

Introduction

0.1 Environmental crisis and alienation from nature

The claim that we are in some deeply unfortunate way ‘alienated from nature’ is an old one, going back at least to Rousseau. It is a claim that continues to resonate in the context of our current environmental woes. We live in a time of anthropogenic mass extinction, serious climate change, ecosystem destruction, large-scale soil erosion and ocean acidification. Many believe that such matters, together with serious environmental injustice and the steady depletion of nonrenewable resources, constitute an environmental crisis that shows there is something seriously amiss with our relationship to nature. And many think that what is seriously amiss is that we are, or have become, alienated from nature.

References to an environmental *crisis* might seem overdramatic; perhaps even mere hyperbole designed to empower environmental organizations, parties and scientists, much as talk of *economic* crises serves to further empower certain other interest groups. Certainly, crisis-talk can be dangerous and should not be engaged in lightly.¹ On the other hand, if we bear in mind the ordinary meaning of a crisis as a time of great difficulty calling urgently for important and difficult decisions, then references to a current environmental crisis seem undeniably justified. The scale of problems such as those just mentioned make environmental crisis-talk reasonable whether we look at the situation anthropocentrically, taking into account only human interests, or nonanthropocentrically, taking account of nonhuman interests or the plight of nature ‘for its own sake’ too. It is a further issue, of course, whether talk of our *alienation from nature* is also reasonable or helpful. Invoking the idea of such alienation suggests that something fairly fundamental has gone awry; something calling for radical critique and remedies. At least in this respect it chimes with references to a crisis: we are confronted not just

¹ See Smith (2011) for an interesting analysis of the dangers inherent in convincing the powerful that we are in an environmental crisis situation.

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by another set of problems to be solved by standard techniques, but an environmental crisis that will be resolved only if we overcome our alienation from nature.

Unsurprisingly then this theme is present especially in the more radical perspectives within environmental philosophy, including deep ecology, eco-feminism and bioregionalism, which relate environmentally problematic forms of thought and action directly to wider social and political problems. Presumably most radical of all is the ‘primitivist’ perspective of writers such as John Zerzan who argue that the environmental crisis was inevitably set in train once our distant ancestors left behind their hunter-gatherer life in the wilderness, took to agriculture and settled in communities with increasingly complex divisions of labour and hierarchical social structures. For our own good, as well as the good of nature, we need to re-acquire as much as we can the closeness to nature enjoyed by humanity before the intervention of civilization (Zerzan 1994).

Not all talk of alienation from nature has quite such radical intent of course. In wider culture too the claim that we are unfortunately alienated from nature is present in some popular nature writing,² in the stances of environmental movements and organizations and in some of the pronouncements of naturalists and commentators on environmental issues. For example, the widely respected British broadcaster and naturalist Sir David Attenborough has warned that modern urban living has left people dangerously ‘out of touch with nature’ (*The Guardian* 2011). Consider also that the idea behind so-called Nature Deficit Disorder (NDD) is that various maladies of the modern world, including depression, diabetes and attention deficit disorders, are the result of an indoors way of life in urbanized environments with minimal interaction with nature. For this reason such problems and disorders are sometimes said to be the ‘cost of our alienation from nature’ (Louv 2010). The cure is supposed to involve more interaction with nature, although not necessarily to the extent of dismantling civilization along with the biomedical technologies and institutions required to diagnose the disorders in the first place.

Indeed something like this is what people often seem to have in mind when they talk of alienation from nature: modern urban living, industry and technology, and associated behaviour and intellectual trends have made us think, feel and act in ways that make sense only if we are not really part of a wider nature.³ For example, in a recent book the

² Sometimes the theme is completely explicit, as in the poet Melanie Challenger’s book *On Extinction: How We Became Estranged from Nature* (Challenger 2011).

³ It is sometimes added, without going the extra, primitivist mile, that pre-industrial, agricultural society had a ‘closer’ awareness and appreciation of wider natural processes. See, for example, Challenger (2011).

environmental activist and former director of Friends of the Earth Tony Juniper discusses various ways in which we depend on nature and yet fail to take account of this economically and politically (Juniper 2013). Political and economic short-termism very often holds sway regardless of the long-term damage done to the natural systems on which economic, political and all other social systems depend (Juniper 2013, ch. 11). Much mainstream economic thinking discounts as ‘externalities’ ecological damage and the degrading of natural systems despite the evidence and warnings of the consequences of this. Much economic discourse and decision-making then proceeds irrationally *as if* nature was an indefinitely self-replenishing storehouse of resources we visit to take things back for profitable employment within our own entirely separate little human world (Juniper 2013, e.g., 278f).

Juniper also discusses the version of the view that we are somehow ‘cut off’ from nature involved in claims about NDD. Sometimes these are underwritten by an application of the evolutionary psychological concept of ‘environment of evolutionary adaptedness’. This refers to the environmental context in which a particular species acquired its adaptive features. The idea is that, like other species, we flourish best in environments that are significantly similar to the natural conditions in which we evolved and so to which our senses and capacities are best adapted (e.g., Juniper 2013, pp. 254ff). In our case this was a savannah environment. Thus, according to the ‘biophilia hypothesis’, we are predisposed to prefer and flourish best in the company of certain kinds of flora and fauna; in particular, according to the ‘savannah hypothesis’, those significantly similar to the savannahs of East Africa.⁴ Not that we should seek to fully recreate the conditions of the savannah, but it is bound to make us ill when we have little or no access to suitable ‘green space’ or insufficient contact with certain kinds of plants and nonhuman animals. And the illnesses associated with NDD are bad not only for the individuals suffering them. The sufferers often need time off work and the standard medical treatments are very expensive. Lack of provision of adequate ‘contact with nature’ is therefore *economically* irrational (Juniper 2013, ch. 10).

That our environmental problems are wrapped up in some way with our alienation from nature seems like an important claim then, one we should take notice of. But what does it mean? How exactly should we understand the idea of alienation from nature? There are plenty of

⁴ See, for example, Kellert and Wilson (1993). The idea that human well-being is best served by an environment significantly similar to that in which we originally evolved is contestable of course. See Joye and De Block (2011) for a review of empirical and conceptual problems with the biophilia and savannah hypotheses.

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descriptions of our environmental situation as involving various deeply problematic political, ethical, psychological and social elements. But there has not been much focus on the idea of alienation from nature itself. There has not been much discussion of what is really added to our picture of the problems by saying they are a matter of our ‘alienation from nature’, rather than simply ignorance, short-sightedness, greed, injustice, laziness and unhealthy indoor sedentary lifestyles, for example. Why not just say the environmental crisis is a function of these common or garden defects and frailties, albeit amplified to unprecedented proportions by massive increases in human population and economic development? The situation is bad enough described in those terms, it might be added, without the portentous talk of alienation from nature. What does such talk contribute beyond some occasional extra rhetorical leverage in the struggle to embed environmental issues more deeply within the public imagination? In this book I discuss what ‘alienation from nature’ should mean. I aim to clarify and explore the notion as one that is indeed helpful in the context of our complex, multifaceted environmental crisis.

0.2 Pleistocene or Anthropocene?

At the outset, however, it is perhaps unsurprising that little attention has been given to the meaning of ‘alienation from nature’. A little thought quickly reveals such apparently serious problems with the idea that it can easily seem better to leave it alone as a piece of hazy and misleading rhetoric, or just to drop it altogether. Some of these problems turn on reducing our environmental predicaments to a condition of alienation from nature to be overcome in favour of a difficult to specify ‘oneness’ with it. There are dangers here of naive romanticism and irrational nostalgia, and of ‘anti-progressive’ references to ‘natural essences’, harmonies and blueprints of human moral order outside human history, with which we ought to be in touch. Dangers also arise from the way alienation has been shaped as a critical social and political concept by Hegel and Marx and the traditions of thought they have inspired. These seem vulnerable to environmental critique insofar as they either equate overcoming alienation from nature with assimilation and mastery of it, or eliminate consideration of nature by focusing entirely on the alienation of humanity from itself and from the products of its labour.

Pushed to do some work of its own then, the idea of overcoming pernicious alienation from nature can quickly suggest pictures of us as either somehow submerging ourselves within nature or submerging nature within us; assimilating it to the humanized artefactual world we are busily making. Neither picture seems very plausible or attractive. The

former is compounded by apparently irrational mythologizing of previous conditions of harmony or closeness held out as conditions we need to retrieve. Again, primitivism is the starkest and most dramatic version of this. We should give up our technology, civilization, even agriculture, and ‘return to the Pleistocene’. We should retrieve the closeness to nature that was lived out by humanity in Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer mode, a closeness from which we fell:

Before agriculture was midwived in the Middle East, humans were in the wilderness. We had no concept of ‘wilderness’ because everything was wilderness and we were a part of it. But with irrigation ditches, crop surpluses, and permanent villages, we *became apart from the natural world* ... Between the wilderness that created us and the civilization created by us grew an *ever-widening rift*.⁵

Obviously, seeking to close up this rift by dismantling civilization is a project with limited appeal, and presumably retaining the original edenic closeness to nature was not a decisive consideration for our distant ancestors either. Nor is it very plausible to suppose that late Pleistocene humanity lived in a close harmony with nature, if that means something like ‘refrained altogether from widespread ecological impact or unsustainably destructive practices’.⁶

In an interesting – and ironic – contrast to the proposal that we *return to the Pleistocene* is the increasingly popular suggestion that we should now take ourselves to be living in a new and unprecedented era. This idea has not yet been adopted formally by the scientific community, but is gaining ground among environmental scientists.⁷ The claim is that the scale of human impact on the Earth, especially since the Industrial Revolution, is so great and the reshaping of Earth systems so profound and long lasting that it justifies declaring the end of the (now) previous geological era (the Holocene, which succeeded the Pleistocene at the end of the last Ice Age some 10,000–15,000 years ago) and the start of a new one: the Anthropocene (or ‘new human’) era.⁸ Whether

⁵ Dave Foreman, founder of the Earth First! movement, quoted by William Cronon in his influential critique of the idea of ‘pure wilderness’ (Cronon 1995, p. 83, emphasis added). I return to the importance of not equating nature with pure wilderness at several places in this book.

⁶ For example, although the extent to which the wave of megafauna extinctions in the late Pleistocene were anthropogenic is a matter of controversy, human predation is generally believed to have been a significant causal factor.

⁷ See for example, ecologist Erle Ellis (2011) and geologist Jan Zalasiewicz (Zalasiewicz et al. 2011), and the other papers in issue 369 of the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A*, a special issue devoted to this topic.

⁸ The current Anthropocene discourse was initiated mainly by the atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen (e.g., Crutzen 2002), winner of a Nobel Prize in 1995 for his research on the ozone layer, and well known also for his work on the likely ‘nuclear winter’ outcome of nuclear warfare.

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this revision of geological eras and the naming of the present one after our own particular species are scientifically respectable is a matter for scientific debate and consideration of the data in the light of the criteria usually employed to decide such matters.⁹ My point is that talk of overcoming alienation from nature in *this* context suggests a picture of achieving oneness through yet more thorough but *better controlled* impacts on the Earth. Here we might envisage large-scale climate and geo-engineering projects and the comprehensive use of genetic modification (GM) and nanotechnologies. The more the Earth's systems function as a set of interlocking technologies smoothly operating to better deliver a sustainable environment for humanity, the 'closer' we will be to this new anthropogenic 'nature' of the Anthropocene. In this picture the environmental crisis is one of *uncontrolled* impact, not excessive impact. And overcoming alienation in favour of oneness as a response to *this* crisis looks to be a purely anthropocentric matter of establishing a new kind of environmental harmony through mastery of nature and assimilating the resulting 'nature' to human artefact and technology. This seems no less fantastical or more attractive than returning to the Pleistocene.

0.3 Humans and beavers

Further problems with talk of alienation from nature and its overcoming are conceptual difficulties turning on the idea of *nature*. One difficulty is the apparent nonsensicality of such talk given that we are simply one evolved species among others and so, like them, entirely a part of a natural world that we cannot leave. That 'nature' encompasses us too, such that we are inescapably a part of a wider natural world, is generally agreed by those who talk and worry about alienation from nature. But then no matter how artificial, civilized and technological we make our lives and surroundings, everything we are, do and produce is just as much a part of nature, just as 'natural' in that sense, as is anything else, including anything else we could be, do and produce. What then could count as *alienation from nature*? I am sitting indoors in front of a computer typing these words rather than walking through the woods with the wind in my hair. But the interior of my house, my computer and these words are no less part of the overall natural world than are the woods, the wind and my hair. I am just as closely and inescapably in touch with nature here as I would be there. Nuclear power stations might be problematic

⁹ See Zalasiewicz et al. (2011) for a discussion of the stratigraphical issues involved in distinguishing and dating geological periods.

in various different ways, but why think they involve our being alienated from nature, any more than the construction of dams by beavers involves *their* being alienated from nature?

Steven Vogel makes this point as part of a forceful argument against Andrew Biro's explanation of the 'fact of humanity's alienation' in terms of 'human beings' self-conscious transformation of their natural environment' (Biro 2005; Vogel 2011, pp. 188f). Unlike purely instinctual animals, we can 'deny our instincts'; stand back from them and use our cognitive and physical abilities to do something other than what they dictate. In this sense we can 'break from the dictates of nature', and so have history and culture (Biro 2005, p. 30). Here then is an account of what the idea of alienation from nature amounts to in itself. For Biro it consists in a self-conscious transformative stance towards nature, focused on moulding it and using it for non-instinctual purposes. In this case the movement from a 'purely instinctive' mode of interaction with nature to a self-conscious one is inherently alienating. It involves the repression of 'inner nature' (spontaneous instincts) and the purposive transformation of our surroundings, or 'external nature'. Biro locates the root of this understanding of alienation from nature in Rousseau's contrast between the strong and independent 'natural man' whose needs are satisfied in a 'state of nature', a situation without civilization and government, and the vain, weak, fearful, dependent and servile 'civilized man', who is subject to a multitude of unsatisfiable artificial needs under conditions of social inequality.

The influence of Rousseau's view is detectable across a range of (therefore more or less romantic) environmental and political thought, including primitivism of course. For Rousseau, however, there is no question of our going back to, or retrieving, a pre-civilized, fully 'natural' way of life: contrary to Voltaire's jibe he did not advocate a human 'return to the forest to walk on all fours'. Rather the move from state of nature to civilization is made inevitable by human Reason, particularly the capacity for comparative thought or reflection on difference. Reason enables us to form the idea of inequality and to distinguish between human subject and natural object. It also allows us to reflect upon and 'deny' our instincts and to *labour* in the sense of self-consciously transforming our environment (Biro 2005, pp. 59ff).

The problem Vogel raises with this is that, even if we accept that our status as cultural, historical and labouring beings turns crucially on our capacity to 'deny our instincts', it is difficult to see why *that* should constitute our alienation *from nature*, given that our self-consciousness, transformative activities and their results all occur within nature too. However repressed our spontaneous instincts, however relentless our toil

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and wonderful or appalling the results, this would still all be going on *within* nature, no less than would minimum repression and toil to produce minimum environmental transformation.

This point also tells against the other claims mentioned above. For example, it might seem plausible that, when out of sight and out of mind in urban cultures with little contact with them, nature's ecological relations are more easily discounted, and that therefore something like NDD and ecologically irrational political and economic short-termism are mutually reinforcing (compare Juniper 2013, e.g., pp. 264f). But notice that however plausible or implausible they are in other terms, such claims cannot establish that we are alienated from nature in the sense of somehow *not or no longer really being part of the natural world*. If the savannah hypothesis is true and we wish to invoke the idea of alienation to summarize our plight in being cut off from savannah-like conditions, why not just say that we are alienated *from the savannah*?

Thus it is not only *unclear* what is added to charges of ignorance or false beliefs about our location in nature, perhaps accompanied by ecologically irrational and destructive decision-making and technology, by saying that they amount to 'alienation from nature'. Given that the conditions constituted by these problems occur within nature, no less than would conditions in which they are absent, it seems entirely mysterious what *could be* added meaningfully by saying they amount to alienation from nature. By definition, both sets of conditions are equally 'natural' in this sense. If a beaver displays ignorance and ecologically unfortunate behaviour by building a dam in an unsuitable location, oblivious to its unsustainability there, and disregarding the damaging flood it causes, is it alienated from nature? If it survives the situation and proceeds to find a more suitable location where it builds a better, more sustainable dam less destructive of the surrounding habitat, has it now overcome its previous state of alienation from nature?

The issue cannot be escaped by arguing that such questions don't arise for beavers because, unlike us, they are not self-conscious rational agents. This difference justifies withholding responsibility and blameworthiness with respect to beavers, but why should that affect the situation with respect to our alienation from nature? As Vogel points out, to insist that it does – that certain ways of exercising, or failing to exercise, rational agency are not only blameworthy but *alienate us from nature* – seems to presuppose the dualist idea that our rational agency, at least when exercised in certain problematical ways, somehow puts us outside nature (Vogel 2011, pp. 188f). Otherwise, like the beaver's dam-building skills, it is just another evolved trait that remains within nature, however badly exercised.

Of course *we* shouldn't be so stupid or greedy as to build homes on flood plains disregarding the known flood risks. But if such appraisals are to be couched in terms of alienation from nature then this must involve some other sense of 'nature', given that we, our greed and stupidity and their consequences are part of nature in the sense of the natural world. The other candidate that initially presents itself as in keeping with the appraisal is 'nonhuman nature': our environmentally problematic attitudes and behaviour involve our alienation from *nonhuman nature*. This sets up the dualism just mentioned, however; a dualism between us, or the rational, self-consciously transformative side of us, and the nature from which we are said to be alienated. And it makes the alienation rationally inescapable by definition. These consequences raise further problems (Vogel 2011, pp. 188f).

One is that if we are alienated from nature by definition then references to our alienation from nature are trivial and lacking in critical purchase. We cannot be anything *but* alienated from nature defined as the *nonhuman*, or in opposition to rational agency. Yet alienation is a critical concept, one usually used to appraise a condition more or less radically as one to be avoided or overcome. There is no room for this critical work if by definition we must be alienated from that which we are alienated. *Any* course of action we choose to adopt will involve our alienation from nature. Whether I spend my life indoors sitting in front of a computer screen dealing with emails or outside in the woods closely observing the web of ecological interdependencies around me, I am still alienated from a nonhuman nature defined in contrast to me. A further problem here is that the dualism imposed by defining alienation from nature like this is inconsistent with the naturalistic hypothesis that we, and all of our attributes and abilities, are no less part of nature than is the case with any other naturally evolved species. This thought pushes us back to the previous sense of nature as the natural world encompassing us and all of our doings. But, as we have just seen, when we run 'nature' in that sense our alienation from it seems to become impossible by definition.

0.4 Don't give up on the idea

It looks like a mistake then to talk of alienation from nature as a condition to be overcome over and above the moral, political, economic, educational, health-related and whatever other more common or garden failings we might associate with the environmental crisis. Once we focus on the idea to ask what it adds to our picture of the situation it too easily suggests unattractive and impossible dreams of returning to some imagined past close harmony with nature or of engineering a new

harmony through God-like domination of the Earth's systems. Further reflection suggests that even if such pictures, or variations on them, were more plausible and attractive it would be difficult to see them as really about us overcoming our alienation from nature. As Vogel's argument brings out, attempting to see them like that seems to mire us in conceptual confusions as we oscillate between different senses of nature. It does not appear helpful to talk of our being alienated from nature in either of these senses of nature. In one sense the alienation is inescapable by definition and so trivial; in the other sense it seems impossible, also by definition, to see how we could be alienated from it in any meaningful way. Vogel concludes from these that we should drop talk of 'alienation from nature' and worry instead about our alienation from '*something like nature*': from the environment always already produced by human labour (Vogel 2011). Such alienation is non-trivial, only too possible and yet may be escaped, at least in principle.

I think the appearances are misleading, however, and that it would be a mistake to drop talk of alienation *from nature*. I aim to show that it can be a helpful notion with which to illuminate our problematic environmental situation. I am taking it that the problems I have mentioned do not entirely demolish the suspicion that alienation from nature is somehow part of the picture of the environmental crisis, as a crisis involving serious deficiencies in our relation with our surroundings that call for a relatively radical critical response. Problems with the idea of alienation from nature serve to amplify the sense of crisis as an *inchoate* sense of a difficult situation requiring difficult important steps. But what steps? We need to deal with our alienation from nature. Yes, but what is *that*, and what could 'dealing with it' possibly and plausibly amount to? I take it that a satisfactory account of alienation from nature addresses these questions. It starts with an inchoate sense of a complex environmental crisis as having something important to do with alienation from nature and clarifies what this is and what it is (or would be) to deal with it.

0.5 Main claim and overall argument

My main claim in this book then is that – notwithstanding problems such as those raised above – talk of alienation from nature can be justified, useful and important. The idea can help us to think through our environmental situation when understood in a certain pluralistic way. It is unhelpful, I think, to view alienation and nature, and so alienation from nature, as single things or conditions to be understood in one