

# Ecocentrism: My road less travelled

## Patrick Curry

### About the author

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### Keywords

Becoming ecocentric

I first saw my way clear to writing this essay in a conversation with Ian Whyte around a campfire in Algonquin Park, Ontario. (Discussions closer to home with Joe Gray also helped.) Equally, however, it seems appropriate that I should be starting it in a café in Paris, France. Let me explain.

My path to ecocentrism differs markedly from most others I know. For one thing, I like being ‘in nature’ but am not much of an outdoorsman. Nor have I been inspired by natural science. I am, in fact, incorrigibly urban, and I have found my way through the humanities, arts – painting, music, fiction and poetry – and non-naturalistic philosophy, especially metaphysics. In that sense my path is an eccentric one, but, for that very reason, it may be interesting or amusing, and perhaps helpful to others out there who are more like me. Needless to say, I didn’t plan it this way. It developed, as these things do, in organic ways that are only clear in hindsight.

I was born in Winnipeg, Canada, in 1951, and lived there till I was fifteen. The year of my birth, my father and grandfather (on my mother’s side) purchased 4000 hectares on Lake Manitoba, which they turned into a wild goose sanctuary. Sir Peter Scott, a friend of my grandfather’s, was also involved. So I grew up familiar with wetlands, waterfowl and the avian inhabitants of the boreal forest and suburban gardens, as well as the great brooding presence of the North, which is never far away. I’m still very fond of those birds. I did a little duck-shooting, as you do there, but slaughtering wild animals never really appealed. (Nowadays, I’d arm ‘em if I could.)

I was also taken off for months at a time by my mother, a great traveller,

to East Africa, where I got to know the spectacular fauna there. On a couple of safaris, we were accompanied by the great ornithologist John G Williams. John was old school: the rarer the bird, the more important it was to shoot, skin and stuff it. That’s how an obscure subspecies of Ugandan cormorant ended up being named after me: *Phalacrocorax carbo patricki*.

However, I was a timid and bookish child, happier reading Ernest Thompson Seton, Charles GD Roberts and Arthur Ransome than roughing it in the wild, and human nature being nothing if not perverse, the effect of my upbringing in this context was substantially negative. I experienced where I lived – especially given its unforgiving climate, dominated by apparently endless winter – as harsh and oppressive, and, culturally speaking, hopelessly provincial; indeed, literally so. (This was unfair, to some extent, but emotions often are.) And, although its birds were incredible, wild Africa itself was raw, overwhelming and often frankly terrifying.

When, therefore, I removed to a small liberal arts boarding school in a bucolic part of upstate New York, I found it idyllic. Here was a nature – temperate, intricate and graced with gentle hills, tall trees and swimmable fresh water – that wasn’t supremely indifferent at best, let alone trying to kill me. It was actually friendly! Fatefully, at exactly the same time I read *The Lord of the Rings*, falling into it in the way one falls in love: helplessly, and utterly enchanted. What happened then, I now see, was that the natural world of upstate New York and New England merged with that of Middle-earth – which, as anyone who has read the book

knows, is extraordinarily vivid, varied and alive. In short, nature became literary, a kind of great non-anthropocentric art, while literature became a natural world.

By the way, *The Lord of the Rings* is not a philosophical treatise, and the relationships with nature therein are not always consistent. But the forests and rivers and mountains of Middle-earth are always fully distinct, independent, sentient characters in their own right; none are generic. And although you will find a Christian stewardship ethics (“Lothlórien is beautiful because there the trees were loved,” says Tolkien in a letter [1981]), there are also instances of ecocentrism. Frodo experiences the intrinsic value of a tree – “He felt a delight in wood and the touch of it, neither as forester nor as carpenter; it was the delight of the living tree itself” (Tolkien, 1966: book 2, chapter 6) – and Goldberry rebukes Frodo for asking whether Tom Bombadil owns the Old Forest: “No indeed! ... The trees and the grasses and all things growing or living in the land each belong to themselves” (book 1, chapter 7).

Eventually, my search for somewhere I felt truly at home took me to the British Isles, where my continuing flight from the Canadian mid-West ensconced me in London. I have remained there more-or-less since. I get by in a series of forays, from parks and the Thames (weekly), to Burnham Beeches and the Ashdown Forest (occasionally) and semi-wild Ireland (two or three times a year).

Before settling down, however, I spent some time at the University of California at Santa Cruz, where I was lucky enough to study under Gregory Bateson during his last year there. As much mentor and model as formal teacher, he was a big influence, and although he didn’t contextualize it so, his work was precisely about how to think and, since they cannot ultimately be separated, live ecologically.

Bateson insisted that there are two modern superstitions (his word): *supernaturalism* and *mechanism*. Equally mistaken and damaging, they also covertly conspire. What would Dawkins

*et alii* and the religious fundamentalists do without each other? Plus, each caste is conveniently left in charge of its side of things. In contrast, Bateson taught that life as it is lived, including not only the natural world but also the mind of the human animal, is both wholly material and wholly mental. It comprises the sum of its ongoing relationships, and these, again, are at once embodied and intangible. (Where exactly is a relationship located?) Hence the titles of his two main books: *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972) and *Mind and Nature: A necessary unity* (1979).

Bateson called this way of apprehending the world ‘systems theory’ (as opposed to theories that prioritize *things*) but, for me, it has come to fuller life as ecocentrism. It runs against a profoundly entrenched tendency in Western metaphysics, as it informs our societies and cultures, to divide everything into a series of exclusive, value-laden binaries: mental/spiritual versus physical/material, natural versus cultural, masculine versus feminine, and so on. These are not only anti-ecological – indeed, ecocidal – but also profoundly disenchanting. Such divisions destroy the wonder of life, which is, as Max Weber says, “concrete magic” (Weber, 1991: 282). Only thus is life’s intrinsic value revealed, helping us to realize that and resist it being carved up, commodified and sold off.

Back in England, I became involved with a tiny group called the Campaign for Political Ecology (where I met Sandy Irvine), then Left Bio (run by the late David Orton but of which Ian Whyte was a stalwart member, as was Victor Postnikov, now our poetry editor). I also got to know others, in addition to those already mentioned, whose work further shaped my thinking in ecocentric ways. They include David Abram, Graham Harvey, Val Plumwood, Sean Kane, Stan Rowe, Ariel Salleh, Ruth Thomas-Pellicer, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Wendy Wheeler. It’s worth noting that these exemplars, teachers and friends, like the others mentioned here, were never only intellectual. They were and are equally moral. Maybe these two aspects cannot,

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or should not, be separated; ultimately, it's about integrity. That's what they communicate, and what we most need to learn.

With Rowe, together with his colleague Ted Mosquin, the term as well as idea of ecocentrism finally came front-and-centre. I had already absorbed quite a lot of Deep Ecology by then, but parts of it left me unhappy. A single ecological 'Big Self' is not only impossible – there are no selves without others – it's solipsistic, whereas ecology is precisely about relationships (plural), while the corresponding call for 'unity' tries to ignore or flatten out differences, which are important as well as unavoidable. We want a world where difference is respected, even appreciated. Ecocentrism shed this unhelpful baggage. (To be fair, though, Richard Sylvan had already done so in his unjustly neglected co-authored book, *The Greening of Ethics* [Sylvan and Bennett, 1994].)

Here's a curious little affiliation: as a boy, I spent time with the redoubtable Al Hochbaum, director of research at Delta Waterfowl Station, down the road from my grandfather's goose sanctuary on Lake Manitoba. Many years later, I found he had been the student of Aldo Leopold who had insisted Leopold should write down his ideas in what became 'Thinking Like a Mountain' (Leopold, 1949). Hochbaum was eventually pushed out of Delta by the managers and money-men... Heigh-ho.

Out of my own interest and concern, I proposed a book on ecological (not 'environmental') ethics, and they accepted. Written with invaluable feedback from Stan Rowe, David Orton and Val Plumwood, it was published in 2006. (I found that when academics at conferences found I wasn't writing for professional reasons they tended to edge away from me, as if it might be catching.) When Polity asked me for a second edition, I took a year to make it bigger and better, and the result appeared in 2011. Meanwhile, the Ecocentric Alliance was born, partly from what remained of Left Bio but with some fresh blood. Then I encountered Joe Gray

through the charity Population Matters, of which we were both members; a chance meeting, as we say in Middle-earth. After wider discussions about a successor to the late *Wild Earth* journal, Joe and I met in a pub near the Barbican in London, and over some organic lager we hatched *The Ecological Citizen*. The first thing we did was to involve Ian Whyte in Ottawa (who is likewise ecocentric to his bones). The Journal in turn has introduced me to many fine ecocentrics who were new to me, some of whom are now my fellow-editors.

I continue to find support and shape for ecocentrism in poems from the heart, the non-anthropocentric humanism of Montaigne, ecofeminism, philosophical Daoism, animism, civic (and potentially eco-) republicanism, myth, biosemiotics, Mahayana Buddhism and indigenous ecological wisdom. Is such eclecticism scandalous? Maybe a better question, in an era of globalization, would be: is it avoidable? In any case, these are all projects which are either non-modern, or working within but against modernity and its ecocidal programme of disenchantment in the name of total mastery.

Contrariwise, the sign and seal of a living natural world, including ourselves as one of its plain citizens, is wonder. That is what tells us to pay attention, because we are in the presence of what makes life worth living. As William Blake says, "Life delights in life" (Blake, 1908). This is decidedly not a matter of psychology or what is called subjectivity. Wild wonder reveals both truth and value, and without personal experience of that, all the political, economic and scientific programmes in the world, important though they are, will fail.

My own work these days is mainly trying to understand (not 'explain') and describe enchantment. What are its dynamics, conditions and effects? How can we make a place for it in our lives, both individual and collective? How can we honour and encourage it? Maybe this is quixotic, even hopeless. Ultimately, though, what is

worth doing these days that isn't? What we most need is not hope but a stubborn sense of wonder together with courage – plain courage in a tight place. In our shared quest for an ecocentric world, I take much from the company, for which I give deep thanks. ■

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‘Green Pietà’  
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