether one’s views are true but whether they can be justified to others as reasonable.”⁵⁸⁹ This move opened up the possibility for liberalism to be receptive to pluralism and, consequently, to engage with the questions of judgment and ethics more generally without positing allegedly self-evident validity claims. Moreover, in contrast to conventional liberal consensus theory—which corresponds to a ‘top-down’ vision of the grounds of ethical and political judgments—Rawls’s understanding of ‘overlapping consensus’ is a genuine attempt at building an ethics on the potentiality of agreement in practice. Mutual understanding is therefore at the center of Rawls’s conception of democratic action, which seeks to delineate how a diversity of persons and groups of persons could debate and reason about the possibilities for living together. Hence the emphasis on the importance of finding ways of engaging in responsive and reciprocal interactions among each other, and of cementing the civic bonds that are needed to address differences through open communication and the prudential exchange of reasons.

And yet, the conceptual scheme within which ‘overlapping consensus’ is worked out in Rawls’s thought remains constraining to the point where it is difficult, if not impossible, to use it for the purposes of a more encompassing approach to democratic thought and action. This is mainly because, for Rawls, the ‘overlapping consensus’ is already given—that is, the role of theory is to discern what such a consensus on basic principles of justice might look like, and to proceed as if no further disagreement on the terms of the debate could possibly arise. At the heart of this issue is Rawls’s conception of legitimacy and justification, which serves to delimit the constraints of what can be said in public, as well as how can it be communicated, and by whom. As Linda

⁵⁸⁹ Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 144.

Zerilli puts it, interlocutors are always at imminent “risk of speaking outside the strictures of public reason,” because when advancing claims democratically, they are bound to be limited “to the mere extension of already legitimate political principles.”⁵⁹⁰ This brings us back to the charge of circularity that I indicated above, which hinders the potential for ‘overlapping consensus’ to effect transformative change in theory and practice.

The question we must ask ourselves is whether the idea of ‘overlapping consensus’ can be recovered and used for purposes other than securing the legitimacy of a mode of reasoning that is imposed by a single tradition without regard for other possible ways of reasoning—and one that is particularly dismissive of those that dispute the premises upon which it is based. Zerilli is right to question the extent to which Rawls’s project—and by extension, liberal theorizing more generally—is able to admit new “public object[s] of judgment” into view, as well as to warn of the danger of repetition and political stagnation that is inherent to it.⁵⁹¹ But Zerilli is also aware that Rawls’s response to the problem of foregrounding critical judgment in the absence of universal rules and principles has something valuable to contribute to the debate. Indeed, she even asserts that there are striking similarities between Rawls’s and Arendt’s accounts on this matter, for both of whom the political use of truth claims has corrosive effects on democratic practice—for, they argue, it precludes debate and constitutes a threat to plurality. Charles Taylor likewise praised Rawls’s later work and stressed the capacity of ‘overlapping consensus’ to provide a way for political theory to go beyond inherited concepts and frameworks for thinking about diversity.⁵⁹² Turning away from the Post-Enlightenment search for an independent political ethic from which we could deduce invariable norms to govern our conducts, Rawls’s idea appeared to Taylor as a

⁵⁹⁰ Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, p. 152.

⁵⁹¹ Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, p. 162.

⁵⁹² See Charles Taylor, “Modes of Secularism,” in *Secularism and its Critics*, ed. R. Bhargava (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 31-53.

crucial step towards an approach that is more sensitive to the diversity and contentiousness that characterise democratic activities.

What is interesting about Taylor's retrieval of 'overlapping consensus' is that he is convinced it has the potential to open up to 'comprehensive doctrines' that are not committed to liberalism, to use Rawls's language. In Taylor's eyes, the concept could provide the conditions of possibility for a multi-tradition dialogue between and among interlocutors that are not bound together by a common identity. The main virtue of 'overlapping consensus', for Taylor, is that it lays the foundation for a shared background of intelligibility that enables us to reason with one another, without however prescribing an underlying rationale for it. But the shared background would nevertheless point towards the articulation of certain norms of conduct, even though their content cannot be specified prior to the interlocutors' interaction. The idea is for the action-guiding norms and standards that are agreed upon to be justifiable from a plurality of philosophical and spiritual worldviews. As he puts it: "it is essential to the overlapping consensus that it be generally understood that there is more than one set of valid reasons for signing on to it."⁵⁹³ In this way, 'overlapping consensus' could form the basis for a "common philosophy of civility," one which would involve the "meeting of very different minds, worlds apart in their premises, uniting only in the immediate practical conclusions."⁵⁹⁴ At its best, it would allow for the diversity of citizens of a given polis to be able to feel "morally bound" to these ethical and political principles and goods, so that they can be enshrined in the form of an "unforced consensus on human rights."⁵⁹⁵

⁵⁹³ Taylor, "Modes of Secularism," pp. 48-49.

⁵⁹⁴ Taylor, "Conditions of an Unforced Consensus on Human Rights," in *Dilemmas and Connexions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 122.

⁵⁹⁵ Taylor, "Modes of Secularism," p. 51; and "Conditions of an Unforced Consensus on Human Rights," pp. 105-124. It is worth noting that the 'overlapping consensus' can operate at various levels and scales: that is, at the level of liberal democratic societies, as it is the case in Rawls's work, or of communities within those societies, or at a global scale, as Taylor has argued for, and so on.

As MacIntyre argues, coming to a common mind is a prerequisite for creating and sustaining the types of societies that can achieve the individual and common goods that are essential to human flourishing.⁵⁹⁶ On his view, what is needed is widespread shared deliberation of the sort that can give voice to all the members of the political community, which entails paying particular attention to those of us whose exercise of reasoning is limited due to physical and/or cognitive disabilities, ill health, and old age. MacIntyre's contribution is valuable for bringing into view the need to institutionalize forms of deliberation that are accessible and appropriate to the needs of all human animals, and through which we can all argue, propose, and express our approval or disapproval of that which affects and concerns us. His work has been praised for attempting to reverse the pattern instituted by mainstream moral and political philosophy of disregard and neglect of the human animal condition of vulnerability and dependence. First, because he emphasizes the need to discard harmful habits of mind that pervade not only professional academic philosophy, but also the wider culture of modern capitalist societies. These habits of mind correspond to the prevalent ascription of value to that which fits particular canons of beauty, and the ensuing confounding of physical appearance and personal quality—or between what is presented and how it is presented, or by whom.⁵⁹⁷ And second, because he highlights the need for deep structural change, notably through the creation and sustaining of networks of generosity and reciprocity within and between political communities. MacIntyre's purpose here is to show that mutual help, cooperation, and solidarity should be at the basis our relations, and that this requires that we institute formal practices of caring for and giving to others that respond to our vulnerabilities, afflictions, and dependence on particular others.

⁵⁹⁶ See MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001), esp. pp. 129-146.

⁵⁹⁷ See MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 137.

What I wanted to stress in the second chapter of the dissertation is that if we want to redirect the idea of ‘overlapping consensus’ towards transformative uses, then reconciling ‘deep diversity’ in the multicultural sense of the term should not be our priority. Rather, following MacIntyre, the attempt to arrive at a common mind should primarily be thought of as way of deliberating and reaching agreements on how to enable and sustain the flourishing of human animals. And this, of course, includes cultural, religious, and other forms of diversity as conventionally understood in political theory, but it is certainly not limited to it. There is a material level of physical need that is prior to and concomitant with the development of cultures—as well as of moral, religious, and philosophical commitments. In this respect, much of the debate about unforced consensus and common ground is missing what is perhaps the most fundamental aspect of our existence and experience as human animals, which is the fact that we are to a large extent determined by our bodies’ needs. Acknowledging this allows us to grasp how power relations and structural injustices permeate human animal lives in ways that analyses that restrict their focus to culture, values, and discourse do not. This resonates with the new materialist call for political theorizing to return to fundamental questions about the nature and importance of matter, and to attend to the materialities of embodied experience and to the place that humans occupy within a material world.⁵⁹⁸ This entails taking heed of that which enables and underlies our existence as corporeal beings with specific needs, feelings, and impairments, as well as our experiences of suffering and limitations. It also leads us to reflect on our modes of production and reproduction, and on how these processes condition the relations that make life possible, imposing and reinforcing unequal and unjust distributions of political and economic power.

⁵⁹⁸ Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “Introducing New Materialisms,” in D. Coole and S. Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 9. See also Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 3.

In other words, MacIntyre's introduction of dependence and vulnerability into debates about reasoning and deliberation allows us to bridge the gap between bodies of literature that do not normally talk to one another. One of the major virtues of this form of theorizing is that it opposes the compartmentalization of philosophical reflection, which corresponds to the making of distinctions between realms of inquiry and to the attendant presumption that these are isolated from one another. I raised this issue in chapter two with regard to the separation of the 'political' from the 'moral' and the 'religious'. As we saw, the positing of a 'political' sphere where interlocutors would engage with each other by exchanging reasons that are purported to make sense to all 'reasonable' persons is but a failed search for neutrality. And this not because the Rawlsian theoretical framework is not up to the job, but because there is no such thing as neutrality in politics.⁵⁹⁹ Thus, what I tried to do in the beginning of the dissertation is to point towards another picture of mutual understanding, one that is not based on the attempt to find a common ground by agreeing to disagree on the nature of the good in the conventional philosophical sense, but rather by becoming aware of an elemental level of practice that concerns us all: the ineluctable materiality of existence.

In this regard, mainstream moral and political philosophy has much to learn from the feminist tradition in political thought, which, although enormously heterogenous, unanimously calls attention to the relations of power, injustices and inequalities that stem from the material dimensions of embodied experience. In addition, the feminist body of literature has underscored the importance of topics such as disability, illness, aging, and childhood, which were neglected by a philosophical canon that was not concerned with the body's central role in human animal life. Taken together, these insights point towards the necessity of putting activities that seek to respond

⁵⁹⁹ See, for instance, Charles Taylor "Neutrality in political science," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers Vol. II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 58-90.

to needs and vulnerabilities at the forefront of ethical and political reflection. Hence the normative requirement of nurturing and cultivating relations that foster the care and assistance that human animals need to survive and flourish.

3. Nature and the hierarchy of beings

The bridge built by MacIntyre in his work on dependence and vulnerability in interrelating the dominant voices and the critiques of those voices is of fundamental importance for the Western tradition of political thought. The latter was built on false assumptions about the nature of human animality that still inform much political theory and philosophy today. The result is the marginalization and exclusion of human animals on the ground that they do not fit the criteria for what and who is a fit object of moral respect. This is why care ethics, disability studies, the phenomenology of illness, and other approaches that focus on embodiment should not merely be seen as important contributions, but rather as indispensable starting points to any ethical and political discussion. In addition to challenging received conceptions of human personhood, an ethics that is attentive to corporeality, when properly understood, can also provide a basis for calling into question the long-standing premise that human animals are higher beings in some cosmic hierarchy.⁶⁰⁰

MacIntyre does this by showing that the differences between human animals and nonhuman animals have been grossly exaggerated in philosophical discussions. This has resulted in the belief that rational thought and practical reasoning are somehow independent of our experience as embodied beings—an experience that we share indeed with nonhuman animals. But

⁶⁰⁰ For the culturally engrained instrumentalized view of nonhuman animals, see Donaldson and Kymlicka, *Zoopolis*, p. 6; and pp. 19-49.

MacIntyre reproduces the very distinction he criticizes by merely moving it around: according to his line of reasoning, those few philosophers who have paid attention to nonhuman animals have only focused on certain species that do not possess the power of “attending to beings” in Heidegger’s sense. This means that such animals have an “incapacity for attention,” which prevents them from “form[ing] a world.”⁶⁰¹ In other words, MacIntyre is saying that lizards, moths, crabs, worms, and the like, are animals that cannot have a subjective point of view. This is because, on his view, these kinds of animals are not aware of other beings’ presence, nor are they able to apprehend their environment in the way other animals do—particularly human animals, dolphins, chimpanzees, horses, elephants, and dogs, among others. He then goes on to provide criteria for determining which animals belong to the first group and which ones belong to the second, and argues that the members of the latter are able to explore their environments, instead of merely responding to it; they are able to “identify and classify”; they also have the capacity to “devote perceptual attention to the objects that they encounter”; and finally, they “exhibit in their activity belief-presupposing and belief-guided intentions and they are able to understand and to respond to the intentions communicated by others.”⁶⁰²

What is striking about the criteria that MacIntyre delineates to make distinctions between kinds of animals is that it reflects the features that are commonly used to determine so-called ‘normal’ cognitive capacities. This form of classifying animals not only reproduces a deeply ingrained anthropocentric bias, but also recreates and legitimizes the distinction between higher and lower animal species. It is therefore unsurprising that MacIntyre’s argument is oblivious to the intrinsic value of nature. Indeed, the contentions he put forward in *Dependent Rational Animals* entail that the lives of only certain beings are conditioned by dependence and vulnerability, and

⁶⁰¹ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, pp. 44-45.

⁶⁰² MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 46.

that their flourishing is somehow more important than the flourishing of other, lesser beings. This is why I argued in chapter two that MacIntyre's argument could be strengthened by extending it to nature as a whole, which includes all living beings and the relations that keep life going. At this stage of the dissertation, I also want to argue that it is necessary for his account to abandon the problematic distinction of worth on which it is based if it is to be meaningful and convincing. To assert that dolphin and elephant lives matter more than grasshoppers and worms is morally arbitrary, and it is particularly problematic when the reason for the distinction of worth is grounded in operative assumptions about cognitive functioning.

An overarching aim of this research project has been the attempt to establish qualitative distinctions among types of relationships, which necessarily prompts the question of how to determine which relations, beings, and things are more valuable and thus worthier of concern and care than others. And I am aware that sketching tentative answers to this question entails treading on dangerous terrain. But the answer that MacIntyre's work seeks to put forward is flawed and ultimately harms his argument, which would fare better if it did not rely on it. This is so because the reasons he gives for establishing such distinctions lead us to neglect the value of certain beings, who are stratified into lower status living things. Worms are a great example. As María Puig de la Bellacasa explains, worms are sources of fertility and their role in the sustaining of life is of fundamental importance, hence the need to care for them and to treat them as our "earthy companions."⁶⁰³ Our obligations towards them are not—and should not be—grounded in the fact that the functioning of their mind resembles the functioning of our own mind. But that does not leave us without reasons to acknowledge the entanglements and interdependencies between and within our worlds, such as their indispensable contribution to life processes by composting food

⁶⁰³ Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, p. 147.

waste and nurturing the soil.⁶⁰⁴ Moreover, just as any other living being, worms are vulnerable creatures with needs of all sorts, and whose neglect cannot be justified on any grounds whatsoever. Indeed, it is wrong to engage in unilateral relations with them or with other beings that are different from us.

It is worth mentioning that MacIntyre's point is not that worms and other small animals are entirely worthless beings, but only that they have an "impoverished form of existence" compared to that of other animals.⁶⁰⁵ According to this line of thought, given that the modes of apprehension of 'higher' nonhuman animals are closer to ours, studying them would inevitably open our eyes to the fact that their biological nature is closely interrelated to our own biological nature. But what I want to argue here is that emphasizing interdependency and vulnerability is intended to cultivate awareness of other beings' exposure to the possibility of harm, subordination, and subjection to arbitrary power without the need to find close similarities in our biological natures. It is imperative that we human animals learn to be receptive and responsive to the more-than-human parts of nature, so that our interactions with those worlds are informed by appropriate normative concerns. And the latter must hold independently of whether the beings we encounter possess certain capacities or not. Because if our normative concerns are grounded in compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness—which presuppose a "threshold level of capacity"⁶⁰⁶—then it is clear that the resulting ethical outlook will reproduce the sort of exclusions that we are attempting to rebuke in the first place. These exclusions will affect human animals with intellectual and physical disabilities, as well as more-than-human beings whose faculties do not fall within the range of 'normal' cognitive and physical competence. In the case of MacIntyre, this is epitomized

⁶⁰⁴ Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, p. 147.

⁶⁰⁵ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 45.

⁶⁰⁶ See Stacy Clifford Simpican, *The Capacity Contract. Intellectual Disability and the Question of Citizenship* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p. 4; p. 10.

in his argument's underlying distinction between 'higher' and 'lesser' animals. And this seriously hinders the attempt to articulate an ethics that aims to incite the kind of care that is expressed in collective efforts to nurture and sustain life on earth.

As I have tried to show in the preceding chapters, what is required for such an ethics to make sense is to begin by taking relationality beyond its anthropocentric roots. Adopting an embodied and dialogical approach is not enough, in and of itself, to disrupt the various forms of oppression and injustice, nor the practices of mastery and destruction that are at the basis of our dominant and dominating social systems. What is needed is a practical and theoretical orientation to the study of politics that integrates both social and ecological concerns, that is to say, a point of view that bridges the gap between specifically human phenomena and nature. The purpose of such an ecosocial point of view is to open up conceptual space in which to develop tools and frameworks that are better able to both help us understand what is at stake—who and what is affected, and in what manner—and to work out tentative ways to start resolving these problems. Only then will we be able to lay the groundwork for a reflection on how to uproot the unsustainable patterns of exploitation that threaten to destroy all forms of life on earth.

4. Nature and the structures of injustice

It is in this spirit that I examined a number of contentious concepts, issues, and debates raised by the concern over how to better frame our ethical and political relations to the world at a time of anthropogenic climate crises. In line with the previous considerations on the political participation of neglected beings, I argued that the hegemonic imaginary of mastery that generates relationships of oppression and domination within and between social and ecological worlds is

grounded in a problematic picture of personhood and citizenship—which in turn rests on a wrong understanding of human animality. This is clearly manifested in the notion of Anthropocene, which has become a prevalent buzzword in the literature on environmental thinking. As I argued in chapter three, following Anna Grear’s work, the Anthropocene’s universalist appeal conceals the uneven responsibility for the destruction of the earth, as well as the uneven ways in which human animals are affected by climate change. Hence the need to put into question the homogenous and disembodied *Anthropos* that is presupposed by the term, and to shed light on the ways in which exploitative social systems destroy subordinated forms of life, human and more-than-human alike.

It is also of crucial importance that we avoid losing sight of hegemony and power when decentering the human in favor of a turn towards and concern for the nonhuman. An adequate theoretical fabric must be attentive to the pervasiveness of power dynamics, and to how these specifically disadvantage and marginalize certain beings and relations. It must also be directed at a systematic dismantling of the political and economic structures that undergird the instrumentalization and exploitation of human and nonhuman others. Indeed, the only way to truly sustain the conditions of life on earth is through a radical critique of the masterful apparatuses that produce and reproduce injustices and inequalities—which affect both social and ecological lifeways. In this regard, I agree with Diana Coole and Samantha Frost’s worry that the privileging of issues that are primarily related to discourse, culture, and values has been concomitant with a neglect of material phenomena and processes.⁶⁰⁷ This, according to Coole and Frost, is mainly due to the dominance of both constructivism in continental thought and liberalism in analytic philosophy, which lack the relevant tools for a fine-grained analysis of configurations of power and oppression and the structures that uphold them. Their claim could be regarded by some as

⁶⁰⁷ Coole and Frost, “Introducing New Materialisms,” p. 3.

slightly totalizing, given that it would be wrong to reduce those traditions of thought to specific—yet prevalent—instances of the so-called cultural turn. But it is nevertheless true that, generally speaking, the ontological and epistemological presumptions that support contemporary theorizing have shifted away from materialist modes of analysis and moved in the direction of textual and cultural approaches to the conceptualization and investigation of the worlds we inhabit. Hence the pressing need to reorient our thinking towards the biological material that populates the environment and the socioeconomic structures that condition life on earth. Feminist theory and practice are at the forefront of this intellectual movement that seeks to foreground the materiality of the human body and the natural world.

But in order to pave the way for such a critical engagement with the entrenched structures of power and the epistemic order that is inherent to it, it is necessary to retrieve an understanding of nature that can allow us to critique the ways in which humans act upon it to its detriment. As we have seen, much work in ecological thought has put forward the idea that the notion of ‘nature’ as pristine and unspoilt matter, if it ever existed, is now completely obsolete. This is so either because human and ‘natural’ phenomena are intertwined to the point of becoming indistinguishable, or because trying to do so conceals the fact that ‘nature’ is what we human animals make of it, rather than a true reflection of what is out there in the world. It is indeed impossible to deny the role that human animals have and continue to play in modifying the biological systems and organisms in their own interest. In this sense, the notion of Anthropocene does capture well the massive reshaping of the earth that is driven by human activity, which has become a geological force in its own right. But what I tried to argue is that there are good reasons to salvage a vision of nature in the light of which we can see the intrinsic value of certain aspects of the world. Here, I am hinting at something like Sharon Krause’s definition of nature as the

“Earth’s more-than-human parts.”⁶⁰⁸ As she puts it, even though it is true that much of the material world we inhabit bears a human imprint, it also “contains many beings and things that exceed the *merely* human,” which include “both nonhuman animals and what we commonly think of as the natural environment.”⁶⁰⁹ And as such, it is necessary that we humans are held—*differentially*—accountable for the consequences that our actions have on those more-than-human parts of the Earth.

Acknowledging this brings awareness to the wrongness of our presently dominant mode of living in this planet, which is characterized by practices of objectification, conquest and mastery over those features of existence to which we have no legitimate title. To put this in different terms, there is a sacred dimension to life that, if recovered, would make us see that our interventions in nature have serious repercussions. But even independently of whether we cultivate the disposition to look at nature with awe and wonder or not, the argument still holds: nature denotes a fixed system of stable and objective laws, and it is not permissible to disregard them, nor is it of our competence to try to reshape them.⁶¹⁰ There are indeed limits to what we can and should do to the environments we inhabit and the beings and relations that constitute them. These limits may not always be clear, which entails that the attempt to specify them will sometimes be difficult and contentious. But engaging in comparative and critical dialogues that can bring insights into what

⁶⁰⁸ Sharon Krause, “Environmental Domination,” *Political Theory*, 2 Dec. 2019 (OnlineFirst), p. 2; and note 1, pp. 19-20.

⁶⁰⁹ Krause “Environmental Domination,” note 1, pp. 19-20.

⁶¹⁰ See Juliana González Valenzuela *Bíos. El cuerpo del alma y el alma del cuerpo* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica and Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2017); see also Kate Soper, “Disposing nature or disposing of it?: Reflections on the instruction of nature,” in Gregory E. Kaebnick, ed., *The Ideal of Nature: Debates About Biotechnology and the Environment* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), pp. 1-16; among others.

something like those limits might look like is one of political theory and philosophy's main purposes.⁶¹¹

That being said, I agree with Kate Soper's call to question the acceptability of both "nature-endorsing" and "nature-sceptical" perspectives, which entails casting a critical eye on the appeal to nature as ontologically fixed as well as on the converse claim that the 'natural' is nothing but revisable cultural norms.⁶¹² This is an important reminder that the idea of 'nature' as essence has been used to fabricate and impose a biological ontology whose normative underpinnings have served to define the 'good' human, and hence to demarcate and exclude those who do not fit into that mold. One of critical theory's main objectives has been to expose the ways in which the political and socioeconomic exclusion and 'dehumanization' of gendered, racialized, and sexualized bodies are bolstered by premises that appeal to nature and biology. And this is something to which the new materialists alert us of as well. Indeed, as Samantha Frost explains, new materialists have sought to reintroduce biological and material processes into analyses of social and political phenomena, but while doing so, they have been acutely attentive to "how the forces of matter and the processes of organic life contribute to the play of power or provide elements or modes of resistance to it."⁶¹³ In short, the key insight in new materialist thinking is that "biology and culture, organisms and contexts, are co-emergent; they provoke, challenge, and consequently shape one another."⁶¹⁴ This contribution has provided a richer and more workable

⁶¹¹ The work of James Tully exemplifies this well. See Tully, "Life sustains life 1: Value, social and ecological," in *Nature and Value*, ed. Akeel Bilgrami (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), pp. 163-180; "Life sustains life 2: The ways of reengagement with the living earth," in *Nature and Value*, ed. Akeel Bilgrami (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), pp. 181-204; and "Deparochializing political theory and beyond: a dialogue approach to comparative political thought"; among others.

⁶¹² Kate Soper, "Nature/'nature'," in *FutureNatural*, eds. G. Robertson et al. (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 22.

⁶¹³ Samantha Frost, "The implications of the new materialisms for feminist epistemology," in *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science*, ed. H.E. Grasswick (London: Springer, 2011), p. 70.

⁶¹⁴ Frost, "The implications of the new materialisms for feminist epistemology," p. 77.

understanding of the entanglements between and among the multiple forms of existence that dwell and act together.

5. The relations that matter: life and our responsibility to sustain it

One of my aims in discussing new materialisms and posthuman thinking has been to draw attention to the need to articulate scalar distinctions of worth between biological life and technology. I argued that these sorts of distinctions are predicated on the contrast between that which is in some sense independent of human activity, on the one hand, and that which is directly dependent on it, on the other. And while it is true that matter on this planet is unavoidably entangled,⁶¹⁵ this does not nevertheless mean that kinds and entities are incapable of being recognized as different from one another. It is indeed possible—and I also contend that it is desirable—to make qualitative evaluations based on two kinds of distinctions: first, a distinction between that which is alive and that which is not; and, second, one between organic forms of life and synthetic ones (that is, artificial, digital, informational, and so on). These distinctions provide the bases for a background of “strong evaluation” in Charles Taylor’s sense of the term,⁶¹⁶ which is to say that they constitute the ontological spaces against which we articulate the evaluative vocabularies that enable us to characterize things, beings, and relations contrastively. And it is in the light of such evaluative frameworks that we can elucidate what makes and what does not make sense about how we relate to what is external to ourselves. But making these distinctions manifest requires that we also deliberate about *life*, and that we sketch possible answers to the questions of

⁶¹⁵ See, for instance, Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*.

⁶¹⁶ See, in particular, his *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers Vol. I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

what counts as life, and what is owed to that which is alive.⁶¹⁷ Again, dealing with these questions may not always be straightforward, and we may never arrive at final answers, but the activity of searching for conditional grounds for thinking about what makes life possible and what is required for life to flourish is integral to political and philosophical inquiry.

As Hasana Sharp and Chloë Taylor point out, the contribution of Judith Butler is crucial in clarifying the relation between the condition of being alive and the protection and care that is warranted by such condition.⁶¹⁸ On this view, the commitment to care and nurture the beings and relations that constitute life on earth emerges through the apprehension that these beings and relations are alive, and therefore that they are vulnerable. The awareness of life—and of the attendant possibility of non-life—brings about obligations to and responsibilities for the beings and relations that exist as well as for their conditions of existence. And although there is something about life that requires and demands its protection, according to Butler, our obligations are to “the conditions that make life possible, not to ‘life itself’.” Further, she asserts that “our obligations emerge from the insight that there can be no sustained life without those sustaining conditions, and that those conditions are both our political responsibility and the matter of our most vexed ethical decisions.”⁶¹⁹ The conditions that sustain life make direct reference to material existence, to the condition of interdependency of matter, and to the vulnerability of that which is alive. As I alluded to in chapter four, in the case of animals (human and nonhuman), these are the conditions that respond to the biological needs of our physical bodies, which minimally include non-negotiable things such as caloric intake, hydration, and shelter.

⁶¹⁷ See, in this regard, Hasana Sharp and Chloë Taylor, eds., *Feminist Philosophies of Life* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2016).

⁶¹⁸ Sharp and Taylor, “Introduction,” in *Feminist Philosophies of Life*, p. 12. See also Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2016).

⁶¹⁹ Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 23, cited in Sharp and Taylor, “Introduction,” p. 14.

This illustrates well the mutual constitution of biological and organismic life, on the one hand, and of the kinds of mediums through which things and beings can grow, on the other.⁶²⁰ In order for animals to survive on this planet, they must necessarily use matter and living processes to produce and consume. Seen in this light, animal intervention in nature is unavoidable, and it would be preposterous to argue that it is morally unjustified. The sustaining and development of animal life depends on processes of alteration and transformation that create the components that are needed for the conservation of the species. Human animals are no exception in this regard, and there clearly is some truth to Butler's assertion that "processes of life themselves require destruction and regeneration."⁶²¹ I would nevertheless resist using the term 'destruction' here, given that it refers to an action that deliberately causes harm, and that the kind of damage it inflicts is so profound that whatever is destroyed does not exist anymore. Cyclical and reproductive modes of interaction with the natural environments must aim at maintaining the essential functions and processes of ecosystems over time. For this reason, relations premised on such modes are not destructive. On the contrary, as Olga Cielemecka and Christine Daigle make clear, sustainable modes of inhabiting the world are ones in which human animal activity "is not a destructive force, but rather one that impacts nature in ways that support its lively ecologies."⁶²² Living systems are interdependent in this way, and they all strive to maintain the life-supporting relations that enable them to function.

But as I argued in chapter six, human animals do have specific responsibilities and obligations that are not imputable to other living beings. As Krause has put it, what is distinctive

⁶²⁰ See Samantha Frost, *Biocultural creatures: Toward a new theory of the human* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2016).

⁶²¹ Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 16, cited in Sharp and Taylor, "Introduction," p. 13.

⁶²² Olga Cielemecka and Christine Daigle, "Posthuman sustainability: an ethos for our anthropocenic future," *Theory, Culture & Society*, forthcoming, p. 11.

about human animals, and, more precisely, about our agency, is that we hold ourselves—and others hold us—accountable for our actions.⁶²³ In other words, it is through the articulation of the evaluative frameworks I mentioned above that we exercise our agency in a meaningful way. The reason is that these frameworks allow us to achieve the kind of reflective awareness by which we come to recognize the importance, worth, and meaning of our relations to our surroundings. Moreover, they enable us to formulate distinctions of worth against which we assess and establish which relations should be fostered and cultivated, and which ones need to be transformed or curbed in the interests of ecosocial coexistence. On this view, agency is that through which we recognize “matters of significance”⁶²⁴ and ascribe value and meaning to the worlds we navigate on a daily basis. The facts of our inhabiting these worlds and of our embeddedness in relations of interdependency with human and more-than-human beings prompt us to figure out how to respond adequately and intelligibly to those beings. This is why agency as a critical form of reflection is necessary for capturing the qualitative differences that exist between ways of relating to nature, and therefore to criticize and repudiate those that destroy the conditions of sustainability of life.

This is most obvious in the difference that exists between masterful relations through which human animals objectify, exploit, and dominate nature, on the one hand, and ways of relating to the living earth that are guided by reciprocity and mutual benefit, on the other. These are opposite ends on a scale that hides many nuances and conundrums, but the contrast is nevertheless integral to an adequate articulation of the kind of background of valuation that can help us maintain balance and harmony in ecosocial configurations. As I tried to show in chapter five, this background provides conceptual tools without which we would not be able to fully grasp what is wrong with

⁶²³ Sharon Krause, “Bodies in action: Corporeal agency and democratic politics,” *Political Theory*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2011, pp. 299-324.

⁶²⁴ Taylor, “The concept of a person,” in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers Vol. I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 102.

extractivist practices such as large-scale mining and drilling, geoengineering, agroindustry, and other forms of production and consumption that destroy the biophysical foundations of ecological systems. In order to preserve the latter's integrity, we need to rely on a picture of agency that is at odds with the view that human activity simpliciter is destructive. The idea is to bring awareness to the fact that there are different ways of responding to and of engaging with more-than-human beings and with the relations that sustain us all. It is also crucial to remain alert to the danger of neglecting these differences. The danger I have in mind is a weak exercise of judgment that would hinder human animals' disposition to care about the beings and relations that matter—that is, the beings and relations that sustain life. This is why I argued in chapter five that despite the importance of decentering human agency and privilege in political theorizing, it is also necessary to refine our articulations of what agency entails in order to pinpoint what is meaningful about the notion.

I am aware that this way of framing the question of agency invites charges of an anthropocentric bias. This is because, contrary to what some new materialists and posthumanists argue,⁶²⁵ the view I am upholding here posits that there is something distinctive about human animal agency. But where my argument meets the new materialist and posthumanist rejection of anthropocentrism is that there is nothing about human agency as I conceive of it that could provide grounds for human exceptionalism. What I have argued for is the need to consider the dissimilarities that exist in how particular beings and things exercise agency, and to recognize that it is not possible to expect the same kind of normative responsiveness from different beings and

⁶²⁵ I have particularly in mind those new materialists and post humanist scholars who uphold a 'flat ontology' in the strongest sense of the term, which entails a complete blurring of the distinction between the organic and inorganic. Such scholars include Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, and William Connolly, among others. See Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); and Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

things. But acknowledging distinctness does not entail the positing of a hierarchy of beings where human animals would be placed above all other forms of life.

Having said that, my argument does rely on the presumption that the worlds of *bios* and the worlds of *techne* are incommensurable, in the sense that there is a fundamental separation between the normative spaces respectively inhabited by biological life and by technological assemblages. This means that there is indeed a certain hierarchy between beings and things, such that it would not make much sense to ascribe the same value and the same worth to a tree as opposed to a desk. More importantly, it would be highly problematic to do so, given that this normative conflation blurs the ontological contrast that allows us to criticize the objectifying stance that is at the root of our unsustainable relationships to the earth.

6. Coda

Finally, I would like to push my argument a bit further and complicate the ‘beings versus things’ dichotomy on which it is based. As I have argued, understanding ontological interdependency from a perspective that seeks to decenter the human subject leads to the awareness that matter is intricately entangled. This is at the heart of what is meant by an adequate understanding of the concept of ‘relations’, and of what relations involve in practice. Indeed, living systems relate to and are also brought into existence by relations with the inorganic worlds around them, and, in this sense, it is possible to say that life is partly constituted by nonlife. But the fact that it is sometimes physically impossible to disentangle organic from inorganic matter does not entail that it is not possible to do so conceptually, even less that it is not required that human animals strive to separate them in both theory and practice.

My criticism is here directed against the sort of position defended by Kim de Wolff (and others), who holds that it would be preposterous to separate certain living beings from synthetic bodies such as plastics if the relationships in which they are embedded are “*supportive of life*.”⁶²⁶ According to De Wolff, the earth’s current reality is best captured by the term ‘plastisphere’, which refers to the meeting of ecosystems and plastic. These interconnections among communities of organisms and plastics undermines the ontological categorization of “plastic and animals, synthetic and natural, waste and life.”⁶²⁷ This is because in the plastisphere, “humans, disciplines and ocean creatures ‘become with’ plastic,” and, as a result, “plastics are named as potential species in return.”⁶²⁸ De Wolff’s work echoes that of Jane Bennett, as it seeks to show that plastics are not an inanimate things, but are rather living entities who “perfor[m] with the kind of agency conventionally reserved for biological or even human entities alone.”⁶²⁹ She then warns of the dangers attached to attempting to remove plastics from the ocean, and writes about how acts of clean-up embody “assumptions of belonging, of bad plastic, of responsibility for human products, assumptions that ignore the communities that *live on and with pollution* in the ocean.”⁶³⁰ Moreover, she concludes by asserting that the presumed ‘liveliness’ of plastic and its condition of entanglement with other bodies shows that it has become “vital to and with other forms of life regardless of human desires.”⁶³¹

De Wolff, Bennett, Haraway, Latour, and other science and technology scholars are right to focus on the importance of relations between living and nonliving bodies, and to complicate taken for granted categories and classifications. However, the point I have attempted to put forward

⁶²⁶ See Kim De Wolff, “Plastic Naturecultures: Multispecies Ethnography and the Dangers of Separating Living from Nonliving Bodies,” *Body & Society*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2017, p. 26. Emphasis in original.

⁶²⁷ De Wolff, “Plastic Naturecultures,” p. 26.

⁶²⁸ De Wolff, “Plastic Naturecultures,” p. 27.

⁶²⁹ De Wolff, “Plastic Naturecultures,” p. 34.

⁶³⁰ De Wolff, “Plastic Naturecultures,” p. 41. My emphasis.

⁶³¹ De Wolff, “Plastic Naturecultures,” p. 43.

in the dissertation is that the conclusions that emanate from their work are problematic because their theoretical prescriptions are conducive to political inertia. This is most clearly illustrated by De Wolff's cautionary statement that it is not only useless but even wrong to try to undo bodily entanglements of plastic and marine creatures.⁶³²

The problem with this viewpoint is that it is uncritical of the capitalist structures of production that are responsible for such entanglements in the first place, and ends up naturalizing a condition that is a product of human intent, which must be fought against and defeated. This of course should not be done at the expense of those forms of life that are in some way dependent on plastic (however that is to be understood). But the inverse argument does not hold: protecting these plastics-creatures interdependencies must not be used as a trump card to legitimize business-as-usual and to reproduce the capitalist and colonial status quo. Otherwise we end up seeing the world through the lenses of our dominant and masterful structures of unsustainability that perpetuate the devastation of the earth. And this makes it impossible to perceive the historical, political, and socioeconomic processes that explain why and how there are close to ten million tons of plastic that enter the ocean every year.

I hope the example above serves to illustrate the relevance of thinking about agency and materiality in the light of conceptual tools that can help us get a normative grip on how we conceive of the lives we live and the worlds in which we live them. Throughout the dissertation I emphasized the role played by vulnerability and sustainability in determining who or what should be thought of as matters of concern. Although it is important to be aware of the dangers inherent in the attempt to adjudicate between subjects of significance in this way, I am also convinced it is a necessary endeavour with which to enable forms of politics that can resist and counter the dominant orders

⁶³² See, for instance, De Wolff, "Plastic Naturecultures," pp. 40-41.

of Western modernity and their masterful apparatuses of oppression and power. It is fundamental that in decentering human agency we don't overlook the historicity of the worlds and things of human creation, and that we don't lose from view the fact that these worlds can be—and often are—harmful to the worlds of nature. This also brings awareness to the fact that our relations with the beings, things, and entities that form our environment are unsustainable and destructive, and that they could be otherwise.

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