Alienations and natures
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This paper concerns the understanding of ‘alienation from nature’ within political theory. The idea of alienation from nature might usefully help to articulate both anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric environmental concerns and the relations between them if the theory involved is appropriately nuanced and pluralistic. Three senses of ‘alienation’ are distinguished (estrangement, renunciation of ownership, and reification), as are three environmental contexts or senses of ‘nature’ (the natural world, non-human nature, and the humanly constructed environment). These different senses of alienation and nature are then mapped onto one another to produce various senses of ‘alienation from or of nature’. It is emphasised that some of these should be viewed as qualified goods. A green political theory focused on alienation needs to consider such different senses of alienation from nature and the relationships between them.

Introduction
How should we understand the idea of alienation from nature within political theory? My suggestion in this paper is that a political theory giving a central role to the idea of alienation from nature should be pluralist in distinguishing different senses of ‘alienation’ and ‘nature’. It should also reject the assumption that alienation from nature in every sense should be overcome as much as possible. Identifying different senses of alienation from nature, some of which should be viewed positively as qualified goods, and the relations of tension and entailment between them, might help to capture various environmental concerns, both anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric, and the tensions and entailments between them.

There are accounts of alienation from nature in the literature that suggest it is something we should try to live with rather than seek to overcome entirely. For example, in his survey of Frankfurt School thinking on the topic, Andrew Biro explains the ‘fact of humanity’s alienation’ in terms of ‘human beings’ self-conscious transformation of their natural environment’: unlike purely instinctual animals, we can deny our instincts and in that sense ‘break from the dictates of nature’, and so have history and culture (Biro, 2005, p.30). He suggests adapting Marcuse’s distinction between basic and surplus repression into one between basic and surplus alienation from nature (p.168). Basic alienation from nature is that degree necessary for human civilization, while surplus alienation is the excess required only given a particular socio-economic stage of civilization. Even if the
surplus-imposing conditions are overcome, basic alienation remains ineliminable and this degree of alienation is valorized as a condition of civilization.

Neil Evernden, by contrast, draws on biology and existential phenomenology to portray humanity as a ‘naturally alien’ neotonic species whose members do not mature into an inflexible concrete form fitted to a specific ecological ‘place’ (Evernden, 1993, ch.5). Because it is biologically intelligible and evolutionarily explicable this ‘alien’ status is within nature, not a matter of transcending nature (Evernden, p.118). Still, as ecologically ‘homeless’ and ‘uncommitted’, we don’t find ourselves ‘already dedicated to a specific slot within nature’ and so must ‘construct’ a world, and (within indeterminate limits) decide how to differentiate it from the rest of nature, how to understand and enact our relation to the nonhuman (pp.118ff). The environmental crisis is constituted by our current mode of doing this, which seems to have two main elements for Evernden: firstly a ‘Cartesian’, ‘objective’ (or in Heidegger’s sense ‘technological’) view of the nonhuman as subject-less, inert matter against which we differentiate ourselves as rational subjects for whom the nonhuman is but a resource (e.g., p.128). Secondly, we tend to view the world so constructed ‘inauthentically’ as unquestionable, the given truth of our natural place (e.g., pp.120-1). Even those who worry about the situation – ‘environmentalists’ and ‘ecologists’ – partake of the assumptions of this paradigm when they think of the ‘natural environment’ as an object in contrast to the human subject. An implication of Evernden’s account is that we cannot overcome our ‘natural alien’ status, although different forms of culture may relieve destructive symptoms of exoticism and placelessness more or less successfully (p.123). Certainly we cannot overcome it, or do anything but intensify those symptoms, by treating the deeply questionable construction of ourselves as masters of objects as the unquestionable truth about our place in the world.

I think that both Biro and Evernden tell part of the story of alienation from nature, but that there is more to it as a story involving elements of anthropocentrism, nonanthropocentrism, constructionism and non-constructionism, overcoming and not overcoming. There is no space to show this in detail, but I think the pluralist framework I sketch here encompasses insights from both kinds of thinkers, as well as those of a range of other environmental theorists. The senses of ‘alienation’ I consider are: estrangement,
a state or feeling of being separated or cut off from; (property) alienation, a renunciation of ownership; reification, the reduction of humanity, human processes and products to ‘merely given things’. The main senses of ‘nature’ are: the natural world, the encompassing nature of which humanity is a part but not the whole; nonhuman nature, the natural world insofar as it is not human or has not been shaped by humanity for human-oriented ends; the humanized environment, the world insofar it has been so shaped. I do not mean that these concepts capture all actual and possible usages of ‘alienation’, ‘nature’ or ‘environmental alienation’. My aim is to use some traditional and central senses to try to indicate some ways of understanding ‘alienation from nature’ and the relations between them and to suggest that political theory shouldn’t view it as one or two things, but as a plurality of conditions, some of which should and some of which shouldn’t be overcome.

Once these different senses of alienation and nature are considered together then their main relations, and so the main claims of a theory seeking to articulate environmental concerns through them, seem to be as follows. Estrangement from the natural world should be overcome without seeking the elimination of all estrangement from nonhuman nature: overcoming estrangement from the natural world entails endorsing some estrangement from nonhuman nature. Consequently overcoming ‘alienation from nature’, in the sense of estrangement from the overall natural world, cannot be equated with becoming fully at home in the world. Similarly, a critique of (property) alienation within the humanized environment should leave space for encouragement of such alienation with respect to nonhuman nature and the natural world. Although an attempt to overcome estrangement from the natural world cannot ignore reification, estrangement and alienation within (from or of) the humanized environment, neither can it seek to eliminate estrangement and alienation with respect to nonhuman nature. Before further explaining and defending these highly compressed claims I will say some more about the ideas of alienation and nature involved in them.

Alienations
The understanding of alienation in political contexts has been shaped most profoundly by the work of Marx, adapting that of Hegel. But it is worth remembering that talk of
alienation long preceded Marx or Hegel (or indeed Rousseau). Thus Raymond Williams tells us (1990, p.33) that one of the main senses of the English word alienation, dating back to the C14th, refers to an act or state of estrangement (for example, being cut off from God, or suffering a breakdown in political or family relationships). Alienation in this sense of *estrangement* tends to be seen as in some sense bad, or to be regretted. This is a tendency I will be questioning.

Another sense of alienation comes into English usage in the C15th to refer to renunciation of ownership (rights, estates, money) or its transfer from one person to another. Such *property-alienation* was not viewed as necessarily bad, but in its dominant uses the term acquired the negative connotations associated with improper, for example involuntary, transfers of ownership (ibid.). I question such connotations when alienation in this sense is viewed in relation to nonhuman nature and the natural world.

As Williams says (pp.34-5), Hegel and Marx introduced variations of alienation as estrangement (*Entfremdung*), by relating it to versions of property-alienation that highlight the idea of ‘externalization’ (*Entäußerung*). Thus Martin Milligan translates Marx’s use of *entfremden* in the *1844 Manuscripts* as ‘estrange’, reserving ‘alienate’ for Marx’s use of *entäussern* in that text. This he explains is because ‘alienate’ is the only English word that very similarly to *entäussern* brings together such ideas as ‘selling’ and ‘externalising’, ‘losing something that remains over-against one’, ‘as a result of one’s own action’ and ‘a simultaneous transfer and renunciation of ownership’. *Entfremden* on the other hand corresponds to alienate in only one sense of the English word (where we speak of people feeling alienated, for example), without any connotation of transfer of ownership. Estrangement, as opposed to (property) alienation is therefore a better translation of *entfremdung* as opposed to *entäußerung*.

Marx also uses the term *Vergegenständlichung*, which is sometimes translated as ‘alienation’, but more often as ‘reification’, to refer to the mistake of viewing human social processes and products as merely given ‘things’(Williams, p.35). Partly because of its influence in shaping the idea of alienation as a critical political concept and partly because it is a familiar source of potential objections to the position I advocate, I will be touching on elements of the Marxian picture below. For now I simply want to make clear

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1. In his translator’s notes to Marx (2007), p.11.
that I will be referring to property-alienation as just ‘alienation’, but the distinctions between this sense of alienation and estrangement and reification should be noted.

**Natures**

It is often said that there is no more contested and ideological a concept as ‘nature’\(^2\). There are indeed many different senses of the term. We can however distinguish some basic usages equivalent to contexts particularly pertinent to the issue of environmental alienation\(^3\).

Firstly there is nature in the sense of the *natural world*; i.e., *everything*, or at least everything subject to the empirical regularities often referred to, perhaps unfortunately, as ‘laws of nature’. The natural world in this sense includes humanity, our actions and the results of our actions. It also includes nature in another sense: the nonhuman part of the natural world is also often referred to just as ‘nature’. Indeed Lewis (1967, pp.45-6) reports that one of the most ancient uses of the term, required by human *practical* needs, refers to that which has not been altered or sustained by human activity:

> ‘This distinction between the uninterfered with and the interfered with will not probably recommend itself to philosophers … What keeps the contrast alive, however, is the daily experience of men as practical, not speculative, beings. The antithesis between unreclaimed land and the cleared, drained, fenced, ploughed, sown, and weeded field – between the broken and unbroken horse…- is forced upon us every day. That is why *nature* as ‘the given’, the thing we start from, the thing we have not yet ‘done anything about’, is such a persistent sense.

> ‘Nature’ in this sense then refers to those parts of the natural world that have not been shaped or transformed by humanity and have an origin and capacity for continued existence independently of humanity. It is often also referred to as the ‘natural world’; misleadingly so here because ‘natural world’ suggests the first sense of nature just mentioned, which also encompasses us and our doings. Phrases like ‘nonhuman nature’ and ‘the nonhuman world’, or just ‘the nonhuman’, are therefore better here.

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\(^2\) See for example, Soper (1995).

\(^3\) Good resources for this, in addition to Soper (1995) and Williams (1990, pp.219-24), include Mill (1904) and Lewis (1967, pp.24-74).
The category of the nonhuman also implies a contrasting category of ‘humanized nature’, comprising humanity and the humanly altered or constructed environment. The distinction, within nature, between the nonhuman and humanized environment is inevitably fuzzy and porous, but it is entailed by the idea of nonhuman nature which, as Lewis says, is itself required by our practical needs, whatever the view from a non-pragmatic, speculative philosophical perspective.

A pluralistic account of alienation from nature follows from mapping the three senses of alienation distinguished earlier onto these categories of the natural world, the nonhuman and the humanized environment. The rest of this paper considers the resulting senses of alienation from nature and some of their relations, paying particular attention to senses which seem to be qualified goods.

The Humanized World: Reification, Alienation and Estrangement

Reification

‘Reification’ has a number of different senses, including treating abstract ideas as if they were really existing particulars (hypostatization). A central sense for this discussion is the taking of what are really human products/processes as naturally (nonhumanly) given things. Reification of the humanized environment involves relating to it as simply a given ‘thing’, rather than the product or embodiment of human effort, creativity, ingenuity or stupidity. In his recent reconstruction of Lukács’s classic account of reification, Honneth (2008) writes of a ‘forgetting’ of the ‘primordial recognition’ of fellow persons and by extension the ‘existential significance’ of their surroundings. This situation in which persons (including oneself) and surrounding objects are reified into mere things to be contemplated, used or endured involves more than narrowly cognitive errors, such as false ontological or ethical beliefs; it has a phenomenological depth encompassing a complexity of habitual attitudes, emotions and actions that might permeate intersubjectivity and social life generally (Honneth, p.22ff). The traditional Marxian focus of the concept is social relations of course: capitalist productive relations, come to be seen as things to be endured, rather than human and therefore revisable social relations; and the persons living out these relations come to see themselves as things,
commodities to be used, exchanged like everything else for profit, rather than as humans with human needs. Honneth (p.28) rejects the ‘totalizing’ Marxian explanation of reification, but retains the notion of a wide-ranging failure of recognition of the human dimension within inter-personal relations and the humanized (constructed or modified) objects they revolve around. He is perhaps right to reject the totalizing Marxian account, but that account remains useful in its emphasis on the connection between the idea of reified social environment and the idea of a social environment apparently out of human control: capitalist relations appear ‘natural’, as if fixed by nonhuman nature, and there is nothing to do but endure and so (needlessly) perpetuate them. Once we shift the focus a little to the wider environmental results of human productive relations – the humanized world shaped by human activity – it is clearly a problem when that is viewed, or assumed, as ‘naturally given’, simply a thing to be endured, no matter how degraded and unsustainable. It is obviously important for ‘green’ political theory to emphasise the need to recognise the world we are making as one we are in fact making, and for which we should take responsibility and over which we should exercise conscious control.4

**Alienation and estrangement**

The Marxian story also alerts us to relations between reification, alienation and estrangement. ‘Alienation’ here refers to the relinquishment or transfer of ownership over items within the humanized environment. This is ‘bad’ when transfers are coerced, fraudulent, exploitative, or generate interpersonal conflict. We speak of ‘environmental injustice’ when distributions or conditions of exchange involve unjust distributions of environmental ‘goods’ or ‘bads’ (for example, pollution; access to ‘natural resources’). In traditional Marxian terms alienation of labour is inherent within capitalist private property relations, and this produces multiple estrangements, including from a reified humanized environment5. Labour is the fundamental mediation between humanity and (the rest of) nature, yet its historical character, sets it apart from other natural processes. An important question here is whether humanity is necessarily estranged from the nonhuman in virtue of this historicity. I return below to the issue of necessary

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5 See Mészáros (2005, pp.99-114) for a thorough discussion of the traditional account.
estrangement from nonhuman nature. However, workers must alienate - sell - their labour, such that it becomes a mere means to survival rather than an affirmation of their rich humanity. They must do this in competition with other workers. They have no ownership of the terms and conditions and machinery of production, being themselves more or less replaceable parts of that machinery. But this machinery and these conditions are produced and reproduced by their labour. Nor, as workers, do they own the goods capital deems it profitable for them to create. The alienation of labour therefore estranges workers from themselves, each other and from the social and material environment of capitalist society, which then appears to them in reified form as a set of things ‘confronting them as a hostile and alien power’, rather than a homely expression of their creative humanity, for which they would be willing and able to take responsibility.

In general, estrangement from the humanized environment involves a lack of homeliness and identification with what in our surroundings is the manifestation of human labour. Putting aside for a moment the relation to labour alienation, this idea of estrangement might best be put in terms of a breakdown in what some call the ‘practice of place’. For example, Peter Cannavà (2007, pp.5-7) explains that ‘place’ is a practice, a ‘process of social construction’ required precisely because we need a ‘home’ - some degree of meaningful familiarity and coherence in our humanized environment - rather than rootless estrangement. All places are founded, as opposed to simply found, through (re)description, (re)interpretation and, usually, transformation; indeed our identities are partly defined in relation to objects around us interpreted as place elements. There must then be mutual preservation of place and identity. The reinterpretive, transformational practice of founding must be balanced with preservationist activities or places become too unstable to be vehicles of meaning, identity and physical security, rather than the ‘stress, disorientation and existential homelessness’. Although in tension founding and preservation are equally integral to place and ought to complement rather than confront one another in zero sum opposition, and both are mostly collective endeavours that should be pursued democratically rather than through imposition (Cannavà, ch.1).

For Cannavà, the phenomenon of ‘sprawl’ exemplifies a breakdown in place through the imposition of narrow short term founding imperatives without adequate

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6 As Evernden emphasises, we are ecologically placeless and so must construct our own.
regard to preservation. Sprawl is a low-density, car-dependent, highly privatized, centreless mode of land development with separated residential, commercial and industrial land use, which in many locations is rapidly consuming open farmland, forests and wilderness whilst draining vitality from urban areas. According to Cannavò (p.105ff) it represents a ‘fundamentally dysfunctional relationship with the places around us’, a cycle of abandonment within interchangeable, homogenized commodified places, increasingly like abstract space rather than meaningful places within which one can be ‘at home’. Now, one might want to reintroduce the relation to labour alienation at this point and argue that the intensifying alienation of labour involved in the increasing power of international capital is fundamental to explaining sprawl even if one hesitates to adopt a totalizing Marxian explanation of all estranging ‘crises of place’. However, overcoming estrangement from the humanized world needs to be qualified as a home-making project given that it is not pursued as a project of homogenous humanity as such, but in different concrete ways in different locations. That the homogenizing pressure of international capital manifested in sprawl is a problem presupposes that something valuable is lost in the loss of difference between different places: recognition of human difference entails some respect for the difference of different places, and so entails that one (or ‘we’) should not expect to be equally at home in all of them. Given that estrangement from the human world consists in not being fully at home in it, then adequate acknowledgement of human difference as manifested in different home-making projects requires putting up with some estrangement from those ‘other’ places\(^7\). That humanity should overcome estrangement from its own humanized world might be true as an abstract ideal, but does not equate to each human being or group finding themselves equally at home in every humanized place.

\[^7\] Even in the same location as one’s own place when the location encompasses cultural heterogeneity as tends to be the case in modern urban areas. See Young, 1990 ch.8. Cannavò’s account of ‘place’ draws heavily upon Young’s.
Nonhuman Nature: Estrangement and Alienation

Estrangement

The discussion of the previous section bracketed relations to nonhuman nature. But not everything embodies human labour, even in highly humanized places. It doesn’t follow though that nonhuman things are ‘mere things’, as if ‘mere-thinghood’ was the ‘natural’ status of nonhuman entities and processes and this status problematic only for reified human agency and its products. This brings us to the idea of estrangement from the nonhuman. The humanized and non-humanized are intertwined and continuous in many ways within overall nature, of course. Indeed, an inadequate appreciation of this seems to be what is sometimes meant by ‘alienation from nature’. However, the natural world, *insofar as it is a nonhuman world*, precisely is not a reflection of human purposes or set up to satisfy our interests or provide us a given ‘natural’ slot to fill. Hence our ‘estrangement’ from it and status as ‘natural aliens’ in Evernden’s sense. To the extent that they are ‘wild’ – embody nonhuman processes or a more than human agency⁸ - then we cannot be fully at home in our surroundings. But whereas within the limits of human difference it seems right to say we should be at home within our surroundings insofar as they are humanized (and criticise such obstacles to that as sprawl and environmental injustice), it does not seem right to say our overcoming of estrangement from the nonhuman should be limited only by recognition of *human* difference. For a theory concerned to articulate a perspective that is not narrowly anthropocentric, estrangement from the nonhuman should be at least a qualified good.

To see this consider that the distinction between the humanized environment and nonhuman nature generates a sense in which we must be estranged from nature by definition. As long as there is something *nonhuman*, then trivially it remains nonhuman and apparently equally trivially so does our estrangement from it as the not-human. This might seem to rob alienation, in this sense of estrangement, of its status as a critical concept with which to condemn certain situations and practices, for *all* human situations and practices by definition involve alienation in this sense of estrangement from the nonhuman (Vogel 2011).

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⁸ See for example Plumwood (2006) and Bennett (2010) for discussion of nonhuman agentic contributions to otherwise humanized landscapes.
We can remove the air of triviality here by emphasizing matters of degree, and by reversing the direction of the critical bite, so to speak. This gives us the idea of estrangement from nonhuman nature as a qualified good. What is not at all trivial is the fact that we can always further ‘overcome’ such estrangement in the sense of eliminating more of nature as nonhuman; the more it is humanized, so that the natural world has less of the nonhuman about it, the less estrangement of this sort there is. Presumably something like this has in effect been the ‘domination of nature’ agenda: we should tame the nonhuman world, reduce nature to the human world as much as possible. A purely anthropocentric constructionism about ‘nature’ (equivalent say to Evernden minus the biology and effort to take the idea of nonhuman ‘lifeworlds’ seriously) would view this project as always already complete, so that a properly ‘post-natural’ environmental philosophy and politics should be about conditions within the humanized environment and not about the relation between that and the nonhuman elements of a ‘wider environment’ called ‘nature’. But if we assume there are nonhuman items and processes from which we are estranged - wildness encountered even in the heart of the city - then we can make sense of this estrangement as a qualified good: living with it, rather than always seeking to overcome it, is equivalent to rejecting domination. This can only be a matter of degree, given that some transformation of the world in line with specifically human needs and interests is ‘basic’ in Biro’s sense. So it seems appropriate to call it a qualified good. I have in mind the claim that nonhuman nature (whether large-scale - ecosystems, species - or local particular wildness encountered on the street) should not be eliminated or transformed for the sake of trivial human interests. This seems to me a sense in which ‘alienation from nature’ can be good: good in the guise of the estrangement from the nonhuman maintained by resisting the wholesale assimilation of nature to humanized landscape.

I am not suggesting here that talk of overcoming alienation from nature in non-domineering ways is impossible or always meaningless; I am suggesting that where estrangement from nonhuman nature is concerned it is more helpful to think of resistance to domination in terms of living with, rather than overcoming, such estrangement. Certainly there are some places – perhaps especially designated ‘wilderness’ areas where nonhuman wildness is most evident and welcome rather than prevented, begrudged or
ignored – where some might see their attachment to place as constituted partly through respect for the nonhuman, for nonhuman agency and productive contribution to place making; indeed by ‘being at home’ with the nonhuman. So, for example, Plumwood’s (e.g., 2002, pp.186ff) ecofeminist ethic of care involves ‘identifying’ with nonhuman co-inhabitants of place, and this might be described as being at home with and so not estranged from them. I don’t want to condemn such a description (much less the practice so described), but suggest things are clearer when ‘overcoming estrangement from nonhuman nature’ denotes a situation of thorough humanization of surroundings to make them reflect specifically human oriented purposes and values. Plumwood (e.g., 1991) rightly rejects a strongly holistic metaphysical understanding of ‘identification’ with nonhuman nature, and associated talk of ‘enlarging the self’, as suggesting the assimilation of nonhuman others to the self. The kind of identifying she has in mind doesn’t amount to that, but a concern for others in their otherness. This retaining of otherness seems to me a retaining of estrangement analogous to that involved when we bracket the nonhuman and consider the estrangement/being at home contrast in encountering human difference and human places that aren’t one’s own: caring for the other needn’t entail assimilating them to make them and their home as smoothly continuous as possible with us and ours. On the contrary, caring for them in their difference requires preserving a degree of estrangement. Similarly, I want to say that even in locations where nonhuman processes and entities are accommodated and cared for ‘partners’ in place-making, there is an element of estrangement from (not being fully at home with) them and their different tendencies of growth and development. Otherwise there is a risk of either reading human values into nonhuman nature, or of equating domesticating nonhuman nature with ‘caring’ for it.

The idea of accepting a degree of estrangement from the nonhuman might be articulated in Marxian materialist terms with reference to Ted Benton’s (1992) ‘eco-regulatory’, as opposed to purely transformative, conception of human labour. Benton’s main illustration of this is labour ‘primarily devoted to optimising and maintaining the

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9 See for example my (2011b) criticism of Martha Nussbaum’s (2006) call for the ‘gradual supplanting of the natural with the just’ as a requirement of extending justice to nonhuman animals.
conditions under which some organic transformations take place’, as in various agricultural and horticultural practices. Here human labour doesn’t itself transform a seed into a plant, say, but optimises the conditions for that to occur, by tilling, irrigating and so on. It is not that these conditions and associated causal mechanisms, such as the topographical and climatic requirements of certain crops, are utterly non-manipulable ‘untouched nature’. The point is the ‘relative non-manipulability of certain contextual conditions and causal mechanisms’ involved in, say, agriculture. ‘For any given socio-technological organisation of the labour process, some things can be altered but others…have to be taken as ‘given’ and adapted to as well as possible.’(Benton, p.61) We cannot coherently envisage this general fact as something that might be transcended by further ‘socio-technological developments’. The idea of human mastery over all nonhuman processes is ‘the purest idealism’ and to fall for it is ‘to court ecological catastrophe’ (Benton, p.63). That Marx was sometimes tempted down this ‘Promethean’ path is a problem. Benton’s emphasis of the ineliminable structure of eco-regulatory labour is a necessary corrective to change the focus from unqualified mastery of nature, to our ‘[c]apacity to bring technology itself, the mediation between human social relations and natural mechanisms under communal control…the distinctive hoped for ecological virtue of socialism.’(Benton, p.67) Not all of Marx’s writings on humanity’s relations to nature express a promethean fantasy. At times the 1844 Manuscripts envisage the development of wider aesthetic and ‘spiritual’ aspects of human/nature relations and an almost Romantic resolution of the ‘conflict’ between humanity and nature\textsuperscript{10}. This requires an eco-regulatory, rather than purely transformative, conception of the labour process, which in turn leaves space for the idea of a certain acceptance of estrangement from the nonhuman, rather than mastery and assimilation of it.

The normativity of this idea can be unpacked further with reference to the literature on extending ecological justice to nonhuman nature. For example, David Schlosberg (2007, pp.139-42) adapts Nancy Fraser’s status injury model of unjust inter-personal misrecognition into a recognitional component of his pluralistic account of ecological justice. Fraser’s model prioritises status injurious mal-recognition as domination rather than the psychological consequences of a felt lack of recognition. This

\footnote{See Marx (2007, e.g., p.102, p.105), Benton ( p.68).}
makes it potentially applicable beyond humanity without anthropomorphism: we might think of what it is to do nonhuman nature an *injustice* partly in terms of the injurious status ascribed to it (Schlosberg, pp.140f). Whilst not wishing to endorse the ‘Cartesian’ restriction of subjectivity to humanity, ‘unjust’ misrecognition of nonhuman entities and processes need not be contingent on its psychological consequences for them. Thus we might routinely fail to recognise nonhumanity adequately, where this isn’t a question of hurting its feelings, or undermining the sense nonhuman entities and processes have of their own worthiness to exist and develop in their own way. It is a matter of our ‘dominating’ them by not considering them except insofar as they are useful, or present an awkward obstacle to an otherwise unlimited promethean project. Such malrecognition might be implicit in thought and action and only occasionally stated explicitly. Tackling ‘ecological injustice’ in this sense apparently involves resisting the project of being fully at home in the world through overcoming all estrangement from the nonhuman.

*Alienation*

This also suggests a necessary relation between accepting estrangement from nonhuman nature and *alienation of* it in the sense of renunciation of ownership. I mean that we might ‘alienate’ nonhuman nature by rejecting the assumption that it should enter considerations of ownership and property rights *only* as something to be owned *for the sake of individual or collective human interests*. If estrangement from nonhuman nature is to be viewed positively as a ‘non-anthropocentric’, anti-domination commitment with something of the normative force of ecological justice, say, then so must a ‘letting go’ of purely anthropocentric conceptions of ownership over the nonhuman world. Traditional political philosophy, whether Lockean or Hegelian, for example, has just such a conception of ownership. Ownership is a key concept through which the human/nonhuman relation is mediated in political contexts, and is an idea that has been filled out with accounts of nonhuman ‘things’ penetrated by, ‘mixed with’, human labour and thereby ‘improved’ – imbued with human spirit and use value - and so brought within the human world. As such it has been the unqualifiedly anthropocentric agenda setting moment of much of the instrumentalization and domination of nature in political
thinking\textsuperscript{11}. At that moment there is no \textit{recognition} of the nonhuman as anything more than, say, a vehicle for \textit{interpersonal} recognition and so the realization of personality. In this context the idea of nature not used is the idea of nature \textit{unemployed}, ‘wasted’, awaiting completion through subservience to humanity. Again, negating this must be a matter of degree, a qualified good; some taking ownership for the sake of human interests is ‘basic’. For example, the practice of place seems inconceivable without some such taking ownership, whether private or collective. Alienation as a positive movement here is a matter of rejecting the assumption that the nonhuman is \textit{merely} something to be owned for the sake of human interests, a matter of a qualified release of the grip of anthropocentric possession. Running the idea of (property) alienation in this particular sense requires distinguishing the notion of relinquishment or renunciation of ownership from that of transfer of ownership (paradigmatically by selling). And, because it is concerned with what has not been produced by human action, it is better thought of on the model of recognising what is already ‘external’, rather than on the model of the externalization (\textit{entäusserung}) of human will. But clearly alienation of nonhuman nature, in this sense of a relinquishment of presumed blanket anthropocentrically-oriented ownership over it, is necessary to any attempt to resist the unqualified overcoming of estrangement from it. And vice versa: there is mutual entailment between these aspects of resistance to human domination of nature. Living with some estrangement from the nonhuman requires a revision of assumptions at the heart of traditional conceptions of ownership.

Equally clearly there is mutual entailment between alienation of the nonhuman and natural worlds. ‘Nature’ in the sense of the natural world encompasses both nonhuman world and humanized environment. To reject the assumption that the nonhuman is significant only as ownership material for human interests is to reject it with respect to the natural world too: insofar as recognition of nonhuman nature as more than a means to human ends enters into considerations of ownership, then so does such recognition of the natural world, simply in virtue of the nonhuman being part of the natural world.

\textsuperscript{11} I expand on this claim in more detail in Hailwood 2011a
Reification, Construction, Abstraction

Before going on to discuss estrangement from the natural world it will be helpful to consider some possible objections to what I’ve said so far. Can one really refer to abstract ideas of nonhuman nature and natural world without being guilty of simply describing abstract relations between reified social constructions? In relation to all three categories of the natural world, nonhuman nature and humanized environment, reification goes straight to the issue of constructionism: if they really encompass nothing more than human constructions, then taking the first two at face value as pertaining to given realities reifies the results of human agency, and so risks estranging us from our humanized surroundings and undermining our ability to take responsibility for them.

However, there are overwhelming conceptual and pragmatic grounds for thinking that ‘nonhuman nature’ and ‘natural world’ refer to more than human constructions. Running those concepts seems a necessary condition of the meaningful applicability of the concepts of human responsibility and anthropogenic causation. Owning up to our role in the world unfolding around us presupposes we have some grip on the idea of aspects of the world as not of our making. To regard the nonhuman as to some extent given in any adequate conception of human labour is to re-endorse Lewis’s explanation of the perennial sense of ‘nature’ as the nonhuman in terms of its practical importance, as well as to accept the message of Benton’s discussion of eco-regulatory labour and allow space for recognising nonhuman contribution to place.

It is hardly plausible that all obstacles to human labour and its appreciation are themselves entirely reducible to human constructions. For example, on the local and concrete level of looking out of the window, I have to report that my view of the spectacle of human ingenuity and embodiment of social labour that was Liverpool during the 2008 European Capital of Culture was for a time partially obscured by a large splat of bird droppings. Clearly that environmental occurrence was influenced in many ways by human activity and so was not a ‘pure natural given’; at the very least it could not have been on my window if there had been no window. But, absent some convincing story involving a robot bird, or fake bird droppings stuck on my window by pranksters, it would be unhelpful to say the droppings themselves, as opposed to our concept of bird droppings and evaluation of them in terms of aesthetics and hygiene, was a social
construction, no less than the window on which they were deposited. The culprit-bird – a gull - and its product were at least relatively ‘wild’. Certainly such wildness can be irritating: I have to decide whether to go to the trouble of cleaning the outside of a second, difficult to do from the inside, or to put up with an excremental view until the regular window cleaner is due. I might interpret the gull as a beautiful, marvellously complex evolved nonhuman organism, the occasional intrusion of whose waste products is a small price to pay for its presence, or as a nasty little flying excrement-generator. Either way, although perfectly familiar and obviously affected by human activity, it is relatively other. In fact, and to illustrate further some of my earlier argument, one may speak of being estranged from the bird and its produce: they intrude and ‘confront me as an alien presence’ that, although not all that powerful, frustrate my purposes by obscuring the spectacle of human genius outside my window. I might seek to overcome this entirely by cleaning the window and advocating the extermination of the gull and its kind. Or I could just live with that estrangement, live my life around it rather than seek to overcome it. Or, I might seek to overcome it to some extent: perhaps we would not mind so much having our view obscured by better coloured bird-droppings. In which case maybe we could intervene more in the relevant circuits of relative wildness: contrive to get the local birds to eat special food that colours their droppings. The estrangement would then be overcome to some extent as some human genius is mingled with the splat on my window. There could be reasons for and against each course: wiping out the birds altogether or causing their droppings to be more pleasing to look at, or simply putting up with them. If refusing domination of the nonhuman by living with some estrangement was the only consideration, the latter option would prevail.

It might be objected that I am ignoring how constructions such as ‘nature’ play an ideological role when presented as reified ahistorical abstractions rather than in dialectical and mediated terms. Like the ‘abstract man’ of moral philosophy rejected by Marx, the ideas of nonhuman nature and the natural world featured in my discussion might seem simply to be posited as unmediated external constraints on the historical unfolding of anthropological nature. In reality we encounter the world in concrete forms always already mediated by particular productive relations characterising a specific stage within that unfolding. I ignore this, for example in my claim that we should endorse some
(property) alienation of nonhuman nature, which simply posits abstract ‘nonhuman nature’ as something ahistorically to be ‘respected’ alongside, and as an attempted partial constraint over, the equally abstract ahistorical ‘possessive individual’ at the centre of traditional justifications of private property. This will do no more about the latter in concrete reality than Adam Smith’s abstract appeal to ‘moral sentiments’ as a qualification of the ‘propensity to truck and barter’.

The position I am advocating need not be interpreted like this. I mentioned earlier some entailment relations between different senses of alienation from nature: these ideas are not just arbitrarily juxtaposed – they are internally related. Moreover, although one wants to say that nonhuman nature is ‘outside history’ simply in virtue of being nonhuman, it is not obvious why this should be inconsistent with emphasising that it is encountered, *even as nonhuman nature*, in particular forms mediated by historically specific forms of production. From the ‘standpoint of human productive labour’ nonhuman nature *must* appear in the particular, concrete forms of those physical, chemical, topographical, biological features relevant to specific labour processes. To borrow again from Benton (1992, p.58), any human labour process has always to accommodate to something nonhuman, but the form that takes, and the extent to which it can be accommodated to, manipulated, or transformed into humanized environment, depends on the particular sociotechnological organisation involved as much as on ‘purely given nature’. ‘Natural limits’ to productive activity then are not just a function of ahistorical nature, but are relative to particular historical situations. The question is whether we can set our own limits ourselves and Benton’s main point is the anti-Promethean one that once a particular ‘limit’ has been overcome by technological change, new features of nonhuman nature always come into focus as conditions to be accommodated to.

The position I am sketching here tries to use ideas of alienation to capture environmental concerns, including ‘non-anthropocentric’ concerns to counter human chauvinism and mastery of nature. But it doesn’t involve positing ‘fixed’ ahistorical abstractions like intrinsic value or ‘natural’ moral blueprints. As far as nonhuman nature is concerned it is a matter of us relaxing our crushing grip now in these
sociotechnological conditions in this situation of eco-crisis, by accepting some estrangement from and some alienation of presumed ownership over nature.

So, reifying the result of human agency as ‘naturally given things’ is to be avoided, but so is letting this idea of reification run wild, as it were, so as to eliminate the idea of the ‘naturally given’ altogether, along with the forms of estrangement and alienation I am suggesting are qualified goods. Both kinds of avoidance seem essential to an alienation-based theory that both meets Evernden’s concern for ‘authenticity’ and non-domination, whilst also doing what Andrew Biro (2005, pp.8-9) suggests is required of it: Rather than remaining trapped in the ‘familiar antinomical binary: either nature is something to be passionately defended against capitalist depredations, or [reified] ‘nature’ can always be revealed as an ideological mask for oppressive social relations…what seems to be required…is a way of talking about nature that avoids both uncritical acceptance and paralysing scepticism – in other words, something that will allow us to talk about both nature and ‘nature’ at once. [This] obviously requires that we not champion one pole at the expense of the other, but … also eschew any effort at dialectical sublation that would consume both perspectives in order to generate a greater whole’.

But this need not require us to ignore internal relations between different senses of alienation.

**Estrangement from the Natural World**

I mentioned earlier that what often seems to be meant by ‘alienation from nature’ is a mistaken sense of humanity as not really part of a wider natural world; not one type of natural being amongst others similarly embedded within and utterly dependent upon a complexity of processes that gave rise to them, sustains them and which they in turn affect more or less profoundly. In terms of the distinctions drawn in this paper, this corresponds to ‘estrangement from the natural world’. Again this need not be just a cognitive error (‘Cartesian’ intellectual commitments, say), but also a matter of feeling and acting as if we are not part of nature, of engaging in social practices that ‘distance’ us from the natural world by pushing its nonhuman parts and our ecological
interrelationships with them to the background of attention. Resisting this tendency requires accepting some estrangement from nonhuman nature in the sense explained above. We might even understand estrangement from the natural world as often wrapped up with impatience with the estrangement involved in being confronted by what has not been fully humanized as an obstacle to satisfaction or to feeling fully at home (will someone please do something about those gulls? If only the earth’s climatic system had an easily operated thermostat, like my home central heating!). If estrangement from the natural world is to be overcome then so must such impatience. And if the drive to be fully at home through unqualified humanization of the world itself produces estrangement from the natural world, then overcoming estrangement from the natural world cannot be equated with being at home in it, whether that homeliness would be achieved through promethean control or through philosophical idealism. Overcoming estrangement from the natural world and overcoming (all) estrangement from the nonhuman exclude one another.

On the other hand, there is mutual entailment between overcoming estrangement from the humanized world and overcoming estrangement from the natural world. I have been taking it that ‘estrangement’ involves different things in the different contexts of the humanized world, the natural world or the nonhuman. Estrangement from nonhuman nature involves recognition of the otherness of the nonhuman, of our ‘separat[ion]’ from nature in the sense that nonhuman entities and processes do not embody human will and aren’t set up to serve human interests or ideals. This is the form of estrangement I am suggesting we need to live with, and that might be filled out with reference to non-anthropocentric, ‘anti-domination’ theories, such as theories of ecological justice (once it is filled out in such ways it entails alienation of nonhuman nature). Estrangement from the natural world is different. It involves misperception of our situation; a lack of appreciation of humanity’s embeddedness within and dependence upon a wider natural world. I am not suggesting we should live with that. Nor am I suggesting we live with surplus estrangement from the humanized environment, which involves a lack of homeliness, a breakdown in the ‘practice of place’ and lack of identification with

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12 My discussion here brackets the degree of estrangement from humanized environments entailed by recognition of human difference.
humanized surroundings. But the humanized world is within the natural world, not set apart from it, so overcoming estrangement from the natural world requires the practice of place be pursued in full appreciation of humanity’s embeddedness within wider ecological realities. And to be efficacious the practice informed by this wider ecological awareness has to be a self/collectively-controlled practice, whose environmental manifestation is of responsible will. Conversely, overcoming estrangement from the humanized world, precisely because it requires perception of that world as the homely embodiment of human will in order to ground stable identity and responsibility, requires progress in appreciating the wider ecological realities in which it is embedded. Otherwise it will be only accidentally sustainable and free from the radical loss of control following ecological catastrophe. Consequently, overcoming estrangement from the humanized world and the natural world rely upon each other as part of a project to overcome pernicious forms of estrangement from nature. Nevertheless, if I’m right, that same project requires qualifying the quest to be fully at home in the world, in that it requires some estrangement and alienation from and of the nonhuman.

A purely unqualified capitalist perspective by definition recognises nonhuman nature only as raw material for profitable transformation. The Marxian tradition is not entirely free from promethean tendencies either. Perhaps, as Benton and others wish, it can be focused more unambiguously on collective mastery and transformation of the terms of our interaction with nonhuman nature, as opposed to the mastery and transformation (elimination) of nonhuman nature itself. For the Marxian, estrangements are generally products of labour alienation. But it is not obvious whether this needs to be the case for all forms of estrangement, or only those forms that are to be overcome along with such alienation. If the latter then the Marxian analysis might be consistent with my claim that overcoming estrangement from the natural world requires overcoming excessive estrangement from the humanized world, without overcoming all estrangement from the nonhuman; if the former then my position is inconsistent with the Marxian analysis. A full treatment of this issue requires a detailed discussion of debates concerning the prospects for ‘greening’ Marxism and there is no space for that here. Either way, a concern to overcome estrangement from the natural world should not neglect reification, alienation and estrangement within the humanized world. For
example, preservation of nonhuman nature should not be pursued without sensitivity to environmental and other injustices suffered by other persons. A preparedness to live with some estrangement from nonhuman nature should not exclude concern to avoid the reification of unjust global social and economic relations as simply given things to be endured.

In conclusion then, my suggestion is that if alienation from nature is to function as a central critical concept within a political theory that seeks to capture a wide range of environmental concerns, this might be achieved by distinguishing different senses of nature as well as alienation; by thinking in terms of degrees rather than absolute dichotomies; and by not allowing the important thought that we must pay attention to humanized landscapes, without reifying them as naturally given, to modulate into treating all talk of ‘nature’ as a reifying expression of estrangement from the socially constructed world. The common assumption that alienation is always negative should be abandoned: alienation can play a positive critical role in environmental contexts by expressing, through the ideas of estrangement and relinquishing possession, the negation of domination. So I am suggesting that what is needed from a political theory employing alienation from nature as a critical concept is a nuanced approach aware of relationships between different senses of alienation from nature, some of which are at least qualified goods.

References


