

Thomas Heyd (ed), *Recognizing the Autonomy of Nature: Theory and Practice*

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A powerful line of argument among environmental philosophers asserts that humans have ethical responsibilities not merely towards individual entities in nature (such as sentient animals, or all living organisms), nor even towards more complex natural wholes (such as species or ecosystems), but also towards nature *itself*—where “nature” is understood simply as that part of the world that is independent of human beings and human actions. There is a *prima facie* duty, this line suggests, just *to let nature be*—to refrain from interfering in natural processes and natural developments. Draining a wetland in order to develop a shopping mall is wrong, on this account, not merely because of the harms it causes to animals and plants, nor even to the wetland ecosystem itself, but also because in doing so a region of the world independent of human action is replaced by one that human beings control. It is nature’s *autonomy* that is thereby violated, and this violation is a separate harm from that caused to any particular set of natural entities.

Recognizing the Autonomy of Nature, edited by Thomas Heyd, is a collection of essays all concerned with developing and (with one exception) defending this line of argument. (It’s based in part on a series of papers originally presented at a conference held in Newfoundland). The essays are by a number of important figures in this area, including Eric Katz, Val Plumwood, Keekok Lee, Andrew Light, and William Jordan (the one sceptic). The book is divided into three sections. The first, after an introduction by Heyd (who teaches at the University of Victoria in British Columbia), includes essays by Plumwood and Lee arguing directly for

the thesis that nature’s autonomy deserves protection; the second, including essays by Katz, Ned Hettinger, and (jointly) William Throop and Beth Vickers, considers the question of what sorts of human practices might be said to respect nature’s autonomy and what sorts violate it; and the third, with essays by Light, Mark Woods, Dean Bavington, and John Sandlos, focuses specifically on the vexed question of ecological management and restoration, practices which philosophers such as Katz in particular have problematized as paradigmatic violations of the autonomy of nature. The essay by Jordan, commissioned especially for the volume, concludes it.

The essays are generally good—I especially liked the ones by Hettinger, Bavington, and Woods—although most of them seem a bit short, closer to conference paper length (which is presumably what they originally were) than to a length appropriate for making a detailed written argument. The essays by the bigger names break no new ground, but rather are either shortened versions of better-known work published elsewhere or summary restatements of it. Still, the anthology does a nice job of presenting the central issues and controversies associated with the idea of nature’s autonomy as something worth protecting, and would be a very good introduction for someone (or for some class) first grappling with this idea and its implications.

The problem is that to grapple with the idea is quickly to come up against a series of difficulties and paradoxes that none of the essays really resolves, although some do a better job than others of noticing and confronting. The difficulties have to do both with the notion of “nature” and with the notion of “autonomy” that need to be employed if the thesis that “nature is autonomous” is to make any sense and is to serve as the basis for normative claims about how humans ought to act. First of all it isn’t clear what the thesis means by the word “nature,” and in particular how it views

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the relation of humans to nature. Are human beings themselves natural organisms or not? To answer no is to fly in the face of all of contemporary science, while to answer yes seems to suggest (surprisingly) that nature's autonomy is in no danger at all—the building of a shopping mall by humans no more violates it than does the building of a dam by beavers or a web by spiders. Or are we humans natural while our products are not? But babies are “products,” and so too is urine and the carbon dioxide we exhale; we'd scarcely call those artificial. Or is it just the products we produce *intentionally* and using our *minds* that aren't natural? But babies are sometimes produced intentionally, first of all—and secondly why aren't our minds and our intentions part of nature? The idea that humans *could* violate the autonomy of nature (in a way that beavers or spiders or kudzu or for that matter tornadoes cannot) assumes a Cartesian/Christian dualism whereby humans possess supernatural characteristics found in no other species, and stands in an uneasy tension with the standard rejection of anthropocentrism among environmental philosophers and their standard claim that we must see ourselves as “plain members” of the biotic community with no special moral or ontological status.

Many authors in this volume just ignore this problem, while those that don't still fail to resolve it. Thus Plumwood for instance acknowledges that talk of humans as violating nature's autonomy assumes a separation between humans and nature, but draws a distinction between this acceptable sense of separation and the “hyperseparation” she associates with the anthropocentric (and androcentric) desire to dominate nature (32–33); yet she gives no serious account of how this distinction is to be drawn, and in fact her examples of modern dominative and “colonizing” approaches to nature don't seem to involve the sort of “radical” and “emphatic” dualism that she defines hyperseparation as requiring (see 37). Woods tries to solve the problem by talking of a continuum between “naturalness” and “artificiality” instead of “sharp metaphysical boundaries” between them (174), but it isn't clear why he thinks this helps: why are *human* actions placed at one end of the continuum (the most “unnatural” one), and not the actions of, say, beavers? It's true that we can analytically distinguish between those parts of the world that have been more affected by human action and those that have not been so affected, but we could also similarly distinguish between the more or less beaver-affected parts too, and yet none of the authors in this volume explain why the first distinction is more important than the second one. If “nature” is *defined* as that which stands opposed to the human (whether on a continuum or not), then *of course* human actions harm nature, but this is so as a matter of definition; if “nature” were opposed to that which beavers do then beavers would be harming nature in exactly the same trivial

sense. What's still lacking is an explanation as to why the definition is made so as to single *us* out.

The other problematic word in the thesis that animates these texts is “autonomy.” The role of autonomy in ethical theory is of course very important, going back to the central role it plays in Kant's ethics. And yet the autonomy spoken of in these essays seems quite different from that so valorized by Kant, a fact again oddly not acknowledged by many of these authors and not sufficiently appreciated even by those who do acknowledge it. For Kant “autonomy”—whose roots are “*auto*,” self, and “*nomos*” law—means self-rule or self-legislation: to be autonomous a will must choose for itself the principles that will guide it, and does not allow its principles to be imposed upon it from anything external to it. To be autonomous thus requires being a *subject* capable of thought and of choice. Autonomy is necessary first and foremost for moral *agency*: only subjects capable of acting autonomously are able to make moral choices, and so only such subjects can be the objects of moral praise or blame. Because only autonomous agents are capable of making moral judgments, and therefore of engaging in moral (or immoral) action, they themselves possess a special moral status, according to Kant, as “ends in themselves.” To violate their autonomy—to force them to act against their own moral choices—is to act immorally, to contradict the formulation of the categorical imperative that enjoins all moral agents to treat all others as ends in themselves and never merely as means.

One may buy this Kantian story or not, but the key facts about it are that it provides an explanation of the moral worth of autonomy and of the harm involved in violating it, and that it grounds that explanation in the free choices of moral subjects. But nature is not a moral subject, and does not make free choices. To speak of its autonomy, then, is to use the word in an entirely different sense than Kant, and indeed in a sense that is almost exactly the opposite. This problem trips up even the several authors who do acknowledge that the autonomy they're speaking of differs from the Kantian one but try to present it as a generalization of Kant's notion. Thus Woods associates nature's autonomy with events that occur “independent of and in spite of human intentionality” (177), not seeming to notice that this is precisely the Kantian definition of *heteronomy*, autonomy's opposite. Throop and Vickers propose an “extension” of the Kantian notion where “to be self-ruled is to have one's behavior regulated by one's own principles” (102), and conclude that a natural entity's autonomy is therefore violated when it is treated in a way not “compatible with that entity's behaving in accord with its nature.” But this confuses Kant with Aristotle, failing to see that autonomy as the regulation of one's behavior by “one's own principles” is a reasonable interpretation of *self-rule* only if the principles involved are *chosen* by the agent: if they're not chosen, for

Kant, how could they be one's *own*? (Woods at 177 similarly talks of autonomy as involving an entity's "internal self-expression... independent of civilized forces"; but what does "self-expression" mean here? In what sense is the growth of a tree a matter of self-expression? Does a tree have a self? Can that self be expressed?)

"Autonomy" in almost all these essays actually means something quite distinct from what Kant meant. Katz, who at first defines it (77–8) as the opposite of "domination" (which begs the question Kant would raise as to whether "domination" is the right word to employ about a subject's relation to a non-subject), eventually makes clear that it simply means "freedom from human impacts" (84). To be autonomous, for many of these authors, just means to be *independent of humans*; it has none of the connotations of agency, choice, freedom, etc., that the Kantian notion involves. There's disagreement among the authors as to how much human impact is sufficient to harm autonomy: while Katz and Lee reject any human-caused effects or changes at all, Hettinger and Throop and Vickers try to distinguish between (as Hettinger puts it) "human *involvement* with nature and human *domination* of nature" (89). But even the latter view begins with some conception of what an entity would be like without any human impact at all, and then allows human "involvement" with the entity only so long as that unaffected character is respected. This issue is important in the second part of the volume, since if Katz and Lee are right there is *no* possibility of a human interaction with nature (which is to say, of any human action at all!) which is not a dominative violation of its autonomy, a view that seems to lead to the suggestion of what Hettinger provocatively criticizes as "a policy of human/nature apartheid" (88). Throop and Vickers want to rehabilitate traditional agriculture (but not industrial agriculture) as involving practices that respect the autonomy of the land; as mentioned, for them human influence on an entity respects its autonomy as long as the effects of that influence are "compatible with that entity's behaving in accord with its nature" (102). But now the problematic word "nature" has returned, and we're back with a problem: what is meant by the "nature" of an entity? And what sort of entities *have* natures?

Can an artifact be autonomous? Does an artifact have a "nature"? If we said that the "nature" of a lightbulb is to provide light (why else would it have the structure it has?), would that mean that I violate its autonomy when I switch it off? The question of the status of artifacts bedevils almost every essay in the volume. Katz is explicit that it makes sense to speak of the autonomy of a rock (and of human impact on the rock as violating that autonomy), so it's clear that for him non-living things can be autonomous (83); Lee agrees (61). But if moving a rock (to clear land for a shopping mall, say) violates its autonomy, wouldn't the same thing be true of moving (or destroying) other

structures on the land, such as abandoned buildings, rusted-out cars, etc.? Or does the fact that something was intentionally built by humans mean that it has no "nature," or—worse—that it has no "autonomy" to violate? But first of all *why* should this be so, if autonomy just means independence from human impact? Why should the fact that humans had a role the *origin* of something rob it of the possibility *now* of existing independently from human "domination"? And secondly, what should we say about *living* organisms that are intentionally built by humans? Babies are my first example, again: they are surely built by humans, and sometimes intentionally so, and yet as they grow they surely gain autonomy, and surely have a "nature." But there are other examples, several which are discussed (with antinomical results) in various essays in this volume: domesticated animals, genetically modified organisms, traditional agricultural products bred for their nutritional and horticultural properties, etc. (See Lee, 65; Hettinger, 91; Woods, 184 n.14) I think there's no plausible way to block the slippery slope here. If autonomy just means being left alone by humans, then I violate the autonomy of my socks every time I put them on. One could try to halt the slide, to be sure, simply by *stipulating* that only things not built by humans can be autonomous (and most of the authors here seem essentially to assume this), but as I've suggested this makes the claim that our actions violate nature's autonomy true by *definition* and so robs it of any real normative content. Or one could stipulate that only living things can be autonomous, but again this would seem to beg the question of why only living things deserve respect on the one hand while on the other it would allow Katz's rocks to be moved to our anthropocentric heart's content.

If autonomy just means independence, then it seems hard to deny that artifacts can be autonomous. Yet nothing follows from this *ethically*, for not all autonomy—in *this* sense of the word—deserves ethical respect. (It's not wrong, surely, to move a rusted automobile in order to build a park, although it does violate its independence.) These authors seem to think that if they can make sense out of the notion of nature's autonomy our duty to respect that autonomy follows immediately, but this is mistaken: what's needed is an independent argument about why nature is the sort of entity whose autonomy *deserves* our respect, and no such argument is offered here. Kant *did* offer this kind of argument, about the rational moral agents whose autonomy consists in the free choice of the principles that guide their actions; that's why the difference between his conception of autonomy and the ones employed in this volume is so important. These authors seem to be borrowing the ethical content of the (subject-oriented) notion of autonomy from Kant on the one hand while actually employing a notion of autonomy as independence which completely undercuts Kant's argument for that content on the other.

I have been painting with a broad brush here, and apologize to the authors for that. Many of the difficulties I have raised are acknowledged in various of these essays, but in my view they are not successfully resolved; I don't have space to offer detailed responses to each of the arguments presented in the volume. William Jordan's concluding essay deserves mention, because it takes quite a different tack, decisively rejecting the nature/culture dualism that underlies all the other contributions to the text. Everything in nature—including we humans and our “culture”—is connected to everything else, he argues; there is no “autonomy” if this is understood to mean complete independence, neither the autonomy of nature from us nor of course human autonomy vis-à-vis nature. “*There is simply no way to disengage,*” he writes, “no way to have no influence on the plants and animals on the other side of the fence” (198). The lesson of prairie restoration projects (which Katz, for instance, has famously rejected as examples of the anthropocentric domination of nature), writes Jordan, is that “the best way to respect the autonomy of a tall grass prairie is [for humans] to burn it at irregular intervals” (199). But he opposes the sentimental attempts of thinkers such as Throop and Vickers to distinguish between “respectful” and “dominative” forms of human interaction with nature: “agriculture is, not just incidentally but at its core, the

manipulation of other species in a radical way,” he writes, and so “even the most benign forms of agriculture ... represent premeditated, methodical, ongoing violence against other species and ecosystems” (195). This is the human condition: to exist in nature *is* to change nature, to “violate” its “autonomy.” But note it is also the condition of *every natural organism*, not some special fate we confront because we possess intention or thought. Jordan takes this line of argument in directions different from those I would follow, speaking of the importance of ritual and of art (and finally, of culture itself) as ways of finding “recompense” for the “crime” at the basis of the human place in nature (199–200), and arguing for restoration as a form of ritual performance; yet in his clear-headed acknowledgment of the antinomies at the heart of any talk of nature's autonomy he casts retrospective doubt on everything that came before his essay in the book.

Despite what I've said here, or rather precisely because of it, I recommend the book to anyone interested in environmental philosophy or concerned with understanding environmental problems. The issues it raises are deeply important ones, and the difficulties it gets into are for that very reason ones that any significant thinking about the environmental questions that face us today must confront.