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# BEYOND “NATURE”

## Towards more engaged and care-full ways of relating to the environment

*Mark Coeckelbergh*

### Introduction

In modernity the environment is usually perceived as “nature”: either it is seen from an objectivist–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 undesirably 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–romantic dialectic but also goes beyond the anthropocentrism–ecocentrism 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 sense in which 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, regional, 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 large multi-national corporations have in continuing unsustainable activities, and our personal addiction to a consumerist lifestyle, including industrially produced food.[1] In this chapter, however, I would like to relate the problem to (the discourse 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 *concepts* 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 of the relation between humans and their environment which is less modern and less romantic.[2] 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,[3] but also helps us to offer a critique of the anthropocentrism–ecocentrism dichotomy itself, at least as far as this dichotomy is framed in terms of a human–nature or culture–nature opposition.

First I will describe and criticize two modern ways of perceiving and seeing the environment: an objectivist–technoscientific one and a subjectivist–romantic one, which may be understood as standing in a dialectic relation. Whereas the first is well known and has been sufficiently criticized in the past century, the second has received a lot less attention, but is, so I will argue, at least as important if we care to understand the roots and meaning of contemporary environmentalism as a *modern* phenomenon. After presenting this brief analysis of the dialectic of modern environmentalism, I will then explore a route towards a less modern, less dualistic way of thinking about the environment, which also deconstructs the anthropocentrism–ecocentrism duality. This part will also be inspired by the phenomenological tradition in philosophical thinking (especially the works of Heidegger), but will also refer to contemporary anthropology (in particular Ingold's interpretation of anthropological studies). I will end with a brief reflection on the possibility of environmental change; that is, positive change to the way(s) we perceive and treat 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". Since early modern thinking and since the Enlightenment, we want to understand and control nature. The normative part of this way of seeing and doing is strongly anthropocentric: what counts is our, that is *human* aims and values, and "nature" is a collection of resources we can use for our purposes. It is, to use Heidegger's words, a "standing reserve" (Heidegger 1977); it stands by for our purposes and has no value of its own, no intrinsic value. It is supposed to stand ready for us as a container of resources, products, and services for our use; we can take whatever and how much we need from it. The non-human world is there to be used for our benefit and advantage. We can extract energy from it, we can make food out of it, we can transform the whole planet into "spaceship earth".[4] The tools for doing this are science and technology, which help us to understand nature, to force nature to reveal its laws and workings, and use this knowledge to dominate it, subject it, bring it to submission. My use of "master" imagery and perhaps phallocentric metaphors is intended: there is indeed what the feminist environmental philosopher Plumwood (1993) calls a "dream of power" in modern thinking. Considering ourselves as masters of nature, we use instrumental rationality to get what we want out of our environment in order to reach our (human) aims.

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 *services* 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.

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 criticism. 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 criticism can thus be analysed 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 objectification of nature and non-human beings – and indeed human beings, which are also seen as objects; for example, machines. The second type of objection consists of 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 benefited us, as Latour [1993] has argued, science in practice is more non-modern than we think, and I also made a caricature[5] 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 "system", "artificial" society, and the destruction 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 wilderness, untouched by human hands and human tools. Others think the "original" state is a 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 recipient 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 "outdoor" into "nature" rather than staying in in "artificial" environments. Romanticism has become so much part of how we think about the environment that we no longer notice it. Moreover, the objectivist–technoscientific current, which was supposed to be completely different from romanticism, has successfully absorbed, colonized, and "processed" our romantic desires. The eco-tourism industry and the outdoor equipment industry produce goods and provide services that respond to our romantic cravings. In the commercialization of "nature", romanticism meets objectivist production. The "natural" and the "authentic" have become commodified. In this way, the two faces of modernity meet. The objectivist rationalist and the subjectivist romantic find one another in a ghastly and sorrowful, yet so far rather successful, embrace.

Moreover, the romantic face is as anthropocentric as the technoscientific one: what counts is our *human* feeling, our desire for harmony. The environment tends to become a screen onto which we project our feelings, a resource for our romantic fantasies, a background to our self-absorbed attempts to be "authentic". It turns out that both are and remain strongly anthropocentric. In so far as they are romantic, those who embrace the "wild"[6] are not ecocentric at all; what they really care about and hope to find "outdoor" is the "nature", the "wilderness", and "authenticity", and the freedom in and of themselves. Real engagement with their environment is accidental or instrumental.

This leads me to a further deconstruction of the technoscientific–romantic dialectic. The romantic was supposed to be the antithesis of the technoscientific (with our current, somewhat odd modern mixture of both being the ugly, if not comic, synthesis of the two). But in fact the technoscientific and the romantic face of modernity share more than they would admit.[7] In particular, they share the same conception of the environment and the same conception of the human–environment relation. They conceptualize the environment as "nature", and although they give different meanings to the term, *both* use the term "nature" to construct the environment as something that is external to the human, something "out there" which either has to be forced into submission and transformed, or has to be left alone and function as a paradise lost to which we hope to return.[8] Thus, in both views, the relation between humans and their environment is an external one, there is a fundamental ontological *distance* and separation between them. It is only when we see the environment as something external to us that we can seek to become its master; that we can enslave it and treat it as an object that can be transformed or as a provider of goods and services. It is only when we view the environment as something external to us that we can treat it as a lost world and as a projection screen of our inner feelings. It is only when we see the human as fundamentally separated from its environment that we can think of the human as having to do with "subject" as opposed to "object"; "mind" or "spirit" (German: *Geist*) as different from "matter" and "flesh"; "culture" as distinct from "nature".

In addition, it is only when we see the human–environment relation in this way that we can set up an opposition between "anthropocentric" and "ecocentric" at all.[9] If the "human" is separated from "nature" and conceptually entirely distinct from it, then it seems that in our descriptive and normative orientations we have to *choose* between one of them. This is the modern dilemma. But it need not be ours. In the next pages, I will explore a route towards a less dualistic, less modern way of thinking about the human–environment relation. My main idea is that we are always already "environmental" by nature (pun intended) and that the environment can only appear as part of our "world"; that is, as perceived by us and as worked upon/transformed by us.

## Towards a less dualistic understanding of the human–environment relation

Searching for different ways of thinking means searching for a different language, which is always connected to searching for different habits, different technologies, and indeed for 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 me sketch a route for non-modern, 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 objectivist–technoscientific domination of the environment is a human–environment relation, which comes close to Heidegger's interpretation of the Greek word *techne*. In his essay 'The Question Concerning Technology' (Heidegger 1977), he criticizes modern technology and finds in the ancient Greek term *techne* 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 *techne* and makes a link between *techne* and *physis* (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 (*physis*) 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 (*Bestand*)."

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 craftsperson and the artist do, and one that has less to do with control and more with letting-be, with letting 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 interprets Heidegger:

> Authentic producing, *techne*, then 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 sakes. This conception of *techne* is consistent with Heidegger's contention that the very being of human *Dasein* is "care." To exist authentically means to care

> for oneself, for others, and for things in an appropriate way. . . . The great work of art, especially poetry, is the *techne* which enables people to be at home with things.
> *(Zimmerman 1990: 230)*

However, in Heidegger it is not very clear what exactly this *techne*, this 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-modern 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 seeing and doing, the objectivist–technoscientific one. In a sense, *both* objectify 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 (say the not-self, if we must use dualistic language). 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 *care-full* way, and in a way that lets 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 sitting 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[10] – the engagement with one's environment is rather limited, has low intensity. There is no direct relation between on 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 problem, 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 clearly a less modern or non-modern form of life. The hunter does not view the animal as a standing-reserve of food and clothing, and the food is not "produced" – at least not in an industrial way; at most, it is "brought-forth" by the hunt and by related practices. And as Ingold suggests (see also below), the animal has to reveal itself, has to "give itself" somehow to the hunter. He quotes a study which found that 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 needed 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:

> [T]he environmental conservation practices by hunter-gatherers, if such it is, differs 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".[11] 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 relation; 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: 76) hunter-gatherer cultures and practices as living "a history of human *concern* with animals, insofar as this notion conveys a caring, attentive regard, a 'being with'." Again, such a description of our dealings with the environment and with the non-humans we encounter in 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-blossom, 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–nostalgic 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, is 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–culture duality is itself part of *our* alienation. And our culture is as much "natural" or "authentic" as theirs. Let me further explain 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 means of hunting and gathering, Ingold seeks to "replace the dichotomy of nature and culture with the synergy 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 "cultural". 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 grounded 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 suggests; it is 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 nature, 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 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 that is the very foundation of knowledge – in pre-modern or less modern cultures as well as in our culture: the basic, existential engagement all of us *always* have with our environment. We are indeed environmental beings. With Ingold (who is also influenced by Heidegger), we must thus reject both the dualism of objectivist science *and* the dualism of romanticism. The latter was a reversal of the former, but turning things upside down is not enough; we need to go beyond modern dualism, also concerning the subject–object dichotomy and the modern philosophy of mind and philosophy of perception that informs the dominant ways of seeing and treating the environment.

Indeed, from this Heideggerian, anthropological, more *integral* and certainly less dualistic point of view, it becomes also more clear what Zimmerman says about Heidegger's view of the relation between "earth" and "world"; that is, between the environment and the human, that earth and world should not be separated, but instead are internally related: "Rightly understood, *physis* names both the earthly and the worldly dimension of things. . . . *Physis* brings forth the humans necessary to disclose what *physis* brings forth." (Zimmerman 1990: 234).

Thus, there is not "nature" apart from human subjectivity and (I would add) human activity, which lets the environment appear – lets it appear at all, and in particular ways – and which transforms it: again, this can be done in various ways, modern ways and others. There is not on the one hand an "environment" and on the other hand "the human". There are humans, but these humans are already "natural" and are always already *in* their environment as they experience, know, and act. There is an environment, but as we speak, think, and interact with it, it is always already a perceived environment,[12] an experienced environment, a *lived environment* and an environment that is worked on by humans, which is as much "earth" as it is "world", non-human and human, natural and cultural. In the lived environment, there is a bringing-forth which is at the same time "natural" and "artificial", which is *physis* in the richer sense suggested by Heidegger and Zimmerman.

For thinking about the environment, this means that the modern ways of viewing the environment as "nature" are fundamentally wrong about the relation between humans and the environment, and that both anthropocentrism and ecocentrism (and those who frame the descriptive and normative discussion about the environment in these terms) get it wrong, at least in so far as they miss the point that (1) humans are always already "natural" and "environmental", indeed *environmental by nature*; and that (2) our environment is always an environment already perceived, known, experienced, and acted upon by humans. Even ecocentrism maintains the "human" versus "nature" duality; it is a mere reversal. Moreover, by framing the environment as "nature", these modern ways of seeing close off other possibilities to relate to nature, such as those suggested by Heidegger and by Ingold. We *can* interact with our environment in a different, more care-full, and less controlling way. There is that possibility – although it may be very difficult to actualize it under present conditions, that is, as far as we are still modern, as far as we still *live* modernity. Let me further reflect on this.

## Closing and opening

In this chapter, I have articulated and distinguished two modern ways of perceiving (and treating) the environment – both of which revolve around the term "nature" and both of which are problematic in similar ways. It seems that we need a change here towards more intense and direct engagement with our environment, which must start from the recognition that our modern framing of the human–environment relation is highly problematic, and which can take inspiration from thinkers who explore non-modern ways of talking about the environment by studying and discussing past or present non-modern (or less modern) forms of life.

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 want to 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 relation. As I argued in *Growing Moral Relations* (2012),[13] moral 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. as "livestock" that stands reserve versus a particular animal as 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 everything 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 technoscientific–romantic dialectic, but also goes beyond the anthropocentrism–ecocentrism duality. This can give us a new framework from within 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 in order to try to make a change, indeed craft 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 margin", "marginally", slowly, and while accepting that there 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 voluntarist 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 moral–environmental relations, we must change our lives. But we will also need some letting-be, what Heidegger calls *Gelassenheit* (Heidegger 1966). If our care-full handling of, more intense 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 poetics a chance to unfold and reveal itself.

## Notes

1 There are also other explanations. Empirical research in environmental psychology and education also point to various "internal" barriers to pro-environmental action such as problems related to motivation (for an overview, see Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002) and lack of direct experience and emotional attachment (Milton 2002). The latter – especially direct experience – is related to the argument of this chapter: what is needed is more engagement with nature, rather than romantic consumption of nature as an external good.

2 Note that I further develop my argument against a romantic environmental ethics elsewhere (Coeckelbergh 2015).

3 Some authors have also argued that there is such a bias in anthropology (e.g. Kopnina 2012) and philosophy (e.g. Plumwood 1993).

4 The term was first used in the 1960s by Adlai Stevenson, Barbara Ward, Kenneth Boulding, and Buckminster 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: a spaceship is something you manage, something you (want to) control. 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 caricature, exaggeration, 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, to bring 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 about the wilderness and wild nature. For example, Callicott has argued that the wilderness concept "perpetuates the pre-Darwinian Western metaphysical dichotomy between 'man' and nature", encouraging getting in contact with the radical non-human "other" (Callicott 1991: 348). Against Callicott, Rolston has argued that there are radical discontinuities between culture and nature (1991: 371). And in more recent work (2012: 179), he discusses the view that "wild nature, out there independently of humans does not exist. . . . The only nature we have from here onward is a nature to which humans have put their hands." Yet romanticism 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, their romantic heritage remains largely hidden.

7 Thus, romanticism can and must be seen as a mere *inversion* or *reversal* of technoscientific rationalism. And reversal means always that dualism is not overcome. To use Plumwood's metaphor:

> In feminist and liberation theory, the misty, forbidden passes of the Mountains of Dualism have swallowed many an unwary traveller in their mazes and chasms. In these mountains, a well-trodden path leads through a steep defile to the Cavern of Reversal, where travellers fall into an upside-down world which strangely resembles the one they seek to escape. Trapped Romantics wander here, lamenting their exile, as do various tribes 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 ecocentrism: it is defined as a term used "to denote a nature-centred, as opposed to human-centred system of values". This clearly reveals the term as being part of dualistic "nature"–"human" thinking.

10 My position on information technology and the way it shapes our contemporary form of life is more nuanced ("environment" also includes the "digital", "virtual", or "online" environment, and our activities include more than those mediated by electronic technologies), but let me for the sake of argument assume that, at least in general, there is today in our (work) 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 alienation and our romantic urge to escape and go into "nature".

11 See also Kay Milton's discussion (2002) of how we develop emotional commitments to nature.

12 By saying this, I do not mean that nature is a mere construct. It is a construct, but not a *mere* construct. We only have access to it through human language, culture, and technology. But on the other hand, it does not only exist in our imagination and our language. It is real and it is not entirely and not necessarily dependent on humans for its existence. But we cannot get to "it" except via human culture. It may have some degree of "otherness", but this otherness is never absolute and is always experienced through the lens of human subjectivity and human transformation of nature. Thus, I agree for example with Horigan (1988), who criticizes the Enlightenment opposition between nature and culture, and I partly agree with constructivist approaches to the environment. There is always perception of the environment: we always know it through the glasses of human subjectivity and culture, and this perception is also connected to social realities and values; it is never neutral. But I disagree if "constructed" means "only existing in language and human reality". (This is a long-standing debate in philosophy, of course: discussions about signs and representation, the question whether there is something independent of the perceiver, etc.)

13 More precisely, the book's focus was on changes to moral status, but its main arguments can be applied to moral change in general.

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