Routledge Handbook of Environmental Anthropology

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BEYOND “NATURE”
Towards more engaged and care-full ways of relating to the environment
Mark Ceeckelbergh

Introduction
In modernity the environment is usually perceived as “nature”: either it is seen from an objective-technoscientific point of view, or it is experienced in subjectivist-romantic terms — both of which are entangled with how we act. This chapter uses philosophical reflection and argument to show that both modes of seeing and treating the environment present a distorted view of the basic, existential relation between humans and their environment — and indeed a distorted view of the human — and undeniably limit the range of possibilities we have for relating to our environment. Influenced by Heideggerian phenomenology and contemporary anthropology, it explores how we might conceptualize a less dualistic and less alienated relation to the environment, and makes us pay attention to the role of technology and the moral significance of the language we use to talk about the environment. It uses the terms “engagement” and “care” to articulate different relational possibilities, and suggests a conception of the human–environment relation which deconstructs not only the technoscientific-humanistic-dialectic but also goes beyond the anthropocentrism–ecocentric duality.

Whereas in the 1970s and the 1980s, political and ethical concern for the environment was perceived as new, radical, and somewhat marginal, today it is mainstream. There is a movement that we are all "green" now — or at least think of ourselves as such. Most educated people in the Western world would claim that they care about the environment. Many of us want to be closer to "nature" and live in a more "natural" way. Moreover, during the past decades, environmental values have been anchored in policies at the local, national, and international level. Most political parties have absorbed discourse about the value of "nature" and the environment (even if their policies and conceptions of the environment differ considerably), and we now find terms such as "sustainability", "ecosystem services" and "ecological structure" in policy documents and in academic discourse. Yet in spite of this proclaimed concern for "nature" and belief in "sustainability", and in spite of the accompanying "environmental turn" in philosophy (Rolston 2012: 1-2), relatively little change has happened in the ways we live our lives, produce goods, and conduct politics. We still produce and consume unsustainable products, we still use fossil fuels, we still use natural "resources", and treat animals in ways that threaten wildlife and biodiversity. Why does this still happen? How is it possible that there is such a gap between our discourse and our action?
There are various mundane explanations for this gap; for example, the pressure on politicians to prioritize human interests (especially in times of financial and economic crisis), the (short-term) interests of large multinational corporations who have in continuing unsustainable activities, and our personal addiction to a consumerist lifestyle, including industrially produced food. In this chapter, however, I would like to relate the problem to (the discussion about) a deeper, cultural-philosophical pattern that is usually indicated by the term “modernity.” I will show that the ways we think about the environment today, including the very ways we use to talk about the environment, are still very “modern.” I will argue that these modern ways of thinking are problematic and explore an alternative conception that these modern ways of thinking are problematic and explore an alternative conception of the relationship between humans and their environment which is less modern and less romantic.

Moreover, I will also argue that this conception does not only enable us to critically address what has been called the anthropocentric bias and the emphasis on mastery and control in much contemporary thinking about the environment, but also helps us to control in much contemporary thinking about the environment.

Two modern ways of thinking about the environment

Today there are at least two dominant ways of perceiving — and therefore treating — the environment. The first I call “objectivist—technoscientific” and the second “subjectivist—romantic.” Historically and conceptually, an important response to the “objectivist—technoscientific” perception is and has been a romantic and nostalgic one. Against the objectivist orientation of science, the romantic thinker emphasizes subjective feeling. Against the domination of nature, the romantic poet expresses her love of nature. Against the “artificial” world of the “machine” and the “savage,” “artificial” society, and the distortion of the “natural,” the romantic wants to promote harmony, naturalness, and authenticity. Some people are nostalgic about a “state of nature” (e.g. Rousseau), an original state when things were still “natural” and “good”, when people could still live in an “authentic” way. Some think that this “natural” state is the wholesome, untouched by human hands and human thought. Others think the “original” state is pastoral one, or one in which there was subsistence agriculture. Thus, here too, “nature” is used, but here “nature” has acquired a very different meaning. It is no longer a container of resources, but a mirror for our subjective feelings, a refuge of our love, a paradise lost, a place of harmony and goodness.

Today we can see this way of thinking in the desire many people have for “natural” products, for “authentic” travels, for going “outdoors” into “nature” rather than staying in an “artificial” environment. Romanticism has become so much part of how we think about it only viewed in terms of our, human, purposes, and is treated as such.

In spite of the widespread use of this kind of concept in policy and in the environmental literature, this way of thinking is very suspect, to say the least, from the point of view of modernity critics. Indeed, in the humanities and the social sciences there has been sufficient criticism of the objectivist—technoscientific dimension of modern thinking. Consider, for instance, work inspired by Marx, Weber, and Heidegger. Moreover, even without modernity criticism many people recognize that using the natural environment as a mere means for human purposes has had devastating consequences for the natural environment. The critique can thus be analyzed into two types of objection. The first type concerns objections to this way of thinking in itself: the desire for total control and the “violence” that is present in the commodification of nature and non-human beings — and indeed human beings, which are also seen as objects, for example, machines. The second type of objection centers on arguments that point to the empirical consequences of this way of thinking: consequences for nature (e.g. destruction of biodiversity) and consequences for human beings. What we wanted to do was make human lives better by using science and technology, so the latter argument goes, but by destroying and threatening nature we have made things worse for humans, and now our very existence is threatened by those things that were meant to improve it. Although these critiques are one-sided (science and technology have also been used, as Latour [1993] has argued, science in practice is more non-modern than we think, and I also make a caricature of them in order to clearly and briefly articulate the modern attitude), there is truth in them and in a less radical form they are embraced by many people. In particular, among people who are concerned about the environment, it has been widely recognized that we have somehow “alienated” ourselves from “nature.”

This brings me to a second way of perceiving the environment, which I call “subjectivist—romantic.” Historically and conceptually, an important response to the “objectivist—technoscientific” perception is and has been a romantic and nostalgic one. Against the objectivist orientation of science, the romantic thinker emphasizes subjective feeling. Against the domination of nature, the romantic poet expresses her love of nature. Against the “artificial” world of the “machine” and the “savage,” “artificial” society, and the destruction of the “natural,” the romantic wants to promote harmony, naturalness, and authenticity.

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Today we can discern this way of seeing the environment in the discourse about natural “resources,” “natural capital,” and “ecosystem services.” Let me take the latter as an example.

The idea of “ecosystem services” is that the environment consists of ecosystems that supply resources and processes from which humanity benefits. In other words, the environment provides growth to humankind. Similarly, one can say that it provides goods. For example, it provides “products” such as water, food, and energy, and it has processes that decompose waste, purify water, take care of crop pollination, etc. It also provides possibilities for recreation. Now seeing the environment as a provider of services or goods is a clear case of the objectivist—technoscientific way of thinking, which sees the environment as a “standing reserve.” It is only viewed in terms of our, human, purposes, and is treated as such.
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different ways of life, for what Wittgenstein (2009) calls different forms of life. For this purpose, we have to attend to non-modern cultures: pre-modern cultures (as far as we can know them at all); or, if contemporary, less modern cultures, since most if not all living cultures have been transformed by modernity. Let us sketch a route for non-moderns, or at least less modern thinking about the environment by using Heidegger (especially Zimmerman's interpretation; 1990) and Ingold (who is also influenced by Heidegger). My aim here is not to adopt Heidegger's history of being or his view of modern technology, but rather to discern in Heideggerian thinking a route, or perhaps only some stepping stones and signposts, towards (understanding) non-modern thinking and living.

Heidegger tried to think differently by playing with ancient Greek language. Although he partly thought in romantic terms—he is interested in the "authentic"—his Greek-German prose offers some suggestions for how we might re-frame the human-environment relation in a less modern way. Indeed, one alternative to the objective-technocratic domination of the environment is a human-environment relation, which comes close to Heidegger's interpretation of the Greek word tekhne. In his essay "The Question Concerning Technology" (Heidegger 1977), he criticizes modern technology and finds in the ancient Greek term tekhne a mode of knowing, doing, and making that is about skill, craft, and art, rather than scientific knowing and domination of nature. Now usually making things is seen as "human" or "cultural" and thus different from "nature"; this is why we do not associate technology with "nature". But Heidegger points to what he thinks is the original meaning of tekhne and makes a link between tekhne and physics (nature), and in this way tries to avoid the meaning of control, calculation, and domination. Let me explain this.

Heidegger's alternative to modern control is what he calls "bringing-forth" (poiesis), which happens in nature (physics) as well as in craft and art: both have "the bursting open belonging to bringing-forth, e.g., the bursting of a blossom into bloom" or the bringing-forth in the craftsman or artist (Heidegger 1977: 10-11). This is different from what Heidegger thinks modern technology does. Modern technology forces nature, "challenges" nature, demands from nature something (e.g. energy). Heidegger writes (1977: 17):

Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering. . . . We call it the standing-reserve (Brauch)."

He also gives the examples of "human resources" and "the supply of patients for a clinic" (1977: 18) - something that is still surprisingly relevant to today's problems. Heidegger's point is that in so far as our current practices and our current technological actions are modern, they turn everything—including nature—into a standing-reserve. "Bursting open," by contrast, is a very different way of perceiving both humans and the environment. It suggests a different relation to the environment: one that is similar to what the craftsman and the artist do, and one that has less to do with control and more with letting-be, with bringing the revealing and the bringing-forth happen somehow. Yet as far as humans are concerned, this letting-be should not be understood as passivity. It is about doing things in a different way. Rather, it also has to do with an active caring and being-concerned-with— with oneself and with one's natural and social environment. As Zimmerman helpfully stresses Heidegger:

Authentic producing, tekhne, is not a matter of an "agent" using "force" to push material together into a specific form. Rather, it is a disclosure of entities for their own sake. This conception of tekhne is consistent with Heidegger's contention that the very being of humans in der Wirklichkeit is "care." To exist authentically means to care
Mark C. Kennellough

However, in Heidegger it is not very clear what exactly this terse, the art, this "letting-be", this "care", and this "being-at home with things" means, let alone what this means for shaping our relation to the environment. It is clear that it is a non-romantic way of perceiving and doing, and we may also conclude that it is a non-romantic way of perceiving and doing. As I have suggested, the romantic perception of the environment as "nature" is remarkably similar to that other modern mode of acting and doing, the objective-technoscientific one. In a sense, both objectively the environment and instrumentalize it, albeit for different purposes. Heidegger presents an alternative here, and it is interesting, for example, that he does not see an opposition between care for oneself and care for things (the non-self, if we must express it). With regard to the environment, it suggests the possibility that care for humans and care for the environment can coincide. But what exactly does this "care" relation mean when it comes to the environment? What does it mean to relate to the environment in a more one-toway way, and in a way that less things be? And how does it overcome alienation from the environment?

Perhaps we can get a clearer picture by looking at "non-modern" cultures and reflecting on their forms of life. It is clear that hunting-gathering, for example, offers a more engaged way of relating to the environment than setting in an office and doing computer-mediated work five or six days a week. The problem with the latter is not that it is less "natural" and more "artificial" , but that -- at least so it seems -- the engagement with one's environment is rather limited, has low intensity. There is no direct relation between the one hand the environment, and on the other hand what most of us do and (literally) making a living (including looking for food, building, etc.). The underlying theme, however, is not so much "more" or "less" environment, but rather how we perceive our environment and how we deal with it. Again this can be reflected upon by looking at non-modern, or (today) at least less modern cultures. Judged on the basis of descriptions quoted and discussed by the contemporary anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000), hunter-gatherers have a distinct language, for example the Cree people of north-eastern Canada think that they can only catch an animal when it is "given" to them and that only respectful activity can enhance the readiness with which the animals give themselves (Ingold 2000: 48). Thus, the animal cannot be demanded and it cannot be controlled. What is required is respect, waiting, attention. If there is killing, it is only when it is necessary, and proper rituals should be observed to avoid wasting of meat (2000: 67). Moreover, a kind of conservation is required, but one that is different from the management of natural "resources", Ingold puts it as follows:

[The environmental conservation practices by hunter-gatherers, if such is it, differ fundamentally from the so-called "scientific" conservation advocated by Western wildlife protection agencies. Scientific conservation is firmly rooted in the doctrine ---, that the world of nature is separate from, and subordinate to, the world of humanity. --- Scientific conservation operates, then, by sealing off portions of wilderness and their animal inhabitants, and by restricting or banning human intervention. (Ingold 2000: 68)]

Hunter-gatherers, by contrast, care for their environment "through a direct engagement with the constituents of the environment, not through a detached, hands-off approach" (2000: 68). Care for the environment, in this view, is a relational matter: "it requires a deep, personal and affectionate involvement." This makes it possible to see a hunt not as an act of control or violence, but rather as "proof of amicable relations between the hunter and the animal" (2000: 69). The model for this kind of human-environment and human-animal relationship is the human-human relationship; indeed, Ingold's interpretation suggests that there is no fundamental difference here between human-human and human-animal relations (2000: 69); there is one social-natural world.

This way of experiencing and treating one's environment seems close to what Heidegger means with letting-be and care/concern (German: Sorge). Ingold describes (2000: 78) hunter-gatherer cultures and practices as living "a history of human contact with animals, insofar as this notion conveys a caring, attential regard, a "being with." Again, such a description of our dealings with the environment and with the non-humans we encounter it suggests that we can learn from anthropology about more care-full, engaged forms of life. It becomes clearer what less control and more care and letting-be, perhaps also letting-appear and letting-bloom, mean in practice.

However, there is a danger that we frame those ways of life in a romantic way, especially when we present such "primitive" (in history) or "indigenous" (today) people as being somehow "closer to nature", as more "natural" than we are. Although the myth of the noble savage has been criticized in philosophy and anthropology, it remains both tempting and highly problematic. What the romantic -ecological view gets right, I think, is the intuition that less modern people are or have been less alienated from their environment. What it gets wrong, however, it that it frames this intuition in terms of an opposition between "nature" and "culture", between "natural" and "artificial", between "authentic" and "non-authentic". It is true that they are more engaged with their environment, but to put this in terms of "nature" is to deny the very ground that makes such engagement possible. To think in terms of the nature-cultural duality is itself part of our alienation. And our culture is as much "natural" or "authentic" as it is "artificial". Let us further explore and develop this thought by deconstructing the nature-culture duality, which is what I take Ingold to be doing in The Perception of the Environment (2000).

Drawing on ethnographic observation of people who make their living by hunting and gathering, Ingold seeks to "replace the dichotomy of nature and culture with the multiple ways of organism and environment" (Ingold 2000: 9). People's involvement with their environment - also our involvement with our environment - is as much "natural" as it is "cultured", Ingold shows that "hunter-gatherers" perception of the environment is embedded in practices of engagement rather than being the result of a social-cultural construction of "naturally given realities" (2000: 10). It is not the case that first there is a "nature" which then gets transformed in our perception into a "cultural" construction. Rather, knowledge is engaged in experience, in our active engagement with and in our environment. Finding a new relation to our environment is indeed about wanting to be at home, as Heidegger suggested it also about actively making oneself at home, in perception and action - which are intrinsically related. It is about home-making, about - to use a Heideggerian term that Ingold also uses - dwelling. Experience", Ingold writes (2000: 11), "does not mediate between mind and matter, since these are not separate in the first place. It is rather intrinsic to the process of 'being alive to the world,'". This view and these studies therefore do not only show that there are no "more engaged, perhaps more "direct" ways of relating to our environment; they also reveal a more basic, existential kind of engagement that we tend to forget about in the West and
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However, we cannot simply escape modern ways of perceiving and treating our environment. It seems entirely reasonable that, based on the insights presented in this chapter, we must move towards a more engaged and care-full form of life, informed by a more relational and non-dualistic understanding of the environment and of the human-environment relationship. As I argued in "Caring as Moral Relations" (2012), "normal" change is dependent on a number of related conditions of possibility, including language, culture, and technology. As this chapter suggests, how we think about the environment depends partly on what language we use. For example, I have shown that talking about "nature" is problematic and is connected to an entire (modern) culture, including ways of thinking and ways of doing. How we conceive of our relations to animals, for example, depends on the language we use to describe them (e.g. is a "livestock" that stands reserve versus a particular animal a "companion" or "friend" with a name) and also on the existing relations we have with them, relations that are embedded within an entire form of life. If we use the terms "wilderness" and "conservation management", this is also not morally neutral but presupposes modern thinking about, and a modern relation to, the environment. And the concept of "ecosystem services" is clearly illustrative of the modern, controlling, and demanding attitude, which Heidegger described as aiming to turn everyday life into a standing-reserve, a resource that we can use for our human purposes. I have also argued that even a concept such as "ecocentrism" is in danger of maintaining the modern status quo; in particular, the assumption that there is a "nature" versus a "culture", that the environment is only externally connected to human subjectivity and human sociality and human life. Unless we can change all this, we are still living under the spell of a way of thinking and doing that does not only destroy non-human environments and non-human beings, but that also denies, disrespects, and thus in a sense violates the environmental nature of humanity.

If we want a less dualistic and less alienated relation to the environment, then one thing we can do is attend to the moral significance of the language we use to talk about the environment. For example, in this chapter I have suggested that by using terms "engagement" and "care" we can try to articulate different relational possibilities. We need a conception of the human-environment relation which deconstructs not only the technoscience-romantic dialectic, but also goes beyond the anthropocentrism-ecocentrism duality. This can give us a new framework from which to think about the environment. It may also support experimenting with, and learning from, less modern attitudes and relations to the environment.

Does this mean environmental change is just around the corner? Such a view would be misleading. Of course we can tinker with our moral language and with our moral relations to order to try to make a change, indeed create a change. I think this is what Heidegger did and what Ingold does. I also hope to have made a small contribution to this here. But perhaps this tinkering can only be done "in the margins", "marginally", slowly, and while accepting the here are limits to what we can do with words and that there is something that Heidegger calls "a destiny". We have already turned the earth into a "spaceship earth" that is managed, controlled, used, and sold. Under these conditions, and keeping in mind the dangers of Modern thinking (Heidegger would say: "technological thinking"), it is a bad idea to respond to our predicament with a voluntary call for action and for change, with a management plan, a call for revolution, or another modern device. Of course we can conclude from this discussion that we must change our moral-environmental language, we must change our ideal-environmental relations, we must change our lives. But we will also need some tending-be-what, what Heidegger calls Gebrauchheit (Heidegger 1966). If our care-full handling of, more intimate engagement with, and respectful relating to the environment has that quality
of bringing-forth, then new blossoms might burst into bloom; then we give a different, less modern environmental politics a chance to unfold and reveal itself.

Notes
1 There are also other explanations. Empirical research in environmental psychology and education also points to various “internal” barriers to pro-environmental action such as problems related to motivation (for an overview, see Kollmus and Agyeman 2002) and lack of direct experience and emotional engagement (Milton 2010). The latter—especially direct experience—is related to the argument of this chapter; what is needed is more engagement with nature, rather than romantic conceptions of nature as an external good.
2 Note that I further develop my argument against a romantic environmental ethics elsewhere (Crockett 2015).
3 Some authors have also argued that there is such a bias in anthropology (e.g. Kopytova 2012) and philosophy (e.g. Plumwood 1993).
4 The term was first used in the 1960s by Aihara Stevans, Barbara Ward, Kenneth Boulding, and Beckerman Fuller, and today it is often used to express concern about limited resources and unsustainable ways of living. Here I use it for illustrating our modern approach to the earth as a spaceship in which things are managed, sometimes even “saved” (to control it); it is an instrument in your hands; it does not have intrinsic value. What matters is the survival and well-being of the crew.
5 In contrast to the received view, I hold that cannibalism, expropriation, etc. can play a positive role in philosophical argument, provided one is aware of using it and provided it helps to bring out more clearly, into the open, a particular view.
6 The qualification “in so far as they are romantic” is important in this sentence. Many contemporary writers might well be less modern and less romantic about the wilderness than suggested here, and in contemporary environmental philosophy, there has been a significant amount of critical discussion around the wilderness and nature, for example, Callan has argued that the wilderness concept “perpetuates the pre-Darwinian Western metaphysical dichotomy between ‘man’ and ‘nature’” (Callan 1991: 348). Against this, Robinson has argued that there are radical dichotomies between culture and nature (1991: 371). And in more recent work (2012: 178), he discusses the view that “wild nature, our subsistence, and even human freedom are inextricably linked.” He goes on to argue that humans do not exist outside of the natural world. Robinson does not believe that humans have a reach toward a nature to which humans have put their hands.” Yet somaticness continues to heavily influence the common view of “nature” and “the wild” in environmentalism, and while the concepts of nature and wilderness have received much attention, these romantic metanarratives remain largely upheld.
7 Thus, somaticness can and must be seen as a more invasive and moral of technoscientific rationalities. And revered means always that discomfort is not the same. To see Plumwood’s metaphor.

In feminist and liberation theory, the entry, forgotten parts of the natural world have been swallowed away by unseemly practise, and their very presence is challenged. In these mountains, a well-trodden path leads from a steep defile down to the Cavern of the Reavers, where trekkers fill in an upland-cloaked world which strongly resembles the one they seek to escape. Trapped Romance wanders here, lingering their exile, and as many various races of Arcadians, Earth Mothers, Noble Savages and Working-Class heroes whose identities are defined by reversing the valuations of the dominant culture. (Plumwood 1993: 3)

8 Note that the religious connotation here is not accidental—however, I will not further discuss this here.
9 See for example the Wikipedia definition of romantic: it is defined as a term used “to denote a nature-centered, as opposed to human-centered system of values.” This clearly reveals the term is being part of a dialectic of “natural” vs. “human” thinking. 10 Any position on information technology and the way it shapes our contemporary forms of life is more nuanced (“environment” also includes the digital, “virtual,” or “online” environment, and the activities include more than these mediated by electronic media, but let me for the sake of argument assume that, at least in general, there is today in our (social) lives less direct engagement with the environment, and that information technology plays a role in that, otherwise it is hard to explain our feeling of disconnection and our romantic urge to escape and go into “nature”.

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