Postmodernism, deep ecology and the idea of wildness: Some problems with Drenthen's formulations

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ABSTRACT. Martin Drenthen has made a strong case for his interpretation of Nietzsche's potential contribution to environmental ethics but he does not do justice to deep ecology. The problematic he identifies is essentially the difficulty of asserting a meaningful basis for action while being aware of the contingency of all meanings. This tension can be seen running through deep ecology, at least as described by its main theorist, Arne Naess, who is not the moral realist that Drenthen would have him. Key differences do emerge as Drenthen develops his idea of "Wildness" or nature as "other," which can only partially support caring action towards nature. Drenthen is ambivalent, even hostile, to a context of experienced reality – central to Naess's ecosophy. This causes him to fall into what is ultimately a fairly traditional nature versus culture distinction and so maintain the existential gulf between humans and nature.

KEYWORDS. Drenthen, deep ecology, postmodernism, environmental ethics

A series of articles in *Environmental Ethics* has explored the role that Nietzsche might play in environmental philosophy. Hallman (1991) began by describing Nietzsche as a kind of proto-deep ecologist. This was heavily criticized by Acampora (1994) for largely ignoring the "high Humanism" of Nietzsche. Acampora's conclusion was that while Nietzsche's criticisms of society could be useful, nothing positive could be gained from him by environmentalists. Drenthen (1999) disagreed with this evaluation and presented his case for the potential contribution of Nietzsche's paradoxical morality to environmental philosophy; although he did agree with Acampora that Nietzsche could not be used to support deep ecology.

Drenthen seems to have made a strong case for his interpretation of Nietzsche,[1] but he does not do justice to deep ecology. The problematic

he identifies is essentially the difficulty of asserting a meaningful basis for action while being aware of the contingency of all meanings. This tension can be seen running through deep ecology, at least as described by its main theorist, Arne Naess, who is not the moral realist that Drenthen would have him. Key differences do emerge as Drenthen develops his idea of "wildness" or nature as "other," which can only partially support caring action towards nature. Drenthen is ambivalent, even hostile, to a context of experienced reality - central to deep ecology. This causes him to fall into what is ultimately a fairly traditional nature versus culture distinction and so maintain the existential gulf between humans and nature.

Drenthen describes "wildness" as what he calls a "Critical border concept" (2005) in the realm of General Ethics. Using Nietzsche, he argues that debates within Environmental Ethics reflect a crisis within moral theory itself. The problem is in needing a concept of nature (in the broadest sense of "reality") to ground morality while being aware of the impossibility of acquiring a definitive version of what nature is. Nietzsche exposes the groundlessness of the moral theories of his day while nevertheless offering his own account of reality in the form of his "will to power." Drenthen interprets this as a paradox of which Nietzsche was aware and maintained as an unavoidable tension running through his thinking. We have no choice but to base our morals on our accounts of nature and we now know these to be thoroughly contingent.

In the area of environmental ethics, this is demonstrated by the opposition between "relativistic constructivism and moralistic value realism" (Drenthen 1999, 175). The first is exemplified by postmodern environmental ethics and authors like Max Oelschlaeger (1995; 1991) and William Cronon (1996). For them, all conceptions of nature are always contingent social constructions and, because a conception of nature makes an ontological claim about reality, it necessarily suppresses other interpretations. The second "traditional" approach assumes that it should be possible "to conceive of nature in a non-domesticating way"(Drenthen 1999, 166) and includes all anthropocentric, weak anthropocentric, non-

anthropocentric, and ecocentric positions. The many differences between these positions all have in common the assumption that nature can speak to us in its own terms. The fundamental difference makes fruitful discussion between these two perspectives more or less impossible.

Deep ecology

Deep ecology falls into the latter account whose ontological presumptions could be compared to Nietzsche's "metaphysical account of nature" (Drenthen 1999, 169). Nietzsche's broader similarity with deep ecology – as asserted by Hallman – only stands in this case if we ignore Nietzsche's radical perspectivism and treat his "will to power" as a straightforward ontology; without Nietzsche's sense that it is also another manifestation of the will to power itself and therefore just another perspective on reality. Drenthen's assumption here is that deep ecology is trying to assert a metaphysical account of nature without any sense of contingency.

This paper will not argue that Nietzsche is a forerunner of deep ecology *pace* Hallman or for his claims of Nietzsche's *will to power* as an essentially ecological "paradigm of nature" (Hallman 1991, 123). While this is an interesting analysis from a deep ecological point of view, it does not exhaust the possibilities for a deep-ecological reading of Nietzsche. Indeed the perspectivism which Drenthen thinks is lacking can be seen quite strongly in Naess's conception of "ecosophy."

Naess distinguishes between eco-philosophy and ecosophy. Eco-philosophy is his general name for the philosophical analysis of issues arising out of our relationship to nature. The concern of eco-philosophy is "to examine a particular kind of problem at the vast juncture between the two well-recognised disciplines [of ecology and philosophy]" (Naess 1989, 36). Ecosophy on the other hand is "a philosophical world-view or system inspired by the conditions of life in the ecosphere" (1989, 38). The important point about ecosophy for our purposes is that there can

be many of them supporting deep ecology but with a wide variety of fundamentally different and even incompatible philosophies.

Naess's idea of ecosophy is an application of his thinking on "total views" and it is here that we can see most clearly his scepticism and pluralism. He describes total views as "how you perceive the world, its relation to yourself, the basic features of the condition of man as you experience them" (Naess, Ayer, and Elders 1999, 22). They are inescapable in the sense that "all we do implies the existence of such systems" (Naess 1989, 38). Also, "there is a character of totality in most of our everyday reasoning and action" (Naess 1964, 18). Ecosophy is important for action because it forms a basis "to approach practical situations involving ourselves" (Naess 1989, 37). While this suggests a pragmatic value, elsewhere he says that philosophical systems in the form of total views "articulate the deepest insights of which man is capable" (Naess 1964, 16). In short, total views are necessary for our everyday orientation in the world, philosophically important, and a basis for action. In Drenthen's Nietzschean formulation, we might call them a perspective on reality.

Furthermore Naess is not trying to promote a single ecosophy, but emphasizes that his is just one account and that others will have different ones which is a good thing in itself. Total views may in fact be incomparable with each other and Naess is critical of those who "do not seem to doubt for a moment that the fundamental beliefs and attitudes of others, for instance, their logic, can be described and compared with each other" (Naess 1964, 29). He goes on to use the word "victims" to describe subjects of a "total description" by those who "in the way of divine intellects" presume to achieve a most "comprehensive and value neutral" frame of reference. All this parallels the perspectivism of Drenthen's Nietzsche including a critique of those who would ignore their perspectivity. "The hunt for any natural resting point is as unrealistic as to reach out for the horizon" (Naess 1964, 25).

Naess acknowledges a tension between his scepticism about knowledge and the requirements of consistent and forceful action. Contemplation

of the "vast plurality of possible worlds" can undermine the capacity to respond to serious problems that we encounter. It is in this context that we can understand the status of the deep ecology platform originally described tentatively in the early 1970s (Naess 1973) and subject to various revisions and reformulations since. The platform is intended as a support for the deep ecology movement in its campaign for cultural, political, and economic change. It is not a statement of metaphysical beliefs or even a general description of a philosophical system. Rather, it is a pragmatic response to the pressing problem of serious degradation of nature. On this level, deep ecology is nothing more than the movement of all those who can loosely derive the general principles of the activist platform from their many various ecosophical perspectives.

Naess's ecosophy (which he calls ecosophy T) has been highly influential within deep ecology, to the extent that some of its theorists identify deep ecology as a whole with central features of Naess's thought.[2] In ecosophy T, Naess makes a crucial distinction between the "concrete contents of reality" which is reality as experienced and the "abstract structures" by which we try to understand and describe it (Naess 1985). We must have abstract structures to act but they are understood as necessarily contingent and perspectival. "Concrete contents" form our bedrock experience of reality and are the basis of all our knowledge and interpretation of the world. Drawing links with the phenomenological tradition, Naess says that "Lebenswelt is not identical with any physical model, nor ecological" but that it is the experienced world that is "*the* world" (2005, 122).

Drenthen criticizes, in particular, one of the central points of the deep ecology platform, the "intrinsic value of nature," because it "pretends to mirror an insight into nature as it is in itself, and thus leave behind anthropomorphic interpretation" (1999, 172). But when we understand the deep ecology platform as a pragmatic activist platform, it follows that there is no intention here to "mirror an insight into nature" as there may be many diverse ways of reaching the conclusion of nature's intrinsic value. From

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the point of view of Naess's ecosophy, a more suitable formulation would be: "attempts to articulate an insight into nature as experienced, and thus leave behind anthropocentric interpretation." The interpretations will inevitably be contingent human interpretations but the concrete contents they refer to will be pre-semantic and pre-human. This can only be construed as a necessarily anthropomorphic interpretation if we adopt a foundational strategy of a subject interpreting its other and impose it on the concrete contents of reality as experienced. In our primordial experience of reality, there is not the experience of a subject relating to an object. Naess describes this as "when absorbed in contemplation of a concrete, natural thing, there is no experience of a subject/object relation" (1985, 423). When we try as subjects to articulate this experience, we will be conscious of the inadequacy of these categories and may prefer, like Naess, to talk in terms of "a relational field" (1989, 28) where "relation between things belongs to the basic constitutions of those things." To speak of intrinsic value as anthropomorphic interpretation is to think in terms of a human subject anthropomorphizing about its environment but for Naess at least (and many other deep ecological positions) it is rather an articulation of a primordial experience that cannot be understood from the more superficial model of a discreet subject valuing its environment; the "subject" *is* its relation to "its environment." In his development of his idea of wildness, Drenthen implicitly assumes this model as if it were not inherently problematic.

WILDNESS

The idea of "wildness" satisfies Drenthen's Nietzschean criteria because it functions both as a "relative moral concept" and it "refers to that which precedes our interpretations, images and myths" (Drenthen 2005, 332). It is not pristine wilderness but that quality in nature that is radically other and breaches any particular moral framework.

Neil Evernden has developed this idea in *The Social Creation of Nature* (1992) where through "our conceptual domestication of nature, we extinguish wild otherness even in the imagination" (Evernden 1992, 116). Again, it is to be distinguished from "wilderness," which can be regarded as a particular object; wildness lies beyond the object in question and is a quality which "directly confronts and confounds our designs." (Evernden 1992, 121) Evernden traces the historical trends which have led to an obscuring of nature's wildness to the point where now "our whole mode of perceiving forces us to domesticate even as we look, and in so doing to deny the possibility of encounter with the other" (1992, 121) Evernden's hope is for the recognition of nature's wildness as the necessary step toward substantial environmental change.

This is very close to Drenthen's formulation of wildness in statements such as "we long for wild nature, but in modelling this desire, we risk losing the object of our desire, because it exists precisely in resisting appropriation" (2005, 333). However, he distances his position from Evernden's on the grounds that Evernden forgets that "each possible relationship with nature requires interpretation" (Drenthen 1999, 173). But *The Social Creation of Nature* is in effect a sustained demonstration of the status of "Nature" as a social phenomenon. Evernden describes "wildness" as a quality that does relate us to something "real" beyond our human constructions but this not mean that it escapes the need for interpretation. He is careful to describe its role in social discourse in terms of acquiring "the vocabulary needed to accommodate wildness" (Evernden 1992, 133). This implies that there is no straightforward way of talking about it and thus always a need to interpret. However, as with Naess, there is an experienced reality that wildness (in Evernden's case) refers to and tries to describe. Drenthen's ideal of wildness is completely removed from human experience[3] and functions as an idea in moral discourse rather than a tangible reality.

Citing child-development studies of the sense of self being formed through contact with wild otherness (Evernden 1992, 112)[4], Evernden

argues that "the implication is that to have the facility to create 'worlds' in the cultural medium of words or images, one must first have had the opportunity of creating a world *with the body,* so to speak, first-hand and presemantically" (Evernden 1992, 113). Without this foundational experience of wild nature people have no choice but to accept the "cultural edifice called nature." Evernden is not drawing logical conclusions regarding moral norms from this and could certainly not be called a "moralistic value realist." Nevertheless, the value of this presemantic experience is to orient us in a different way towards nature. The sense of self is formed together with the sense of otherness as a gradual process of differentiation in childhood, creating a contingent, interdependent, and complex dynamic between self and other, from the beginning. This represents a sophisticated illustration of Naess's model of a relational field where the relationship defines the subject. Drenthen's subject is much more clearly drawn and is always at the centre of things; interpreting, and appropriating, although with a tantalising otherness on its conceptual horizon.

Drenthen's wildness is also much more abstract. For an example of nature that is truly "other," he gives the project of Dutch conservationist van Slobbe, who put a circular hedge around a piece of land, hidden in a nature reserve (Drenthen 2005, 334). This land "cannot be experienced, valued or made subject to human plans or endeavours." In fact, we can't even be sure if it exists at all. For Drenthen this functions in social discourse "as a moral reminder of human finitude in a land dominated by culture" (Drenthen 2005, 334). This is a firmly humanist model where the "other" is set beyond and against the human subject. Drenthen's wildness is the purest of otherness untouched by the human subject but this runs the risk of what Val Plumwood has called "normative hyperseperation" (1999, 210); in effect, it reproduces the long and problematic gulf between humans and nature characteristic of the western tradition.

Wolfe (2003) has comprehensively challenged this model for imagining a false separateness; rather he says "the-other-than human resides at the very core of the human itself, not as the untouched ethical antidote

to reason, but as part of reason itself" (Wolfe 2003, 17). The human is "embedded and entangled" in all that "used to be thought of as its opposite or others" (Wolfe 2003, 193). This is a development of Evernden's picture of self and other being constituted together. Wolfe has shown that the opposition cannot be clearly drawn and opens up a complexity that, at present, Drenthen's model is unable to accommodate. Drenthen claims that we are "interested in nature that is beyond our control" and "fascinated by the limitations of our power" (Drenthen 2005, 334), but this can only make sense in the context of an actually experienced other that viscerally challenges our ability to describe and control and on a deeper level is co-constituted with our subjectivity itself.

Instead of being a necessarily limited and flawed attempt to articulate a concrete content of experience, wildness or "the other" is never experienced and functions only as an abstraction within moral discourse. Thus, we can never be sure if van Slobbe's enclosure exists or not; it is the idea of it that matters. We are not "confronted and confounded" by anything, making it difficult to see what kind of a claim such a nature can make on us. Naess makes a similar point (in response to an article by Peter Reed (1999)) in this way: "If something is vast, inhuman and utterly different from anything familiar, this in itself does not elicit awe. Nor do I see that we are led to protect it, or even feel an obligation to protect it" (Naess 1999, 203). In contrast, for Naess, the ability to *identify* with other life motivates us to want to protect it. Without an element of identification, we are just as likely to feel alienated and indifferent as to care more for nature. Using an example of a sacred Sherpa mountain, Naess argues that while there is awe for the mountain, it is its perception as "a beautiful princess" and "mother" that inspires the Sherpa resolve to protect it from western climbers (Naess 1999, 203). Drenthen describes morality broadly as that which "enable[s] us to see nature as a meaningful place for us to dwell in, as a world that makes sense" (Drenthen 2005, 318) but he does not seem to recognise the value of this impulse for effectively caring about nature.

The danger with identification is that it can become Evernden's "conceptual domestication" thereby reducing and ultimately endangering the very thing that we seek to protect. What is needed is an exploration of the dynamic between identity and difference that does not reduce the complexity of this relationship by drawing on discredited dualistic paradigms.[5] Further, how these two are constituted from, and relate to, the more primordial concrete contents cannot be explained away by using the model of the "subject versus other" being called into question.

Drenthen encourages us to think of nature as something completely outside the realm of human culture, as shown by van Slobbe's project, but a more mundane example of the play of identity and difference can be found. In the compost heap of the organic farmer, there is a useful process of turning waste vegetable matter into fertile compost. The farmer will appreciate this role of eliminating her reliance on the industrial processes of artificial fertilizer production and the pollution and intensive energy use that goes with this. She may even identify with the organisms cooperating in her crop husbandry. But this is also a place of death and decay and creatures whose lives will always resist our complete comprehension. A space has been created for nature's otherness that makes a definite contribution to resisting some of the destructive capacity of advanced industrial culture but it is not hidden away from view in a nature reserve or indeed is it wild nature at all; it is there at the end of the garden.

This is not to undermine the importance of having places where nature is left alone as much as possible for ecological, aesthetic, and other reasons, but rather to point out that the conceptual appropriation of nature and the complex drama of identity and difference begins closer to home. Maintaining the possibilities for the richness of experience from which this drama can be explored, both in the mixed communities of humans, domestic, and other animals as well as in more remote "natural" areas, is a good place to ground an environmental ethic. It does not deny contingency by asserting one interpretation of how nature "really is" but it does gives value to the things that we care about and are fascinated by.

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NOTES

1. For example, in a later article Acampora has changed his position to be more in line with Drenthen (Acampora 2003).

2. Fox has made this argument most forcefully describing that which is most "tenable and distinctive" about deep ecology as its "transpersonal" character, i.e., Naess' ecosophy of self-realization through spontaneous experience of nature (Fox 1995 especially part three).

3. See the van Slobbe project below for an illustration of Drenthen's thinking on the status of wildness.

4. Evernden cites Cobb (1977).

5. For examples of discussions on this issue see Plumwood (1999, 209), Kidner (2001, 245-247) and Wolfe (2003, conclusion 190 -207).