

# Habermas and Green Political Thought: Two Roads Converging

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This article focuses on the relationship between Critical Theory and ecological ethics. It defines this perspective and provides a description of its application to environmental ethics. Objections to the use of Critical Theory in environmental ethics and an overview of an alternative ecocentric approach developed by Robyn Eckersley follow. The third section responds to this critique, and argues that this alternative has profound theoretical problems. Specifically, it is based on a one-sided and antiquated notion of ecology, misrepresents the intellectual foundations of Critical Theory, and commits the naturalistic fallacy. It also encounters substantial practical concerns regarding its political acceptance, efficacy, and implementation into democratic political practices. Accordingly, there is little compelling intellectual force or empirical evidence to warrant its acceptance. The article concludes with an overview of the current efforts that are being made to integrate Critical Theory into environmental decision-making.

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Scientific-technical civilization has confronted all nations, races, and cultures, regardless of their group-specific, culturally relative moral traditions, with a common ethical problem. For the first time in the history of the human species, human beings are faced with the task of accepting collective responsibility for the consequences of their actions on a world-wide scale [*Apel, 1980: 23*].

The events of the first year of the new millennium do not bode well for the future of the global environment. Biodiversity loss continues to accelerate. Global climate change, with its manifold adverse ecological impacts, continues to advance. Portending future climate disruptions, the El Niño effect is re-emerging in the Pacific Ocean (*New York Times*, 8 Sept. 2001, p.A14). International efforts to reverse global warming continue, with few tangible results. Quietly, bureaucrats and financial managers have assessed these trends, made their conclusions, and begun to take actions that anticipate the impacts of global climate change. Planners at LaGuardia and

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Kennedy International Airports are drafting construction plans to keep the runways above the expected rise in sea level. The US Army Corp of Engineers is studying where to build dikes to preserve shorefront property. Insurance companies are divesting themselves of coverage of such property in anticipation of increased storms and associated damage. Exxon-Mobil is studying ways to keep the Trans-Alaska pipeline stable after the permafrost on which it rests melts. Finally, on Wall Street, scientists are tutoring financiers on how best to manage their investments to maximise profits in view of climate change (*New York Times*, 19 Nov. 2000, p.B1).

It seems as if our social institutions have surrendered any attempt to deal effectively with environmental degradation. Rather, these institutions make marginal, reactive adjustments instead of the significant proactive changes that are required. Absent these significant changes, the future we can anticipate is one in which we must resign ourselves to the inevitability of mass extinctions of numerous species due to human activities, and loss of entire ecosystems due to climate change. Thus, the development of an ecologically sustainable society is one of the most sweeping and crucial challenges our social institutions will ever face. So far, however, the efforts undertaken make this imperative seem only a Utopian fantasy, fast receding from our grasp.

The social learning capacity of our society must be expanded to generate new ways to respond to the process of ecological degradation. One key component in fostering social learning to address ecological degradation is through the development and instantiation of binding ecological norms [Brulle, 2000: 49–73]. To enable large-scale, multicultural action among numerous human communities, an ecological ethics must work within the pluralist, postmodern world. This requires an ethics that can accommodate a wide range of cultural viewpoints, including conflicting notions of what is sacred and profane, what constitutes truth and heresy, and even basic notions regarding what it means to be human [Cooper, 1996: 257].

One important approach to this problem has been developed by the intellectual project that is defined by Critical Theory. This perspective holds the possibility of defining a means through which such an ecological ethics can be developed. As noted by Dobson: 'Critical Theory might provide a historical and material analysis of the relationship between human beings and the natural world, together, perhaps with a non-utopian resolution of the contemporary difficulties with this relationship' [Dobson, 1996: 298]. However, Critical Theory has been criticised extensively as unable to meet this task. In this article, I defend the use of Critical Theory in the creation of environmental ethics. I start with a short description of the key concepts in Critical Theory and how this perspective has been applied in the area of environmental ethics. In the second section, I summarise the objections to

the use of Critical Theory in environmental ethics by focusing on the robust and articulate work of Robyn Eckersley. My response to this critique is provided in the third section. I conclude the article with an overview of efforts to integrate Critical Theory into environmental decision-making, and how these efforts could be extended to foster the development of an ecologically sustainable society.

### Critical Theory and Environmental Ethics

A cogent argument has been developed for the use of Critical Theory for the development of a social science that unites theory with practice, thus enabling us to develop the cognitive, moral and aesthetic cultural resources to expand the social learning capacity of our society.<sup>1</sup> The area of Critical Theory that I focus on centres on the work of Jürgen Habermas, as defined by his 'Theory of Communicative Action' [*Habermas, 1984, 1987a*]. This theory starts with the development of a post-metaphysical world. Habermas maintains that in previous historical eras, the justifications for classical ethics were based in encompassing metaphysical or spiritual belief systems that provided a philosophical definition of the 'good life'. However, we now encounter in modern societies 'a pluralism of individual life styles and collective forms of life, and a corresponding multiplicity of ideas of the good life' [*Habermas, 1993: 122*]. As a result of this pluralisation of world-views, the critique of metaphysics by postmodernism, and the growth of science, classical ethics has been challenged and, in the opinion of Habermas, has broken down [*Habermas, 1984: 2, Baynes et al., 1987: 4*]. Thus 'if we take modern pluralism seriously, we must renounce the classical philosophical claim to defend one uniquely privileged mode of life' [*Habermas, 1993: 123*].

In this post-metaphysical situation, Habermas seeks to avoid a cultural relativist position. His project is to develop a philosophy that can fully acknowledge the insights of postmodernism and cultural pluralism, while at the same time, serve to preserve some form of reason as a guide in everyday life practice [*Habermas, 1987b*]. To accomplish this task, Habermas turns to an analysis of language use. By using philosophy and empirical social science, he seeks to demonstrate how the use of language and social interaction necessarily rely on norms of speech use. These norms form the pragmatic presuppositions of speech, and define rational universal moral principles [*Habermas, 1993: 163*].

Habermas's analysis of language focuses on how communication creates and maintains social order. To examine the presuppositions of language use, Habermas bases his analysis on a thought experiment of social interaction based only on 'pure communicative sociation' [*Habermas. 1996: 323*]

which he defines as the Ideal Speech Situation. In this situation, it is assumed that the actors can express their goals truthfully and without reservation, that all pertinent evidence can be brought into play in the discussion, and that the agreement is based on reasoned argument [*Habermas, 1984: 294; 1996: 4*].

This analysis allows Habermas to identify the functionally necessary resources for communication to exist which exist as 'formal-pragmatic presuppositions and conditions of an explicitly rational behavior' [*Habermas, 1984: 2*]. These presuppositions, in the form of three types of validity claims of truth, normative adequacy and sincerity, enable the communication process and are embedded in the use of any natural language. By fulfilling these validity claims, a mutually agreed upon definition of the situation is constructed which describes the relevant states in a situation, places the interaction within the ethical criteria of a specific historical and social context, and ties the individual's personal identity to the interaction [*Habermas, 1984: 136*]. Thus language and social interaction necessarily rely on norms of truth, rightness and sincerity.

The process of developing mutual agreement defines a universal and rational moral framework. In coming to mutual agreement, the claims of the speaker must be validated for the discourse to be rational. Validation requires an open speech community in which the unforced force of the better argument prevails. This allows Habermas to define a universal morality from which the rationality of a social order can be evaluated in a Discourse Principle [*Habermas, 1987a: 141*], which states that 'The only regulations and ways of acting that can claim legitimacy are those to which all who are possibly affected could assent as participants in rational discourses' [*Habermas, 1996: 458*].

Habermas [*1996*] builds on this perspective to develop the links between rationality, law and constitutional democracy. He argues that the legitimate reciprocal behavioural expectations in a pluralist modern society now take the form of rational law. In such a society, law can no longer be legitimated by metaphysical arguments. Rather, 'Under post-metaphysical conditions, the only legitimate law is one that emerges from the discursive opinion and will formation of equally enfranchised citizens' [*Habermas, 1996: 408*]. This requires that citizens understand themselves as authors of the laws to which they are subject, and to see public decision-making as a process of self-determination through an open and rational discourse. This ties the rationality of an open discourse to the formation of legitimate laws in a democracy. To institutionalise this process, the constitutional state has developed with a formal separation of powers [*Habermas, 1996: 132-93*]. Thus the normative content and structure of a representative constitutional democracy arise 'from the structure of linguistic communication' [*Habermas, 1996: 297*].

The development of representative constitutional democracy is an attempt to implement the Discourse Principle in a political system. To realise this principle, all citizens must have basic individual rights, including freedom of speech, individual legal protection and rights of political association. In addition, there is a need for political rights, to ensure broad and inclusive public participation in political decision-making. Habermas defines these requirements in the Democratic Principle: 'The establishment of the legal code ... must be compelled through communicative and participatory rights that guarantee equal opportunities for the public use of communicative liberties' [*Habermas, 1996: 458*]. This principle then defines a number of specific criteria for a democratic and socially rational political process [*Habermas, 1996: 305–6*].

In addition, Habermas also identifies a need for Social and Ecological Rights, which are defined as the 'basic rights to the provision of living conditions' [*Habermas 1996:123*]. These rights define the empirical conditions that are necessary 'insofar as the effective exercise of civil and political rights depends on certain social and material conditions such that citizens can meet their basic material needs' [*Habermas, 1996: 78*]. It is important to note that these rights are not conceptually derived, but empirical requirements to enable citizens the necessary means to realise their political rights [*Habermas, 2001: 77*].

Habermas's analysis thus points away from ethics based in metaphysical inquiry, and towards sociological inquiry into a critical assessment of existing social institutions compared to the standards of rationality defined by Critical Theory. The presuppositions of language use provide a basis from which the rationality and legitimacy of the political decision-making institutions can be judged, and also form a guide for reconstructing these institutions [*Habermas, 1996: 5*]. Thus Habermas seeks to preserve reason as a guide in everyday life practice, and to enhance the social learning capacity of society. As a result, there is a division between morals and ethics within Critical Theory. Questions of morals involve who are to be considered as morally competent agents entitled to be considered as ends-in-themselves – that is, how do we make decisions and who participates in this process? In this area, the Democratic Principle specifies that to take joint action, the process must involve the active and democratic participation of all of the affected human parties. On the other hand are ethical questions regarding what should we do?, that is, what is the 'good life?' Here, Critical Theory can provide no guidance regarding what ethics should be used. It can 'only show the participants the procedure they must follow if they want to solve moral problems and must leave all concrete decisions up to them' [*Habermas, 1993: 128*]. It does not define any particular ethics, or specify any requirement that joint action be based on only one set of cultural beliefs.

What this means is that Critical Theory cannot specify an ethical standard for the treatment of nature. Ecological Rights are concerned solely with protecting aspects of nature strictly for human utilitarian purposes. Critical Theory does not provide guidance beyond this utilitarian perspective regarding treatment of the natural world. Instead, an ecological ethics is seen as a concern about what constitutes the 'good life', and thus outside of the purview of Critical Theory. Instead, Critical Theory recognises that there are many different forms of reasoning about the value of the natural environment [Oelschlaeger, 1991]. These different perspectives inform multiple ethical arguments for the preservation of nature, and their acceptance is dependent on the cultural context in which the argument is made. Hence no one universal argument for the preservation of nature will fit all cultures. Which one of these ethics would apply to a particular circumstance is a matter to be decided by the participants themselves. Critical Theory can contribute to this debate over environmental ethics by defining the social conditions in which a morally binding ethics can be constructed and enacted [Habermas, 1983: 1–20].

There is no theoretical barrier to the development of an ethics for the treatment of nature in Critical Theory. Critical theorists have argued that there are good reasons to believe that a democratic decision-making process would consider treatment of nature a significant ethical concern. First, it is clear from the ecological sciences that humanity and nature are interdependent. In an undistorted communication situation, this relationship would have to be recognised, and taken into account in human deliberations [Torgerson, 1999: 120]. Additionally, the dependence of nature on our actions would also be made clear. Thus our responsibility for and treatment of nature would become an ethical concern of the human community in an undistorted communication situation [Caterino, 1994: 32; Vogel, 1996: 165–71; Habermas, 1993: 111]. However, in none of these formulations does nature attain the status of a moral subject. Rather, nature is seen as an object of moral concern for the human community, and it is through our deliberations that we would decide how it should be treated. In short, apart from anthropocentric utilitarian concerns, Critical Theory provides no guarantee that we will decide to preserve the natural world.

### **The Green Critique of Critical Theory**

The critique over the application of Critical Theory to ecological ethics has been engaged in by a number of authors, starting more than 20 years ago [Whitebook, 1979]. The core of this critique is that Critical Theory cannot adequately integrate concern for non-human nature, since it only considers the development of norms between mutual participants in a discourse. This

omits consideration of the fate of other species that are not capable of participating in this dialogue. Thus Critical Theory is an anthropocentric belief system that separates and privileges human emancipation over the emancipation of non-human beings, and cannot serve as a basis for informing a cultural practice that would fully protect biodiversity.

One of the most influential critiques has been the work of Robyn Eckersley. Since the publication of *Habermas and Green Political Theory: Two Roads Diverging* [Eckersley, 1990], she has developed a persuasive critique of the use of Critical Theory in defining environmental ethics. For Eckersley, there is much to commend about Critical Theory. She sees it as adequate for human affairs, and also notes that public participation enhances deliberations for the preservation of the natural environment. She also agrees that community decisions should be reached through democratic deliberations among representatives of the various groups of the society [Eckersley, 1999: 33].

However, Eckersley believes there are limits to its utilisation. Specifically, she argues that Critical Theory 'does not attempt to restructure the ground rules of decision-making to provide any explicit protection or recognition of non-human interests' [Eckersley, 1995a: 179]. Critical theory is not adequate for the full preservation of nature because it is based only on human concerns, and as such, fails to justify the preservation of species that do not have a utilitarian value for humans. In addition, aesthetic arguments are also inadequate in themselves to guarantee protection of nature. Aesthetic values are selective, based on the particulars of taste, and see the protection of nature as secondary to ensuring the protection of a particular human experience. Hence, aesthetic arguments are particular, weak, and anthropocentric. Thus utilitarian or aesthetic arguments alone cannot provide a general basis for environmental protection [Eckersley, 1998a: 178–9].

To reliably protect nature, Eckersley argues that we need to develop a concept of nature as a an end-it-itself, not as just one more criterion in the 'good life'. Hence we need 'reliable grounds for the protection on nonhuman nature' [Eckersley, 1998a: 165]. This calls for the development of an expanded ethics that can include the non-human community in our decision-making process. To provide for this ethics, she argues that there is a need to develop a scientifically informed moral line of argument [Eckersley, 1998a: 178]. Eckersley maintains that science 'may be enlisted to inform and support arguments concerning the desirability of either existing or potential human orientations toward the rest of nature' [Eckersley, 1998b: 83].

At the core of her argument is the autopoietic intrinsic value theory [Eckersley, 1992: 60–61]. Developed by Fox [1995: 165–76], this ethics is

based on the characteristic of autopoietic entities as 'primarily and continuously concerned with the regeneration of their own organizational activity and structure' [Eckersley, 1995a: 188]. All living entities that make up nature have the capacity to define themselves through evolutionary processes, and thus are autopoietic entities [Eckersley, 1999: 39]. It is this capacity for 'self-directedness' which provides the ultimate ground upon which we recognise humans as moral subjects. Since nature also has a capacity for self-directedness, it should be 'recognized as a morally considerable being, deserving of recognition and consideration in human deliberation' [Eckersley, 1999: 42].

Based on this formulation, Eckersley seeks 'to inscribe ecocentric norms into the procedures of discursive dialogue in an impartial way – as a matter of morality and justice rather than ethics in Habermas' sense of those terms' [Eckersley, 1999: 25]. She notes that moral concern is not limited to individuals who have the ability to participate in community dialogue. The ability to engage in the conversation is thus not a requirement to be treated as a subject of moral concern. Arguing that Habermas's Critical Theory is 'ultimately based on respect for the relative autonomy of the human subject', she maintains that the treatment of the other as moral subjects should be extended to nature, regardless of its level of communicative competence [Eckersley, 1999: 44–5]. To realise this moral requirement requires an addition to Habermas's Discourse Principle as follows: 'A just common structure of political action must be common to all those affected, irrespective of whether they happen to be able to speak or gesture' [Eckersley, 1999: 46]. The question that this ethics formulates regarding nature is 'If they could talk and reason, would they agree to the proposed norm' [Eckersley, 1999: 44]?

However, there is a problem in designating a particular human group or individual to serve as a representative of nature. Since all of our knowledge of nature is socially constructed and particular, there can be no authentic human representative of nature [Eckersley, 1999: 40]. Her solution to meet the moral requirement of including the concerns of nonhuman beings in human decision-making processes is to mandate institutional procedures that would 'guide human decision makers away from putting "the silent environmental constituency" at grave risk' [Eckersley, 1999: 45–6]. She then cites the Precautionary Principle as one such procedure which would institutionalize the moral mandate to consider the impacts of human actions on non-human beings [Eckersley, 1999: 46].

### **Analysis of Eckersley's Critique**

Eckersley develops an interesting argument for the inclusion of the concerns

of nature within Critical Theory. One can sympathise with and favour her aim of developing ecocentric morals. However, I believe that her argument has a number of serious theoretical and political limitations.

### *Theoretical Concerns*

My first concern is the scientific basis for autopoietic intrinsic value theory. Autopoietics is not a concept that is used by evolutionary ecologists to describe the behaviour of different species or ecosystems. Seeing nature as an autopoietic system is based rather on the application of systems ecology to construct a philosophy of nature. In systems ecology, nature is seen as a bio-cybernetic entity that regulates itself [Keulartz, 1998: 149; Hazelrigg, 1995: 295]. This view was commonly held by many ecologists throughout most of the 1960s and 1970s. However, the notion of community, and the supposed self-ordering properties of these communities was robustly critiqued in the 1980's [Schrader-Frechette and McCoy, 1994b: 111–12]. As a result of this debate, systems ecology was supplanted in the 1980s and 1990s by evolutionary ecology. Evolutionary ecology centers on the idea that nature evolves through the generation, diffusion, and selective retention of random mutations. Nature is involved in a process of continual adaptation, which is not an active structuring process. Accordingly, evolutionary ecology rejects the idea that nature can be seen as a self-regulating mechanism. Rather, nature is seen as a chaotic system, in which chance and random events, as well as linear and non-linear interactions govern [Zimmerman, 1994: 12; Hazelrigg, 1995: 295–6].

The result of this progression of thinking is that one cannot use ecological science to define what the essence of nature really is. As Schrader-Frechette and McCoy [1994b: 112] note: 'If one cannot tell what a community or stability is, then it is likely not possible to determine – in any precise way – what a natural community or ecosystem is and when it is in some equilibrium or homeostatic state ... then ecological science has little that is precise and firm to contribute to disputes over environmental ethics and values.' While a review of the debate between systems and evolutionary ecologists is beyond the scope or concern of this article, it is fair to conclude that 'If the controversy between systems ecology and evolutionary ecology makes one thing clear, it is that the constant appeal to the ecology is misleading, to say the least' [Keulartz, 1998: 155].

The notion of autopoietics is thus based on the selective use of ecological science to forward a particular view of nature. Eckersley's argument 'orients itself one-sidedly toward system ecology's account of nature, thereby doing scant justice to the multiplicity of views of nature circulating both in science and society' [Keulartz, 1998: 21]. In her argument, she conflates living processes into the agency of nature. This is a

social construction that highlights the self-determining components of nature, and downplays the more mechanistic and random models of nature.

The autopoietics of nature, and thus the endowment of agency to nature is not a universal and objective idea, firmly grounded in ecological science. Rather, it is a social construction of nature that suits a particular political aim. As Hazelrigg [1995: 292] notes: 'Preserving nature means preserving a particular construction of what nature is supposed to be.' Eckersley's nature needs to be an agent to have worth, and therefore, she constructs this particular definition through the selective use of ecological theory.

It is obvious that ecological science can provide information about practical impacts on the natural environment. However, this science holds no special competence in providing moral or aesthetic reasoning. Thus there are limits to the use of scientific and biological reasoning, especially in regard to human ethics [*Schrader-Frechette and McCoy, 1994a*]. Greenwood [1984: 202] has persuasively argued that such moral tales have very little to do with evolution, because 'without fixed natural categories, without a fixed boundary between nature and culture, without a fixed "human nature", and without any overall direction in the life process, it is impossible to make nature into a source of ethical and political prescriptions.'<sup>2</sup>

In addition, the uncritical use of a systems ecology perspective sets up an artificial dichotomy between human and non-human nature. From a systems ecology viewpoint, human activities are artifices that upset the balance of the self-regulating system of nature. This informs a particular treatment of nature as apart from man. Hence 'systems ecology views functional disentanglement as an essential precondition for a healthy nature' [*Keulartz, 1998: 173; 1999*]. This dichotomy is not present if an evolutionary ecology perspective is adopted. Humans are seen as part of the complex interactions between living entities, and the apparent dichotomy between human and non-human nature disappears into a consideration of specific interactions [*Yrjö, 2000; Keulartz, 1998: 173*].

The society/nature split is also scientifically and historically inaccurate [*Yrjö, 2000*]. Many of the supposed natural systems have been found to be the result of human artifice [*Keulartz, 1998: 152-5; Beck, 1985: 80-81; Richerson et al., 1996*]. Humans have played a role in the evolution of life on earth for millions of years. In that time, they have exercised an important influence on virtually all of the natural world. In his examination of the evolutionary history of North America, Flannery [2001: 173-254] shows the extraordinary impact of humans on the shape of the ecology of the entire North American continent. His analysis shows that the impact of humans began more than 13,000 years ago, and significantly altered the type and distribution of both flora and fauna. For example, in examining the evidence

related to the co-evolution of the plains Indians and the giant bison herds, Flannery [2001: 227] concluded that 'All this leads me to believe that while a symbol of the "wild west", beloved of the wildest of "wild" Indians and a victim of the likes of Buffalo Bill, the bison is a human artifact for it was shaped by Indians and its distribution determined by them.' So not only are our ideas about nature socially constructed, but also nature itself is partially the product of human social interaction [Vogel, 1996; 165–71]. The dichotomy between nature and society has been empirically, historically, and intellectually falsified [Yrjö, 2000]. The imprint of humans on the globe has become so ubiquitous, that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, there are virtually no places beyond human influence.

My second concern regards the structure of the argument for an ethics based on autopoietics. From a rhetorical perspective, Eckersley constructs a bio-rhetoric, in which biology is used to infer moral necessities. As such, a bio-rhetoric 'is thus talk on its way from an is to an ought, making that connection only in the play of language' [Lyne, 1990: 38]. While this may be an interesting rhetorical strategy, it does not make up for its theoretical deficiencies. I agree with Lyne, who noted in his analysis of other bio-rhetorics that 'Like the motion of an arrow, it will seem to dissolve under an analytic stare' [Lyne, 1990: 38]. To link ecology and ethics is a highly problematic enterprise [Kitcher, 1994: 440], and in a previous writing, Eckersley [1998b: 90] states that 'we cannot "divine" a telos from nature's unfolding for the purposes of developing an ecological ethics'. However, in her attempt to extend communicative ethics to include nature, it appears that she does exactly this. This problem originates in the development of the autopoietic intrinsic value theory. Eckersley's work builds on the development of this perspective by Fox [1995], and an examination of his work reveals the origins of this problem.

Fox's argument for the intrinsic value of nature starts with the characteristics of living systems. Citing biologists, Fox argues that

more recent thinking regarding the nature of living systems ... emphasizes the fact that living systems can be distinguished from nonliving systems by particular kinds of ends for which they strive. Specifically living systems are seen as being characterized by the property of autopoiesis ... [which] refers to the fact that living systems continuously strive to produce and sustain their own organizational activity and structure [Fox 1995: 169].

Based on the authority of science, Fox then argues that 'The fact that autopoietic processes are primarily and continuously engaged in the recursive process of regenerating themselves means that they are not merely means to ends that are external to themselves, but rather that they are ends

in themselves ... [and] therefore deserving of moral consideration' [Fox, 1995: 172]. Ignoring other scientific perspectives, Fox creates an unproblematic and reified nature with a specific 'essence', that of an autopoietic entity. This essence then legitimates a specific form of moral treatment of nature, as an end-in-itself. Here Fox engages in a bio-rhetoric by deriving norms for the treatment of nature from ecological facts, and thus his argument can be thus seen as a variety of ethical naturalism [Glacken, 1967: 36–49]. In effect, the autopoietic intrinsic value of nature is based on a claim to be able to 'discern the essence of nature, and to require us to act in accordance with it' [Cheney, 1989: 294]. As a result, Fox, and Eckersley by inclusion, commit the naturalistic fallacy [Kerr, 2000].

Could not this same criticism be applied to the development of the Discourse Principle by Habermas? This criticism is based on a misunderstanding of the links between validity claims and speech acts. Universal Pragmatics identifies the unavoidable presuppositions of language use, which define, metaphorically speaking, a necessary 'moral' grammar of justice and solidarity that are the presuppositions of communicative action. We cannot engage in communicative action without invoking these principles, just as we cannot form comprehensible sentences without the use of grammar. To argue against these presuppositions places one in the state of a performative contradiction – that is, 'systematically disputing the necessary presuppositions of communicative action while engaging in it' [Habermas, 1993: 162]. Based on this logic, Habermas argues that one can link the use of language to the values of justice and solidarity 'without committing a naturalistic fallacy' [Habermas, 1993: 50].

My third theoretical concern relates to Eckersley's extension of autopoietics into Critical Theory. By attributing agency to nature, Eckersley seeks to extend the realm of moral concern to all of nature. She maintains that communication abilities are not a relevant consideration for whether a living entity should be treated as an end-in-itself. In contrast, Kant's criteria for the treatment of humans as ends-in-themselves is based on the capacity to act as a rational, self-defining being, with consciousness, will, and freedom to act based upon ethical choices [Kant, 1785: 75–8]. The ability to speak is not just an arbitrary endowment. Consciousness and self-awareness are bound up with the acquisition of language. The ability to act in the world based on reasoned choices is based on conscious choices, and creates the ethical requirement to treat every rational being as an end-in itself. Communicative competence is thus not arbitrary from a moral point of view. Rather, it is a fundamental precondition of rational existence. Furthermore, self-directedness and agency cannot be reduced to merely the unfolding of biological processes [Vogel, 1996: 160–61]. Moral subjects are others with whom we can enter into a normative and reciprocal relationship. Nature

cannot make choices about what it will do or not do, nor can we enter into a binding reciprocal relationship with nature. To extrapolate agency into a property of all living entities, whether or not they are endowed with any sentience, or ability to choose, is a fundamental distortion of this idea.

In addition, Eckersley misrepresents the rigorous foundations of Critical Theory. She argues that the basis for the acceptance of Critical Theory is that this ethics provides the best means for ensuring a free dialogue that protects the autonomy and integrity of human actors [Eckersley, 1999: 44]. Habermas is certainly concerned with individual autonomy. However, this argument ignores the robust foundations of Critical Theory in Habermas's Universal Pragmatics. Habermas does not derive his ethics as a means to uphold individual dignity and autonomy. If he did the latter, he could be correctly critiqued as developing a Eurocentric metaphysics. The values of solidarity, respect, truthfulness, authenticity, and autonomy are not metaphysical assumptions, or values in their own right. Rather, these norms are the implicit assumptions of the use of everyday speech. By ignoring this foundational work of Habermas, Eckersley misrepresents the cognitive argument for the acceptance of Critical Theory, and produces a weak and arbitrary argument for its extension to include nature.

#### *Political Concerns*

The next set of concerns regards the implications of attempting to translate this form of ethics into political practice. First, this position is likely to have little appeal to environmental groups not directly concerned with wilderness preservation. The split between human and non-human nature systematically devalues the urban environment as something outside of nature [Light, 2001: 17]. This creates a geographic dualism between human-impacted areas and wilderness. Since human-impacted areas are no longer seen as part of nature, the end result is a systematic blindness of this ethical argument to urban environmental problems [Light, 2001: 17–18]. This limits its political acceptability, and creates a division between environmental groups concerned with environmental justice and those dealing with ecological sustainability [Light, 2001: 27; Dobson, 1998]. Additionally, this argument, by asserting its basis in science, serves to delegitimize other sources for the ethical treatment of nature. For example, American Evangelical Christians argue that it is the Biblical story of Noah that defines an ethical duty to act for the preservation of nature. By establishing one justification for the protection of nature, this argument limits the political acceptability of this ecological ethics, and thus limits the possibility to form a broad based political movement to protect the natural environment.

Second, even if accepted, it is not at all clear that an 'ecocentric' perspective would result in an ecologically sustainable society. While the

need for such a belief system has now become virtually taken-for-granted within environmental philosophy, I am in agreement with Light [2001: 9] who sees this uncritical acceptance of an ecocentric norm as 'an accepted prejudice, [rather] than as a proven position'. Even a casual review of the historical record shows that virtually all human civilizations have been unsustainable. There are several examples that can be drawn from the anthropological literature of nomadic peoples, endowed with an ecocentric view of nature, creating serious permanent ecological disruptions [*Ponting, 1992: 18–36; Richerson et al., 1996: 286–9; Flannery, 2001: 173–254*]. Philosophical arguments alone do not provide a compelling case for the efficacy of an ecocentric ethics [*Yrjö, 2000: 160*]. Rather, what is needed is the provision of anthropological, or sociological evidence of the real impact of an ecocentric perspective on a society's practices toward the natural environment. Absent this evidence, Eckersley's assertion remains just that.

Finally, there is an unresolved tension between Eckersley's advocacy of a neo-Aristotelian form of ethics and democratic political practice. The autopoietic intrinsic value theory defines a given value for nature, apart from any discussion by a human community. This brings a conflict between the democratic requirement for the participants themselves to determine the 'good life' through their own deliberations and this form of neo-Aristotelian morals [*Habermas, 1993: 123–5*]. In examining similar arguments, Vogel [1996: 9] argues that 'instead of allowing the human community to decide these matters democratically, those who make such arguments attempt to short-circuit democratic discourse by labeling as "natural" – and hence unquestionable – what are inevitably really their own socially situated normative claims' [*Vogel, 1996: 9*]. Such neo-Aristotelian ethics, derived apart from the active participation of the participants themselves, are 'beset with insuperable difficulties' [*Habermas, 1993: 125*]. Eckersley does not explain how this dynamic would be resolved in a democratic and pluralistic society with multiple definitions of the good life.

Taken together, the theoretical and practical limitations of Eckersley's attempt to graft an ecocentric ethics onto Critical Theory is highly problematic. Since one can certainly argue for the Precautionary Principle from a number of different perspectives, including Critical Theory, the enactment of this approach to providing some legal protection for the natural world does not require acceptance of the autopoietic intrinsic value of nature. Accordingly, there is little compelling intellectual force or practical need for this viewpoint.

### **Critical Theory in Practice**

If Eckersley's attempted graft between Critical Theory and ecocentric ethics

is unviable, then the question arises: what environmental norm can adequately protect the natural environment? I believe no one ethics or argument will fit all situations or cultural beliefs. Decisions regarding protection of the natural environment will always be partial, temporary, and contingent. So a universal morality guiding our treatment of nature is most probably an impossibility. The question remains as to whether or not Critical Theory can inform a practice that is capable of protecting the natural world? If it is to realise this task, it must be capable of informing a political practice that could increase protection of the natural world. Thus the locus of efforts by Critical Theorists to protect the natural world is to enable a change in the conditions under which decisions about the natural environment are made. As Dobson [1993: 198] states, summarising Habermas's position: 'Healing the rift between human beings and the natural world ... is not a matter of joining what was once put asunder, but of getting the relations between human beings right first.'

There are many useful examples of this type of analysis. Here I can only quickly point to three such projects. The first project focuses on changing the decision-making processes of government agencies that deal with environmental issues.<sup>3</sup> Individuals working in this area have developed and tested a decision-making process which integrates scientific analysis and community deliberation into a comprehensive strategy for environmental decision-making. Known as Analytic Deliberation, this process defines a democratic method for development of government policies that recognises the link between social rationality and public involvement. It also provides techniques for integrating practical, normative and aesthetic concerns into a democratic decision-making process [NRC, 1996]. This process has been verified and expanded in a number of reports on watershed planning [1999c: 240–53], environmental justice [1999b: 64–8], and valuing biodiversity [NRC, 1999a]. This project, while very useful, is limited. Its focus is on administrative decision-making and small group processes. While this process can help a society make better decisions regarding the application of existing laws and scientific evidence with community concerns, it fails to deal with the vast power differentials that exist outside of this process. It also fails to consider the larger decision-making structures in society.

The second project focuses on the relationship between different planning approaches and their potential to realise a deliberative and democratic practice. Over the past decade, a number of scholars and planners have worked to develop and test planning practices that can better realise the democratic morality of Critical Theory. This approach has expanded beyond Analytic Deliberation to include an analyses of the power and institutional relationships within which government planning activities

are conducted. These efforts have initiated the development of a planning practice that is both sensitive to issues of power and ethics, and able to assess issues in situated political processes [Forster, 1989, 1993, 1999].

The final project attempts to deal with society level decision-making processes [Habermas, 1996: 299]. As Dryzek [2000: 142] has argued, values alone are not sufficient to reform our social order. Rather, what is required is also structural change in our political and economic structures. This leads to considerations of institutional structures and the role they play in either promoting or hindering an ethical consideration of nature. Some of the major works in this area focus on the role of the state and environmental degradation [Janicke, 1990; Eckersley, 1995b], economic structure [Schnaiberg, 1980; Jaeger, 1994], risk decision-making [Beck, 1985], and the public sphere and social movements [Brulle, 2000; Torgerson, 1999; Dowie, 1995].

## Conclusion

There is no necessary conflict between ecocentric norms and Critical Theory. Rather, the relationship is one of mutual reliance. One key task for the realisation of the aims of both Critical Theory and ecocentric norms is the development of a strong public sphere. In this discursive arena, the industrialist presuppositions of profitability would not be the deciding force. Rather, the public space defines an arena in which ecological politics would take place and meaningful disagreements and debates about our society and the actions necessary to foster ecological sustainability would be carried out [Brulle, 2000: 64–8; Torgerson, 1999: 162]. To create the public space defines a political task that would be accomplished ‘through legally institutionalized procedures of democratic deliberation and decision-making, and gain sufficient strength to hold its own against the other two social forces – money and administrative power’ [Habermas, 1998: 249]. This would open up the possibility of a fair hearing for the protection of the natural world. So while the creation of a public sphere would not necessarily result in decisions always to protect nature, it is a necessary prerequisite for us to even consider these questions in a meaningful way.

We need to develop and institutionalise more adequate procedures to integrate the consideration of ecological values into the decision-making process. To accomplish this task, we do not need to look to metaphysical arguments, but to ourselves and our beliefs, political actions, and social institutions. Constructing an ecologically sustainable society has never been accomplished before, and so we do not know in advance what will or will not work, including ethics, institutions, or individual personality characteristics. Thus any efforts to create this society should proceed

through a practice of trial and error in a 'logic of justified hope and controlled experiment' [Habermas, 1971: 283–4]. Critical Theory can provide valuable intellectual resources toward the realisation of this project. It is in the democratic conversation about our fate and the fate of nature that Habermas and green political theory converge.

## NOTES

1. There has been an extensive debate between Critical Theory and the other major schools of thought. For summaries of the epistemological arguments on which the Theory of Communicative Action is based, see Radnitsky [1973], Bleicher [1982], and Holub [1991]. The Communicative Ethics developed by Habermas has been the subject of intense debate. For a discussion of the viability of this ethical position, see Benhabib and Dallmayr [1990].
2. Also Gould [1988] and Keulartz [1998:156]
3. There is an extensive literature that examines the legal and administrative efforts to protect the natural environment [Cranor, 2001, Lindstrom and Smith, 2001; NRC 1995; Taylor, 1984]. In addition, there is also a large amount of research on public involvement in environmental decision making. For an excellent review of these perspectives, see Webler [1995, 1999], Webler and Tuler [2000].

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