

PARTICULARISM AND THE *POLITICS OF NATURE*

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By

BLAIR PERUNIAK, B.A. (Hon.)

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AUTHOR: Blair Peruniak, B.A. Honours (Lethbridge University)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. Elisabeth Gedge

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Abstract

This thesis is an attempt to offer an account of the practical ethics of Bruno Latour's political ecology based on Jonathan Dancy's recent work on ethical particularism with the aim of demonstrating the possibility of their entering into a fruitful alliance. I argue that Dancy's particularism offers Latour a defensible (though not uncontroversial) position through which to anticipate, and respond to, various concerns arising from the latter's attempts to minimize the role of principles in ecological-moral deliberation. In return, Latour's ecology encourages us to consider the possibility of a particularist ecological ethic while allowing us to see what is most important about particularism in the context of pressing matters of public concern.

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Introduction

This thesis is an attempt to offer an account of the practical ethics of Bruno Latour's *Politics of Nature*¹ based on Jonathan Dancy's recent work on ethical particularism² with the aim of demonstrating the possibility of their entering into a fruitful alliance. The aspect of practical ethics I investigate is the role played by reasons in ecological moral deliberation. Despite widespread disagreement about the normative role of reasons and competing theories about how reasons behave, very little has been said about the nature of reasons in ecological theory. No one, to my knowledge, has given any thought to how particularism might contribute to our understanding of moral deliberation on pressing ecological issues.

My investigation is prompted by an apparent convergence between Dancy and Latour on the basic meta-ethical question of whether moral deliberation is essentially principle-based. For the most part, ecological ethics has been an attempt to formulate and apply moral principles to ecological issues (Des Jardins 2001; Elliot 2003; Minter, *et al.*

¹ Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Catherine Porter, *Trans.* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004). To date, very little has been said about the ethical dimensions of Latour's ecology. For one exception (which is more expository than critical), see Miriam Fraser, "The Ethics of Reality and Virtual Reality: Latour, Facts and Values," (*History of Human Sciences*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2007), 45-72. Although Latour claims (2004: 252n4) that his *Politics* presupposes no knowledge of his previous work I have found it useful at times to draw from his *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993) which, incidentally, can be read as a preface to the former.

² Jonathan Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Dancy has been working on ideas about moral particularism, including the theory of reasons, since the early 80's. His views, along with other prominent particularists, are influenced by the work of John McDowell. For the purposes of this thesis, I also draw from Dancy's *Moral Reasons* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1993).

2004). By contrast, Latour and Dancy argue that appealing to moral principles is neither necessary nor is it a particularly prudent approach within their respective realms of moral deliberation.³

According to Latour, principles ‘short-circuit’ deliberative practices by defining or attempting to define ahead of time the relevance of the features and entities such practices are designed to investigate (Latour 2004: 167, 211). Moreover, principle-based ecologies rely on a dubious metaphysical distinction between humans and nature which has tended to restrict the discussion of the relevance of ecological features and considerations to the question of how those features serve as sources or loci of intrinsic value. As Ben Minter points out:

Many of the leading contributors to nonanthropocentric environmental ethics over the past several decades have taken what might be referred to as a “principle-ist” approach⁴ to their subject, in which specific environmental policy goals and management actions are thought to be deduced from a small number of previously articulated general moral principles. The identification and justification of these general principles, which commonly revolve around the obligation to promote nature’s “intrinsic value,” is consequently viewed...as the primary mission of environmental ethics as a branch of applied philosophy.⁵

³ There is a fair amount of overlap here since Dancy is concerned with practical ethics in general and the ethical implications for Latour’s political ecology covers all humans and nonhumans.

⁴ It is important to emphasize that Minter is using the term ‘principle-ist’ in a restricted sense to mean universal principles established in advance of an empirical investigation into particular cases. His own approach to ecological deliberation involves the use of principles which bear a strong resemblance to *prima facie* principles. I examine his position more closely in chapter two. The point here is that given a slightly broader conception, the term ‘principle-ist’ could be applied to most ecological theories, including Minter’s.

⁵ Ben Minter, *et al.*, “Environmental Ethics Beyond Principle? The Case for Pragmatic Contextualism,” (*Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* Vol. 17, No. 2, 2004), 131.

As an alternative, Latour urges us to abandon deliberative approaches to ecological issues that rely on general principles and, instead, adopt a form of deliberation that allows us to discern the moral relevance of features and entities ‘without preliminary conditions’ (2004: 167). Moral deliberation, he says, must become thoroughly ‘experimental’ where experimentation means “instrument-based, rare, difficult to reproduce, [and] always contested...” (Latour 2004: 238). However, by denying deliberators recourse to basic moral principles and by making no move to align himself with any specific ethical theory, Latour has left the ethical dimensions of his ‘experimental ecology’ without a clear reference point and, thus, in desperate need of clarification. In my final analysis, I aim to show how Latour’s experimental deliberation can be understood through the lens of ethical particularism.

At base, particularism is the claim that *moral thought, moral judgment, and the possibility of moral distinctions in no way depends on the provision of a finite set of moral principles* (Dancy 2004: 7).⁶ I follow Timothy Chappell, however, in opting for a ‘non-literal’ interpretation of this thesis (since, taken literally, it is uncontentionally true—

⁶ The principles that the particularist alleges we can do without come in two basic forms. First, there are absolute principles which stipulate that all acts of a certain kind are deemed wrong or right. Aldo Leopold’s influential land ethic takes this basic form: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (Leopold [1949] 1966: 262). The second type of principle are contributory. These purport to tell us that certain features contribute to the overall wrongness or rightness of an act without telling us whether the act is actually wrong or right. It is possible that an act may violate one or several contributory principles without being overall right or wrong. So the point of deliberation, under the contributory model, is to determine how the principles ‘balance out’, so to speak. See Jonathan Dancy (2004: 15-17) as well as his [2001] Revised, 2009. “Moral Particularism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

no one claims that the *possibility* of moral thought depends on principles—and, thus, uninteresting).⁷ For our purposes, then, the initial appeal of a particularist ethic is drawn from Dancy’s following characterization:

Particularists think that moral judgment can get along perfectly well without any appeal to principles, indeed that there is no essential link between being a full moral agent and having principles...and that the imposition of principles on an area that doesn’t need them is likely to lead to some sort of distortion (Dancy 2004: 1-2).

According to Dancy (2004: 15), the error of principle-based reasoning traces to the theory of reasons where, crucially, support for principles hinges on the assumption that reasons behave atomistically. Atomism states that “a feature that is a reason in one case must remain a reason, and retain the same polarity [e.g., as a right- or wrong-making feature], in any other” (2004: 7, 74). On this account, reasons are *general* reasons and their invariance provides a basis on which to describe and reference moral principles. Particularists (in Dancy’s view) are opposed to this understanding of moral reasons; instead, they opt for a holistic account of reason behaviour. According to holism, “a feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another” (2004: 73). As Dancy puts it, “For the particularist, it is going to be variability all the way down” (Dancy, 2004: 10) and it is this latter understanding of reason behaviour that underlies the particularist’s rejection of principled approaches to ethics:

If moral reasons...function holistically, it cannot be the case that the possibility of such reasons rests on the existence of principles that specify morally relevant

⁷ Timothy Chappell, 2005. Review of *Ethics Without Principles* by Jonathan Dancy (2004). *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*: 7.

features as functioning atomistically. A principle-based approach to ethics is inconsistent with the holism of reasons. (Dancy 2004: 77)⁸

Strictly speaking, particularism is a doctrine in meta-ethics, so it is unclear whether it has anything substantive to offer in the way of practical moral guidance on issues concerning human-nonhuman relationships.⁹ This point—or worry—is amplified by the fact that the scenarios devised to highlight the particularist’s agenda are seldom, if ever, motivated by broader social issues. As David Bakhurst points out, particularists have been content to focus almost exclusively on problems of private morality, “a phenomenon that intensifies the suspicion that particularism’s contempt for principles leaves it with nothing to say about public policy and the law, and that this is a fatal ineptness.”¹⁰ It is my contention, however, that particularism does have implications for understanding ecological policy as a guide to action some of which are echoed in Kristin Shrader-Frechette’s case-studies approach to applied ecology.¹¹

⁸ Dancy goes on to point out that holism does not establish that moral principles are impossible. It is theoretically possible to have a set of principles (all of which are holistic in the sense of specifying a finite list of defeasibility conditions) which account for all moral reasons. Dancy thinks that it would be a ‘cosmic accident’ if morality could be captured in such a way; “There is no need for things to be so, and therefore there is nothing for principles to do.” (2004: 81-82).

⁹ John O’Neill (2003: 164) has pointed out that the relevance of meta-ethical considerations to substantive ecological issues has to do with the fact that “where the relationship of humans to a non-human world is concerned, the pull of some form of realism about values has seemed to be particularly strong.”

¹⁰ David Bakhurst “Pragmatism and Ethical Particularism,” in *New Pragmatists*, Cheryl Misak, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 138.

¹¹ Kristin Shrader-Frechette, “Practical Ecology and Foundations for Environmental Ethics,” *The Journal of Philosophy* (Vol. 92, No.12, 1995), 621-635 and Kristin Shrader-Frechette and Earl D. McCoy, “Applied Ecology and the Logic of Case Studies,” (*Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 61, No. 2, 1994), 228-249.

Most important, the possibility of a Latourian-Particularist alliance raises the question of whether a finite set of moral principles is at all necessary for—or best serves—moral deliberation on ecological issues: Can political ecology articulate, and institute, a practicable normative relationship between humans and nonhumans in the absence of general moral principles? My aim is not to give a definitive answer to this question, but, rather, to show that it should be taken more seriously by ecological ethicists. As Dancy says, “Particularism claims that generalism is the cause of many bad moral decisions made in the ill-judged and unnecessary attempt to fit what we are to say here to what we have said on another occasion” (1993: 64). Given our current concerns about irreversible harms and widespread ecological collapse it may be the case that any reliance on general moral principles is a dangerous pre-commitment strategy.

My discussion is divided into three parts. In chapter one, I contrast the metaphysical and deliberative assumptions of standard, principle-based ecologies with those of Latour’s non-principled ecology. I argue that while principle-based ecologies rely on a conception of nature which presupposes that the features of humans and nonhumans operate as invariant moral reasons, Latour’s ecology is thoroughly incompatible with an atomistic conception of nature. I demonstrate this incompatibility by explaining the metaphysical and moral foundations of Latour’s “experimental” form of ecological deliberation. In chapter two, I consider various criticisms directed against the possibility of an ecological ethic without principles and I reject two alternative approaches to moral deliberation suggested by prominent ecological ethicists. In the final chapter, I employ a particularist theory of reason behaviour in support of Latour’s

experimental deliberation. I argue that Dancy's particularism offers Latour a defensible (though not uncontroversial) position through which to anticipate, and respond to, various concerns arising from the latter's attempts to minimize the role of principles in ecological-moral deliberation. In return, Latour's ecology provides particularism with an opportunity to overcome its 'fatal ineptness'—its relative silence on pressing matters of public moral concern.

Chapter I. Ecology and Reasons

1.1 Atomism In Ecology

In his *Ethics Without Ontology* (2004) Hilary Putnam noted that “[e]thicists have long insisted that our duties are *knowable* by us, and that, indeed, if they were not they could not be our duties.”¹² Most ecological moral theorists suggest that knowledge of duties depends on our ability to draw distinctions in order to establish clear moral categories on the basis of which we can articulate general principles or norms of conduct. However, insofar as knowing our duties means knowing *to whom* (to which particular subject or class of subjects) our duties are owed, ethicists have tended to presuppose that we are capable of distinguishing between those within the moral fold and those beyond it. The assumption here is that there *are* things beyond moral consideration and that certain contextual features can be discounted from our moral deliberations. As concerns practical deliberation this is no doubt true, but it is a separate claim (which requires an argument) to suggest that this can be done in some sort of *a priori* manner. Thus, it is still a question whether a definitive pattern of exclusion emerges that could allow us to reference principles as a matter of justifying certain courses of action.¹³

In order to formulate principles, it is important that a feature that counts as a reason in favour of action in one context be able to serve as a precedent for other, similar contexts in which that feature is a reason. The point here is that appealing to general

¹² Hilary Putnam, *Ethics Without Ontology*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 124-125.

¹³ Here we are considering moral reasoning as a species of practical reasoning in the sense of guiding conduct and justifying commitments.

principles presupposes that entities (as ‘bundles of features’) which operate as reasons are essentially *stable*—that morally relevant features will always ‘behave’ in a specific way—i.e., as universally right- or wrong-making features and, therefore, as reasons either in favour of, or against, various courses of action.¹⁴ Crucially, the assumption that links the prospects of defining our duties to a capacity for discerning morally relevant features is the idea that those features are essentially invariant.

To be sure, (English-speaking) ecological ethicists have generated a rich array of positions and alternatives. Despite this variety, however, there is an underlying consensus that, insofar as they function as moral reasons, humans and nonhumans pose no real difficulties in terms of their essential moral identities (i.e., as means or ends).¹⁵ This is not to say that ecologists agree on which entities should serve as means for other, intrinsically valuable entities. Rather, as Kerry Whiteside observes, “...many green thinkers regard the locus of value, not the identity of humanity or nature, as what is most problematic for environmental ethics” (2002: 59).

North American ecologists have largely been preoccupied with the search for an environmental ethic based on an alleged Nature/Human dualism which presupposes what is most essential about humans and nonhumans and, hence, largely determines how the bearers of value fit our conception of principles and duties. The N/H bifurcation, crystallized in the Modern naturalist philosophies of Descartes and Rousseau, defines

¹⁴ These assumptions are mutually restrictive since whether a certain feature counts as universally right- or wrong-making depends, first of all, on whether it has been deemed morally relevant.

¹⁵ According to Latour, there is a widespread assumption among ecologists that in order to ground ethical claims we need a robust ecological metaphysics which describes the essence of the entities and features (1998: 225; 2004: 155-156).

human essence not as the opposite of nature, but *in opposition* to nature.¹⁶ For Descartes, human nature is the capacity to dominate and possess nature; for Rousseau, it is our ability to escape domination by nature; that is, to escape the conditions imposed on us by our environment.¹⁷ Curiously, despite environmental ethicists' near unanimous denouncement of Cartesian dualism, the anthropocentric-nonanthropocentric polarization of North American ecology leaves it unclear as to whether contemporary environmental ethicists have actually abandoned Descartes' (or Rousseau's) deeper assumptions about nature-human relationships.

Arguably, attempts at extending the boundaries of moral consideration to entities arrogantly excluded by, or dangerously unaccounted for in, ethical-political theory have failed to challenge the assumption that humans and nature possess pure and irreducibly distinct essences. Furthermore, the polarization of ecological discourse into anthropocentric and nonanthropocentric rubrics seems only to reinforce the general

¹⁶ By contrast, “[t]he Greek view of nature as an intelligent organism was based on an analogy...between the world of nature and the individual human being, who begins by finding certain characteristics in himself as an individual, and goes on to think of nature as possessed of similar characteristics.” R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945), 8. Latour would argue that the dualist paradigm is much older than Descartes which is not to say that the Ancient Greek and ‘Modern’ conceptions of nature are identical.

¹⁷ *The Philosophical Works of Descartes Vol. 1*. E. Haldane and G. Ross *Trans.* (New York: Dover Press, 1955), 119 and J. J. Rousseau’s “A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality,” in Jean-Jacque Rousseau *The Social Contract and Discourses*. G.D.H Cole *Trans.* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1973), 54. Compare with Max Scheler: “that the nature of man, or that which may be called his unique place in nature...[is] a principle opposed to life as such, even to life in man...the essential characteristic of the [human] being, regardless of its psychological make-up, is its existential liberation from the organic world—its freedom and detachability from the bondage and pressure of life, from its dependence upon all that belongs to life, including its own drive-motivated intelligence.” Max Scheler, *Man’s Place in Nature*, Hans Myerhoff *Trans.* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1971), 36-37.

distinction between humans and nonhumans by proffering a clear, yet parochial, framework for generating and interpreting political and jurisprudential responses to ecological concerns. The declaration of principles on human rights and the environment (1994), driven by the now widespread understanding that ‘human rights violations lead to environmental degradation and vice versa’¹⁸ is easily cast as ‘enlightened’ anthropocentrism according to which, harming nonhumans is ‘wrong’ or ‘bad’ ultimately insofar as it leads to human suffering. In contrast, Ecuador’s recent constitutional reforms which grant ecosystems and ‘natural’ communities constitutional rights in recognition of their “unalienable right to exist, flourish and evolve”¹⁹ is radically ecocentric.²⁰ Thus, insofar as ecological concerns are framed along this N/H division, there is a significant continuity between Modernist intuitions and those expressed in contemporary ecological debates.

In presupposing that humans and nonhumans have stable and discrete essences the N/H dualism acts to legitimize the notion of an invariant reason. This allows a wide range of general value claims about the potential bearers of value to fit our conception of principles and duties. If humans and nonhumans have discrete essences then nothing

¹⁸ University of Minnesota Human Rights Library. “Draft Principles On Human Rights And The Environment,” E/CN.4/Sub.2/1994/9, Annex I (1994).URL: <<http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instree/1994-dec.htm>> Retrieved, Oct 1, 2008.

¹⁹ Comier, Zoe. 2008. In Ecuador, rivers, plants, and animals have rights. *The Globe and Mail*. Oct. 11.

²⁰ It remains to be seen whether such reforms can be realized in practice given Ecuador’s equal, and, thus, conflicting commitment to human rights. In fact, it has been suggested that Ecuador’s ecocentric policies may have certain legal advantages. Although humans are responsible for ‘exercising’ rights ‘on behalf of’ natural entities (such that the basis of any legal claim need not refer to harms against humans) there is a thin, but audible line between a mouthpiece and a ventriloquist’s dummy.

should prevent the move from an observation about how an entity (i.e., a ‘bundle of essential features’) contributes as a right- or wrong-making feature in one situation to the assertion that those same features will make the same contribution wherever they occur.

It is an important question, however, to what extent our metaphysical commitments ought to influence our approaches to moral judgement. Hilary Putnam (2002: 9) argues that, with respect to moral matters of concern, we can—and ought to—abandon commitments to dualisms without giving up on useful distinctions. For Putnam (as for Dewey), a dualism is always a *metaphysical* dualism. And it is an important feature of metaphysical claims that they be “omnipresent...conceived of as something that could be applied to absolutely *every* meaningful judgment in absolutely *every* area.” (Putnam 2002: 10). In contrast, “...ordinary distinctions have ranges of application, and we are not surprised if they do not always apply [to all such judgments]” (2002: 11).

According to Putnam, the problem with dualisms is that they are often accompanied by dubious ‘inflationary’ claims about “...the existence of things unknown to ordinary sense perception and to common sense, indeed things that are invisible...” (2004: 17).²¹ Inflationary claims are dangerous in that they threaten to commit us to a version of ethical monism “in the sense that one reduces (or imagines one has reduced) all ethical problems, indeed all value problems, to just *one* issue, the presence or absence of this single super thing...” (2004: 19). Concerns about ethical monism are especially

²¹ Putnam’s (2004: 15-32) examples of invisible ‘super things’ include Plato’s ‘ideas’ and G. E. Moore’s conception of “the good”.

relevant to ecological ethics where it is commonly acknowledged that “the central, axiological problem...[is] the problem of intrinsic value in nature.”^{22, 23}

Identifying the ‘true’ locus of value (in ‘nature’ or in ‘society’) and thus the ‘proper’ subjects of moral consideration ‘once and for all’ is, of course, extremely attractive. Most important, it affords two crucial judgements that are necessary for determining our duties. First, it makes possible the identification of those to whom we have duties by virtue of the presence or absence of key features. Second, it allows us to rank entities on the basis of their relationship to the bearers of intrinsic value. These points are related. Obviously we cannot hope to articulate our duties on the basis of all the features that *might* be identified in any given ecological issue; thus, key features serve as legitimate stopping points for moral deliberation. This, in turn, allows us to establish a progressively systematic normative order, a further corollary of which is that we can reduce to a minimum the number of cases where—or the degree to which—subjective moral judgements enter into play.

But how do claims about intrinsic value operate as reasons? One possibility is that the concept of intrinsic value functions in the capacity of a ‘thin’ ethical concept (e.g., ‘right’ or ‘good’). To say that an entity has intrinsic value in the sense of a thin ethical

²² Callicott, quoted in Bryan Norton, "Epistemology and Environmental Values," In: *Land, Value, Community: Callicott and Environmental Philosophy*. (Edited by Wayne Ouderkirk and Jim Hill. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 130.

²³ Indeed, as Kerry Whiteside points out, "...the controversy over nature's intrinsic value has become so pervasive that most English-speaking ecologists feel bound to situate themselves, affirmatively or critically, in relation to it" (2002: 71). For overviews of the different formulations of intrinsic value employed in environmental philosophy see John O'Neill, "The Varieties of Intrinsic Value," *The Monist*, 75 (1992), 119-137 and his, "Meta-Ethics," In: *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy*, Edited by Dale Jamieson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 163-176.

concept is to say, for example, that it would be right to treat that entity in a certain way (e.g., by preserving, protecting, or restoring it). On this view, intrinsic value claims are expressions about what we have overall reason to do.

It is unclear, however, whether claims about intrinsic value can be used to support normative claims as reasons without ‘passing the buck’ to specific, concrete (or relational) features of entities. We might say, for example, that a range of wetlands ought to be protected simply because it has ‘a good of its own, independent of human interests’ or because respecting it as an end-in-itself is ‘constitutive of human flourishing’ (O’Neill 2003: 168-170). Inevitably, however, we will be prompted to point to certain qualities or attributes belonging to, or associated with, the entities in question that ‘make up’ the overall (i.e., the intrinsic value) judgment. These might include biological qualities associated with living entities or features correlating to human flourishing (e.g., the ability of a wetlands to filter water for human consumption). Regardless, in each case, as John O’Neill points out, “[r]eferences to intrinsic value only have power insofar as they call upon more specific reason-giving concepts...Robbed of that more specific content, one is left with concepts adrift that lend themselves to the kind of abstract metaphysics of value often to be found in environmental philosophy” (2003: 174).²⁴ In other words, if we want to make sense of why the intrinsic value of an entity or an ecosystem gives us reason for action we need to look to the contributory reasons that are, in some sense, ‘expressed’ by the claim that an entity has intrinsic value.

²⁴ O’Neill is referring to ‘thick-ethical’ concepts such as ‘cruel’ and ‘kind’ which can apply to human actions towards the environment. But this is a rather narrow view of what can stand as a reason.

There is a related point here, which is that once we identify the features that are deserving of our respect we no longer need to justify our actions in reference to an ‘overall’ intrinsic value. In other words, once the ‘contributory reasons’ have been accounted for, an overall reason cannot give us *more* of a reason to act (i.e., an overall reason doesn’t add to the ‘store of reasons’ in favour or against a certain action).²⁵ So the notion of intrinsic value, when it operates as an overall reason, is, at best, superfluous. At worst, it is as an empty placeholder used in the absence of any specifiable reasons.

It might be argued, however, that we can ground intrinsic values in more specific features that are not susceptible to buck-passing accounts of value. Furthermore, we could avoid the inflationist worries generated by metaphysical commitments by appealing to features that straddle both sides of the N/H dualism (e.g., sentience). It is important to note, however, that not all metaphysical claims are merely bad, *a priori* intuitions. They can, and do, develop out of our practical, everyday language and experiences. As Putnam explains, it is only “[w]hen the distinction *becomes* a [dualism that]...it typically gets accompanied by a highly contentious set of metaphysical claims (even if they are typically claimed to be anti-metaphysical claims)” (Putnam 2002: 61—Emphasis added). To be sure, arguments are needed to support claims to the effect that certain features or considerations deserve a special value status or have more or less reason-giving force. But there is a prior question about how (or in what sense) we mean to use metaphysical assumptions to support normative claims. As T.M. Scanlon notes:

²⁵ Here I am following Dancy: “To talk of what there is overall reason to do...is to talk about where the contributory reasons come down—on this side or on that” (Dancy 2004: 16).

...it does not seem that the reason-giving force of facts about right and wrong derives from their metaphysical status. This is shown by the fact that it is not clear how an account of this status—for example, one showing that judgments of right and wrong are about some aspect of physical and psychological reality—would, simply in virtue of the “reality” it would give to the subject matter of judgments of right and wrong, bolster their reason-giving force.²⁶

Nonetheless, it is hardly controversial to claim that there are differences between humans and nonhumans, or between humans and their environment more generally. That we can and do readily distinguish between humans and non-humans in common sense—and useful—ways is, I think, enough to establish this point. It is unclear, however, how these common sense distinctions ought to inform our moral judgements.

Variation among humans makes it difficult, if not morally dangerous, to strictly distinguish between humans and nonhumans on the basis of more or less specific, physical criteria such as self-awareness, sentience, or intentionality. Attempts to do so inevitably exclude some human groups from moral consideration who, despite their differences, seem for many to remain the proper subjects of moral concern.²⁷ In fact, it is far from obvious why we should identify certain capacities as ‘the’ morally relevant criteria in the first place. The point is that once we entertain the idea that the absence of certain capacities does not automatically disqualify an entity from the realm of moral concern—and that capacities such as cognition and sentience admit of degree—it is difficult to tell what exactly *is* the morally relevant feature that marks the boundary of

²⁶ T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 3.

²⁷ The classic example (and one around which there has been much debate in ecological/animal rights theory) is based on Kant’s moral theory, according to which serious moral consideration is reserved only for beings that are capable of rational thought exemplified by the ability to formulate self-legislating, universal laws.

moral consideration between humans and nonhumans.²⁸ This is not to say that the features which distinguish humans from nonhumans are irrelevant to normative considerations. The key point for our purposes, however, is that attempts to identify essential or objectively relevant moral features or distinctions already assume that there are such features whose relevance in future cases is somehow guaranteed.

A similar assumption underlies a different, though equally common, approach to ecological moral judgement which, for our purposes, we can identify as ‘moderate pluralism’. According to Peter Wenz, a moderately pluralist theory ‘contains a variety of principles which are not reducible to or derived from any master principle’.²⁹ The idea here is to identify a range of irreducible and often conflicting duties (some which are owed to humans, others, to nonhumans) in an effort to see where the balance of duty lies overall. For our purposes, it is not unimportant that Wenz likens this notion of ‘moderate pluralism’ (which he takes to be the most defensible form of an ecological ethic) to W.D. Ross’s (1930) theory of prima facie duties. Crucial to the notion of a prima facie duty in Ross’s system is the idea that by identifying how a feature makes a difference in one case we know—automatically, by intuition—that that feature (or group of features) will make the same difference (and carry the same positive or negative moral polarity) in every case in which the feature (or group of features) appears (Ross 1930: 29, 32-33; Dancy 2004: 6, 11).

²⁸ For a classic treatment of this discussion see Kenneth Goodpaster, “On Being Morally Considerable,” (*Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 75, No. 6, 1976), 308-325.

²⁹ Peter Wenz, “Minimal, Moderate, and Extreme Moral Pluralism,” In: *Land, Value, Community: Callicot and Environmental Philosophy*. Wayne Ouderkirk and Jim Hill, eds. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 193.

Ecologists commonly refer to *prima facie* duties—duties to species, duties to preserve, respect or restore wilderness areas, and so on. Paul Taylor claims that “[i]f we were to accept a life-centered theory of environmental ethics...[o]ur duties with respect to the “world” of nature would be seen as making *prima facie* claims upon us to be balanced against our duties with respect to the “world” of human civilization”.³⁰ One problem is that it is unclear whether Taylor or other theorists who make reference to *prima facie* duties (e.g., Rolston 2003; Varner 2003) base their understanding of *prima facie* duty on Ross’s theory.³¹ So the inference from claims about *prima facie* duties to the underlying structure of reason-behaviour may need to be restricted to cases of more explicate usage (of which there are very few).

Nonetheless, if there is any similarity between ecologists and Ross on the notion of a *prima facie* duty it is likely to be that a *prima facie* duty specifies a reason which is always relevant in any case where it appears and always on the same side, either for or against. To be sure, many ecologists are clearly attuned to the fact that a consideration that stands as a reason on one occasion may impose a stronger or weaker obligation on another. As Wenz notes, “The strength of an obligation varies, not only with one’s relationship to its object, but also with the object’s claim” (2002: 192). On this picture,

³⁰ Paul Taylor, “The Ethics of Respect for Nature,” in: *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*. Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston, eds. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Pub. 2003), 75.

³¹ The term *prima facie* duty in Ross’s system is, strictly speaking, a misnomer. It has largely been replaced by the notion of a *pro tanto* duty (i.e., ‘so far as that goes’). A *prima facie* duty suggests the possibility of a feature which at ‘first glance’ appears to be a reason for action, but which might later be shown to have been no reason at all. Ross, however, meant for a reason to remain *some* reason for doing an action even if overall judgement led us to forsake the action on the balance of reasons against (Ross 1930: 20). On this point see (Dancy 2004: 17n3; 1993: 180).

reasons are salient features or considerations and their salience depends on the context (i.e., the presence or absence of other features).³² But a feature which is specified as a reason by some prima facie duty is still behaving atomistically (i.e., as a reason which is morally relevant wherever it appears and which carries its moral valence—as right- or wrong-making—from case to case).

The problem with this approach is that it appears to deny the possibility that a salient feature may be a reason in favour of an act in one case, but no reason at all in another, or even a reason against. Consider the following example from Wenz: ‘All other things being equal, a senator ought to honour her pledges to the Environmental Defense Fund’ (2002: 190). Now, Wenz may be willing to allow that pledge-money originally promised to the EDF may be reallocated to the National Defense Fund. But, on Wenz’s view, whatever the reasons for reallocating the funds, the senator always has *some* reason to maintain her original pledge. All that has happened is that other things were *not* equal in this situation and, hence, a prima facie reason was defeated or overridden. Imagine, however, that the senator learns that the EDF is a front for business ventures which are ecologically irresponsible. Is it the case that the senator still has *some* reason to maintain her pledge, but that it is now overridden by other considerations? This is possible. But it might be argued that her pledge is no longer any reason at all.

³² The particularist will of course agree with the point that salience is context relative. See (Dancy 1993: 114-115).

Atomistic conceptions of reason-behaviour are also present in approaches to ecological reasoning which utilize the notion of ‘moral weight’.³³ Paul Taylor (2003: 79) claims that “...judgments [about anything that happens to an entity which is favourable or unfavourable in relation to its good] are given weight as reasons for action in our practical deliberation. They become morally relevant facts in the guidance of our conduct.” It is a common assumption that the weight of the individual features are constant and independent of other features. This suggests that deliberation is largely a matter of ‘adding up’ the weights in favour of (or against) various courses of action to determine the overall ‘balance’ (Dancy 2004: 9; Dobson 2003: 152). The important point here is that the ‘weight’ of a feature (or entity) in one case is thought to remain the same, and to weigh in ‘on the same side’, for or against, in other cases. This raises a question about whether entities or their features are the sort of things that retain a *constant* moral weight regardless of their associations with other entities or features in varying contexts. In fact, although assumptions about the invariance of moral weights are useful for deliberative practices, it is not at all obvious why weights must remain invariant from case to case.

The method of weighing moral features also raises further concerns. First of all, since it is commonly accepted that the values of features may be affected by contextual differences or certain ‘background features’, the idea that features have a ‘basic’ or essential weight seems to me rather strange. At the very least, there is a serious question about how we can isolate the features of vast networks of causal relations (‘once and for all’) for the purposes of assigning them an essential weight without ignoring the

³³ The discussion in this paragraph draws from Dancy’s explication of the ‘additive’ or “kitchen-scales” model of weighing reasons (2004: 9-10).

important role that variations in context can play. The weighing method also fails to account for the possibility of an irreducible value or an incalculable worth. Perhaps most importantly, it gives us nothing to say about those entities which have yet to be assigned a weight (i.e., entities yet to be identified by scientific analysis which, because they cannot be weighed, have no way of bearing on the cases in which they are present) (Latour 2004: 169).³⁴

So far, each of the approaches we've considered—identifying a core N/H dualism, appealing to intrinsic value, specifying criteria for moral consideration, weighing contextual features, and balancing prima facie duties—relies on an atomistic conception of nature according to which entities and ecological features are pressed into service as invariant moral reasons. This assumption is of some practical significance. Whether moral boundaries are subject to radical and unpredictable shifts depends on the existence of discernible *and* sufficiently stable reference-points. Furthermore, if reasons do not act according to some regular pattern there is little hope of articulating moral principles. So the idea that the invariance of ecological features as moral reasons secures the stability of a normative order provides a powerful incentive for normative theorists. Not surprisingly, standard ecology is broadly consistent with a generalist view of moral reasoning, according to which moral distinctions and moral judgement depend on the

³⁴ It seems to me that a lot of potentially relevant information is going to be left out of this picture. As Robert E. Babe reminds us, “In terms of ecosystem interactions...human knowledge is overwhelmed by ignorance. E. O. Wilson has estimated that of all species extant on earth, scientists have managed to name only perhaps 10 per cent. Simply identifying a species and naming it, of course, is but a first step toward learning about its interactions with other species. What we do not know, we cannot name, and what we cannot name we cannot value” (Babe 2006: 49).

availability of a finite set of moral principles. On the generalist view, without principles we could not readily distinguish right from wrong and, therefore, we could not know our duties.

Generalism has been challenged most forcefully by ethical particularists who argue that moral distinctions and sound moral judgement are in no way dependent on our ability to construct normative principles from particular cases. Criticism of principle-based reasoning has not, however, been confined to mainstream moral theory. In the next section I examine a similar, though less explicit, challenge in Bruno Latour's political ecology. There are few opportunities to associate Latour's ecology with any clear normative principle and there is strong evidence to suggest that his deliberative model is ultimately opposed to the application of moral principles to particular cases. Nonetheless, we needn't deny the possibility of identifying some fundamental principle with his overall approach. So, for the moment we can simply say that Latour is ambiguous about the prospects of a principled ecology. Leaving this question aside, our discussion of Latour's ecology will focus on two questions. First, what *are* the basic reason-giving features in his approach to moral judgement? And, second, how do these reasons actually work?

1.2 Latour's Ecology

According to Latour, most ethical-political responses to the ecological crisis, broadly construed, have misunderstood the central problem raised by political ecology:

If political ecology poses a problem it is not because it *finally* introduces nature into political preoccupations that had earlier been too exclusively oriented towards humans, it is because it *continues, alas, to use nature to abort politics...[that is,] under the pretext of protecting nature, the ecology movements have also retained the conception of nature that makes their political struggles hopeless.* (Latour 2004: 19—Emphasis in original)

For Latour, the ecological crisis has manifested as a crisis in objectivity (2004: 129): “the fundamental discovery of the ecology movement [is that] no one knows what an environment can do: no one can define in advance what a human being is detached from what makes him be” (Latour 2004: 197).³⁵

Thus, in Latour's view, the appropriate grounds for moral deliberation are not to be sought in reference to a settled metaphysics of nature. Rather, we must base our deliberative practices and inquiries on a bare ‘metaphysical minimum’ (2004: 61, 75): humans and nonhumans are ‘actors’. An actor is merely ‘any entity that modifies another entity’ (2004: 237). There is constant uncertainty about what actors are capable of or how

³⁵ To underscore the sterility of the debate between anthropocentrists and nonanthropocentrists Latour suggests that we set aside the idea of intrinsic value and dispose of any clean distinction between means and ends. As Kerry Whiteside puts it: “Nature is never simply “out there,” to be encountered in an unadulterated form. Neither is humanity “in here,” the essence of an autonomous, reflecting subject.” (Whiteside 2002: 74). The lack of a clear distinction between humans and nonhumans adds up to this: “Nothing, not even the human, is for itself or by itself, but always *by other things* and *for other things*” (Latour 2002: 256—Emphasis in original).

they might modify the conditions of other actors or entities. Thus, as Latour says, “of actors it can only be said that they act.”³⁶

Latour’s minimalist approach has important implications for our approach to ecological deliberation and moral judgement. First, when we deliberate on ecological issues we are never merely speaking of humans *or* nonhumans. In fact, for Latour “[t]here is no sense in which the notion of a human can be disentangled from the nonhumans into whose fate it has woven more and more intimately over the ages.”³⁷ Thus, he urges that we deliberate in terms of particular *associations* of nonhumans and humans, which he calls ‘propositions.’ A proposition is not a statement which can be labeled true or false; it is a network of human and nonhuman actors which can be described through their actions and their effects on other actors (or actants). So, the relevance of any particular actor can neither be determined on the basis of an entity in isolation nor a fundamental human-nonhuman distinction. For our purposes, we can say that to be in a position to evaluate an issue is to be able to articulate its proposition. Hence, the essential question for deliberation is: “are these propositions well-articulated or not?” (2004: 187-188).

³⁶ Latour’s actors bear a certain resemblance to Aristotle’s notion of substance. As Etienne Gilson (1952: 44) tells us: “Nothing is more important to remember in Aristotle’s philosophy of being, and yet nothing is more commonly overlooked: in their innermost reality, substances are unknown. All we know about them is that, since they act, they are, and they are acts.” (Incidentally, Graham Harman (2009) ignores this important resemblance in his comparison of Latour’s and Aristotle’s metaphysics.)

³⁷ Bruno Latour, “Pragmatogonies: A Mythical Account of How Humans and Non-Humans Swap Properties,” (*American Behavioral Scientist* 37, No. 6., 1994), 793-794.

Consider the issue of whether to support or to condemn the use of nuclear energy or a more specific policy that would monitor and moderate its use. In determining a course of action we appeal to a complex network of human and nonhuman actors that are relevant to the decision: the resources that go into energy production, the properties of its waste, the stability of geological storage tanks, alternative sources of energy, coal companies and their shareholders, the concerns (and misconceptions) of the public, and so on. All of these features can serve (and be appealed to) as reasons for taking one course of action over another. As Latour says, “Every time the debate over values appears, the number of parties involved, the range of stakeholders in the discussion, is always *extended*” (2004: 106—Emphasis in original). Also, since virtually anything can count as an actor there are an irreducible number of features that are potentially relevant to our evaluations of ecologically right action. Finally, since we cannot presuppose definitive descriptions of actors, they provide poor reference points for essentialist, or universal value claims.³⁸

On Latour’s account, then, the basic reason-giving facts that we appeal to in our deliberative practices are facts about assemblies of human and nonhuman actors. One corollary of this is that evaluations of ecologically right action do not focus on some property of overall goodness (such as an actor’s intrinsic value); rather, in evaluating

³⁸ The idea of associating a form of normative agency with nonhumans has met with considerable resistance. Luc Ferry (1992: 139), for instance, claims that “[it] is shockingly obvious [that] nature is not an *agent*.” For Ferry, agency is strictly a legal term.

varying courses of action we are concerned with how actors serve as contributory reasons for action.³⁹

1.2.1 Experimental Deliberation: The Role of the Moralists

Latour's alternative to standard ecological rubrics—the 'collective'—is best understood as a process of deliberation which utilizes various 'skill sets'⁴⁰ in proposing provisional hierarchies of associations of humans and nonhumans (2004: 147, 238).⁴¹ As Latour explains:

The collective...is not a thing in the world, a being with fixed and definitive borders, but *a movement of establishing provisional cohesion that will have to be started all over again every single day*. Its borders, by definition, cannot be the object of any stabilization, any naturalization, despite the continual efforts of the great scientific narratives to unify what brings us all together under the auspices of nature... (Latour 2004: 147—Emphasis added).

Whereas standard ecologies may be characterized by their attempts to include and safeguard nonhumans by imposing a set of obligations that tend towards 'total inclusion' on the basis of an alleged equal moral worth, Latour's ecology attempts to shift this impossible obligation to the more practical one of 'total representation' (Latour 2004:

³⁹ I discuss the notion of a contributory reason in chapter 3.

⁴⁰ Latour includes skills of scientists, economists, politicians, and 'moralists'.

⁴¹ According to an earlier description: "...the word *collective* [is used] as a substantive to mean the tangle (as conventionally understood) of society (humans-among-themselves) and the objective world (things-in-themselves)" (1994: 807n5). Sometimes Latour uses the term 'collective' to reference the provisional ecological/normative hierarchies of humans and nonhumans. We should keep in mind that there may be several or many collectives.

198). In this way he avoids the ‘paralyzing obligation’ to do no harm in a ‘kingdom of ends’ that earlier frustrated the deep ecologists.⁴² As Latour writes:

[w]ithout the ability to divide the collective into friends and enemies, the requirement of closure [i.e., the necessity of passing judgements and making concrete decisions] could never be fulfilled: one would want to embrace everything, satisfy everyone, all the humans and nonhumans together, and the collective...would no longer be able to learn, because it would no longer have the capacity to take up again, in the next cycle, the integration of the excluded entities that would have appealed (Latour 2004: 146).

For our purposes, I will restrict my discussion of Latour’s deliberative processes to the relationship between the role of the moralist and Latour’s concept of moral ‘representation’.⁴³ Moralists are charged with the ongoing task of appealing on behalf of the entities which are excluded from, or by, deliberative processes. Because of the moralists, no entity can be given a permanent value rank in a hierarchy of means and ends and no feature which serves as a reason for excluding an entity from discussions about its moral worth or relevance to the collective can be described *in essence*. In this sense, the role of the moralist is to keep experimental deliberation experimental by re-presenting actors excluded from, or by, deliberative practices. As Latour says:

I do not hesitate to make this profound contrast between *acceleration* and *representation* play a central normative role. This is the source from which we are going to draw our indignation and our legal and moral standing. “Represent rather than short-circuit,” such is the goal of political ecology. (2004: 126)

⁴² Arne Naess’s *in principle* bioegalitarianism is self-defeating in this sense since the very attempt to put it into practice is equivalent to a violation of its fundamental law.

⁴³ According to Latour, ‘experimental’ deliberation relies on an operational distinction between the ‘power to take into account’ (i.e., identifying entities that will need to be considered by the collective as conditional ‘members’) and ‘the power to put into order’ (i.e., ranking heterogeneous entities in a hierarchy that enables efficient political and ethical decision making). Maintaining this distinction is “...the heart of the constitutional work of political ecology” (2004: 120).

The moralist's task poses a serious problem from the perspective of standard moral-ecological theory. In particular, the atomistic theory of reasons and the principled ecologies they support do not seem capable of supporting the moralist's radical revisability. In fact, if atomism were true we would envision the moralist in a very different role—one in which moralists worked to subsume particular cases under general principles. However, as Miriam Fraser observes, “[t]he skills that Latour identifies for moralists are, notably, almost exactly opposite to the application of abstract principles to concrete facts” (2007: 62). More specifically, the actions of moralists suggest that we cannot determine whether entities (as a ‘bundles of features’) will count in favour of, or against, admittance into the normative order based on how those entities and their features counted as reasons in previous cases. From the perspective of the moralists, entities (or actors) do not behave atomistically, as invariant moral reasons; as a result, they are incapable of being captured in principles.

From the moralist's perspective, it is a mistake to close off discussions about the relevance of any particular entity or feature by attempting to settle on its general moral status. To be clear, moralists do not question the legitimacy of exclusionary decisions, *per se*; rather, the role of the moralist is to challenge the legitimacy of our *commitments* to exclusionary moral decisions by challenging the extent to which we can rely on the relevance of the features of previous cases to justify future decisions. Thus, whenever a decision is made (or an action taken) which could be used as a precedent for future decisions, moralists initiate a new round of deliberation the purpose of which is to reevaluate the moral status (or moral relevance) of the excluded appellant. This does not

simply mean that all decisions made during the processes of the collective are defeasible (i.e., subject to revision *in principle*). In Latour's system, the right of appeal is never held in abeyance pending further inquiries; it is exercised *immediately* by moralists (2004: 179-180) in recognition of the collective as a potentially "dangerous artifice." The suggestion is that what at one point in time might be an 'enemy' in one's conception of the best ecological normative order (or vision of the good life) may become an 'ally' or friend at another, and vice versa. As such, we must be constantly on guard for even the smallest changes or most minor details in our assessment of ecologically right action. As Latour cautions, "An infinitesimal cause can have vast effects; an insignificant actor becomes central;...a miracle product turns out to have nefarious consequences..." (2004: 25).

Nonetheless, one might ask whether it is reasonable to subject our decisions (or the reasons that favoured those decisions) to constant and, more or less, immediate reappraisal. It might be argued that moralists force us to engage in 'deliberative overkill' as a result of which deliberators may be distracted from truly novel cases, or, what is worse, the process of deliberation may be slowed to such an extent that it fails to match the urgency of ecological issues. The essential question then is, How can Latour justify the moralist's radical stance towards upholding the 'rights of the appellant' to contest their cases?

1.2.2 On Justifying Ecologically

According to Latour, recognizing the moral implications of the entanglement of humans and nonhumans and the fundamental discovery of the ecology movement means redefining morality by appealing to a modified version of Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative:

We can define morality as uncertainty about the proper relation between means and ends extending Kant's famous definition of the obligation "not to treat human beings simply as means but always also as ends"—provided that we extend it to nonhumans as well. (2004: 155)⁴⁴

Latour's modified version of Kant's imperative⁴⁵ gives the impression that he is appealing to a basic principle of justice—one on which we might ground our deliberative procedures and skills, including those of the moralists. This is not altogether false. However, as a normative principle, it clearly fails, since, in extending the 'mere means' formulation to include all nonhumans, Latour has removed its quasi-determinate aspect (i.e., the distinction between rational subjects and nonrational objects) and thus disabled its most basic guiding mechanism. If nothing is a 'mere means' then there is little one can do to formulate a principle that, if it is to provide any guidance at all, tells us what *is* permissible to exclude in *a priori* fashion. As Latour has said elsewhere: "It is this

⁴⁴ See also (Latour 2004: 155-156; 1998: 232).

⁴⁵ We should be careful not to mistake Latour's modification for an appreciation of the ecological implications of Kant's moral philosophy. On the contrary, Latour suggests that we should reserve our strongest criticisms for Kant rather than Descartes since, "[i]t is with Kantianism that our [Modern Constitution that divides humans and nonhumans, nature and society] receives its truly canonical form. *What was a mere distinction is sharpened into total separation...* [t]hings-in-themselves become inaccessible while, symmetrically, the transcendental subject becomes infinitely remote from the world" (Latour 1993: 56—Emphasis added). See also (Latour 1993: 51) and (Whiteside 2002: 255).

conjunction of actors who can never take each other as simple means which explains the uncertainty into which we are plunged...” (1998: 232). By invoking this modified formulation, Latour calls for a reinterpretation of our commitment to democratic ‘humanism’. If we are going to uphold a humanist ethic which is compatible with the ‘fundamental discovery of the ecology movement’ then *humanism too must become experimental* (Latour 2004: 198—Emphasis in original).

Latour’s modification of Kant’s ‘mere means’ formulation is perhaps better understood in terms of what David Backhurst refers to as a ‘democratic condition of inquiry’ (2007: 131).⁴⁶ For Latour, uncertainty is not a negative condition *of*, but a positive condition *for*, ecological deliberation, one which serves as a basis for favouring certain normative procedures over others. As a condition of inquiry into the moral and hierarchical status of all entities, however, it stands in marked contrast to that of the dominant tradition of moral-political philosophy. In the latter tradition (of which Rawls is representative), ethical deliberation is essentially human oriented and the implications of moral equality (in the form of principles of justice) are revealed through the

⁴⁶ It might be argued that Latour’s attempts to ‘free-up’ the initial stages of deliberation from a priori commitments to moral principles is really a matter of putting those commitments (and the biases they impose) ‘to one side’ as it were for the sake of a genuine and unhampered investigation into how the features of a given case are functioning *here and now*. This in itself does not amount to the wholesale *rejection* of moral principles; rather, it is an attempt to acknowledge that insofar as we recognize that our judgements are fallible we must attempt to remove ourselves, as much as possible, from the ‘authority’ of principles even at the earliest stages of our deliberative investigations. This would be in addition to acknowledging that our principles are revisable. However, if he wants to allow our principles to play any role at all or if he wishes (eventually) to introduce a new set of moral rules he needs to be able to square them with this ‘first principle’ (i.e., his expanded Kantianism) and it is not at all clear how he might accomplish this.

concealment of identities and individual interests. Michael Callon's critical summary of this approach is helpful here:⁴⁷

Since Kant, political philosophy tends to consider it necessary that, before entering into public space, human subjects be severed from all the attachments that hold them in the world and be stripped of their own bodies, social identities, and existential problems so that they are no longer interested in anything but the common good. The concern for justice requires these transparent beings, who are rational by dint of being transparent, and who decide not to discuss the good, that which they value and to which they are attached, so as to be able to concentrate solely on questions of justice. The just comes before the good. These authors' [Kant, Rawls, Habermas, Arendt] recognition of the existence of singularities, differences, and attachments, and their attempt to devise procedures for removing them, make their position broadly unrealistic. Furthermore, they nourish the notably relativist critics who denounce the concealment of relations of force behind the image of persons debating questions of justice and equity in a disinterested and disembodied way. (Callon *et al.* 2009: 263)

What does this critical perspective tell us about how to engage in moral-ecological deliberation? It is important to recognize that deliberators are interested parties who resist 'purification' of their self-interests for the sake of disinterested justice. As David Backhurst notes, "Moral agents enter situations with certain dispositions to treat certain properties as important and these dispositions are partly constitutive of their understanding of themselves as moral agents" (quoted in Little 2000: 173).⁴⁸ From Latour's point of view, however, the real problem is that agreements about which things are just or unjust can only be reached if we have already settled on certain descriptions of

⁴⁷ Callon's (2009) is largely inspired by Latour's *Politics of Nature*.

⁴⁸ While Backhurst's point is no doubt true, I join Michael Callon in thinking that "...we should resist the idea that the people is made up of individual citizens each of whom knows exactly what he or she wants on every subject and is endowed with preferences that are fixed once and for all" (Callon 2009: 114).

the world⁴⁹ in a way that presumes a ‘totalized knowledge’ (2004: 65). A political ecology which operates on the basis of a ‘settled’ metaphysics is incompatible with Latour’s ‘democratic condition of inquiry’ since the former works to end debate and, ultimately, to discourage healthy public skepticism (Latour 2004: 86).

In response, he claims that only by allowing questions about ‘what there is’ to be posed *in unison* with questions of ‘what ought to be’ does the notion of a fully open—and democratic—process of deliberation on ecological problems make sense (2004: 93).⁵⁰

Hence, he writes:

Morality has changed direction: it obliges us not to define [moral] foundations, but to recommence the process of composition while moving as quickly as possible to the next iteration...*no morality ever again authorizes us to exclude [any entity] definitively...* (Latour 2004: 198—Emphasis in original)⁵¹

In recognition of morality’s change of course, Latour recommends that we “leave aside the search “for principles” to become attentive to the requirement of a unified ranking” (Latour 2004: 158-159). The challenge for Latour, however, is to show how his form of deliberation can remain essentially experimental without undermining the possibility of developing a practicable normative system.

In recognition of the entanglement of moral means and ends, Latour tells us that we must engage in an ongoing process of investigation into the potential moral status of

⁴⁹ As Jonathan Dancy points out, “[a]greed ‘principles of justice’ [‘of ‘fairness’, ‘equality’, and so on’] would be agreements on which things are just and which unjust, formulated in advance of the particular case” (Dancy 2004: 134).

⁵⁰ See also (Latour 1993: 15-16) and (Moscovici 1976: 145-151) and Miriam Fraser 2007: 59). Latour writes, “It is impossible to begin to ask the moral question [of what *ought* to be done] *after* the states of the world have been defined. The question of what ought to be...is not a moment in the process; rather, it is coextensive with the entire process” (Latour 2004: 125).

⁵¹ See also pp. 124, 156, 158-159, 197, 213.

entities excluded from, or by, our deliberative processes. However, this means that the boundaries of moral consideration need to be reconceived as a “*porous and fragile membrane* that separates the collective [associations of humans and nonhumans] from what it must be able to absorb in the future” (Latour, 2004: 160—Emphasis added).

Latour assures us, however, that although “[w]hat endangers the collective today may be an ally tomorrow, and *morality*, which “salvages” those who have been excluded, *is in no way at stake*” (Latour 2004: 279n6—Emphasis added). But it is a serious question as to how we are supposed to appeal to entities as reasons in our moral deliberations if there is no way of knowing ahead of time whether an entity is a friend or an enemy. And it is unclear, for that matter, on what basis we can apply our deliberative ‘skills’ without grounding them on general normative principles. Given the vast network of human and nonhuman representatives, how does Latour’s representation actually work in practice (Whiteside 2002)? How does such variability allow us to make sense of moral commitments? Thus, despite Latour’s assurances, whether morality *is* at stake in his experimental, nonprincipled ecology is precisely the issue. I turn now to consider the practical implications of a political ecology without principles.

Chapter II. Ecology Without Principles?

The previous chapter contrasted the metaphysical underpinnings of centered ecologies with the central tenets of Latour's 'experimental metaphysics'. In the former case, I argued that there was a presumption (fueled by an essentialist metaphysics) in favour of an atomistic theory of reason-behaviour which was reflected in certain dominant, principle-based approaches to moral-ecological judgment. From this perspective, Latour's endorsement of a minimalist metaphysics, his resistance to the idea that the basic reason-giving features of reality (i.e., actors) are essentially invariant, and his rejection of principle-based reasoning signal a radical departure from the latter tradition. In the present chapter, I consider and respond to various practical concerns which may be brought against the view that principles have no substantive role to play in ecological moral deliberation. I argue that although Latour's experimental deliberation denies recourse to general moral principles, this is not fatal for his project. The question, however, is whether there are any alternatives to standard ecological reasoning which do not require us to abandon principles altogether. I consider two such alternatives. The first is a recent proposal to *merge* detailed empirical practices with a rich panoply of moral principles. The second is an attempt to account for the irreducible values of humans and nonhumans by minimizing, though not eliminating, principled-based ranking. I characterize these as conservative and extreme alternatives, respectively and I argue that they fail as practical alternatives to Latour's form of moral deliberation.

2.1 Stability and Revisability

We now face the difficult task of sorting through several practical problems associated with the possibility of a normative ecological order starved of principles. Our main question is this. Is it possible to establish a normative order that is consistent with Latour's non-principled approach which does not undermine the value of stability that a normative system is supposed to provide?

A stable normative system is one in which we are capable of making moral judgements, maintaining moral commitments and regulating our actions on the basis of an expectation of what can be reasonably expected of others. In short, the stability of the normative order is dependent on our ability to engage in practical reasoning. I will return to this last point momentarily. At this point, however, we can understand stability as a function of the level of predictability we have about how others will behave and the choices they will tend to make under various conditions.

Latour's suggestion that deliberation and moral judgement can operate in the absence of moral principles raises several concerns. Timothy Chappell (2005) maintains that in the absence of a general set of predetermined (and enforceable) principles, individuals may be tempted to use moral deliberation as a way of justifying less than admirable actions; consequently, individuals will be forced to conduct their everyday affairs on an understanding of trust as 'honour-among-thieves'.⁵² "[T]he point,"

⁵² This criticism and one that I look at below (Hooker) were originally directed at Dancy. However, since they are aimed at the general view (which Latour and Dancy share) that we can get by in moral and social life without principles, and, more important,

Chappell claims, “or one main point, of a normative ethics is to impose a certain sort of deliberative *discipline* in the society and the individuals to which it applies.” In light of this concern it is a serious question whether Latour has unwittingly designed a normative/deliberative system which, by removing an important source of moral motivation, invites us to become self-indulgent opportunists. There are several reasons for doubting this. First of all, opportunism does not pose a unique problem for Latour. Principles, even when strictly enforced, do not of themselves impose deliberative discipline without a certain *willingness* to apply or adhere to them. In fact, many opportunists and so-called ‘free-riders’ depend on general principles to which most people conform to make sense of (and justify) their actions. Moreover, the idea that principles supply us with a basic degree of moral motivation is a claim for which there is little empirical support (Dancy 1993). So it is still a question whether Latour’s system is really worse off for want of steadfast principles of conduct.

If we are to take Latour seriously, however, then we cannot separate these latter worries about our expectations of other humans from questions concerning our expectations of nonhumans. So there is also tension between the value of normative stability grounded on what we are able to predict about nonhumans (which validate and make meaningful the generalizations of our moral-ecological principles) and the value of revisability grounded in a healthy skepticism about how to evaluate the features of reality (especially the nonhuman ones) that inform our deliberative practices. Michel Serres

(1995) summarizes our predicament nicely: “nonhumans resist facile categorizations and

that we are better off for doing so I see no reason why we cannot redirect them at Latour for the purposes of determining how he might respond on his own accord.

yet, given the threat of ecological collapse, we are forced to consider (to reconsider) how we are going to evaluate or organize them in a coherent ethical—and legal—system.”⁵³

It might be argued that a moral order framed on ‘permeable boundaries’ and transient moral distinctions will cause considerable anxiety and will inevitably result in chaos. If knowing what our duties are implies knowing to whom we have duties, and if conflict resolution requires recourse to a hierarchy of values held in common on the basis of which entities and their relations can be evaluated, then it seems that we must bring moral boundaries into focus and define our moral foundations; despite our uncertainty about ‘what an environment can do’ we need a way of bringing ‘closure’, as Latour puts it (2004: 110-111), to issues of relative value status in order to implement policies and make everyday decisions. Latour himself acknowledges that ‘[p]erplexity is not a stable state, nor is controversy’ (Latour 2004: 104). Thus, if we are to achieve some semblance of normative stability in the expectation of what we can reasonably expect from others, operating on the assumption that entities have discrete essences that delineate reasonably fixed boundaries of moral consideration may seem unavoidable.

Nonetheless, the concern to determine our obligations in spite of uncertainty about the moral relevance of different ecological features (or sets of features) cannot be

⁵³ Latour seems unaware of the distinction between legal and moral reasoning, which has been defended (with some controversy) by legal and moral theorists. The distinction is based on the fact that, for the most part, Law is based on some form of ‘established precedent’. As Neil MacCormick writes: “[i]n law there is a kind of master rule book, the constitution, statute law, delegated legislation, codes, and the like...Hence, the universalization that goes on in law is in a context that is already law-defined in large part, and concerns the teasing out of issues where the purport of the established law is challenged or challengeable” MacCormick, Neil. *Rhetoric and the Rule of Law: A Theory of Legal Reasoning*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 99-100.

considered apart from the distinctly practical goal of achieving the best possible normative order of humans and nonhumans. This raises the question of whether the value of stability imposes conflicting demands on our deliberative practices. On the one hand, as I have been suggesting, the value of normative stability lies in a capacity to make predictions and to act on the basis of what can reasonably be expected of others (and, perhaps, other ‘things’).⁵⁴ The demand for stability in this sense has often been identified with the demand for a clear and *lasting* articulation of our obligations (i.e., a set of widely promulgated and enforceable principles). Brad Hooker claims, for example, that without principles individuals will be “unable to form confident expectations about what [others] will do.”⁵⁵ But there is also a genuine concern that rigid adherence to any set of principles is bound to lead to errors in exceptional circumstances.⁵⁶ On the other hand, stability is identified with an assurance that what has been wrongly, or dangerously, excluded will once again be taken into account so that adherence to the moral order does not result in decisions that would threaten the safety of its members (e.g., we cannot allow the exclusion, ‘once and for all’ of nuclear waste by way of deep subsurface storage to put the members of the collective in danger because of a sadistic government or a

⁵⁴ I do not wish to get into discussions about the contractual limitations of nonhuman agents. Suffice to say that the condition of speech imposes an incredibly narrow view of contractarianism. For a non-standard view that gives nonhumans a less passive role in contract theory see Michel Serres *The Natural Contract*.

⁵⁵ Brad Hooker, “Moral Particularism: Wrong and Bad,” In: *Moral Particularism*, Brad Hooker and Margaret Little, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 22. See also, Brad Hooker, “Moral Particularism in the Real World,” in *Challenging Moral Particularism*, Mark Norris Lance, Matjaž Potrč, and Vojko Strahovnik, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 12-30.

⁵⁶ It might be argued that what we really require in order to make confident predictions about one another’s choices is for everyone to have sufficiently *similar* principles.

geological disturbance). Thus, as Latour says, “With the morality of political ecology, we no longer risk believing in the lasting existence of [precise moral boundaries]. If we cannot come to an understanding—politically, scientifically, economically—without setting the majority of beings aside, thanks to morality, outcasts will be able to make themselves heard once again” (2004: 160-161).

This tension between the two opposing senses of stability is reflected in Latour’s description of the ‘contradictory requirements’ of the concept of value (2004: 105-108).⁵⁷ According to Latour, appealing to value in its first sense requires us to rank all entities under consideration in order to establish a hierarchy of values. Appealing to value in its second sense, however, requires a continuous reassessment of the normative system based on an evaluation (or reevaluation) of entities that have been excluded (deliberately or unintentionally) from deliberative processes; accordingly, we can never allow the environment as a serious political issue to pose the question ‘What can we really afford to leave out of the moral circle?’ in a purely rhetorical sense (i.e., either in a way that would prevent us from deciding on moral/political issues until we had somehow identified everything—all entities and their relations—or in a way that denied the possibility of provisional moral distinctions between entities and, *ipso facto*, acts of exclusion). Value in its first sense offers to bring closure to specific issues by allowing us to end deliberation with a decision. This is important, for at the very least, we want to be able to say what it means for actions, policies, and laws to be (ecologically) justified at any given time. However, we also want to make decisions that will lead to the ‘best possible’

⁵⁷ For a similar treatment of the dual sense of ‘fact’ see Latour (2004: 103-105.)

hierarchical arrangement of entities and their value associations while avoiding unforeseen harms. Thus, value in its second sense requires that every decision be essentially provisional with the goal of reassembling the hierarchy.

The point is simply that appealing to the practical demand for stability is not a straightforward reason for rejecting Latour's proposal, nor does it tell in favour of a principled approach to moral-ecological judgement.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the ability to predict what others will do in various situations and the alleged discipline imposed by principles tells us little about how best to evaluate human-nonhuman relations. It remains to be seen, however, whether Latour's ecology is consistent with certain basic understanding of how what reasoning implies.

2.2 Latour's Deliberative Rationality

So far, the objections raised against Latour's approach (or his style of approach) have focused on the notion of normative stability as a function of predictability. Here I want to consider the stability of the normative order as a function of practical reasoning. It is often assumed that only when reasons work in an intelligible or coherent fashion (i.e., one that is consistent with the practical application of regulative norms) that practical reasoning is possible. One concern is whether the nature of Latour's deliberative rationality is consistent with his basic moral-political commitments. According to Whiteside, Latour's commitment to humanism and democracy⁵⁹ is, in fact, threatened by

⁵⁸ On the distinction between practical requirements and morality, see (Dancy 2004: 83, 133-134) and (Latour 2004: 171).

⁵⁹ This criticism is directed at French ecological theory in general, but it can easily be leveled against Latour's model of deliberation.

his attempt to develop a form of political ecology that "...is opposed to the shortcuts of reason" (Latour 2004: 186, 187). As Whiteside explains:

Defending humanism and democracy seems to require an appeal to reason. After all, doesn't any debate about our environmental future require evaluating evidence, criticizing logic, and seeking out *general principles of rightful conduct*? (Whiteside 2004: 257—Emphasis added).⁶⁰

Two claims seem to follow from this assessment.⁶¹ First, denying recourse to principles in moral deliberation—especially at a stage in deliberation where we desire guidance most of all—is inherently irrational. Second, humanism and democracy are essentially principle-based. If humanism and democracy are grounded in a conception of reason (and of rational justification) that is expressed through a set of regulative norms which translate into basic standards of conduct and principles of action, and if deliberators (operating within the bounds of a democratic humanism) are only rational insofar as they can understand and comply with general moral principles, then Latour's attempt to deny recourse to basic principles and his attempts to employ the skills of the moralists suggest a critical error. This is because, in Latour's experimental deliberation, we neither start from nor arrive at any basic set of principles. Now, it just seems incredible that Latour would take this position unless he thought that the ability to understand and agree on general moral principles was not the extensional equivalent of rationality or, indeed, of democratic humanism. Nonetheless, from Whiteside's perspective, the question is whether Latour's project (towards which he is broadly sympathetic) can be reconciled with rationalism as understood in generalist ethical theory.

⁶⁰ See also (Whiteside 2002: 265-266, 276, 285-286).

⁶¹ There might be a third suggestion which is that evaluating evidence and criticizing logic leads us, naturally, to the formulation of general principles.

I don't consider his solution here.⁶² We needn't go into the details of Whiteside's proposal, however, to show that his assessment of the correlation between democratic humanism and a principled rationality begs the question (in both senses of his question, above) against the very alternative that we are currently considering (i.e., a rational, non-principled ethic that is consistent with democracy and humanism).⁶³

For Latour, appealing to 'reason' means appealing to those irreducible singularities that Habermas, Rawls, and others would have us forgo for the sake of generalized, transcendent principles of justice.⁶⁴ It also requires that we appeal to a certain conception of decision-making which allows us to identify sources of uncertainty as critical entry points for more democratic forms of discussion which are especially inviting to non-specialists (but which will ultimately draw specialists and non-specialists into closer quarters). The latter requirement calls for a distinction between two forms of rationality that he refers to through a distinction between 'Science' and 'the sciences'. By appealing to this notion of 'Science' we are appealing to a subsumptivist form of rationality. Subsumptivism works by positing a finite set of first principles which are

⁶² Whiteside relies on what he sees as an affinity between French ecologists (Lipeitz, Moscovici, etc.) and Habermas' 'communicative ethics'. Latour entertains Habermas' views by repeating the modification he made to Kant's 'mere means' formulation. For our purposes, the problem is that Habermas' ethics invites a form of deliberation "in which all parties involved seek to justify their actions in universal, principled terms" (2002: 282; see also 267, 268-269).

⁶³ Recall that, according to Latour, humanism is just as experimental as the process of deliberation that it seeks to engender (Latour 2004: 198).

⁶⁴ As Latour puts it (2004: 185), "If there are indeed countless transcendences (the multitude of propositions that knock at the door), there is no longer *the* unified transcendence capable of putting an end to the logorrhea of public assemblies. Politics is no longer threatened by that sword of Damocles consisting of salvation brought by reason."

capable of determining the nature of any particular case.⁶⁵ Conflict between principles and particular cases is either the result of the misapplication of a principle (i.e., applying the wrong principle) or an indication that the relevant principle has not been adequately codified.

In Latour's terms, subsumptivism is understood in the sense of a "Science [that] will end up extending far enough so that conflicts are only bad memories" (Latour 2004: 218).⁶⁶ Latour argues, however, that deliberative practices cannot be based on the concept of a 'Science' that represents the alleged indisputable nature of reality, the existence of value-free 'facts' and the appeal to a kind of 'natural authority' in the laws of nature as represented by highly trained experts. A commitment to this form of rationality ignores the uncertainty revealed in the interminable disputes of 'the sciences' (2004: 187, 249)—these include disputes between scientists (and between scientists and non-specialists) as well as the controversies over the nature of scientific practice all of which are influenced by value considerations, including the public's concerns about how the production of specialized knowledge does, and ought to, influence their lives (as, for example, whether new technologies and their accompanying risks are acceptable).⁶⁷

⁶⁵ For an analysis of the notion of subsumptivism see (Dancy 2004: 3-4).

⁶⁶ Callon (*et al.* 2009: 126) gives us a good definition of 'Science' in its subsumptive mode: "[S]cience is what is not reconsidered (unless to clarify, complete, enrich, or amend knowledge of what has already been disputed and validated)."

⁶⁷ Latour argues that "[a] philosophy of ecology that did not absorb the controversies among scientists would neglect all its intellectual duties" (Latour 2004: 255n15). The result of disputes and consultations is always further experimentation. By attempting to show that we can deliberate on the basis of his conception of 'the sciences', Latour draws attention to a false dichotomy between hardcore realism (a belief in value-neutral facts) and constructivism (the belief that facts are social constructions, or, at best,

Thus, for Latour, ‘reason’ is neither expressed through a set of essential principles agreed upon by everyone prior to deliberation nor does it allow for the subsumption of new cases under general principles.

We have not, however, ruled out the possibility of reconciling an experimental approach with the ‘demands of reason’ as expressed in the ability to understand and appeal to principles. In other words, there may be a form of deliberation that is sufficiently experimental, yet which does not force us to renounce principles altogether. In the next section I consider one such proposal in the form of a contextually sensitive, principled pluralism.⁶⁸

2.3 The Limits of Pluralism

2.3.1 Experimenting With Principles?

A number of North American ecologists have recently urged that the principles of traditional ecological ethics are inadequate to the task of guiding decision-makers who face unique and highly complex moral-ecological scenarios. They argue that “environmental ethicists...should reconsider their historical focus on a small number of fixed and universal moral principles advanced to govern public and private environmental attitudes, decisions, and actions” (Minteer, *et al.* 2004: 132) in favour of a more robust

mere opinions), and, thus, a false choice between two positions, each of which represents a dubious deliberative authority.

⁶⁸ Minteer’s pluralism is similar to Wenz’s moderate pluralism (see chapter one).

pluralism of principles (many of which are already outlined in traditional ecological theories) grounded in the empirical details of particular cases.⁶⁹

Specifically, we believe that a contextual and situation-centered understanding of ethical judgements is a more appropriate model of moral experience; a stance which suggests that individuals are (and should be) less ideological and categorical in their views of what actions are ‘right’ regarding nature... If this is so, then our investigations into public environmentalism need to adopt an unabashedly experimental spirit, employing materials and tools that are shaped, but not entirely determined, by well-known theoretical debates in environmental philosophy. (Minteer and Manning 2000: 52).⁷⁰

Thus, we are now faced with two distinct approaches to experimental deliberation.

The first (Latour’s), tells us that experimentation is essentially non-principled. The second (Minteer, *et al.*), suggests that we can ‘experiment’ ‘bottom up’ by attending to the particulars of a given case without being forced into a position of “principle-nihilism” (2004: 154). Principles, as Minteer notes (2005), play an important role in expressing shared values and standards among scientists and the general public. Thus, rather than eliminate principles, “we need to *merge* the principles of environmental, animal, and

⁶⁹ On the tendency for ecological thought to ‘drift away from the very problems that gave rise to it as a distinctive political discourse’ see Bob Pepperman Taylor, “Environmental Ethics & Political Theory,” (*Polity* Vol. 23, No. 4, 1991): 567-583. See also Bruno Latour (2004: 19-20) on the “growing divorce between [political ecology’s] burgeoning practice and its theory about that practice.”

⁷⁰ This proposal has been developed in a series of recent collaborations between Minteer and fellow ecologists. See Ben Minteer and James Collins. “Why We Need An “Ecological Ethics,” (*Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, Vol. 3, No. 6, 2005), 334-337; Ben Minteer and Robert E. Manning. “Convergence in Environmental Values: an Empirical and Conceptual Defense,” *Ethics, Place and Environment* (Vol. 3, No. 1, 2000), 52. See also Ben Minteer, Elizabeth A. Corley, and Robert E. Manning, “Environmental Ethics Beyond Principle? The Case for Pragmatic Contextualism,” (*Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* Vol. 17, No. 2. 2004), 131–156. Since the common link between these articles is Minteer I refer to him in the main body of the text.

research ethics with practical examples to create a new area of inquiry” (2005: 334—
Emphasis added).

My own view is that this attempt to construct a ‘middle’ way between a limited set of universal principles and so-called ‘principle-nihilism’ is ultimately misguided. First, it is questionable whether traditional ecological ethics can be fairly characterized (in the way Minter and Collins suggest) as the practice of *merely* applying various standards to all cases or issues. In fact, it just seems mistaken to say that holding to any standard ecological theory commits one to the view that particular details are somehow ultimately irrelevant or that novel cases are incapable of forcing revisions on otherwise ‘generally reliable’ principles.⁷¹ In other words, that moral principles are subject to revisions in light of changes to context or in view of the peculiar details presented in novel cases is not especially damning of traditional principle-based ecologies. The question then is whether this renewed emphasis on the idea that ‘context matters’ is enough to distinguish Minter’s approach from those he criticizes.

Minter’s method “begin[s] with an inquiry into the empirical circumstances [and from there] engage[s] a set of moral principles – perhaps, in many cases, revising and refitting them – as we reason through and deliberate over their potential to help us resolve environmental policy and management choices” (2003: 132-133). This is not unlike Rawls’ ‘reflective equilibrium’ approach, which, as Gilbert Harman points out, “...is

⁷¹ The latter point also applies to ecological moral theories that claim to be supported by the ‘laws of nature’ or the ‘principles of scientific ecology’. For instance, J. Baird Callicot (1989: 22) claims that Leopold’s land ethic is ‘fully supported by the science of ecology’, but he does not, for that matter, subscribe to the idea that the principles of scientific ecology have been fully articulated in a way that would preclude revisability in the face of new knowledge.

conservative in that we start with our present views [including our intuitions about specific cases and general moral principles] *and try to make the least change* that will best promote the coherence of our whole view” (Harman 2003: 416—Emphasis added). Although Minter’s approach is unlikely to generate excessively long codifications and there is no need to show how any one principle is decisive for any given case, his gesture towards ‘a new area of inquiry’ seems to amount to the somewhat banal claim that the specific details of particular issues ought to be given more prominence in ecological deliberation.

It is an important point (and one well worth stressing) that framing questions about moral obligations and policy decisions in terms of universal norms, essences, and values obscures the importance of particulars. As Latour reminds us, despite the fact that environmental policy and the moral status of humans and nonhumans are regularly framed in terms of general classes or categories, “[i]t is always *this* invertebrate, *this* branch of a river, *this* rubbish dump or *this* land-use plan which finds itself the subject of concern, protection, criticism or demonstration.”⁷² The concern is that despite Minter’s insistence that we need to put pressure on our moral principles by entertaining unique details of particular cases it is unclear what this ‘pressure’ is supposed to amount to. Minter seems opposed to the idea that we can use principles ahead of time to determine the relevance of the details of particular cases. At the same time, he claims that “the contexts themselves possess a general normative structure” (2003: 151). Furthermore, his

⁷² Bruno Latour, “To Modernize or Ecologise? That is the Question,” (Translated by Charis Cussins In: *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millennium*. Edited by Bruce Braun and Noel Castree. New York: Routledge, 1998), 222-234.

suggestion that principles can be “harmonized” with particulars seems to imply that conflict between general moral responses to ecological issues and details which frustrate those responses can eventually be smoothed over. But it is difficult to see how, simply in virtue of the tension between principles and particulars, we will reach some decision that does not end up appealing to first-order, universal principles in cases of conflict. In other words, nothing seems to prevent us from ‘sliding back’ to first order principles in order to come to a final decision. Thus, it is a serious question whether ‘harmonization’ is really a departure from standard approaches to moral-ecological judgement.

Although Minter’s goal is to adopt a contextual approach to ecological deliberation he fails to notice that “[m]oral principles, however we conceive of them, seem all to be in the business of specifying features as *general* reasons” (Dancy 2004: 76). In Minter’s model, the features and considerations that serve as reasons seem more likely to pull in opposite directions than merge towards harmonization.

It is fair to point out that Minter never tells us why we should reject principle nihilism. As a result, he fails to explain what motivates his move from a rich value-pluralism (a position which Latour shares) to a principled-pluralism (where values and the features that represent them contribute to cases in a predictable manner). Thus, it stands to be shown why we ought to dismiss a form of deliberation which eschews principles in support of Minter’s ‘middle way’.

2.3.2 Incommensurable Values

For Latour, adopting a pluralistic stance does not necessarily get us any closer to judgements of ecologically right action.⁷³ In Latour's words, "no amount of pluralism can push the question further [as to how these contradictory beings can be made to live together]." The more articulated and precise our pluralism becomes, the more difficult the task of ranking. As a result, "...[entities] will have to become *even more irreducible to all the others* and even more incommensurable with all the others!" (2004: 173—Emphasis in original). How does deliberation proceed in the face of such overwhelming incommensurability?

Some ecologists have argued that we need to reject the deliberative rationality implicit in value-ranking in order to observe or respect the irreducible values that we confront in practice. The idea is that there are situations where value incommensurability cannot be ignored or overridden for the purposes of deliberative (or practical) commensurability; in such circumstances, judgement in the form of ranking is to be suspended. For example, Val Plumwood claims that we ought to adopt "Non-ranking, as a meta-ethical principle of minimizing ranking and dealing with conflict...contextually in ways that avoid invariant categories and type ranking between broad classes of beings..." (2002: 174). According to Plumwood, we need an ethic that allows us to measure equality along an 'axis of difference and incommensurability' (2002: 189-195). Similarly, Kerry Whiteside claims that "[s]keptics [of centered ecologies] urge us to see

⁷³ Latour's theory is pluralistic in the sense that there are many value considerations which are irreducible to one another and which might be morally salient to any given case.

that there are times when we must “let beings be” out of recognition that our cognitive and ethical schemata, while enabling our action, incite us unwittingly to destroy what they cannot encompass” (Whiteside 2002: 287).

There are several problems, as I see it, with the idea that we ought to ‘respect incommensurables’ as Plumwood and Whiteside suggest. First, ethical pretences indicating that ‘the new way must ‘let beings be’...let [nonhuman entities] manifest themselves in their own presence and worth, and not merely as objects for the all powerful subject’ are grossly misleading in the assumption that conditions of physical isolation are even remotely achievable.⁷⁴ And neither author makes it clear how we can distinguish between cases where value-incommensurability ultimately forces us to abandon our deliberative procedures in order to ‘let things be’ for fear that the requirement to come to a decision will ‘[incite] us unwittingly to destroy what we cannot encompass’ through our deliberative practices.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Similarly, Tom Regan’s ‘preservationist principle’ of ‘non-destruction, non-interference and non-meddling’. For more on these points see Arne Naess, “A Defense of the Deep Ecology Movement,” *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 6 (1984): 270 and George Sessions, “Shallow and Deep Ecology: A Review of the Philosophical Literature” In: Robert C. Schultz and J. Donald Hughes, eds. *Ecological Consciousness: Essays from the Earthday X Colloquium*, University of Denver, 1980 (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981). On equating the idea of being ‘natural’ with being ‘unmodified by human activity’ where “we value [nature] in part because...[its] existence is independent of us.” see: Robert Elliot, “Faking Nature,” (*Inquiry*, Vol. 25, 1982), 86.

⁷⁵ Plumwood sees incommensurable equality as an alternative to the ‘equality of sameness’ which underlies both Naess’s biospherical egalitarianism and the ‘scalar’ model (which we referred to earlier as ‘Kitchen scales model) of moral weight. Although her model is successful in avoiding our criticisms of the latter views (see above), the possibility of non-ranking raises a different issue. What Plumwood is trying to emphasize is non-ranking at wide or very general levels. However, if ‘ranking on a scale as equal...opens up also the possibility of ranking as greater or lesser than’ as Plumwood suggests (2002: 175) then non-ranking must also open up the possibility of abstaining

Most important, both Whiteside and Plumwood frame metaphysical incommensurability in a way that invites us to abstain from moral deliberation, which seems counterproductive. Clearly, if deliberative abstinence is recommended in the service of some good then we need to know whether it can achieve this goal. It is one thing to suggest that there is a sense in which we can respect an entity's incommensurable value by preventing it from being subjected to deliberative processes. It is doubtful, however, whether we can do this for a great many things without undermining deliberative processes altogether; nothing seems to dismiss the possibility that, at some level, everything is incommensurable. (Latour has said as much in claiming that 'nothing is irreducible to anything else'.) Yet, much of the 'stress' of making (metaphysically) incommensurable values deliberately commensurable seems to be due to the implications of ranking under an atomistic assumption of reason-behaviour—for, under atomism, in making a claim about how a feature or consideration makes a difference in this case we are claiming that it will be relevant in the same way for all other cases in which it appears. Indeed, this seems to be a way of denying or ignoring incommensurability altogether. In other words, ranking is not really the problem. The problem is when ranking occurs in the context of atomism where decisions 'carry over', so to speak, into future cases.

from ranking at even the case-specific level. But this seems hardly to be an option for deliberators whose task must surely be to determine which entities will serve as losers in contexts of scarcity (whatever that scarcity amounts to in the particular case).

Latour avoids this problem by making a commitment to use any decision about the status of an entity as a new starting point for deliberations (2004: 159). Therefore, no decision can reduce the value of an entity in general. As he puts it:

In the eyes of morality, indeed, the closure of the collective by any global scenarization at all is not only impossible but also illegitimate. It would presuppose either the inclusion of the totality of beings in the “kingdom of ends,” as Kant would have it, or a premature closure that would return too large a number of these beings to the status of mere means, or else finally, *the definitive acceptance of a pluralism that would renounce the search for a common world* (Latour 2004: 157—Emphasis added).

Latour is not hopeful that we can avoid the problems posed by standard ecologies and so-called ‘principle-ist’ approaches to ecological deliberation by appealing to a greater number of principles or value considerations, nor does he think that problems of value incommensurability can be mitigated by reducing or abstaining from deliberation. To be sure, there are many value considerations that we need to take into account and many of these are not ultimately reducible to any other. However, as Latour points out, “...morality is less preoccupied with values than with preventing too ready an access to ends” (Latour 2002: 257). This is not to say that value considerations are unimportant. But in order to avoid the weak and extreme tendencies of value pluralism we must engage in more—not less—intensive forms of deliberation. Unfortunately, Latour has been less than explicit about how the values and properties of entities under consideration in deliberation operate as reasons—missing from Latour’s account of deliberation is a detailed picture of how reasons actually work. So we need a theory of reasons that would support Latour’s system of deliberative representation in opposition to the subsumptivist

and pluralist options that we have encountered. I turn now to consider what I think is the most plausible option for Latour's approach.

Chapter III. Particularizing Latour's Ecology

In the present chapter I argue that Latour's non-principled, experimental deliberation is uniquely compatible with a particularist approach to moral reasoning and moral judgement. To this end, I consider how a particularist ethic can serve as a resource for understanding Latour's deliberative ecology with the aim of defending the latter's approach against the 'principle-ist' demands of standard ecological theory. To be clear, it is not my intention to offer a full defense of Dancy's ethics, and I do not mean to imply that the plausibility of Latour's approach stands or falls on the strength of particularist arguments; nonetheless, I think that Latour's position can be strengthened by appealing to key features of a particularist ethic. I demonstrate this by supplementing two underdeveloped aspects of Latour's ecology with the core metaphysical and epistemological insights offered in Dancy's particularism. First, I argue that Latour's radical notion of deliberative 're-presentation' as entailed by the role of the moralist is supported by the particularist's core doctrine—the holism of reasons. Second, I show how particularism can supply Latour with a plausible (and much needed) moral epistemology.

In order to fulfill my promissory note, I briefly explore the practical implications of a Latourian-particularist alliance for ecological policy. Specifically, I argue that this alliance encourages us to combine a precautionary approach to the production of ecological knowledge with the logic of Kristin Shrader-Frechette's case-studies approach to ecological ethics. I conclude by offering a particularist interpretation of Aldo Leopold's influential definition of an 'ecological ethic'.

3.1 Particularism and the ‘Metaphysics of Moral Reasons’

I begin by outlining the central features of Dancy’s particularism. According to Dancy, particularism is primarily a view in ‘moral metaphysics’ which is concerned with how actions get to be right or wrong (2004: 140, 141).⁷⁶ To this end, Dancy offers an account of how moral reasons work which aims to show that principles have no essential role to play in our deliberative practices. The idea is that once we understand how reasons work we ought to be skeptical of the idea that there is some necessary or definitive pattern to the way that reasons act or combine to tell us in advance which actions are permissible or optimistic.⁷⁷ Accordingly, particularists see rationality and moral judgement as having little to do with understanding or following moral rules.⁷⁸ As Dancy writes:

To be rational, to think rationally, to be a competent assessor of reasons, need not be to be a competent rule-handler, nor is it necessary that one should be a competent assessor of the context-independent individual contributions of the reasons present in the case, because there may be no such context-independent contributions to be assessed. (2004: 190)

⁷⁶ Thus, our epistemology of reasons will largely be informed by our account of the metaphysics of reasons. On this point see Lind, Andreas and Johan Brannmark. 2008. “Particularism in Question: An Interview with Jonathan Dancy,” (*Theoria: A Swedish Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 74, No. 1, 2008), 11.

⁷⁷ Recently, Dancy has noted that “Particularism...is more a sort of a suspicion than a thesis, the general suspicion that the role of principles in moral thought has been greatly exaggerated.” (Lind and Brannmark 2008: 3).

⁷⁸ To be sure, particularism is not a unified theory and there is much debate between its supporters and detractors. Some so-called moderate particularists (e.g., Margret Little and Marc Lance) argue that moral generalizations do play an important role in moral thought and judgement and this has led them to re-characterize their position as a form of “deep contextualism”. On this point see Mark Norris Lance, Matjaž Potrč, and Vojko Strahovnik, eds. *Challenging Moral Particularism*. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 74n5. See also Brad Hooker and Margaret Little, eds. *Moral Particularism*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.)

As I understand it, Dancy's particularism is a consequence of a general theory of reasons which has two main aspects. The first is a theory of moral relevance which suggests that there are a variety of ways that features of reality can be relevant to moral judgement. The second is the doctrine of holism which offers support for the idea that reason-behaviour is essentially variable, and, thus, unsuitable for codification into general principles.

3.1.1 Favouring and Enabling

For Dancy, reasons are always contributory reasons. A contributory reason for action is a reason which stands in a 'favouring' relation to action (2004: 29). According to Dancy, most attempts to characterize the notion of a contributory reason have tended to describe reasons at the level of overall judgement, as 'ought-makers'. Dancy claims (2004: 22-23), however, that to suggest that contributory reasons are *essentially* 'ought-makers' conflates two distinct normative relations. There is a theoretical relation which involves reasoning to a conclusion one takes to be true (i.e., the relationship between reasons and ought-judgements) and a practical relation between reasons and actions (which need not involve any reference to an ought judgement). Crucially, it is the latter relation on which the concept of reasons as favourers is based and through which Dancy seeks to explain the basic 'logic' of contributory reasons. The idea that reasons are 'favourers', while preventing us from conflating two normative relations, also allows for the idea that moral reasons share a common 'logic' with ordinary practical reasons for action. Most important, the notion of favouring is opposed to a conception of moral relevance which is essentially general; there is nothing in the notion of favouring to

suggest that if a feature was relevant to a previous case, it must somehow be relevant to any case in which it appears (2004: 33, 35 100).

In Dancy's view, virtually anything might be a reason under the right circumstances.⁷⁹ Along with this irreducible plurality of potentially relevant features we must also bear in mind different 'forms of relevance' that practical features of reality are capable of assuming under different circumstances. In addition to favourers, there are features which act as enablers (disablers), intensifiers (attenuators), and so on (2004: 38-42). So there are a number of ways that a feature might be relevant to a case and thus a number of ways an action can be made right or wrong.

3.1.2. Holism

The centrepiece of Dancy's particularism is the doctrine of holism in the theory of reasons. To recall, holism is the view that "a feature that is a reason in favour of action in one case may be no reason at all in another, or even a reason against" (Dancy 2004: 73, 190). In terms of moral reasons, this variability cashes out as the ability for features to change their moral 'valence' or 'polarity' as right- or wrong-making from case to case in a way that is essentially uncodifiable.

Particularism is a 'local' consequence of holism (2004: 190, 191); that is, if we accept that holism is true of non-moral reasons (e.g., reasons for belief and ordinary practical reasons) then we need an explanation for why holism should fail for moral

⁷⁹ Dancy's outlook on what might count as a reason "sees no difference, apparently, between such features as being very damaging to one's health and the number of leaves on a tree. It sees no difference between the causation of unwanted and undeserved pain and whether one sets out with the right foot or the left foot" (Dancy 2004: 111).

reasons. Presumably, this explanation would account for the distinction between moral and non-moral reasons. According to Dancy, however, no such account (at least, none that is satisfactory) has presented itself, and, until such time as it has, we ought to be able to unify reason-behaviour under the theory of holism (2004: 76). Consider Dancy's examples of holism for ordinary practical reasons:

There are plenty of examples to persuade us that such reasons are holistic. For instance, that there will be nobody much else around is sometimes a good reason for going there, and sometimes a very good reason for staying away. That one of the candidates wants the job very much indeed is sometimes a reason for giving it to him and sometimes a reason for doing the opposite. And so on. (2004: 74)

Dancy claims that these sorts of examples (which he says are 'legion') tend to establish the essential variability of ordinary practical reasons.⁸⁰ That said, we should be able to devise some examples of reasons holism more suited to our theme. Here is one. That a species is threatened with extinction is sometimes a reason to protect it. But sometimes it is no reason at all, or even a reason to destroy it (e.g., if the 'species' is small pox). Here is another. That bio-prospecting is 'exploitative of natural communities' may be a reason to prevent pharmaceutical companies from accessing areas of undeveloped rainforest or ocean floors. But it may be a reason in favour (e.g., such activities lead to important advances in cancer treatments). Beyond the potential variability of reasons, it is difficult to say what exactly these examples (either Dancy's or

⁸⁰ Dancy also argues for the holism of reasons for belief.

my own) establish, especially if one does not ‘see’⁸¹ the features in the examples as operating in the intended manner.⁸²

How does this account of the nature of reason-behaviour threaten a principle-based approach to moral judgement?⁸³ Dancy suggests that there is a general assumption among ethicists, that in order for moral thought and judgement to be possible, the relationship between ordinary features of reality and moral properties such as rightness and wrongness must be specifiable in a set of principles which see features as making *regular* contributions to the cases in which they are relevant. Dancy argues, however, that any attempt to establish a principled ethic on the basis of a set of general reasons

⁸¹ Dancy has claimed (1993: 114) that “the central role of moral rationality is to find a view of the situation and the demands it creates whose structure is internally persuasive in the sort of way a narrative can be.”

⁸² Raz (2006: 107) argues that Dancy’s examples of ordinary practical reasons (cited above) are actually not reasons in Dancy’s sense (i.e., favourers); rather, Raz claims that they are either enablers or intensifiers. According to Raz, favourers would be “Features which show that there is some advantage in going to the place or in being there, that there is something good about being there...features which establish that a candidate has a right to the job or that he or she will do it well, and so on.” Indeed, Dancy has written that ‘reasons stem from the prospect of some good’. It is therefore difficult to understand the basis of Raz’s complaint since Dancy’s examples do seem to imply a sensitivity to such prospects.

⁸³ Mark Lance and Margret Little (2008: 58) claim that Dancy’s main reason for dismissing principles is that they are simply unnecessary. Indeed, Dancy says that “the best way to put the particularist’s conclusion is that...given the holism of reasons, there is no discernable need for a complete set of reasons to be [captured in a set of principles]” (2004: 82). Joseph Raz claims, however, that the particularists’ favoured account of how reasons operate demands little more than a slight tweaking of the generalists’ deliberative apparatus: “Arguably the truth of holism makes no difference to wider issues. If holism is true it would simply mean that general theses which those who reject holism take to be about reasons are instead about reasons and their enablers. Subject to easy substitution all the non-holistic theses remain intact.” Joseph Raz, “The Trouble With Particularism (Dancy’s Version),” (*Mind*, Vol. 115, 2006), 118.

must offer more than a mere statistical account of the frequency of those reasons as right- or wrong-making:

...even if there is a variety of cases in which in making a moral judgment one does indeed specify as a reason a consideration that one takes to be *normally* sufficient [i.e., good enough to make the action overall right or wrong], it cannot be that in all cases one commits oneself to the normal sufficiency of one's reasons. For there will be many an unusual case concerning which there is no suggestion that the feature doing the work here must normally have the same effect elsewhere. So it cannot be the case that moral judgement, with reasons specified, per se commits the judger to the normal or general sufficiency of those reasons. (2004: 130-131; see also Dancy 1993: 103-104)

In response, Dancy's critics argue that particularist characterizations of moral principles (including the one above) are misleading. In specific, particularists fail to account for the flexibility of the moral principles they seek to undermine. As Mark Lance and Margret Little put it, "[w]e should be anti-principlist, if principle is understood in the classic sense of an exceptionless covering law; but we need not – and should not – be anti-generalist."⁸⁴ Both prima facie and absolute principles are capable of accommodating exceptional or novel cases by amending or codifying the relevant principle(s) (e.g., by inserting some 'unless' clause for each deviation) (Dancy 2004: 11-12). Dancy points out, however, that in either case we end up with an increasingly complex set of codifications which we must somehow be able to reconcile with the demand for guidance that led us to those principles in the first place.⁸⁵ Moreover, it is unclear how such defeasible generalizations are capable of acting as guides to so-called 'non-standard'

⁸⁴ Mark Lance and Margret Little, "From Particularism to Defeasibility in Ethics," In: *Challenging Moral Particularism*. Lance, Mark Norris, Matjaž Potrč, and Vojko Strahovnik, eds. (New York: Routledge 2008), 73.

⁸⁵ In the latter case, Dancy argues that "[m]oral progress...seems to require more and more elaborately codified principles, with each so expressed that it is impossible for it to require of us actions forbidden by other principles" (2004: 12).

cases. Take, for example, Lance's and Little's claim (2008: 72) that, "Lying...is necessarily defeasibly bad-making." The problem is that this 'property' of lying as 'necessarily defeasible' does not seem able to account for the nature of exceptional cases in which lying is (or might be) good-making (Dancy 2004: 114-115).⁸⁶

This is all I want to say for the moment about particularism and the holism of reasons. Further points will surface in the context of applying particularism to Latour's ecology. I turn now to consider how the particularist's account of reasons can be useful in supplementing Latour's account of moral representation and the moral epistemology of experimental deliberation.

3.2 The Moralist As Moral Particularist

As we saw in chapter one, the moralist views the grounds of ethical-political decisions as *essentially* provisional. From the perspective of standard ecological theory, this in itself is not overly problematic; indeed, 'moralists' may simply refer to concerned denizens who, having acquired skills from working at the fringes of moral considerability, are best suited to the task of reminding us that our moral judgments are *always fallible*. Latour's notion of re-presentation, however, imposes a rather stringent requirement on our deliberative practices, which he describes as follows:

Enemies, excluded parties, and the opposition are, *thanks to ethics*, going to remain not simple entities that have been externalized forever, but also entities that will *have to be* reintegrated, at some later point, in the form of friends, included parties, and potential allies" (2004: 157—First emphasis added).

⁸⁶ Dancy claims that there is such a thing as a 'default reason' (1993: 230; 2004: 111-117). Metaphorically speaking, he says, certain reason-giving features enter cases "switched on". These default reasons, however, are not a basis on which to establish moral principles.

The question is what sort of ethic is compatible with—and, thus, able to account for—this deliberative requirement? As we have seen, most ecological theories are committed to an atomistic conception of moral reasons according to which, if we know how a feature has contributed in previous cases, we have solid grounds for thinking that it will be relevant in a similar way in all cases in which it appears. On this view, the incentive to ‘re-present’ or reinvestigate an entity’s moral status is, to some degree, limited to instances where there is already some reason to think that we are dealing with an exceptional or novel case. It is doubtful, then, whether any standard ecological theory would be willing to entertain the idea that we *must* reintegrate entities or ‘actors’ excluded from, or in the course of, our deliberative practices.

One way to make sense of this deliberative requirement is to see it as part of an ethical particularist approach to moral deliberation. According to this view:

The basic reason-facts which we are to come to know are particular; their purview is initially restricted to the particular case. We need to be able to come to know these non-general facts, or to acquire justified beliefs about them; and our knowledge of them will be our basic normative knowledge. (Dancy 2004: 141)

On this view, Latour’s notion of representation and, in specific, the requirement to reintegrate excluded entities into deliberative practices as potential allies can be understood as a consequence of the moralist’s attempt to recognize the holism of reasons.⁸⁷ That is, insofar as actors serve as reasons in moral deliberation they ‘must’ be reintegrated as potential allies in recognition of the fact that an actor which serves as a

⁸⁷ My suggestion here is partly in response to Miriam Fraser’s question (2007: 69n22) as to what name to give those who undertake the moralist’s task ‘especially as they are frequently members of other professions’.

reason in favour of an action in one case may be no reason at all, or even against in another.

All the same, can we not say that at least *some* entities are just ‘bad’ for any potential normative order (at least, any order that humans would wish to belong to)? In what sense is, say, the AIDS virus a potential *ally*?⁸⁸ There are two responses to this point. The first is that the moralist may be quite happy to admit that there are certain entities which are simply inimical to any hierarchy that humans are capable of belonging to. That is, there may be certain entities that carry a basic moral relevance around with them from case to case. I doubt, however, whether this is enough to overturn the moralist’s entire approach, since the great majority of entities do not enjoy such a definitive value status.⁸⁹ The real question is, if moralists were to treat such entities as potentially variant moral reasons, what kind of mistake would they be making? As Dancy might put it ‘Would this be failure of *rationality* or just a mistake of fact’?⁹⁰ In other words, the moralist can agree that, say, a specific virus is an enemy of the collective without having to admit that this is so because it has been an enemy at other points in time; as the particularist would have it, if an entity is an enemy to the collective, it is so because of how it is operating or ‘modifying’ the situation of other actors *here, in this case*, regardless of how it functions in other cases.

⁸⁸ This rhetorical question, often aimed at deep ecologists who wish to grant all living members of the biotic community a moral status (e.g., Ferry 1992: 140), has less force when aimed at Latour, who suggests that we can reject the possibility of an instituted bioegalitarianism without buying into the certainty that underpins the *reductio ad absurdum*.

⁸⁹ This is how Dancy responds to attempts to discredit particularism by showing that there exists at least one moral principle (Dancy 2004: 77).

⁹⁰ I borrow this question from Dancy (2004: 78).

The question remains, however, whether Latour's notion of re-presentation is entirely coherent. The problem is that if the moralist 'appeals' on behalf of a particular entity on the grounds that certain background features have conspired to make that entity valuable where before it was simply dangerous (or as reason in favour of an action, when earlier it was a reason against) then one could no longer say that the moralist is reintegrating a *particular* appellant, but, rather, an entirely new set of features.⁹¹

This brings us to an important point, which I have decided to leave out until now. Dancy claims that "there can be forms of holism that do not go so far as particularism. That is, we can accept the context-sensitivity, the variability, of reasons, but still suppose that there are the sorts of general truths about how reasons behave that might be expressed by moral principles" (2004: 7–8). For our purposes, we need to distinguish between the view that the capacity for a reason to change or lose its moral polarity can only be expressed—and explained—as being part of a larger context or combination of features (i.e., a deep contextualism), and Dancy's view, that changes in the polarity of reason-giving features need not reference changes in background context. "The difference," Dancy claims, "lies in what is doing the speaking [for or] against in cases where features are combined" (2004: 8). In the former case, the significance of changes to the moral valence of reason-giving features lies in its combination (i.e., it is the combination which ultimately counts as a reason for or against); on Dancy's picture, changes in moral valence are attributed to individual reason-giving features *within* a combination. To be sure, favourers derive their status from the presence (or absence) of

⁹¹ It would also be odd for Latour to draw a distinction between unknown entities and entities that have been excluded through the processes of deliberation.

enabling conditions. However, Dancy claims that a reason can be characterized without needing to reference its enabling conditions; that is, we can give a *complete* reason for taking a certain course of action without having to list all the features which played an enabling role.⁹²

The key here is to notice a distinction between ‘what makes an action right and what determines whether an action is right’ (Dancy 2004: 99). To answer the latter question we would need to reference all the enabling conditions that are relevant to whether the action *is* right. The former question, however, concerns only those features of the case that count as reasons for taking a certain course of action (for our purposes, these are the actors that count as reasons). Crucially, Latour’s moralists are concerned with the question of what makes an action right; thus, they need not refer to background features when re-presenting an excluded party.

Furthermore, by distinguishing between actors as favourers and actors as enablers we can avoid the problem of having to deal with a potentially endless networks of actors (Harman 2009: 106). But the distinction between favourers and enablers raises an important question: If entities (or particular associations of humans and nonhumans) are going to be re-presented to the collective, on what basis are we to separate the entities or propositions from their conditions of existence? Note that Dancy faces a similar problem: if our judgments rely on a distinction between reasons and their enabling conditions, what

⁹² Dancy tells us that “there is a general distinction between a feature that plays a certain role and a feature whose presence or absence is required for the first feature to play its role, but which does not play that role itself” (2004: 45). Only favourers are *bona fide* reasons, so to give a *complete* reason for why one acted, one need not reference the conditions which enabled the favourers to stand as reasons (2004: 46-47).

is the criterion for its application? Interestingly, both Latour and Dancy resist appeals to any definitive—or lasting—criterion for distinguishing either between an actor and its associations or a reason and its enabling conditions. All we can say is that, since it is not always clear what is doing the enabling and what is doing the favouring, we must be cautious in applying the distinction (Dancy 2004: 51).⁹³

3.3 Experimental Epistemology: Learning Without Principles

What does Latour’s experimental approach to deliberation reveal about the status of his moral epistemology (i.e., how we come to know and appeal to actors as moral reasons in experimental deliberation)? I take it that if our basic normative knowledge is knowledge of actors, we need to find a way of saying how—and what—we can learn from observing actors in particular cases; that is, we need an account of how judgements about new cases are informed by our moral experience.⁹⁴

Unfortunately, Latour is ambiguous on this point. On the one hand, he suggests that we can only learn from our deliberative encounters by leaving off the search for a set of general moral truths. On the other hand, he claims that experimental deliberation offers an ‘intermediate path between definitive knowledge and ignorance’ provided that

⁹³ Dancy argues that being forced to give a criterion for all of our distinctions would lead immediately to Pyrrhonian skepticism. For Latour, a criterion is simply unavailable: “the collective does not yet know according to what criteria it is to articulate its propositions” (2004: 123-124).

⁹⁴ This is an important question for Latour who identifies deliberative or “collective experience” as the source of normativity in his approach (Latour 2004: 270n32).

we ‘trace our steps along the invisible path of a painful learning curve’ (2004: 199-200).⁹⁵

As he explains:

The deliberations of the collective must no longer be suspended or short-circuited by some definitive knowledge...The collective does not aim to know, but it has to experiment in such a way that it can learn in the course of the trial. Its entire normative capacity depends henceforth on the difference that it is going to be able to register between t_0 and $t + 1$... (2004: 196)

As I understand it, Latour is gesturing towards a theory of moral relevance that is consistent with his experimental metaphysics. According to this theory, the subjects of experiments (i.e., what we experiment on) are actors and, for the sake of moral judgement, we need to know how any given actor is relevant to a specific case. On Latour’s view, however, assigning an essential relevance to actors would mean short-circuiting future deliberations (i.e., deliberation would no longer be ‘experimental’ since we would know in advance the relevance of the actors in question). As he says, “[i]t would be sinful to suspend the learning curve for good, even—or especially—in the name of intangible moral principles...” (2004: 198). Unfortunately, Latour never tells us what his intermediate normative knowledge actually amounts to; as a result, he fails to show what it is we learn from our deliberative inquiries that could serve as guidance in future cases.

Elsewhere (1993: 86, 87, 108), Latour claims that actors have a ‘history’ or a “trajectory” that can be traced to reveal a sort of pattern of relevance. According to Graham Harman (2009: 65), however, the notion of a trajectory must somehow be reconciled with the idea that knowledge of ‘actors’ is essentially confined to particular

⁹⁵ Latour identifies this process with a third, and final, ‘power’ of the collective which he calls the ‘power to follow up’ (2004: 242).

cases (which, for our part, we have already tried to establish by dovetailing Latour's experimental metaphysics with the particularist's metaphysics of reasons). Harman describes the problem as follows:

[According to Latour, actors] are effectively frozen into their own absolutely specific location and set of relationships, and cannot possibly endure outside them. By contrast, the (derivative) notion of trajectories teaches the opposite lesson. When considering a trajectory, we never find a thing in a single time and place, but get to know it only by following its becomings, watching the details of its *curriculum vita...* (*ibid.*)⁹⁶

The worry is that Latour will be forced to recognize (and, thus, fuse) a generalist epistemology with what is essentially a particularist metaphysics.⁹⁷ After all, if knowledge gained from particular deliberative inquiries can serve as a guide for future deliberations then it must be expressible as a form of general moral knowledge. In order to shore up Latour's account we need to say what it is we know when we have 'intermediate knowledge' of an actor. We can avoid this problem, however, by appealing to the particularist's moral epistemology of reasons.

According to Dancy, "[t]he leading thought behind particularism is the thought that the behaviour of a reason (or of a consideration that serves as a reason) in a new case cannot be predicted from its behaviour elsewhere" (1993: 60). But this does not mean that particularists have nothing to say about how judgements are informed by experience of particular cases. Rather, Dancy's claim is that particular cases tell us how a feature or a consideration that serves as a reason *can* make a difference under the right

⁹⁶ Harman makes this "paradox" 'the primary target for criticism' in the second half of his (2009: 65).

⁹⁷ According to Dancy (1993: 102), W.D. Ross can be read as committing the opposite error.

circumstances (Dancy 1993: 67; 2004: 191). On this account, knowledge gained from particular cases is, indeed, general moral knowledge, but not of a kind suitable for expression in moral principles.

Applying this to Latour's experimental deliberation we can say that 'learning' from actors (or studying their 'trajectories') means becoming attentive to how certain kinds of actors can make a difference to cases in which they serve as reasons.⁹⁸ Latour writes:

A bad experiment is not one that fails, but one from which the researcher has drawn no lesson that will help prepare the next lesson. A good experiment is not one that offers some definite knowledge, but one that has allowed the researcher to trace the critical path along which it will be necessary to pass so that the following iteration [i.e., deliberation] will not be carried out in vain. (Latour 2004: 196)

In other words, we never learn what an actor *is* (i.e., its essence or essential relevance); rather, through our deliberative experiments we come to know what actors are capable of doing (i.e., how they *can* or *might* be relevant and in what ways).

In the context of a particularist epistemology of reasons, the implications of Latour's intermediate knowledge for practical reasoning and moral judgement are twofold. On the one hand, competent moral judgement does not require an ability to predict the relevance of an actor on the basis of its relevance elsewhere. As Dancy tells us, "Particularists conceive of the knowledge brought to a new case as much more like knowledge-how than like knowledge-that. That is, it is a skill of discernment, not knowledge of a set of true general propositions discovered by thinking about previous

⁹⁸ Harman (2009: 65) allows that actors do have a sort of essence but this essence has only "pragmatic value in helping us to identify certain things as the same."

cases and applied somehow to new ones” (2004: 142-143).⁹⁹ On the other hand, experience is not irrelevant. As Margret Little points out, on the particularist’s view “[e]ven past experience is said to be helpful, not because it gives one a sense of patterns that one might project forward, but because it offers one practice in—and hence hones the skills of—discerning the moral status of individual cases” (Little 2000: 294).

To be sure, many will be uncomfortable with the idea that our ethical practices are ‘experimental’. After all, moral judgement is not an ‘experiment’ and the goal of deliberation is not merely to ‘prepare for the next lesson’; morality requires that we do the right thing *here and now*, so the suggestion that we are experimenting for the sake of a learning process might be seen to conflict with, or prevent us from reinforcing, this underlying sense of obligation. Neither Latour nor Dancy suggest, however, that the goal of deliberation is anything less than morally right action. For Latour, the point is simply that even a deliberative experiment which leads one to take appropriate (or morally right) action is ‘bad’ if it causes us to approach new cases in the wrong way (i.e., by assuming that one can gain definitive moral knowledge in or from particular cases).¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Both Dancy and Latour reject the notion of a moral sense. See (Dancy 2004: 143, 146; Latour: 157, 276-77n46).

¹⁰⁰ Similarly Dancy claims that “[principled people] often come to do the right thing in the wrong sort of way, and that sometimes mistakes in their approach can result in mistakes in action” (2004: 3).

3.4 Particularism and Precautionary Policy

In this section I outline a particularist conception of the normative role of ecological policy as a guide for action. I then move to address the question of whether particularism can accommodate the notion of precaution as applied to ecological policy in general, and, if so, in what way.

From the particularist's point of view, appealing to, or applying, ecological policy in specific cases is not like appealing to, or applying, principles. So, the particularist would resist the idea that ecological policies are best understood as a list of explicit directives or Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) which tell us how to act given that certain features or conditions obtain. Nor would the particularist view policy as the sort of guide that can alert us to the practical difference that a certain feature (or set of features) *will* make in any given case; rather, policy is best understood as a record of the 'habits' of properties that have been described during previous deliberations. In other words, policy tells us how certain features and their combinations *have* made a difference in the past. From this position, the particularist would urge that we can determine how similar features *might* make a difference to the case at hand. Admittedly, this is far less guidance than we may have hoped for in consulting policy, but it is enough to show that the particularist's agenda is not so extreme as to suggest that policy, or the practice of policy-making, is irrelevant or unimportant.

There remains an important question, however, about how particularists are going to deal with the problem of the *efficient* application of ecological policy to individual cases. The rapid loss of biodiversity, the contamination of clean water supplies,

desertification—all of these issues force us to consider how we are going to effect widespread, timely change under the direction of a particularist (or Latourian) ecology. Arguably, if the scope of judgement in the application of policy is essentially ‘local’ and if even the smallest cases require a special forum of deliberation it will be impossible to make the sort of progress in applying policy that the present crisis appears to call for. The concern here is that a particularist ethic would prevent us from applying stringent ecological policies quickly and over a broad spectrum of issues. However, the idea that we need to meet a certain basic level of efficiency in applying policies over a wide range of cases presupposes that there are enough similarities between cases to allow us to devise and follow general policy guidelines. Particularists, however, suggest that the pressure to be more efficient in judgements concerning the application of policy to particular cases will tend to come at the expense of the quality of our decisions since we will be more likely to gloss over subtle, but important differences between cases. As Dancy says, “There is no substitute for the kind of detailed attention to each new case which an appeal to principles might lead us to shirk” (1993: 70). So we should be careful not to characterize the ability to make morally right decisions from case to case as a matter of efficiency. If principled approaches to policy are somehow more efficient (or, as some might have it, more ‘cost-effective’), they may well lead to poorer decisions.

In fact, it seems that there is a more basic question underlying this dispute, which is whether, all other things being equal, the costs of principle-based reasoning outweigh the costs of a more discriminating (but more time-consuming) approach to judgement. Unless we can answer this question (which is doubtful), whether the nature of the

ecological crisis puts us in a position where we are forced to choose between a principled and a particularist ethic on the basis of a demand for greater policy efficiency is irrelevant. So the particularist is likely to stick to the idea that we are ultimately concerned with the quality of our judgements, not the efficiency of those judgements applied to many cases.

In urging that we not jump to conclusions about how the features of a case are working *here* simply in virtue of how they appeared to be working in other cases particularists espouse a sort of precautionary approach to the development and application of ecological policy. However, if this is true, then particularists face a further challenge in reconciling their precautionary moral-epistemology with the notion of precaution as it is commonly understood in the context of ecological policy; that is, as a principle applied to environmental policy *in general*.¹⁰¹

In its most basic form, the precautionary principle states that scientific certainty is not a prerequisite for taking ecologically defensive action. The 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, for example, states: ‘Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.’¹⁰² The problem is that if ecological policy is governed by, or subsumable under, a ‘master’ principle of precaution then every time we appeal to a policy we seem to be expressing a

¹⁰¹ Cass R. Sunstein, “Beyond the Precautionary Principle,” (*University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, Vol. 151, No. 3, 2003), 1007.

¹⁰² See also (Callon, *et al.* 2009: 207; 205-210) for a discussion of the precautionary principle as defined in the French Constitutional Charter of the Environment, 28 (Feb. 2005), article 5 (along with several other formulations).

sort of moral truth, in which case particularism is either false of policy or incompatible with a precautionary approach to policy. In either case, particularism seems unlikely to offer a viable ecological ethic. Hence, we need an alternative account of precaution that supports ecologically defensive action in the face of uncertainty about the causal relations between environmental harms and their sources, but which is not principle-based.

Latour's ecology supplies an alternative account of precaution which is compatible with a particularist ethic. The suggestion in chapter one was that Latour's deliberative procedures operate on the basis of a precautionary approach whereby uncertainty about how we ought to act in response to ecological concerns reveals itself as uncertainty about what nature *is*.¹⁰³ In this sense, precaution is not a 'rational' response to uncertainty about which set of principles best represents our ecological concerns in general, nor is it a principle that guides us in the application of policies to specific cases. As Whiteside notes, "[w]hat precaution calls for is not a moral rule...—one that prescribes our obligations in advance of an inquiry—but as Latour suggests, monitoring, experimentation, procedures, and democratic debate" (Whiteside 2006: 108; see also 109 and 111). This alternative allows us to merge the concept of precaution with the particularist's (and Latour's) moral-epistemology. Michael Callon summarizes this view of precaution as follows:

Precaution...is a process of producing knowledge; it is also an exploration of identities which will eventually make up the collective. It does not define the boundaries of the acceptable and the unacceptable. It involves a type of judgment that, without a rule of action, readily leaves indeterminacy. Such a judgment does not have a univocal meaning which is imposed *a priori* on social actors and

¹⁰³ In his *Politics of Nature* Latour makes frequent reference to the notion of precaution. See especially (21, 113, 263n17, 268n18, 270n31, 277n46).

determines their perceptions and behavior. It is not a matter of a pre-defined model of action that serves as a norm or general measure for judging actions. With all the more reason, precaution is not in any way a legally sanctioned imperative. No more does it enable one to decide whether an act is in itself just or unjust. (Callon, *et al.* 2009: 223)¹⁰⁴

In the next section I consider what a precautionary form of knowledge production might look like in practice. At this point, however, we need to address a potential criticism. Sceptics of particularism may argue that by subverting the principle of precaution as a universal ‘rule of action’ we will deprive ourselves of a useful tool for supporting ecologically defensive action. Recent criticisms of the principle of precaution suggest, however, that it is precisely because of its status as a universal principle that it fails to offer any clear guidance in applying policy to ecological problems. Cass R. Sunstein points out (2003: 1008) that since there will inevitably be reasons to exercise precaution for or against any course of action, no precautionary measures can be instituted or acted upon without violating the principle; consequently, “[a]ny effort to be universally precautionary will be paralyzing, forbidding every imaginable step, including no step at all.”

In fact, the particularist can support precautionary action while avoiding its paralyzing effects; that is, just as the form of precautionary action and the degree to which it is applied in any give case cannot be dictated ahead of time by referring to a ‘general

¹⁰⁴ Similarly Whiteside claims (2006: 27) that “Precaution is this uncertainty [about what nature is and how we come to know it] made self-conscious. As a result, precaution cannot prejudge environmental risks on the grounds that certain changes are unnatural. Nor can it make decisions about technologies as a function of their so-called sustainability. Rather, precaution obliges us to examine and discuss the innumerable linkages through which we come to know nature. It diversifies the contacts at the interface of nature and humanity. It problematizes and opens to discussion the values that are implicit in the scientific framing of environmental issues.”

principle of precaution', the idea of ecologically defensive action need not be based on any principle. For the particularist, the contents of the particular case dictate if and how precaution is to be applied.

Interestingly, despite my appeal to Whiteside in favour of a non-principled understanding of precaution (above), it seems that ultimately he endorses a principled view of precaution. Precaution can be understood as a principle of action, he suggests, as long as we allow that there may be certain exceptions. He claims, for instance, that precautionary measures cannot be undertaken independent of an evaluation of the *known* outcomes of different actions. Consider the following example:

If precautionary alarms had been sounded about the pesticide DDT, and yet if a precautionary ban would have meant that thousands of people would die in certain tropical countries because no adequate substitute for mosquito control could be found, then perhaps for those regions, for a time, an exception to a precautionary ban might be arranged. (Whiteside 2006: 55)

Nonetheless, "[m]aking temporary, localized exceptions to the [precautionary] principle does not mean that the principle itself should be overturned" (Whiteside 2006: 55). His worry, I think, is that we will abandon the notion of precaution altogether unless it is decisive or counts in the same way in every case to which it is applied. If we allow, however, that precaution is a really a process for determining what action is called for in specific cases then we needn't worry about whether certain actions are exceptions to some general rule; we can, in fact, avoid such questions altogether.

3.5 An Ecology of Case Studies

Here I briefly consider Kristin Shrader-Frechette's case-studies approach to ecology as an example of how a particularist ecology might work in practice. According to Schrader-Frechette (1994; 1995; 2002), most ecologists base their ethical claims on 'soft' ethical principles or on 'hard' scientific-deductive theories (or on some combination of the two). She claims, however, that ecological principles and their associated scientific concepts (e.g., integrity, stability, species, ecosystem, etc) are either too vague to give guidance in specific cases or misleading because they ignore the fact that ecological concepts and scientific 'laws' are themselves based on controversial methodological value judgements.¹⁰⁵ As an alternative, she calls for a new, 'practical' approach to ecology and policy decision-making:

Both soft ecology and hard ecology seem to fail to address the uniqueness, particularity, and historicity of many ecological phenomena. As a consequence, it likely will be difficult for either of them to provide clear directions for how to preserve the environment or how to guide environmental ethics and policy. For this we need a middle path—dictated in part by humans... We need the practical ecology of case studies [which...relies] on the practice of ecologists and on their individual cases. (1995: 635)¹⁰⁶

The logic of Schrader-Frechette's case-studies approach has much in common with

¹⁰⁵ For example, Holmes Rolston III claims that species represent a 'core, biological identity'; "respecting this identity generates duties to species" (2003: 409). However, as Schrader-Frechette points out, "although the term "species" has a commonly accepted meaning, and although evolutionary theory gives a precise technical sense to the term, there is general agreement in biology neither on what counts as causally sufficient or necessary conditions for a set of organisms to be a species nor on whether species are individuals" (1994: 627; 1995: 229).

¹⁰⁶ Elsewhere she claims that "[i]f exceptionless ecological laws are unlikely, and if there are problems with applying general ecological theory...problem solving in applied ecology may require a new logic of case studies." (Shrader-Frechette 1994: 230)

particularism.¹⁰⁷ Case-studies consist of small-scale experiments and field-studies focusing on ‘one or two species’ conducted on the basis of specific policy decisions and environmental management choices. The case-studies approach utilizes “rules of thumb and informal inferences based on natural history” which do not provide grounds for general ethical principles (1995: 634), but which can help to determine how the presence of a certain feature *might* make a difference to the case at hand (1994: 234). Shrader-Frechette’s approach is consistent with a particularist ethic in its suggestion that the best policy decisions are those made in the absence of general principles which stipulate certain features as right- or wrong-making reasons in advance of particular cases. As she says, “ecology might be most helpful in undergirding environmental ethics and policy making when it does not try to predict complex interactions among many species, but instead avoids the uncertainties of both soft and hard ecology and attempts to predict what will happen for only one or two taxa in a particular case” (1995: 633).

One concern is that Shrader-Frechette’s approach will be ineffective or simply impractical for complex cases requiring decisions that entail severe and widespread consequences for many species (including humans). We cannot, for example, make a decision about whether to construct a hydroelectric dam on a major river on the basis of the suspected consequences for merely one or two species. But neither Shrader-Frechette nor Dancy argues that we should limit the amount of information used in making policy decisions to a degree which obscures (or ignores) the complexity of ecological issues (albeit some limits must be set). Nothing prevents us from utilizing

¹⁰⁷ This is not to say that Shrader-Frechette would agree with the particularist’s claim that moral principles play no essential role in ecological ethics.

information from many field-studies into our assessments of complex cases; rather, by making a decision on the basis of the details of the particular case alone, we avoid unhelpful generalizations or misleading concepts which may lead us to overlook or misinterpret important details.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ See Kristin Shrader-Frechette, "Biocentrism, Biological Science, and Ethical Theory," In: *Land, Value, Community: Callicot and Environmental Philosophy*. Edited by Wayne Ouderkirk and Jim Hill. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 85-95.

Conclusion

I conclude that a fruitful alliance may be forged between Latour's ecology and Dancy's ethical particularism. In specific, Dancy's moral metaphysics and his epistemology of reasons complement, and lend support to, Latour's concept of actors as the basic normative concept of experimental deliberation. In return, Latour's ecology provides a forum for exploring the possibility of a non-principled approach to ecological ethics.

Nonetheless, particularists face strong opposition from ecologists who see principles as essential for resolving environmental issues. There is widespread agreement that environmental catastrophes can only be averted through large-scale social change and, as Dale Jamieson writes, "[f]or social change to occur it is important that there be people of integrity and character who act on the basis of principles and ideals."¹⁰⁹ By contrast, particularists view the idea that the possibility of social change depends on individuals with a penchant for rule-following as an assumption for which there is no solid basis. Moreover, particularists deny that there is any essential link between integrity (or 'character') and the 'person of principle' (Dancy 2009). They worry that individuals who 'stick to their convictions' are more likely to misinterpret the features of particular

¹⁰⁹ Dale Jamieson, "Ethics, Public Policy, and Global Warming," (*Science, Technology, & Human Values*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 1992), 151. According to David Backhurst, "The particularist needs an account of moral commitment, a way of making sense of how our moral lives can be guided by an allegiance to certain substantive visions of the good. This problem seems acute where particularists are strong, wide holists, holding that no property, not even those picked out by 'thick' moral concepts, has moral relevance antecedent to its interaction with other properties in particular cases" (Backhurst in Little 2000: 172).

cases in ways that match (or conflict least with) their principles. This sort of character may have its advantages. Yet, as Dancy's warns, "[i]f you are going to be incorrigible you had better always be right; incorrigible error is the worst of all worlds."¹¹⁰

The question remains, however, whether anything more than a speculative meta-ethic could possibly emerge from Latour's particularized ecology. Like Dancy, Latour offers no guidance on particular moral issues and there is little in his approach to indicate how moral decisions will be given final approval if not ultimately by way of 'unaided judgement'. This is all the more troubling when we consider Dancy's claim that the 'skills of discernment' necessary for becoming competent in moral judgement are not readily (or equally) available to everyone. The problem, he tells us, is that our moral sensitivities need to be cultivated, if at all, at an early age:

To have the relevant sensitivities just is to be able to get things right case by case. The only remaining question is how we might get into this enviable state. And the answer is that for us it is probably too late. As Aristotle held, moral education is the key; for those who are past educating, there is no real remedy. (1993: 64)¹¹¹

If this is true, then skeptics of particularism may seem to have good reason for doubting the possibility of a particularist ecological ethic. How can the particularist respond to such doubts? To answer this question, consider Aldo Leopold's well-known definition of an ecological ethic:

¹¹⁰ Jonathan Dancy, "Moral Particularism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2009.

¹¹¹ Dancy (1993: 50, 58n12) has suggested that Aristotle is slightly overzealous on this point.

[a]n ethic may be regarded as a mode of guidance for meeting ecological situations so new or intricate, or involving such deferred reactions, that the path of social expediency is not discernable to the average individual. (1949: 239)¹¹²

The first thing to notice is that, like Dancy, Leopold identifies the average individual's lack of discernment as the motivation for a mode of guidance. Thus, Dancy's acknowledgment of this deficiency (and its sources), should not count against his approach. The question is whether we should be trying to identify a 'mode of guidance' with a set of principles or something else altogether.

The first interpretation suggests that individuals are in need of a sort of 'crutch for moral judgement' in the form of principles which can, perhaps, serve as 'indispensible shorthands' for less-than-ideal deliberative situations (including circumstances where we are pressed to make tough decisions with little time for critical reflection). Understood in this sense, Leopold's definition seems to imply that when it comes to complex ecological issues we need to defer to some kind of authority who *is* able to discern the path of social expediency. We may well be forced to adopt such a strategy in cases of emergency. But this raises serious concerns, for instance, about the potential for moral corruption and the

¹¹² It is interesting to note that Leopold's definition bears a certain resemblance to the foundations we have identified for the precautionary principle. As Whiteside tells us: "[t]he precautionary principle springs from the realization that existing levels of scientific understanding are not always sufficient to allow societies to devise effective, timely strategies for environmental protection. Requiring high levels of scientific proof before acting is in certain cases an *irrational* strategy (Whiteside 2006: 146—Emphasis in original). The particularist (along with Latour) might argue that needing to determine the foundations of morality before acting (a view that Minter (2003: 135) attributes to Callicot) is equally irrational.

sorts of regimes that would benefit from a public desperate to retain moral order in times of ecological crises.¹¹³

Note, however, that nothing in Leopold's definition commits us to a mode of guidance in the form of a set of principles. Indeed, if the path of social expediency is not discernable to the average individual, introducing him or her to a set of principles will do nothing to change that fact. For one can always ask, 'why *these* principles?' Presumably, however, the answer to this question is in some sense unavailable to the average individual since this is why principles were called for in the first place.

It seems that there are, in fact, two questions that Leopold's definition of an ethic might be understood to address. There is a question about 'what it is right or wrong to do' in any given scenario and a different question about how one gets into a position to 'see' how the features of a case contribute to the rightness or wrongness of various courses of action. I see the search for principles as an attempt to by-pass, or to make up for, what amounts to an inherent inability in most people to answer the latter question. By contrast, on the particularist's view, although individuals may lack the requisite skills of moral discernment, they are not *inherently* lacking in this respect; thus, in refusing to entertain a core set of guiding principles, it is worthwhile considering how we might foster a sensitivity to the way reasons work and to the contributions that particular features can make in particular cases. Leopold's notion of a 'mode of guidance' might be

¹¹³ See, for example, Kent Peacock's discussion of the threat of so-called 'life-boat regimes' in his, "Symbiosis and the Ecological Role of Philosophy," (*Dialogue*, 38, 1999), 699–717 and Stephen Gardiner, "A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Ethics and the Problem of Moral Corruption," (*Environmental Values*, 15, 2006): 397-413.

best understood in the context of this latter point; that is, an ecological ethic may best be understood as a way of putting individuals in a position to make better decisions by requiring us to pay special attention to how we deliberate and by honing our skills of discernment. In this sense, the call for an ecological ethic can be regarded as a call for greater public participation in the production of ecological knowledge or a 'mode of guidance' resulting from institutional practices which place scientists, researchers, ethicists and the general public in a more intimate relationship for dealing with matters of common concern. How we may best go about achieving this relationship and what it might look like in practice are still open questions which are subjects for further investigation. A Particularist-Latourian ecology encourages us to see these as central questions which should not be marginalized in the search for a reliable set of moral principles.

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