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Neil H. Kessler

Ontology and Closeness in Human-Nature Relationships

Beyond Dualisms, Materialism
and Posthumanism

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Preface

I was sitting in a rented cabin on the coast of Maine, its multi-paned glass windows wrapping me in a sea of mist-soaked spruces and oaks when, in the course of my research, I happened upon a paper by Peter Martin entitled “Caring for the Environment” and published in the Australian Journal of Environmental Education in 2007. In it, he explores the applicability of Nel Noddings’ care theory to environmental ethics, and through that, to environmental education. As I read it, I found myself wholeheartedly agreeing with Martin’s attempt to adapt Noddings’ particular, relational ethic to the human-nature relationship. In fact, I was thinking of doing that very thing in my own research. But after reading his essay, I realized that something was missing from it.

In particular, at one point Martin is describing two other authors’ critiques of ecofeminist Karen Warren’s first-person account of a woman having a relationship with a cliff, which she describes in her essay “The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism”, published in the journal *Environmental Ethics* in 1990. To their suggestions that this person had either “fantasized” the relationship or was being “anthropomorphic,” Martin responds on page 60 by saying, “Suggesting that people’s relationships with entities in the environment have structural similarities to interpersonal relationships is clearly open to criticism.” He supports this statement by correctly pointing out that empirical support for such a similarity has been scant. But, instead of going on to suggest that it is true nonetheless and requires more, or a different kind of, empirical inquiry, instead he seems to retreat by saying, also on page 60, “My purpose here is [only] to raise the *possibility* of such a likeness becoming a pedagogical *tool* [emphasis added] or means of informing educational practice.” In other words, noting the difficulty of making the case for human-nature relationships to have “structural similarities to interpersonal relationships,” he settles for the relationship being a metaphor and, in so doing, inadvertently undercuts the possibility of the real relationship that he himself notes, elsewhere in the essay, is crucial to development of care for the environment.

In following the trajectory of Martin’s argumentation, I realized he had gone to the end of the same intellectual *cul-de-sac* that so many other modern scholars have. That is, when attempting to muster an argument for similarities between interhuman

and human-nature relationships, there is a simple lack of evidence in modern societies from which to draw such parallels. But, I suggest that this is not because these similarities don't exist. Instead, it's because few serious scholars dare to look for them within the modern scientific and educational context. Martin puts it mildly when he describes the attempt to draw such parallels as "open to criticism." In my mind, to attempt such a thing is to risk intellectual heresy. And maybe it's because I have had enough relational experiences in my own life with more-than-human beings and had no place to "put" those experiences except in the realm of spirituality or unsubstantiated belief (instead of in what common sense told me was simple reality and knowledge) that it was exactly in answering the question: "Can we have a real, caring relationship with nature?" that I realized scholarship was sorely needed. In coming to that conclusion, I also understood that answering that question necessitated first answering another. That is, "What are more-than-human beings like, or, what do we take them to be like?" Only after answering *those* questions could we know whether and what kind of relationships we are having with more-than-human beings or that it would be possible to have with them.

In the end, this book is inspired by these foundational questions—as much as it is by the sea-cloaked spruces and the Osprey out on the point of land that weekend in Maine, my heart leaping the following day as I got her, perched on the tallest tree out on the point, to respond when I broke out the Osprey call that I'd been working on for years. It's a whistle whose air comes from deep down in the diaphragm, the lips a simple reed to shape that air, to blow it out into that green, stone-shouldered place with a piercing, descending cry. And though she offered only one response to me before returning to her conversation with another of her kin across the inlet, when I struck that shrill cord for the first time, she turned and looked down, ratcheting out a long call of...annoyance? No matter. She *noticed* me—as I had her from far up the long, private driveway that I trespassingly descended to reach the place where she was—where she surveyed with such elegant fierceness everything tethered so meekly to the Earth beneath her. It is from that place of meeting that this book begins.

Durham, NH, USA

Neil H. Kessler

Acknowledgments

First, I would also like to thank my greatest teacher, Martín Prechtel. His strength and tenacity literally pried open my modern mind to thinking about the human-nature relationship in the ways I have attempted to show in these pages. This book would have been inconceivable without his kindness, generosity, and insistence on trying to crack the hard shell of the modern world that blinds us to the possibilities of true belonging. I think of this book as one, long response to his ornate exhortations.

I'd also like to express deep gratitude to my family. My wife, Mariya Shnaydman, has given so much of her time and care and love just so that this book could come to be. I literally could not have done it without her. And to my sweet son and daughter. They have tolerated my double-mindedness as I worked feverishly to put this book together. It is their love of nature and unfiltered ability to see the magic there that keeps me going. It is toward their future that this book takes gentle yet forthright aim.

I would also like to thank the members of my doctoral committee, without whose intellectual rigor and encouragement the research for this book would've never come to be. In particular, I'd like to thank my committee chair, Dr. John Carroll, who gave me the latitude to write whatever I felt it was important to write, and Dr. Barbara Houston, whose encouragement, so long ago, to "fail boldly" has been a spur pushing me beyond any "normalizing" limits. Her kindness and uncompromising intellect is the stuff of a great teacher and a friend.

In particular, I also want to thank Dori Mercadante, whose unflappability in the presence of great and wild ideas has been a steadying and inspiring influence throughout the writing of this book and long before it. I would not think the way I do about the natural world if it wasn't for her willingness to always ask the next, more difficult question and to not let me off the hook when providing an answer.

I would like to bow to two great and wild horses, my friends Eleanor and Marilyn, whom I met so long ago standing on their powerful hooves at the edge of a hot springs, secreted there against the sun-tattooed cliffs of the high New Mexico desert. It is the text within the text within the text that I send on wide wings to them. I am also grateful to the wonderful people at the Wild Rockies Field Institute in

Missoula, Montana. If not for the opportunity to teach their one-of-a-kind field-immersive courses, I never would have traveled as far down this wild road as I have. In particular, I'd like to thank Bethany Swanson, whose mix of affability, kindness, and care for this great, natural world have long been an inspiration.

Finally, I would like thank all the little stones, sitting alone in the moonlight. May you not be so lonely, unless that is what you desire to be. I'd like to thank the iron-black stallion in the field in Paonia, Colorado, for shooting me straight through with the power of his voice. And then, I'd like to thank the birds. All of them. The pigeons on the city streets with their maple-bud-red legs and shimmering necks. The poor starlings, who've done nothing more than glitter like a Milky Way-encrusted sky as they follow us humans from place to place. The chickadees who refuse to be banded easily. The red-tailed hawks, inscribing their brawny weightlessness on the dawnlit skies. The red-bellied woodpecker couple up the street from my house, who showed me so many things that first spring in my neighborhood. And all the tit-mouses, their flint-capped tenacity and gregariousness a thread that weaves together the woods around my house on a daily basis. It is because of all of you that I have the desire to speak so that someday it might become common, modern knowledge in the world that with you we *can* speak.

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