DO WE NEED NATURE? GETTING TO GRIPS WITH A DOUBLY MISLEADING QUESTION
Warwick Fox

Warwick Fox questions the question set by Shell and The Economist *for their year 2003 essay prize.*

Shell and *The Economist* have been running an annual writing prize since 2000, which, as the website for the prize announces, 'has sought to encourage future thinking.' (www.shelleconomistprize.com). In 2003 the essay topic for this international competition was 'Do we need nature?' This topic, and the lure of a US$20,000 first prize together with significant second and third prizes, attracted close to 6,000 entries. Announcing the winners on their website in November 2003, the sponsors of the competition glossed their essay question as follows (and I quote in full):

> In 2003, the debate surrounding GM foods, the use of gene therapy and humanity's increasing reliance on science and technology became the focus for our essay writers. Entrants were asked to consider a number of issues including biodiversity, gene therapy, genetic modification, renewable energy and nuclear power.

Is that what you got from the essay question? At any rate, on the basis of this précis, at least, it appears that entrants were not being asked to consider the coherence of the question itself — or the assumptions that it implicitly relies upon. However, philosophers are, among other things, in the business of examining, and often attacking, the assumptions that lie buried under apparently open-minded questions, and that is precisely what I want to do with respect to the above question. (It is this role that can make philosophers such a liberating breath of fresh air or such a pesky nuisance, like an irritating gadfly, as Socrates put it, depending upon your social and intellectual point of view.)

As I see it, the question 'Do we need nature?' embodies

not one but two misleading assumptions. The first can be explained as follows. Even to ask the question 'Do we need nature?' is to illustrate a form of misunderstanding so deep and so bizarre that it beggars belief, yet it is a form of misunderstanding that lies at the root of the Western tradition, at least. We have for a long time told ourselves self-serving philosophical and religious stories about our place in the larger scheme of things. On the one hand, there is blind and dumb nature, including all non-human animals, and, on the other hand, there is ... dah-dah-dah dah-dah dah dahhh ... *us!!!* We are really pretty special. In the Western tradition, we have for long periods believed that we dwell at the centre of the universe; that humans and humans alone possess a soul and are created in the image of a God to whom they have a privileged personal relationship; that humans occupy the highest (and therefore most perfect) position in a scale of nature (Aristotle's influential *scala naturae*); that humans occupy the highest earthly position in a Great Chain of Being, which stretches all the way up to God (a view that permeated medieval thinking); and that humans are essentially and uniquely rational (a view that runs from the early Greek philosophers right through the greatest thinkers up to the present, yet one that is called into question by what we have learned from Freud and the panoply of developments in clinical psychiatry and psychology since Freud as well as from human cognitive psychology, comparative psychology, and cognitive ethology).

The upshot of this overwhelmingly dominant human-centred (or *anthropocentric*) tradition is that we have seen ourselves as standing outside the natural order, and further, seen nature as existing, or having been created, expressly *for* us to use as we see fit. As the Australian philosopher John Passmore argues in his classic study *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, throughout the history of Western philosophical thinking 'It is constantly assumed that whatever exists does so *only for the sake of* the rational' (my emphasis).[1]

Our best current understanding today, however, clearly suggests that we humans are as much part and parcel of the natural order as any other entity. We have our own special

characteristics of course (as do other animals), but (also like other animals) we are none the less a product of entirely natural evolutionary processes, and the rest of the natural world, in its complex ecological interactions, represents the context that sustains us. This understanding means that if you were, mentally, to take away all *natural* things, then not only would you be taking away those things that *sustain* us, you would also be subtracting *us* from the picture itself, precisely because we *are* part and parcel of nature.

Now we can see the deeply confused and confusing nature of the question 'Do we need nature?' — particularly when it is asked in a contemporary context, as is the case here. For to ask this question is tantamount to asking, among other things, 'Do you need *yourself*?' (This follows because, to repeat, we are part and parcel of nature.) How do you even begin to answer a question like this? The question is gram- matically correct, yet something seems to have gone deeply wrong in the mind of the person who has asked it. *Do* you need yourself? What does a question like that *mean*? I might need other people and other things, but what does it mean to 'need' myself? What would it mean if *I* didn't 'need' *myself*? Perhaps the most charitable construction we can put on such a question, in the spirit of attempting to make sense of it, is that it is a bizarre way of asking whether I want to live or commit suicide. Well, so it is when we ask the question 'Do we need nature?'

'OK, OK,' I hear you say, 'point taken, but it's *obvious* that the question isn't meant that way. The word 'nature' is obvi- ously being used in the *conventional* way to refer to the *rest* of the world, that is, to the *non*-human world, the world of spontaneously self-organizing and self-sustaining 'stuff' that surrounds us as opposed to humankind and the artefacts that we ourselves create. What the question clearly *means* is: 'Do we need *non*-human nature?'

But that's just the point at issue isn't it?: that our 'con- ventional' understanding of the word *nature* to 'really mean' *non-human nature* both illustrates and systematically rein- forces our deeply ingrained blind spot with respect to seeing

ourselves *as* part of nature. Even so, I am perfectly happy to accept the above reformulation of the question — that is, 'Do we need *non*-human nature?' — (and then get stuck into the limitations imposed by *that* question), but, in turn, I think it is only fair that you accept how far you have shifted your ground in rephrasing the question in this way. The first form of the question clearly implies that we are somehow *not* part of nature, or else we find ourselves asking the bizarre question I raised above: 'Do we need ourselves?' However, the second form of the question clearly implies that we *are* part of nature, and that the focus of our inquiry is upon whether and to what extent, in this technologically dazzling age, we really do need the non-human part of nature, which is to say the *rest of the world* besides ourselves and our creations. In moving from the first formulation of the question to the second, far more precise one, you have in fact (merely!) *shifted your whole world-view*; you have shifted from a world-view in which, whether consciously or otherwise, you saw humans as *apart from* nature to one in which you see humans as *a part of* nature. This is no small thing, and it reflects the painfully slow shift in world-view that we are experiencing as a culture from the dominant human-centred tradition that has informed the West since at least the time of the Greeks to the more ecologically savvy world-view that has, for sound empirically based reasons, been developing since Darwin.

Yet even this second, more precise understanding of the question embodies crippling limitations in terms of the narrow range of answers it encourages. For all its apparent invitation to open-minded thinking, its apparent ecological awareness, or its hip post-modern appeal, the question 'Do we need non-human nature?' explicitly defines a framework of thinking about non-human nature that is bounded in terms of our *need* for it. Well, of course we need it, and in a great many respects. For a start, we need the raw stuffs of non-human nature — 'natural resources' — if only to *physically transform* them in various ways in order to satisfy our equally various needs and desires. Thus, we farm, dam, mine, log, pulp, and slaughter various bits of non-human nature in order to provide

us with food, energy, shelter, clothing, transport, and so on. This sort of physical transformation of the non-human world — where non-human nature is valued primarily in terms of what we can turn it into (especially the ultimate value of money) — can assume either an aggressive, and increasingly unacceptable, form or a milder, increasingly endorsed form. The aggressive form of physically transforming non-human nature can be referred to as the *unrestrained exploitation* approach to the non-human world; its milder, and infinitely saner, form, in which we prudently attempt to balance the development of natural resources with their conservation (so that we don't run out — or choke on our own wastes), can be referred to as the *resource conservation and development* approach or, as it is more commonly known these days, the *sustainable development* approach.

But we also need nature in more benign ways too, in ways that require us to *preserve* it pretty much as it is rather than physically transform it. This gives us the *resource preservation* approach. The arguments for this approach come in many and varied forms. For example, non-human nature, or various aspects of it, should be preserved because: it provides us with all manner of life supporting 'free goods and services', such as fresh air and clean water; aspects of it ('indicator species') provide us with 'early warning systems' or 'barometers' in regard to the health *of* our ecological life support systems (much like the canaries that miners would take into the mines to warn them of gas leaks); aspects of it provide us with 'silos' of genetic diversity for use in medicine and agriculture; aspects of it are especially important for scientific study (e.g., of our evolutionary origins); parts of it are great for recreation; we find parts of it very beautiful; parts of it inspire religious awe in us; aspects of it have special symbolic significance for us (e.g., certain species effectively become national symbols, others are symbolic of things we cherish, like freedom, and so on); and some commentators even argue that contact with wild places — which constituted the context of most of our evolutionary development — is essential for us in order to grow into psychologically healthy (or less neurotic) human beings.

Building on independent work by the Australian philosopher William Godfrey-Smith (now William Grey) and myself, we can label these various arguments as the 'life-support system', 'early warning system', 'silo', 'laboratory', 'gymnasium', 'art gallery', 'cathedral', 'symbolic value', and 'psycho-developmental' arguments respectively.[2]

But are these human-needs-based or *use value* arguments to define the *limits* of non-human nature's value? If, for example, we were to be bullish about the promises of technology and argue towards the conclusion that, with biotechnology, nanotechnology, and who-knows-what-other-sort-of-technology around the corner, it's entirely possible that we will *not* 'need' non-human nature, what then? Would a negative answer to the question 'Do we need non-human nature?' thereby imply that it was *worthless*, and that we would therefore be free to dispense with it simply on the basis that it had outlived its *usefulness*?

You can see, then, that my argument with the question that I have been interrogating here is twofold. First, the original question buys into and reinforces the false assumption that we are not part of nature. Second, even on a corrected understanding (let alone an uncorrected one), it turns out that this superficially provocative question confines our thinking within severely human-centred limits, because it encourages us to think of non-human nature's value purely in terms of its usefulness to us. Harking back to my opening paragraph, I ask you: Is this the shape that 'future thinking' should be encouraged to take? Even in an ecologically savvy age, it seems that traditional, anthropocentric forms of thinking die hard.

We badly need more adequate ways of thinking about our relationship with the non-human world. Even if we *could* live in technologically sustained bubbles, even if we *wanted* to, even if we didn't 'need' non-human nature, it would surely still be the case that something of great value is lost when the biological diversity of this planet is lost, whether we happened to miss it or not. Not all value is referable back to humans (or their gods). Some things just seem to have intrinsic features that make them readily *able* to be *valued*, features that lend themselves to

valuation. They just happen to be sources of value, regardless of whether or not any conscious being happens to be around to value them. We refer to such things as being *intrinsically valuable*. I put it to you that the glorious *responsive cohesion* that exists between the myriad elements of this planet's biodiversity — that is to say, the countless ways in which the myriad entities that constitute our planetary biodiversity are responsive to each other so as to constitute a coherent, life sustaining biosphere — is a case in point.[3]

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Notes

[1] John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1980), p. 15.

[2] William Godfrey-Smith, 'The Value of Wilderness', *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 1, no. 4 (1979), pp. 309-319; Warwick Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism* (The State University of New York Press: Albany NY, 1995, and Totnes, Devon: Green Books, 1995), Ch. 6.

[3] For more on the idea of *responsive cohesion* and its fundamental value, see Warwick Fox, 'Towards an Ethics (or at Least a Value Theory) of the Built Environment', in Warwick Fox, ed., *Ethics and the Built Environment* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 207-21.