

Simon Hailwood

*Alienation and Nature in Environmental Philosophy*

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Simon Hailwood's *Alienation and Nature* is a remarkably full and complex book – yet it has a very straightforward goal, and, ultimately, its main normative claim can be stated quite simply.

The goal is to explore the ways the ideas of alienation and estrangement can be used to analyse various dimensions of human beings' relationships with nature, in order to demonstrate that indeed those ideas are valuable conceptual tools for understanding and evaluating those relationships.

The normative claim is that, although in many contexts alienation and estrangement are to be overcome, in certain contexts they are appropriate, and are to be lived with. The contexts are distinguished by an only apparently simple distinction, to which I will return below, between 'landscapes', which human beings have transformed, or merely interpreted, to suit their own purposes, and 'nonhuman nature', where human transformation is absent or minimal, and which is not interpreted in terms relating to human beings. Hailwood argues persuasively that although, in the former context, the environment they have made, human beings ought to feel at home (though this must include a respect for the different social meanings of places constructed by different social groups), in the second context human beings ought to accept a degree of estrangement (and alienate their claims to ownership). In both contexts, note, the normative aim is the rejection of domination and instrumentalisation. Hailwood's key insight is that that normative aim must be pursued differently in the two contexts – in particular, that abandoning domination of nonhuman nature involves a kind of acceptance that humans are not, and should not imagine themselves as being, 'in their place' there.

The complexity comes in with Hailwood's painstaking attention to the intellectual heritage – recent and more historical – of deployments of alienation and estrangement in critiques of social life, as well as in the environmental context. And though environmental concerns motivate the book, and remain in the foreground throughout, Hailwood does a service for readers who, like me, are not well versed in the philosophical debates that focus on the richly normative conceptions of personhood associated with (forgive the simplification) the 'Continental tradition'. That is, in discussing how works of Hegel, Marx, the Frankfurt School and Merleau-Ponty, and contemporary scholarship addressed to those works, bears on environmental issues, Hailwood ably supplies the explanation needed to make his application of potentially unfamiliar ideas intelligible. His account of this complicated, often difficult, intellectual context in itself contributes to the book's value. But it also provides a background to his basic normative insight, revealing the nuance embedded in its apparently simple statement.

I am persuaded by Hailwood's broad assertion that the notions of alienation and estrangement have an important role in normative environmental critique, and I am sympathetic with the practical demand that humans 'back off' nature to a greater extent than at present. At the same time I am sceptical about the value of the sharp conceptual dichotomy on which he relies, between nonhuman nature and landscape.

I believe that a passage from Adam Smith is helpful here. In his *Lectures on Jurisprudence* Smith posits two distinct relationships human beings and non-human animals have with the environment.

The natural temperature of the air is altogether adapted to the condition of the other animals, who seem to feel very little inconvenience from the several vicissitudes of the weather. But even this soft and subtil(e) fluid is too severe for [Man's] tender and delicate frame . . . [so] he even forms to himself around his body a sort of new atmosphere, more soft, warm and comfortable than that of the common circumambient air. For this purpose he furnishes himself with cloaths [*sic*] which he wraps round his body, and builds himself a house to extend this atmosphere to some greater distance around him. These are contrivances which none of the other animals perceive the need of, but men can hardly subsist without them. (Lecture of 3/28/1763, pp. 10–11; Meek and Stein 1982, p. 334–5).

Non-human animals, that is, live in a kind of 'unestranged' immediacy with their environment. By contrast, human beings are estranged from their environment by their biology, in the direct sense that they cannot survive without transforming it. (Hailwood cites Neil Evernden's idea that humans are 'natural aliens', because they are not biologically adapted to any particular environment). Human beings can only be at home when they have modified the environment to meet their needs – i.e. by converting it from nonhuman nature to landscape.

The position Hailwood advocates, that human beings should live with some estrangement from nonhuman nature, is thus a demand that we acknowledge that the immediate, unestranged relationship with nature characteristic of nonhuman animals is not available to us (except perhaps through intimations given by Merleau-Ponty's 'primordial perception'). Actual human interactions with the environment (beyond the most minimal and disinterested) would be a stain on the purity of nonhuman nature. That purity, figured by the image of animals fully at home in their habitat, serves as a kind of normative ideal that should check human activity. Hailwood seems to advocate an environmental moral consciousness that acknowledges this ideal, in effect accepting an imperative to preserve the possibility of immediacy within the nonhuman realm by recognising that we must abstain from trespassing into it.

This normative ideal, of a pure nonhuman nature, is certainly appealing – but I do not endorse it. I'll explain why by returning to the Smith passage: Smith is decisively mistaken about nonhuman animals. Animals are typically not in a condition of immediate adaptation to their environment. Rather, like human beings, animals actively transform their surroundings – often quite substantially – to make them suited to their biological needs. This phenomenon, known as niche construction, is classically exemplified by beavers' construction of dams, but is quite widespread (Odling-Smee et al., 1996).

Thus, as Steven Vogel (who Hailwood discusses at length) suggests, it seems either arbitrary or trivial to single out *nonhuman* nature for normative elevation, as if it alone is authentic and morally worthy (Vogel, 2011). For on a planet constantly reshaped by the life forms that inhabit it to better meet their interests in survival, what makes a (human) landscape normatively inferior

to a landscape shaped by beavers? Potentially many things – but surely not the single fact that it was transformed by humans, and is therefore by definition no longer nonhuman nature.

Finally, though, the lesson I draw from niche construction is not simply the observation that, because human beings are natural beings, the transformations they effect in the environment are therefore natural too. Hailwood grants this point by placing landscape within the wider natural world – alongside, but conceptually distinct from, nonhuman nature. My conclusion is stronger, I think. For me, the fact that human beings engage in niche construction, far from setting them apart from nature, is instead specifically *how they are natural*. The capacity to niche construct, though elaborated by human social cooperation, is not itself a human product; it is as much a constituent of nonhuman nature as other fundamental natural processes which human beings did not bring to but rather find in the world. But then, the demand that human beings live with a measure of estrangement from nonhuman nature would require some estrangement from what makes them natural at all. This seems to echo a very traditional moral outlook, which associates morality with the transcendence of nature.

### *References*

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