
A FIRST ENCOUNTER:
FRENCH ENVIRONMENTAL
PHILOSOPHY FROM AN
ANGLO-AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT. The “French exception” could be many things—language purity, cultural assimilation of immigrants, federalism counterbalanced by labor unionism, popular intellectualism. The French exception in environmental philosophy is constituted by humanism and the replacement of ethics by politics. Anglo-American environmental ethics makes of local nature a moral patient. In the French humanistic politics of global nature, global nature is indeterminate. Science incompletely represents global nature in both senses of the word “represents.” As an object global, nature is under-determined by a science incapable of so wide a grasp. And as subject in law, science speaks on behalf of a mute and indifferent nature, while policies regarding nature as an agent of powerful effect are decided in the political arena.

KEY WORDS. French exception, ecology, environmentalism, French environmental philosophy, humanism, M. Serres, C. Larrère, nature, nature as political.

I first encountered French environmental philosophy when I became acquainted with Catherine Larrère in 1992 at an international conference in Brazil on the eve of the Earth Summit. The conference was titled “Ethics, university, and environment.” It was organized by Fernando J. R. da Rocha, then head of the Philosophy Department at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul in Porto Alegre. The participants were drawn from four continents—North and South America, Europe, and Australia. Larrère was one of two European participants, while the other was from Spain (Nicholás M. Sosa). As I write in July 2012, twenty years has elapsed since my first encounter with Larrère, as well as my first encounter with a distinctly French approach to environmental philosophy. The difference between the French approach to environmental philosophy that I then and there encountered in the person and work of

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Larrère (and through her, Michel Serres) and the Anglo-American approach, as it then existed in the early 1990s, was so stark as to be utterly mystifying to me. Anglophone environmental philosophy had emerged in the mid-1970s with the publication of three papers: “The shallow and the deep, long-range ecology movements: a summary,” by Arne Naess (1973); “Is there a need for a new, an environmental ethic?” by Richard Routley (1973); and “Is there an ecological ethic?,” by Holmes Rolston III (1975). Naess was Norwegian; Routley was Australian—both are now deceased—and Rolston is American. By 1979, a journal, *Environmental Ethics*, dedicated to the new field, had commenced publication, edited by Eugene C. Hargrove. It was then and there—Porto Alegre, 1992— from Larrère, that I first heard of the French Exception. By now, of course, there is more buzz about American exceptionalism—and we all know what that means. In any case, the French approach to environmental philosophy certainly appeared to be an exception to anything I was familiar with.

I wondered just what is this “French Exception?” Larrère, to her credit, allowed me freedom to wonder—by not providing me with a precise account of just what it was.

One possibility: the Académie Française’s attempt to keep French pure. To a native speaker of English, such a project seems as strange as it is futile—an exception indeed. English is perhaps the most promiscuous language in the world. It was born a bastard—of Germanic and French parentage—and ever since has welcomed foreign words and phrases (many of them from contemporary French, *merci beaucoup!*) with open arms.

Another possibility: ~culturalism and immigration. The US, Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, and many other liberal Western democracies welcomed (until recently) immigration and espouse a policy of multiculturalism. Immigrants are free to dress as they like, speak their native tongues, practice their religions, and so on. The French welcomed (until recently) immigrants, but espouse uniculturalism. Immigrants are strongly encouraged to learn to speak French and adopt French culture and values.

Yet another possibility: a strong, centralized, bureaucratic state, perpetually counterbalanced by strong unions and periodic paralyzing strikes. This political equipoise enables France to resist economic globalization and commitment to protecting its distinctive system of agriculture and thus protecting the provincial French way of life and landscape.

A further possibility: Only in France are intellectuals popular celebrities. Certainly that’s one French exception that is the envy of all of us American intellectuals, toiling away in total anonymity—happily, but far from the public eye. Where but in France is the café (Café de Flor) once frequented by a famous philosopher (Jean Paul Sartre) a tourist attraction?

After all this speculation, I was happy to discover Larrère's version of the French exception in her essay, "Libéralisme et Republicanisme: Y a-t-il une exception Française?" For Larrère (2000: 127), a specialist in political philosophy, "*l'exception se trouve dans la rapport, typiquement française, entre la Révolution et la République. C'est, en 1789, avec la Révolution française, que se inventerait un modèle republican, dont l'originalité reposerait sur deux caractéristiques: sa visée universelle et sa dimension égalitaire, ou démocratique*" ("The exception lies in the typically French accommodation between the Revolution and the Republic. It was in 1789 with the French Revolution that invented a republican model, the originality of which lay in two characteristics: universalism and equality or democracy").

The French exception that I discuss here is French environmental philosophy. In conversation and correspondence over the years, I learned from Larrère that the French philosophes who enjoyed celebrity in the United States—the Foucaults, the Derridas, the Baudrillards—were exceptions of yet another kind in France. They were not, by any means, in the mainstream of well-established, well-placed French academic philosophy. On the one hand, there were the Catholics and, on the other, the Marxists dominating the universities, according to Larrère. The former were parochial, in every sense of the word, and, upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, the latter had nothing viable left to think. Environmental philosophy was something fresh, new, and exciting to think in France. But of course, it must be thought in the French way. Larrère's approach to environmental philosophy is a leading example of the French exception about which I wish to comment.

Environmental philosophy first emerged in former colonies of the British Empire—in North America and Australia. It also, curiously, emerged in Norway. Among the first (and still among the best) were the aforementioned Australians Richard and Val Routley, (later Sylvan and Plumwood, respectively), the American Holmes Rolston III, and the Norwegian Arne Naess. (Sadly, all but Rolston are now dead.) While Norway seems a far cry from North America and Australia, the three regions share a common national mythology and Protestant religious heritage—that of an Edenic nature that was sullied and polluted by a sinful, fallen humanity. In America and Australia there was the myth of a continental "original condition" of wilderness (or *terra nullius*—empty land—as it is called in Australia). In Norway there were the pure, cold arctic and sub-arctic territories (much beloved and celebrated by Naess in his "Ecosophy T"). The indigenous inhabitants—the American Indians, the Australian Aborigines, the Sami—were either erased altogether by the pristine myth or portrayed as ecologically noble savages. Nature and nature's innocent and unfallen creatures were at grave risk of destruction and extinction by hordes of greedy industrialists and their consumerist clients. Environ-

mental philosophers would help to save nature and all natural beings, human and otherwise, by theorizing their intrinsic value. (In retrospect, I admit, it does seem a bit quixotic, but that's how environmental philosophy got started.)

With the help of historians, such as Roderick Nash (*Wilderness and the American Mind*) and Carolyn Merchant (*The Death of Nature*), environmental philosophers created a pantheon of precursors. Among them were three of Olympian status—Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold. Thoreau found spiritual solace and “higher laws” in nature. Muir wrote rapturous accounts of the “glories” of nature and was the first to plead for the rights of nature. Aldo Leopold ended his understated masterpiece, *A Sand County Almanac*, with an essay titled “The land ethic.”

The American story—inherited from Thoreau, Muir, and Leopold—was a dualistic one, a story of modern, mechanized “man,” over-running a fragile and vulnerable nature. The French knew of a very different story, one certainly that Naess would also have known, but one of which the Americans and Australians were completely ignorant. It was the story of Blut und Boden, blood and soil, as made up by the Nazis. One prominent feature of German National Socialism was a veneration of nature, complete with conservation projects, which would—and did—make Aldo Leopold (1935, 1936a, 1936b, 1936c, 1936d, 1936e) proud of his German heritage. (Leopold visited Germany on a forestry junket in 1935 and wrote enthusiastically of the *Naturschutz* conservation movement and the *Dauerwald* initiative in forestry—without so much as a disparaging word about the politics with which they were associated and in which they were embedded.) From a French point of view, environmental philosophy in the American-Australian-Norwegian mode was not only deeply ecological, it was also deeply troubling (Ferry 1992). The much vaunted holism of “The land ethic” by Leopold, with its emphasis on “the community concept” in ecology raised the specter of “ecofascism” (Zimmerman 1995). Historically at least, there was a very dark side to Deep Ecology.

Of course, by now, American and Australian environmental philosophers are aware of the troubling parallels between the contemporary American and Australian environmental movements and those of Germany in the 1930s. The first inkling we got of the dark side of Deep Ecology was *Ecology in the Twentieth Century: A History*, by Anna Bramwell (1989). I read it expecting an intellectual history of ecology, similar to Donald Worster's (1977) *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*. Instead, I found a very hostile political history of ecology. In the US, “ecology,” is the name of which, as a science, but in both the UK and Europe, in vernacular usage “ecology” is not as sharply distinguished, in the popular imaginary, from another word for environmentalism as it is in the US. (The British magazine *The Ecologist*, for example, has very little to do with the science

of ecology and few if any ecologists contribute to it.) Bramwell is British and her treatment of political ecology could be easily dismissed as the work of a crank—by those of us who might wish to preserve our innocence.

However, when one of our own, Michael Zimmerman (1994, 1995), drew out the parallels between Nazi environmental philosophy and Australian and American environmental philosophy, we could no longer ignore it. (Zimmerman had begun to have doubts about his extrapolation of an environmental philosophy from the work of Martin Heidegger, after Heidegger's Nazi sympathies and loyalties had been heralded, and thus he composed palinodes.) There is, we would protest, no necessary connection between racist nationalism and environmentalism. Moreover, I have defended the Leopold land ethic against the charge of ecofascism (Callicott, 1999). To be sure, there is, however, a contingent of American environmental philosophers (I am less familiar with the Australian scene) who do exhibit xenophobic nativism, if not racist nationalism, inveighing against the "brown scourge" invading the US from Mexico (Cafaro and Staples, 2009). And Ramachandra Guha (1989, 1998) has accused conservation biologists, inspired by Deep Ecology, of commandeering *Lebensraum* for biodiversity by systematically dispossessing and evicting disempowered locals in densely populated developing countries in Asia and Africa. In Guha's view, Deep Conservation Biology is a form of imperialism, driven by a secular missionary zeal, if not by a Wagnerian mythos.

There is another source of French antipathy toward anglophone environmental philosophy. From the eighteenth century through the twentieth, anglophone philosophy has exhibited a robust concern for ethics: David Hume (*Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*), Jeremy Bentham (*Principles of Morals and Legislation*), John Stuart Mill (*Utilitarianism*), G. E. Moore (*Principia Ethica*). By contrast francophone philosophy, from the eighteenth century through the twentieth, has been more concerned with politics than with ethics: Charles Louis Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (*L'esprit de lois*), Jean-Jacque Rousseau (*Du contrat social ou Principes du droit politique*), Alexis-Charles-Henri Clérel de Tocqueville (*De la démocratie en Amérique*). Anglophone environmental philosophy by now has become much more than environmental ethics—but it originated as environmental ethics and is still dominated by environmental ethics. Because ethics is not a robust area of francophone philosophy—neither now nor historically—environmental philosophy originating with and still dominated by environmental ethics is a bit alien from a French philosophical point of view.

A properly French environmental philosophy must then be no less a humanism than a properly French existentialism, if it is to keep the threat

of ecofascism at bay. And a properly French environmental philosophy must be cast in the philosophical sphere of politics and not ethics. As Larrère (1996: 117) bluntly stated, "From a French point of view, the putative ethical dimension of environmental problems is actually a political dimension." And sure enough, we got the first French exception in environmental philosophy with the publication of *Le contrat naturel* by Michel Serres (1990). As I recall, Serres was the announced French environmental philosopher at the Porto Alegre conference, but for reasons I do not recall, Larrère came instead. Perhaps by then Serres had lost interest in the subject.

From the vantage point of hindsight, the first French sortie into environmental philosophy, Serres' *Le contrat naturel* was both two decades behind Anglophone environmental philosophy and two decades ahead of it. Two decades behind, as the Anglophone tradition got started in the 1970s and *Le contrat naturel* was published in 1990. Two decades ahead because Serres was moved to venture into the *terra incognita* of environmental philosophy by the phenomenon of global climate change. With the single exception of Dale Jamieson, in 1992, American, Australian, and British environmental philosophers were still primarily concerned with local and regional environmental issues, with islands of wilderness, with "old growth forests," and with local and regional habitat for endangered species. Most American, Australian, and British environmental philosophers were autodidacts in ecology with its (literally) regional ontologies of biotic communities and ecosystems. Serres was not only thinking on a planetary scale, he vividly remarked on the unprecedented nature of globality for philosophy. It is my opinion that traditional Anglophone environmental ethics (such as the land ethic and my elaboration and defense of it) is incapable of just being "scaled up" so to philosophically engage the challenge of global climate change. We have to go back to square one and start all over from scratch if we are to meet that challenge. To do so we can turn first to Serres and to his intellectual descendants, Bruno Latour and Catherine Larrère, as points of departure. From them I have recently learned more than I thought I could back in 1992.

That being said, I return to 1992 on the eve of the (first) Earth Summit. Larrère's conference presentation began with an implicit critique of Anglophone environmental ethics, exposing one assumption on which it had been based and anticipating a fierce debate that was about to ensue focused on the idea of wilderness (Callicott and Nelson 1998). "There is no transcendent nature—she said—that we can recover. There is no pristine nature; there is only hybrid nature that has been shaped by natural and cultural forces" (Larrère 1996: 117). In his book titled, *The End of Nature*, published in 1989, Bill Mckibben had made a similar point, but in the form of an elegy, not in the form of a point of departure. In 1992, I had replied

to McKibben in a paper titled, "La Nature est Morte, Vive la Nature!" but still had not fully appreciated the extent to which the unprecedented spatial and temporal scales of global climate change would force environmental philosophy to be rethought from the ground up. For McKibben there once was—and not so long ago—a transcendent nature; and he entertained the hope that by some ethical miracle it could be recovered. Larrère's point was more radical than McKibben's: there never was a transcendent nature. From that point of departure, she then went on to build her own environmental philosophy on the foundation laid down by Serres in *Le contrat naturel*.

Not only does she anticipate the debunking of the wilderness myth that was soon to follow in anglophone environmental philosophy; Larrère anticipates the shift in focus from the local to the global that anglophone environmental philosophy is still struggling now, in the second decade of the third millennium. I repeat. Anglophone environmental philosophy, following Leopold, had been spatially scaled to local biotic communities, ecosystems, and landscapes. It was clear to Larrère, twenty years ago, as it was to Serres, that an adequate environmental philosophy must be of a planetary spatial scale: "We have passed from local liaisons to an ensemble of relations that link us globally to the whole world. We will call 'nature' this globalization of our relations with the world and 'contract' the relations we have with the globality of the world" (Larrère, 1996: 121).

The humanism of Larrère's environmental philosophy is adamant and radical, so much that it was shocking to another conference participant, Holmes Rolston III (1997), who was also a participant in the Porto Alegre pre-Rio conference. According to Larrère (1996: 122), "nature is but a certain state of science." Not only is this statement shocking to anglophone environmental philosophers such as Rolston, it is hardly intelligible to us. Surely nature existed before science existed, indeed before humanity existed. And isn't science the study of nature? And doesn't the object of scientific study exist independently of the study of it? Whatever it may mean, this statement is surely the very height of the "arrogance of humanism" (Ehrenfeld, 1978). I cannot imagine any philosopher, except a French philosopher, being so bold—and so exceptional. Larrère repeats this statement three times in her chapter, as if to rub our noses in it. As her essay proceeds, we learn that what might more modestly be meant by the provocative phrase "nature is but a certain state of science" is that what we believe nature to be is given us by science. More profoundly, it conveys implicitly that our source of the knowledge of nature, science, changes. Nature is but a certain state of science. Yesterday's nature (balanced, harmonious) is not the one of today (dynamic, disturbed, adrift) and, doubtless, today's nature will not be tomorrow's nature.

Ah, but there is more French exceptionalism to come. Science, according to Larrère, does not adequately express nature at a global scale, it does not capture global nature. “A global ecosystem... has not been—and perhaps cannot be—adequately described by science, at least not by modern science” (Larrère 1996: 122). Must we then conclude that at a global scale nature does not exist if “[n]ature is only the name given to a certain state of science”? (Larrère 1996: 122). Undaunted by the logic of her own definition of nature, Larrère (1996: 122), nevertheless, declares that “[a] global ecosystem exists...” Even then, if nature is only the name given to a certain state of science and a global ecosystem has not been—and perhaps cannot be—adequately described by science, then how can it exist? That is precisely her point: it is not fully actual. “A different discourse therefore has to identify something that does not completely exist... It cannot be done without bombast and all the rhetorical devices—which, as Larrère notes, characterizes the discourse of Serres—that give life to what is not fully real” (Larrère 1996: 123).

By far the most provocative, from the perspective of anglophone environmental philosophy—and thus the quintessence of the French exception in environmental philosophy—is the assertion, made by Serres (a view later to be vacated by Larrère), that nature is the new enemy of man. In the anglophone tradition of environmental philosophy, modern mechanized man is alienated from nature and dominant over it. And one task of anglophone environmental philosophy is to restore a lost harmony of man with a benign and fecund nature. That nature could somehow be malevolent and out to get man is regarded as a long discarded Medieval notion. Nature is, rather, Mother Nature; where the anglophone environmental philosopher longs to nestle once more into her nurturing bosom. To suppose that nature could be the enemy of man is, from the perspective of anglophone environmental philosophy, a damnable heresy. However, we find, apparently independently, the same heresy voiced by the father of the Gaia Hypothesis, James Lovelock. In a book provocatively titled *The Revenge of Gaia*, Lovelock (2006: 10 & 17) declares “the ineluctable forces of Gaia marshal against us. By changing the environment we have unknowingly declared war on Gaia ... Unless we see the Earth as a planet that behaves as if it were alive, at least to the extent of regulating its climate and its chemistry, we will lack the will to change our way of life and to understand that we have made it our greatest enemy.”

Now, with whom do we contract? Not family and friends, with whom we have relationships built on affection and implicit trust. If those with whom we enter into contracts are not always or even usually enemies, neither are they friends and family. We should not presume to contract with Mother Nature, but, just maybe, a contract with an indifferent nature is conceivable. Thus, following Serres, in her first venture into environ-

mental philosophy back in 1992, Larrère proposed an environmental philosophy in the form of *Le contrat naturel*.

Once she has boldly, aggressively, and thoroughly established the French exception in environmental philosophy—a distinct French approach to environmental philosophy—Larrère moves toward a convergence with some of the conclusions often reached by anglophone environmental philosophers. First, if nature is the enemy of man, it is an enemy of our own making: “It is indeed a threat to mankind, but now only as the result of human action, not because of its own natural power. Looked at this way, nature seems much more a victim than an enemy” (Larrère 1996: 130). While nature has always been indifferent toward man, it has not always been an existential threat. “Its formidable power—which once surpassed us in every way—has become an ensemble of fragile relations. Our relations with the earth have become fragile because we have saturated natural systems. In the face of this new fragility, ‘we need a collective ethic’” (Larrère 1996: 122). There is little in these statements with which a Routley, a Naess, a Rolston could disagree.

Larrère even goes so far as to flirt with the distinctly anglophone romance with the idea not of natural rights, but of the rights of nature, first broached by John Muir (1916) in the early twentieth century. (For a history see Nash 1989.) “Here we reach the point of suggesting that nature has rights, that it is not only an object of law (property), but a subject in law—that is, a party to law.” (For an anglophone development of this idea see Stone 1972 and Callicott and Grove-Fanning 2009.)

Just how would nature be a subject in law, a party to law? Nature is mute. It cannot speak for itself. To this problem, Larrère finds a solution in the history of political philosophy, a solution, which, incidentally, was also proposed by Stone (1972), without the benefit of the historical depth—and thus the gravitas and authority—that Larrère (1996: 132) brings to it:

Can we therefore push back the boundaries of the contract to include nature without making the very idea of the contract vacuous? For Hobbes, while you cannot make a contract with God, you can with his representatives. And in the chapter he devotes to “persons, authors, and personified beings,” Hobbes specifies that “there are few things which cannot be represented in a fictive way,” inanimate things, beings devoid of reason, false gods, the true God. Anything can be personified—that is, represented—and become a subject, because somebody can speak in its name.

Who speaks in the name of nature? According to Serres, science speaks for nature. But, as Larrère notes, the discourse of science, on the one hand, and that of policy and law, on the other, are different and mutually exclusive. The latter “is prescriptive and written in the imperative. Science is descriptive and written in the indicative; it seeks correspondence be-

tween its discourse and its object. Law is performative; it makes the act of speaking effective, efficacious. There can, therefore, be no question that one regime imposes its rules on the other... Each domain gets rid of what characterizes the other" (Larrère, 1996: 122).

Ultimately, however, Larrère's romantic flirtation with the rights of nature gives way to the *realpolitik* of nature. Because the discourse of science, on the one hand, and of politics, on the other, are what they are, the discourse of politics, not that of science, will determine the fate of beleaguered nature in a human-saturated and globalized world. Larrère (1996: 129) could well have been writing post-Rio+20/Copenhagen rather than pre-Rio when she penned these prescient words:

Who judges the danger? The question provides its own answer. Science records and does not judge. The decision, which is a judgment, is a matter of law and power. The matter is uncertain, but it is necessary to take a decision... Should we consider certain recent phenomena—such as successive years of drought in northern Europe—as abnormal, short-term fluctuations in a climate regime that will remain stable over the long haul? Or should we consider them to be bellwethers of anthropogenic global warming? Science provides the discourse to formulate the alternatives. But it is the responsibility of politics to make a judgment and take a decision.

The decision rests with the authorities in power. That is a banal observation, but the powers that be settle the relations between science and politics, the difference between commenting and interpreting. Commentary is descriptive; interpretation is a prelude to intervention. Judgment brought to be on a situation transforms that situation. Judgment consists of a decision that is not deducible from the facts. Judgment cuts through uncertainties, producing an interpretation of a situation—which transforms it. To give an account of the logic of political action is to give an account of how interpretation is at the same time intervention.

That's the French exception in environmental philosophy! A cold and sobering look at the *realpolitik* of the human relationship with nature. It is a welcome antidote and complement to the ethical idealism bordering on romanticism, characteristic of anglophone environmental philosophy. Here at the beginning of the third millennium we need them both. Above all, we need for all of philosophy, anglophone and francophone, to follow the lead of environmental philosophy—whether anglophone or francophone—and turn outward to the world rather than inward to the worn out, narrowly conceived, intra-disciplinary puzzles that preoccupied philosophy in the twentieth century. The twentieth century is over. The neo-Scholasticism of twentieth-century philosophy—typified by Anglo-American analytic philosophy and Continental phenomenology—should be relegated to the same dust bin of history wherein reposes the Absolute

Idealism of the nineteenth century. Larrère's work in environmental philosophy blazes a trail into the interdisciplinary twenty-first century that I hope all future philosophers will follow.

NOTE

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