Nonhuman Publics and Human Politics: In Defense of an Ecological Political Sphere

by

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ABSTRACT

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In this dissertation, I argue for a conception of the political sphere that includes the nonhuman, which I call the ecological political sphere. Modern theories of the political sphere consider political commonalities, the relationships that ground the political sphere, to be limited to human beings. However, I argue that there are clear reasons for considering the political sphere to consist of a nonhuman dimension, especially if we are attentive to entrenched ecological networks existing today due to practices like industrial farming. Nonhumans, I argue, are of great political significance, insofar as they shape power relationships and are often key agents that motivate our practical and conceptual projects; they are also integral to understanding contemporary forms of injustice. I use traditional and critical theoretical frameworks, like the political theories of Hannah Arendt, John Locke, Iris Marion Young, and Michel Foucault, in order to develop my argument for a nonhuman political sphere. I argue that a conception of political sphere that includes nonhumans can 1) amend the theory of environmental domination that is popular in environmental theory, 2) help us to understand the affective political agency of nonhumans and the significant role these agents play in our human lives, and 3) be a boon to participatory democratic initiatives, which seek more just political arrangements and equality for those who are politically marginalized. The third point in particular provides support for the reasonableness of contemporary ecological political movements that defend experimental forms of political representation for the nonhuman environment, like the rights for nature defended by the 2008 Ecuadorean Constitution.
For Erin

&

In memory of Dewey (2007-2014)

ἄληθὸς φιλίᾳ
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Introduction

Political declarations that support rights and protections for the nonhuman environment are globally on the rise. In most continents, a polity or a group of people has made some form of environmental declaration or communiqué that proclaims political protection for the nonhuman environment. As David R. Boyd documents, “147 out of 193 national constitutions incorporate some form of environmental protection provisions, including government’s duty to protect the environment, the individual responsibility to protect the environment . . . Constitutional environmental provisions are now the norm throughout Europe, Asia, Latin America, and Africa.”¹ Still, though there is a proliferation of political declarations defending the protection of the nonhuman world, there continues to be little guidance from political philosophers for how we ought to make sense of these declarations, especially for cases like Ecuador, which “became the first nation in the world to provide explicit constitutional recognition of rights of Nature.”² How are we to understand the claim that a nonhuman entity is fundamentally political and deserving of rights?

We do not have to search too far to compose a list of possible objections and objectors to the idea that nonhuman entities have rights. For instance, one could object as follows: Maybe nature can become a political topic of conversation for humans, but it is not political itself. Thus, let’s protect nonhuman nature through the development of rights, but let’s also remember that those rights are always qualified as human rights. In short, this sort of view concludes, what we are actually talking about here is “a right to an adequate environment,” which “can and should be

¹ David R. Boyd, The Environmental Rights Revolution: A Global Study of Constitutions, Human Rights, and the Environment (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 76. Boyd has collected some very useful data that captures the prevalence and type of constitutional protections that exist globally. See Table 3.2 and Figures 3.2 and 3.3. In addition to national constitutions, it is also important to note an increase in international efforts to defend rights for nature. For instance, The International Rights for Nature Tribunal (http://therightsofnature.org/rights-of-nature-tribunal-paris/) and the OSI Geneva Forum (http://www.osi-genevaforum.org/What-about-Rights-of-Nature.html).
² Ibid., 70.
considered a genuine human right: as a moral right, it is on par with established universal human rights . . .”

Or, one might consider a more traditional philosophical objection: only beings that are rational, self-aware, and have interests can properly belong to a polis and be considered political, since civic life and virtue must be a possibility for rights-bearing political subjects. In other words, to engage in rational deliberations with others is an ability that is required for a political subject, even if the subject fails to actualize this status. As Peter Carruthers puts it, an example of this second view, right-bearers must be qualified as “rational agents” because this status is “necessary to secure them direct rights under contractualism.”

From the very start, rights for nature seem misguided. Aren’t political subjects, by necessity, entities who can formulate and hold intentional and rational views in order to communicate and participate in collective life (voting, having a “voice,” etc.)? On the contrary, in this dissertation, I argue for a concept of an ecological political sphere that is a proper dimension of the traditional political sphere. In my view, relational commonalities, which I consider to be the fundamental characteristic of political subjects, are not always strictly human; nor can we assume that current human-to-human versions of this concept necessarily exclude the nonhuman world. Accordingly, this dissertation aims to defend the idea that the political sphere has a nonanthropocentric ecological dimension, since our ecological relationships with the nonhuman world present us with relations and commonalities with others that are not only human. Furthermore, since these relations have significant power over the lives of humans, a just form of politics (especially democratic politics) must include political initiatives, like the positing of rights for nature, that protect the ecological dimension of the public sphere.

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3 Tim Hayward, Constitutional Environmental Rights (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 58.
Prioritizing the political

While there are many people writing about environmental rights today, and even though understanding Ecuador’s 2008 constitutional rights for nature is a key impetus of my project, my focus will be on the idea of the ecological political sphere itself, rather than simply on the concept of rights. I will discuss the concept of rights when germane, because they do play an essential role in how we understand the political today. However, for my purposes, it is important to make a distinction of logical sequence when considering the political sphere and rights. The political sphere must be presupposed whenever we are having a discussion about rights, and the degree to which the reverse can be said to be true is highly debatable. Not all political theories are right-based theories, even though the majority of Modern and contemporary theories are. It is more accurate to say that rights are a subsidiary part of the political sphere itself, not vice versa, given the historical and place-specific character of rights, and the fact that the notion of a universal human right applicable to literally each and every human being is a fairly recent development. That is, rights are only one way in which we can discuss how social and political commonality occurs and how it should be managed and organized.

To qualify political status as prior to rights is, in other words, a matter of logical sequence. I consider the political sphere/rights distinction and sequence important, because in the case of nature’s rights, we must first understand what it means for the nonhuman environment to be political, in order to answer the question of whether it could possibly have rights. In order for practical legal initiatives to firmly take root and be compelling, I think it is essential that they be preceded by a clear theoretical conception of the nonhuman environment’s status as a political

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5 As Samuel Moyn points out, there is not a clear, working notion of universal human rights until the UN’s 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and even then it wasn’t until the 1960s and 70s that it started to be properly developed into a view of international justice. See Samuel Moyn, The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2012), chapter one.
entity in the political sphere. Once this work is done, it will be extremely difficult to make the case that something like the nonhuman environment and resources should not be given rights and legal protection (among other considerations), since rights are an essential component of our contemporary political sphere, both in how we negotiate commonality and how we apply moral worth. In this light, my dissertation has both theoretical and practical aims: to develop a compelling view of political commonality that is ecological, which broadens our understanding of concepts like exploitation and political agency; and, secondly, to explain how such a theoretical articulation can aid the pursuit of environmental rights and justice.

What I mean by ‘political’ is more along the lines of traditional understandings of the political sphere: a sphere of relations that maps and organizes basic commonalities. In order to relate, there must be a commonality between two things that allows a relationship to form, even amidst differences. Hannah Arendt’s definition is useful here, and her framework is one that I employ often throughout the chapters that follow: “Politics deals with the coexistence and association of different [persons]. [Humans] organize themselves politically according to certain essential commonalities found within or abstracted from an absolute chaos of differences . . . Politics arises in what lies between men and is established as relationships.” For Arendt, politics is the activity that “deals” with different human beings relating to and existing alongside of each other. The dealings of politics presuppose a political sphere – a realm of relation and commonality – and this is what guides the governing of organizational institutions, policies, and states. It is with this understanding in mind that I wish to ask the question, “How can we, in general, speak of nature as something belonging to the political realm?” In other words, I consider how commonality is something that involves nonhuman entities. An ecological political sphere, articulated in this light, is not clearly developed in contemporary accounts of

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environmental ethics and politics. I think it will continue to be difficult (if not an intractable affair altogether) to successfully defend the rights of nature, or to produce a convincing response to the objections suggested in the first section above, until a persuasive account of an ecological political sphere is given. I develop an argument toward that end in the chapters that follow, and I aim to convince the reader that in our contemporary world, “what lies between men” and women are often ecological relations we share in common with nonhuman entities, which elucidate the nonanthropocentric dimension of our political lives, and whatever polis we belong to.

**Summary of chapters**

In the first chapter, I explain and critique the two main approaches to contemporary environmental politics. I call these views the indirect approach and the incomplete approach. I develop my argument against these approaches by considering how factory farming results in a networking of relationships and dependency among people and a variety of nonhumans. I argue that the ecological relationships that factory farming results in are one key example of why the nonhuman environment belongs to the political sphere, even if these relationships are not ones that everyone is conscious of in their day-to-day lives.

In chapter two, I provide a detailed account of my approach to the political/politics distinction. I look at classic approaches to the distinction in contract theory (Locke, Rousseau), and I consider (in particular) the idea that the goal of politics is to sustain human relationships. I suggest, building on chapter one’s argument, that the traditional view of political sustainability is insufficient on its own, because it usually isolates humans outside of their existing context – i.e., relationships with the nonhuman environment – and mainly considers their relationships from an institutional and discursive standpoint. However, I suggest that Locke’s provisos on property do seem to suggest that a legitimate liberal theory of politics needs to have an ecological conception
of sustainability. I argue that Plumwood’s concept of “ecological rationality” can aid the
development of a new, ecological conception of the sustainability desideratum found in liberal
political theory.

After establishing the reasonableness of rights for nature and an ecological political
sphere in chapters one and two, chapter three begins to develop a clearer account of what,
exactly, this theory provides. In chapter three, I argue that a political concept of human and
nonhuman relationships can help develop a logically consistent and persuasive defense of
environmental domination. I develop a critique of the natural/artificial distinction in
environmental theory, and the practical suggestions about preserving wilderness that result from
the distinction. I suggest, using my concept of ecological commonalities, that we need a political
account of human and nonhuman relationships, not one that classifies the nonhuman as ‘other,’
in order to properly defend a theory of environmental domination. I further suggest that insights
from political theorists who discuss exploitative forms of domination can help to amend the
claim that humans dominate nature, and can therefore provide better support for the sorts of
normative claims made by those seeking environmental protection.

In chapter four, I continue the work of chapter three by considering how we should
understand nonhuman entities if the traditional models in environmental theory have so many
shortcomings. I argue that, especially for my purpose, a key concept that can be used to describe
nonhuman entities is affective political agency. I review literatures that critique the traditional
understanding of agency and I argue that the concepts of agency found in these literatures
(especially actor-network theory) lend credence to my view that the political sphere is best
understood as including nonhumans. That is, since nonhuman entities have capacity to “act upon
our possible action,” an understanding of politics taken from Foucault, I argue that they are best
understood as affective political entities. I argue that nonhumans are affective agents in humans’ physical, conceptual, and ideal lives. Affective agency, in my view, doesn’t always justify the need for positive political protections and right. However, I do think this form of agency can justify political protections and rights for some nonhuman entities, namely those who are represented, by humans, in an antagonistic public sphere. In other words, nonhumans can be justified as subjects deserving positive political protections and rights, if they are contested as affective agents that make possible (or limit) the realization of collective life and forms of justice.

In my last chapter, I conclude the dissertation by developing a concept of “environmentlessness” from Hannah Arendt’s understanding of statelessness, which can be used to describe the political injustice experienced by those who are disenfranchised from the ecological political sphere. I argue that experimental forms of political representation, like the rights of nature defended by the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution, should be seen as measures that can increase political equality and reduce political marginalization, since they encourage active, democratic participatory models of political action.
Chapter One
Environmental Politics and Ecological Networks

Are rights for nature defensible?

In 2008, the government and citizens of Ecuador ratified the country’s twentieth constitution. The constitution has sparked controversy since its ratification, mainly due to the ‘citizen’s revolution’ that President Rafael Correa has suggested it initiates. The most heated contention surrounds the meaning of the constitutional amendments that grant rights for nature. The natural environment, it is claimed, is a bearer of rights, and any Ecuadorean, no matter one’s social, religious, or economic standing, can uphold these rights.¹ In short, citizens may bring legal suits in the name of nature against environmentally harmful projects, whether carried out by international corporations or local governments (from oil extraction to the privatization of water), which have historically plagued the region. Moreover, the constitution generally aims to protect the environment against any practices that harm any site of life: “Nature, or Pacha Mama, where life is reproduced and occurs, has the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, functions and evolutionary processes.”²

Implied in this amended constitution, and the principle of buen vivir that serves as its desideratum,³ is a political sphere that no longer limits the body politic to human bodies.

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¹ These ideas are found in the section of the constitution that grants rights to nature (articles 71-74). Additionally, the section of the constitution that deals with the practical steps that should be taken when confronting environmental damage (articles 395-399) also supports the centrality of citizen involvement – especially those being directly affected by environmental damages. For an English translation of the constitution, see http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Ecuador/english08.html.
² article 71.
³ The ‘good living’ principle of buen vivir is an ideal that is to guide the interpretation of Ecuador’s constitution. This concept is influential regionally, and has also been used in Bolivia’s constitution as well. As Catherine Walsh explains, the buen vivir principle denotes a pluralistic and evolving account of the political good as a social-natural relationship: “[it] denotes, organizes, and constructs a system of knowledge and living based on the communion of humans and nature.” See Catherine Walsh, “Development as Buen Vivir: Institutional Arrangements and (De)colonial Entanglements.” Development 53 (2010), 18.
We should hardly be surprised that the Ecuadorian amendments incite contention. How do we go about giving the nonhuman world inalienable rights? Who decides what constitutes an abuse of the rights of the nonhuman environment? The difficulty of understanding the amendments’ practical and theoretical content has, in fact, been evident since 2008. Practically speaking, it is unclear which citizens and which parts of the environment are truly gaining new forms of political representation. For instance, there are some who attack President Correa and his government for repeatedly referring to a ‘citizen’s revolution’ while failing to actively support or empower the local indigenous communities whose philosophies are said to serve as inspiration for the new amendments. In the wake of the new constitution, these communities have been galvanized in their opposition against the government. Leaders in CONAIE, a large indigenous organization in Ecuador, have at times proposed separatism, since the government still fails to recognize their environmental concerns post-constitution. Furthermore, there have been cases in which leading NGOs responsible for protecting local resources have been forced to disband by the government. For many, then, it is unclear whether the constitution’s claims amount to anything more than rhetorical flourish.

If Ecuador’s constitution were an isolated example, then it might be possible to write it off as an ambitious – though ambiguous – legal experiment, and thus not warranting any detailed consideration by environmental philosophy. However, the case in Ecuador is just one of many instances in which rights for nature are being protected in law; such protections are gaining in popularity. For example, Switzerland has deemed animal and plant life to have ‘dignity’ and

4 Walsh, “Development as Buen Vivir.”
6 Naomi Klein’s letter to President Correa, for example, addresses the closing of Acción Ecológica, which was a key organization fighting for environmental justice and sustainability initiatives in Ecuador. See http://nacla.org/news/open-letter-rafael-coria.
New Zealand has granted rights to a specific river – the Whanganui. Furthermore, as Tim Hayward points out, roughly nine countries have direct references to environmental rights to ecological equilibrium in their constitutions. As Peter Burdon highlights, in the U.S., a growing number of local municipalities are developing ordinances similar to those in Latin America. In Spokane, Washington for instance, one ordinance states:

Ecosystems, including but not limited to, all groundwater systems, surfacewater systems, and aquifers have the right to exist and flourish. River systems have the right to flow and have water quality necessary to provide habitat for native plants and animals, and to provide clean drinking water. Aquifers have the right to sustainable recharge, flow, and water quality.

The rights of nature are thus appealing to an increasing number of people globally, even in light of current practical setbacks.

Declarations for the rights of nature make assumptions that are odds with the traditional discourse surrounding rights. Quite simply, we usually think of rights and constitutions to be about human political agents, and to speak of the nonhuman environment as a bearer of rights is to assume that the political sphere (and political agency for that matter) is not restricted to human life. Such declarations also require another noteworthy assumption: the nonhuman environment is an integral aspect of justice. If we take constitutions and local ordinances to be ideal statements about what a group of people consider the demands of justice to be, and what a just social order requires, then in many contemporary political settings, human obligations and just orderings are no longer simply anthropocentric. Justice is, instead, a particular configuration of human and nonhuman life in concert. Furthermore, rights for nature assume political bonds that

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8 For details on the Swiss constitution see S. Pouteau, “Providing Grounds for Agricultural Ethics: The Wider Philosophical Significance of Plant Life Integrity,” Climate Change and Sustainable Development: Ethical Perspectives on Land Use and Food Production (Wageningen: Wageningen Academic Publishers, 2012), 155; For information regarding New Zealand, see Alison Fairbrother, “I, River: In New Zealand, the Whanganui River Becomes a Legal Person” Take Part, September 17, 2012.

9 Tim Hayward’s account is the following: “Quite distinct formulations of environmental rights are also to be found, though: some constitutional rights also make reference to ecological equilibrium or balance (e.g., Brazil, Cape Verde, Costa Rica, Mongolia, Mozambique, Paraguay, the Philippines, Portugal, Seychelles…” See Constitutional Environmental Rights, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 28.

are based on a concept of relationality that moves beyond the political sphere as a human condition; they suggest a political sphere that is based on an ecological condition. In other words, the rights of nature would have us believe that the relational bonds that politics governs should not (and cannot) be limited to human interactions and deserts.

Below and in the subsequent chapters of this dissertation, I will develop and defend an account of ecological relationships that supports the prospect of extending rights to the nonhuman environment. That is, I seek to advance an account of the political sphere that includes humans and nonhumans, and which suggests that rights for nature are not prima facie unreasonable. I use the term ‘nonhuman’ to denote what is sometimes called nonhuman nature or the nonhuman environment. I use this term to indicate those living and non-living entities (what I will call biotic and abiotic, respectively) that are traditionally understood as the natural environment. Anything from rivers, mountains, and natural resources, to all the varieties of insects, reptiles, mammals, etc. that live in these environs. I will often use the phrase ‘the nonhuman world,’ ‘nonhuman entities,’ ‘the nonhuman,’ or simply ‘nonhumans’ in order to refer to nonhuman nature. On those occasions that I limit a discussion to animals, I will always signify this by using the phrase ‘nonhuman animals.’ If I don’t specify that I am speaking about animals, it can be assumed that I have in mind the entire nonhuman environment. Additionally, since I am focusing on ecological relationships that concern contemporary rights for nature discussions, I am not attempting to address the built environments or technological entities that are sometimes called nonhuman as well.11 Furthermore, I agree with Steven Vogel’s suggestion that we should employ the term environmental rather than nature/natural, since the natural and artificial dichotomy is defended with fallacious argumentation (again, discussed in chapter three).

11 For instance, Bruno Latour is famous for referring to technological apparatuses as nonhuman entities. See Bruno Latour We Have Never Been Modern, trans Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), especially sections 2.2 and 3.2.
However, I will still limit my conversation to the so-called natural objects that are the traditional focus of environmental philosophy, instead of devoting much to technology and built environments, because the former are the most politically germane nonhuman entities in global political movements.\(^1\)

In the present chapter, I will focus on setting up the two dominant and sustained conversations about nonhuman politics, in order to understand why there is a need for an account of the political sphere that includes ecology and nonhuman life. The arguments that I develop in this chapter are therefore arguments to which I will return and further develop in future chapters; this is especially true of the concept of the political that I will begin to describe in this chapter, which will be given a more detailed explanation and defense in chapter two. In this chapter, I explain how standard models do a fine job developing new human rights or capturing the political significance of some nonhuman entities. However, when faced with the ethical and political conundrums that proliferate within standard environmental practices, these models are found wanting. I use the example of factory farming to highlight one example of such political and ethical conundrums, and argue that only by starting with the assumption that there is an ecological dimension of the political sphere are we able to account for the complex web of relationships that characterize our contemporary interactions with nonhuman entities. I am not suggesting that the political sphere does not include traditional, humanistic and human-centric relationships; I am only claiming that it also includes an ecological dimension that is equally a part of our contemporary sphere of political relationships. In short, I will argue that a

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\(^1\) I do discuss nonhuman technology in chapter four, and there I explain that technology is certainly something that can be considered an affective political agent. However, most political movements focus on nonhuman nature, because things like food and resources are seen as the most important nonhuman entities that need political protection and that people need access to. For Vogel’s argument, see his essay, “Why ‘Nature’ Has No Place in Environmental Philosophy,” in *The Ideal of Nature: Debates about Biotechnology and the Environment*, ed. Gregory E. Kaebnick (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011). Another similar argument worth considering is Andrew Biro’s, found in chapter seven of *Denaturalizing Ecological Politics: Alienation from Nature from Rousseau to the Frankfurt School and Beyond* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).
contemporary account of the political sphere must address the entrenched relationships we have with nonhumans, and that close examination of these relationships demonstrates that there are significant, shared interests between humans and the nonhuman – interests that suggest an ecological political sphere and explain why it is reasonable (and consistent) to declare rights for the nonhuman.

**The political and the ecological: theorizing with a hatchet**

Before discussing the models of contemporary environmental politics that are the primary focus of this chapter, however, I will first discuss in more detail my use and understanding of the terms ‘ecology’ and ‘politics’. These two terms are foundational in this dissertation, and both are highly contested theoretical concepts. Generally speaking, my approach focuses on political lines of inquiry first and foremost. That is, when I employ the term ‘ecology’, I have in mind interrelationships between humans and the environment that are based on mutual care, interests, and harms. I am not using the term ‘ecology’ in a scientific sense, but as a way of drawing attention to normative relations between humans and the nonhuman environment, which actively influence our pursuit of justice and eradicating forms of exploitation and oppression. Thus, I only have in mind human and nonhuman relations that can be described as *political*; I do not use the term ‘ecology’ to denote every possible ecological relationship.

For example, my use of the term ‘ecology’ is quite different, though somewhat related to, the understanding found in the theoretical approach known as systems ecology and in contemporary theorists of the “nonhuman turn.” As Howard T. Odum explains, systems ecology is concerned with the environmental network that connects and interrelates humans with their environment:

> General concepts of systems study…help humans to visualize complex networks of parts and processes. The environment has organisms, chemical cycles, water, air, humans, machines, soils,
cities, forests, lake, streams, estuaries, and oceans; and connecting them all are flows of energy, including that associated with matter and information…There are many people in [the environment] along with the complexity of the rest of nature. Because humans are in the system, they see so much detail that they are often bewildered. A simplified version of a system is called a model. People can learn and understand simplified models even if they cannot perceive the full system at a time.\(^\text{13}\)

Odum’s account of systems ecology is very useful for understanding and distinguishing my use of the term ‘ecology’. First, following the view of systems ecology provided by Odum, I employ the term ‘ecology’ to conceptualize relations between varieties of entities that are environmental. These entities include humans, animals, and natural resources. In this way, I too aim to describe an environmental system (i.e., a model) that involves a network of relationships. However, the ecological view that I develop in this dissertation is not a scientific model; it is a political model. The distinction, as I see it, lies in the lines of inquiry one employs when outlining the connections between environmental entities. Scientific perspectives, which draw their connections by conducting inquires into phenomena like Odum’s “flows of energy,” can be useful descriptive accounts of the environments we inhabit. My focus, though, is on connections with more obvious normative dimensions: power/control, harms/forms of domination, mutual interests, and justice. Although we could certainly draw out ethical and political implications from scientific ecologies, the goal of these accounts is not prescriptive. In contrast, I am focused on existing human and environmental relationships that are inherently normative, insofar as the ecologies – that is, the interrelationships – I am highlighting are those that have primarily been shaped according to human interests and power. Therefore, I don’t deny the accuracy of other uses of ecology – like systems ecology – but note that their purpose and results are aimed at the best scientific description, not a normative or prescriptive politics.

Contemporary authors of the “nonhuman turn” are closer aligned with my view of ecology, but they too aim primarily at descriptive ecologies, though distinguished from scientific

views by their focus on ontological distinctions. Jane Bennett explains this well: “The nonhuman turn, then, can be understood as a continuation of earlier attempts [like Lucretius, Darwin, and Spinoza’s] to depict a world populated not by active subjects and passive objects but by lively and essentially interactive materials, by bodies human and nonhuman.”¹⁴ As Bennett highlights, the aim of new philosophies in the nonhuman turn is to continue the ontological work of previous centuries that focus on what we can call ecological ontologies. However, as in the case of scientific ecologies, their work is first focused on developing an ecological ontology, with many authors of the nonhuman turn drawing from Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory. From these ontologies, many authors, including Bennett, do go on to develop political and normative accounts, and sometimes call their works “political ecologies.” In this dissertation, especially in chapter four, I explain why I find these accounts suggestive and to some degree similar to my own project, since they often, unlike scientific accounts, do have a political end in mind. However, I am influenced by political ecologies that are first and foremost political, not ontological. So I won’t be using the term ‘political ecology’ exactly as authors of the “nonhuman turn” do.

Two schools of ecological thinking best align with my understanding of ecology: critical geographers who originally coined the phrase “political ecology” and the environmental theorists who Andrew Biro describes as developing “critical ecology.” Biro explains that critical ecology represents a broad range of perspectives (from biocentrism to eco-socialism), each of which shares an underlining theme: “a commitment to radical critique, or in other words an understanding that adequately addresses the environmental crisis we currently face will require us to rethink some of our fundamental sociopolitical institutions.” Additionally, these

frameworks “can be described as ‘critical ecologies’ because their central focus is the oikos, or human dwelling place.”15 This dissertation aims to develop such a critical ecology, insofar as it is an attempt to rethink the position of nonhumans in our theoretical accounts of the political sphere. In my account, an important undertaking for rethinking “our fundamental sociopolitical institutions” is to reassess and critique the key operational concepts that provide a foundation for the discourse of those institutions. Whereas some might suggest that we ought to wipe the slate clean, as it were, and develop completely new concepts, I find many traditional theories (such as social contract theory) to be useful and practical, and would argue that many can be rethought by going back to insights that have traditionally been passed over too quickly (e.g., Locke’s provisos, as will be discussed in chapter two). Thus, the ecological theory that I develop, like Biro’s, does focus on the human dwelling place: while I am interested in ecological relationships, these relationships are, for me, a way of better understanding the environmental character of human (i.e., anthropocentric) political relationships. My aim is to illuminate the political relationships that have altered these environmental relations, and the failure of traditional political theories to fully develop the ecological dimensions implicit in their own arguments — or the failure to think critically about why such a dimension is needed, when such ideas are entirely absent from their accounts.

Geographers who develop the term ‘political ecology’ provide a view that is complementary to Biro’s critical ecology, and use a metaphor of a hatchet to capture their understanding of ecological theory. This metaphor is useful in illustrating the approach to ecology that I aim to develop in the chapters that follow. Paul Robbins, in Political Ecology, develops the hatchet metaphor as follows:

As critique, political ecology seeks to expose flaws in dominant approaches to the environment favored by corporate, state, and international authorities, working to demonstrate the undesirable impacts of policies and market conditions, especially from the point of view of local people, marginal groups, and vulnerable populations. It works to “denaturalize” certain social and environmental conditions, showing them to be contingent outcomes of power, and not inevitable. As critical historiography, deconstruction, and myth-busting research, political ecology is a hatchet, cutting and pruning away the stories, methods, and policies that create pernicious social and environmental outcomes.¹⁶

As in the case of Biro’s critical ecology, critique is foregrounded as the central method used by political ecology. Political ecologists use critique to destabilize dominant discourses about environmental conditions, especially those discourses that purport to explain “natural” relationships (e.g., the “free” market) that just so happen to lead to social inequalities and injustices, as well as environmental degradation. Political ecologists develop an ecology that foregrounds the political insofar as human relationships of power (especially related to control and access) shape a great deal of the interactions between humans and the nonhuman environment; such an ecology is also what I attempt to develop in the pages that follow. Ecological relationships, in other words, are already saturated with human politics, although our popular and dominant narratives obscure this reality.

Political ecology’s focus on narrative critique is in fact aligned with many of the arguments I develop below. Robbins describes political ecological work as focused on dissecting “stories, methods, and policies” that lead to harmful results for humans and nonhumans, and moreover, as critiquing the political power that such environmental narratives help establish, and which often perpetuates political disenfranchisement. I also criticize dominant conceptions of human beings’ relationship with the environment— but my focus is on narratives coming from traditional theories of the political sphere and environmentalism. In chapter two, for instance, I consider the idea of commonality that is developed in social contract theory, while in chapter three I consider the “nature as other” view that is popular in many standard environmental

theories. However, while I do focus on developing critiques of traditional frameworks, I also find many of their terms able to accommodate an ecological view of politics, if reimagined. Thus, in the spirit of political ecology’s hatchet, throughout the chapters that follow I employ traditional political terminology (e.g., equality, agency, etc.), while at the same time seeking to prune away and expose the flaws of these concepts, traditionally conceived. This does not mean that I wish to hack down and burn the entire bush. I find traditional terms to be effective and practically useful, since their use and development over time means that they are a recognizable and easily understood platform for political discourse. However, because most traditional terms exclude nonhumans, I aim, with my political ecological hatchet, to cut away at the exclusionary aspects of these terms, in order to employ the traditional tools of political theory for inclusionary, ecological ends.

My view of politics is therefore sympathetic with, and draws from, many traditional, anthropocentric frameworks. Yet, I also challenge the idea that mutual interests are interests limited to human beings. That is, as I will argue in this chapter, we can often identify mutual interests and protections that involve embedded ecological relationships between human and nonhuman life. Political interests, in these instances, are not strictly anthropocentric, nor are they rightly understood as nonanthropocentric. Instead, they are reciprocal, ecological interests that humans have in common with their nonhuman environment.

In short, I develop a political ecology that sees ecology through a political lens and understands politics in a way consistent with many traditional views, but I also suggest, like many in critical theory that politics is more expansive than what is allowed for in a strictly traditional reading. For instance, conventionally, political thinkers have draw a conceptual distinction between politics and the political. This widespread formal distinction is based on the
discrepancy between an activity and a set of relations. Briefly, the activity of politics is contextualized by a set of relations, and politics is largely a practice that regulates a preferred set of relations. For instance, in a very basic sense, property is political because it involves a set of human relationships regarding ownership. Not having a clear sense of how property is defined would lead to a multitude of conflicts (to say the least), so we construct and maintain an abundance of restrictions and regulations to guide how we relate to one another regarding ownership. In this instance, a relationship that people have in common with each other (ownership) is described as political, whereas the activity of determining what the rules and regulations should be is the work of politics. Simply put, politics is classically understood as the activity of determining how a relationship should (ideally) be organized, while an entity is considered political if it is involved in a relationship (between people or people and things) that the activity must assume as its basis. In chapter two, I will return to this distinction and provide examples from theorists like Locke and Rousseau. I endorse this distinction, but I also argue that it is no longer reasonable (and perhaps never was) to think that political practices are only organizing human relationships. Politics, especially today, has an ecological dimension in that it shapes shared ecological interests as well as shared anthropocentric values and interests. I therefore modify the traditional distinction by expanding its public sphere to include nonhumans. I suggest that traditional theories (like social contract theory) already have many of the theoretical tools and concepts needed for an ecological political sphere, but traditional readings and narratives simply don’t develop the ecological potential of traditional theories.

Politics is traditionally considered to be something that happens inside our governments and our institutions – making and executing laws, levying taxes, etc. Yet, it is also something that people take part in when they protest and challenge the actions (politics) of their
governments. Thus, I think politics is not something that necessarily belongs in one place (i.e., the state, à la Weber), but it is the activity of anyone (or any group) who addresses the idea of a relationship held in common (what is political). Politics can be the action of an individual or a group, and it can affirm standard ideas about how we relate, or call these into question, proposing an alternative. In my view, politics consists of a series of fluid and mutable relationships, since many political movements originate precisely because of a contestation of the common ‘we’ that a government or the ‘powers that be’ assumes. For instance, feminist and critical race theorists have famously argued that de jure and institutional regulations do not fully address de facto relationships. Or, as Michel Foucault’s work demonstrates by developing detailed historical accounts of concepts like sex and health, it is difficult to articulate a contemporary notion of power that is strictly top-down, since so many social practices and non-governmental institutions are also actively engaged in power relationships and the formation of our understanding of the self. Politics, in my view, is any attempt to organize and sustain reciprocal interests, and it often becomes manifest as an activity that shapes the forms of action

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18 Here I want to both draw on and distinguish my view from Jacques Rancière’s. Similarly to Rancière, I think politics is a type of activity that attempts to substantiate and propel forward an idea of what is common between people, but unlike him, I do not think there are justifiable reasons for restricting this to ‘the people’. That is, a more basic idea of politics is that it is any activity that sustains and promotes order based on a view of common interests and necessities. Ranciere, however, thinks status quo politics is a form of ‘policing,’ and thus it is not actually politics proper. See, Jacques Rancière, Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 27-45.
19 The concept of structural oppression explained by Iris Marion Young provides a great example of common relationships and modes of organizing these relationships that are not merely juridical. See Justice and the Politics of Difference (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 39-65. Additionally, we see this idea very early on in authors writing about the politics of race. W.E.B. Du Bois’ The Souls of Black Folk is largely a reflection on the conditions of black Americans after the passing into law of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments. That is, throughout the book he has a sustained conversation about how to realize, in his terminology, the “self-actualization” of black Americans in light of fact that juridical and institutional practices failed to remove “the Veil” that keeps black Americans from full realization of themselves. See The Souls of Black Folk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Especially consider chapters one, two, and four.
20 A classic example from Foucault is the penal system and the evolution of disciplinary power. His concept of panopticism is especially useful regarding the difficulties of a strictly top-down model of power. See Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 195-228.
that are available to individuals and groups (i.e., power). I argue that humans are particularly adept at such activities, and they are most properly the agents that do politics, but that the political sphere, insofar as it is grounded by mutual interests, is not strictly human. At times, as I will argue in chapter four, we even have reasons to think that some nonhumans (some of the time) have political agency. In sum, our common relationships, and their organization and management, might often involve legal systems and institutions, but they also involve social practices, customs, norms, and types of agents that are outside of law and which law could never entirely regulate. When I use the term political, I therefore have in mind a general idea of living together and negotiating our relationships that most often takes an institutional form today—but we would be mistaken to think that institutions and laws fully capture these relationships.

I have tried to make clear that I consider politics to be an activity that directly represents, regulates, and sustains commonalities – i.e., something that relates political beings to one another. As an activity that is quite complex and nuanced, it is best understood as a particular trait and/or virtue of human beings. Human beings construct a wide range of ordered institutions for this exact purpose, as well as complicated social practices, which surely require a great deal of reflective intelligence, memory, and complex, historically dynamic linguistic practices. However, as I will explain in section three of this chapter, it is not clear why the relationships that politics considers must be restricted to human affairs and values (i.e., anthropocentrism). As I will argue, there are relationships that are central and common to all humans that, on a closer look, are not exclusive to human relationships. Instead, there are ecological interests that, I suggest, are as common and important as relationships like ownership. Hence, the work I begin in this chapter is influenced by the hatchet approach in political theory, in that I start with common, traditional ways of discussing politics (e.g., a focus on mutual interests and
commonality), but I aim to slowly prune and remove the crooked contents that are not altogether consistent with existing conditions between humans and their environment. In short, my political ecology aims to develop tools for reimagining the political sphere as fundamentally including mutual interests (and avoidance of harm) that are not merely grounded on anthropocentric concerns. Yet, I think an ecological political sphere can be reimagined with many of the tools and concepts readily available in the rich literature of traditional and critical political theory, despite the fact that the majority of the authors in these traditions are solely concerned with the human *polis*.

**Dominant models of environmental politics**

In this section, I begin developing my argument for an ecological political sphere by outlining the two standard approaches to claims about the political status of nonhumans in environmental political thought. I call these approaches the indirect and incomplete models. While greatly invested in the idea of moral and political *consideration*, most authors in mainstream environmental political thought want to hold onto the idea of a political sphere that is still human-centric, or that is only marginally nonhuman. Both models are fairly critical of the idea that we can or should conceive of nonhumans as rights-bearers or political in any direct sense. In this light, the contemporary environmental political movements discussed in the first section, specifically the examples in Latin America, are clearly pushing the boundaries of theory by way of their political practice.
A. The indirect model

The traditional view of politics and the political sphere – that they are both grounded in human affairs and concerns – is seen in the indirect model of environmental politics. For the authors using this model, there is a political gulf separating humans and nonhumans, insofar as the political sphere only involves human actors and human relationships. If the nonhuman becomes a concern for politics, it is therefore an indirect concern, meaning it becomes a thing of interest only due to its effects on specific human goods and relationships. Two authors who exemplify the indirect nonhuman politics position are Peter Carruthers and Tim Hayward. For both of these authors, nonhuman political status is out of the question, largely due to their commitments to rational contractarianism. For Carruthers, there are no satisfactory reasons to even extend moral consideration to nonhumans, let alone rights or political status. Hence, nonhumans are only a concern if that concern is directly connected to human interests and goods. For Hayward, a flourishing human life means that we protect a constitutional right to a healthy environment, which implies only an indirect moral and political concern with nonhumans.

Carruthers is more forthright in his approach and states unequivocally throughout his book, The Animals Issue, that nonhuman animal rights and political standing are antithetical to the project of liberal contractualism. Mostly equating contractarianism with the work of John Rawls, Carruthers explains, “no animals appear capable of long-term planning, or of representing to themselves different possible futures. And no animals appear capable of conceptualizing (let alone under) general socially agreed rules.”21 In short, Carruthers holds Rawls’s view that being political involves the work of formulating a “reflective equilibrium”: formulating fair and equal

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ideal principles behind a veil of ignorance, which requires a being to have intentional and reflective capacities.\textsuperscript{22}

More importantly, Carruthers argues, similar to Donald Davidson’s view,\textsuperscript{23} that moral rules themselves are only those that \textit{rational} people agree on in light of the possible interests of other \textit{rational} beings.\textsuperscript{24} Without clear articulation or evidence of a nonhuman animal’s rational, moral reflections, a human agent formulating a reflective equilibrium has no way to actually consider the nonhuman animal. Thus, Carruthers thinks we must conclude that “[n]o animals count as rational agents, in the sense necessary to secure them direct rights under contractualism.”\textsuperscript{25} In other words, it can only be through indirect means that we could even consider nonhuman animals, morally or politically.\textsuperscript{26} With this critique of nonhuman animal political standing, it is safe to say that nonhuman beings other than animals would fare no better under Carruthers’ assessment.\textsuperscript{27}

Tim Hayward’s indirect view is not as disparaging of nonhuman standing but still holds firmly to an indirect approach. For instance, in his book \textit{Constitutional Environmental Rights}, he explains how his approach to a human constitutional right to an adequate environment relates to environmentalists’ concerns. In particular, he responds to the environmentalist question of

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\item \textsuperscript{24} Carruthers, \textit{The Animals Issue}, 100.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 145.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Carruthers closes his book considering these indirect approaches to nonhuman animal moral consideration. For instance, certain relationships with nonhumans degrade the moral character of the humans involved, or they greatly interfere with the good of those humans considered ‘animal lovers’. However, he even thinks these arguments fail because they work with the faulty assumption that animals have moral value. In other words, we cannot say that we truly harm humans by practices like hunting, factory farming etc., because this would require the faulty presupposition that animals are things that can be morally harmed. Carruthers closes his book saying we shouldn’t think that “there is anything wrong with admiring animals, or enjoying their company. . . But what this does mean, is that those who are committed to any aspect of the animal rights movement are thoroughly misguided” (196).
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“whether the environment is really well served by enhancing the rights of humans”28 – that is, does a rights program that is human-centered and clearly anthropocentric in any way protect and foster the good of nonhumans? Hayward responds in the affirmative. By defending a ‘weak’ anthropocentrism, Hayward nuances his position from a “strong” anthropocentrism (where the end sought is always in human interests) by explaining that “where there is not a serious cost in human terms there is a positive reason actively to show concern for features and constituents of the nonhuman environment, regardless of whether humans stand to derive any immediate benefit.”29

Basically, while human interests are still the primary and overriding interest in Hayward’s human right to an adequate environment, human interests, when trivial, can become secondary. We can imagine a scenario like the following in order to understand Hayward’s view of trivial interests: if we knew that building yet another retail center in an area already congested with urban sprawl and strip malls would (due to location) likely pollute a river and destroy wildlife in and around the river, then we would choose to protect the nonhuman environment over the economic human good since not doing so would result in a considerable nonhuman loss and a trivial human gain. Furthermore, what Hayward highlights as a strength of weak anthropocentrism is that often Redgwell’s idea of a “spill-over effect”30 would come into play. Because human and nonhuman goods often overlap, looking after a human right to an adequate environment will often involve spillover goods for the nonhuman environment, even though the nonhuman is not granted moral or political status. In the strip mall example, for instance, we could also imagine a defense of a nonhuman right to an adequate environment, if the river being

28 Hayward, 32
29 Ibid., 33.
polluted were also a water source used for the city’s drinking water. Here, protecting the waterway against retail development would be protecting a human right to an adequate environment, which would have the spillover effect of protecting the river and wildlife in addition to providing clean drinking water for humans. However, it is worth noting that the idea of “trivial interests” is vague. One can imagine the difficulty of coming to a consensus about what denotes a “trivial” gain in practice. If we return to the strip mall example, it is reasonable to assume that there would be many people who would not consider yet another strip mall a trivial concern. Many of their concerns could be grounded with compelling arguments, not simply the desire to have more commercial goods. For example, a new strip mall implies the creation of jobs for many people in the community where it is located, which more than likely will include people who are low-income and for whom a job at a strip mall is no trivial concern. As I explain in section III, competing economic concerns like these are a good reason to doubt whether Hayward’s view, in practice, would really be anything other than a strong anthropocentrism.

B. The incomplete model

Whereas indirect theorists assume a traditional model of politics and the political sphere, some authors in environmental political thought challenge these models. What I call incomplete approaches to environmental political thought defend a specific status that should be granted to nonhuman beings (right-holder, agent, a thing that suffers or has interests), but such views fail to fully develop a concept of an ecological dimension of the political sphere. While these authors might not think the agents behind the activity of politics need to be changed (a claim with which I would agree), they do suggest some partial changes to the political sphere. I am therefore more sympathetic with the incomplete model and it is more compatible with my concept of an ecological political sphere than the indirect model. However, I argue that their refusal to
seriously engage any alternative theory of the political sphere limits the usefulness of their political suggestions.

What I call the incomplete view of nonhuman politics can be seen in the work of Paul W. Taylor, and in the political theory of nonhuman animals defended by Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka. Taylor supports biocentrism, a view that purports that each individual biotic life has a good, and he specifically argues that all plants and animals are moral subjects that deserve our respect. For him, the moral status of natural beings stands even though they are not – like human moral subjects – culpable. Using his language, nonhumans should be considered moral subjects even though it would still be incorrect to call them moral agents. As he explains in *Respect for Nature*, moral agents are beings that have knowledge of a moral code, and, in light of this knowledge, they can formulate moral judgments and assess their own behavior. In other words, only rational biotic beings aware of a moral code can rightly be called virtuous/immoral or be held responsible for actions in general, because “[t]he agent to whom the rule applies must also be able to perform the action for that reason, doing it because it is required by the rule (or to refrain from performing it because it is prohibited by the rule). These are capabilities that moral agents alone possess.” Moral subjects, on the other hand, are simply those things that deserve moral treatment. They are things that are not capable of having knowledge of moral norms, but “must be things that can be harmed or benefitted.” Moral subjects, like human infants, nonhuman animals, and biotic life in general, are living things that have interests that can be harmed or protected. It should be noted that having a good, or, being able to be harmed or benefitted, is the criterion that Taylor uses to defend the notion that humans are fundamentally

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32 Ibid., 16.
33 Ibid., 17.
members of the biotic community (what he calls the ‘biocentric outlook’). Thus, ‘moral subjects’ is a broad category that, Taylor argues, belongs to all biotic life in general. In short, moral agents are things that are able to recognize and judge the good of moral subjects – moral subjects then are said to have a good of their own, which can be assessed by moral agents.

Taylor thus develops a heterodox axiology, yet explicitly refrains from developing the political consequences of his understanding of value. His reason for political abstinence: pragmatics. In the penultimate chapter of his environmental classic, he explains how, in lieu of his theory of value, it is completely rational and consistent with most political discourse to discuss animals and plants as beings with moral rights. However, he also thinks it should be avoided, because, in his mind, when we involve the language of rights, it detracts from changing environmental practices. Moral rights, which for him are synonymous with the normative basis of human political rights, are easily associated with animals and plants when we recognize that these biotic creatures have a good that can be harmed and, thus, a defensible picture of inherent worth. When such beings are 1) recognized as having a good, which 2) implies they are owed treatment that doesn’t harm their good, “[i]t is then but a short step to thinking of those duties as being correlated with a general moral right on the part of the animals and plants to have their good preserved and protected.” He continues by arguing for the view that the protection of animals’ and plants’ good is a matter of moral rights, since they “correspond to the four rules of duty” that “make up a valid ethical system grounded on respect for nature…the right not to be harmed, the right not to be interfered with, the right not to have one’s trust broken, and the right to restitution when one has been wronged.”

Even though Taylor admits that “[animals and plants] are deserving of such treatment in

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34 Ibid., 99-115.
35 Taylor 253.
36 Ibid.
he stops short of defending their status as moral right-holders. For Taylor, one can have moral rights in virtue of having inherent worth, but this does not mean that one is necessarily a moral agent or holder of rights. A nonhuman moral right, then, only speaks to their rights as beings with defensible goods and inherent value. Since he believes that using the language of rights would probably lead to equivocations between right-holder and inherent value, he thinks that the rights approach would be less successful than working on changing people’s philosophical and moral outlooks. Convincing people of the biocentric outlook, and then assuming that this would affect their practices as a result would be a more successful approach. Basically, since talk of political rights is a loaded, human-centric discourse, Taylor thinks such rights for nonhuman nature would be confusing to institutionalize. Developing a respect for nature outlook instead would avoid these rhetorical pitfalls. While biocentrism extends moral consideration past the normal human boundaries found in anthropocentric political models, the extension of moral consideration to nonhuman nature does not carry over to a restructuring of the political. Instead, Taylor’s model of moral consideration only aims at promoting new attitudes (for him, respect) toward natural things, which means the importance is placed on changing dispositions toward the natural world.

More recent theories do develop this hesitancy in Taylor, but they, too, display an incomplete account. Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka, for example, go as far as arguing for granting citizenship to nonhuman animals; however, they still limit political status to only these nonhumans. Their approach is similar to Taylor’s in that they develop their account from a consideration of individual organisms. In short, they rely on the assumption that there is some basic level of personhood in nonhuman animals. The authors are careful here not to argue that the type of subjectivity found in nonhuman animals is exactly the same as human subjectivity,

Ibid.
nor do they have the intersubjective relationships possible in human-to-human relationships.

Rather, they posit the following:

The better we understand animals, the greater the opportunities for rich and rewarding (and just) intersubjective relationship. There will always be some animals whose world and experience are so removed from ours – like the eelpout fish living deep in the Pacific Ocean thermal vents – that the best we can do is recognize that there is a self there, respect their basic rights, and leave them to get on with life. But there will be countless others with whom greater understanding and relationship is possible . . . We already know that in the case of most animals, there is ‘someone home.’ This, in our view, is sufficient to ground respect for basic inviolable rights.  

This passage captures the political grounding of Donaldson and Kymlicka’s argument and shows it to be somewhat similar to Taylor’s, even though the focus is granting rights and citizenship instead of only cultivating an attitude of respect. The authors focus on individual capabilities (i.e., subjectivity) as the starting point of rights and political consideration, similar Taylor’s focus on an individual organism’s ability to have a biological good as the grounds of moral consideration and respect. However, perhaps in response to biocentric theories like Taylor’s, Donaldson and Kymlicka suggest that rights can introduce new concepts – that of nonhuman animal citizenship. Hence, if we can say that there is “someone home” in the case of nonhuman animals, then the political implications are perhaps more significant than Taylor assumes for these biotic beings. Having some type of self – although admittedly different than a human self – at least makes intersubjective relationships between humans and nonhuman animals plausible.

Although Davidson and Kymlicka do posit granting citizen status to nonhuman animals, this does not entail a radical alteration of the political sphere in their view, because they encourage us to see their account as an expansion of the standard notion of subjectivity. In other words, the “question of selfhood or personhood identifies the set of beings to whom justice and

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39 Taylor, for example, doesn’t think that political ideas like nonhuman rights add anything new to our ethical discourse about worth. For example, as he says on pg. 254 of *Respect for Nature*, “[T]he language of moral rights has come to be well-established in assertions about the rights of persons, especially in the first-person assertions of our own rights,” and “[w]e do not really add anything new to the consideration of [nonhumans] as possessors of inherent worth by ascribing rights to them…The use of the language of rights introduces no new concepts.”
inviolable rights are owed,” since “[o]nly a being with subjective experience can have interests, or be owed the direct duties of justice that protect those interests.”\footnote{Ibid., 36.} The political sphere is not changed by considering the possibility that nonhuman animals are citizens deserving justice; the authors suggest that we are merely being more consistent by realizing that many nonhuman animals also “have inviolable rights in virtue of their sentience and selfhood,”\footnote{Ibid., 31.} whereas “[n]on-sentient entities” still remain outside of the political sphere because, “lacking subjectivity, they are not rightfully the objects of fairness, nor are they agents of intersubjectivity, the motivating spirit of justice.”\footnote{Ibid., 36.} Donaldson and Kymlicka do not think that their account of nonhuman animal citizenship alters the political sphere, nor does it involve anything beyond humans and some nonhuman animals,\footnote{They do mention that which nonhuman animals count as selves is an open question and has to be addressed on a case-by-case basis. Furthermore, they explain that the reason they use selfhood and subjectivity rather than the traditional category ‘personhood’ is due to the philosophical problematic nature of inquiries surrounding personhood – i.e., it is usually defined in a restricted manner (i.e., mental capabilities) that excludes many human selves that still have rights and should be considered morally valuable. For more, see Zoopolis, 24-36.} because political belonging is primarily a result of moral status. Political belonging is acquired by having standing as a moral subject, which for them begins and ends with subjectivity. What I argue in the next section is that conscious subjectivity and the moral status that accompanies this condition is surely one aspect of the political sphere, as Donaldson and Kymlicka suggest. However, I think Donaldson and Kymlicka’s approach is limited because I do not think that accepting this premise means that \textit{only} this relationship defines political belongingness. In my view, Donaldson and Kymlicka’s approach is more politically useful than Taylor’s account, since they directly discuss one type of nonhuman politics (i.e., nonhuman animals). However, I still find Donaldson and Kymlicka’s view ‘incomplete’ because I argue that political relationships include far-reaching ecological relationships that include but are not limited to nonhuman animal life and subjectivity.
The Political and the factory farm

Politics is understandably considered a *sui generis* human activity: the organization and managing of a multitude of people, institutions, and processes, involves a great deal of complexity; it requires communication that is greatly eased by propositional content; and it is distinguished from a mere display of force and strength.\(^\text{44}\) It therefore makes good sense that the conversation in environmental political thought usually takes an either indirect or incomplete approach. If politics is ultimately a human affair, it wouldn’t make sense to extend its focus beyond the human realm. Or, if we do consider something other than humans, it can only be those entities that meet the standard by which each human is considered political (e.g., subjectivity for Donaldson and Kymlicka). However, as I explain in this section, I think there are good reasons to consider many nonhumans as belonging to the political sphere. I suggest that we should consider the political sphere to exist wherever we recognize mutual interests that are demonstrably key to organizing, managing, or sustaining shared relationships. That is, whether intentional or not, if one’s identity or the living out of one’s life is greatly benefited or harmed by a relationship that one finds oneself in, or chooses to be a part of, then this relationship can be deemed political. Such relationships should be understood as things that the active pursuit to govern and organize (politics) should be concerned with. This means that if an entity has power over one’s life — in the sense that it shapes an entity’s possible action, or plays a continual, significant role shaping mutual interests and harms — then it should probably be given

\(^{44}\) Even an author like Machiavelli, who is supposedly the author of *realpolitik* doesn’t simply suggest a politics based on force. His concept of *virtù*, for instance, includes skilled oration and dissembling through speech. Hence, a significant part of politics’ guile is discursive. Consider, for example, chapter eighteen of *The Prince* where he discusses two ways by which princes should keep the faith of his people. There is a show of force to be sure, but there is also the skill of “[knowing] how to get around men’s brains with [one’s] astuteness,” which is the skill proper to humans and exemplified in the use of law as a mode of “combat.” See Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 68-71.
considerable attention, as well as the designations that are fitting for such entities (e.g., right-holder).

If a river, for instance, can have a series of effects on a human’s ability to live out one’s life, just as, say, another person’s actions can act in similar ways on the person in question, then we are justified in considering that river a part of the political sphere. Additionally, if this river can be harmful in its relationship with other entities, due to the fact that it has been harmed (e.g., polluted), then this river, as a part of the political sphere, is something that should be protected (via rights), especially if such protection can ward off both harms (the original pollution and the effects of the pollution on others). In short, it is reasonable, as New Zealanders protecting the rights of the Whanganui River claim, to understand entities like rivers to be “Te Awa Tupua”: “an integrated, living whole.” 45 A river is identifiable as a combination of many integrated parts, and damaging one of its parts can threaten the health of the river as whole, not to mention the entities in the local environment. By considering the example of factory farming, I aim to demonstrate how different types of nonhumans today (not just those with subjective experiences) are a part of relationships that fundamentally shape and organize the lives of humans and nonhumans alike. The network of human and nonhuman relationships found in the example of factory farming challenges the idea of a human-only political sphere, and the ecological network it elucidates suggests that all sorts of nonhumans (i.e., rivers as well as nonhuman animals) are political.

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A. Factory farming: a network of harms

In their book, *The Ethics of What We Eat*[^46], Peter Singer and Jim Mason illustrate how food production involves a network of relationships between humans, nonhuman animals, and the nonhuman environment. Building on their account, I suggest that the complex network that they highlight can help us to understand why it is reasonable to assume that there are ecological relationships that mark a common world to which humans belong, and which can be justified as political. Hence, I think the relationships between humans and nonhumans existing today due to industrial farming and agriculture practices are salient examples of why the political sphere includes nonhuman beings.

In the U.S., industrial farms are scattered throughout the country and become larger by the year. In a ten-year study ranging from 1997-2007, Food and Water Watch found that factory farming increased by leaps and bounds. As they report, “[t]he number of livestock units on factory farms rose 21.2 percent from 23.8 million in 2002 to 28.8 million in 2007.”[^47] The harms of industrialized farming continue to be documented, and it is already well established in social science research that the impacts reach communities throughout the U.S. and in most countries throughout the world.[^48] Chicken farms are one major type of industrial animal farming that can help show why we should be concerned about the increase of factory farming, and why the relationships we find in these farming practices suggest mutual impacts that deserve political standing.

[^48]: Michael Carolan, throughout his book *The Sociology of Food and Agriculture*, highlights the numerous ways in which communities throughout the globe – especially peasant communities and laborers – suffer from industrial farming practices. Health impacts are especially noteworthy and range from acute respiratory symptoms to increased rates of cancer. See, especially, *The Sociology of Food and Agriculture* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 104-105; 111-119.
Singer and Mason’s analysis of broiler chicken farming is an especially useful example. A broiler chicken is a chicken that is farmed for its meat rather than its eggs. While a broiler is not necessarily a factory-farmed chicken, Singer and Mason explain that in the U.S. it might as well be: “Virtually all the [broiler] chickens sold in America – more than 99 percent, according to Bill Roenigk, vice-president of the National Chicken Council – come from factory-farm production similar to that used by Tyson Foods.” Most people can probably agree that the life of a broiler chicken is itself quite short and brutish, even if one is not morally opposed to the killing and eating of nonhuman animals. First, we can consider their living quarters. Broiler chickens in factory farms are given the space of a standard sheet of paper (8.5”x11”) as chicks, but this space stays the same as they grow and mature. What this means is that by the time they are full grown “[t]hey are unable to move without pushing into other birds, unable to stretch their wings at will, or to get away from the dominant, aggressive birds.”

Yet, not having room to spread one’s wings is hardly the most significant burden of a broiler chicken’s close living quarters. The amount of droppings, which are not usually cleaned “for an entire year, and sometimes for several years,” create such a large concentration of ammonia in the air that it leads to “chronic respiratory disease, sores on their feet and hocks, and breast blisters. It makes their eyes water, and when it is really bad, many birds go blind.” At this point, one might imagine that a broiler chicken, if it could, would simply choose death over life. However, the business of slaughter doesn’t fare any better. After being crammed into cages and spending hours being loaded, transported, and then unloaded, the chickens are hung upside down from metal shackles, dipped into electrified water, and quickly run past a blade whose goal is to cut the chicken’s throat in order for it to be dead prior to going into a tank of scalding water.

49 Singer and Mason, 21-22.
50 Ibid., 23.
51 Ibid., 24.
However, it is estimated that three million chickens a year are boiled alive, since quite often the electrical shock and blade are ineffective.\textsuperscript{52} Dr. Mohan Raj, a clinical veterinary scientist quoted by Singer and Mason, estimates that “[t]he majority of broilers are likely to be conscious and suffer pain and distress at slaughter,” while John Webster, another veterinary scientist quoted by the authors, simply calls broiler chicken farming “both in magnitude and severity, the single most severe, systemic example of man’s [sic] inhumanity to another sentient animal.”\textsuperscript{53}

However, let us assume that one is not put off by the life and death of broiler chickens down on the factory farm. Like Carruthers, we might be convinced that a broiler chicken, although sentient and conscious to some degree, is not rational; therefore, we cannot substantiate any claim that would oblige humans to care for the chicken’s wellbeing. How about the link that directly connects industrial chicken farming to the health of the local ecosystems and the people who work on these farms and reside nearby? These connections, especially the human ones, are of interest to both indirect and incomplete models. But, what I want to suggest is that these models fail precisely because the focus on individual subjectivities often misses the context wherein these subjectivities are found and that, to a large degree, these contexts shape and organize the daily lives of all the subjectivities (human and nonhuman) in question.

The astronomical amount of waste created by factory chicken farming can give us a sense of how humans and nonhumans are caught within a network of political ecological relationships.

Explaining the conditions of the Delmarva Peninsula, Singer and Mason tell us

More than 600 million chickens a year are raised on the Delmarva Peninsula. Those chickens produce more manure than a city of four million people, and instead of getting processed like human waste, chicken manure is spread on fields… but a University of Delaware study found that the county only has enough land to cope with the manure from 64 million chickens. Up to half of the nutrients in the excess manure washes off into the rivers and streams, or gets into the groundwater.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 25-26.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 26; 24.
The results of this situation, which are139(233,415),(593,457) par for the course in factory farming, are devastating for local environs and people. Following a chain-reaction, the excess nitrogen in the water leads to excessive algae, which in turn creates “dead zones” because the algae removes oxygen from the water, killing the majority of aquatic life in the Delmarva Peninsula. “In July 2003, a dead zone stretched for 100 miles down the central portion of the bay.”

Furthermore, people living in the area deal with an excessive amount of flies and mice, both of which are drawn to the chicken waste, and this leads to airborne illnesses ranging from “stomach cramps, diarrhea, nausea” as well as intestinal parasites. These, however, are only some of the minor illnesses. For factory farm workers, the situation is much worse: “Over 25 percent of [Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation] workers develop respiratory diseases, ranging from bronchitis to mucus membrane irritation, asthma, and acute respiratory distress syndrome.”

We see similar (if not worse) harms in workers in industrial agriculture, where “[annually], worldwide, more than 26 million individuals suffer from nonfatal pesticide poisoning, while an additional 220,000 poisoning result in death.” Studies have also linked vegetable workers’ proximity to pesticides with startlingly increased likelihood of cancer. Factory farming, although originated by humans, has thoroughly spun and constituted a serious network of harms that has nearly taken on a life of its own, affecting human and nonhumans of

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54 Pig farming, for example, deals with the same exact problems regarding excessive production of waste: the pollution of waterways and the increase of human illness. Moreover, in 2003 the American Public Health Association encouraged the US government to halt the construction of factory farms because of the amount of human illness caused by the waste farms produced. See Singer and Mason, 42-54.

55 Ibid., 30.

56 Ibid., 30.

57 Carolan, 111.

58 Ibid., 113.

59 The United Farmworkers of America Cancer Register Study of 2001 found that their UFA workers had a much higher likelihood of developing one of many types of cancer due to their continued exposure to pesticides. See Carolan, 113.
all shapes and sizes. Perhaps, as some theorists have suggested, the only entities free of its harms are those humans who are privileged enough to determine where they will live and are sometimes able to avoid these harms.  

**B. The insufficiency of indirect and incomplete models**

The interconnected ecological network that is demonstrated in the example of factory farms illustrates principles that a variety of environmental schools of thought have considered. Ecocentrists, biocentrists, and deep ecologists, all of which will be considered in more detail in chapter three, have views that highlight the interconnectedness within ecosystems. Leopold’s concept of the land ethic is nothing if not attentive to the reciprocal relationship between land, animals, and humans – and this continues to be developed by Leopold’s well-known advocate, J. Baird Callicott.  

Taylor’s biocentrism, although theorizing by way of a micro-ecological view that considers the good of individual organisms first, always has the larger context and its relationship to the individual in perspective: “No life community associated with a particular ecological system is an isolated unit. It is directly or indirectly connected with other life communities… It is for this reason that entire biosphere of our planet comprises a single unified whole…” Furthermore, Arne Naess’ deep ecology actually goes so far as to claim that the human concept of self is not properly realized until it develops ecological self-knowledge.

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60 I say “sometimes” because many of these harms are recognized so long after the initial pollution that by the time someone finds out that they are in an area with infected water sources, for instance, it could have already done significant damage to their health. Katie Damien’s documentary, *My Toxic Backyard*, helps to demonstrate the lack of epistemological clarity as seen in communities in western North Carolina. For theorists on environmental privilege see, for example, the work of Sheila Foster and Luke Cole who develop the concept of “environmental racism” to capture the unequal privileges that people experience regarding the environment. See *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 54-79.


62 Taylor, 117. In general, see 116-119.

However, in authors within environmental political thought, we often see more focus on the abilities of individual agents, which often takes away from a more holistic, ecological perspective. Carruthers’ view, for starters, assumes that politics and the political sphere must have the same agents, because the obligations and interests that politics uses as its guide, must be expressed by the agent in a rational, propositional, and linguistic form. In short, politics only needs to consider rational agents as political, because only these types of agents are able to express their interests and desires in a clear way (i.e., linguistically). However, there are problems we must consider, if we wish to use the indirect political model to understand whether or not the nonhuman is political. Not only would this model exclude nonhumans, it would also exclude humans that are unable (due to age, disability, etc.) to express themselves linguistically and rationally. This critique is well made by many authors in environmental philosophy (often drawing on work from disability studies), and it is a hallmark of utilitarian approaches to nonhuman animal ethics. I will focus, however, on a related but different issue. The indirect model, in my view, is also greatly limited in that it tends to focus on mutual interests restricted to humans, while it doesn’t seriously consider the types of mutual interests and harms that shape human and nonhuman life alike.

For example, when we consider the network of harms generated by factory farming, we will see that if we consider sustaining human and nonhuman entities, we are usually faced with relationships that are never merely imbued with human interests and goods. As we see in the example of the broiler chicken, we are dealing with an overall series of harms that are integrally related and never simply a matter of a human good. Changing the situation to reduce illnesses and increase the wellbeing of humans necessarily involves a more sustainable stewardship of

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64 Donaldson and Kymlicka, for example, consider multiple examples in Zoopolis. See the following passages: 55-66; 95-100; 105-108. For a classic utilitarian example, see Peter Singer, Animal Liberation: The Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement (New York: Harper Collins, 1975), 1-23.
nonhumans. We are caught in a relationship in which mutual ecological interests arise: the sustainability of an entity, whether human or nonhuman, means orchestrating behaviors and actions that consider all the entities in the relationship as ecologically common. However, since these relations have been largely shaped by social and political institutions – the laws that permit factory farms to exist, and the social practices that create a high demand for cheap, readily available meat – I think we are dealing with mutual interests that are best understood as a political ecological relationship. In other words, here we can note an understanding of ecological equality that is best described as belonging to the political sphere. I will discuss and defend this claim in more detail in chapter two. Yet, before one disagrees with this claim by taking issue with the idea that something like a river is a thing that can be ‘sustained,’ I think it is important that we always consider a thing holistically. That is, a river can be a thing that is destroyed or sustained because a river is never simply water flowing through a channel. A river, properly understood, should consider all its parts – the flora, fauna, and all the living organisms that help create a distinct river. Polluting a river to the point that it creates a “dead zone,” as discussed above, is, I argue, to reach a point at which the river that used to exist is now destroyed.

What is discovered in the example of factory farming is that what most of us would consider a very significant interest – sustaining oneself and some degree of well-being – is something that easily extends beyond human life, and occurs within a context that is larger than human. When nonhuman animals are excessively farmed (and are arguably seriously and unnecessarily harmed in the process), a network of damages is put into motion. What this suggests is that one type of nonhuman – a broiler chicken, for instance – cannot be isolated from its ecological condition anymore than the person living downstream (and downwind) from a broiler chicken farm. In other words, as standard approaches in environmental philosophy cited
above have thoroughly argued, we are situated in an ecological context that we depend on and that greatly shapes and sustains us.

This ecological condition, furthermore, is not simply a condition of subjectivities, as suggested by Donaldson and Kymlicka. Again, what the example of factory farming elucidates is that we can understand how a common condition and relationship can exist (and does exist) that cannot be reduced to a specific type of being – subjective or biotic. Addressing the common relationship would necessarily mean addressing all of the beings involved in the equation – i.e., the general context itself. In the case of animal waste, the harm under consideration is as much about the close and unpleasant living quarters of the nonhuman animals and related human illnesses as it is about the polluted rivers. The damages, we could say, grow organically across the so-called human and nonhuman divide, and corroborate an ecological condition.

The reason that this ecological network is political, even though its object of concern is not rational discourse, is that the relationships we encounter within our ecological networks are primary factors in how our lives and possibilities are organized, realized, and sustained. Several authors who develop a capability approach have made similar arguments regarding human life – and this is also a key component of Hayward’s approach. For instance, Rauschmayer, Omann, and Frühmann have argued that sustainable development is “an expression of particular values aimed at encouraging peoples and societies to develop specific capabilities,” and these values are needed in order to “enable people to select certain strategies over others for meeting their needs so that all people – both those living now and in the future – can have a decent quality of life.”

Felix Rauschmayer et al., introduction to Sustainable Development: Capabilities, Needs, and Well-being (New York: Routledge, 2011), xi-xii. For a thorough account of their argument see the article in this volume by Rauschmayer et al. called “Needs, capabilities and quality of life: refocusing sustainable development.” In addition to this volume, two of the same editors also have another helpful co-edited volume on the same issue. See Ortrud Lessmann and Felix Rauschmayer (eds.), The Capability Approach and Sustainability (London: Routledge, 2013). For a view that is specifically about nonsentient life see Katy Fulfer, “The Capabilities Approach to Justice and the Flourishing of Nonsentient Life,” Ethics & the Environment 18 (2013): 19-38.
However, as I have just argued, the type of ecological contexts and networks we are faced with today (e.g., factory farming) continually highlight more than just human flourishing. Examples like factory farming help us to see is that it is very questionable how a human interest concerning sustainability, health, or a healthy environment could ever be isolated from our nonhuman neighbors. Human health is directly related to the care, treatment, and the existing conditions of nonhumans. As they are treated badly and experience declines, we see a corresponding decline in humans. This is what I mean when I say that the relationships between humans and nonhumans highlight a commonality that is political in nature.

One might argue that the network of harms is anthropogenic (i.e., originating from humans), thus, it merely shows us that *humans* have created harmful practices like factory farming that have had all kinds of (perhaps) unforeseen impacts on humans and nonhumans. In other words, the industrial farming examples are simply one of human wrongdoings that can be corrected; they say nothing about nonhuman politics. I think the statement about origins is obviously correct, insofar as it is true that the network of harms we can see radiating from industrial farming practices do have humans as their efficient cause. However, in response to this I argue that this challenge does not attack the more fundamental claim that I am identifying: human and nonhuman entities are sustained alongside one another within ecosystems. In other words, the factory-farming example could be replaced by a condition that is not originally caused by humans. For instance, during a drought we notice the same network of harms. A lack of water similarly affects plants, animals, and humans, since we (again) have ecological commonalities that can be understood as integrated. A lack of water not only harms humans and nonhumans that have thirst, but as plants die from lack of water, their deaths have a rippling effect that harms our sustenance as well. We need plants, or the nonhuman animals that depend on them, in order to
sustain ourselves. In short, the harms of factory farming are human in origin, and they exemplify a contemporary (and particularly heinous) example of the principle of a political ecological network.

Moreover, the causation objection fails to take notice of the entrenched nature of the ecological relationships I am considering, which, when taken seriously, actually make the question of origin irrelevant. No matter who started the relationships – and it is quite clear that humans have caused a network of harms with the introduction and development of industrial farming – they are now in motion and cannot simply be wished away. We now live in a world in which the majority of our farming practices have become industrialized, which have lasting impacts on numerous humans and nonhumans throughout the globe. In fact, as some theorists suggest (and this is a point I will return to in chapters three and five) we may be at a point in history at which we can no longer speak of nature that is pristine, or unaffected by humans. That is, we might now be living within what some refer to as the anthropocene, and what Bill McKibben has famously called the end of nature.\footnote{Bill McKibben, \textit{The End of Nature} (New York: Random House, 1989).} Even if we do not fully agree with these authors—and I do not—we can still learn a great deal from their insight. Namely, even if we stopped all of our environmentally damaging practices tomorrow, it is not clear that their effects could ever be reversed. Even if we could talk about the reversal of many environmental damages, it would be such a long process that we would still need to continue to consider the entrenched networks of humans and nonhumans as a political concern for some time to come. I think the same argument can be made regarding the economic systems that keep these relationships afloat: they are so embedded and involve such a wide array of legal systems and types of agents that an overnight fix is unthinkable. We thus have yet another reason why the political status of nonhumans is a pressing issue that will continue to be an issue for us as far into
the future as we can reasonable imagine. Extant human and nonhuman relationships affect so
many people in so many places that beginning to understand the entrenched, widespread, and
non-anthropocentric nature of these relationships will be crucial to beginning to providing
solutions.

Another possible response to my argument is that the issues I address are just as easily
tackled by an approach like Hayward’s – that is, a human right to a healthy environment is a
sufficient solution. I have already explained how human harms and the limitation of human
flourishing are directly related to an unhealthy environment. Therefore, it does seem like it
would be sufficient to defend a human right to the environment and not challenge the idea of a
purely anthropocentric political sphere because, after all, looking after humans will have,
according to Hayward, spillover effects that benefit nonhumans. However, upon closer
inspection, the sufficiency of a human right to a healthy environment is not convincing,
especially if we contextualize this proposal within the example of factory farming.

The main problem this view faces is the competing human goods and rights that will
often take precedence if we are only obliged to consider environmental concerns from a human
perspective. The prime example is economic goods. Considering the case of pesticides and the
excessive number of nonhumans that are farmed can help us to understand why economic goods
pose competing problems that need more than a human-centric perspective. While we may
realize that the use of pesticides has been directly linked to harms for workers, and that excessive
animal farming damages ecosystems and local residents, the affordability of food that results
from practices that increase production rates for little cost is arguably a good that many,
especially persons earning a low income and those owning the industrial companies, might favor
even knowing the harms.
In fact, this is the view we hear from owners of factory farms time and again. As they argue, for farms to be competitive in the marketplace, they must be able to produce meat cheaply, regardless of the secondary harms. Singer and Mason highlight this stance throughout *The Ethics of What We Eat* and at one moment, quoting a chicken farming manual, they capture the economic pressure faced in industrial farming: “[l]imiting the floor space gives poorer results on a per bird basis, yet the question has always been and continues to be: What is the least amount of floor space necessary per bird to produce the greatest return on investment.”67 In other words, producers, in order to keep their farms afloat and remain competitive in the marketplace, are locked into raising chickens in overpopulated coops and the harms that accompany these practices. The same attitude is expressed in other nonhuman animal farming industries. In fact, farmers explain the economic pinch experienced in pig farming in unequivocal language:

As long as the market provides no incentives for reducing the pigs’ pain, the pig producer cannot afford to spend more than a penny, or perhaps a nickel for that purpose. If he does, someone else who won’t spend anything to reduce pain will produce cheaper pigs and put him out of business. That is why the way that factory farming treats animals is not so much a problem of gratuitous cruelty or sadism, and the main problem is not a matter of preventing isolated incidents of animal abuse. The core issue is the commercial pressures that exist in a competitive market system in which animals are items of property, and the conditions in which they are kept are not regulated by federal or state animal-welfare law.68

In sum, it is not at all clear that the goods that would come from a human right to a healthy environment would be given precedence over other human goods like economic freedom and the desire to have highly affordable foods. If restricted to human interests alone, it is reasonable to assume that many people would consider their economic interests before the interests of the environment.

Developing an argument that is grounded in a shared human and nonhuman good is not only a better representation of the reality of these relationships, but it also provides a stronger

67 Singer and Mason, 23.
68 Ibid., 55.
obligation than one that is strictly human. That is, as I have argued, a proper understanding of sustainable relationships can never simply be reduced to human interests, with mere spillover effects for nonhumans. We are actually dealing with reciprocal and dependent relationships. In such a scenario, individuals can surely express interests in a rational and linguistic manner, and it is this behavior that leads to the most effective action for altering a set of relationships. Again, the activity of politics can still be described as a human affair. However, what is acted on – i.e., the idea of what is being held in common and therefore the guiding relation of politics – not only belongs to rational humans, but to nonhuman animals and the nonhuman environment. We are dealing, in other words, with an ecological political good that, as I will argue in the next chapter, is as fundamental as the need for human participation in politics. That is, following Arendt, I will argue that the ecological political good captures a fundamental component of political life that, although concerning a non-anthropogenic good and sense of equality, is another primary political relationship. I will suggest that we can understand primary human relationships as political while also understanding that there are relationships that are equally demanding and necessary, which happen to be of an ecological dimension.

For now, though, we can understand that since factory farms dominate the agricultural and nonhuman animal husbandry landscape today, and since the network of harms that grow organically from this situation are never merely human problems, we must take seriously the idea that these relationships are of a political nature. I say this because they so seriously shape and organize so many lives, most often to the detriment of the humans and nonhumans in question, that any concern for justice and the common good demands that we understand this situation as a political problem. It is a political problem because the well being that needs to be sustained in ecological relationships is such a basic prerequisite for a decent life that it demands
to be taken up as a relationship that is common and primary for all humans. It just so happens, however, that this common human interest is also something we share with nonhumans.

**Conclusion: The reasonableness of an ecological political sphere**

I have argued in this chapter that it is generally reasonable to believe that nonhumans can be incorporated into our understanding of the political sphere, contrary to the dominant approaches in environmental politics (i.e., indirect and incomplete models). That is, the political sphere is not, strictly speaking, anthropocentric. Rather, there are both anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric aspects of the political sphere. Since I consider the political to be any relationship that establishes a commonality and makes a significant impact on the shape and organization of one’s life, I do not think we are required to have a concept of the political sphere that is reducible to one type of entity – e.g., humans. I do not wish to offer a fundamental, ahistorical conception of the political sphere – which is perhaps always a dubious undertaking. Instead, I have suggested that we need a more flexible, comprehensive, and far-reaching concept of the political sphere that can take into account any type of relationship that might arise and be disclosed as a concern serious enough to threaten the ability of the entities within that relationship to sustain themselves in a meaningful way. In short, I am concerned with an understanding of the political sphere that is concerned with how to best theorize our contemporary relationships, even if these relationships challenge our inherited and well-established conceptions of politics.

However, on this note, in the next chapter I will explain why my concept of an ecological dimension of the political sphere is not altogether alien from classic contractarian frameworks, even though contemporary contractarians have not carried forward some of the nuanced elements of contractarianism’s founders. Specifically, I will consider John Locke’s *Two Treatises*, and
show that they contain an understanding of sustainability that has an ecological dimension. I aim
to demonstrate that a reinterpretation of contract theory can actually produce a contract theory
that is friendly to an ecological dimension. While it might often be thought that the goal of
contract politics is to sustain human peace and security, I will argue that the sustainability in
question must be considered beyond the scope of human relationships, because it is a mistake to
disregard the common importance and centrality of our relationships with nonhumans in our
contemporary world. In other words, I suggest that it is not too far-fetched to think that Locke
himself might support rights for nature, or at least the recognition of an ecological political
sphere.
Chapter Two
The Sustainability of the Political Sphere

Introduction

In chapter one, I argued that the notion of an ecological public sphere better captures the interdependent and politically consequential relationship between humans and the nonhuman environment. I considered popular arguments in environmental political thought that discredit (some more than others) the idea that nonhumans are political. The network of relationships we share with nonhumans in the example of factory farming shows, I suggested, that we have good reason to develop the idea of an ecological political sphere. I argued that factory farming is an important example of political ecological relationships: a form of human relation with the nonhuman world that is shaped by human interests and power dynamics (e.g., economics). However, I also suggested that even though many of these environmental relationships originate from human, anthropocentric practices, the networks they have evolved into today produce concerns that are not limited to human beings (e.g., disease and degradation). I therefore introduced a theoretical framework that I described as a “political ecology,” which is intended to support my claim that there are public, political concerns that are not simply anthropocentric — even if they originate from anthropocentric practices. Mutual human and nonhuman interests highlight relations that deserve political standing, and I use the phrase ‘ecological political sphere’ to denote this series of relations.

In this chapter, I continue to develop the perspective of political ecology by pruning traditional understandings of politics, and specifically challenging the idea that politics only aims to sustain human relationships. I consider this “sustainability desideratum” in contract theory, and I seek to expose how the insufficiency of this narrative. In fact, I argue that John Locke, a classic liberal theorist, develops possibilities for an ecological political sphere, even though these
possibilities aren’t given much consideration by posterity (as is evident in authors like Carruthers, discussed in chapter one). I suggest that consideration of the work of John Locke strengthens the reasonableness of an ecological political sphere. Locke is very concerned with our relationship with nonhumans, as is evident in his theory of the provisos of property. I suggest that while traditional readings of Locke are correct – politics is about sustaining human communities – it is also the case, for Locke, that politics is greatly concerned with sustaining the relations we have with nonhumans; human and nonhuman relationships are a primary political relationship, just like juridical relationships between humans. In this light, Locke gives us a notion of environmental commonality that is a central concern guiding the activity of politics. His theory, I argue, is compatible with Val Plumwood’s understanding of “ecological rationality,” which suggests that a proper understanding of rational conduct is one that adopts a holistic understanding of the context and outcomes of our action. Plumwood claims that only an understanding of ecological relationships that attends to our dependence on and involvement with nonhumans can be considered rational, and I argue that Locke would agree with this idea. This demonstrates that an ecological political sphere is not overly demanding as a theory, since it is compatible with a philosophical outlook already recognized as hugely influential on our dominant systems of government. This provides further support for the overall reasonability of my argument, and for pursuits like rights for nature discussed in chapter one. Additionally, it supports my argument that a political ecology need not be a complete deconstruction of traditional political theory: there are resources in traditional theory that can be critically reevaluated and used in defense of an ecological political sphere.

As should be clear by now, my argument for an ecological political sphere is not a replacement for traditional understandings of an anthropocentric political sphere. In fact, I
suggest that political ecological relations are best understood in a manner analogous to relations deemed “private” in traditional public/private distinctions. That is, political ecological relations, like relations that concern domestic workers, are traditional “hidden” from the public sphere, because they concern the maintenance and needs of the physical body. Just as matters thought to be wholly “private” have been shown to have public, even political significance, so I argue that we have several reasons to consider political ecological relations a public concern. Food production and resource extraction, for instance, are environmental concerns that are central to the organization and management of human life. Yet, they rely on networks that involve mutual interests shared by humans and nonhumans (as discussed in chapter one). Environmental relationships, like many domestic relationships that have historically been hidden from the public sphere, thus involve needs and goods that the public depends on. Therefore, I suggest that we not only need to make environmental relationships more visible and public, but that doing so will mean granting nonhumans political status, since the political ecological relations of concern involve mutual human and nonhuman interests. In short, I use critiques of the traditional public/private sphere distinction in order to further my claim that it is reasonable to conclude that nonhumans belong to the public sphere. I specifically draw on critiques of the public/private divide made by Hannah Arendt and Iris Marion Young in order to argue that the ecological sphere is a highly visible, albeit largely unacknowledged, part of our public affairs. Just as authors have argued that other bodily relations – like domestic care of the body – are correctly understood as public, political concerns, so should we consider political ecological relations as central to the public sphere today.
Politics as a sustaining activity

In chapter one I began by giving a description of the traditional politics/political distinction, and here I extend my argument that this distinction should include an integral ecological component. Moving beyond the last chapter, I consider how classic contract theorists understand the politics/political distinction and how it is directly connected to the public/private sphere distinction developed in the 20th century by authors like Hannah Arendt and John Rawls. I also highlight the desideratum of sustaining common relationships in contract theory (which is often directly related to basic biological survival) and suggest that it is compatible with the idea of nonhuman political status. Hence, we can depict an additional sphere of relations, specifically ecological relations, which include a series of public concerns and mutual interests, even though they, like the traditional understanding of “private” relations, are often considered to be outside of the public sphere.

A. Politics and the political sphere

A distinction between politics and the political such as the one I described in chapter one is discernible in classic modern political theories. In this section, I consider social contract theory as developed by Locke and Rousseau. Here I will not yet draw out the ecological dimensions of social contract theory, I will merely set up its basic narrative about politics and the political community. I will discuss the ecological dimensions of Locke’s political thought in subsequent sections. To begin, let’s consider Locke’s *Two Treatises on Government*.¹ In his account of the motivations and goals of a body politic, Locke continually notes (especially in chapters thirteen and nineteen) that the actual activity of government (i.e., executive and legislative power) is justified by the degree to which it upholds the “fiduciary trust” of the commonwealth (i.e., civil

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Locke citations come from John Locke, *Two Treatise of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2009. 2T is used to designate the second treatise and the number that follows indicates the section number as used by Laslett.
A commonwealth, in Locke’s account, is a contractual community that lies at the root of the activity of politics; it is distinguished from “any Form of Government” and is likened to what “the Latines signify by the word Civitas,” or a “Society of Men” (2T: §133). It is this body that has established and codified through laws a set of relational principles: who belongs to the community, how the individuals of the community are obliged to relate to one another, etc. Hence, even though the executive and legislative powers of a commonwealth are responsible for the activity of politics and governing, “the Community perpetually retains a Supreme Power of saving themselves from the attempts and designs of any Body, even if their Legislators, whenever they shall be so foolish, or so wicked, as to lay and carry on designs against the Liberties and Properties to Subject” (2T: §149).

A fundamental set of relationships – the social community, for Locke – sets the priorities of any and all activities of politics within a government. The act of establishing the legislative itself – that is, the formation of a political society – assumes that there is already a relational community that exists. Sheldon Wolin, commenting on this influential aspect of Locke’s thought, claims that it is exactly Locke’s assumption that “society” is “a self-activating unity capable of generating a common will” that marks his “attack against the traditional model of society, wherein ordered social relationships and institutions were sustained by the direction imparted from a political center…” In other words, Locke’s conception of a social community is a foregrounded relationship that the activity of politics must consider when legislating and enacting laws. Moreover, the social community of a commonwealth is merely a sustainable version of the “natural community” – that is, for Locke the civil relationship on which politics is

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based is found in the state of nature. However, in Locke’s state of nature no impartial judge exists and accordingly there is no secure protection of our property and our person. The lack of juridical legitimacy necessitates an addendum to the laws of nature via legislature (i.e., contract), but it is politics’ foundation in a natural, social relationship that consequently leads to a new politics: a commonwealth with ultimate power to establish, alter, and dissolve laws and executive power.

Locke is by no means unique in making a political sphere/politics distinction of this order. Rousseau addresses this distinction between the political sphere and politics using direct and unequivocal language:

…for while the opposition of particular interests made the establishment of societies necessary, it is the agreement of these same interests which made it possible. What these different interests have in common is what forms the social bond, and if there were not some point on which all interests agree, no society could exist. Now it is solely in terms of this common interest that society ought to be governed.  

Rousseau, in very direct terms, claims that it is the commonality of people that guides governing. Indeed, Rousseau’s political project is to sustain the natural liberty common to all within a political society. Rousseau claims that renouncing one’s natural liberty is a sign of madness, since “[t]o renounce one’s freedom is to renounce one’s quality as man, the rights of humanity, and even its duties” (OC III, 356). Thus, a legitimate form of politics is one that equally sustains each person’s common liberty. For Rousseau, we can sustain natural liberty if sovereignty is understood as an inalienable and indivisible “general will”: inalienable insofar as it “is nothing but a collective being” and “can only be represented by itself” (OC III, 368), and indivisible in that “it is either the will of the body of the people, or that of only a part. In the first case, the

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4 As Locke says in §128, “And were it not for the corruption, and vitioussness of degenerate Men, there would be no need of any other; no necessity that Men should separate from this great and natural Community, and by positive agreements combine into smaller and divided associations” (emphasis added).
declaration of this will is an act of sovereignty and constitutes law, in the second case it is merely a particular will, or an act of magistracy; at most it is a decree” (OC III, 369). Rousseau includes all citizens as equal members of sovereignty, and therefore legitimate politics is only that which sustains the public (common) good of all against partisan interests.6

While contractarians like Rousseau and Locke are interested in common goals like peace and protection against illegitimate rulers, it is also reasonable to assume that a primary interest of most contractarians is the basic bodily survival of each member in the political community. In other words, we seek peace, security, and a life without tyranny often because, quite simply, the sorts of conditions that lack these qualities (i.e., the state of nature) offer a dim chance of survival. A better guarantee of a sustained biological life is arguably the foundational motivation of modern contract theory, insofar as it is the condition that must always be assumed to be in place prior to the enjoyment of social and political goods. The protection of a community’s biological life is one example of an ecological relationship that is of foundational concern for traditional theories of politics, even if traditional readings don’t focus a great deal of attention on this aspect of social contract theory. I call this concern a “sustainability desideratum,” and below I highlight how, even in social contract theory, we can recognize a need to sustain and protect ecological relationships. Rousseau is perhaps the exception, since he argues that society replaces the peacefulness of a human’s natural condition, and it is society that develops greed and the threat of losing one’s life.7 However, the natural condition of people in Hobbes and Locke’s

6 As Rousseau states (OC III, 363), “Now the Sovereign, since it is formed entirely of the individuals who make it up, has not and cannot have any interests contrary to theirs,” and since it must always be thought of as collective of equals it “cannot harm any one of [its members] in particular.” In other words, a partisan interest that could harm others is renounced by Rousseau’s theory of politics, since sovereignty is considered a general will that must sustain the common natural rights and freedoms of all its individual members.

7 For instance, in Rousseau’s The State of War he says that “Man is naturally peaceable and timorous, at the slightest danger his first movement is to flee; he becomes warlike only by dint of habit and experience. Honor, interest, prejudices, vengeance, all the passions that might make him brave perils and death, are far from him in the state of nature. It is only after he has entered into society with another human being that he decides to attack someone else;
political theories does not guarantee the survival of a political body. Locke’s view will be discussed below, and Hobbes’ life-threatening and brutish state of nature is well known.  

Pierre Manent, reflecting on bodily sustainability in contract theory, comments that “[t]he only teaching of nature, in any event its only teaching not open to question, is the injunction of animal necessity: survival…The root of human right, if it is to be as unquestionable as a mathematical proposition, is to be sought in this act without an idea, in the properly animal act.” This means that in a political philosophy like Locke’s, “[he] will erect the lofty structure of the liberal and democratic state on the puny base of the solitary animal in search of food.” Manent touches on the sustainability desideratum found in modern political thought by identifying the significance of motives that relate us to, rather than distinguish us from, the nonhuman. In fact, as he suggests elsewhere, moderns produce generalities and concepts like the state of nature, largely to secure their individual, biological lives. Moderns invent “moral being” for the purpose of sustaining “physical being.” In other words, “one would say that the means, humanity properly speaking, is infinitely greater in dignity than the end, animal survival,” yet in actuality, the wish “to avoid perishing” is what leads to the creation of “labor, property, law, and the arts and sciences. It is then he discovers that he has become a man.” While Locke’s theological commitments might lead him to challenge Manent’s reading concerning the inventive nature of morals, the suggestion that physical sustainability is an important motivator and catalyst of many of our social and political goods is still an astute insight. The discussion of Locke’s provisos below will help illustrate this point, since the provisos are concerned with bodily sustainability and are, Locke claims, part of the common good.

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10 Ibid., 183.
What is useful in Manent’s reading is his foregrounding of the extent to which the human, conceptual goods that are often seen as the ultimate ends of politics, are directly linked to the desideratum of protecting biological life – a purportedly base or, to use Manent’s language, “puny” good. There is also merit in the idea that modern theories of politics should be understood as human, creative productions (i.e., artificial), even if authors base their theories on principles that they do not consider to be mere constructions. Manent’s view of politics as a creative, artificial project is shared with many other authors; it is a view that Hobbes (for example) is well known for holding.\(^1\) Social contract theory, in this reading, is to a large degree spurred by environmental commonalities (e.g., seeking survival) that place humans alongside their nonhuman neighbors. In other words, there is a central concern for bodily sustainability in contract theory, and we can expand on this desideratum in order to defend an ecological political sphere that is congruent with key ideas in modern political thought (i.e., Locke’s provisos).

I have shown thus far that the activity of politics in classic contractarianism seeks to sustain the commonality that relates all political beings together. Rousseau summarizes this impetus quite well: ‘To find a form of association that will defend and protect the person and goods of each associate with the full common force, and by means of which each, uniting with all, nevertheless obey only himself and remain as free as before.’ This is the fundamental

\(^1\) For Hobbes’ discussion consider the Introduction to the *Leviathan* where he compares a commonwealth to an artificial person. See, *Leviathan*, 9-11. Also worth considering are Andrzej Rapaczynski and Hannah Arendt. Rapaczynski, mapping out the idea of production and human action from ancient Greece to modernity, says that “In the mainstream, ‘production’ came to be seen no longer as the mere reproduction of life, but as a truly creative activity, shaping both man and his world, until, in the modern use of the term, it came to stand for the greatest part of human activities, including those which endow human beings with their moral worth (and which Aristotle had thought to belong in the totally separate category of ‘action’).” Similarly, Arendt describes humans’ creative fabrication by using the term *homo faber*, and she claims that this activity extends to the work of artists as well as the work of theorists (arguably the same) who construct images of human beings and how they ought to ideally conceive themselves. See Andrzej Rapaczynski, *Nature and Politics: Liberalism in the Philosophies of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 116 and Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 207-212, 230, and 243-247.
problem to which the social contract provides the solution.”\(^{12}\) In short, the views of Locke and Rousseau are exemplars of a traditional understanding of politics that I began discussing in chapter one. Furthermore, the goal of sustainability is central to these authors’ views even though they have different views of legitimate politics: Locke supports a tripartite government and Rousseau a united general will, but both focus on sustaining a view of life and interests that are purportedly shared by all political entities. Correlatively, although we find differences in how, exactly, these authors understand what truly comprises the life and interests that people hold in common—and thus, which are the items sustained by politics—the goal of sustainability remains a constant.\(^{13}\) In short, the sustainability desideratum that is seen in modern politics primarily focuses on common human goods. While the work of Locke does imply ecological dimensions, as I will discuss in the next section, the nonhuman world is typically an assumed background against which politics takes place, whereas the life, liberty, property, and rights of humans are the primary things needing preservation. Yet, even though these theorists have many human-specific goods in mind (e.g., property, liberty), I will argue that bodily good and survival—a similarity that involves relationships shared with nonhumans—can (and should) be considered an

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\(^{13}\) For instance, Rousseau (as discussed above) makes the argument that renouncing liberty graciously is illogical. That is, as he mentions in BK I, Chapter Four of *The Social Contract*, to give away one’s freedom is to give away what makes one properly human: “To renounce one’s freedom is to renounce one’s quality as man, the rights of humanity, and even its duties” The life and interest that Rousseau wants to sustain is the common freedom that quite literally equalizes all people as common. Hence, his politics focuses on a radically democratic general will that does not rely on representative sovereignty but a public and general sovereignty that hinges on public engagement and deliberation. Locke, on the other hand, aims to sustain a different view of life and interests. He does want to sustain the property of each person and their right to not be coerced by an illegitimate authority (as mentioned in the text above), but he is not interested in sustaining the sovereignty of each individual. Rather, the majority opinion guides politics, and politics itself (being the legislative and executive) is importantly a government, quite distinct from ‘the people’ (i.e., the commonwealth). Moreover, as I’ve explained, Rousseau does not think politics is about sustaining the biological, whereas this is important for Locke and Hobbes. See Rousseau, *OC*, III: 351-378; John Locke, *2T*: Ch. 10-13. For a good account of the distinctions between Locke and Rousseau, see Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, trans. by Rebecca Balinski (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), chapters four and six.
additional dimension of political commonality and the public sphere, and I think that authors like Locke clearly assume the primacy of the ecological dimension of politics.

**B. The public and the private sphere**

Liberal political theory during the last century has continued to consider preservation a central goal of politics. Liberal theorists continue to think of the activity of politics as sustaining and preserving common relationships. In the work of John Rawls, for instance, we have the suggestion that justice cannot be sustained unless we formulate the principles that guide our political activities through a lens that equalizes each person. For Rawls, sustaining social bonds is an issue that concerns individuals’ expectations and how they relate to the distribution of goods. Since agreement about goods is typically an intractable affair, we can only construct fair principles of justice if the influential parties are composed of reasonable persons:

> Three main kinds of conflicts set citizens at odds: those deriving from differences in status, class position, or occupation, or from differences in ethnicity, gender, or race; and finally, those deriving from the burdens of judgment…[Political liberalism] holds that even though our comprehensive doctrines are irreconcilable and cannot be compromised, nevertheless citizens who affirm reasonable doctrines may share reasons of another kind, namely, public reasons given in terms of political conceptions of justice…For once we accept reasonable principles of justice and recognize them to be reasonable (even if not the most reasonable), and know, or reasonably believe, that our political and social institutions satisfy them, the second kind of conflict need not arise, or arise so forcefully.\(^{14}\)

That is, politics, first and foremost, should aim to sustain justice (i.e., fairness) for every party involved. For Rawls, the activity of politics is the pursuit of fair distribution and ordering, and a reasonable public sphere (discussed in more detail below) helps ensure that fairness is continually preserved.

Some might object that the view of politics as sustaining and preserving might hold for standard contractarian accounts like Rawls’s, but is not a plausible reading of critical accounts, especially those that define politics as dissent and resistance. Jacques Rancière, for instance,

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defines politics as an activity of groups that are excluded from the common. He favors a view of politics as “dissensus,” which would seem, *prima facie*, to be contra the goal of preservation and sustainability. That is, for Rancière, the activity of politics is limited to acts by the “part without a part”: politics occurs when a group that is not visible under an established and working definition of commonness successfully asserts and establishes its visibility (or forces its recognition).

For Rancière, politics is the act that opposes the exercise of power or an established consensus that claims to have all parts accounted for; it is the act of establishing commonality through a protestation of a false, established consensus. As such, politics forces political recognition by way of dissensus: “[t]he essence of politics is dissensus. Dissensus is not a confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the demonstration (*manifestation*) of a gap in the sensible itself. Political demonstration makes visible that which had no reason to be seen…”

Though some might consider Rancière’s view of politics as dissensus to constitute an attack on the notion of politics as sustainability, I think we, instead, get a sense of the flexibility of the form of politics as sustainability. For, in Rancière’s theory, politics is only said to occur when the activity of dissensus is enacted. While someone might argue that Rancière only gives us a descriptive account of politics, he clearly discusses the absence of “actual” politics in pejorative terms, calling status quo politics “policing.” From the distinction between politics and policing, it is reasonably clear that Rancière implies that dissensus is a good that should be sustained, since dissensus is the only activity that actually counts as politics. In his view, commonness is itself a shifting and historically contingent idea; thus we must have an understanding of politics that can adequately address commonness’s contingent ontology. In

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15 Rancière repeats this view throughout his writings. For a good introduction to his suggestion that politics involves the “part without a part,” see Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 27-44.
16 Ibid., 38.
17 Ibid., 44-45.
other words, just as in contractarian views of politics, the goal in Rancière’s politics is to sustain an activity (dissensus) that best looks after what’s common, since he thinks that it is only by constantly challenging the public sphere that we can keep from reducing politics to the power held by a few over the many. Rancière’s account, like Hannah Arendt’s discussed below, is useful for my argument because it focuses on political relationships that are hidden from dominant conceptions of the public sphere (i.e., the part without a part). Ecological political relationships are typically excluded from any serious public consideration—and as I will discuss in chapter five, this exclusion of environmental concerns affects and further marginalizes many groups of people in a body politic. Hence, I suggest that the contestation of the public sphere, which often seeks to politicize concerns that are traditionally thought of as “private,” is an activity that must include environmental relationships.

The contestation of the public sphere is a theme in many discussions of politics in the twentieth century. In fact, considering the distinction between the public and private sphere in these discussions will elucidate how politics’ sustainability in the twentieth century often has a physical or bodily dimension. Thus, the public/private distinction in political theory can also help situate my argument for an ecological political sphere. The distinction between the public and private sphere illustrates analogically how the ecological relationships can constitute a sphere of primary importance that should be taken into account in contemporary understandings of politics.

18 For Rancière, a significant threat to the activity of politics is the reduction of its meaning to “a form of government that enables oligarchies to rule in the name of the people” or “a form of society that governs the power of commodities.” Hence, it is important to base politics on a constant, active, and contingent demos (the people), not principles seen as natural or ahistorical. As he explains: “Unequal society does not carry any equal society in its womb. Rather, egalitarian society is only ever the set of egalitarian relations that are traced here and now through singular and precarious acts. Democracy is as bare in its relation to the power of wealth as it is to the power of kinship that today comes to assist and to rival it. It is not based on any nature of things nor guaranteed by any institutional form. It is not borne along by any historical necessity and does not bear any. It is only entrusted to the constancy of its specific acts.” See, Jacques Ranciere, Hatred of Democracy, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2009), 96-97.
In his essay, “Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical,”\textsuperscript{19} John Rawls articulates a distinction between the public and private sphere that remains influential today. In the essay, Rawls argues (similarly to his argument in \textit{The Law of Peoples} quoted above) that a constitutional democratic theory of justice, in order to be fair and equal for all citizens, “should be, so far as possible, independent of controversial philosophical and religious doctrines.”\textsuperscript{20} For Rawls, the only moral goods that may be employed are those supporting the basic tenets of a constitutional democracy, in which all citizens are recognized as free and equal. In other words, a political conception of justice suggests “no general moral conception can provide a publicly recognized basis for a conception of justice,” because “a workable conception of political justice…must allow for a diversity of doctrines and the plurality of conflicting, and indeed incommensurable, conceptions of the good affirmed by the members of existing democratic societies.”\textsuperscript{21} In short, Rawls distinguishes a public and a private sphere in order to ground a public conception of justice that allows for a plurality of views of the good, which avoids a theory of politics that is based on a specific moral doctrine (e.g., utilitarianism).

Rawls considers the public sphere to be guided by citizens’ reasonableness, which is distinguished from, but does not completely exclude, citizens’ individual rational goods. As he explains in \textit{Political Liberalism}, “reasonable and rational are complementary ideas” that bolster each other. “Merely reasonable agents would have no ends of their own they wanted to advance by fair cooperation; merely rational agents lack a sense of justice and fail to recognize the independent validity of the claims of others.”\textsuperscript{22} In other words, both aspects of an agent are required: a person must be able to formulate individual concepts of the good as a rational agent,

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 223.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 225.
and as a reasonable citizen one is guided by social cooperation and “insists that reciprocity should hold [the public sphere] so that each benefits along with others.”23 In short, the reasonable is the part of the moral sensibility that “connects with the idea of fair cooperation,”24 whereas the rational is the part that forms principles on its own (i.e., individually); the public, here, is identified with the reasonable and the nonpublic with the rational - though neither is inherently altruistic nor egotistical.25

Rawls uses his idea of a veil of ignorance in order to exemplify the idea of reasonableness. Behind a veil of ignorance,26 we reach an “original position” wherein “parties are not allowed to know their social position,” which means “the original position must abstract from and not be affected by the contingencies of the social world…”27 In other words, our “nonpublic identity,” which represents private, rational goods for Rawls, is representative of “citizens in their personal affairs” and includes how citizens “view themselves from certain religious, philosophical, and moral convictions, or from certain enduring attachments and loyalties.”28 However, personal attachments found in the private sphere “may and often change over time,” whereas “[t]here is no change in our public or political identity.” The cooperative desideratum guiding reasonableness, Rawls suggests, can found a public agreement that can

23 Ibid., 50.
24 Ibid., 51.
25 As Rawls explains, it is a mistake to think that he is claiming that the rational is self-serving or that the reasonable is altruistic. He explains in Political Liberalism (pg. 51) that “rational agents” aren’t “self-interested: that is, their interests are not always interests in benefits to themselves. Ever interest is an interest of a self (agent), but not every interest is in benefits to the self that has it. Indeed, rational agents may have all kinds of affections for persons and attachments to communities and places, including love of country and of nature; and they may select and order their ends in various ways.” Regarding the reasonable, he says in the same work (pg. 54) that “the reasonable (with its idea of reciprocity) is not the altruistic (the impartial acting solely for the interests of others) nor is it the concern for self…This reasonable society is neither a society of saints nor a society of the self-centered.”
28 Ibid., 241.
stand the test of time.²⁹ Rawls therefore argues that a legitimate account of politics must confine itself to the realm of reasonable discourse, the public sphere, and bracket our private (i.e., “nonpublic”) motives and interests. Public agreement can only be established by the one common relationship that can produce a consensus – public reason.

Rawls’ account of the public sphere, in which reasonable discourse is considered the political relationship *par excellence*, is not wholly a new idea, nor one originating in contract theory. As Hannah Arendt explains in her classic work, *The Human Condition*, we can see a linguistic account of politics in ancient Greece. While a linguistic public sphere is arguably distinct from a public sphere grounded in consensus,³⁰ we can at least understand how the idea of a linguistic public sphere is a primary condition of any form of politics. That is, language is the vehicle of politics, no matter the *telos* of a specific political discourse (consensus, deception, or domination). Arendt argues that Aristotle’s politics helps us to understand the basic linguistic element of politics in that

Aristotle’s definition of man as *zoon politikon* was not only unrelated and even opposed to the natural association experienced in house life; it can be fully understood only if one adds his second famous definition of man as a *zoon logon ekhon* (‘a living being capable of speech’)…Aristotle meant neither to define man in general nor to indicate man’s highest capacity, which to him was not *logos*, that is, not speech or reason, but *nous*, the capacity of contemplation…In his two most famous definitions, Aristotle only formulated the current opinion of the *polis* about man and the political way of life, and according to this opinion, everybody outside the *polis* – slaves and barbarians – was *aneu logou*, deprived, of course, not of the faculty of speech, but of a way of life in which speech and only speech make sense and where the central concern of all citizens was to talk with each other.³¹

Arendt’s reading of the Greeks distinguishes a public and private sphere largely based on the distinction between household (*oikia*) and city (*polis*). Public persons are those who have

²⁹ Ibid., 242.
³⁰ Machiavelli, for instance, argues for a type of linguistic politics that is often deceptive. However, this could still be claimed to be ‘rational’ if we understand the term in a general way – something that is logical or makes sense given one’s goals. Hence, if we view politics as primarily about gaining and retaining power, then it is quite rational to claim that you will often have to deceive people (linguistically) in order to succeed in the activity of politics. See, for instance, Machiavelli’s conversation on whether a prince should be fear or loved: *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), chapter seventeen.
“speech” and whose life’s work is contemplation, whereas there are entire segments of society (for instance, “slaves and barbarians”) who are hidden, away from the public sphere, as people who only belong to “private” relationships. In Aristotle’s traditional account, private individuals are excluded from the polis because their vita activa is related to sustaining bodies in the household (food, sex, etc.), not public discourse with others. As I discuss next, Arendt claims that traditional philosophical accounts of the public sphere have been tempted to hide bodily relationships from public view by relegating such relationships to the private affairs of individuals. Similarly, I will suggest that ecological relationships tend to have the same fate, and we can understand why a concept of the public (i.e., political) sphere should be wary of limiting its conception to public agreement, speech, and other exclusive conceptions of public concerns. The political sphere, in other words, surely involves reasonable discourse, but other relationships (such as those involved in sustaining the body) are also of a primary importance.

As Arendt notes, the Greek conception of the household involves a ruler and ruled relationship – where patriarchs order and govern the family – and in this concept of the household is a private sphere that has a “prepolitical force” (i.e., the head of the household). That is, “government and power” arises “in the private rather than the public sphere” for the Greeks, because the family represents the first institution that organizes humanity’s natural social bonds.  

While the organization of the household is considered a “prepolitical force” it is still distinguished from a public sphere, the polis, because “[the polis] knew only ‘equals,’ whereas the household was the center of the strictest inequality.” Arendt explains that the polis involved a reciprocal relationship between freedom and equality. One belonged to the polis only insofar as one was free from being an authority (a ruler) and having to take orders from others (being

\[\text{32 Ibid., 32.}\]
\[\text{33 Ibid.}\]
ruled). However, freedom from ruling and being ruled (i.e., freedom from relationships of inequality) could only be attained when one was with equals outside of household life. In the household, no one was thought to be with peers: one was either the head who ordered subordinates (women, children or slaves), or one was a subordinate whose life was ordered by someone else. In short, Arendt explains that the public/private distinction in Greek thought created a concept of the public sphere that “meant to live among and to have to deal only with one’s peers, and it presupposed the existence of ‘unequals’ who, as a matter of fact, were always the majority of the population in a city-state.”

Arendt challenges the public/private distinction founded by the Greeks and influential throughout modernity due to its exclusion of bodily relationships and the majority of people (considered private citizens) who care for the bodily needs of others. Arendt explains that when considered “from the viewpoint of privacy rather than the body politic” – that is, from the view of the majority of lives who are not able to take part in the polis – we can understand how the private/public distinction is actually a “distinction between things that should be shown and things that should be hidden.” From ancient Greece to today,

it has always been the bodily part of human existence that needed to be hidden in privacy, all things connected with the necessity of the life process itself, which prior to the modern age comprehended all activities serving the subsistence of the individual and the survival of the species. Hidden away were the laborers who ‘with their bodies minister to the [bodily] needs of life,’ and the women who with their bodies guarantee the physical survival of the species. Women and slaves belonged to the same category and were hidden away not only because they were somebody else’s property but because their life was ‘laborious,’ devoted to bodily functions.

Arendt’s own account of the public sphere can help us understand why she takes issue with a

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34 Ibid.
35 In chapter two of The Human Condition, Arendt explains the historical nature of this distinction, especially how the idea evolved from ancient to modern conceptions. She does think, however, that the “modern age emancipated the working classes and [women],” which has given us over to an age that doesn’t hide “bodily functions.” See pg. 73. For a very thorough overview of gender and exclusion in modern political thought, see Nancy J. Hirschmann, Gender, Class, and Freedom in Modern Political Theory (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
36 Arendt, Human Condition, 72.
37 Ibid.
sphere of human existence that is, publicly, neither heard from nor seen. Arendt’s idea of the 
public sphere is primarily grounded by her concept of “action,” which designates a form of 
articulation and expression that she refers to as both speech and action. Arendt’s prescribed view 
of the public sphere, unlike Rawls’, does not have consensus-building as its goal, and doesn’t 
equate public discourse with consensus. Nor does Arendt claim that speech and action always 
manifest themselves grammatically. In short, she develops an idea of the political sphere that is 
highly contentious, and does not limit it to goods that can be universally agreed upon. 38 
However, what is even more important, for my purposes, is Arendt’s suggestion that the 
traditional view of the public sphere, which is similar to Rawls’ understanding, makes bodily 
relationships a private, nonpublic matter.

Arendt explains her view of the public sphere and her corresponding idea of action in 
chapter five of The Human Condition. Arendt’s view of the public sphere is a somewhat 
linguistic conception, but it is distinct from a standard deliberative accounts. Arendt does admit, 
in a passage relating the ancient Greek polis to her view, that “the political realm rises directly 
out of acting together, the ‘sharing of word and deed’,,” and thus “[w]henever people gather 
together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever.” 39 Arendt is 
careful to speak of the public sphere as a contingent space, because it involves some measure of 
human distinction. While language is something that unites all people in common, the ability to 
express and distinguish oneself with language only occurs in certain contexts. By the word 
“action,” Arendt means the ability to distinguish oneself as an individual, which requires a 
context of a human community, a place where it is possible for one to be seen and heard. “In

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38 It is worth noting, however, that Arendt does not condone a politics of deception. Even though she does not think 
politics needs to aim at consensus, she still holds that the political sphere is grounded in trust and the willingness to 
forgive and be forgiven. This is her concept of political power, which is distinguished from violence, force and 
strength. Cf. §28 and §33-34 of Human Condition.
39 Ibid., 198-99.
acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice.”  

Hence, the public sphere, simply put, appears whenever people are in a communicative relationship with other humans that allows for each person to distinguish him or herself and be heard – somehow, someway.

However, although it seems like Arendt’s view of the public sphere is limited to linguistic speech, the public sphere, for her, does not always rely on spoken language because, as Arendt suggests, even the sans-culotte worn by labor workers in the late 1700s allowed these workers to ‘appear’ in the public sphere – i.e., distinguish themselves (and therefore “act”) by way of an article of clothing.  

The focus, then, of Arendt’s public sphere, is being able to belong to human community, which means that one lives in a context in which one can take action of some kind, linguistically or even through such measures as clothing. Totalitarianism and statelessness, as Arendt addresses in her other work, are therefore contexts in which people are wrested from the public realm, since they are deprived of a public. It is the active denial of the public realm that makes these conditions dehumanizing: “[a] life without speech and action…is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men.” In sum, Arendt’s public sphere, contra Rawls’s account, is importantly not a space that seeks consensus, nor is it one in which we must keep our nonpublic lives hidden. The public sphere is precisely known by its plurality, and to exclude different, competing conceptions of the good would, according to Arendt, keep individuals from truly appearing and distinguishing

40 Ibid., 179.  
41 Ibid., 218.  
42 See, Hannah Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism (Cleveland: Meridian, 1958), chapter nine.  
43 Arendt, The Human Condition, 176.
themselves in public with others. While Rawls’ public sphere is by no means a totalitarian politics, under Arendt’s conception it constitutes an unjustified degree of exclusion, since it greatly restricts what speech and action truly gets political attention.

The critique of the contractarian public sphere that Arendt’s view implies is important because it challenges the lack of political significance it affords so-called private concerns and individuals. Arendt’s theory suggests that any type of politics that requires such restrictions on the public sphere is itself problematic, insofar as its concept of governance does not allow for people to realize their proper human political community in its full sense. This conversation is important for my argument about an ecological political sphere primarily because of Arendt’s insight about the hidden quality of the private sphere, and her suspicion of any theory of politics that actively brackets key aspects of human relationships from the public realm, especially those that are significant, primary ways in which we understand ourselves. Though Rawls’s concept of the public sphere does have many egalitarian measures that even Arendt would be in favor of, it does continue the tradition of keeping private concerns hidden from the public realm. As Iris Marion Young argues, there are good reasons to think “the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer” is “not only because a tyrannical power coerces them, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society.” Even though a reasonable public sphere like Rawls’ can provide significant procedural and institutional forms of justice, it often overlooks injustices whose “causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules.” Young calls these causes “structural oppression” because they are “a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market

mechanisms – in short, the normal practices of everyday life.”

Structural oppressions, in other words, are often hidden from plain view and are not the result of reasonable, procedural decision-making; they therefore challenge the idea that a full description of justice can be accounted for by a public sphere that is based on a reasonable conception formulated behind a veil of ignorance. Young’s discussion of structural oppression thus highlights her insistence that we engage non-ideal circumstances, contrary to Rawls’ insistence that we confine an analysis of justice to ideal theory. For, these structural injustices are a part of the nonpublic self (to use Rawls’ term); the self insofar as it belongs to social groups that “constitute individuals.” While social groups don’t fully determine any individual, what traditional contract theory fails to notice is that “[a] person’s particular sense of history, affinity, and separateness, even the mode of reasoning, evaluating, and expressing feeling, are constituted partly by her or his group affinities.” Young suggests, in short, that a public sphere that is limited to ideal theory and universality tends to exclude a wide range of relationships that are often unique to groups and non-ideal – that is, they are circumstances that are not universal nor shared by all rational people. These specific group affiliations and identities are highly heterogeneous (as are the oppression that often greets them), and since many experience injustices due to their group identities, they represent nonpublic concerns that greatly shape how people live their lives. Thus, they deserve, as Young insists, to be called political and understood as oppressive. Young’s notion of structural oppression, like Arendt’s concept of action, gives us another good reason to think of the political sphere as multi-dimensional. Young, in fact, goes beyond Arendt in claiming that we even ought to understand relationships that often function at

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid., 45.
47 Young’s notion of group identity and oppression are both explained as heterogeneous and fluid. That is, group identities often change and the types of oppression follow suit. See pgs.46-48 and her discussion about applying the criteria of the “five faces of oppression” found on pgs. 63-65.
the unconscious level as worthy of political status.

The argument I begin to develop in this chapter can be conceptualized similarly. Our ecological relationships should rightly be considered political, even though it is generally assumed that they are excluded because the political sphere is strictly a human sphere or a sphere of reasonable deliberation. Arendt’s insight that there is an historical trend of privatizing the body and relationships that have to do with our biological survival helps to explain how ecological relationships are usually regarded. However, what even Arendt misses is that the tradition of making bodily relationships private and hidden extends to our relationships with nonhumans. Although we find ourselves in a world and living human lives that at each turn depend on those nonhumans that exist alongside and with us, these relationships are in serious ways still hidden from the public sphere, since the majority of our governing bodies (and environmental political theories) continue to limit this sphere to human agents and the pursuit of universal criteria that these agents hold in common with each other.

Hence, the public and private sphere distinction is important for our purposes when we consider the criticism it has received. What criticisms like Young’s and Arendt’s help to illuminate is that an adequate theory of politics and the public sphere must make it possible to consider things other than reasonable, universal concerns as political. This sort of criticism has been offered against contractarian conceptions of the political sphere from numerous critical enterprises. With such critics, I too want to argue that politics is an activity that governs what is common, but that our primary commonality is not always reducible to human reason. Reason is surely a very significant commonality that should always be considered. However, social realities like gender, race, and class form considerable differences (to say the least), and they

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suggest epistemological hurdles that problematize a simplistic thought experiment like the veil of ignorance, as Young has pointed out.\textsuperscript{49} Similarly, I wish to argue that the ecological relationships we share with the nonhuman world are inherently political today, and our inability to recognize the political import of these relationships currently keeps us from developing policies that are crucial to sustaining our body politics.

I do not wish, however, to confuse the plight of nonhumans with past social justice movements, as many authors in environmental thought attempt to do.\textsuperscript{50} These authors defend the idea that nonhumans deserve consideration because many minority groups were given political and moral recognition for capacities that nonhumans (especially animals) also have. Rather than discussing the capabilities of nonhumans in relation to moral and political human agents, what I am pointing out is that we can identify a sphere of political relationships, just as Young identifies a series of relationships that can be called ‘structural oppression.’ These relationships concern interests that are common among humans as well as nonhumans. The ecological sphere is therefore a category of political relationships that represent a series of interests that shape the lives of humans and nonhumans. A consistent understanding of politics, especially one that aims to preserve mutual interests in light of a multitude of human difference, needs to account for the entrenched and vital role these relationships play in our world today.

\textbf{Locke’s provisos: toward a conception of an ecological political sphere}

While politics as sustainability continues to be an important motif in the twentieth century, it is much more difficult to understand how the political understanding of sustainability could ever be accompanied by an ecological dimension – that is, it is difficult without

\textsuperscript{49} For instance, Young, \textit{Justice and the Politics of Difference}, 101-107.

equivocating when one uses the word sustainability. When the term sustainability is used today, it is most often explicitly connected with ecological and environmental concerns – that is, relationships between humans and nonhuman beings and environments. Thus far, however, all we have seen is a concept of politics’ activity as sustaining and preserving human relationships and interests. Hence, one would be justified in worrying that I am equivocating by connecting politics with sustainability, since the term sustainability is typically an ecological concept. For instance, one could respond by saying the following: sure, politics aims to preserve a social order, but this doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with nonhumans; nonhumans do not deliberate on legislation, nor do they contest sovereignty in order to be represented within a polis. In short, they are not active participants of politics.

As a matter of practicality, it is therefore understandable why most theorists want to limit the activity of politics to human concerns. However, I suggest that a more comprehensive account of political sustainability needs to include 1) nonhumans as an essential aspect of the political sphere, and thus we need to develop 2) a politicized concept of ecological sustainability (or, if the reverse is preferred, an ecological concept of the sustainability desideratum found in modern and contemporary theories of politics). In this section, I suggest that both (1) and (2) can actually be addressed, and we can begin developing the idea of an ecological political sphere, by a critical reassessment of modern articulations of the political sphere. Due to space limitations, I will only focus on the work of John Locke; however, it is important to note that Karl Marx’s political theory is considered by many commentators to have an explicit ecological message.

51 I have also decided to focus on Locke for practical and theoretical reasons. Practically speaking, a majority of political systems today, especially those that are interested nonhuman rights and those that find such rights to be implausible, are using constitutional democratic forms of government that resemble Locke’s political system. Theoretically, an environmental reading of Locke’s theory is less explicit, especially one that would support an ecological political sphere. Therefore, I think that showing how Locke’s theory supports an ecological political sphere has more practical possibilities, and although several authors have discussed ideas of sustainability in Locke
A. Locke’s provisos on property

In chapter one I considered how factory farming provided an example of a common relationship that we have good reasons to take as a serious, political concern, even though the common interest at stake was decidedly ecological. I argued that the entrenched network of relationships should be considered political because they shape, organize, and manage the day-to-day lives of many humans, globally. Similarly, I think we find the concept of a human and nonhuman network implied in Locke’s philosophy: an ecological framework is crucial to Locke’s understanding of the provisos of property, which are grounded in his understanding of the law of nature. Yet, since the provisos follow from the law of nature, they are principles that carry over to political society and designate a human and nonhuman relationship that is a primary motivation for the activity of politics. In short, nonhumans are highly significant entities in Locke’s account of politics. Nonhumans are important political motivators, both due to their relationship with human individuals, as well as the complications they present for human interactions. In the conversation that follows, I show why we should not think of an ecological political sphere as totally alien to the project of contract theory.

In chapter five of the Second Treatise, Locke explains his labor theory of property. It is his theory of property, in addition to the need for an impartial executive power, that necessitates a civil society (a commonwealth, for Locke). In both property and the case of an impartial judge, the law of nature, which is described by Locke as a “Law of reason” (2T: §30), establishes rational restrictions. These laws are not overcome or cast off in civil society; rather, they are

(mentioned below), the political potential has yet to be fully developed. It is my goal to develop the political implications of Locke’s environmentalism.

fundamental principles that Locke thinks any rational human can comprehend and should follow. As James Tully explains, the laws of nature play a very important role for Locke’s political theory in general: they “provide the objective foundation for Locke’s theory of natural rights.”

What is interesting about the proviso principles that also follow from the law of nature, similar to natural rights, is that they do not encourage an individualistic ethos. That is, where natural rights assume a natural community (as discussed in section one) the provisos demonstrate a political ecology – a theory of social and political relationships that presupposes sustainability for humans and nonhumans. In short, nowhere in Locke’s account do we find an individualistic ethos that simply aims to protect and preserve individual people. His theory aims at the good of humankind as a whole, which involves an implicit concern for nonhumans now and in the future, due to the fundamental relationship that humans share with their nonhuman neighbors.

We can glean this theory of human and nonhuman political sustainability from the restrictions that are placed on human conduct via the two laws of nature: the preservation of humankind and the preservation of society with others. People are seen as naturally free and equal in Locke’s theory, but beyond this, he also assumes the natural reasonability of people and the laws of nature that are a rational guide for humanity’s natural and political state. As he states in 2T: §8, individuals do not have “Absolute or Arbitrary Power” over one another, but rather even in the state of nature “calm reason and conscience dictates, what is proportionate to his Transgression, which is so much as may serve for Reparation and Restraint.” In fact, we do not get an account of unrestricted freedom in Locke’s state of nature, nor do we get a chaotic and brutish view of life. Instead, the law of nature puts all people, as Tully comments, “under an

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54 For a thorough overview of these two laws of nature throughout Locke’s work, see Tully, *Discourse on Property*, chapter two.
obligation to work for the preservation of others whenever this does not entail his own destruction. Natural law ‘harmonizes’ human activity in such a way that the whole human community is taken into account and provided for.” In short, the natural human condition in Locke’s theory is one that is greatly concerned with the preservation of a natural human community, which follows from the dictates of reason and establishes natural duties.

In Locke’s theory, people are restricted, negatively, from anything that would “harm another in his life, liberty, or possessions” (2T: §6), and also must actively look after the public good. Preserving the common good follows from the law of nature, as a principle of reason itself (given by God, according to Locke), which serves as an active obligation for human beings no matter their condition (i.e., natural or political). As Locke explains in 2T: §131, there are clear, rational restrictions on power in civil society: the “Legislative constituted by [society], can never be suppos’d to extend farther than the common good,” and all judicial activities are “to be directed to no other end, but the Peace, Safety, and publick good of the people.” In 2T: §135 Locke expands on what he means by “publick good.” A power that looks after the public good “can never have a right to destroy, enslave, or designedly to impoverish the Subjects.” In these passages, Locke defends the idea that the move to a political society is not one that supports rampant individualism and individual goods. In fact, in the same passage just quoted, he makes this quite explicit: “The Obligations of the Law of Nature, cease not in Society, but only in many Cases are drawn closer, and have by Humane Laws known Penalties annexed to them, to inforce their observation.” Importantly for my argument, the obligations from natural law also include

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55 Ibid., 45-47.
56 Tully, in Discourse on Property, also explains, building on the insights of MacIntyre, how the connection between rational law of nature and human preservation is an aspect of Locke’s account that is indebted to the thought of Medieval natural law theorists like Aquinas. As he explains on pg. 47, “The belief that we incline natural law by our rational nature is an essential convention of rationalist theory of natural law. It stems from Aquinas’ original presentation and analysis of self-preservation as the first law of nature (ST: I. II.94.2; cf. MacIntyre, 1974: pp. 117-18).” Furthermore, Tully (pg. 45) actually sees the law of nature as creating positive obligations and rights.
important provisos regarding the relationships humans have with nonhumans. The provisos of property that follow from the law of nature include strictures against waste. The provisos, as well as the general protection of life and property, are codified and have a firmer basis in civil society (i.e., “are drawn closer”) because they are now protected by legislation. Thus, the idea of political sustainability that is implied in Locke’s politics seeks to preserve human and nonhuman relationships even in political society. His ecological view of political sustainability will become clearer if we consider his provisos in more detail.

Locke explains that we gain a right to things (i.e., we have a property in something, in Locke’s terminology), as long as we don’t violate the two provisos that are also essential aspects of the law of nature: that there “is enough, and as good left in common for others” (2T: §27), (this is called the “sufficiency condition” by some commentators57) and, secondly, that people only enjoy property “[a]s much as any one can make use of to any advantage of life before it spoils; so much he may by his labor fix a Property in. Whatever is beyond this, is more than his share, and belongs to others. Nothing was made by God for Man to spoil or destroy” (2T: §31). To violate these principles is to act irrationally, according to Locke, insofar as it would constitute a violation of the law of nature. Hence, Locke’s political ecology permits the use and appropriation of the nonhuman world, but it demands that people have sustainable relationships with the nonhuman world. That is, waste and complete destruction are unjustifiable, but this does not mean use (and in many cases, the death of nonhuman entities) is prohibited.

As Tully suggests,58 violating a provisos is understood as a “use-right” abuse in Locke. Tully develops this account of the provisos by considering 2T: §37 of the Second Treatise, in

which Locke states that one who violates a proviso “offended against the common law of Nature, and was liable to be punished; he invaded his neighbor’s share, for he had no right, farther than his own use.” If I can only work five acres of land, then anything outside of the five acres I work is not my property. As Locke states, “[a]s much Land as a man tills, plants, improves, cultivate, and can use the product of, so much is his property” (2T: §32, emphasis added). In this sense, even if I can cultivate five acres, I can only have as property the items from these five acres that I can actually consume - the rest is not my property. Property as understood in its natural condition is, thus, not fixed in any real sense and always falls subject to our obligations to follow the provisos of waste and sustainability. Property has measures to follow (2T: §36) and is a constant endeavor that involves what, within a property’s lifespan, I am able to appropriate and use. In this sense, we can lose property and can have no essential right to it – fundamentally, it is common to all outside of political obligation. If last year I worked ten acres of land, but now I am injured and can only work five of those acres, it is not unjust for someone else to be able to take over (as their own) the five acres I can no longer cultivate (i.e., there is no inherent, fixed property). In other words, as Steve Daskal explains, the provisos are just as much about others’ labor as they are about my use. Locke’s provisos keep me from “[denying] others the opportunity to spend their labor productively…being denied all (or sufficiently many) opportunities to spend one’s labor productively does constitute a significant harm.”

A popular reading of Locke assumes that once we move into civil society (a commonwealth) there is no longer a concern for a sustainable relationship between humans and nonhumans. That is, the provisos only relate to life outside of political obligation, and Locke’s

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proper political theory is only concerned with sustaining human interests. The creation of ‘fixed’ property rights (i.e., private property), according to this reading, negates the rational provisos and allows for unlimited accumulation as long as one follows the legislations agreed upon when forming a commonwealth. Locke seems to support such a view. For Locke, people are driven to society for security – to be vested in a specific authority. The best manner to go about this, and for all to continue to have as much liberty as possible, is to form a civil society wherein legislative and executive forces are created – laws and penal systems – to which each person agrees. Locke says that people will simply be united “for the mutual Preservation of their Lives, Liberties and Estates, which I call by the general Name, Property” (2T: §123). Law will be the tie that binds society, and it will lead to “the preservation of the Society, and (as far as will consist with the public good) of every person in it” (2T: §134).

However, as Susan P. Libell suggests, when we consider the provisos, Locke actually gives us a theory of liberalism that supports many environmentalists’ concerns. If we seek a theory of property that both protects the rights of individuals and the community and defines property in a way that makes it possible to maintain an ecological balance that sustains the norms of liberal community...[then]...Lockean liberalism can be revised to address many of these goals...A Lockean conception of the relationships between the individual and the rest of humankind requires that individuals be able to act in their own self-interest in order to preserve themselves, but Locke also insists that the individual can and should have an interest in the rest of humankind. This assumption about human nature and obligation should affect our understanding of duties towards each other, toward the needy, and toward the public at large. It also affects the extent to which we understand state actions (such as environmental regulations) not as impositions on our natural rights and choices, but as appropriate protection of the public good and of conditions of fairness.

Several authors have done an excellent job explaining these traditional accounts and why a closer look at the provisos should give us reason to doubt that Locke would agree that we can disregard nonhumans when we move from the state of nature to a political society. For instance, Kathleen M. Squadrito criticizes Macpherson on this issue while Shrader-Freehette critiques a number of traditional readings, which includes Macpherson, Strauss, and even Squadrito. Furthermore, Rebecca Judge critiques “Neo-Lockeans” for similar reasons, and includes Nozick in this group of theorists. See Kathleen M. Squadrito, “Locke’s Dominion,” Environmental Ethics 1 (1979): 255-262; Kristin Shrader-Freehette, “Locke and Limits on Land Ownership,” Journal of the History of Ideas 54 (1993): 201-219 and n21 for an extensive list of authors she critiques; Rebecca Judge, “Restoring the Commons: Toward a New Interpretation of Locke’s Theory of Property,” Land Economics 78 (2002): 331-338.

The provisos – as limiting principles that follow from the laws of nature for Locke – aim to sustain the good of everyone no matter the condition in question, natural or political. Remembering what was quoted from 2T: §37 above, a person who violates the proviso is violating the law of nature. Moreover, for Locke, the law of nature consists of principles that are always the basis of our social relationships. As Locke states plainly, “For so truly are a great part of the Municipal Laws of Countries, which are only so far right, as they are founded on the Law of Nature, by which they are to be regulated and interpreted” (2T: §12). Libell’s reading is insightful: the provisos do support a vision of liberalism and political sustainability that considers individual goods and the good of people to be integrally connected to sustaining nonhuman life. If Locke suggests that we violate natural, rational obligations by wasting and not leaving “enough and as good” for others, then not heeding this principle, for Locke, is a violation of a basic material good that relates to the preservation of all humanity: the preservation and bodily good that is gained in our relationships with the nonhuman world.

Adding to Libell’s account, I think that acting reasonably, for Locke, demands moderation with regard to consumption (again, both in the state of nature and political society). In other words, implied in the provisos is that one acts irrationally when one’s relationships with the material, nonhuman world is excessive and beyond one’s needs. Or, as Locke says, when one is lead by the “Phansies and intricate Contrivances of Men, following contrary and hidden interests put into Words” one has not considered the law of nature and rational principles like the provisos that are “as intelligible and plain to a rational Creature, and a studier of that Law, as the positive Laws of Common-wealths, nay possibly plainer” (2T: §12). Supported here is a natural community that extends beyond human relationships and involves an ecological symbiosis between humans and nonhumans. For Locke, the rational, composed person and government –
those following the law of nature – would understand the material obligations as well as the
general immaterial value that restricts behavior, and would act (or create legislation) that aligns
with these obligations. Humans form a natural community, according to Locke, and thus rational
people understand that they have obligations to themselves as well as humankind as a whole.
Furthermore, since relationships with the nonhuman world shape human beings’ interactions and
the structures they build, and since the nonhuman is finite, one is obliged to sustain the
nonhuman in one’s pursuit of rational, ethical, and political action.\textsuperscript{62}

As we see in Locke’s conception of the provisos of property, there is indeed significant
consideration that must be given to nonhuman beings. They are not simply dispensable, nor are
people to consume them at will: their spoil and waste is a general violation of reason. Locke
condemns waste because it takes away from others, but he even makes a stronger case than
simply a concern for other humans. For Locke, waste is a \textit{prima facie} moral ill due to his
theological commitments: “Nothing was made by God for Man to spoil or destroy” (2T: §31). In
other words, even though it is true that a concern for others guides Locke’s concern for
nonhumans and their sustainability, he also thinks that all parts of environment, as God’s
creation, deserves respect due to its divine origin.\textsuperscript{63} The sustainability sought by politics is thus
two-fold. It 1) seeks to sustain the material and immaterial values of all humankind (life, liberty,
property), but it also 2) aims to sustain the material world as a thing of value due to its origin
(theological) and as a good shared by humans. Thus, the provisos of property suggest a view of

\textsuperscript{62} Rapaczynski claims (pg. 117) that in Locke’s theory of property we can see an “ethics of production” that
represents “an attempt to fuse the discourse of interests with the discourse of moral action…” For his full account of
Locke’s “ethics of production,” see 171-176 and the entirety of chapter four.

\textsuperscript{63} Several authors do an excellent job discussing the theological aspect of Locke’s theory of natural law and politics.
Most of Dunn’s historical look at Locke’s \textit{Two Treatises} involves his theological commitments, but especially
useful is chapter eight. See John Dunn, \textit{The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of the ‘Two Treatises of Government’} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1995. Also consider Ruth W.
Grant, \textit{John Locke’s Liberalism} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 38-39; Sreenivasan, 69-81; Tully,
\textit{Discourse on Property}, 35-38.
political sustainability that is more developed than a crude anthropocentrism or a theory that would promote the unqualified or unrestricted use of nonhumans (even when we are concerned with private property). Indeed, due to Locke’s theological commitments, he supports a reflective interaction with nonhumans. If one is not able to use a nonhuman being before it spoils, or if one’s use is so excessive that it hinders the public good, one’s actions are not justified according to Locke. Hence, Locke’s political theory implicitly aspires to protects human and nonhuman ecological relationships (even if it does not fully develop an analysis of how to do so), since the provisos are established by the law of nature and greatly affect the ways in which humans live and order their lives (e.g., property).

One could obviously argue that because a great deal of Locke’s theory rests on theological commitments – that nothing was made by God that should spoil – these commitments cannot ground politics in a contemporary liberal state. Therefore, one could conclude that we lose the foundation of his argument – that there are basic rational principles that support provisos of sustainability for human and nonhuman relationships. However, I think that we can still support Locke’s basic claims even if we let go of his theological commitments. Building on Val Plumwood’s idea of “ecological rationality,” I argue below that a reasonable view of political preservation should still consider Locke’s provisos to stand, even without grounding the rationality of preservation on claims about the origins of humans and nonhumans. We can, I argue, have a Lockean account of preservation that supports an ecological political sphere and is not built upon a specific religious ethos or theology. Rather, we can base this understanding of sustainability on relationships that are, to use Rawls’ phrase, political, not metaphysical. However, I think the way in which we use the term ‘political’ is even more basic than what Rawls suggests. It involves, as I’ve suggested in section one, any type of relationships that
fundamentally shapes and organizes one’s life, which means it does not have to be limited to public agreement, nor to relationships comprised solely of human agents. In this way, I think that we should seek to make visible the ecological relationships that are typically hidden from the public sphere or lack formal political status.

B. Rethinking Locke’s political sustainability: from theological to ecological rationality

In *Environmental Culture*, Val Plumwood develops a conception of “ecological rationality” that can bolster Locke’s theory of the provisos and his view of political preservation, without having recourse to a theological law of nature. Plumwood’s idea is a holistic view of rationality, insofar as she claims that rational thought needs to include the broadest possible view of a subject’s context and the consequences of their actions. In her view, many popular political and economic accounts of rationality are unpersuasive, due to their lack of concern for context and outcomes of thought and action. Plumwood uses the example of contemporary views of commodity relationships in order to make her point. In standard economic and political accounts, “[o]ur own species appears in this system as ‘outside nature,’ as essentially intellectual beings, ‘rational choosers’ calculating maximum satisfaction and not essentially reliant on the earth, beings whose basic ecological demands have no more legitimacy than any other desire, however trivial.” When we do hear about other species in this model, they are only presented in a “commodified form,” and as such “they are food for the insatiable appetites of the free market, exchangeable and tradeable ‘things’ that create no restraint or impose no limits, but are simply available for human use, a use divorced from respect.” In fact, Plumwood suggests that our “global economic systems of property formation” consider this understanding of commodities to be rational and have thus produced an “ethics-free market” that “is as much a hazard as a

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65 Ibid., 27.
66 Ibid.
rudderless engine.” Yet, since their outcomes influence and shape the lives of so many people around the globe, Plumwood argues that we need to have a rationality that considers “care, compassion, and personal relationships,” instead of having a “public and economic spheres [that] are increasingly occupied by narrow egoism.”67 The popular conception of rationality, which governs a great deal of our political realities, has, according to Plumwood, an account of rationality that few, other than those gaining profits from such a view, would find compelling.

Plumwood prescribes “ecological rationality” as a concept that can help alter many of our damaging environmental practices, since, for her, the form of rationality that prevails in Western societies, which guides our thinking, is the ultimate cause of environmental degradation.68 She describes ecological rationality, and distinguishes it from popular economic and political rationality, in a passage that is illuminating and worth considering in its entirety:

How does ecological rationality relate to rationalism and to other forms of rationality? As there are different forms of rationality, so there are different failures of rationality. Ecological rationality includes that higher-order form of critical, prudential self-critical reason which scrutinizes the match or fit between an agent’s choices, actions and effects and that agent’s overall desires, interests and objectives as they require certain ecological conditions for their fulfillment. Initially such an inquiry might aim at developing a balance between ecologically destructive capacities and corrective capacities, although a more sensible and ambitious objective would aim at phasing out destructive capacities and evolving a sympathetic partnership or communicative relationship with nature. A civilization which lacks or underdevelops ecological rationality, which sets in motion massive processes of biospheric and ecological degradation which it cannot respond to or correct, does not match its actions to the survival aims it may be assumed to have. Unless it has for good reasons chosen a path of self-extinction, its actions display a rationality failure in the ecological area in the same way that the actions of someone in the grip of a terminal addiction may be thought of as displaying a rationality failure, as contrary to their overall wishes and well-being.69

In short, Plumwood thinks that dominant frameworks in economic and political thought display underdeveloped ecological rationalities, especially in their commodification of nonhumans. For Plumwood, these dominant forms of rationality fail because they contradict the survival goals present in contemporary contract as well as the modern theories we have considered above. The

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67 Ibid., 36.
68 In her view, our ecological crisis is caused by a failure of reason and culture. See chapter one of Environmental Culture, especially pages 13-16.
69 Ibid., 68-69.
ecological trajectory of these frameworks leads us toward “self-extinction,” even though it is reasonable to assume that they do not consciously endorse self-destructive goals. In short, for Plumwood, a theory that doesn’t foreground sustainable relationships between human and nonhuman incorporates a flawed and truncated conception of rationality, because it does not successfully connect its presuppositions (i.e., preserving life) with its theoretical commitments and their practical results.

Plumwood’s account of ecological rationality is a concept that can be used in support of Locke’s provisos, insofar as it aims to encourage more consistency between our activities and their underlining ideals and assumptions. What we see in Locke’s theory is a politics that protects security and peace by juridical means. However, as discussed above, his provisos are also seen as principles that attempt to sustain and preserve the common ecological good, insofar as the provisos support sustainable ecological relationships. Locke therefore aims to create a politics (an activity) that consistently looks after the peace and sustainability of human relationships and ecological relationships, the two not being mutually exclusive. In other words, Locke’s provisos are key elements of his politics’ rationality, and though he bases them on theological principles, we can easily see how the theological commitments are not necessary requirements. His provisos can just as easily be understood as an ecological form of rationality that mirrors a conception like Plumwood’s: Locke, like Plumwood, considers consistency of thought to necessarily include an ecological dimension.

We can also connect Locke’s provisos to Plumwood’s understanding of ecological rationality if we consider the example of factory farming that I presented in chapter one. The web of harms I considered there can be better addressed by implementing an environmental framework like Locke or Plumwood’s. Locke’s provisos against excessive consumption and
waste support more holistic understandings of human and nonhuman relationships. They challenge the agent in question to realize her or himself within a more interrelated framework, and to realize that political relationships involve altering one’s relation with the nonhuman environment. Even if the activity of making a property happens in apparent physical isolation – e.g., a person cutting down a tree in the wilderness – Locke thinks it should always be understood as happening on a social and political stage. A person must always ask: Am I taking so much that I am not leaving as much and as good for others? Am I actually going to be able to use what I am taking and appropriating as my own property? In this way, Locke thinks that we must always try to synthesize our individual action within a framework that considers others – people and nonhumans. Nonhumans sustain our individual lives and therefore also sustain the lives of everyone else. Hence, we need to respect and care about how we go about relating to nonhumans. Locke’s view is therefore through a human political lens, but he sees our relations with nonhumans as a vital concern in determining just relationships with human beings. Whether our actions can be said to preserve the common good pivots on the way in which we treat the nonhuman world. In short, Locke thinks we must – if are to be fully rational – act in a manner that continually accounts for the context in which our acquisitions occur, and this involves intentional consideration of nonhuman entities and our relationships with them. I am arguing, in short, that Locke’s environmental intuition is a boon for a critical understanding of environmental politics. Locke by no means provides a radical environmentalism, but he does foreground legitimate politics as including a political ecology, something that is for the most part disregarded by the majority of the liberal traditions he inspired. Locke’s provisos underscore how human relationships (even those guided by liberal politics) are not merely built on humans engaging each other with intellectual capabilities like speech and contemplation; rather, even our
relationships with, and use of, the nonhuman environment is a political action that shapes and organizes the lives of other humans. For Locke, excessive environmental inequality (e.g., overexploiting resources, and monopolies on resources needed by all) breaks our “fiduciary trust,” just like being subjected to an arbitrary judge. Both activities violate the Law of Nature and corrupt natural social community; both discursive and environmental interests are mutual goods that, according to Locke, a just form of politics is required to protect.

Considering the provisos in this light, the ecological rationality that is a quintessential part of Locke’s view of political sustainability is evident, and we can imagine how his view could be applied to the factory farming scenarios we encounter today. By excessively farming and producing mass quantities of nonhumans, we might think we are looking after the common good (i.e., economically affordable meats and vegetables); but this suggestion is (using Plumwood’s language) a rationality failure. Such a view fails to consider how our actions create a massive network of detrimental impacts that harm the common good, and even fails to respect the negative duties that most would say we owe, at a minimum, other humans. The diseases and illnesses experienced by workers and local residents, the horrible living conditions for nonhumans, and the amounts of pollution these farms create, are hardly consistent with an understanding of politics that seeks to sustain a common good. The economic and political institutions that allow and perpetuate these actions do not appear to consider how their activities are consistent with or diverge from basic ecological principles that support common goods. Instead, as we saw in chapter one, the driving force of many such actions is competitiveness within the market. There appears to be little room for ethics and sustainability in the discussion. Hence, a very large and growing set of economic and political practices is abstracted from the

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larger, holistic context of their activities – human and nonhuman ecological relationships – in order to fulfill market demands. Factory farming implies the sacrifice of an ecological common good (biological well-being), in order to meet the challenges of the marketplace. According to Locke (and Plumwood), these activities run contrary to political sustainability: they are a violation of sustainability and reasonability, both of which have an ecological dimension. The sacrifice is also a violation of negative forms of liberty, insofar as there are direct connections to be made between the activities of these farms and harm to the well being of many local residents.71

Lastly, it is worth noting that a broader consideration of Locke’s work reveals an author who despises domination in any form – human or nonhuman. Kathleen M. Squadrito develops this argument well by drawing on lesser-known texts like Some Thoughts Concerning Education.72 Locke develops a position of “responsible stewardship” in Education, which “stresses man’s duties and obligations towards all creation.”73 Squadrito, quoting a passage in which Locke rebukes children who kill nonhuman entities for fun, explains that Locke sees any practice of domination as a product of human culture that should be despised. Locke says in Education that people should be taught, from the time of their birth, “to be tender to all sensible creatures, and to spoil or waste nothing at all,” and moreover, that we should be careful how we teach history because when we celebrate “conquerors, (who for the most part are but the great butchers of mankind),” we “farther mislead growing youths, who by this means come to think

71 For instance, if we consider John Stuart Mill’s standard definition of negative liberty, the harms associated with factory farms would surely be considered a violation of the local citizen’s liberty. As he says in chapter one of On Liberty, “If any one does an act harmful to others, there is prima facie case for publishing him, by law, or where legal penalties are not safely applicable, by general disapprobation…A person may cause evil to others not only by his actions but by his inaction, and in either case he is justly accountable to them for the injury.” See John Stuart Mill, On Liberty and The Subjection of Women (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 17.
73 Squadrito, 259.
slaughter the laudable business of mankind, and the most heroic of virtues.” Concern for nonhumans is therefore something that comes up in different texts by Locke, and it is reasonable to assume that he is not just concerned with preserving humans. As Squadrito suggests, “Locke does not accord animals rights, but does impose duties on humans concerning the treatment of animals.” From what I have argued about the provisos, it seems reasonable that these sorts of duties and claims about anti-domination would also extend to other nonhumans as well, especially those we seek to appropriate and form into a property.

The idea of sustaining the body politic is therefore fundamentally, for Locke, about sustaining life and the continuation of primary relationships that look after this end. Laws and property rights create social restrictions and allowances that sustain one dimension of the common good. For Locke, however, sustaining the body politic and the common good also involves our relations to and interactions with nonhuman beings. Politics’ sphere of relationships extends beyond human relationships. In his provisos, we see an implied understanding of ecological sphere that also must be consulted when politics considers its sphere of interests. In other words, I have argued in this chapter that political sustainability is not a project that can be abstracted from ecological questions and relationships. It is reasonable to believe that we can even ground an understanding of an ecological political sphere in classic liberal theories like Locke’s. Political preservation and sustainability, even for a theorist like Locke, is a concern that must seriously engage and consider the relationships we share with nonhumans.

One might argue that Locke’s political theory does not support an ecological political sphere because his conception of political commonality is limited by the (mostly) clear borders instituted by law and international relations, whereas the commonality we share with the

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74 Ibid.
75 Ibid., 260
nonhuman world does not have unequivocal borders. That is, an objection based on incongruity might suggest that nonhuman entities are actually shared by many different peoples and political communities, and that Locke has in mind an idea of commonality that is limited to specific (and separate) contractual communities. For example, imagine that two countries (A and B) have river X running through their countries. Countries A and B have separate constitutions that greatly differ, and river X flows from country A into B. Under Locke’s theory, countries A and B have two different political commonalities that are founded by their respective (and differing) constitutions. How does river X belong to a sense of commonality that is political if it isn’t bound by the same territorial borders that demarcate political communities A and B? The objection claims that these two senses of commonality are incongruous, and that the nonhuman world cannot, therefore, represent political commonality under contractarian politics.

In response, I argue that 1) not all nonhuman entities and ecological relationships are transnational and that 2) we can employ two separate senses of commonality (domestic and international) in order to address those nonhuman entities that are not restricted to a single country’s territorial borders. Firstly, not all nonhuman entities exist across territorial borders. For instance, the nonhuman animals farmed by industrial farms in the U.S. are located within the country’s borders. Therefore, any environmental similarities shared between these nonhuman animals and the workers and local residents are limited to a domestic setting. Additionally, while some rivers and waterways do extend from one country to the next, there are many that do not. Hence, in the case of a polluted waterway near a factory farm, it is easy to imagine that some of these may be rivers, streams, and lakes that are domestic or even merely regional. In short, I argue that the incongruity objection is not actually applicable to every nonhuman entity. There
are many environmental relationships we share with domestic nonhuman entities that can support
a commonality that is restricted to a demarcated and bounded territory.

Secondly, for transnational nonhuman entities (e.g., shared rivers like the Nile and the
Jordan) a contractarian account can support a view of international commonality. Two countries
can form international contracts that stipulate shared goods and interests that the separate
territories have in common and want to sustain jointly. Hence, it is not unreasonable to think that
there could be extended, transnational forms of political commonality that include nonhuman
entities like a river. If river X originates and is polluted in country A, the damages from this
pollution will harm citizens in both country A and country B. Hence, the two countries have a
transnational commonality even if the individual countries are harmed to different degrees by the
pollution. The shared ecological relationship that is created by polluted river X is enough to
suggest a transnational commonality that is political, since it compromises both country A and
country B’s abilities to sustain their citizens. Ecological commonalities can be international, and
similarly to a transnational concern for human rights, it is reasonable to infer that contemporary
contractual communities can build on Locke’s idea of commonality to include ecological
relationships that span territorial borders, in order to formulate a conception of transnational
ecological commonality that addresses nonhuman entities that are not merely domestic.

Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, I want to return, for a moment, to Arendt’s insight about the
hidden character of things belonging to the private sphere, and how this hiddenness corresponds
with an attempt to remove the body and our bodily needs from plain view. Arendt’s comment is
powerful because the subjects that have a hidden character are quite literally those that are the
most visible. As Arendt mentions, nonpublic persons actually made up the majority of people in
ancient Greece – children, women, and slaves. Therefore, we can only imagine that these people were the majority of persons one came across in the streets of the city. Hence, the idea that these people could be, publicly speaking, hidden, even though they were ubiquitous in the daily relationships, interchanges, and visual horizon of males that had public standing, makes salient the privileging and exclusionary nature of the traditional polis. Moreover, seen from the view of private subjects, the whole public affair surely appeared as an ironic and illogical spectacle: those who literally surrounded public people at every moment, and who provided for and sustained their bodily needs each day, were nowhere to be found in the public sphere. The most visible people suddenly vanished. How could a monumental disappearing act of this proportion not leave one questioning the legitimacy of the magician and his stage? Illusions are unfortunately still a mainstay of politics. Authors in critical traditions – Marxism, feminism, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, etc. – show how true this is of our contemporary world. Even authors in popular liberal political theory, like Thomas Pogge, often see their task as demystifying the practice of politics.  

The ecological sphere is ubiquitous and visible, although greatly hidden in public, just as is Arendt’s private sphere. Nonhumans of all types surround us at all times, and we always find ourselves within nonhuman relationships. We do, after all, live in ecosystems. This is true of the largest and most developed city as it is of national parks and wilderness spaces. The public sphere, from time to time, does consider our ecological relationships and there are a great many efforts to establish laws and constitutions, as discussed at the outset of chapter one, that will bring more public attention to our ecological relationships. However, we lack a political sphere

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76 A key part of Pogge’s work focuses on disclosing the harm done by global institutions – institutions that widely agree to moral universalism and human rights, yet whose practices often perpetuate conditions of severe poverty that can be considered a human rights violation. Consider two texts by Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008) chapters four and eight and “Are We Violating the Human Rights of the World’s Poor?,” *Yale Human Rights & Development Law Journal* 14 (2011): 1-33.
that considers and treats human and nonhuman relationships as central to our mutual well-being, since the typical commodity relationship that Plumwood addresses is largely the norm – as exemplified in practices like factory farming. Though there is a growing interest in considering nonhumans, nonhumans are still not given the sort of serious political consideration that the idea of an ecological political sphere would require. Nonhumans of all kinds are still largely excluded from the public sphere: they are highly visible, yet publicly hidden; under the traditional view and practice of politics, this is not altogether surprising, since they concern our bodily relationships and the preservation of our physical life.

Although Locke does not provide us with an account of inherent value regarding nonhumans,77 his understanding of politics includes primary relationships with the nonhuman that can be considered a form of commonality central to his understanding of political sustainability. I suggest that we should, like Locke, recognize an additional dimension that accompanies the standard notion of the public sphere, which politics must consider when governing: an ecological sphere that comprises important, common relationships shared by humans and nonhumans. With a more developed account of the ecological sphere, it would become more clear to practitioners of politics why we cannot violate the ideals like the ones found in the Clean Air Act, even if violations would increase revenue and jobs. If there is damage to nonhuman animals and nature, then we (or someone) will be suffering from these damages, too. In short, a developed understanding of the ecological sphere that is politically derived will draw attention to the web of relationships that currently exist, and it will help to minimize the distance between agent, actions, and context.

77 As Libell suggests, “Locke’s focus on human betterment excludes any argument in favor of the intrinsic value or beauty of nature. His anthropocentrism may disappoint greens who insist on the intrinsic value of nature, but it may complement approaches advocated by a growing number of greens who see the potential of liberalism.” See Libell, 236.
I have shown in this chapter that there are several practical and theoretical resources that support the plausibility of a public sphere that includes the nonhuman. In this chapter I have shown how the nonhuman world even occupies a central place in modern contract theories that are often considered antagonistic to environmental concerns. In this sense, this chapter is contra those who think that the idea of nonhuman political rights is unthinkable or unworkable under our predominant, modern theories of politics. If ecological relationships are central to the desideratum of preservation and sustainability in a political theorist like Locke, it becomes difficult to argue that modern forms of politics must restrict their accounts of the political sphere to anthropocentric concerns. Indeed, to do so would, according to Locke, be to deny the requirements of a fully developed rationality. Instead, we should favor a politics that is deeply concerned with relationships among and between humans and nonhumans.
Chapter Three
Nonhuman Exploitation:
An Amended Theory of Environmental Domination

Introduction

In this chapter, I critically examine the understanding of nature as other. Identifying the nonhuman environment with naturalness is a historically prominent feature of environmental theory, which is especially true of canonical works in biocentrism and holism. Yet as I shall show, this identification is riddled with problems. Empirically, we have very good reasons to doubt whether it is plausible to think that the nonhuman, today, can be distinguished from human beings based on the criterion of naturalness. Logically, the idea of naturalness that these authors employ has serious shortcomings; notably, these views are built on arguments that beg the question. Hence, when we look closely, we see the fallaciousness of a concept of nonhuman nature that relies on a sharp dichotomy between humans and nonhumans.

More importantly, I argue that the popular environmental concept of naturalness as other-than-human substantially weakens the defense of practical, political applications. Most accounts of nonhuman naturalness defend a view of noninterference in order to combat what is often referred to as the human domination of the nonhuman world; I use the phrase ‘environmental domination’ to refer to this concept. I argue that when we consider popular environmental thought’s practical suggestions about conserving wilderness, the lack of a consistent view of naturalness also leaves the account of environmental domination logically insufficient and unclear. I suggest that in order to develop a practically useful concept of environmental domination, which can support claims of substantial normative and political obligations owed to the nonhuman world, we need a more precise and logically consistent political understanding of domination. I therefore argue for a concept of environmental equality in order to amend the
traditional concept of environmental domination. Unjust domination is, I suggest, an *exploitative relationship*. I use Alan Wertheimer, Ruth Sample, and Hallie Liberto’s insights on exploitation in order to define environmental domination as a relation in which 1) two things share some baseline equality, and 2) there is a harmful imbalance of power that degrades one member, due to their vulnerability, which is best described, using Liberto’s terminology, as “caged vulnerability.” Although the authors I consider limit exploitative domination to human relationships, I suggest that this concept can also be used to describe environmental relationships, which, as I argued in chapter one, involve mutual harms and goods between humans and nonhumans. In order to develop a *political* account of the nonhuman environment, which is the aim of this dissertation, it is necessary to show the argumentative fallacies in dominant concepts of nonhumans in environmental philosophy which, like those in political theory discussed in the last chapter, attempt to keep distance between humans and nonhumans.

In short, this chapter furthers my political ecological theory, as it was set out in the first chapter: to use a theoretical hatchet to prune traditional narratives and concepts that have shaped a great deal of our relations with the environment. I pinpoint the shortcomings of concepts that create unwarranted theoretical distance between humans and their environments; and I argue that we need to develop concepts (and ultimately, practices) that highlight the shared, mutual interests of humans and non-human nature. As I will discuss below, although concepts like ‘the nonhuman’ and ‘equality’ are highly contentious and might seem impractical for developing a political ecology – ‘nonhuman’ in particular seems to reinforce a strict binary and equality usually applies to human-to-human relationships—they may nevertheless prove useful. This chapter develops these terms in a manner that supports an ecological political sphere, in part through reimagining and pruning these concepts in the service of grounding a theory of
environmental injustice (i.e., the domination of the environment). I don’t believe, in other words, that describing an ecological political sphere means creating an entirely new political grammar. The practical and traditional concepts of political theory, like some of its traditional authors (i.e., Locke), can be reimagined and given an environmental application.

The natural/artificial distinction

This section focuses on establishing the natural and artificial distinction that is often used by mainstream environmental philosophers, which these authors use to support the claim that the nonhuman is other and natural, distinguished from human artificiality. I argue that authors who view the nonhuman as other rely on an unconvincing and illogical distinction between the natural and artificial. I primarily focus on the work of Eric Katz and Keekok Lee, who have both written extensively on this distinction. In part, I further substantiate the critiques concerning this distinction made by thinkers like Steven Vogel – namely, that authors who defend the distinction do so by begging the question.¹ Lee and Katz assume that humans are best defined in opposition to naturalness because of their intentionality; however, this claim is never convincingly argued for. That is, those who make this distinction never clearly establish why human proximity and involvement with the nonhuman must necessarily strip the nonhuman of naturalness, nor is limiting naturalness to nonhumans thoroughly defended. Frameworks that rely on the natural/artificial distinction – which, as I explain in the second section of the chapter, also include classic views in biocentrism and holism – rely on fallacious arguments. I therefore

conclude that the problems with the distinction that I identify in this section reflect an insurmountable structural issue facing the nonhuman view of nature.

A. The distinction

Nature, in the cultural imagination, is often regarded as something intractable and sprawling. Those of us in the southern U.S. might say this idea is physically represented in the kudzu plant. A seemingly unstoppable force, this vine grows and overtakes any building, signage, or tree in its path, and blankets areas rapidly and almost surreptitiously. It is an implacable force that takes conscious and intentional efforts to control or marshal. Intellectually, the concept of nature resembles the kudzu: it branches off in multiple directions and covers more ground than any other concept one encounters. In fact, in order to condense and organize the sprawling meanings of “nature,” several environmental theorists have taken up the task of marshaling lists of the senses in which we use the term.² Keekok Lee, for instance, almost reaches double-digits counting all of concept’s referents: cosmos, wilderness, the environment as affected by human degradation, natural kinds, natural elements, nonhuman beings (abiotic and biotic), and the foil of artifacts.³ Additionally, there is the list that Brennan and Lo compile (what they call N1-N4) when examining the work of Holmes Rolston III: scientific laws (physics and chemistry), spontaneous biological processes, species-specific traits and behaviors, and that which is opposed to reflection and rationality.⁴ Other lists may enumerate these so-called types of “nature” differently; nonetheless, there is an important structural commonality pervading most lists. The common core that unites these authors is the sharp dichotomy they draw between

⁴ Brennan and Lo, 118-123.
humans and nonhumans, which is based on the concept of naturalness. For many environmentalists, a proper understanding of nonhuman nature defines it as “natural” or other-than-human – what I refer to in this chapter as ‘nature as other.’

If we presume that the nonhuman environment is radically distinct from humans, prior to distinguishing the different meanings of nature, we are committed to the notion that nature’s ideal form is the complete removal from humans. Some have described this as nature’s ‘otherness’ in relation to humanness. Kate Soper, in her descriptive account of the discourses of nature, explains how the general usage of the term “nature” refers to everything which is not human and distinguished from the work of humanity. Thus ‘nature’ is opposed to culture, to history, to convention, to what is artificially worked or produced, in short, to everything which is defining of the order of humanity. I speak of this conception of nature as ‘otherness’ to humanity . . . 5

The sense of nature as ‘other’ is one in which nature is diametrically opposed to humans. This ‘otherness’ provides many authors, as I will explain, with their ontological framework. These authors establish a kind of ecological gradation, which runs from natural things (‘other’ to humans), to artificial things (purely the result of human intention and reason), and includes entities that fall in between, which are measured regarding their proximity to humans: the more humans have been involved with a nonhuman entity in question, the more reason we have to call the entity artificial.

In subsequent sections of this chapter, I argue that accounts that connect nonhumans to naturalness and humans to artifice are not justified. Identifying the nonhuman with naturalness makes it difficult to ground normative and political prescriptions regarding environmental relations, because the assumption that nonhumans are strictly “natural” supports a strict dichotomy between human affairs and the environment: nonhumans are in the realm of nature

5 Soper, 15.
and humans belong to culture and politics. However, some might find it odd that I continue to use the term ‘nonhuman,’ if my aim is to critique such dichotomies and develop a view that defends mutual and shared interests between humans and their environments. On this view, the term ‘nonhuman’ always implies a problematic dichotomy. As Richard Grusin explains, many theorists, especially those of the “nonhuman turn,” share a “refusal of such fundamental logical oppositions as human/nonhuman and subject/object. For practitioners of the nonhuman turn, what is problematic about these dualisms is their insistent privileging of the human.”

For some, then, there is an implied dualism in the term ‘nonhuman,’ insofar as using the prefix ‘non’ implies that these entities are diametrically opposed to humans. That is, on this view, the term ‘nonhuman’ can never be employed in projects that attempt to blur traditional, anthropocentric distinctions between humans and nonhumans, because these terms works to reinforce dualisms, like a sharp subject/object distinction.

We should not underestimate the degree to which language can keep dualisms in play, even when we are trying to move away from a dualistic relationship. Nevertheless, the term ‘nonhuman’ remains practically and politically useful, even if it (arguably) always carries with it traces of diametrical opposition to humans. First, as with any universal, it is useful to have an identifiable categorical term that can be used as a referent for a vast range of differing entities. The term ‘nonhuman’ is able to do this work: it can be used to refer to plants, animals, rivers, and mountains (to name a few entities), all at once or separately, just as the term ‘city’ can name widely different locales but is a quick way of discussing certain people and places that fall within a specific geographical-political border. In this way, one can name a vast array of entities with a single term, without having to list all of the entities one has in mind: nonhumans are entities that

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do not belong to a single species or even ontological category (i.e., natural), yet they are not a part of the human species. They do relate to and resemble humans at times, often in politically germane ways, as I argued in the first two chapters and will continue to argue throughout this dissertation. In my view, it is useful to have a term like ‘nonhuman’ that can do this unifying work, especially when it is a term that is immediately operational: people already have a general sense of what the term means and refers to, so it doesn’t require the retooling and educational process that would be required, if we were to create an entirely new environmental grammar.

Second, even if the term ‘nonhuman’ is traditionally linked to a dualism, we can be explicit and take intentional steps to use the term in a way that separates it from its dualistic history. This historical dualism is a problem, when one is defending the view (as I am) that ‘nonhuman’ does not refer to entities completely different than humans; different in some respects, certainly, but in many ways related and similar. Thus, I think that we can use the term, while also claiming that entities that fall under this moniker take part in traditional human activities and capabilities (like politics and agency). Such qualifications destabilize and deconstruct the traditional implied dualism. In this dissertation, I aim to use the concept of the nonhuman in a way that subverts the traditional dualism, and many authors, even some of the most important thinkers of the nonhuman turn (e.g., Bruno Latour), continue to employ the term, even though their frameworks are well known for claiming that there is no diametrical opposition between humans and nonhumans. Again, there are differences, but, for Latour, we all (humans and nonhumans) belong to an ontological “collective.” That is, there are not entirely separate ontological spheres of existence – i.e., nature and culture – but instead, there is one shared world in which humans relate to and affect nonhumans (and vice versa).

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The term ‘nonhuman’ is, however, problematic if it is tethered too closely to a notion of otherness, which has been the traditional approach for many environmental philosophers. Otherness, for these theorists, is grounded in the natural and artificial distinction, which we get a good example of in the work of environmental philosopher Keekok Lee. For Lee, “[nature] means no more and no less than the following: it simply is what has come into existence, continues to exist, and finally, disintegrates/decays, thereby going out of existence, in principle, entirely independent of human volition or intentionality, of human control, manipulation, or intervention.” In short, a natural entity is nonhuman: it does not resemble, is not controlled by, nor is it dependent on human beings and their intentions. A world in which humans share a close proximity with the nonhuman, and in which humans often use and manipulate nonhumans according to their interests and desires, is a world in which the nonhuman is susceptible to degradation and a transformation from natural to artificial.

Lee’s account of nature and naturalness resonates with a wide range of environmental philosophers. Eric Katz, for one, describes nature as “the realm of entities and processes unmodified by human agency.” On the other hand there is the canonical work of Paul W. Taylor. In Taylor’s *Respect for Nature*, the designation ‘natural ecosystem’ is given two meanings, both of which are rooted in the traditional notion of wilderness, or pristine nature.

Natural ecosystems, for Taylor, refer to “any collection of ecologically interrelated living things that, without human intrusion or control, maintain their existence as species-population over time…” Natural ecosystems are either the type that have always remained untouched by human

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11 Ibid., 3.
beings, or they are populations, which, while presently without human interference, “were at one
time worked by human labor (such as farming and mining) or have undergone modification in
the past as the result of certain human practices (such as sheep grazing or woodcutting).” The
distinction between naturalness and wilderness therefore hinges on the absence of humans in
Taylor’s environmental ethics, even though he understands humans as part of the biotic
community that includes plants and nonhuman animals.  

While naturalness is ‘other’ to humans for these authors, the artificial is quintessentially
human. As Lee remarks, “[a]rtefacts are the material embodiments of human intentional
structures. A world without humans and human consciousness is a world without (human)
artefacts.” Again, Katz’s definition is nearly identical to Lee’s: “I consider the world of
artifacts to be the realm in which entities and processes are modified and created by human
intention and human manipulation.” These authors understand the term ‘artifact’ as an
expansive notion of art or technology and as an essential quality of humans. In their view, any
object that humans work with or create becomes ontologically a new object, not just a new
combination of ‘natural’ things. That is, in their view, the human-made object is an artificial
whole, even if its parts can all be called ‘natural.’ 

12 Ibid., 4.
13 Ibid., 116-135.
16 Lee explicitly employs Hannah Arendt’s notion of homo faber, which Arendt uses to indicate the creative activity of
humans that results in artifacts rather than necessities, which keep the body alive. That is, our labor (animal laborans) that is completed in order to take care of necessities is distinct from the activity that results in products that are not necessary for survival: human artifacts like tables, chairs, paintings, decorative clothing and accessories, etc. Arendt considers such artifacts the work of homo faber, and Lee tends to rely on this framework in her distinction between natural and artificial. For an in-depth account of Arendt’s distinction, consider chapters three and four of Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). For a compact discussion of the distinction, consider pgs. 136-53 - especially pgs.136-39. For Lee’s use of Arendt’s homo faber, see Philosophy and Revolutions, chapter six.
Cutting down a tree to build furniture, or creating synthetic products (e.g., plastics) are both activities that take materials in the world and process them through intentional and instrumental reasoning. For these authors, a human plan or intention is (quite literally) stamped onto the object’s ontology. Lee, for instance, thinks “[a]rtefactual kinds . . . are entities whose existence and maintenance are the intended outcome of human volition and agency. They come into, or go out of, existence entirely at human bidding.”\textsuperscript{17} Once again, the emphasis is on the idea that human rationality marks a threshold that separates the natural from the artificial, meaning that an essential quality of humanity is rationality and its arts, the counterpoint to nonhuman nature’s purposeless, or spontaneous existence. As Holmes Rolston III remarks, what we see in these accounts of artifice is the idea that “no human has ever acted deliberately except to interfere in the spontaneous course of nature. All human actions are in this sense unnatural because they are artifactual, and the advice to follow nature is impossible. We could not do so if we tried, for in deliberately trying to do so we act unnaturally.”\textsuperscript{18}

For these authors, the natural and artificial distinction, as I have suggested, occurs on a sliding scale. To what degree is an ecosystem or thing X natural? It is natural to the degree that it is removed from human life and practices. Take the example of a wooden and plastic chair. A wooden chair, for these authors, lies closer to the natural than the plastic chair. The plastic chair is made from materials that have undergone several processes in order to 1) derive the medium itself and then 2) mold the medium into a piece of a furniture. Wood can simply be cut down in ‘nature’ and then have a few additional steps added in order to craft a basic chair.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{17} Keekok Lee, \textit{The Natural and the Artefactual: The Implications of Deep Science and Deep Technology for Environmental Philosophy} (Lanham: Lexington Books, 1999), 118.
\textsuperscript{19} Katz provides this example – “Preserving the Distinction between Nature and Artifact,” 75 – and Lee uses a similar example, but discusses wooden versus plastic rocking horses. See Lee, \textit{Philosophy and Revolutions in Genetics}, 5.
The same measure can be applied to specific environs. Lee mentions that we should not think that an environment is forever unnatural once humans are present. Walking on the moon for a small amount of time, even if this is done on a few different occasions, is far less an affront to the natural status of an environment than is draining a swamp or building a dam.\textsuperscript{20} She explains that “the more permanent or wide-ranging the consequences of the impact, the more they undermine the autonomous status of that part of nature, and the more such affected nature becomes assimilated to human culture.”\textsuperscript{21} In such scenarios, Lee thinks the naturalness of nonhuman nature becomes “suppressed” by human endeavors, which means that they never completely lose their natural status. “Even as artifacts they have a residual sense of their own \textit{telos}, which has to be suppressed in order to realize their human ends”; however, if humans left an environment that they had degraded and made artificial, “[the \textit{telos} of the natural objects] could reassert itself in spite of their anthropogenic genesis.”\textsuperscript{22}

Katz, however, is not so optimistic. Natural restoration, as he is known for saying, marks the beginning of artifice and the end of nature. Once humans have it \textit{in their mind} to restore a particular environment, the restored place is quite literally, in his view, a re-creation. It is an environment, created again, under the guise and direction of human intention and judgments. It is an equivocation, he thinks, to call a restored environment “natural”: “We cannot \textit{restore} a natural environment; at best we can create a perfect substitute, but this substitute is an artifact created by human beings, not a naturally occurring entity or system. It is a product of human intention and design.”\textsuperscript{23} Once something has had its design and origin pass through the human mind, it will always be, to some degree, an artificial thing. Even if humans disappear from the landscape, the

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 57.
\textsuperscript{22} Lee, \textit{Philosophy and Revolutions}, 16.
\textsuperscript{23} Katz, “Preserving the Distinction between Nature and Artifact,” 73.
landscape itself will still continue to carry with it a trace of human artifice. Contrary to Lee, Katz thinks that while an environment might once again exist in the absence of humans, it will just be suppressing the humanness and artificiality that remains a key component of how it came to be what it is.

The nonhuman-as-other view establishes a polemic between natural and artificial that limits the political potential of its environmental theory. If one argues that the natural is literally determined by the degree to which it is separate from humanity, then it is difficult to know what would motivate someone, holding a traditional view of the political sphere that already excludes the nonhuman, to want to give any serious political consideration to a nonhuman entity. In this scenario, we would have to be satisfied with a ‘let nature be’ mentality. The more we become involved with the nonhuman, the more we strip it of its naturalness. Many authors holding this view in fact suggest the prescription of noninterference, as I discuss below.

The need for notions of equality and commonness between the human and nonhuman to provide a more substantial political motivation, helps to identify another problem: nonhuman otherness, and the hands-off approach it implies, makes it difficult for those who hold this view to defend preventative measures. Under this view, we only consider the nonhuman when we can clearly see that a particular relationship between it and humans – e.g., pollution – is leading to a multitude of human harms. However, such an account fails to consider the entrenched network of political ecological relationships that we always share with the nonhuman today (as discussed in chapter one). Thus, it makes more sense to have an account that considers our similarities with the nonhuman both in harmful and healthful times. The view of nonhuman otherness, in other words, would only have us be involved with the nonhuman in times of crises. My view of the ecological political sphere aims at governance over our ecological relationships at all times, since
these relationships represent a primary interest in human life. I do not think we should ‘let nature be,’ but, instead, we should manage ecological relationships and access to nonhuman environs as much as possible, in order to prevent harms like those in factory farming (discussed in chapter one) from arising – which result from our social and political practices.

Yet, one might suggest that it is hard to imagine how we can actually defend equality with an environmental scope. Equality is already a contested term, even when it is only used to discuss human-to-human relationships, let alone to address the ways in which we relate to nonhuman entities. The grounding of the concept of equality is notoriously controversial: Is human dignity a prerequisite of equality? If so, must one have higher-order reflective reasoning abilities in order to be a political equal? If not, how is dignity grounded? In one’s ability to suffer? In one’s being part of a human community, no matter one’s mental or physical abilities? For some environmental theorists, it is no problem to extend equality beyond a human community. Peter Singer, for instance, famously argues that ability to suffer is all that is required for a view of equality, and this sense of equality is implied as the lowest common denominator in traditional moral and political conceptions: “If a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with the like suffering – insofar as rough comparisons can be made – of any other being.”24 In this light, he claims that all animals are in fact equals.

My own approach to the idea of environmental equality is both different than traditional conceptions grounded in claims about human nature and distinct from views like Singer’s. First, I am not claiming a view of environmental equality that is a catch-all concept of any notion of

political equality whatsoever. Instead, I am developing this concept in order to be able to theorize political ecological relationships that often go unnoticed, but are a crucial part of the public sphere and the realization of justice. I’ll return to this idea in chapter four and chapter five. Second, I do not base the concept of environmental equality on a specific individual ability or capacity. Hence, unlike Singer, I do not have in mind prerequisites like sentience in my understanding of environmental equality. Third, while this concept is neither strictly anthropocentric nor limited to humans, I do understand the concept, as a concept that is part of the political ecology I am developing in this dissertation, to be anthropogenic. That is, in light of human social and political practices, we have developed relations with the environment that involve new forms of commonness and equality. They do not eliminate other understandings of political equality, but rather it adds to political equality an additional possibility – an equality apropos of our current relations with the environment. As I argued in chapter one, factory farming establishes environmental relations that create entrenched connections with the nonhuman world, and these relations help us to understand why it is reasonable to think that there are mutual interests and harms that humans share with nonhumans. Moreover, in chapter two I argued that this form of commonness, which I am now calling environmental equality, can help us to ground an environmental rationality and public sphere, which is a reinterpretation of Locke’s provisios framed by Val Plumwood’s ecofeminism. Here too, I have in mind an environmental equality that originates from human political communities (i.e., anthropogenic), but that exists as shared relations between humans and nonhumans. Both of my previous arguments have focused on how human relationships and practices have created conditions of mutual interests and harms shared between humans and nonhumans. Hence, the sense of equality that I invoke here is one that is grounded by the degree to which power relationships and social
practices form one’s interests, harms, and the horizon of one’s possibilities for action. In the next chapter, I connect this view to Foucault’s theory of politics as “action upon possible action,” and in chapter five I relate the principle of environmental equality to Nancy Fraser’s “all-subjected” principle, which states that any individual affected by and relevant to governance, must be thought to belong to the public sphere.

In the current chapter I aim to show how traditional discourses in environmental philosophy are unable to account for such a view of equality, given their use of a highly problematic natural/artificial distinction. Following this, I develop my view of environmental equality by arguing that with such a view in place, we are able to more thoroughly ground normative and political environmental views like the domination of nonhuman entities.

B. Question-begging in the natural and artificial distinction

To view nonhumans as distinct from humans due to their “naturalness” creates considerable roadblocks for imagining a political sphere, and political concepts (like a concept of environmental equality), that extend to nonhumans. I will develop this argument in subsequent sections, but first, I will argue that the argument for the “naturalness” of nonhumans is not logically consistent. As mentioned previously, in this section I will mainly build on, and further substantiate, the arguments of Steven Vogel. In general, Vogel claims that the idea that humans are unnatural is never clearly established by those who defend the view of nonhuman nature. He argues that one defending this view could either mean that humans are themselves unnatural biologically speaking, or that the products they make are unnatural. Regarding the first interpretation, Vogel responds that this is essentially a claim about life itself. If we want to escape the metropolis and go to ‘nature’, we are fundamentally speaking about “the biological world, the world of flora and fauna, the biosphere . . . humans are of course alive too and so are
still fully natural even in this sense.” Alternatively, the idea that humans are unnatural by virtue of the products they create also lacks precision. Vogel critiques this second interpretation by pointing out that there are many things that can rightly be called the products of humans that are hardly artificial. We produce spawn, carbon dioxide, and waste products, all three of which can happen with or without our intentional planning. “When we exhale [emitting CO2], when we defecate, when we make babies, the objects we produce are not typically called artificial or unnatural. It thus seems as though some of the behaviors through which human produce new objects in the world are natural while others are not.” Vogel calls for an environmental philosophy that takes more care to developed nuanced arguments regarding the distinctions between humans and nonhumans, and he generally suggests that environmental philosophy theorize about the built environment, since it is unclear whether any part of the earth is, strictly speaking, untouched by humans. For now, I will restrict the discussion to the argumentative fallacies, especially begging the question, which is usually a hallmark of the natural and artificial distinction.

Returning to Katz, he, more than Lee, best demonstrates how the natural and artificial distinction rests on question-begging argumentation, since his account is more direct and answers the types of questions that are not fully addressed by Lee. Katz claims that human products – for example, a restored environment – are unnatural. The reasoning used to defend this claim appears to be definitional: restoration is artificial simply because humans did the restoring and they belong to the realm of culture. Katz claims that “[w]e live our lives in a

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26 Ibid., 91.
27 For more on this idea in particular, consider his clear and condensed argument found in “On Nature and Alienation,” section VI.
cultural world, what Jacques Ellul called a technological milieu; we do not live in nature.”

Moreover, “there is just too much going on within a natural system for us to try to duplicate it through our science and technology.” If we are going to define nature as autonomous from, and more complex than, humans, Katz argues that we must be consistent on this point. A restored environment will never be natural, and we humans – as the torchbearers of technology, culture, and all things artificial – cannot be identified in any real sense with our ‘other’.

The formal consistency in views like Katz’s, does not resolve problems with the basic premises of the natural/artificial distinction and his view of the nonhuman as other. We are typically given no reason to believe that the distinction is not merely definitional and based on question-begging reasoning. For instance, Katz merely asserts, but does not defend, the claim that the cultural dimension in humans is de facto evidence of why they do not live in nature. What’s more, Katz makes these unjustified assertions in a passage wherein he is critiquing the “fuzzy thinking” of those who think humans are a part of nature. He says the idea that humans exist in nature “is a prime example of fuzzy thinking. Of course, humans are biological beings, and thus in some sense natural, but we have lived for the last ten thousand years (at least) as cultural beings . . . we do not live in nature.” This is the entirety of the defense of this position that the reader receives. His assertion that our “modifying natural processes to suit our needs and interests” is proof enough that we do not exist as a part of nature is, moreover, unconvincing. If modification sufficed to align a being with culture, then other types of nonhuman beings who also modify natural processes to suit their needs and interests would arguably fall on the culture/artificial side of the divide. For example, a beaver modifies a tree’s growth in order to

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29 Ibid., 77.
31 Ibid., 75.
build a dwelling, and this activity is made possible by the tools at the beaver’s disposal; some
degree of thought about trees and dams is needed, in addition to large, sharp incisors.

Certainly, human modification and needs can be numerous and complex, but it is easy to
argue that this is due to the tools at their disposal – a higher degree of reflective, intentional
thought, allowing them to have a more open relationship with basic biological predispositions. In
fact, this is exactly what an evolutionary perspective of human beings, like the one presented by
Mary Midgley, suggests. Humans, like nonhuman animals, belong to species that have general
characteristics. Sociality, for example, is a type of disposition that arguably belongs to humans as
naturally as it does other social mammals. Our level of reflective intelligence means that we have
variety and options regarding our social relationships, which also means there are arguably no
specific types of social relationships that are ‘natural’ for humans. Yet, it is another thing
altogether (and perhaps unreasonable) to assume that having social relationships, as a
predisposition, is something that people can choose to accept or reject. Thus, for evolutionary
perspectives like Midgley, humans experience a greater ability to modify their contexts, but they
are still organisms that are born, exist, and evolve within a species-context that has natural
predispositions.\footnote{Midgley defends an evolutionary view like the one I’ve described in her work \textit{Beast and Man}, where she argues
for a view of open and closed instincts that can help us capture how humans and nonhuman animals exist in
complementary ways. Midgley argues that we should understand humans as within nature, and that human behavior
happens in a context that cannot wholly be reduced to culture. For example, instincts, for Midgley, occur on a scale
ranging from closed (determined) to open (partly determined but shaped a great deal by experience). Midgley
explains (pg. 51) that any creature “cannot just wander at random till something ‘reinforces’ a movement, since this
is the surest way to an early death.” Rather, all species (including humans) have traits and characteristics that form
dispositions and provide guidance. For Midgley, these are evolving dispositions “[a]nd the more complex, the more
intelligent creatures become, the more they are programmed in [an open] way, rather than in full detail . . .These
open instincts are general tendencies to certain \textit{kinds} of behavior” (pg. 51). Midgley suggests that widespread
patterns that guide people (like sociality) are instinctual just as they are for some nonhuman animals; however, this
is not to say that specific \textit{types} of behaviors that relate to this general pattern can be called instinctual. Hence,
Midgley makes room for both evolutionary biology and historical, human preference and practices. See \textit{Beast and
Man: The Roots of Human Nature} (London: Routledge, 2002). The bulk of her conversation about instincts is found
in chapter three.}
The usual answer provided by authors who defend naturalness, as to why we must give
an overriding priority to the cultural, is that these are the terms they have already agreed to: the
natural means that which is outside of human influence and the artificial is that which is brought
about by human intention rather than spontaneity. On this issue, Vogel makes his most
devastating remarks. Authors who utilized a natural and artificial distinction do not supply
reasoning for why human intentionality should be our sole focus and standard. Hence, the natural
and artificial binary that is measured by this standard is built on question-begging argumentation.
Vogel’s argument is captured in the following passage:

The argument here is perfectly general; we can’t decide whether humans are natural or
not by observing nature, because before observing we would need to decide whether
humans themselves are a part of what is to be observed. . . [hence, the natural and
artificial distinction] begins by assuming the existence of such a difference – begins, that
is, by assuming that humans are distinct from nature, typically because of their mental
capacities – and then uses that assumption to justify the claim that that which humans
have made or done (the artificial) can be ontologically distinguished from the natural. . .
The dualism here is presupposed, not argued for.33

The same assumed substantive and methodological dualism that Vogel is criticizing is discussed
in the next section, where I investigate how the idea of the nonhuman as other is employed in
discussions about wilderness. Building on Vogel’s argument, I suggest that the natural and
artificial distinction forces a strict and fallacious ontological divide based on intentionality; this
enables these authors to justify their normative and political conclusions, in particular, the claim
namely that humans are ‘dominating’ nature.

I argue, along with Vogel, that acknowledging that humans have cultural aspects in no
way commits us to the view that this human culture automatically negates (or supersedes)
biology. Why should we prioritize our cultural aspects to such an overwhelming degree? Are we
not always metabolizing, growing, dying, and all of the other things common to biological
beings? Our cultural aspects might be able to alter these aspects of ourselves, but they do not

override them or make our life ‘less’ biological. Most of us will gain weight more easily with age due to a declining metabolism, we will experience illnesses, and, unfortunately, all of us will die no matter how much we invest ourselves in culture. These aspects of human beings are present each day and in each hour of our lives, no matter how much they might be absent from our thought. For these and other reasons, it is not clear why we should give priority to the cultural over and above the biological, unless the deciding factor is how we like to think of ourselves, rather than how we actually exist. We can surely have more complicated relationships with the biological and ecological aspects of our lives than other biological beings (e.g., using diet pills or exercise in response to a waning metabolism), but this is reactionary behavior that does not override our biology; instead, this activity works with our biology in order to achieve a desired end. In fact, we are always working with and trying to shape certain biological processes. Biological processes, for instance metabolism and entropy, are a context that is already given; we simply try to have some measure of negotiation within this context. It is shortsighted to think that we are completely controlling nature or that our negotiations with it mean we have moved outside of it.

A more plausible account of our ontological character grasps the ways in which humans exist simultaneously in so-called natural and cultural environments. I suggest, in the next section, that the either/or character of the distinction mainly serves rhetorical and ideological ends: once the nonhuman is separated from the human, those who hold this view are able to claim that the collapse of the natural into the artificial means that humans are dominating nature. However, I argue that a theory of domination requires shared commonalities. We are better served if we can claim that harm is being done to a nonhuman world is a political concern. To claim that something is dominated is surely to assume that the object or person in question needs some
degree of justice. In order to have justice, one must first be recognized as belonging to political relationships of some kind – which is precisely what my view of the ecological political argues for. It remains questionable how the nonhuman as other could ever develop a substantial view of domination that politics should ever seriously consider.

C. Wilderness

The either/or character of the natural/artificial distinction mainly serves rhetorical and ideological ends: once the nonhuman is separated from the human, those who hold this view are able to claim that the collapse of the natural into the artificial means that humans are dominating nature. For example, discussions about wilderness protection have traditionally warned against human interference and domination. The goal of wilderness preservation is usually to protect nature that is ‘pristine’ or untouched by humans from the outcomes of human involvement: natural degradation and the artificiality of nature. Hence, among the threats human presence poses is a loss of biodiversity, a loss of intrinsic value, and in general the complete disappearance of anything that can truly be classified as natural. The equivocation of nonhuman nature with wilderness is historically a hallmark of American environmental thought, and the impetus for many of its projects and the policies they influenced – i.e., the Sierra Club – can be traced back to concern with securing and protecting wilderness spaces. As J. Baird Callicott remarks, the concept of wilderness was crucial to Emerson and Thoreau, authors who historically epitomize American environmental thinking. It was these authors who began suggesting, “that wild nature might serve ‘higher’ human spiritual values as well as supply raw materials for meeting our more

mundane physical needs.” Roderick Nash’s corpus also explores the central place of wilderness in American thought, especially in his classic *Wilderness and the American Mind*. For American settlers, it was a matter of “[t]ransforming the wild into the rural”; this “Wildernesse-worke” was close to the hearts of American settlers, and it had “[s]criptural precedents which the New England pioneers knew well.” However, these early American experiences with wilderness “gave rise to fear and hatred on the part of those who had to fight it for survival and success,” and “[i]t was their children and grandchildren . . . who began to sense its ethical and aesthetic values.”

It should not be surprising to anyone that mainstream approaches like biocentrism and holism owe significant intellectual debts to the idea of wilderness. Aldo Leopold, perhaps the founder of contemporary mainstream environmental philosophy, “was committed to wilderness preservation no less fully at the end of his career than at the beginning.” A degree from the Yale Forest School in 1909 led Leopold to his job in the US Forest Service. Leopold’s forestry work developed his ecological views, and cultivated in him the conviction “of the importance of protecting wilderness,” even though “indifference and open hostility to his ‘crazy’ ideas still existed in the Service” at the time. Hence, authors defending wilderness think that, as much as possible, protective measures must be put in place to save nature from human domination, because otherwise, naturalness, especially its aesthetic and ethical value, will disappear.

We can understand how wilderness discussions lose their political potential, once the concept of nonhuman naturalness if removed, if we consider classic frameworks like biocentrism

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36 Nash, 27 and 31.
37 Ibid., 43.
39 Nash, 190-191. See Nash, chapter 11 for a general biography and intellectual history of Leopold.
and holism. Paul W. Taylor’s biocentrism, an environmental theory that claims value for all individual living things (plants, animals, and humans) and the biotic communities they comprise, suggests a theory of wilderness preservation that attempts to directly incorporate a political framework. For Taylor, we must protect nature’s negative liberty—that is, nature’s freedom from human coercive domination. Correspondingly, the idea of wilderness protection establishes a negative duty for humans. Humans must not interfere with autonomous nature unless it is absolutely necessary, and even in those cases it must be done carefully and sustainably. Biotic nonhumans, living things like plants and animals, deserve respect and are first and foremost valuable as individual beings; their individual good needs to be protected against anthropocentric values and domination. This protection comes by way of ‘letting nature be’ – that is, preserving wilderness.

Taylor prescribes four duties that all rely on minimizing human involvement due to (a belief in) human unnaturalness and the threat of anthropocentric domination: nonmaleficence, noninterference, fidelity, and restitutive. Humans must remove themselves from any scenario in which nonhuman life is being harmed (nonmaleficence), they must ‘let nature be’ (noninterference), they must remain faithful to nonhuman nature by not eliminating it for sport (fidelity), and only when they can be entirely certain that an action can restore a balance to an ecosystem should they take restorative steps (restitutive justice). Limiting human involvement is an especially salient feature of his discussion regarding noninterference. In his example, transplanting trees and flowers from a natural setting to an artificial human landscape “break[s] the rule of Noninterference whether or not we then take good care of them and so enable them to

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40 In *Respect for Nature*, Taylor argues that we have a negative duty to not interfere with nonhuman nature, which in turn implies that we can recognize a negative liberty to biological noninterference in all biotic creatures. See chapter four and six, especially pgs. 169-198.
41 Ibid., chapter four and six.
live longer, healthier lives than they would have enjoyed in the wild. We have done wrong by not letting them live out their lives in freedom.” Clearly, for Taylor, human involvement in natural systems is a moral ill, since it should be avoided even when it could help prolong a natural being’s biological good – or, that which makes a thing valuable in the first place.

The crux of Taylor’s argument thus rests on the idea that the nonhuman is other, since naturalness, as in Lee and Katz, is viewed as human removal, and the prescriptive goal is to preserve human removal. These basic assumptions lead to all four normative and political prescriptions Taylor suggests. However, if we cannot theoretically defend the idea that naturalness can be restricted to pristine wild, as argued in the last section, then his practical principles of action become obscured. This is because it is unclear how (or why) we should defend the view that human presence leads to the domination of nature by artificiality. If, as I’ve suggested, naturalness cannot be restricted to the nonhuman, then the notion of a ‘pristine’ nature (in the strict sense) as the object of preservation essentially collapses. We could just as easily argue that the best solution is for humans and nonhumans to live in close proximity, because all biotic life is interdependent (as Taylor claims) and proximity can help us realize how best to sustain a mutually beneficial relationship. Simply leaving nonhumans alone could easily increase the gap of knowledge and experience — things that are arguably crucial to developing respect, empathy, and a host of demeanors that could help encourage humans to develop sustainable relationships with nonhumans. In other words, focusing on how we humans live among and depend upon nonhumans seems a better way to realize one’s respect for nonhumans than the noninterference approach that Taylor suggests.

If we remove the concept of pristine nonhuman nature from Taylor’s account, what remains is the fact that humans and nonhumans have a shared biological basis. This alone does

\[42\] Ibid., 174-175.
not imply, however, that humans ought to limit all of their involvement with nonhuman beings in order to protect nonhumans. Even if increased human presence has led, historically and today, to the excessive utilization (and disruption) of other biotic beings and biotic communities, there is still a distinction that needs to be upheld: human presence doesn’t *necessarily* result in a dominative relationship with nonhuman biotic life, nor does proximity to humans necessitate that a being or environ transform into a different kind of being – i.e., artificial. Rather, *unsustainable ecological relationships* – ones in which humans seek to exploit nonhumans – have led to identifying human presence with nonhuman destruction. I will discuss my view of nonhuman exploitation in section three. For now, I am simply suggesting that it is unclear why human noninterference is better than sustainable ecological relationships between humans and nonhumans; unless, that is, we insist on a view of naturalness that means the absence of humans. The natural and artificial distinction is never clearly or convincingly argued for in the wilderness narratives I have examined here, but rather appears to primarily serve a rhetorical purpose.

Wilderness is as crucial to the prescriptive normative claims of environmental holism as it is biocentrism. Likewise, the holism’s normative arguments also lose their prescriptive strength, once the concept of naturalness is logically undermined. For example, Holmes Rolston III’s holism, which claims value for all ‘natural’ things (living and nonliving), defends in no uncertain terms the absolute need for the concept of wilderness. Pristine wilderness, for Rolston, captures the intrinsic value of naturalness, which human social and political practices interrupt and corrupt. Rolston has argued for a theory of wilderness in direct disagreement with other leading authors like J. Baird Callicott. Rolston’s critique of Callicott’s suggestion that we need to focus on the concept of sustainable development rather than wilderness preservation can be

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seen in his essay “The Wilderness Idea Reaffirmed.” In this essay, Rolston gives perhaps his most straightforward defense of wilderness, and does not sway from his position that nature is only conceivable as nonhuman. In fact, as I explain below, Rolston claims that when environmentalists suggest anything but nature is radically distinct from humans, it is the result of “metaphysical confusion.”

Rolston contends that the drastic differences between humans and nonhumans should convince any careful environmental thinker that there is an ontological gulf separating these two kinds of entities – one of kind not of degree. This gulf substantiates the need to preserve and protect wilderness, and conceptually, justifies the continued use of the natural and artificial distinction. If we distinguish culture and instinct, then, Rolston argues, we must follow this logic out entirely and propose a full and strict human and nature distinction.

Humans now superimpose cultures on the wild nature out of which they once emerged. . . Humans have a myriad of lifestyle options, evidenced by their cultures; and each human makes daily decisions that affect his or her character. Little or nothing in wild nature approaches this. . . In that sense, animals have freedom within ecosystems, but humans have freedom from ecosystems. Animals are adapted to their niches; humans adapt their ecosystems to their needs.

As this passage demonstrates, Rolston identifies nonhuman nature as that which is wild and radically opposed to humans. We would be pained, Rolston believes, to find anything that even comes close to resembling human behavior and decision-making in the nonhuman natural world. Thus the natural world, for Rolston, is a blank canvas when put into a relationship with human beings: humans “superimpose” their creations onto the natural canvas, and when they don’t like this medium they are not bound by its constraints.

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44 Holmes Rolston III, “The Wilderness Idea Reaffirmed,” in The Great New Wilderness Debate, 367-386. Rolston’s essay, as it is found in this collection of essay about wilderness, is actually sandwiched between two of Callicott’s essays. The first Callicott essay “The Wilderness Idea Revisited” is the catalyst of Rolston’s essay and critique, and the Callicott essay following Rolston’s is his response, “The Good Old-Time Wilderness Religion.”


46 Ibid., 368.
For Rolston, human thoughts and intentions dominate, superimpose, and seek to infuse wild nature with artifice: “The values intrinsic to wilderness cannot, on pain of both logical and empirical contradiction, be ‘improved’ by deliberate human management,” and what’s more, “when culture seeks to improve nature, the management intent spoils the wilderness. Wilderness management, in that sense, is a contradiction in terms. . . A scientifically managed wilderness is as conceptually impossible as wildlife in a zoo.” In other words, for Rolston, like Taylor, no human involvement of any kind can result in anything natural or wild. It is thus a mistake to think that we can move beyond the wilderness paradigm to sustainable development of a shared human and nonhuman ecosystem and maintain anything we can call a ‘natural’ ecosystem. Natural ecosystems are only sustained when we mark off ample territories as wildness and nature preserves. Only a world with large and numerous wild spaces will be a world with natural ecosystems.

The exploitative domination of nonhumans

In this final section, I amend the common view in environmental philosophy that humans dominate nature. As I’ve argued, it is fallacious to claim that humans dominate naturalness. Thus, we need a more cogent and persuasive theory of the human domination of the nonhuman world. It is certainly clear that humans do degrade the nonhuman environment, and that nonhuman entities are vulnerable to humans’ degrading practices; for this reason, we need normative and political concepts that create obligations that support the nonhuman’s flourishing. However, we also need to account for the degree of commonness, not otherness, existing due to human social and political life. Our political ecological relationships must be a central concern of our prescriptive and normative environmental politics, which views of wilderness and nature as

other assume can be sufficiently addressed by “letting nature be.” Moreover, we need a theory that has a consistent grammar: if it is logically inconsistent to call the nonhuman “other,” then on what foundation do we ground the claim that humans dominate the nonhuman world? What sort of relationship of dominance should we be concerned with, in other words, if we are not concerned about the domination of naturalness?

I close this chapter by arguing that the concept of environmental domination only makes sense when we assume that humans and nonhumans inhabit shared contexts and spaces that in turn suggest that they have a shared environmental fate. Drawing on political accounts of domination – especially those that elucidate degrading, exploitative forms of domination – I suggest that amending traditional environmental theories, in order to have a better philosophical account of the human domination of the nonhuman world, means having a political account of our current dominative ecological relationships. An environmental political theory of domination requires a concept of shared environmental fate between humans and nonhumans, not a theory that assumes a sharp dichotomy between the two.

A. Defining exploitative domination

Environmental domination is a practical concern for the environmental theorists I’ve discussed throughout this chapter. Practically speaking, the degradation of our nonhuman environment is at stake, usually due to excessive human interests and needs. For example, wilderness conservation, in practice, aims to sustain flourishing nonhuman environments, now and in the future, that are threatened by excessive use, development, and appropriation by humans. Here degradation means 1) corrupting intrinsic natural value (i.e., pristine wilderness) by affecting it with human artifice or 2) excessively appropriating a nonhuman entity or environ for human use, to the degree that the entity or environ in question can no longer flourish – that is,
a species becomes extinct or an environ can no longer sustain life, as a result of an unnecessary level of human appropriation. Authors who defend nonhuman otherness are concerned with more ethical and just human treatment of nonhumans (with both notions of degradation in mind), which requires practices that conserve (or preserve), not degrade. A core practical concern, in other words, is a defense against dominative treatment of the nonhuman environment that is exploitative.

Alan Wertheimer offers a basic definition of harmful dominative exploitation in the following way: “An exploitative transaction is one in which A takes unfair advantage of B. A engages in harmful exploitation when A gains by an action or transaction that is harmful to B where we define harm in relation to some appropriate baseline.”48 There are two things worth noting in Wertheimer’s definition, which are commonly found in political discussions about domination. First, domination that is exploitative assumes a “baseline” or basic equality to exist between at least two entities (usually people). Second, the relationship formed by a shared baseline, in order to be described as harmful, must contain an unfair and unwanted advantage or imbalance.

Wertheimer’s definition aligns well with classic views of domination in political theory. For example, Philip Pettit explains that the republican tradition develops an idea of domination wherein “[o]ne agent dominates another if and only if they have a certain power over that other, in particular a power of interference on an arbitrary basis,“49 which “means that [the power-victims] live at the mercy of [the power-bearing], that they are in the position of a dependent or debtor or something of that kind.”50 One important baseline equality held between people, in

50 Ibid., 65.
republican accounts, is liberty.\textsuperscript{51} Therefore, when one “lives at the mercy of another,” the harmful imbalance that is experienced is often described as the damaging limitation of one’s liberty. Republicans do not consider all interferences domination; rather, important for a republican definition is the idea of arbitrary interference. Using the example of a public official, Pettit argues that this person “who interferes with people in a way that is forced to track their interests and ideas fails to enjoy subjugating power over the person affected. The official is subject to such screening and sanctioning devices…[that]…they interfere, since they operate on the basis of coercive law, but their interference is non-arbitrary.”\textsuperscript{52} In short, the republican understanding of domination separates the idea of domination from interference: experiencing limitations of liberty is not always equivalent to being dominated. Some forms of interference, it is argued, are not necessarily harmful, and some are thought to provide protection and security (i.e., interference by public officials).

Contemporary political theorists, especially those writing on social justice, have continued to examine the ways in which we understand domination, usually opting for the word most often used today, oppression. They, too, often distinguish between interference and domination and echo Wertheimer’s definition. Marilyn Frye, for example, provides a now-canonical view of oppression in her book \textit{The Politics of Reality}.\textsuperscript{53} Frye claims that oppression is an overused term, and often applied to any situation in which suffering or limitations are experienced, rather than signaling a unique type of suffering or limitation: “Human beings can be miserable,” she claims, “without being oppressed, and it is perfectly consistent to deny that a


\textsuperscript{52} Pettit, 65.

person or group is oppressed without denying that they have feelings or that they suffer.” She goes on to explain that in order to capture the specific type of limitation that oppression signifies, the term should be used only to capture limitations and suffering that are experienced macroscopically (systemically) and are thoroughly debilitating for the subject in question. That is, the term should be reserved for those who experience sanctions whether they fulfill or resist what is expected of them by social and political norms – their realities are inescapably limited and shaped by ideals coming from without. “The experience of oppressed people,” she observes, “is that the living of one’s life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction.” Oppression is thus experienced due to structural injustices that often occur at the social and institutional level. As Frye puts it elsewhere, the oppressed person(s) finds him or herself within a “double bind,” wherein all possible action has negative consequences of some sort. Hence, she likens oppression to being inside a birdcage; the experience of oppression “is the experience of being caged in: all avenues, in every direction, are blocked or booby trapped.” A feminist theory of oppression, similar to the republican definition of domination, also separates interferences from domination – not all limitations are adequate descriptions of being oppressed. Furthermore, accounts like Frye’s also assume that the important commonalities shared by all persons are subject to an imbalance in oppression: people who are oppressed do not experience equal treatment or respect of their autonomy; they face double binds that cage in their social and political possibilities.

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54 Ibid., 2.
55 Ibid., 4.
56 Ibid.
From these accounts, it is reasonable to conclude that employing a political theory of domination requires a baseline equality of some kind. In fact, for many social and political theorists, treating one member as “other” is itself an instance of domination. Equality is needed in order to substantiate the claim that a specific interaction is dominoative. Claims about domination, without a substantial, shared baseline, do not suggest clear, practical and political obligations or harms. As I argued above, the concept of otherness and a strict dichotomy between humans and nonhumans are examples of unclear attempts to defend environmental domination. To amend this discourse, I argue that we must employ an account of environmental equality, like the one developed in chapter one. In chapter one I argued that political ecological relationships that form shared networks of harm and health exhibit mutual interests that aren’t strictly human or nonhuman. The degree to which an entity has flourishing, established within environmental relationships, constitutes a baseline that is often shared between humans and nonhumans today. Accordingly, a conception of environmental relationships that emphasizes interrelated and shared harms and goods can ground a theory of environmental domination.

I suggest below that a theory of environmental domination can be further strengthened if we focus on current social and political practices of domination in which humans exploit nonhumans, creating an imbalance that degrades nonhumans by capitalizing on their vulnerabilities—for example, the overexploitation of nonhuman species. Focusing on specific practices, instead of making claims about the domination of the nonhuman environment writ large, is more precise and can address important political relationships that are crucial to the flourishing of humans and nonhumans alike. In order to develop an account that focuses on

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57 Consider, for example, Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, who both identify the “othering” of a person or group as a key moment in domination. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), chapter five and seven, and Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 29-79.
domination as an exploitative practice, I will use the insights of two contemporary philosophers of exploitative domination: Ruth Sample and Hallie Liberto. I use the term ‘vulnerable’ in this section, in order to mark the imbalance of power in the political ecological relationships that I have described thus far in this dissertation (and those that I’ve yet to discuss). I take this language from Sample and Liberto’s explanation of domination. I argue that nonhumans can be considered vulnerable because their mutual interests in environmental relationships are often hidden from the public sphere, which means that their realities are sometimes shaped by human practices, without being taken into consideration by humans. Hence, they are vulnerable to domination and exploitation because they have no significant form of representation or visibility. As I’ll argue in the last two chapters, even from an anthropocentric standpoint, we shouldn’t take these vulnerabilities lightly, because, as mutual interests, failing to address them also entails human injustices with which an anthropocentric political framework is also very much concerned. Hence, the mutual goods and harms shared by humans and nonhumans, which form the basis of an environmental equality, imply that the problems and injustices of the public sphere cannot always be addressed by focusing on human interests and agents. Caring for human agents, in contexts that involve our political ecological relationships, will require mutual concern and public standing for nonhumans.

B. Ecological exploitative domination

In this section, I will move toward amending the theory of environmental domination by considering authors in political theory who develop more nuanced accounts of domination. For example, Ruth Sample and Hallie Liberto further qualify Wertheimer’s understanding of exploitative domination, and are useful resources for amending the concept of environmental domination. One the one hand, Sample argues that “[w]hen a person interacts with another for
the sake of further advantage in a way that degrades the other person in virtue of her vulnerability, exploitation has occurred.”  

Sample grounds her view, using a Kantian framework, with the idea of respect for persons: when there is a lack of respect for persons, an individual or social/political arrangement can exploit a person or group, insofar as persons are often taken advantage and their human dignity is degraded.  

On the other hand, Liberto suggests, using Marilyn Frye’s account of oppression, that the vulnerability in exploitation is that of being caged in, where “someone [has] no reasonable options.” Liberto explains,  

On my view, a necessary condition of being wrongfully exploited is that one is, in part, caged, and one’s exploiter contributes a systematically related bar to that cage. The cage can be comprised of bars, each representing a bad option determined by physical/natural constraints…or the bars can represent bad options that are the product of oppressive social institutions or practices.  

Importantly, for Liberto, the caged-in experience of exploitation differs from the type of harmful domination that is experienced in oppression. The two experiences have a similar structure, insofar as the person being dominated is in a double bind, but “[t]he double bind faced by [someone exploited] need not constitute oppression. One need not be oppressed to be wrongfully exploited, just caged in,” regarding a particular circumstance.  

In short, for Liberto, exploitation is an experience of harmful domination, wherein a person is vulnerable in a specific circumstance: “all of the reasonable alternatives available to the victim are attached to unjust burdens or hassles, and so cage” the individual, which means that the exploiter has “extracted excessive benefits from someone who could not reasonably refuse his offer.”  

Sample’s understanding of exploitation as degrading, when tied to an account of vulnerability like

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59 See, Sample, pgs. 62-73. Also, Sample gives a good example (pgs. 126-127) of how “a system of gender roles” can be exploitative, regardless if the man in question actively intends to gain advantage over a woman.  
61 Ibid., 628.  
62 Ibid., fn. 4 and pg. 629.
Liberto’s, which focuses on “extracting excessive benefits,” provides an understanding of exploitative domination that can amend ecological political accounts of domination.

Exploitation better captures the harmful and dominative political ecological relationships existing between humans and nonhumans because, on the whole, the damages done to nonhuman entities are done in the pursuit of excessive human benefits. For instance, we can again think of industrial farming, wherein agricultural practices and the treatment of nonhuman animals are viewed through the lens of human economics. Competition on the market and the production of cheap, widely available meat is the primary concern. Meanwhile, these farming practices, because of the amount waste they create, actively destroy rivers and living nonhuman entities in these rivers by creating “dead zones,” which in turn harm local residents. These scenarios actively exploit the nonhuman world in order to serve and sustain the extraction of excessive benefits from nonhumans, resulting in harms for many humans and nonhumans. Extinct animals also serve as a great example. There are many species whose extinction came about due to “[t]he hunting, trapping, collecting and fishing of wildlife at unsustainable levels” – i.e., the overexploitation of wildlife – “and there are many species who are slated for the same fate.”63 Other extinct species, and some that are actively becoming extinct, die out due to human practices of excessive consumption that occur only to provide entertainment for those people who find in the thrill of hunting and killing a scarce species. In either scenario, we are dealing with practices that actively support the excessive good of one group by actively maintaining excessively degrading conditions for another group. What’s more, the harms that are created through exploitative environmental domination have side effects that harm many humans, too.

A theory of exploitative domination is also more precise than the traditional understanding of environmental domination, because it helps to pinpoint specific practices and

63 “Threats to Wildlife: Overexploitation,” www.nwf.org
instances of degradation of vulnerable entities, rather than focusing on concepts like ‘nature writ large’ or ‘wilderness.’ To connect domination to these nebulous concepts is very difficult. First, as I’ve already discussed, they usually incorporate the untenable view that the nonhuman is other. One could claim that nature writ large is subjected to limitations and suffering, since habitats and environs are globally shifting as a result of climate change brought on and accelerated by human industry and technology. Yet here too, I think the argument about environmental domination is better argued for, and can ground more practical political obligations, if we focus on specific relationships of exploitative domination. We have an abundance of evidence attesting to the fact that the globe’s climate is changing due to human activity and that this has effects on species worldwide. The World Meteorological Organization’s (WMO) most recent statement on climate change states, “[t]here is a strong scientific consensus that the global climate is changing and that human activity contributes significantly. This consensus is attested to by a joint statement signed in 2005 by 11 of the world’s leading national science academies.”64 If this weren’t proof enough, “[s]everal surveys of the refereed literature on climate change science have confirmed that virtually all published papers accept the fundamentals of human-induced climate change.”65

However, can we clearly state that the evidence of climate change therefore supports the claim that humans dominate every single inch of the nonhuman world? Climate change is surely leading to severe limitations for species in some ecosystems, but it is not yet describable as dominating all species and environs. It might be true that the writing is on the wall and climate change will one day lead to a situation in which all environments and nonhumans throughout the globe are harmfully interfered with. However, it is questionable whether we could ever have

65 Ibid.
access to an epistemic standpoint to sufficiently justify that claim. As the WMO report also points out, there is still difficulty in attributing the efficient cause of specific events: “While climate scientists believe that it is not yet possible to attribute individual events to climate change [e.g., extreme weather and natural disasters], they increasingly conclude that many recent events would have occurred in a different way or would have not occurred at all in the absence of climate change.” Thus, it is more accurate and reasonable to move away from claims about nature writ large, which are largely rhetorical, and instead focus on specific political ecological relationships where we can clearly demonstrate that we are excessively degrading nonhuman entities and environs in virtue of their vulnerabilities.

For example, overexploited nonhumans, mentioned above, are nonhumans that find themselves caged in – often literally so – and they (as well as their species) are degraded, often to the point of extinction. Overexploited species are unable to flourish as a species and experience severe and systemic limitations due to human tastes and preferences that fuel excessive market demands and production practices. This example, I think, shows that we must be much more precise when we discuss the ills of nonhuman entities. For, while select species can become dominated and oppressed due to human practices – to the point of their species’ extinction – it is not clearly the case that this is happening everywhere with every species or nonhuman entity. In practice, when we discuss environmental domination, we point out the destruction of a natural place, resource, or species; we are thus always speaking of a specific context, location, and thing, which is not the same as the wholesale domination or oppression of nature. While some nonhuman beings have been (or are currently being) oppressed by humans and their practices, this simply does not warrant the conclusion that humans dominate every single nonhuman entity. It is also worth seriously considering Stephen Jay Gould’s insight:

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66 Ibid.
“Nature does not exist for us, had no idea we were coming, and doesn’t give a damn about us.”

In sum, the nonhuman world we signify when we use a concept like nature writ large is something much greater than us, which we ourselves are within and depend on. It was around long before us, will be after us, and it seems clear that we hold little power over something as grand as “nature itself.” We might manipulate it at times, and our practices often lead to the domination of specific nonhuman entities that we exist alongside of, but this is hardly a domination of what is referred to by a concept like nature writ large. It is only by virtue of our hubris that we think this referent is something we could actually dominate.

By considering specific social and political forms of exploitative domination, we can successfully develop and apply a political theory of the exploitative domination of nonhumans. The amended view of environmental domination that I am suggesting can further justify the idea that there is an ecological dimension of the public sphere that needs visibility and intervention by systems of governance, since it includes, à la Wertheimer, an “appropriate baseline” (i.e., ecological equality). It is, therefore, reasonable to apply Sample and Liberto’s accounts of exploitative domination to political ecological relationships, even though these thinkers limit their accounts to human interactions. In the cases mentioned above, as well as the factory farming example discussed in chapter one, we are dealing with relationships between two entities sharing a baseline equality, and involving the human exploitation of nonhuman entities—in other words, the excessive degradation of flourishing, to which nonhumans are vulnerable, and which creates harms for humans as well. Hence, the benefit of a conception of domination as exploitation for environmental thought is not only that it is more logical than the human domination of a nonhuman other, but it is also more applicable to claims about obligations that

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aim to protect and sustain our current nonhuman environment and the political ecological relations we share with it. A theory of exploitative domination helps us to focus on specific harms to the environment, rather than trying to show how nature writ large is dominated, a claim that is difficult to defend with any precision.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have demonstrated the multitude of problems (rhetorical, empirical, and logical) that accounts of nonhuman otherness face. Since this otherness lens a key component of many mainstream discussions in environmental philosophy today, and since we need environmental theories like environmental domination, which can ground claims about ethical and political obligations, and motivate practical political change, we should focus on consistent, precise, and empirically accurate theories that can best account for our exploitative relationships with the nonhuman world. By simply approaching the conversation as an effort to understand humans and nonhumans – their similarities and differences, how they live alongside and affect the living of their respective lives – we can still have a thoughtful conversation about the philosophical landscape as it is shaped by environmental concerns. Indeed, by considering our similarities and shared relations with the nonhuman world, we distance ourselves from the theoretical baggage of the natural and artificial distinction, with all its shortcomings and flaws. Doing so makes us better equipped to defend the idea that nonhumans belong to a widened political sphere and so constitute a significant concern in human politics.

In the next chapter, I argue that one way to highlight similarities, as opposed to stark differences between humans and the nonhuman, is to reevaluate the idea of agency. By considering the growing literature on critical accounts of agency – developed by views in actor-network theory – we can begin to see why it is reasonable to consider the nonhuman as in a
political relationship with humans. Similar to the ecological interests and goods discussed in chapter one, an affective concept of agency helps to justify the claim that the nonhuman cannot be understood as completely other-than-human. This is because nonhuman entities play a significant political role in our lives, as agents with the ability to shape and organize human life and human relationships.
Chapter Four
Affective Nonhuman Political Agency

Introduction

In the first three chapters, I considered how mainstream political and environmental theories have a limited view, some more than others, of human relations with the nonhuman world. Political philosophers tend to think of the political sphere as separate from the nonhuman world, while environmentalists often understand the nonhuman as “other” or only partially related to the public sphere (i.e., the incomplete view). I argued that the main limitation of these accounts is that they don’t accurately describe contemporary political ecological relationships that humans currently share with the nonhuman world (e.g., factory farming). In response, I argued for an ecological political sphere, a concept that I suggested is more capable of elucidating our network of ecological interests and harms. I also argued that this ecological network is best conceptualized as a political ecology, because it consists of relations that shape and organize shared interests between human life and the nonhuman world. Additionally, in the last chapter I argued for a concept of environmental equality that would amend the theory that humans dominate the nonhuman world. A concept of environmental equality, I suggested, is needed in order to sufficiently ground claims of injustice toward nonhuman entities.

Chapters four and five focus less on criticism and more on providing a positive description of the ecological political sphere. In the current chapter, I defend a non-anthropogenic concept of political agency, meaning that this type of agency does not originate from humans alone. Since I proposed a new way to envision the political sphere in chapters one and two, and I suggested that nonhumans are not “other” to humans in chapter three, I now want to begin describing the composition of the political sphere – a new commonwealth, so to speak – that results from my argument. In short, if the social relationships assumed in politics’ activities
include political ecological relations with nonhumans, as I’ve argued, then to further defend my claim, I will need to answer two questions: 1) What type of membership belongs to these newcomers to the body politic? and 2) What kinds of political arrangements best accommodate the inclusion of an ecological political sphere?

In this chapter and the final chapter, I will approach these two questions with the political ecological framework that I have been developing since chapter one. That is, my approach does favor a human-centric framework to politics over a nonanthropocentric one (i.e., the “nonhuman turn” discussed in chapter one), even though my argument (at the same time) expands the concept of the public sphere to nonhumans via the ecological relationships that are primarily a result of human social and political practices. In short, I am highlighting conditions within our contemporary public sphere that cannot be reduced to mere human concerns, even though they originate from human practices, which often dominate these nonhuman entities by degrading their vulnerabilities (as discussed in chapter three). However, I will answer question one above by implementing some of the insights of authors who are highly influential voices of the nonhuman turn. The most notable of these are authors Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett; yet, I will also utilize the views of Langdon Winner and Michel Foucault. Though I do not attempt to develop a purely nonanthropocentric view of politics, I do think authors of the nonhuman turn have concepts that are very useful when trying to understand, on the other side of the argument, why politics can no longer be consider merely anthropocentric. Hence, these alternative voices of the nonhuman turn have critical insights, especially regarding our understanding of agency, which can aid the further articulation of my theory of an ecological political sphere and my defense of its reasonableness. In short, in this chapter I will continue the work of pruning
traditional concepts in our traditional political vocabulary – this time, agency – in order to
develop, rather than create anew, a grammar for an ecological political sphere.

It will take both chapters four and five to address the two questions listed above. In this
chapter, I begin answering question 1 by arguing that the nonhuman world involves political
agents. In section one, I consider traditional views of agency that restrict agency to intentional,
rational humans, and I consider the critiques of these views already made by scholars in
nonhuman animal studies. I agree with nonhuman animal theorists who think that the concept of
agency cannot realistically be limited to human beings. Furthermore, using Michel Foucault’s
understanding of politics as power that is “action upon possible action,” I demonstrate through
specific examples that the nonhuman environment involves many agents whose affective
relationship with humans do, in fact, display power relationships that mold human action and
thought. I also develop my concept of affective nonhuman agency by considering key theories in
science and technology studies (e.g., Bruno Latour’s “actants”). I consider, in section two, how
the nonhuman world affectively shapes and helps organize three key human political concerns:
physical well being, conceptions of the good, and our pursuit of ideal living (i.e., happiness).
Section two serves, in part, as the first step toward answering question 2 above, and it aims to
further elucidate claims from chapter one – primarily, that our embedded network of ecological
harms and interests are political. My main objective in this chapter is to show that literatures on
nonhuman agency can further substantiate my view of an ecological political sphere. The chapter
is still, in part, argumentative, insofar as I am arguing for a concept of nonhuman political
agency that can further elucidate and justify my concept of an ecological political sphere.
Agency, political agency, and actants: alternative theories of agency

In chapter one, I discussed the network of ecological harms and interests that are now established in many parts of the world – especially the U.S. – due to factory farming. I argued that the ecological relationships we observe in factory farming are now so embedded that ameliorating the harms and protecting the interests arising from them is an ecological project that cannot be guided by a politics that only governs a human political sphere (e.g., human right to a healthy environment). In this section, I argue for a relational concept of political agency, which does not result from reflective intellectual capacities. Rather, building on my understanding of the political sphere as including those ecological relationships that shape and organize one’s life, I suggest that political agency refers to agents that are, traditionally conceived, active and passive. That is, human beings that have reflective abilities and can “actively” reflect on their relations with other entities are indeed political agents. However, other so-called “passive” entities (like nonhuman animals and the environment) are also political agents. They have “affective political agency”: the nonhuman world is comprised of entities that alter, influence, and have varying degrees of authority over (that is, they politically affect) the lives and actions of human agents (and vice versa).

The ability to partake in the power relationships that shape and organize the lives of others, whether intentional or not, is, I argue, what is required for political agency. I develop this view of political agency by considering theories from the contemporary and growing body of literature in animal studies and science and technology studies. As will become clear in the second part of this section, my analysis shares much with the argument developed by Langdon Winner, Jane Bennett, and Bruno Latour, to the effect that an affective form of agency can be identified in nonhuman entities, even those that are without mindfulness. These authors use the
term ‘affective’ to highlight how nonhumans and humans modify and constitute each other, often “drawing on a Spinozist notion of affect, which refers broadly to the capacity of any body for activity and responsiveness.”\(^1\) This is the meaning of the term ‘affective’ I intend, when I employ it in this chapter to describe nonhumans as “affective agents.” Although these authors usually focus on nonhuman technological objects, I suggest that their theories can be extended to the nonhuman environment that concerns me in this dissertation. In this section I also draw from the notion of politics developed by Michel Foucault in order to further “politicize” the view of agency that authors in science and technology studies have developed. I will discuss my indebtedness to all of these philosophers and theorists in what follows.

**A. Agency and the nonhuman animal critique**

Nonhuman agency is discussed in many different philosophical and theoretical circles. Scholars in critical animal studies as well as science and technology studies (discussed below) have been responsible for influential literature on the topic. These two fields elaborate the ways in which nonhuman things are not quite so alien to human agents as we often suppose, and they build their arguments quite differently due to their respective objects of study – nonhuman animals and technology. Nonhuman animal accounts emphasize shared human and nonhuman capacities like communication, consciousness, sentience, and intentionality, while the field of science and technology studies largely focuses on the affective dimension of technologies on human life and association.

Authors in nonhuman animal studies are quick to debunk the assumption that nonhuman animals are instinctual, non-agential entities, to which humans owe no moral or political consideration. They are largely responding to mainstream philosophers of the twentieth century,

\(^1\) Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), xii.
who defend what I refer to as the traditional view of agency. The view typically restricts agency to human beings, even if there are other similarities that can be observed between humans and nonhumans (e.g., sentience). Donald Davidson’s essay, “Rational Animals,” is an excellent example. In this essay, Davidson extends his previously formulated ideas about agency and action in order to consider which animals can rightly be considered rational, and thus agential, entities. In Davidson’s opinion, a rational agent is an agent who has thoughts, which depend on propositional attitudes and linguistic communication. Or, more generally, Davidson claims the capacity to communicate requires the ability to make subjective-objective distinctions.

Propositional attitudes are central to agency, for Davidson, because they are proof that an agent is capable of having beliefs. He explains that we could never suppose that a dog chasing a cat up a tree can have the belief ‘the cat ran up that oak tree’, because of the degree of specificity and several other beliefs that are necessary in order to formulate such a proposition. For instance, the dog would have to have well formulated concepts of ‘tree’ and ‘cat’ in order for such a belief to be possible. As Davidson explains,

[1]his would seem impossible unless we suppose the dog has many general beliefs about trees: that they are growing things, that they need soil and water, that they have leaves or needles, that they burn. There is no fixed list of things someone with the concept of a tree must believe, but without many general beliefs, there would be no reason to identify a belief as a belief about a tree, much less an oak tree. Similar considerations apply to the dog’s supposed thinking about the cat.

Accordingly, Davidson thinks that, without proof of an assortment of beliefs that have a complex degree of specificity, we cannot, in the first place, think that an animal is capable of a single

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3 See, for instance, Davidson’s essays on agency from the 60s and 70s found in Essays on Actions and Events (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Especially useful is the book’s third essay, “Agency.”

4 Davidson, “Rational Animals,” 326-327.

5 Davidson, “Rational Animals,” 320.
belief, since beliefs are interconnected within a system of meaning and cannot be isolated beliefs. In a straightforward manner, Davidson concludes that nonhuman animals are without thought (meaning, in the end, without rationality and agency), because “unless there is actually such a complex pattern of behavior” – that is, holding several, specific, intersecting beliefs – “there is no thought.” Davidson connects his argument about belief and thought to an intersubjective linguistic defense of rationality. That is, he thinks having a belief requires the concept of belief itself, which is dependent upon language (a shared, social phenomenon). Hence, his conclusion is “that rationality is a social trait. Only communicators have it,” which means that rationality, beliefs, thought – in short, agency – is solely limited to human animals.

Even though Davidson’s argument in “Rational Animals” is well formulated, the main problem he encounters is empirical support. He limits his justifications to hypothetical examples of domesticated animals (dogs and cats), which are by no means the pinnacle of nonhuman animal intelligence; furthermore, Davidson fails to draw on behavioral and cognitive sciences studying animals in a controlled way – i.e., with a methodology that is not limited to one person’s speculative take on a dog’s thought processes when chasing a cat up a tree. Davidson’s account is therefore based on speculation about animal behavior, rather than thorough examination of the animal behavior, which requires some consideration of scientific research. The argument, then, is similar to a view that speculates that fish clearly don’t experience pain in a way similar to humans, because their bodies seem so dissimilar and less complex. Yet, as researcher Dr. Culum Brown explains, “[t]he structure of the fish brain is varied and rather different from ours, yet it functions in a very similar way.” Fish, as Brown’s research demonstrates, have a developed (and reliable) long-term memory, and intelligence that far

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6 Ibid., 322.
7 Ibid., 327.
surpasses popular prejudices about fish (i.e., the “three-second memory” view). In short, judging and understanding nonhuman animals by only considering everyday observations, whether a cat/dog relationship or the bodily difference of a fish, usually produces insufficient accounts of the lives of nonhuman animals. In this light, I think we can isolate indirect and direct critiques of Davidson’s view. Scientists who work with nonhuman animals (like Brown) often provide an indirect critique of the notion that communication and intentionality is limited to rational humans, and philosophers writing on the human/nonhuman animal distinction often directly level similar critiques against Davidson. Next, I will consider the direct responses from philosophers, and then I will consider how scientists in bonobo studies offer an indirect response to Davidson’s view. Both accounts, I argue, give us good reasons to consider agency as a matter of degree, not something that is either present or absent in nonhuman animals. In the second half of this chapter, I suggest that viewing agency as a matter of degree can extend to a theory of political agency that includes nonhuman entities.

Philosopher Helen Steward, for instance, directly critiques Davidson’s position regarding nonhuman animal agency in her essay “Animal Agency,” by arguing, “propositional attitude psychology…is not the essence, but rather a sophisticated outgrowth of the basic concept of agency, suited in particular to enable us to deal with our human conspecifics. The concept of agent is a more general and less demanding notion, applicable unproblematically to many sorts of animals…” In short, Steward does not think the lack of complex propositional behavior renders an entity agentless. For her, following such a view produces an overly intellectualized view of agency that tends to disregard embodiment all together. A more circumspect account of agency certainly differentiates between higher and lower forms of agency, but doesn’t reduce a

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8 For a discussion of Dr. Culum Brown’s research, where this quote comes from, see Peter Singer and Jim Mason, *The Ethics of What We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter* (New York: Rodale, 2006), 130-131.

sense of agency to knowledge content. Rather, in Steward’s view, agency is a sign of more basic physical-intellectual patterns that are found in both humans and nonhumans. In her example, if we observe the activity of a cockerel moving from one side of a farmyard to the other, negotiating its movement in relation to the other nonhuman animals in its visual horizon, it is reasonable that we wouldn’t claim that the activity is the result of propositional attitudes. However, 

[i]t is most unnatural to suppose that the cockerel was caused to make its journey across the yard by anything like a mere reflex or a simple stimulus-response mechanism. For although we obviously have to recognize the huge importance of instinct in the lives of animals, instincts which prescribe for a given animal a range of basic activities from which it is certainly not free to forbear, I think we allow to the animal – and this is crucial, in my view, for the concept of agency – a certain freedom and control over the precise movements by means of which it satisfies those instinctual needs and desires. To watch a creature engaged in such goal-directed activity is, I maintain, to think of it as a moment-to-moment controller of its own body, a centre of subjectivity, a possessor of some representational and some motivational states (whether or not we are prepared to call these beliefs and desires) and a settler of matters which concern its own bodily movements – and this way of thinking is at the same time a way of seeing. 

Steward thus considers agency from an embodied perspective, which includes, but is not limited to, propositional beliefs. In her view, an entity can be described as an agent if it has 1) a body in motion, 2) some form of subjectivity, 3) basic level strivings/intentions, and 4) the ability to, at times, act for itself (i.e., not just action in response to environmental phenomenon). Perhaps a dog doesn’t have the complex networks of belief that are required for propositional thought, but Steward thinks that observing and interacting with nonhuman animals provides demonstrative proof that most are “settler[s] of matters” – things that negotiate and interact with their environment – and this is enough to preclude the notion that they are mere instinctual, machine-
like creatures.\textsuperscript{12} 13

Indeed, scientists who are currently working with primates, and whose work can easily be considered an indirect response to Davidson’s position, offer the most persuasive evidence that agency is hardly something to be restricted to (or originating from) human beings. The research team studying bonobo apes at Iowa’s Great Ape Trust, for instance, have written numerous essays that serve as a striking example of how traditional accounts of nonhuman animals (like Davidson’s) misunderstand the agency of nonhumans when they suggest communication and intentions are unique to humans.\textsuperscript{14} By putting to practice Searle’s claim that consciousness is a property of, not simply the result of, the human brain,\textsuperscript{15} some researchers at the center study how the bonobo apes, when raised in a hybrid human-ape culture (especially from birth), develop

\textsuperscript{12} Steward rightly explains how we have to be quite dedicated to dogmatic forms of thinking to believe that nonhuman animals are not in some way controllers of their bodies and centres of subjectivity. As she explains (p. 229), “It seems to me that the results of the primitive and unreflective categorization of animals as agents are phenomenologically tangible to those open to its influence – watching a bird pecking around for food or a cat stalking a mouse is just utterly unlike watching, say, trees blow in the wind or a car drive down a road. To watch a creature engaged in such goal-directed activity is, I maintain, to think of it as a moment-to-moment controller of its own body, a centre of subjectivity, a possessor of some representational and some motivational states (whether or not we are prepared to call these beliefs and desires) and a settler of matters which concern its own bodily movements – and this way of thinking is at the same time a way of seeing.”

\textsuperscript{13} Additionally, as Blasimme and Bortolotti point out, to even approach the question of nonhuman mindfulness and agency by naïve anthropocentric paradigms – i.e., defining criteria according to highly developed human forms – is to not even broach epistemic legitimation in the categories we employ. That is, if we choose our criteria for key aspects of agency, like mindfulness, from only considering human-to-human relations, then most likely we will miss ways in which the category in question is, in fact, more expansive than its human manifestation. Blasimme and Bortolotti suggest that philosophical discussions of agency can be enriched by work being done in the sciences. We can criticize behavioral sciences and comparative psychology on the grounds that they too think the human mind is the model of mindfulness, yet they are still more favorable because they “offer a vantage point that is at least, in principle, capable of expanding our understanding of animal minds beyond the restricted boundaries of ordinary thought” (pg.92). See, Alessandro Blasimme and Lisa Bortolotti, “Intentionality and the Welfare of Minded Nonhumans,” Theorema 29 (2010): 83-96.


\textsuperscript{15} The authors primarily use John Searle’s view as it is laid out in The Rediscovery of the Mind (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992).
non-reactive linguistic and reasoning capabilities similar to human infants.\textsuperscript{16} That is, the nonhuman apes are not just responding to rote memorization of pictorial or linguistic cues, but are able to, themselves, initiate conversations and synthesize information from conversations, even when the information is not directed at them.\textsuperscript{17} Furthermore, we have good reason to believe that they are even able to conceive of their own good and a sense of good living and welfare.\textsuperscript{18} From these studies, the researchers have concluded that

\begin{quote}
[...]the paradigms of the past, in which animal cognition is viewed as riding upon a different substrate than human cognition, are breaking down...[since new research is] investigating the issues of intentionality, inter-subjectivity, sematic meaning, observational learning, and tool use from a new perspective – one that incorporates the historical and social-affective development of the subject into the assessment process. In essence the ‘experimenter’ becomes a part of the world of the ‘subject’ in order to ascertain the competencies of the other.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

An important focus of nonhuman studies is relational and interactive models of research and experimentation. Instead of studying bonobo apes in a fixed and controlled laboratory setting, researchers are living with and creating alternative human-ape and ape-ape cultures. In short, they are developing \textit{sui generis} techniques of assessing and teaching language, which require the development of new frameworks of understanding, both on the part of researchers and the apes alike.\textsuperscript{20} Perhaps more than any other nonhuman animal scholarship, bonobo studies have shown

\textsuperscript{16} These researchers describe their framework in the following way: “We accept Searle's description of consciousness and agree with the view that subjective experience must be taken seriously as an object of study. Moreover, we would observe that ‘consciousness cannot be understood unless it is accurately described and that reductive approaches are inherently inappropriate to this descriptive task’ (Velmans, 1998)...Our position is a simple assumption: consciousness is a property (Searle, 1992) which the brain manipulates in ways we might conceive of as bending, folding, focusing, or magnifying. Such contouring of consciousness is a function of the brain's typology, which we assert has been fashioned by culture. We suggest that reality is a construction of consciousness molded by forces of the brain shaped by culture.” See, Savage-Rumbaugh et al., “Ape Consciousness-Human Consciousness,” 910.

\textsuperscript{17} For example, the researchers explain that one bonobo, Kanzi, was put in a room where two researchers talked to each other about how to properly use certain tools. Then, when given said tools, Kanzi put to work the information overheard in the researchers’ conversation, without any non-linguistic demonstration or direct linguistic instruction. Ibid., 916-920.

\textsuperscript{18} See Savage-Rumbaugh et al., “Welfare of Apes in Captive Environments.”

\textsuperscript{19} Savage-Rumbaugh et al., “Ape Consciousness-Human Consciousness,” 919.

\textsuperscript{20} The researchers moved from a simplistic model that uses a lexical keyboard and one-on-one work with individual apes to a model that focuses on exchanges of meaning between multiple apes who understood the lexical keyboard. An important study with apes Sherman and Austin “revealed that symbolic communication of a high level, with the
how changing our obsolete models of nonhuman animals “requires inter-subjectivity – the mutual attribution of intentionality and a joint history, informed by mutually shared affective experiences. These components of communication are not limited to *Homo sapiens*, nor are they a peculiarity of the human capacity to reason.”

Nonhuman animal studies present difficult challenges for traditional accounts of agency. To limit agency to reflective human intellects doesn’t fully capture the embodied experience that is also important to these traditional agents, as Steward suggests; moreover, there are many important aspects of traditional agents (sentience, consciousness, and language) that most current studies suggest exist on a continuum for humans and nonhumans. Hence, the authors I’ve considered above highlight the human and nonhuman animal similarities that are striking when we assess nonhuman animals with empirical studies that more carefully reflect on the types of lives and capacities that nonhuman animals exhibit. This methodology is found in Steward’s “settlers of matters” and the enormous time and energy spent living with bonobo apes by researchers at the Great Ape Trust. It is also worth mentioning that many ethical theorists writing on nonhuman animals also focus on shared capacities like sentience, consciousness, and emotions. In short, studies on nonhuman animals give excellent reasons to believe that more expansive concepts of agency are more compelling than traditional accounts like Davidson’s.

Nonhuman animals studies suggest we are better off asking about *degrees* of agency in human and nonhuman animals, rather than considering agency a strict, categorical distinction.

However, what does this conversation tell us about the agency – especially the *political* agency –

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21 Ibid., 919.

of nonhuman entities that lack subjectivity? My claim thus far has been that there exists an ecological political sphere that includes living and non-living entities, subjective and non-subjective entities. Hence, while I do find nonhuman animal studies an extremely useful resource – especially since it provides a significant critique of traditional views of agency – the view of nonhuman agency found in science and technology studies is more useful for my argument. This is because thinkers in science and technology studies link their conception of agency to affectivity, rather than shared capabilities like consciousness and sentience. Affective agency, I argue, can be developed as a political concept that can be applied to many different environmental nonhumans, no matter their similarities with human beings.

B. Science and technology studies and political agency

There are two insights that influence my conclusion that political agency is a concept that can be extended beyond human agents. First, there is the idea, coming from Steward, that an agent is a “settler of matters.” If we understand politics as activities and processes that organize collective life, as I argued in chapter one and two, then I think Steward’s concept can be applied to political conversations by adding a qualification: a political agent is an organizer of matters. That is, an entity can be considered a political agent when it is actively involved in constraining and enabling the action of others, which doesn’t necessarily require intentionality or rational discourse; it often does, but neither intentionality nor rational discourse is a necessary condition of the ability to organize others and collective relationships. Thus, for people living near factory farms, as well as low-income farmers of the global South (discussed below), political ecological networks shape and organize their lives lived among each other. There are many human, discursive forces that shape these realities (e.g., laws, social customs, and economic markets), however, day-to-day relationships with the nonhuman world are often additional factors
constituting, say, economic standing or the forms of disease and health that are possible for human individuals.

I will develop the idea of a political agent as an “organizer of matters”, second, by relating this concept to Michel Foucault’s idea of politics as “action upon possible action.” While Foucault does not explicitly develop a nonhuman account of political agency from this concept of politics, I find it very useful for developing my account of an ecological political sphere. Foucault’s concept of politics, when applied to the notion of nonhuman affective agency, helps to further justify the claim that political agency is not limited to human agents. Human agents do have different possibilities to shape collective life, and the ways they do shape collective life are often more explicit, and are stated, justified, and defended via linguistic practices. However, if we come back to the insight above, derived from critical animal studies, that agency occurs in degrees, it becomes clear that we have some very good reasons for thinking of agency and political agency as something that is not merely a human potentiality.

First, unless we beg the question, as I argued authors defending nonhuman “otherness” do when they assume naturalness is a standard that measures proximity to humans, then political agency is best approached without the assumption that it is a standard measured according to intentionality or discourse. That is, I argued that considering naturalness as a matter of the degree to which a thing is separated from human cultures and practices only works if it is clear that humans don’t belong to nature in the first place. This point is never clearly established or argued for by authors who defend this view – it is simply assumed. Likewise, a concept of agency must be approached as a general quality – something that occurs on a continuum – and not simply a standard that we assume must derive from a particular instance or type of agency (i.e., human agency). The view that an agent is a “settler of matters” therefore approaches the concept as a
qualitative interaction of a thing with its environment. Now, Steward still connects the idea of a “settler of matters” to nonhuman animals having a clear subjective state of some kind, but I argue that this is just one way to understand a thing that “settles matters.” For instance, Langdon Winner suggests that technology often settles a matter for a community. There are “instances in which the invention, design, or arrangement of a specific technical device or system becomes a way of settling an issue for a community.” While the person creating the device can intentionally design it in order to settle a matter in a specific way (thus eliminating any clear sense of political agency in a technology), there are many historical cases wherein a technical device settles an issue for a community in a manner that doesn’t rely on the intentions of humans. Winner considers, for example, how built environments prior to the 1970s included many devices that settled the issue of mobility for the public in a way that marginalized disabled bodies:

But to recognize the political dimension in the shapes of technology does not require that we look for conscious conspiracies or malicious intentions. The organized movement of handicapped people in the United States during the 1970s pointed out the countless ways in which machines, instruments, and structures of common use – buses, buildings, sidewalks, plumbing fixtures, and so forth – made it impossible for many handicapped persons to move about freely, a condition that systematically excluded them from public life. It is safe to say that designs unsuited for the handicapped arose more from long-standing neglect than from anyone’s active intention. But now that the issue has been raised for public attention, it is evident that justice requires a remedy. A whole range of artifacts are now being redesigned and rebuilt to accommodate this minority. In this passage, Winner argues that technology can settle an issue for a public, even though this technical device is clearly not an intentional subjectivity, nor is there a conspiracy coming from intentional human subjectivities that causes the effects of particular technological devices to include or marginalize specific individuals from public life. In this way, it is possible, using my phrase, to think of things as organizers of public matters, even without intentional subjectivity. If an entity has intentional subjectivity, then surely the way in which it can organize matters in

24 Ibid., 125.
public can differ – perhaps it is more explicit, visible, or even efficient. However, this does not mean that the ability to organize matters that are public only occurs in this one fashion. Nonhumans, too, are entities that organize public matters, and many authors of the nonhuman turn have argued for this view.

For instance, in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett argues in favor of a view of affective agency that includes any basic material entity (biotic or abiotic). Bennett’s politics of technology and material is presently in an inchoate form, but even still, we can understand that she is attempting a significant reorientation of political theory. For Bennett, there is a primary foundation to value, which she understands as the vibrancy of matter: a force, power, or ability to effect, self-organize, and associate (what she calls “thing-power”). The vitality of material, Bennett thinks, will help us to develop a more nuanced account of agency and politics. She suggests that to possess affective properties, even without language, communicative voice, or intention, is to have agential relations and politics. Bennett does nuance her view by claiming that affective agency does not result in absolute equivalence between environmental matter and human beings, since humans are more complex material realities with greater talents and skills. However, this does not entail a refusal to admit that the nonhuman can also be agential and political. Explaining her view with the analogy of bicycling, she says,

> Agency is, I believe, distributed across a mosaic, but it is also possible to say something about the kind of striving that may be exercised by a human within the assemblage. This exertion is perhaps best understood on the model of riding a bicycle on a gravel road. One can throw one’s weight this way or that, inflect the bike in one direction or toward one trajectory of motion. But the rider is but one actant operative in the moving whole.

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26 Ibid., 94-95.
27 Ibid., 38.
In Bennett’s view, we are enmeshed within a network of vital materials. There are complex, lively materials, like human beings, but there are also lively nonhuman materials that function as agents. Political relationships, on this view, are not specific to humanity, but are something that all materials, as effective bodies, are a part of. Thus, agency is extended to nonhuman biotic things as well as technologies – like electrical grids.28 29

Bennett’s account of nonhuman political agency is not radically new. In fact, as I will discuss below, it complements and further develops ideas central to the work of Langdon Winner and Bruno Latour. Moreover, I think that the notion of politics that Bennett is implementing can be seen in the late writings of Michel Foucault, one of the twentieth century’s most significant political theorists. Foucault’s understanding of politics as power that is “action upon possible action,” supports an affective account of political agency, even if Foucault doesn’t explicitly advocate an understanding of politics that extends to nonhumans. Below, I support Foucault’s concept of politics and consider how it complements and helps me to further develop my concept of an ecological political sphere.

In Foucault’s essay “The Subject and Power,” an essay written late in his life,30 he explains his developed and mature concept of power as having an “active” quality that is concerned with the types of action that are available to a person. As he explains,

The exercise of power is not simply a relationship between ‘partners,’ individual or collective; it is a way in which some act on others…Power exists only as an exercise by some on others, only when it is put into action…In effect, what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of

30 This essay first appeared in 1982, two years before Foucault’s death, as an afterward Foucault wrote for Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow’s Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). The version I am using is found in Michel Foucault, Power, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1994).
action that does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on possible or actual future or present actions.31 The politics of power that Foucault describes here is any activity that delimits and enables the boundaries of others’ action. In short, if one sees oneself as able to be or do a certain thing, this is largely due, according to Foucault, to the series of power relationships that help to form who one is now, and who one aspires to be in the future. If certain laws, for instance, keep one from, or allow one to, marry a person whom one loves, then these laws are examples of power relationships. Legal standards of this sort will often, when longstanding, affect how people envision their lives, and what, in general, they see as life possibilities. That is, these types of public standards will often shape the choices and decisions people make in their day-to-day lives, and how they understand the sort of happiness that is available to them and worth pursuing. The activity of power, in this example a law about marriage, organizes and manages social relationships, which implies that people and things become political agents insofar as they have this ability to act upon the possible action of others. Foucault’s account implies, in short, that a political agent is an agent of power: having the ability to affect and determine, to varying degrees, how others live with each other and understand themselves.

Foucault’s understanding of the politics of power, similar to my description of politics in earlier chapters, is an activity that organizes the activity ranges expressed within people’s relations to one another, even though Foucault’s account goes further than mine by making claims about the constitution of self-knowledge and subjectivity. Yet, in the closing pages of this chapter, I will discuss how a concept of affective nonhuman agents can inform our notions of an ideal life. These claims do support Foucault’s understanding of power’s role in forming subjectivity. For me, as for others, an affective view of politics provides a vantage point for

31 Foucault, 340.
assessing the nonhuman’s place in politics: nonhuman entities are an active part of the political, since they often affect one’s actions and pursuits of life with others.

For example, if we return to Winner’s insights, we see that he develops an understanding of affective nonhuman politics that implies an understanding of political agency similar to Foucault’s theory. In “Do Artifacts Have Politics?,” Winner considers the veracity of Lewis Mumford’s view that the politics of objects is predetermined by the social and economic systems from whence they originate. For Mumford, any political aspect of technologies is determined by clear-cut intentions behind their development, and they either restrict the public, guiding it in a specific direction (authoritarian), or they provide the public with a new resource for self-governing (democratic). Winner, critical of this political reductionism, explains the flexibility of technological artifacts: they are created by human labor, but they are rarely wholly determined by human intentionality. Technologies, as he explains, often involve varying political ramifications, given that we can never fully predict how a society will encounter these objects or what historical processes will alter human relationships with a technology, no matter how loaded with intentions it may be at the start. However, Winner does think one thing is clear: nonhuman technological entities are agents of politics at times, because many technologies “establish a framework for public order that will endure over many generations. For that reason the same careful attention one would give to the rules, roles, and relationships of politics must also be given to such things as the building of highways, the creation of television networks, and the

33 For Winner’s discussion of Mumford see Winner, 121.
34 Winner provides several case study examples of the way technology and artifacts affect politics. He examines the construction of low-hanging overpasses in Long Island, NY during the early 20th century, Cyrus McCormick’s “pneumatic molding machines” created in the 1880s, as well as the history and development of the tomato harvester by UCLA in the 1940s. These examples, according to Winner, result in affects on power and human relations that range from clearly intentional to those that are unintentional (or both). See Winner, 123-128.
tailoring of seemingly insignificant features of new machines.\textsuperscript{35} In other words, these technologies are political because they involve “arrangements of power and authority in human associations as well as activities that take place within those arrangements.”\textsuperscript{36}

Winner thus considers the affective power of technology to alter power arrangements, which has the effect of changing human relations and the types of action therein. Winner’s conception of politics, which is based on power arrangements and shaping the action of others, echoes Foucault’s understanding of politics and demonstrates how this theory of politics can extend to nonhuman entities. Bruno Latour, another writer in science and technology studies, has developed a concept to account for the particular agency of nonhuman entities. In his early work, Latour referred to nonhuman agents as “quasi-objects,” but as he has refined his theory he has opted for the less awkward “actant.”\textsuperscript{37}

Latour, offering a rather idiosyncratic suggestion, argues that nonhumans are actors who “speak” and associate with us, just as much as we understand and relate to them. That is, he asks us not to presume from the start that nonhuman technologies are somehow determined beings and we are free subjects. Rather, both cases exhibit a “recalcitrance.” Often, things surprise us and tell us something we did not expect to find (and which we could not simply construct ourselves). Thus, he argues, we are not simply free to construct things as we wish, but, rather, in nonhuman relationships we find our knowledge determined and co-constituted by nonhumans. An \textit{actant}, for Latour, is an entity that is neither a static object nor a human subject.\textsuperscript{38} Latour suggests that a polemical model of subjects and objects does not quite capture the experience of

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 128.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{37} For instance, in \textit{We Have Never Been Modern}, nonhuman agents are strictly referred to as quasi-objects. See, for example, 51-55 and 82-85.
relating to or attempting to understand nonhumans. Rather, the experience involves “a range of uncertainties going from necessity to freedom.”\textsuperscript{39} \textsuperscript{40} In short, when giving an account of a human and nonhuman relationship, Latour claims that we cannot assume that the human subject is the agent. The production of facts and knowledge requires the interrelationship between humans and nonhumans, and thus our account should be considered a “pragmatogony”: “an account of the reciprocal constitution of human subjects and the objects of their world.”\textsuperscript{41}

The concept “actant” is useful for my view of an ecological political sphere, mainly because Latour challenges us to reformulate our understanding of association and commonality to include affective relationships. Although he often discusses these associations in a laboratory setting, I think we can include actants in our relationship with the nonhuman environment. Often, as I will argue in the next section, the nonhuman environment is an actor that helps shape our life, even if it is not agential in the traditional sense discussed by Davidson. We often do exist with nonhuman beings in a “range of uncertainties,” and we are often challenged to rethink our moral and political systems, for instance, in light of new discoveries and elucidations about the way the nonhuman affects human relationships.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 82.
\textsuperscript{40} To understand this “range of uncertainties,” Latour asks us, in his \textit{Politics of Nature}, to consider a laboratory setting. In this setting, Latour claims that it is correct to think that the nonhuman entities involved (whether the technology or the material entities being analyzed) are things that have degrees of uncertainties, and that human action and thought is also uncertain. It is unclear how the nonhumans will express themselves – what and how they will show themselves – and it is uncertain how humans will respond to what is expressed. In any given experiment, we form, \textit{with} nonhumans, “an association whose exact composition is not yet known to anyone, but about which a series of trials makes it possible to say that [both humans and nonhumans] \textit{act}, that is, quite simply, that they modify other actors through a series of trials that can be listed thanks to some experimental protocol. This is the minimal, secular, nonpolemical definition of an actor.” (pg. 75) Furthermore, “Anyone who believes that nonhumans are defined by strict obedience to the laws of causality must never have followed the slow development of a laboratory experiment…To distribute roles from the outset between the controllable an obedient object on the one hand and the free and rebellious human on the other is to preclude…[considering how nonhumans are]…mediators with whom it is necessary to reckon, as active agents whose potential is still unknown” (pgs. 81-82).
Moreover, by including the insights of Foucault and Winner, we can develop a conception of affective nonhuman agency – like Latour’s actants – that is political. That is, nonhumans are not only agents insofar as our experiments in science involve non-polemical relationships that involve a range of uncertainties, but, rather, they are also entities that affect our range of public actions. As a consequence, I argue that nonhuman entities do indeed co-constitute many of our human relationships and, as such, affect the manner in which we experience power and authority in our public and day-to-day lives. In the next section, I provide examples that further substantiate the claim that nonhuman affective agency is not only a reasonable description of agency; it is also a political force in our lives.

**Affective political agency abounds: physical, conceptual, and ideal affective agency**

In the last section I provided an overview of alternative accounts of agency and I suggested a framework to develop an understanding of political nonhuman agency that is derived from a theory of affective agency. In this section, I further defend this claim by considering three specific ways in which nonhumans are affective political agents in the lives of humans. My defense of affective nonhuman political agency seeks to further justify the idea of an ecological dimension of the political sphere. That is, even though the nonhuman entities that we share ecological relationships with are often entities (rivers, trees, etc.) that don’t resemble the majority of human capabilities and interests, they do remain significant political agents that greatly affect our basic needs and interests, how we relate with other humans, and how we pursue our conceptions of a rewarding, good life. In short, they shape and arrange our current engagements and ways of life, and they propose limits, responsibilities, and goods that we aspire to have in the future.
A. Material dependencies

Nonhumans are a part of our entrenched ecological network (as seen in factory farming); as such, they are social and political agents in the lives of humans. In the life of our communities and in our institutions, the nonhuman plays a significant role shaping and organizing our lives. Our economic well being, which is connected to a multitude of relationships (gender, class, race, etc.), serves as an excellent example. In fact, popular theoretical accounts of global politics (discussed in more detail below) have pinpointed the entrenched relationship between environmental mismanagement/degradation and global poverty/inequality. Whether causation is linked to international economics and trade, neocolonialism, or merely unjust political procedures that can be rectified with better practical guidelines (all three are often combined), the nonhuman environment has been placed at the forefront of these discussions, especially when the concern is the realization of transnational justice.\(^\text{42}\) Thus, the nonhuman plays a significant role in guiding the actions and possible actions of current global economic and agriculture practices. Often, such a view captures a negative description of nonhuman agency. That is, situations in which environmental nonhumans are mostly absent from the lives of people provide a salient example of how material dependency affects the lives of humans.

For instance, empirical studies by UN organizations confirm accounts of global theorists that connect environmental degradation to extreme inequality. The Food and Agricultural Organization’s (FAO) investigations concerning access to environmental resources (land and water), and their connection to development, have demonstrated how production models driven

\(^{42}\) We see this, for example, in Amartya Sen *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), chapter 9. Also worth considering are authors in political ecology who examine the relation between economics, ecology, and social and political practices. For most authors, all of these fields of inquiry are interrelated and dialectical. For a good introduction and overview of new and old views of political ecology, see Michael Watts and Richard Peet, “Liberating Political Ecology,” in *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, development, social movements*, Richard Peet and Michael Watts eds., (New York: Routledge, 2004).
by continual increases in environmental output (e.g., agriculture) for the lowest cost possible, trend away from the alleviation of extreme poverty. As the FAO reports, there is a direct correlation between increased levels of poverty and the highest levels of environmental degradation/the lowest amount of improving lands.\(^{43}\)

The concentrations of rural poverty can be linked to marginal lands where access to land and water is uncertain. Commonly, poor farmers are locked in a poverty trap of small, remote plots with no secure tenure, poor-quality soils and high vulnerability to land degradation and climatic uncertainty. At the same time, technologies and farming systems within their reach are typically low-management, low-input systems that often contribute to resource degradation. However, improved farming systems can modify the relationship between land and water resources and poverty: the likelihood of being poor is much lower (less than half) when improved farming systems are employed (Hussain and Hanjra, 2004). Thus, improving land and water tenure arrangements and management practices in these areas is likely to have a direct positive impact on food insecurity and poverty (Lipton, 2007).\(^{44}\)

The nonhuman world, as these studies suggest, is an integral part of lives of those in extreme poverty. The type of relationship with the nonhuman environment, and the degree of nonhuman presence, in the lives of these people can be directly connected to many important capabilities. As the FAO report concludes, better access to, and responsible practices with, the nonhuman environment are the factors most likely to secure food and improved economic status for many people in the world, especially those who face extreme levels of poverty and famine.

The FAO example supports a view of physical dependency on the nonhuman environment and the idea that the nonhuman is a political agent because nonhuman entities often play a significant role in determining one’s economic standing. While many of us in the global North are not always conscious of our degree of environmental dependency, or the role it plays in our economic flourishing, which is discussed by some authors as the result of environmental racism,\(^{45}\) those in extreme poverty have quite different realities. Rural, low-income farmers, as

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\(^{44}\) Ibid., 69.

\(^{45}\) Luke Cole and Shelia Foster provide their now classic view in *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001). Their analysis of
discussed in FAO quote above, are stuck in a “poverty trap” that results from the way the nonhuman world is present in, and determines, their economic standing. If these people had access to better soil and better water, it is reasonable to conclude, as the study suggests, that there would be a direct impact on their economic standing and their ability to escape the cyclical poverty trap they now experience. There are surely human social and political relationships to blame as well, which perhaps form the causal origin of the nonhuman relations that contribute to the poverty trap. For instance, the unequal and unjust distribution of land and water are usually not random or coincidental, but, instead, the result of human political decisions. However, once these practices have become entrenched, as they are in the “poverty trap” described above, the efficient cause of the trap is (to some degree) less significant than the current reality that these people face. That is, human practices are likely the source of most of these traps and entrenched relationships with the nonhuman world, but the day-to-day reality is that nonhumans are now central agents that affect and perpetuate the trap. Without changing the nonhuman circumstances and relations (i.e., basic material realities), these low-income farmers will not evade the poverty trap. The poverty trap, in other words, is consistent with the political ecological framework that I defend throughout this dissertation. Human practices have organized many ecological relationships we experience today; however, these relationships have become so entrenched that nonhumans are now themselves describable as belonging to the public sphere. In the example of the poverty trap experienced by low-income farmers, nonhumans are clearly causal agents that directly affect people’s economic standing. The political standing of these nonhumans does not override the human origin of the ecological condition, nor the fact that changing the condition

Chester, Pennsylvania (chapter three) captures the unequal and race-based distribution of toxic waste, yet as they go on to analyze in chapter four, “Chester is not unique as a magnet for toxic waste facilities: it shares a social, political, and economic history with other communities that are experiencing a proliferation of unwanted toxic waste sites.” (pg. 54)
would also probably involve human political action similar to the original actions and decisions.

Likewise, I argue, the human social and political discourses and actions that affect these realities do not override the fact that nonhumans are currently playing such a central role in determining human economic standing. While an affective relationship with the nonhuman is clearer in global South, we all physically depend on the nonhuman environment, and this dependency is a very basic way in which we realize our actions, our economic standing, and what sorts of lives are possible for us. For many of us in the North, the degree to which our bodily needs and social and political standing relies on these entities is often hidden from our public purview.

Furthermore, the FAO report further substantiates existing studies on gender disparities in relation to the nonhuman environment. Both the 2010 Asia-Pacific Development Report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the 2009 World Survey of Women in Development show that, globally, women bear the greatest brunt of environmental injustices. Social norms in many places leave women in an environmental double bind: they are responsible for the majority of food production while they lack “access to land, credit, or other productive assets,” and this “[l]ack of access to and control over land and property has been increasingly linked to poverty, migration, urbanization, violence and HIV/AIDS.”46 Unfortunately, even the recent legal land reforms in these areas have not provided women with “real rights” that trump “long-standing social norms favoring men’s rights to land,”47 which is on par with the worldwide phenomenon of women being a minute percentage of property right holders.48 This double bind

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47 Ibid., 43.
48 The most often-quoted percentage is that women own only 1-2% of land worldwide. This estimate has received some criticism, but it can generally be agreed that even if the percentage is not quite this low, it is probably not significantly higher – mainly due to the extent of women’s inequality in other arenas and the fact that legal reforms do not always successfully overhaul social practices and norms. For a critique of the estimate, see Philip Cohen, “Women Own 1% of World Property: A Feminist Myth that Won’t Die,” The Atlantic, March 8, 2013; for the still
has even further environmental complications, because, as is the case in Asia and the Pacific, “[w]hen property rights are weaker for women, they may have less capacity and fewer incentives to practice conservation and protection—particularly if they are struggling to make a living. Crops that can be quickly grown and harvested, even if they lead to soil erosion, will take precedence over long-term options, such as slow-growing trees needed for reforestation.” Thus, even the effects of climate change hit women the hardest. They have “less control over assets and fewer coping mechanisms,” meaning they “will be among those most affected by natural disasters and declines in energy, water and food resources.” In sum, women around the globe often suffer more than men, because they lack access to the nonhuman environment, an affective political agent that is crucial to every person’s flourishing.

In a very basic sense, it is also important to remember, as Jane Bennett suggests, that we all subsist on food and our food has important public effects. Bennett critiques the view that food is “a passive resource at the disposal of consumers” and instead argues that “[e]dible material is an agent inside and alongside intention-forming, morality-(dis)obeying, language-using, reflexivity-wielding, culture-making human beings.” She develops her position by considering numerous studies showing that increases of fatty acids (e.g., omega-3) were directly linked to the decrease of anti-social behavior in prison inmates, an increase in learning comprehension in children, and a lower rate of depression. In her view, “[s]cientific studies of the effects of dietary fat on the moods and cognitive dispositions of humans, not only the thickness of their flesh” lead to the conclusion that “[f]ood is an active inducer-producer of salient, public

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Again, we often underestimate the degree to which our relations with the nonhuman world include nonhuman affective agencies that, at times, can have power over our actions and associations in ways that are hardly obvious to the casual observer or one holding a traditional view of agency.

From these examples, we can begin to get a real sense of the global extent to which nonhumans affect the lives of people. Those in extreme poverty are those with the least amount of power and control over environmental sustainability and resources (which furthers their destitution), and it is clear that, globally, women are suffering the most from this situation. Even when we promote development plans to increase production (with the aim of having more food and resources), if these plans do not encourage sustainable practices and direct relationships between people and the nonhumans that significantly shape their lives, it is unlikely that extreme levels of poverty will improve. Furthermore, food, which we physically depend on, in some cases, demonstrates the ability to actually affect our dispositions, moods, and how we relate to others. Environmental nonhumans are thus crucial, affective agents in our lives, which corroborates the need for an ecological political sphere. Even if issues of acute poverty and famine (the most important covered above) seem distant to those of us in North America, research suggests that many citizens of our own countries face similar scenarios.

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53 Ibid., 134.
54 Donna Haraway also reflects on the way in which nonhuman things are agents in our lives. For instance, at the start of When Species Meet (pg. 3-4) she considers how our selves are largely composed of entities that we don’t usually consider ‘human’: “I love the fact that human genomes can be found in only 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with genomes of bacteria, fungi, protest, and such, some of which play a symphony necessary to my being alive at all, and some of which are hitching a ride and doing the rest of me, of us, no harm. I am vastly outnumbered by my tiny companions; better put, I become an adult human being in company with these tiny messmates. To be one is always to become with many.” See When Species Meet (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2008).
55 Although I have given examples of the importance of nonhuman agency in the global South, it can also easily be seen in the global North, and even in the wealthiest countries in North America. For instance, we can look at mountain top removal and how this produces environmental inequality for the low-income people of the Appalachian United States. A great deal of sociologist Shannon Elizabeth Bell’s work focuses on this issue. See Shannon Elizabeth Bell and Yvonne A. Braun, “Coal, Identity, and the Gendering of Environmental Justice
B. Moral and political agents

Nonhuman entities exhibit affective agency in ways that shape and organize our politics and morals, in addition to being physical agents that affect our human bodily needs. Here we have a very direct (i.e., positive) encounter with affective agency that is more readily called ‘political’. Before I consider environmental nonhumans, I want to consider how science and technology studies can help situate my claim. For example, studies on information systems are extremely useful in this regard. Authors writing on information systems suggest that machines have significant forms of agency, and can affect our moral theories and practices. Alison Adam, for instance, suggests that technology can be an agent central to human ethics, because many technologies – in her example, police databases – are not merely instruments into which

Activism in Central Appalachia,” *Gender and Society* 24 (2010): 794-813. Moreover, in an essay co-written with Richard York, Bell considers the historical dependency of coal in the lives of those in Central Appalachia (pgs. 192-193) and the two “argue that the coal industry in West Virginia has worked to instill a sense of cultural identity” to a degree “that ideological manipulation is a means by which those in power attempt to hold on to that power.” (pg. 187). See “Community Economic Identity: The Coal Industry and Ideology Construction in West Virginia,” in *Environmental Sociology: From Analysis to Action*, eds. Leslie King and Deborah McCarthy Auriffeille (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014).


57 For instance, in “Socio-Theoretical Accounts of IS,” Rose et al. explain the differences between machine and human agency quite well, and especially underscore the significance of machines for humans’ ability to realize their own agency. They explain this (pgs. 145-146) saying “If people do not perceive it to be possible to alter the machines they work with, then the machines have become autonomous at least in the sense that they are as they are, and that their design history has become effectively irrelevant. In addition it is impossible for the designers of the machines to foresee, or in many cases even understand, all the sets of conditions they will be used under, or the decisions of the humans who supervise and work with them. Machine agency, however, should not be understood as equivalent to human agency. Many of the components which are central to human agency (such as self awareness, social awareness, interpretation, intentionality and the attribution of agency to others), are not readily available to machines, though rudimentary forms of them can increasingly be programmed…The exercise of agency, through its intended and unintended consequences, partially constitutes the set of conditions under which the future exercise of agency is carried out. In this emergent process, machine and human agency can be found inextricably intertwined: a double dance of agency. Humans base their actions on complex interpretations of past actions and present conditions, and on attributions of agency to machines. Those actions are partly planned, partly opportunistic; partly proactive, partly re-active to conditions; partly successful, partly unsuccessful; part strategic over-sight, part bricolage and tinkering. Machines (in this case computer systems) also play an important (but different) part in the double dance. Machines facilitate and enable some parts of the human exercise of agency, but constrain other parts. Seen more from the standpoint of their own agency, they accommodate some human purposes, but resist others. Humans try to marshal the agency of machines to serve their own purposes, but cannot always anticipate or control the consequences. Outcomes are emergent from the interaction of both forms of agency, not from one alone.”
we input “behavioral coordinates” and get a particular shaping of human action in return.\textsuperscript{58} Adams makes this point by considering the manner in which the UK’s Data Protection Act (DPA) aims to secure the privacy of individuals, yet in practice it has been known to keep pertinent criminal information about individuals from employers, which has resulted in heinous workplace crimes.\textsuperscript{59}

Adam suggests that moral responsibility spans a network of human and nonhuman interactions: humans have to negotiate human/human relationships alongside of technology – technology, here, playing an affective role shaping human social and political living – and this means that typically humans are not the only causal agents when mistakes are made (i.e., the erasure of personal data).

The morality is distributed through the network of the people who protect personal data from being wrongly accessed, the people who must judge when to make personal data available and the database which, through its holding of personal data records, has morality delegated to it and inscribed in it. The database can exert controls over people through the actions of those who may or may not retrieve personal data.\textsuperscript{60}

Even if we consider technology to be the surrogate of human intentions, this is not enough to absolutely deny the agency of technology, since technologies actively shape human lives insofar as we are intertwined in networking relationships with these objects, which tacitly carry norms with them: “The designer of technology inscribes morality into its design whether it involves paying electricity bills, fastening seat belts or handling personal data in such a way that privacy is protected appropriately. Meaningful moral activity may be achieved, therefore, without a high degree of agency.”\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{58} Adam, 236-237.
\textsuperscript{59} Her key example is how the DPA led police officers to erase a person’s criminal record of assault and underage sex charges, and this person went on to gain employment at a school where he was arrested for the murder and rape of ten children who were under his care at the school. See Adam, 233-236.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 241.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 240-241.
To return to Winner for a moment, he argues that nonhuman technology challenges our morals and politics in ways that are often irreducible to the human intentions that create and use technology. Winner explains, using the atom bomb as an example, that no matter how democratic a society is, the presence of an atom bomb (or any weapon that can cause mass destruction) necessarily creates authoritarian political relationships: “The internal social system of the bomb must be authoritarian; there is no other way. The state of affairs stands as a practical necessity independent of any larger political system in which the bomb is embedded, independent of the kinds of regime or character of its rulers.”

Indeed, it is Winner’s assessment that as our societies rely more and more on “large, complex technological systems,” we find ourselves in political climates that are guided by practicality and utility, rather than morals and political justice. In transnational debates about the energy crisis, for example, we observe “a sentiment increasingly common in the land,” that “what [these] dilemmas require is not a redistribution of wealth or a broader public participation but, rather, stronger, centralized public management,” demonstrating that nonhuman technologies affect important aspects of public life and values.

The nonhuman environment, I argue, is, like nonhuman technology, an affective agent in our shared systems of values. First, environmental nonhumans affect the way we understand our obligations to others and future generations. Thomas Pogge, for instance, considers environmental degradation, tied with poverty, as the most difficult challenge confronting humans. In fact, the nonhuman world, especially in its resources, is understood to be so critical to human life and the securing of human rights for those in extreme poverty that Pogge develops a Global Resource Dividend (GRD). His GRD proposal “is not a global tax on income or wealth.

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62 Winner, 131.
63 Ibid.
It is a dividend owed by those who make *disproportionate* – as distinct from *good* or *efficient* – use of the natural resources of our planet to those whose access is thereby reduced below a fair share.\(^{65}\) In other words, his argument implies that the nonhuman world plays an important role in humans’ abilities to realize their needs and have dignity, to the degree that its mismanagement currently involves human rights violations that oblige countries with high levels of resource appropriation, resulting in pollution and environmental degradation, to pay a dividend that will be disbursed toward the eradication of extreme poverty.\(^{66}\)

As Pogge argues in *World Poverty and Human Rights*,

Currently, appropriation of wealth from our planet is highly uneven. Affluent people use vastly more of the world’s resources, and they do so unilaterally, without giving any compensation to the global poor for their disproportionate consumption. Yes, the affluent often pay for these resources they use, such as imported crude oil. But these payments go to other affluent people, such as the Saudi family or the Nigerian kleptocracy, with very little, if anything, trickling down to the global poor. So the question remains: what entitles a global elite to use up the world’s natural resources on mutually agreeable terms while leaving the global poor empty-handed.\(^{67}\)

The nonhuman environment is, accordingly, a significant, affective actor in transnational politics, and nonhuman resources have a direct impact on our global economic system and its exclusion of those in extreme poverty. Humans are certainly the ones placing economic value on these resources, but, as discussed above, one’s relationships with the resources will greatly affect their social, political, and economic standing. That is, the closer one’s proximity, and the greater one’s capability to use resources, the more one is able to reduce one’s penury. In short, Pogge’s analysis suggests an account of current environmental practices wherein the nonhuman world is

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 349.

\(^{66}\) In 8.3 of *World Poverty and Human Rights*, Pogge discusses his plan for GRD disbursements, which will be “designed so as to make these funds maximally effective toward ensuring that all human beings can meet their own basic needs with dignity.” (pg. 212) Also, for Pogge’s analysis of why current global political relationships constitute a violation of the human rights of the world’s poor, see “Are We Violating the Human Rights of the World’s Poor?,” *Yale Human Rights and Development Law Journal* 14 (2011): 1-33. In this essay he equates the fundamental injustice of poverty to the institution of slavery (pg. 20), and he thus claims that global poverty is, to varying degrees, something that everyone in the ‘developed’ world are complicit in, citizens less so than governments. However, citizens of these countries are thought to have, according to Pogge, obligations to compensate the global poor via NGOs (pgs. 30-33).

\(^{67}\) Ibid., 208.
an important, affective political agent insofar as it plays a crucial role in our conceptualization of
global politics and justice. Pogge asks us to reconsider our obligations to the global poor and to
support a GRD, since environmental resources are such key motivators, affecting the decisions
and actions of powerful countries throughout the world.

Pogge’s account echoes authors writing on global food security. Authors like Philip
McMichael, for example, explain the manner in which agrofuels affect the global economic
systems and lead to human rights violations and a need to reformulate our moral and political
obligations. When edible nonhumans become entities that can be grown for human fuel, these
“agrofuels” have extraordinary, affective impacts on human lives “insofar as they undermine
food-provisioning cultures, and degrade environments (increasing emissions, with further
degradation).”

Nonhuman entities’ effects on our physical well being (discussed above) have led some
authors to create new theories of justice – intergenerational justice – in order to consider how we
are, arguably, obliged to future generations, people we will never know, in addition to those
obligations we owe to our contemporaries (rich or poor). For instance, Richard P. Hiskes
comments that “t[he phenomena of global warming and climate change give rise to a singular
question: what do the living owe those who come after them?” That is, climate change, for
which past and present human generations are largely responsible, seems, prima facie, to demand

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69 See “Biofuels and the Financialization of the Global Food System,” in Food Systems Failure. In this essay, McMichael agrees with Jean Ziegler’s suggestion that “biofuels are a ‘crime against humanity’,” and McMichael demonstrates why “the resort to biofuels symbolizes the fetish of exchange-value as, on the one hand, fuel crops displace food crops and, on the other, deepen a process of global argo-industrialization premised on land-grabbing, displacement of small producers, and increased emission of carbon (deforestation) and nitrous oxide (inorganic fertilizer)...all of which subordinates agriculture to a financial calculus at the expense of sociological sustainability.” (pgs. 60-61)
70 McMichael, 75.
that we reformulate our moral and political ideas. However, why must we think about future
generations? Is it because we are destroying the nonhuman environment, which will be a
significant player in their lives? Or, as Brian Barry has suggested, the goal of sustainability
primarily acknowledges that “there is some X whose value should be maintained, in as far as it
lies within our power to do so, into the indefinite future.”72 The nonhuman world (X), in other
words, has value in that it provides some of the basic needs that humans require in order to have
a good life. Barry argues that if we assume that “one of the defining characteristics of human
beings is their ability to form their own conceptions of the good life,” then minimally it obliges
us to provide a basic “a range of opportunities” available for future generations.73

This suggests that we should at any rate leave people in the future with the possibility of not
falling below our level. We cannot, of course, guarantee that our doing this will actually provide
people in the further future with what we make possible. The next generation may, for all we can
know, go on a gigantic spree and leave their successors relatively impoverished. The Potential for
sustaining the same level of X as we enjoy depends on each successive generation playing its part.
All we can do is leave open the possibility, and that is what we are obliged by justice to do.74

Barry implies that nonhumans affect humans in such a primary and significant manner that we
must reformulate our theories of justice to include future, unknown people, in addition to those
contemporaries in need of justice (e.g., Pogge’s extremely poor). Whether we consider Pogge’s
contemporary concerns or Barry and Hiskes’ concern for future generations, the nonhuman is an
active force that challenges our formulations of justice and the good. The nonhuman, far from a
passive thing, is an essential part of the challenge to envision a better, more just world, insofar as
it has an effect on the organization and reasonableness of our thinking about the world we inhabit
together.

72 Brian Barry, “Sustainability and Intergenerational Justice,” in Reflecting on Nature: Readings in Environmental
73 Ibid., 114-115.
74 Ibid., 116.
C. Ideal agents

As I mentioned in chapter one’s Introduction, Ecuador’s constitutional amendments that grant rights for nature are, in part, motivated by the principle of *buen vivir*. However, not mentioned in the Introduction is that this principle is a core-orienting ideal of Bolivia’s latest constitution as well. In Ecuador and Bolivia, the nonhuman world is described, in seemingly Aristotelian parlance, as an essential component of individual and communities’ ‘good living’. In Ecuador, the principle is represented by the indigenous concept of *sumak kawsay*, whereas in Bolivia, it is described as *suma qamaña*. Both cases represent the *buen vivir* principle insofar as both are used to denote a pluralistic and evolving account of the ‘good life’ as a social-natural relationship. The implementation of *buen vivir* often includes reworking health and development paradigms that are popular in the global North. In Bolivia, *buen vivir* is an “ethical and moral [principle] describing the values, ends and objectives of the State…[the main one being] an economic plural model (in the sense of diverse cultural origins of economic activities)…” Article 71 of Ecuador’s constitution, also discussed in chapter one, makes it clear that *buen vivir*, in Ecuador, requires the development of policy supporting the idea of a fundamental relationality between nature and the human being, thus implicitly advocating environmental conservation and (in this context) indigenous knowledges. Yet, *buen vivir* is also

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77 Gudynas, 442-443.
78 Article 71 reads, “Nature, or Pachamama, where life reproduces and realizes itself, has the right to exist, to be integrally respected, and to the maintenance and regeneration of its vital cycles, structures, evolutionary functions and processes. Every person, community, town or nationality will be able to demand from their public authority the fulfillment of the rights of nature.”
a principle that equally justifies securing socioeconomic and political goods for its citizenry (e.g., food, labor, and collective rights for the marginalized).  

*Buen vivir* is one example of how the nonhuman world affects our ideals. While the nonhuman does significantly affect specific theories of goodness and justice, as seen above, it is also a salient agent in our idealized conception of life itself – what it means, generally speaking, to have a good and happy life. For many citizens of Ecuador and Bolivia, the nonhuman environment is a crucial component that affects the degree to which they can understand themselves as living good and happy lives. In fact, public protests and demonstrations about natural resources and the environment are common in Latin America, and the ratified constitutions have not put a halt to citizens’ fighting for their view of a good life, by way of environmental protection. Many people thus acknowledge a view of happiness that is to some degree shaped by the nonhuman world. Here I am only interested in how the nonhuman world currently shapes many people’s understanding of happiness; I am not making normative claims about whether it should. However, it is reasonable to think that most human views of happiness, if they are comprehensive, must include the nonhuman environment. For, in the very least, one’s physiological health is often directly related to edible nonhuman entities, as I discussed above.

An example of a conceptualization of the importance of the nonhuman in “good human lives” that is found more universally than the concept of *buen vivir*, even though they are similar.

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79 Catherine Walsh comments on this (pg. 18) and lists the diversity of goods recognized as essential to the meaning of *buen vivir*: “*Buen vivir*, in addition to being the transversal axis, has its own ‘regimen’ with more than 75 articles that include water and food, nature, education, health, labour and social security, housing, culture, social communication, science, technology, ancestral knowledge, biodiversity, ecological systems, alternative energy, and individual and collective rights of historically unprotected groups, among other areas.” See Catherine Walsh, “Development as Buen Vivir: Institutional arrangements and (de)colonial entanglements,” *Development* 53 (2010).

to and align with the basic assumptions of *buen vivir*, are claims about the connections we form with the nonhuman animals in our lives. In social science literature, a substantial amount of research has been (and is being) done that focuses on how companion animals influence humans’ ability to have a fulfilled and happy life. Physiological and social well being is improved when humans form relationships with companion species, which often help people to address disabilities, cope with challenges, and develop strong capacities for emotional connections. All of these efforts help people to realize and actualize their views of a happy and good life. For instance, stress caused by cardiovascular reactivity, arthritis, and that of children undergoing health procedures, has been shown to be more manageable with companion animal interaction. Studies on stress, “[t]aken in their totality…suggest a buffering effect on physiological stress response associated with pet presence.” Additionally, for many of us, a happy life will include the ability to form substantial social and emotional relationships with other people. At times, having a happy life with lasting emotional relationships will require having a developed, and considerable degree of, empathy. Here too, studies suggest that nonhuman animal relationships will affect one’s ability to develop empathy, especially the development of empathy in childhood. As one study reports, its analyses support the hypothesis that normal preschool children’s intellectual, motor, and social development is associated with the presence of a companion animal and increases with their age, the quality of their home environment, and their relationship with the companion animal. While the children’s age and the quality of their home environments were associated with measures of

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the children’s cognitive, motor, and social development, the companion animal effect was limited to the young children’s social development including their empathy for other children.\textsuperscript{83} Findings about empathy development and stress reduction perhaps come as no surprise for those who have, or were raised with, domesticated animals. However, some companion animal trainers claim that a crucial part of their adult happiness is found in the work relations they share with canines.

Donna Haraway, for example, discusses how dog trainer Vicki Hearne considers her sense of the good life as directly related to her nonhuman companions. In her discussion about Hearne, Haraway suggests that “[s]omething important comes into the world in the relational practice of training; all of the participants are remodeled by it.”\textsuperscript{84} Training “remodels” humans insofar as it challenges their abilities as much as the nonhuman animal’s: perseverance, focus, and skill-development is required from both parties. The shared “animal happiness” that Hearne understands to be gained through training is described as “the capacity for satisfaction that comes from striving, from work, from the fulfillment of possibility…A dog and a handler,” for instance, “discover happiness together in the labor of training.”\textsuperscript{85} Hearne understands her happiness found in training as an “Aristotelian and Jeffersonian happiness,” insofar as it involves a habitual activity that “is about yearning for excellence and having the chance to try to reach it in terms recognizable to concrete beings, not to categorical abstractions.”\textsuperscript{86} For trainers like Hearne, the work we undertake with our nonhuman animals can be a central human activity that helps us fulfill a substantial and ideal life. Such virtuous work is found and fostered in our encounters

\textsuperscript{84} Donna Haraway, \textit{The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness} (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 54. Also worth noting is Haraway’s discussion about training in \textit{When Species Meet}. See, chapter eight.
\textsuperscript{85} Haraway, \textit{Companion Species Manifesto}, 52.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.
with our nonhuman companions, encounters that affect us as we strive to test and develop their abilities.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, environmental nonhumans demonstrate many forms of affective agency in our lives. The examples given above – physical, conceptual, and ideal – aim to substantiate this argument and elucidate the type of membership nonhumans have with humans in a shared ecological political sphere. Nonhumans are entities that are at times affective political agents, in addition to entities that share ecological interests with us (as discussed in chapter one). Indeed, nonhumans play a role in many of our current associations: our physical well being and flourishing, our conceptions of the good and just, and how we envision overall happiness and good living. As a consequence, we can reasonably assert that nonhumans are affective agents in many of the power relationships that have command over us. Nonhumans, as well as many human agents and institutions, actualize boundaries and relationships that help to determine our possible modes of action and subjectivity.
Chapter Five
The Injustice of Environmentlessness

Introduction

In the first four chapters of this dissertation, I developed arguments in support of an ecological political sphere. I argued that many of our relations with the environment are shaped by human social and political practices, and that these practices, in turn, suggest that we need to reimagine our conception of the public sphere. In the last chapter I argued that many of the entities that make up the nonhuman environment may be understood as members of the political sphere insofar as they are affective political agents. That is, in addition to sharing similar environmental fates with humans (defended in chapter one and three), many nonhuman entities affectively shape the possible action of other humans and nonhumans. In short, the nonhuman world is a key organizer and settler of many matters relating to the organization and use of the natural and built environments alike, for many contemporary human communities. In order to fully understand mutual public interests, and to protect against mutual harms, it is typically necessary, today, to include the nonhuman world in our understanding of the political sphere.

In this closing chapter, I flesh out and defend a concept of “environmentlessness” that captures how nonhuman political standing affects conceptions of political justice and belonging. Analogous to Hannah Arendt’s identification of statelessness and worldlessness as conditions that remove one from political belonging, I claim that the condition of environmentlessness is a violation of similar severity. I’ve argued that nonhumans are rightly considered public entities, and thus their goods and harms are often reciprocally shared with humans, which means that belonging to the political sphere includes environmental relationships as well as traditional discursive relationships. Arendt argues that being removed from a life of action with others positions one outside of the public sphere, and I seek to add to her understanding of the value of
political belonging by arguing that being removed from shared environmental relationships is equally a removal from public life. In short, environmentless is a condition wherein one is denied common life with others: the inability to access and be represented in relationships that actively determine one’s possible life and action. Overexploitation, discussed in chapter three, is an example of how nonhumans can be environmentless. However, in this chapter, I will primarily focus on how this concept can apply to contemporary conditions of human political agents.

I began this dissertation by arguing that it is reasonable to support movements like those that grant rights to nature — as defended by Ecuador’s 2008 constitution — given that our contemporary political ecologies (e.g., factory farming) create networks of harm that cannot be reversed if we only seek human rights and hope for spillover effects that benefit the nonhuman world. I argued in chapter one, for instance, that economic goods make it difficult to guarantee that human rights to a healthy environment will be enough to reverse the damaging environmental networks that have come from industrial farming. Jobs and economic growth are, for many, more valuable than environmental health, even if environmental health is arguably a more primary good. In chapter three, I argued that the reciprocal aspect of environmental goods and harms, which help us to conceptualize a shared human and nonhuman political baseline, allows us to amend a theory of environmental domination. Furthermore, I suggested that an amended theory is needed in order to conceptualize a theory of nonhuman exploitation. Here the focus was on new forms of nonhuman injustices that are identifiable with a theory of an ecological political sphere. Now, in this chapter, I will focus on how this amended theory can be employed to reshape our view of human political injustice. That is, how might the concept of the ecological political sphere alter our view of human injustice and help to ground the claim that environmentlessness is a basic form of political injustice? Since many human goods and harms
cannot be extracted from environmental conditions, and since nonhumans are principal factors organizing our lives, a human existence that is removed from environmental governance is one in which a person is removed from public life. To illustrate this claim and lend support to my argument, I consider some of the political activities in Ecuador in the years following the 2008 constitution. The political situation in Ecuador helps to substantiate why a life deprived of the environmental is correctly considered a life outside of our contemporary political sphere. Hence, an important goal of defending an ecological political sphere is to support and encourage the visualization and representation of everyone’s equality in ecological governing, no matter one’s economic or social standing. I argue that movements like positing rights for nature, and the participatory political action that they encourage in settings like Ecuador, support this goal. Even though the implementation of constitutional rights for nature in Ecuador has encountered problems (discussed below), the fact that these rights encourage the active participation and dissent of all Ecuadorian citizens opens the door for a public sphere that seeks to eradicate conditions like statelessness as well as environmentlessness.

**From statelessness and worldlessness to environmentlessness**

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt proposes a hierarchy of rights, yet without making explicit use of this terminology. Instead, she suggests that a “fundamental” violation of human rights occurs when one is denied human political community, whereas being deprived of specific political rights (e.g., freedom of speech) when one is already a citizen of a state or political community is a violation of less severity. Arendt thus considers conditions like statelessness to be the most serious kind of political harm or rights violation, because it
represents a condition in which one has been stripped of political life and community, which restricts one from living a fully human life.\(^1\) She explains this ‘hierarchy’ in the following way:

The fundamental deprivation of human rights is manifested first and above all in the deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective. Something much more fundamental than freedom and justice, which are rights of citizens, is at stake when belonging to the community into which one is born is no longer a matter of course and not belonging no longer a matter of choice, or when one is placed in a situation where, unless he commits a crime, his treatment by others does not depend on what he does or does not do. This extremity, and nothing else, is the situation of people deprived of human rights. They are deprived, not of the right to freedom, but of the right to action; not of the right to think whatever they please, but of the right to opinion. Privileges in some cases, injustices in most, blessings and doom are meted out to them according to accident and without any relation whatsoever to what they do, did, or may do.\(^2\)

In this passage, Arendt echoes the claim she makes in *The Human Condition* that I discussed in chapter two. If people are denied speech and action with other people – in short, stranded and hidden as private individuals without access to the public sphere – they experience a significant loss of their humanity.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt calls this loss of political belonging “worldlessness.” Arendt sees this condition, like the condition of statelessness, as an existence stripped of public life with others. Instead of the person who is a refugee without a state, the “worldless” person is best exemplified by those who have been marginalized – for example, the slave, or the servant. These people have no chance to live in public with others, but are instead positioned within social relationships in such as way as to be reduced to supporting the basic survival and bodily needs of others. Just as Arendt proposes the real issue of human rights to be a general right to

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1 More recently, Giorgio Agamben has developed a similar view, through the lens of biopower. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, he advances (p. 83) the idea that “the production of bare life is the originary activity of the sovereign.” That is, in politics, zoë (or unqualified biological life) is not more primary nor does it serve as a foundation that qualified ways of life, bios, develop from. Rather, Agamben claims that the political sphere can be identified as the locale of the production of bare life (or sacred life) by sovereign power. Agamben explains (pg. 90) this bare life to be “[n]either political bios nor natural zoē” but “the zone of indistinction in which zoē and bios constitute each other in including and excluding each other.” In other words, the meaning of power and sovereignty today (and as far back as ancient Rome) is thus understood as an issue of biopower, wherein the living subject to be governed is a ‘bare life’ that cannot be reduced to biological or political life alone. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

belong to the political sphere, in her account of worldlessness, she sees the real problem of the traditional private sphere to be that persons relegated to it are “ejected from [public life] in so far as [they are] imprisoned in the privacy of [their] own body, caught in the fulfillment of needs in which nobody can share and which nobody can fully communicate…The price for the elimination of life’s burden from the shoulders of all citizens was enormous and by no means consisted only in the violent injustice of forcing one part of humanity into the darkness of pain and necessity.”

For Arendt, access to the public sphere — where one discloses who one is with speech and action, against the backdrop of a plurality of human interests that are decidedly not cohesive — is what establishes oneself as a political animal. Politics must remain a sphere of plurality and contention, because there is always a danger that the “fundamental” human right to be political will be lost for some by an “act of violence” that attempts to exclude persons from the public sphere, through means like denying citizenship or reducing some people to the indentured service of others’ “burden of biological life.”

As she says in The Origins of Totalitarianism, “The crimes against human rights, which have become a specialty of totalitarian regimes, can always be justified by the pretext that right is equivalent to being good or useful for the whole in distinction to its parts.”

Arendt suggests that the exclusionary logic of totalitarianism can be present, though in subtle ways, in any form of politics that, in practice, limits human plurality and recognition. In other words, statelessness and worldlessness marginalizes people and denies them an actual place (or visibility) within the public sphere, and such limits remain a concern in some of the most established democracies today.

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*4 Ibid., 119.
*6 Charles Mills, for instance, argues that contract in the U.S. has always been a racial contract, from its inception to today. Non-whites in the U.S. have always (on the whole) been less visible and excluded from the dominant political life. In Arendt’s terminology, they have always experienced some degree of statelessness. Also, when non-whites are included, it is through, and according to to, the standards of white discourse. See Charles Mills, *The Racial*
injustice of worldlessness, in my view, is that one is restricted to the burden of caring for bodies
and the bodily, but still not given a voice or recognition in these matters. Bodily concerns are
viewed as private concerns within the traditional public/private distinction. The labor and life
that consume traditional private individuals are the burdens and continual needs of the body, and
these groups are denied political forms of representation that can address this state of affairs.

Analogous to Arendt’s views of worldlessness and statelessness, I argue that being
denied access to and control over environmental relationships is to exist in a condition of
political exclusion. I call this condition “environmentlessness.” Similar to Arendt’s argument, I
argue below that the condition of environmentlessness, like the condition of traditional “private”
individuals excluded from the public sphere, denies a person a substantive form of equality and
representation. Human equality, for Arendt, refers to the common ability that people have to
distinguish themselves among others with speech and action. On the one hand, then, there is
human equality, which is somewhat paradoxical because it is the equal ability for people to
express themselves as unequal: “If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other
and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will
come after them.” However, “If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any
other who is, was, or will be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves
understood.”7 Hence, important for Arendt is that human equality is about commonalities, not
sameness; assuming sameness helps to justify the idea that one can be denied visibility and a
place in the public realm (e.g., statelessness), because someone else can, as a complete equal,
speak for you. On the other hand, political equality is what legitimates a public sphere; it is the

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pursuit of *equal visibility* of human equality. Or, in other words, the condition of political equality occurs when each person has the equal ability, in public, to distinguish themselves from others: “The equality attending the public realm is necessarily an equality of unequals who stand in need of being ‘equalized’ in certain respects and for specific purposes. As such, the equalizing factor arises not from human ‘nature’ but from outside…”

Arendt’s theory of the public sphere is thus radically anti-exclusionary and anti-elitist, as discussed in chapter two; she, like many authors in democratic theory, sees legitimate politics as a practice attempting to realize human equality. Marginalization of individuals and groups is not condoned by these views, nor are any practices that could conceivably produce or perpetuate marginalization, since they would violate the ideal of equality that guides democratic politics.

In this regard, Arendt’s account is similar to Robert Dahl’s democratic theory. Dahl begins his account, in *On Democracy*, as most democratic theorists do, by explaining that at the core of democracy is an expression of the fundamental and true equality of each human being. If we were “to identify some criteria that a process for governing an association would have to meet in order to satisfy the requirement that all members are equally entitled to participate in the association’s decisions,” Dahl suggests we would need at least five things equally available to all: effective participation, voting equality, enlightened understanding, control of the agenda, and inclusion of adults. The ideal of political equality therefore suggests “standards against which to measure the performance of actual associations that claim to be democratic.”

Arendt’s theory of political representation, which is similar to traditional democratic accounts like Dahl’s, can be expanded to include ecological relationships. I argue that we should be concerned with such an expansion and reimaging of the public sphere, if we want to have a

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8 Ibid., 215.
10 Ibid., 42.
public sphere that seeks to protect substantive forms of equality. If it is the case that the political sphere contains an ecological dimension predicated upon ecological commonalities — as I have argued — then analogous to Arendt’s argument, to deny a person access to the ecological dimension of political relations (in this case leaving them environmentless) is a fundamental political violation. Since the ecological political sphere presents us with commonalities that relate to everyone, these ecological commonalities, like the common goods Dahl discusses, need to be “equalized” by politics, especially if we aim for a democratic politics that seeks to reduce the marginalization and “invisibility” of individuals and groups of people. In other words, the “standards” that Dahl mentions, which are required for actual democracies to legitimate themselves, must include additional forms of representation and goods related to the nonhuman environment, in order for a form of politics to remain democratic and respect each person’s equality.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I use Arendt’s framework in order to situate my argument for the two conclusions set out above: first, if our ecological relationships are a dimension of the public sphere, we must agree that exclusionary environmental practices politically marginalize individuals and groups. I propose that we see these practices of political marginalization as contributing to “environmentlessness,” in a sense analogous to Arendt’s understanding of statelessness: that is, destructive and exploitative environmental arrangements constitute a fundamental political violation of humanity insofar as they fosters inequality by keeping people from partaking – with full visibility – in the public sphere. Secondly, and building on the first point, the remedy for this state of environmentlessness is a new form of political inclusion consisting in a re-imagined and enlarged public sphere. I argue that encouraging the participatory democratic action of the human individuals who are excluded best
protects this enlarged public sphere, and that as a result, we should embrace experimental political principles like the rights of nature. In other words, to agree that environmentlessness is a fundamental violation of humanity means that we must defend the ecological equality of people, just as Arendt’s view of politics takes seriously the equality of speech and action. I suggest that examples from Ecuador give us reasons to believe that the acknowledgement of rights of nature can support the pursuit of more equal and just public spheres, since the contemporary commons, as I’ve been arguing throughout this dissertation, is composed of traditional political concerns as well as new political ecological relationships. New, experimental political forms of representation like the recognition of rights of nature can, I suggest, move us toward human politics that are more just, since they try to publicly represent the ecological commonwealth: the mutual interests and harms that humans share with the nonhumans in their environments.

The pursuit of an environmental dimension of political equality is reasonable, I argue, since nonhumans too are involved in governing structures that influence harms and benefits (e.g., factory farming). Or, to employ Nancy Fraser’s terminology, nonhumans belong to an “all-subjected” concept of the public sphere. In her book, *Scales of Justice*, Fraser argues that the entities that are subjected and relevant to governance must all be incorporated into a framing of justice:

> According to [the all-subjected] principle, all those who are subject to a given governance structure have moral standing as subjects of justice in relation to it. On this view, what turns a collection of people into fellow subjects of justice is neither shared citizenship or nationality, nor common possession of abstract personhood, nor the sheer fact of causal interdependence, but rather their joint subjection to a structure of governance that sets the ground rules that govern their interaction...I understand ['subjection to structure of governance'] broadly, as encompassing relations to powers of various types. Not restricted to states, governance structures also

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11 Fraser thinks an “all-subjected” principle is needed when we deal with “abnormal justice” – that is, when the what, who, and how of justice is not based on meta-agreement. She refers to the what, who, and how of justice as the “three nodes” of abnormal justice. She describes the three respective nodes accordingly: the first “is the matter of justice, the substance with which it is concerned”; second, “the scope of justice, the frame within which it applies”; lastly, “the issue is in essence procedural: How, in a given case, should one determine the pertinent grammar for reflecting on justice?” For this discussion, see Nancy Fraser, *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 52-57.
compromise non-state agencies that generate enforceable rules that structure important swaths of social interaction…Understood in this way, the all-subjected principle affords a critical standard for assessing the (in)justice of frames. An issue is justly framed if and only if everyone subjected to the governance structure(s) that regulate the relevant swath(s) of social interaction is accorded equal consideration. To deserve such consideration, moreover, one need not already be an officially accredited member of the structure in question; one need only be subjected to it.12

Briefly, Fraser’s “all-subjected” principle offers an inclusionary concept of the public sphere that is a wide-ranging and open-ended arena of social and political interaction and disagreement. The principle is a guide for conditions of abnormal justice, which Fraser suggests is characteristic of our current political predicament.13 The public sphere, in other words, always needs to guard against exclusionary practices that marginalize people whose lives are directly affected and subject to relationships of governance and power. In short, a legitimate framing of justice must go out of its way to make sure that “the relevant public should match the reach of governance structure that regulates the relevant swath of social interaction.”14

In light of my argument about ecological commonality, and the arguments I’ve made about the affective agency of nonhumans, it is reasonable to understand our current “relevant public” as including nonhumans as a subjected party. As I discussed in previous chapters, ecological relationships often involve a network of interests and harms that are not clearly anthropocentric. However, in cases like factory farming and toxic waste disposal, what is most often clearly seen is an exploitative economic relationship. While many different nonhuman entities are exploited and harmed in the process of factory farming, the owners of companies and people of high economic standing, either gain from this relationship or can largely avoid its

12 Ibid., 65-66.
13 Ibid., 48-49. Here Fraser argues the following: “Of course, it is doubtful that justice discourse is ever fully normal…There may well be no real-world context in which public debates about justice remain wholly within the bounds set by a given set of constitutive assumptions. And we may never encounter a case in which every participant shares every assumption. Whenever a situation approaching normality does appear, moreover, one may well suspect that it rests on the suppression or marginalization of those who dissent from the reigning consensus.”
14 Ibid., 96.
harm. Factory farming corporations run their farms in the manner that they do in order to continue the high rate of profits they make from these operations. Affluent persons who find themselves in harm’s way, due to farming practices, etc., have the option to relocate; but, as I discuss below, more often than not, the sites of damaging environmental networks are positioned in regions that only affect low-income, racialized minorities, with these decisions again motivated by economic considerations. Some authors, as I will discuss, see this unequal distribution of environmental harms as an environmental form of racism. In sum, the nonhuman world affects, and is affected by, the governing of human lives. With this in mind, Fraser’s concept of all-subjected is useful for understanding the injustice of environmentlessness. If we agree with the democratic ideal that those subjected to and affected by governance must be included in the public sphere, then nonhumans and human relations with nonhumans must be included. People are often marginalized and excluded from the public sphere, as I will explain below, because of their relation to the nonhuman world. Or, in some cases, marginalization occurs because one is denied equal access to ecological relationships, which have power over one’s ability to flourish. In short, we have good reasons to think of the nonhuman as part of the “relevant swath of social interaction” of governing structures.

The view I am proposing might appear similar to a multispecies’ view of politics like Eben Kirksey’s, who argues that “[c]osmopolitical worlds are structured by relations of reciprocal capture, a dual process of identity construction where each agent has an interest in

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15 As mentioned in chapter one, factory farms make the profits they do by considering economics prior to ethics. Singer and Mason, after interviewing factory farmers, conclude the following: “As long as the market provides no incentive for reducing the pigs’ pain, the pig producer cannot afford to spend more than a penny, or perhaps a nickel, for that purpose…The core issue is the commercial pressures that exist in a competitive market system in which animals are items of property, and the conditions in which they are kept are not regulated by federal or state animal-welfare law.” See, The Ethics of What We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter (New York: Rodale, 2006).
seeing the other maintain its existence.” However, unlike Kirksey’s view, I am not arguing for a complete reciprocal picture of human and nonhuman relations and politics. While I have suggested that nonhumans affect humans in multiple, significant ways, I still think, contrary to the focus in many multispecies views, that humans’ ability to act upon the possible action of nonhumans comprises a political imbalance, since, as I argued in chapter three, humans are far more likely to exploit the vulnerabilities of nonhumans and, in this sense, actively and consciously politically dominate the possible actions of nonhumans. Humans, as I argued in chapter three, have the capacity to exploit the vulnerabilities of nonhuman in disastrous ways, and as I explain with the example of environmental racism below, humans with power tend to marginalize other humans (via the nonhuman world) as well. Thus, my view is still committed to politics as, properly speaking, a human activity, since it is humans more than others who have the ability to actively (and often egregiously) take part in the activity of governing. In other words, the power differential, in terms of scale and organization, should be taken seriously, since it is in such differentials that injustice and significant harms occur. Hence, while my view has similarities with some of the reciprocal aspects in a multispecies view, Arendt’s view (and Fraser’s complimentary principle) is more relevant for my concerns. That is, my goal throughout

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17 As Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich explain (pgs. 545-546), in an overview of the history and meaning of multispecies ethnography and politics, the focus of this approach is “how a multitude of organisms’ livelihoods shape and are shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces.” This aspect of multispecies ethnography is indeed useful and compliments my view of an ecological political sphere. However, as the authors also explain, the view “has emerged with the activity of a swarm, a network with no center to dictate order, populated by ‘a multitude of different creative agents’.” My view suggests, instead, that humans do play a more significant role dictating order, since their activities are often highly exploitative and dominative over nonhumans and marginalized humans. Thus, while I think an ecological political sphere reimages power relationships and puts pressure on traditional understandings of the “center” of order, I do not think ecological networks have no center, or no one party that dictates order more than others. Important for identifying and making claims about injustice is that there is a party or group that has more power over governing relationships, and that this dominant group abuses others via this advantage. See Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich, “The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography,” Cultural Anthropology 25 (2010): 545-576. Also worth considering is Kirksey’s edited volume, The Multispecies Salon, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
this dissertation has been to argue for the defensibility of the rights of nature, and to show how such claims can be justified by reimaging human politics and traditional understandings of the political sphere from the vantage point of ecological relationships. I am primarily focused on arguing how an ecological political sphere complements, rather than moves beyond, human-centric views.

Environmental marginalization

In the last chapter I discussed affective nonhuman political agency and I suggested that nonhumans play a significant political role in our lives, since they often shape and organize power relationships. I now further this claim by suggesting that their “action upon possible action” results, for many, in political exclusion. We can begin to understand why this is reasonable, if we think about the examples mentioned in chapter four. For instance, our physical dependency on the nonhuman world usually becomes more apparent when we experience a lack in regard to ecological commonalities. As I mentioned, recent reports by the FAO directly link the ability for humans to flourish with the relationships one has (or doesn’t have) with the nonhuman world. Lacking the nonhuman world thus results in less flourishing, but it is often importantly a lack of both aspects of the public sphere – human and nonhuman - since environmentlessness also involves things like economic standing and peaceful living with others.\(^\text{18}\)

Environmental racism is another way to understand environmentlessness as a form of political marginalization. That is, in this example we also get a sense of how

\(^{18}\) Also, as the UN Women study shows, lack of ecological relationships affects women in particular. They have fewer opportunities to own property, and it has been shown, according to the study, that “[l]ack of access to and control over land and property has been increasingly linked to poverty, migration, urbanization, violence and HIV/AIDS.” See United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, “World Survey on the Role of Women in Development: Women’s Control Over Economic Resources and Access to Financial Resources, Including Microfinance,” UN General Assembly, June 17, 2009, \url{http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/ws2009/}, 41.
environmentlessness directly relates to a lack of public visibility. Sheila Foster and Luke Cole’s study on environmental racism elucidates the links between environmental degradation and economics. They show how toxic waste sites in the United States, for example, are continually located in sectors with low property costs, which means that waste sites move into neighborhoods occupied by low-income people. On average, non-whites occupy the majority of these neighborhoods.¹⁹ Thus, the authors suggest that these practices have a significant racial dimension: “Taken together, the national studies conducted to date provide evidence that people of color bear a disproportionate burden of environmental hazards, particularly toxic waste sites. Numerous local studies, with some exceptions, have, on the basis of their assessment of particular cities, counties or regions, similarly concluded that racial disparities exist in the location of toxic waste facilities.”²⁰ In short, the environmentlessness seen in Cole and Foster’s account of environmental racism is a version wherein people lack political standing and equality with others, due to environmental inequalities that are directly related to economics and race. These people, mainly low-income non-whites, are picked for toxic waste sites because the low property value in their area, and the presence of toxic waste sites further degrade their environment and their economic standing. That is, as can be imagined, waste dispensaries further reduce the property cost in these neighbors, making it nearly impossible for these people to sell and relocate. Here, inequality is seamlessly political and ecological; and since these groups of

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¹⁹ The authors (pgs.66-67), building on research done by Nancy Denton, explain the long, entrenched, and racist history of residential color lines in America: “…at critical points between the end of the Civil War in 1865 and the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968, ‘white America chose to strengthen the walls of the ghetto.’ During this time period, residential segregation was constructed and imposed through various public and private processes – discriminatory real estate practices, exclusionary and expulsive zoning, redlining, and white flight, among others – that both contained growing urban black populations and limited mobility of blacks and other people of color. Some of these actions and decisions were individual, some were collective, and others reflected ‘the powers and prerogatives of government’; together, these practices effectively constructed and maintained the residential color line well into the twentieth century and up to the present.” See Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster, From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

²⁰ Ibid., 58.
people lack substantial political equality regarding their environmental conditions and the ecological commonalities that are fundamental for them as they are for others, they are, in virtue of their environmentlessness, often further marginalized from the public sphere.

The environmentlessness and marginalization seen in environmental racism is also apparent on the global level. Pogge mentions two important global practices that are worth considering here, environmentally empowered tyranny and disproportionate polluting:

First, affluent countries and their firms buy huge quantities of natural resources from the rulers of developing countries without regard for how such leaders came to power and how they exercise power. In many cases, this amounts to collaboration in the theft of these resources from their owners: the country’s people. It also enriches their oppressors, thereby entrenching the oppression: tyrants sell us the natural resources of their victims and then use the proceeds to buy the weapons they need to keep themselves in power…[Also, and second,]…affluent countries account for a disproportionate share of global pollution. Their emissions are prime contributors to serious health hazards, extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and climate change, to which poor populations are especially vulnerable. A recent report by the Global Humanitarian Forum estimated that climate change is already seriously affecting 325 million people and is annually causing $125 billion in economic losses, as well as 300,000 deaths, of which 99% are in less developed countries.  

Both cases Pogge considers are global political practices that he sees as violations of the global poor’s human rights. Moreover, and importantly for my argument, both are examples of injustices wherein the nonhuman environment is at the disposal of global elites to the detriment of most people, but especially the politically disenfranchised and excluded. Therefore, it further substantiates the idea that many people do experience an environmentless reality—a reality that is directly connected to global political injustices and oppressions (i.e., the empowering of tyrants), which also further demonstrates the entrenched connections between the different dimensions of the public sphere, ecological and discursive.

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**Ecuador: participatory ecological politics**

In the sections above I argued in favor of a concept of environmentlessness that captures the type of marginalization and inequality that can be conceptualized through a theory of an ecological political sphere. From the view of a political sphere that includes nonhumans, I have argued that we can identify new forms of human political injustice, and that these conditions, like statelessness, should be considered fundamental injustices that cannot be tolerated by politics that claim to be democratic and in pursuit of substantive forms of equality. Hence, just as a shared environmental baseline allows us to establish, in chapter three, an understanding of nonhuman exploitation and domination, the same baseline helps us to understand environmentlessness as a new form of human injustice. I turn now to my second argument: that participatory democratic political action should be considered an important activity that can reduce the degree to which people experience environmentlessness; and that, correspondingly, democratic systems of governing should adopt experimental practices like the rights of nature, which aim to reduce inequalities that stem from conditions like environmentlessness.

As I mentioned in chapter one, Ecuador’s new constitutional amendments aim to bring better political visibility to historically marginalized citizens in Ecuador. In a democratic setting, Ecuador’s ratified 2008 constitution asserts that “[a]ll persons, communities, peoples and nations can call upon public authorities to enforce the rights of nature.”22 At the center of Ecuador’s codification of the rights of nature, then, is a declaration of participatory democracy, which legitimates any individual’s attempt to enforce the rights of nature. The constitution defends the participatory political action of its citizens (no matter their status), if those citizens can

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22 Article 71. All English translations of the Ecuadorean constitution, unless otherwise noted, come from the Political Database of the Americas. See, [http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Ecuador/english08.html](http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Ecuador/english08.html)
reasonably prove that there is degradation to a ‘site of life’. The democratic participation proposed by the constitution is significant. It promotes a concept of political action that is as expansive as the site of life it protects, since it encourages any political subject to participate and does not rely on party politics, nor on a specific political goal. That is, one does not need to be part of an established political group before or after one defends the rights of nature.

Additionally, as Claire Kendall reported, Thomas Linzey, a U.S. lawyer who assisted the Ecuadoreans in composing the articles on nature’s rights, explained that, analogous to the way in which measuring compensation is directly related to a person’s injury, “under the new system, it will be measured according to damage to the ecosystem. The new system is, in essence, an attempt to codify sustainable development. The new laws would grant people the right to sue on behalf of the ecosystem, even if not injured themselves.”

The constitution, in short, allows for a new measure of democratic political participation that, whether intentional or not, supports ecological political equality. The constitutional amendments support what political theorists writing on Latin America often refer to as the “pluriuniverse,” which is similar to Arendt’s idea of political equality that “equalizes” each human’s equal right to speech and action. The pluriuniverse is a vision of politics that attempts to represent, as the Zapatistas put it, “a world where many worlds fit”; or, what Gustavo Esteva, discussing the Zapatistas, calls a “movement of movements.” The goal of political action in the context of a pluriuniverse is to represent the plurality of human political views and goods

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23 As mentioned in earlier chapters, Nature, according to the Ecuadorean constitution (Article 71) is “where life is reproduced and occurs, has the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, functions and evolutionary processes.” I will refer to this as a ‘site of life’ in this chapter, since the constitution’s definition is so encompassing and includes “functions and evolutionary processes.”


25 Gloria Muñoz Ramie’s, in her book The Fire and the Word, discusses this ideal of the Zapatistas. She documents her extended period spent living with the Zapatistas, and elucidates the social justice initiatives that lay at the root of the movement, which don’t typically get reported on by popular media. See The Fire and the Word: A History of the Zapatista Movement (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2008).

without having elites or institutional bureaucracies create exclusionary public spheres. That is, the concept of a “movement” in this context is distinguished from “political organization,” insofar as movements “have only informal and voluntary participation; operate largely without structures; and are characterized by an open form of participation in which leaders are neither able to control nor represent participants, but only help to convene, coordinate and stimulate the movement.”

Or, as Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash have explained, writing on the concept of pluriuniverse,

grassroots struggles for radical democracy are not looking for a more democratic access to the existing structures of the modern state, supposedly or conventionally democratic. Respecting their own political styles and designs, they seek to go beyond the decentralization of state structures. They radically differentiate this from decentralism, for the latter refers to authentic government by the people themselves. It cannot be reduced to the modern cliché of “self-government” – a euphemism for the democratic integration of everyone to state rule. Decentralization has as a premise a notion of power which centralizes it at the top – delegating it from the top down through levels of competence. Decentralism, in radical contrast, retains power in the hands of “the people” – recreating, regenerating and relying upon political bodies on the human scale, constructing from the bottom up mechanisms for delegating limited functions to the state for concerting the harmonious coexistence of local units.

The pluriuniverse plays a significant role in the political theories of indigenous and grassroots movements in the global South, and it signifies an active attempt by thinkers and activists in the global South to resist a universal account of the political (often articulated from the global North) that risks becoming a work of contemporary “coloniality,” as Quijano puts it, in that it downplays the significance and relevance of knowledge systems and conceptions of justice favored by diverse and autonomous political agents in the South. The constitution, by including

29 Aníbal Quijano uses the term “coloniality” to signify the racial character of globalization, in that it continues to perpetuate European (i.e., white) ideals globally. Quijano thinks that that a significant axis of global power is therefore based on race. He claims (pg.181), that “[t]he racial axis has a colonial origin and character, but it has proven to be more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix it was established. Therefore, the model of power that is globally hegemonic today presupposes an element of coloniality.” See, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” in Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate, eds. Mabel Moraña et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
rights for nature, which can be defended by any single individual, encourages participatory
democratic action that can support the idea of the pluriuniverse and attempts to eradicate
coloniality. Any Ecuadorian citizen can protest activities or policies that create conditions of
environmentlessness, or they can similarly defend a nonhuman entity whose degradation could
lead to such a condition in the future. In general, they are encouraged by the constitution to
protest and fight for a political sphere that recognizes ecological commonality and that protects
humans and nonhumans simultaneously by protecting and sustaining flourishing ecological
relationships. Indeed, following its ratification, many excluded groups have attempted to defend
rights for nature and support their own non-dominant knowledge systems by attacking practices
in Ecuador that are environmentally damaging and/or politically exclusive.

For example, many indigenous groups have used, and continue to use, Ecuador’s new
amendments as a springboard for democratic political action that supports the democratic ideal
of a pluriuniverse through the participatory measures granted to them by the constitution. In
March of 2010, for instance, Kichwa-speaking indigenous peoples of the Sarayaku territory
rallied in Quito to protest the energy ministry’s recent initiative for oil drilling near their
Amazonian homes. The communities are not only persuaded that “the irresponsible start of oil
projects in the Sarayaku region would have an irreversible impact on the environment and
culture [altering] the social life of the families in the communities, causing major divisions,” but
they also think that it highlights the state’s refusal to admit that the area in Blocks 23 and 24,
where the oil drilling will commence, is considered “a sacred territory, a biodiversity and
ancestral culture heritage site of the Kichwa people of Ecuador.” The month of April saw
similar concerns raised against a water bill that some forecasted as the resource’s potential
privatization. The Confederation of Indigenous Nationals of Ecuador (CONAIE) spoke out

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against the bill, and head of CONAIE, Marlon Santi, explained to the press that since October of 2009, the group “had presented their proposals to the National Assembly so that they might be incorporated into the proposed legislation, but those suggestions had not been included by lawmakers.” Thus, the group is continually encouraged by Santi to put down their national flags, because “the homeland doesn’t belong to anyone,” a retort directed toward the government’s new motto “the homeland belongs to everyone.”

To return to the Lockean view discussed in chapter two, we can conclude that exclusion from the commonwealth is accomplished not only via explicit legislation; rather, when one no longer belongs to political ecological relationships, one also experiences exclusion from political belonging. If a community’s political ecology is directly connected to practices that marginalize and exclude individuals considered to be within a compact’s bounds, then the practices in question have violated a member’s liberty. That is, for Locke, the provisos of property demand that we justify political relationships ecologically as well as legally. Privatization of resources, which can lead many citizens to a condition of environmentlessness, where they are without “as good and as much” as others, can be framed, under Locke’s theory, as a nullification of the social compact. The legal parallel, for Locke, is arbitrary sovereignty (tyranny), which also nulls a contract. Hence, even a classic liberal understanding of contract can be used to justify Santi’s conclusion.

These disputes over oil and water are participatory political actions that demonstrate that the nonhuman environment is a central political agent in the lives of many people, particularly communities whose natural environments and ways of life are undergoing rapid changes triggered by development and resource extraction. Nonhuman resources are a part of fundamental ecological networks that have power over these communities and the types of action that are made possible for them. These are not trivial effects or relationships, but are “irreversible

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impact[s]” that resemble similar disruptions and degradations of ecological networks at the cost of low-income, often marginalized, people around the world. Standard democratic processes are in place in Ecuador (e.g., elected representatives), but these indigenous communities, whose sense of empowerment is encouraged by the constitutional amendments, are using the rights of nature to seek a further democratization of the public sphere. They assert and represent themselves by protesting their lack of ecological equality and criticizing the political and environmental practices carried out by the government and corporations. These practices often have the effect of leaving democratic dissenters environmentless and without the necessary conditions – political and ecological – for a flourishing life. Thus, the indigenous groups in particular seek to truly test whether they are seen as part of the homeland – if their world can fit within Ecuador’s sovereignty – by using the participatory measures that the constitution has put at their disposal. Participatory democracy, in other words, is a strategy deployed by excluded groups to protest the arrangement and construction of sovereignty in their country by supporting their political contestation and the idea of a pluriuniverse.

**Dissent and political equality**

Despite the apparent value of political contestation for democracy, one could object in response to my argument in chapter four and to my claim that environmentlessness should be considered a fundamental human violation, that the nonhuman politics I am supporting easily lends itself to a cacophony of political voices that in turn could contribute to an unhelpful over-
representation of the political. Regarding chapter four, one might comment that the concept of an affective nonhuman political agent seemingly has no reasonable limits. If I value an anthill in my backyard, and I form some sort of so-called relationship with the anthill that calms my nerves and helps me sleep at night, then it is a political agent that has power over what I see as my horizon of possible action. I can remain calm, and have more sleep-filled nights, if the anthill in my backyard remains in my life. It would seem reasonable for someone to claim that a concept of political agency that is this expansive is unworkable and thus shows why political subjects, as well as politics, needs to remain solely a human affair. If we call affective nonhuman environmental entities political, so continues this line of criticism, then we will likely experience such an overwhelming amount of political dissent, about so many seemingly trivial and perhaps highly questionable things (e.g., an anthill), that this could pose a real threat to political stability. A second objection, then, to which I respond below, is that agreeing that affective agency is political could easily lead to a chaotic form of politics that would, quite literally, make a mountain out of a mole (or ant) hill.

The objections of over-representation and political stability are reasonable responses, but not, I think, insurmountable. First, we are usually better served by concepts of the political that threaten to be too expansive, if they function to reimagine the basic structure of the political sphere. That is, if we are only interested in extending certain goods (e.g., rights) without amending our basic understanding of political agency and belonging, then it is highly questionable what impact such goods will have. Even if we pass rights for nonhumans, it takes someone who thinks that nonhumans are actually political entities for the protection of said rights to be upheld. In other words, if the political is given priority, as I suggested it ought to be in the Introduction, and it can be shown that it is reasonable to expand the political to fully
capture all of the entities who are “settlers of matters” and subject themselves to the power of others, then a more expansive approach must be seen as necessary for the realization of justice. Hence, expanding our conception of the political seems warranted, especially when we can highlight significant ways in which certain (currently politically excluded) agents help to organize, shape, and have (or give) power over (and to) individuals. I have argued throughout this dissertation that the nonhuman environment is such an agent. Along these lines, it is reasonable to infer that an ecological political sphere would give greater traction to political claims about the nonhuman world and its effects on the lives of people. The example of the protests in Ecuador following the 2008 constitution above helps to make this point, since what has occurred, following the constitution’s ratification, is better visibility for historically marginalized people in Ecuador. Political practices that marginalize these communities have not completely disappeared, as I will discuss below, but there have been significant strides toward this goal.33

Second, regarding the concern for political stability, I argue that it is is better to seek out a more just world for more people, than to have a smoothly functioning democracy that serves the representation and visibility of some over others (i.e., that doesn’t “equalize” politics, as Arendt puts it). Again, I give examples from Ecuador below that substantiate this claim. Central to my argument here is the observation that honoring the ideal of equality in democratic politics will require that we accept some measure of threat of political instability. To the extent that one’s degree of assured political representation corresponds to one’s degree of privilege, then we must acknowledge that many human and nonhuman agents today have, at best, precarious political

33 For instance, during the 1990s, Chevron caused many environmental disasters in Ecuador’s Amazon, affecting many indigenous communities. See, Patricia Widen, “Global Links and Environmental Flows: Oil Disputes in Ecuador,” Global Environmental Politics 9 (2009): 31-57.
status — or what we might call nominal inclusion in the demos. For these agents, the tradeoff between security and equality is not only a necessity, but a democratic responsibility.

In sum, extending the concept of political equality to ecological relations and commonalities requires new forms of democratic participation, like the rights of nature, that might seem odd to many, or that are met with the types of objections discussed above. However, the experience of environmentlessness gives us a very good reason for taking experimental forms of representation seriously. First, it is not clear that practices guided by impartiality and consensus are sufficient or reasonable. As discussed in chapter two, there is cause to doubt that policies of impartiality are truly impartial in practice. A highly critical stance on impartiality is seen in Young, who, arguing that a person cannot “adopt an unsituated moral point of view,” calls impartiality an “impossibility” and an “ideal” that “is an idealist fiction.” We should be concerned, in other words, with any view of politics that builds itself on the possibility of neutral moral and political judgment – whether a representative’s judgment or that of civilians. A central problem that indigenous peoples in Ecuador face is that institutional and representational forms of democracy have not facilitated the recognition of the basic ecological relationships that are so central to our lives and communities. Likewise, the economic-driven practices of toxic waste disposal, practices that many claim to be politically neutral, perpetuate political practices of racial exclusion. It is generally questionable whether any person or government can be impartial enough – publicly or otherwise – to act and judge according to a truly neutral standard, not to mention the difficulty of defending the idea that there can be a common good that all reasonable people can agree on. Thus, the constitutional amendments that permit and encourage active citizen participation (rather than simply relying on the neutral judgment of the state) allow for

more substantial forms of participation that can bolster the political advocacy of any person or group who wants to more fully realize political equality, further democratizing the public sphere.

For example, in light of the constitutional amendments, Marlon Santi has encouraged all members of the confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) to form a “permanent mobilization against the government” and to “sidestep state authority and assume responsibility for education and health and the administering of justice and management of natural resources in their region and [declare] the creation of a plurinational parliament to achieve the ‘real’ integration of indigenous people.”35 The democratic participation that the amended constitution encourages has (and continues) to galvanize a marginalized section of the body politic, in order to further their mobilization and efforts to fight for a society with greater equality.

Second, writers from the global South, who share Young’s concern about impartiality, further recognize the global democratic importance of new forms of experimental political participation. For authors like Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Leonardo Avritzer, democracy led by so-called impartiality and consensus, has, in the last century, often contributed to a “hegemonic form of democracy” that the authors call “elitist representative democracy.” In practice, this form of democracy is hegemonic insofar as elites of the global North propose to extend their own liberal representative democracy to the global South, “ignoring the experiments and discussions coming from the countries of the southern hemisphere in the debate on democracy.”36 In short, the elites of the North implicitly disavow the equality of Southern people when they imply that their Northern democratic procedures are impartial and therefore

35 EFE, “Ecuador’s Indians Step-Up.”
universally applicable to all people.\textsuperscript{37} In sum, traditional forms of democratic representation do not always suffice, and in order to keep the ideal goals of democracy alive, we need to be open to new forms of representation, even if they are historically unprecedented and might threaten other political goods like peace and security.

The two possible objections are therefore reasonable, but I argue that a more democratized public sphere that seeks to reduce the marginalization of all agents sharing fundamental political commonalities better captures the ideal goal of democratic equality. In my view, the examples of marginalization and environmentlessness discussed above, and throughout this dissertation, suggest that we need to revision the political sphere in a manner that takes extra care to understand environmental relationships and their political significance. An important step in this direction is to create new, non-anthropocentric and often experimental forms of political representation, like the constitutional amendments proposed by Ecuador. Since these forms of political representation encourage forms of political action that seek visibility for marginalized people, they can hasten the introduction of badly-needed inclusionary political practices. These practices in turn may reduce the occurrences of the new injustices that become apparent with an

\textsuperscript{37} This postcolonial critique has also been made against radical democratic theorists of the global north. As Conway and Singh explain, the model of radical democracy found in the work of Chantal Mouffe, for instance, hardly does enough work to understand the way in which political realities differ based on locale. By theorizing in traditional, universalist fashion, radical democratic theory from the global North often conceptualizes politics from the perspective of European modernity (both in examples and in its political terminology and framework – e.g., political parties) and assumes that such a theory of the political can easily be applied globally. That is, it doesn’t consider the idea that the grassroots and indigenous movements in places like Ecuador may not be an example of political organization and protest that can simply be lumped in with any other political movement in the global North; it doesn’t consider how different racial and ethnic histories and social relationships in the colonial world might challenge the salience and applicability of one’s theory of the political. Specifically, they explain (pg. 693) that in assuming that “[t]he work of all political actors must either be hegemonic or counter-hegemonic,” this necessarily implies that the work of politics must “ultimately be aimed towards the construction of hegemony – that is, a system of shared meaning, identity, and political power – that spans the entire political community and permeates all areas of social life.” The difficulty of this ontology of the political is that doesn’t provide room for the difference that place makes on theories of the political sphere and politics, and in the process neglects the political autonomy of many in the global South. See Conway and Singh, “Radical Democracy in Global Perspective.”
ecological political sphere – e.g., environmental exploitative domination discussed in chapter four and environmentlessness discussed in this chapter.

There have been negative factors to contend with in Ecuador, like the closing of important environmental NGO Acción Ecológica (AE). In 2009, the government shut down AE for supposedly failing to comply with the government’s charter concerning NGOs. Yet, backpedalling on this explanation and attempting to renew the organization’s legal status, the government merely asked, subsequently, that the group move their registration to the Ministry of Environment. AE, as Danieal Devir explains, “works closely with communities affected by industrial shrimping, logging, mining, and oil exploitation,” and their leader, Ivonne Ramos, believes that it is quite possible that the “elimination of [their] legal status is a retaliation against [their] organization’s opposition to government policies…” AE sought to protect the ecosystems of those people (e.g., peasant farmers) who could not live without their local resources (both as a matter of work and sustenance). In a letter addressed to President Correa, Naomi Klein echoes Ramos’ position explaining that “[t]oo often the environmental movement is part of a professional class of NGOs, more interested in nature than in people…AE…[was] so clearly part of a genuine people’s movement, working in direct solidarity with the communities affected by the extractive industries.” The 2008 constitution’s inclusion of the ‘rights of nature’ initially appeared to Klein as “the most important intellectual movement of our time” with “a progressive government working with grassroots and indigenous movements to find solutions that reconcile economic justice with ecological imperatives and indigenous rights.” However, with AE’s dissolution, Klein suggests that “these activist are seeing something all too familiar: a state seemingly using its power to weaken dissent.”

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Notwithstanding these setbacks, I think the rights of nature still have significant political merit and worth. The rights of nature help encourage democratic participation that further mobilizes concern for the nonhuman environment, ecological relationships, and the pursuit of a world without people who are rendered environmentless. Writing the nonhuman environment itself into the constitution, as a political subject whose meaning can be contended, is a significant achievement. This legal reform actively seeks to empower citizenry, it further reduces the gap between true political equality and existing unequal practices, and it aims to take seriously the violation of environmentlessness. In short, it is the first of many steps required to tangibly empower environmentally disempowered peoples.

If the rights of nature can encourage significant participation, even when a government does not fully comply with its constitutional obligation, as is arguably the case in the shutdown of AE, then there is much political hope for this form of democratic environmental politics. That is, the practical results that have followed from Ecuador’s constitution (or lack thereof), might seem, for some, to support the original objections: encouraging participatory political action in defense of the nonhuman world leads to over-representation and lack of peace. Hence, critics might cite lack of governmental follow-through as proof that a government would never truly risk security and stability in order to achieve more democratized forms of participation. These objectors might further observe that, while Ecuador claims to support radical forms of participatory democracy, it has 1) continued to support the government’s agenda and the concerns of power, which are often exclusionary and exploitative, and 2) encouraged a chaotic public sphere that is harmful to peace and prosperity.

The first objection seems reasonable when we consider the government shutdown of AE (discussed above). Additionally, we can consider the Ecuadorian government’s response to
protests against a specific piece of proposed legislation concerning natural resources (water and oil): in the aftermath of this bill’s introduction, the only recognition the government gave the groups protesting was to allow a few protesters come into the hearings, though they were relegated to the seats set aside for public observance and were in no way granted speaking privileges.\textsuperscript{40} However, just because the Ecuadorian government has responded in this way thus far does not mean it must continue to do so. It is reasonable to think that experimental forms of representation will take time to become effective.\textsuperscript{41} What is important is that the constitution does support (even if only in name) a participatory politics that doesn’t assume one universal form — namely, one that corresponds to highly institutional and bureaucratic forms of democracy. The significance of the example of contemporary Ecuador, then, is that it provides constitutional support for a never-before-seen participatory politics. Admittedly, this politics is far from realized. Nonetheless, the democratic participation it has fostered thus far is promising insofar as it gestures towards the alternative, inclusive political practices that might emerge from an enlarged and re-imagined political sphere that accords status to nonhuman agents.

Correspondingly, I would suggest in reply to the second objection, and in support of the approach of thinkers like de Sousa Santos and Avritzer, that the participatory politics that an ecological political sphere requires should embrace the types of political experimentalism that the rights of nature imply. This form of political experimentalism recognizes a new, creative role for the social actor to carry out political action and to suggest what visibility means for him or herself (as is being done in the oil and water protests discussed above). An ecological political

\textsuperscript{40} EFE, “Ecuador’s Indians Step-Up.”

\textsuperscript{41} De Sousa Santos’ volume, Dictomatizing Democracy, highlights how the experimental and radically democratizing political practices in the global South, are very much new modes of politics that take time to implement and assess, and as he and Avritzer discuss, there are many vulnerabilities and ambiguities that exist in these experimental forms of politics, but there are equally important potentialities, like participatory budgeting. See De Sousa Santos and Avritzer, li-lxii.
sphere does theoretically open the door for a cacophony of political voices to be heard, which may disrupt otherwise smoothly functioning institutional practices. For instance, an ecological political sphere not only asks us to consider the political standing of marginalized humans, but also suggests that we consider how rivers are also political agents that directly organize and shape the forms of action and life available to many in the community. It directly influences the continued economic privilege of many, allowing them to use it as a cheap source of waste disposal and overflow. Yet, for many, it settles the limits of their health, day-to-day flourishing, and the longevity of their life. Hence, I suggest we should gladly embrace a greater level of engagement and disruption on the part of social actors, human and nonhuman. Political ecological disruption can help us realize, as de Sousa Santos and Avritzer observe, that “participatory democracy” is a social and political set of practices in which, “at the beginning of the century, social emancipation is being reinvented,” which generally aims for more just and democratic forms of sovereignty that seek publics that eradicate statelessness and environmentlessness.⁴²

**Conclusion**

Ecuador’s constitutional amendments regarding nonhuman nature bring into view the politics of nature as one of the most pressing concerns for our notions of justice and legitimization today. The eruption of protests that has followed the amendments, pressing for the realization of these laws, is a testament to the importance of the nonhuman world in the social and political lives of those who are often excluded from Ecuador’s politics. The Ecuadorian constitution’s seemingly impossible notion of the political rights of the nonhuman world points towards a new kind of politics within an enlarged and reconfigured political sphere. To have

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⁴² De Sousa Santos and Avritzer, xlvi.
such an expansive concept like nature itself defended by the constitution is, in short, to encourage contestation that continually checks hegemony, and helps to ensure that the process of democracy is never halted or silenced. In this way, nature in the Ecuadorian constitution seems to repel the concretization of a totalizing, top-down practice of governing; as is obvious from the protests that have followed the constitution’s ratification, the new articles in defense of nature provide political fuel for the movements, groups, and individuals fighting for a more democratized sense of equality and visibility in Ecuador’s politics. These movements demand a radical and expanded sense of justice that empowers marginalized voices and people; they engage in a “chaos” that is productive and politically necessary for any governing body seeking a more just, rather than simply a smoothly functioning, democracy.

The political visibility made possible by the constitutional amendments will continue to aid Ecuador’s citizenry in their efforts to assert their equality in human and ecological relationships, as well as to actualize their political life in the public sphere. To be effective, this political actualization must be developed in both the traditional domain of representative (human) constitutional politics as well as along the ecological dimension I have argued for throughout this dissertation. People from the United States and the global North might be tempted to pass judgment on the missteps of Ecuador’s government, given that Correa’s administration has not always fully recognized the equality of its citizens who try to fully participate in public life. However, if these judgments are passed under the assumption that their own governments are models of democratic environmental justice, I invite them to consider their own, domestic environmental and political practices. Governments of liberal constitutional democracies in the global North allow corporations and factory farms to pollute on massive scales, with a multitude of harms registered to local residents, workers, sentient nonhuman
entities with emotional lives, and ecosystems. In this light, the environmental movements that Ecuador encourages — by way of participatory democratic political action that is supported by the country’s constitution — can be seen as a visionary beacon for liberal democracies that are often only thinly democratic and that fail woefully in their purported attempts to safeguard the nonhuman environment.
Conclusion

In this dissertation I have argued for the reasonableness and appeal of environmental political initiatives that grant political standing to the non-human world, like the rights for nature defended by the 2008 Ecuadorean constitution. I developed a concept of an ecological political sphere in order to support and ground the political status of the nonhuman environment.

In chapter one I argued, by appealing to the ecological networks that exist in many parts of the world today due to industrial farming, that the dominate theories in mainstream environmental politics cannot justify limiting the political sphere to humans or only select nonhumans. In opposition to these theories, I argued that current ecological commonalities between humans and nonhumans justify including nonhumans in our concept of the political sphere. Contrary to mainstream theories, I demonstrated why it is not sufficient to simply defend a human right to a healthy environment or only grant political status to nonhuman animals. The networks of harm seen in factory farming spare no nonhuman entity from degradation, and it is not clear that a human constitutional right can evade degrading environmental practices by humans, which I highlighted by considering competing economic concerns that influence a person’s conception of health.

The types of ecological commonalities that humans shared with nonhumans, once established, served an important role in chapters two and three. In chapter two, I argued that although political standing for the nonhuman world might seem radical, the concept of the political sphere, in Modern and contemporary theories, relies on relations of commonality. Moreover, the activity of politics is an endeavor that sustains and orders the most fundamental commonalities that humans share with one another. By considering the provisos on property defended in John Locke’s political theory, which can have its theological commitments replaced
with a concept like Val Plumwood’s “ecological rationality,” I argued that it is possible to develop a critical reading of a classic liberal political theorist, which can further substantiate the reasonableness of an ecological political sphere.

In chapter three, I further showed how ecological commonalities play a central role in amending a popular claim in environmental philosophy: the claim that humans dominate nature, which is typically used to substantiate normative or political claims about our obligations to the environment. Contrary to this approach, I demonstrated why a political concept of human and nonhuman relationships is more persuasive, because the typical assumptions grounding the domination of nature claim in environmental philosophy – like the natural and artificial distinction – are built on fallacious reasoning and cannot provide a clear and persuasive foundation for the practical political initiatives that they suggest (e.g., protecting the nonhuman environment from degradation). Ecological commonalities, however, can provide the requisite baseline for a theory of environmental domination, especially a theory of exploitative domination.

In chapter four I sought to ground the idea of an ecological political sphere more thoroughly by arguing that nonhuman entities can rightly be called political agents. Building on Foucault’s understanding of politics as “action upon possible action,” I demonstrated how nonhuman entities affect human power relationships and the horizon of action of each individual person. My examples of the physical, conceptual, and ideal ways in which nonhumans affect human action and flourishing helped to justify the claim that nonhumans of all types can indeed be considered political agents that are a part of the political sphere.

Finally, in chapter five, I completed my argument by defending the benefits of my concept of the ecological political sphere. My concept, I argued, can help to pin-point and better
understand a significant injustice – what I call “environmentlessness” – that adds to the political marginalization faced by many people. I showed how experimental forms of political representation that include nonhuman entities, like the positing of rights for nature, are not only well-grounded by my theory of an ecological political sphere, but can encourage participatory democratic political action that seeks to further realize substantive forms of political equality. I used examples of the political contestation that has followed the constitutional amendments in Ecuador in order to further substantiate my argument. Thus, an ecological dimension of the political sphere is not only a reasonable and sound concept; it also legitimizes global environmental political movements seeking to create new forms of experimental environmental politics, which support the promise of a more just and sustainable future for humans and their nonhuman neighbors, with whom they share so much in common, in light of their shared fate.

In sum, we live today in environments that have been greatly altered by our political ecological practices. Perhaps there was once a time when we could sufficiently theorize the public sphere, and develop a rich conception of mutual interests and harms, by considering only the speech and deeds of human political agents. However, I’ve argued throughout this dissertation that this time is now past, if indeed it ever existed (e.g., Locke’s provisos). Addressing our contemporary networks of harm, the pursuit of justice, and the continual resistance to oppression all require a serious consideration of our political ecological relationships. With the theoretical hatchet of political ecology, I have, in the previous five chapters, trimmed and cut back traditional political assumptions that separate nonhumans from the political, to make manifest the fundamental organizational and relational role they share with human political agents today. Nonhuman entities do not provide an inert backdrop or context, a stage on which politics happens; nor are they “other” or apart from human activities, and
marked, as such, by naturalness. Rather, I have argued that the nonhuman world permeates and is an inseparable element of many of the contemporary problems, solutions, and relationships that organize our body politics.


Blasimme, Alessandro and Lisa Bortolotti. “Intentionality and the Welfare of Minded Non-


Kirksey, Eben. “Interspecies Love: Being and becoming with a common ant, *Ectatomma ruidum* (Roger).” In *The Politics of Species: Reshaping our Relationships with Other Animals,*


[http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Ecuador/english08.html](http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Ecuador/english08.html).


