The Randomness Effect

Harvey L. Hix
University of Wyoming
hhix@uwyo.edu

Abstract

On the premise that sound ecological decision depends on sound ecological description, this essay takes the contrast between randomness and design as the provocation for a redescription of the human ecological situation. In phenomenological terms, it argues, our ecological condition includes the randomness effect, namely that something appears "random" or "designed" to me, not because of how it is, but because of how I stand in relation to it. In metaphysical terms, our ecological condition realizes influence asymmetry, the principle that in any system, the subsuming has more influence on the subsumed than vice versa: the influence of a system on an entity within it is relatively strong, immediate, comprehensive, and immitigable; the influence of the entity on the system is relatively weak, mediated, partial, and mitigable. In psychological terms, our ecological condition reflects umbrasubjectivity, the condition of the self not in more or less symmetrical relation to a similar self, but in an asymmetrical relation to a dissimilar. This essay concludes that ecological description in terms of the randomness effect, influence asymmetry, and umbrasubjectivity shifts ecological deliberation and ecological decision away from ethics and economics, toward poetics, and begins to reflect on a number of upshots: technocracy cannot overcome the ecological situation of humans; ecology occurs under the sign of mystery, not of problem; ecology is a social project, situated in a social world; ecology is interminable; market principles are inadequate to, because irrelevant to, our ecological situation; *ethical* principles are inadequate to, because irrelevant to, our ecological situation. As a result, ecology more closely resembles the religious than the ethical; and a redescribed ecology also repositions ecopoetics.

Keywords: Philosophy and ecology, philosophy and ecopoetics, randomness, design, influence asymmetry, umbrasubjectivity.

Resumen

Dado que una decisión ecológica sensata depende de una descripción ecológica sensata, el presente ensayo toma el contraste entre el azar y el diseño como la provocación para una re-descripción de la situación ecológica humana. En términos fenomenológicos, como se argumenta, nuestra situación ecológica incluye el efecto del azar, es decir, que algo me parece "azar" o "diseño" no porque cómo es, sino por cómo me sitúo en relación a ello. En términos metafísicos, nuestra condición ecológica realiza la asimetría de la influencia, el principio de que en todo sistema lo incluyente influye más en lo incluido, que viceversa: la influencia de un sistema en una entidad interior es relativamente fuerte, inmediata, abarcadora, y no se puede mitigar; la influencia de la entidad en el sistema es relativamente débil, parcial, y se puede mediar y mitigar. En términos psicológicos, nuestra condición ecológica refleja la umbrasubjetividad, la condición del propio ser que no está en una relación más o menos simétrica con un ser parecido, sino en una relación asimétrica con un otro disímil. Se concluye que la descripción ecológica en términos del efecto del azar, de la asimetría de la influencia y de la umbrasubjetividad aparta la deliberación ecológica y la decisión ecológica lejos de la ética y de la economía, para desplazarlas hacia la poética. Esto conduce a una serie de conclusiones: la tecnocracia no puede superar la situación ecológica de los humanos; la ecología actúa bajo el signo del misterio y no del problema; la ecología es un proyecto social situado en un mundo social; la ecología es interminable; los principios del mercado son inadecuados, ya que son irrelevantes, con respecto a nuestra situación ecológica; los principios *éticos* son inadecuados, ya que son irrelevantes, con respecto a nuestra situación ecológica; la ecología se asemeja más lo religioso que a lo ético; y una ecología re-descrita al mismo tiempo re-posiciona la ecopoética.

Looking through Dürer's drawing grid onto a landscape reveals in that landscape much that otherwise one might not observe, enabling one to draw a more accurate picture than one could without the grid. Analogously, looking through the concepts of randomness and design onto the "landscape" of ecology facilitates a more accurate ecological understanding. Privileging a phenomenological angle to start its reflection, one blending scholarly and poetical meditation, this paper will look, not *at* randomness and design, but *through* them onto the question of how description of our ecological situation influences our ecological deliberation and decision. Viewing the ecological landscape through the "grid" of randomness and design reveals ethics and economics as less salient means of ecological deliberation than they might seem without the grid, and reveals poetics as more salient and robust. Taking the contrast between randomness and design as the provocation for a redescription of the human ecological situation, this philosophically-oriented essay also repositions ecopoetics on the basis of the central concepts of "influence asymmetry" and "umbrasubjectivity."

From Sound Description to Sound Decision

Climate change deniers are right about one thing, at least: namely, that description conditions decision. That the category is "climate change deniers," rather than, say, "recycling refusers" or "high thermostat setters," indicates the shared recognition. The common feature that creates the category is a shared description (the climate is not changing), not a shared decision ("I will water my lawn as often as I like," or "I will drive a gas-guzzling SUV if I want to"). Typically and problematically, climate change deniers work backward: they embrace the description they need in order to rationalize the decisions to which they are already committed. Climate-change deniers do not first research the latest scientific findings on glacial retreat, determine disinterestedly that those findings are a "bunch of hoo-ha," and, having ascertained that climate change is not occurring, *then* decide to go buy that SUV and drive it to work instead of taking public transportation. They deny climate change in order to warrant the prior commitment to a green lawn and a private commute: they would be flat-earthers if that is what it took.

Still, there is a lesson there for those of us who wish to work in the other direction, not to embrace whatever description would justify the decisions to which we are committed already, but to adjust our decisions in light of the best available description. Since the quality of our decisions depends so heavily on the quality of our descriptions, we will be wise to attend to our descriptions very carefully. Such is the relationship between fact and value that inaccurate description occasions inept decision.

The better our descriptions, the better our decisions; the worse our descriptions, the worse our decisions.

To illustrate the point, imagine a family of three, in which the parents are practicing Christian Scientists and the child contracts a life-threatening infection such as tetanus. The parents' fatally inept decision to treat the disease exclusively by prayer, without administering antibiotics, might seem to result from bad judgment. But the difference between the imagined Christian Scientists and the rest of us (those who, if we had a child with tetanus, would take the child to a doctor for treatment by antibiotics) is *not* that the rest of us all have a sound faculty of judgment while Christian Scientists all have a defective one. The difference does not lie in the general *faculty* of judgment, but in the *basis* for this particular judgment. The rest of us, confronted with a case of tetanus, would decide what to do on the basis of a description featuring bacteria as the immediate cause of that illness, but the Christian Scientist parents decide what to do on the basis of a description that identifies God as the immediate cause. If the Christian Scientist parents' description of the situation were accurate, if they were *right* that God, not bacteria, is the immediate cause of the child's tetanus, then their decision to treat the case of tetanus by praying for the child's health would be a wise decision. Given their description, their judgment is sound. What needs fixing in this situation is not the parents' capacity for judgment, but their description of the situation, the description on the basis of which they *apply* their capacity for judgment. Nothing about the parents' capacity for judgment needs mending; adjust their description of the situation, and the decision, too, will be rectified. The child will die because the parents decided on the basis of an inaccurate description of the circumstances; had they (the same parents, with the same capacity for judgment) decided on the basis of an accurate description, the child would have lived.

The infection example enjoys the advantage of consensus around the description: Christian Scientists being a very small minority, the vast majority of parents would decide on the basis of a description of the disease as immediately caused by bacteria rather than by God; so the vast majority of parents who *could* take their ill child to a doctor *would*. However, it is not the *consensus* around the description that connects it to sound decision-making: its accuracy alone does. To illustrate the point, consider Amartya Sen's argument that famine is not a function of food quantity but of entitlement relations (8). If a poll were taken, surely the majority of those questioned would hold the "common-sense" view that famines occur when, and because, there is not enough food to go around. Sen argues, though, that famine does not result from an insufficient food supply to feed everyone, but because at a given place and time, the political and economic arrangements withhold from certain persons entitlement adequate to secure enough food to live on (154-55). If the common-sense view is right, then my decision to focus famine-prevention efforts on food production will be a good one; conversely, if Sen is right, my decision will be a bad one. Which description will lead me to a sound decision is not determined by which one is more widely accepted, but by which one proves more accurate. I should base my decision on Sen's description of famine causation because it is accurate, *despite* its being held by very few other persons.

Sound decision depends on accurate description in "local" decisions such as the ill child, and in "global" decisions such as famine prevention. It also applies to specifically ecological decisions, as, for example, the poet, farmer, and environmental activist Wendell Berry (b. 1934) has argued. Berry contends that no cure to ecological problems such as "soil erosion, soil degradation, the pollution of waterways by sediment and toxic chemicals," and so on, "is possible, either in policy or practice, except within understood limits, which is to say within a correct diagnosis. This requires patience. *A good solution*" Berry asserts, "*has to begin with a description of the problem that is full, clear, and reliable*" (qtd. in Olmstead, n.p., emphasis added). This dependence of decision on description lies behind Henry David Thoreau's maxim that "There are a thousand hacking at the branches […] to one who is striking at the root" (75).

The stakes of description can be immeasurable. The stakes of ecological description *are* immeasurable: on them depend the condition of the planetary biosphere, the well-being of billions of humans, and even the continued existence of the human species. In this paper, therefore, I address not our (individual or collective) ecological judgments *per se*, but the basis for those judgments, our (individual and collective) description of our ecological situation. What calls this paper makes for alterations to our ecological decisions remain secondary and derivative; its primary call is for refinements to our description of our ecological situation, our *basis* for ecological decision. In this context, the notions of randomness and design offer a cue as to why precisely such redescription is needed.

The Randomness Effect

In *phenomenological* terms, our ecological condition includes what might be coined "the randomness effect." As a concept that applies to all kinds of domains, it is, for instance, most memorably exemplified in a scene of the film *The Silence of the Lambs* in which Clarice, the aspiring FBI agent on assignment to catch a serial killer, discusses the case with her roommate, Ardelia. They are trying to piece together the available evidence and the enigmatic hints dropped by the brilliant but menacing psychologist Hannibal Lecter, when Ardelia, case file in hand, asks: "Is this Lecter's handwriting? Clarice, doesn't this random scattering of sites seem desperately random, like the elaborations of a bad liar?" Clarice wonders out loud, "'Desperately random.' What does he mean?" Ardelia guesses, "Not random at all, maybe. Like there's some pattern here …?" The scene draws on the widely-shared understanding that detectives and psychologists are especially adept at discerning design where others perceive only randomness: Clarice, the student detective/psychologist, is learning to recognize design where others merely detect randomness, and Lecter *is* precisely a genius psychologist because he sees design always and everywhere. Lecter knows, and the film depends on the audience's knowing, that even something that looks *very* random still only *looks* random. Good detectives and good psychologists keep investigating, no matter how much apparent randomness confronts them, until they find the design. In drawing on that understanding, the scene highlights a feature of the concepts of randomness and

design as they are most commonly defined and accepted: "design" refers (synchronically) to the structure or (diachronically) to the causation of the thing in itself, and "randomness" indicates my failure to recognize that structure or causation. Clarice knows that as long as things look random to her, she is not seeing "what is there," which *will*, however, readily reveal itself to her when she finally does see design. Said differently, the randomness is in her perception alone; the design is in the world.

"Design," thus, applies to how things *are*, "randomness" to how they *appear*. Things *seem* random, but *have* design. They seem random, not when they have no design, but when the design they do possess is not currently available to me. If I were to go fishing tomorrow morning, I might use "random" in recounting the adventure to friends in the pub later in the evening. But from my saying it was random when I got a nibble from a fish and when I did not, my listener will not be learning that the animals in the lake eat or do not eat independently of whether they are hungry, or that those fish locate themselves in the lake independently of water temperature or abundance of vegetation. What my listener will in fact learn is that I did not know the topography of the lake, to what sort of fish it serves as a habitat, and what their shoaling or feeding patterns are. I experienced the situation as random not because it *was* random, but because I am ignorant of the factors relevant to the design. There was a pattern, but I just did not see it.

Design is comprehensive: if something results from, or manifests, design, *all* of it does. Of an ecosystem, say: if it is design that coyotes eat field mice and other small rodents on the grassland, then it is not random that cows eat grass on that same grassland, and it is not random that *this* coyote is eating *this* field mouse at *this* moment, even though when I saw this coyote in this field, I could have predicted only that it would eat *a* field mouse, not that it would eat *this* field mouse. My ability to predict the one but not the other does not arise because one reflects design and the other randomness. My ability to predict is a function of how coarse-grained or fine-grained my knowledge is of such factors as the location of individual field mice in the field, not a function of a "real" shift from design governing generality to randomness governing particularity.

Randomness and design did not originate together as paired concepts in, for instance, physics, to describe two exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories of phenomena in the world. The folk theory that everything originates in either randomness or design may serve quite well in many contexts, such as when people are making excuses to their life partner for their large gambling losses. However, as a scientific theory regarding the causation of events and the structure of objects in the world, this folk wisdom is implausible: that some events fulfill one order of causation, other events fulfill a contrary order of causation, and that both sorts of events occur in our world, these three combined assumptions lead to all the problems of dualism we know to expect from having watched Descartes locate the jointure of mind and body in the pineal gland, "that part [of the brain] in which the 'common sense' is said to be found" (98). If it was designed that the house have picture windows facing the golf course and random that my drive sliced in just that direction, was it random or designed

that the window broke? As categories to account for objects and events *in themselves*, independently of perception of them, randomness and design do not work.

An analogy helps to clarify the distinction. Roland Barthes observes that what I experience from fiction is not reality *per se*, but what he calls "the reality effect" (148). Barthes begins by noting a seemingly useless detail in a Flaubert story, the speaker's mentioning, in describing a room, that "an old piano supported, under a barometer, a pyramidal heap of boxes and cartons" (141). Even if "it is just possible to see in the notation of the piano an indication of its owner's bourgeois standing" (Barthes (142), yet "no purpose seems to justify reference to the barometer," an object that seems not to participate "in the order of the *notable*" (142). Barthes finds that Flaubert's description "is thoroughly mixed with 'realistic' imperatives, as if the referent's exactitude, superior or indifferent to any other function, governed and alone justified its description" (145). Its *resistance* to "advancing the plot," its "pure and simple 'representation' of 'the real'" (Barthes 146) allows it to confirm "the great mythic opposition of the *true-to-life* (the lifelike) and the *intelligible*" (146). Said resistance and representation thus advance in literature a "realism" aligned with and "contemporary with the regnum of 'objective' history" and other institutions serving "the incessant need to authenticate the 'real'" (146).[1] Details such as the barometer in Flaubert's story do not communicate reality itself, but instead perform what Barthes calls "the referential illusion" (seeming to *denote* while actually *signifying* reality), and thus create the reality effect (148).

Similarly, what I experience from the environment is not randomness *per se*, but what, modifying Barthes' term, I call "the randomness effect." Randomness and design are better understood as referring to my experience of phenomena than to the phenomena themselves. It is more precise to maintain than to blur the distinction between "I experience it *as* random" and "it *is* random." The former means I do not comprehend the design, the latter that no design exists. The second constitutes a *much* stronger claim, just as atheism amounts to a much stronger claim than agnosticism. My designating something "random" or "designed" does not disclose a feature or quality of the thing in itself, but does indicate something about my subjectivity. Something appears "random" or "designed" to me, not because of how it is, but because of how I stand in relation to it.

Influence Asymmetry

To move from phenomenology to metaphysics, in *metaphysical* terms, our ecological condition realizes what I call "influence asymmetry." Indeed, the randomness effect attends, and draws attention to, the principle that in any system, the subsuming has more influence on the subsumed than vice versa: the influence of a system on an entity within it is relatively strong, immediate, comprehensive, and immitigable; by contrast, the influence of the entity on the system is relatively weak, mediated, partial,

---

[1] Photography, exhibitions of ancient objects, tourism of monumental sites, and so on, all contribute to such authentification.

and mitigable. Take as an example the relationship between a sand dune (the subsuming system) and a sand grain (the subsumed entity). The influence of the dune on the grain proves relatively strong (if the dune changes, the grain is changed), immediate (the dune's shift itself does the shifting of the grain), comprehensive (the whole grain is moved with every move of the dune), and immitigable (the grain cannot keep itself from being displaced). The influence of the grain on the dune is relatively weak (the grain's shifting does not noticeably shift the whole dune), mediated (if the grain *did* rearrange the dune, it would do so only *as* part of a group of grains, as in, say, a slide), partial (the shift of the grain is not the whole shift of the dune), and mitigable (the grain might move toward the west as part of the dune's moving east).

The principle of influence asymmetry describes a *relationship*, not *things*. It does not divide things once and for all into categories of system and entity, subsuming and subsumed, influencer and influenced. In the illustration just offered, the sand dune is the system, but it would be entity rather than system if the illustration were of a whole desert. The dune subsumes the grain, but is subsumed by the desert. The asymmetry inheres in the relationship, not in either party to the relationship. In addition, some other strong claims could be made about influence asymmetry. For example, influence asymmetry applies regardless of the *type* of system: it holds for biological systems (e.g. tree/leaf), physical systems (solar system/comet), mechanical systems (internal combustion engine/spark plug), social systems (bee colony/worker bee), and so on. Influence asymmetry applies regardless of how the system is construed: there is influence asymmetry between the sand dune and the sand grain whether I define the dune as a biological system or as a physical system, and influence asymmetry between a Galapagos microclimate and an individual finch whether I interpret them in Paley's terms or in Darwin's. Influence asymmetry holds in system/entity relationships always and everywhere, i.e. at all scales (cell/mitochondria or galaxy/star), and at all times (that sand grain has been more influenced than influencer since the dune originated, and will be until the dune is no more).

I do not make or defend such strong claims here, though. What matters for the purposes of my present meditation of randomness and design is that influence asymmetry holds between the earth's planetary ecosystem and any one human. The effect of the earth's ecosystem on me is relatively: strong (certain weather conditions can kill me); immediate (I see and feel any change in the weather); comprehensive (*everything* about my life is affected by the earth's ecosystem); and immitigable (I cannot stop, or significantly change, the course of the ecosystem). By contrast, my effect on the earth's ecosystem is relatively: weak (I cannot make it rain on my flower garden); mediated (any effect I *do* have, such as climate change, is not only due to *me* but to *us*); partial (my heating my house does not noticeably affect conditions elsewhere); and mitigable (the ecosystem will soon eliminate any difference I manage between the temperature outside my house and the temperature inside). Influence asymmetry is an essential, crucial feature of the relationship between the planetary biosphere and an individual human. To be accurate enough to offer a basis for sound ecological decision, any description of our ecological situation will need to take account of it.

Umbrasubjecvity

If we shift from metaphysics to psychology, in *psychological* terms, our ecological condition reflects "umbrasubjectivity." Just as influence asymmetry leads me to experience the effects of the system as random (this morning was warm, but it turned suddenly cold), so it precludes my imposing my design on the system (I want the climate to remain hospitable to humans, *not* to change, but I cannot make that happen). Influence asymmetry makes nature look random to me, and subjects me to nature utterly. The randomness effect and influence asymmetry together point toward a particular form of subjectivity. If "subjectivity" without any qualifiers refers to the self or individual, and "intersubjectivity" denotes the self in more or less symmetrical relation to a similar self, I propose "umbrasubjectivity" to refer to the self in an asymmetrical relation to a dissimilar. When I am the more influenced than influencing party in relation to influence asymmetry, I am "umbrasubjected." The coinage adds the Latin *umbra*, meaning "shadow," to the existing compound of *sub-*, meaning "under," and *jacere*, meaning "to throw," to highlight the overshadowedness of the more influenced party when it comes to influence asymmetry.

Explorations of subjectivity have tended to elide subjectivity and intersubjectivity, as if subjectivity were exhausted by intersubjectivity. Recent studies of other topics, though, have exposed the need for recognition and understanding of umbrasubjectivity as well as intersubjectivity. N. Katherine Hayles' *Unthought* (2017), for example, asserts and explores the claim that "nonconscious cognitive processes inaccessible to conscious introspection but nevertheless essential for consciousness to function" constitute "a mode of interacting with the world" (1). This fact has implications, Hayles contends, for subjectivity: "human subjects," she says, "are no longer contained—or even defined—by the boundaries of their skins" (2). Instead of being discrete, self-contained subjects that face one another in intersubjective relationship, humans are part of "a *planetary cognitive ecology* that includes both human and technical actors" (Hayles 3-4), and "in which cognition and decision-making powers are distributed throughout the system" (4). Our enmeshment within this planetary cognitive ecology and our inseparability from it both entail that our subjectivity is not as we once thought it, and that descriptions of our intersubjectivity are not complete descriptions of our subjectivity.

Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects* (2013) attends to material rather than cognitive ecology, but exposes no less dramatically the need for recognition of umbrasubjectivity. Defining hyperobjects as "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (1), Morton contends that they have implications for human subjectivity, having "already ushered in a new human phase of *hypocrisy*, *weakness*, and *lameness*" (2) by which terms he means, respectively, that we live without the possibility of a metalanguage, we experience as "disturbingly visible" a "gap between phenomenon and thing," and we experience as conspicuous the fragility of all things (2). By erasing "anything meaningfully like a 'world' at all," hyperobjects, according to Morton,

problematize "what phenomenological 'experience' is" (3). The same follows from Morton's hyperobjects as from Hayles's unthought: our subjectivity is not as we once thought it, and descriptions of our intersubjectivity are not complete descriptions of our subjectivity.

Shifting from Ethics and Economics toward Poetics

Ecological description in terms of the randomness effect, influence asymmetry, and umbrasubjectivity shifts ecological deliberation and ecological decision away from ethics and economics, toward poetics. The three new terms name three different aspects of the same situation. The randomness effect is how the subsuming appears to the subsumed. Influence asymmetry denotes how subsuming and subsumed stand in relation to one another. Umbrasubjectivity conveys how the subsumed is, as conditioned by its influence-asymmetric relationship to the subsuming. The randomness effect is an experiential element of umbrasubjectivity. The condition of a human in the influence-asymmetrical relationship between the planetary ecosystem and one human is a condition of umbrasubjectivity.

Ecology occurs within the situation described by the randomness effect, influence asymmetry, and umbrasubjectivity. If description conditions decision, then the implications of a description of our ecological situation in these terms should be salient to ecological judgment, and so it proves. Even the most partial and provisional sketch of such implications confirms that salience. So let the following eight propositions open (but most certainly not at all complete) a list of "Prolegomena to Any Future Ecology":

Technocracy Cannot Overcome the Ecological Situation of Humans

The randomness effect, influence asymmetry, and umbrasubjectivity do not precisely parallel Felix Guattari's "three ecological registers (the environment, social relations and human subjectivity)" (19-20), but Guattari contends that, without addressing itself to all three of his registers, any approach to such challenges as the environmental crisis and intensifying migration movements will be "purely technocratic" (19-20). That contention can be extended to the three "registers" presented here. The randomness effect, influence asymmetry, and umbrasubjectivity are inextricably interconnected, so only an approach that addressed itself to all three could avoid replicating the technocracy that hastened our arrival at the current state of affairs. Technocracy operates on the assumption that influence asymmetry can be "flipped," i.e. that our technology can exert greater influence on nature than nature exerts on us. But humanity is inalterably *within* nature, so not even in principle, much less in practice, can technology reverse the influence asymmetry that defines our ecological situation. Sound ecological judgment will have to concede influence asymmetry: no ecological decision that depends on defying influence asymmetry could be sound.

Ecology Occurs under the Sign of Mystery, Not of Problem

American philosopher Louis Mackey's distinction between a problem and a mystery helps avert default to the technocratic. A problem, Mackey says, "can be solved. The terms in which it is stated define what will count as a solution. Confronted on a math test with a problem that cannot be solved, the student has every right to complain that it 'isn't really a problem'" (247). A mystery resembles a problem in being "an indeterminate situation that begs to be made determinate" (Mackey 247), but, unlike a problem, "its indeterminacy is such that the description of the mystery does not specify conditions of resolution and closure" (Mackey 247). A mystery "cannot be fully described. Faced with a mystery, you can never be sure what will count as a solution, or even that there is one" (Mackey 247). The technocratic can address itself only to problems, but the ecological, as the randomness effect highlights, occurs to us as a mystery. The technocratic seeks a solution to a problem, but the ecological, because it is a mystery, is not offered in terms of problem and solution. Confronted with a problem, I can, in principle, discover a solution. "How do I keep from waking my partner when I read in bed?," I ask myself. "Oh, I know: I'll use one of those little clip-on lights." Problem solved. I need only act in a manner adequate to an occasion. Confronted with a mystery, though, I cannot simply find the right switch to flip. There is no "mystery solved" to hope for or pursue. The shadow over the umbrasubject cannot be removed by technology.

Ecology is a Social Project, Situated in a Social World

As, according to Karl Marx, one cannot be a communist by oneself, so one cannot be an ecologist by oneself. Ecology in the situation marked out by the randomness effect, influence asymmetry, and umbrasubjectivity exemplifies what anthropoligist Elizabeth Povinelli calls a *social project* (7). In her explication of social projects, Povinelli herself is drawing on English philosopher Bernard Williams, for whom, in Povinelli's characterization, projects are "thick subjectivities" that "provide the context of moral and political calculation" (6), but Povinelli shifts away from Williams' focus on "the point of view of individual moral agents" (7) to her own focus on "the point of view of the social worlds in which these projects are situated" (7). She declares particular interest in "those *social projects* that attempt to capacitate an alternative set of human and posthuman worlds" (7). If Guattari's three registers establish a criterion of extension, identifying the ground ecological judgment must cover, Povinelli's concept establishes a criterion of mode, directing us to undertake ecological action "as aggregating practices, incessantly fixing phenomena and cosubstantiating practices" (8) in our "multiply partially organized and thus always multiply partially disorganized" social worlds (8). We the umbrasubjected who can do nothing as individual moral agents will do well to turn toward social projects that attempt to capacitate ecological alternativity.

Ecology Is Interminable

Of the influence-asymmetric relation between state and individual, Chantal Mouffe notes that the impossibility of "a society beyond division and power" (1) entails of every order that it be "the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices" (2), and thus that democratic politics, far from fulfilling a triumphal progress toward ultimate consensus and concord, actually stages "the confrontation between conflicting hegemonic projects, a confrontation with no possibility of final reconciliation" (17). That is, because the state/citizen relation is incontrovertibly influence asymmetric, individuals can never fix or finalize the relation. Where influence asymmetry is *necessary*, the influenced cannot settle *contingencies* once for all. In regard to the state, Mouffe reasons, no critique can be radical nor any revolution total, and therefore "artists can no longer pretend to constitute an avant-garde offering a radical critique" (104). Artists *can*, however, engage in critical artistic practices that operate as "counter-hegemonic interventions" to construct new subjectivities and thus "help subvert the existing configuration of power" (105). However different they are in other respects, the relation between human and nature resembles the relation between human and state in that both are inevitably influence asymmetric. So ecology shares the quality Mouffe attributes to politics, that it can only be provisional, never radical, and it can only be interminable, never ultimate and finalizing.

Market Principles Are Inadequate to, because Irrelevant to, our Ecological Situation

In a global socius saturated with the rhetoric of neoliberalism, market principles are widely assumed to be ideal in regard to all matters, resulting always in "efficiency," the best possible arrangement and outcomes. This includes proposals to shape ecological policy by market principles. Market principles, though, assume a description of the human situation different from, and in contradiction with, the description here proposed. Market principles assume the ultimacy of free exchange between equals. What is fundamental and constitutive is the single, independent, unbound exchange between two equal and free agents. These exchanges precede and generate anything "larger" than themselves (corporations, or the market as a whole). There is no influence asymmetry, because the market is constructed by (is the sum of) the individual transactions. Exchange is not subsumed, and the market is not subsuming. This denial of influence asymmetry (and attendant denial of the randomness effect and umbrasubjectivity) generates various implausibilities, such as the economic agent who acts always and only out of "rational self-interest." What matters here, though, is that the incongruence between the world to which market principles would be adequate and the ecological world in which we live precludes market principles from offering reliable guidance in ecological decision-making. If there is (if there were) any domain such as market principles presuppose, then they might (they would) ground sound judgment in that domain. But ecology is utterly different from any such domain.

ECOZON@

Vol 10, No 1

Ethical Principles Are Inadequate to, because Irrelevant to, Our Ecological Situation

More surprising (at least to most persons attentive to ecological concerns) than the inadequacy of market principles to our ecological situation is the inadequacy of *ethical* principles. But just as market principles assume exchange between equals, so ethical principles assume interaction between equals. The randomness effect, influence asymmetry, and umbrasubjectivity describe our ecological situation, but not our ethical situation, and that dissimilarity between ethics and ecology precludes unqualified inference from ethics to ecology. This difference results from the relationship between two humans being, in principle, reciprocal: my capacity to help you or be helped by you is (again, in principle) proportional. However, the influence asymmetry that holds, necessarily, between nature and a human (or humanity) does not necessarily hold between one human and another, and in fact the removal of influence asymmetry that proves *impossible* in ecology remains an *ideal* in ethics.

Ecology is not ethical, therefore. Influence asymmetry makes ethics and ecology dissimilar, leaving us unable to assume that ethical obligations and ecological obligations will harmonize neatly, and unable to reason directly from ethical obligations to ecological obligations. If the intersubjective is the realm of the ethical, then our most salient ecological thinking will not be ethical thinking. Nothing guarantees that intersubjective responsibilities or rights or virtues correlate with umbrasubjective responsibilities or rights or virtues. Consequently, we cannot reason immediately from the former to the latter.

The challenge to grounding interpersonal ethics is, as Plato portrayed it in the *Republic*, the Gyges ring problem (Book II, 359c-360d): why should I be good, when it is more profitable to be bad? The challenge to grounding ecology is, instead, the free rider problem: why should I "do my part," when I will receive the same benefit without making any individual sacrifice/contribution? Successful ways of responding to the two challenges will not always, and do not necessarily, correspond.

Ecology More Closely Resembles the Religious than the Ethical

Kierkegaard's articulation and illustration in *Fear and Trembling*, through a reading of the Abraham and Isaac story, of the priority of the religious over the ethical (30) could be formulated in terms of the description proposed here of our ecological situation. Kierkegaard emphasizes that the mandate given by God to Abraham in the story, "Kill your son," is a manifestly *un*ethical mandate (30), and that Abraham's intention to fulfill the mandate is a manifestly *un*ethical intention (31). Abraham cannot rationalize the mandate, or justify his decision to fulfill it, to Sarah or to Isaac.

In the terms proposed here, what Abraham's relation to God shares with the human relation to nature is influence asymmetry. God's influence over Abraham, like nature's influence over a human or humans, is strong, immediate, comprehensive, and immitigable; by contrast, Abraham's influence over God is weak, mediated, partial, and mitigable. Abraham experiences in relation to God what we experience in relation to

nature: umbrasubjectivity. Abraham cannot reason from his ethical obligations, which include the mandate *not* to kill his son, to his religious obligations, which include the mandate *to* kill his son. "In ethical terms, Abraham's relation to Isaac is quite simply this: the father shall love the son more than himself" (Kierkegaard 57). Abraham, like Job, stands as a counterexample to the Deuteronomic theology, which takes for granted the correspondence of ethical and religious, assuming that if I fulfill my ethical obligations, if in other words I am good, God will reward me, and that if I violate my ethical obligations, God will punish me. Job and Kierkegaard's Abraham have to renounce that assumption, and influence asymmetry means that we must renounce the analogous assumption that the ethical and the ecological always and necessarily correspond.

A Redescribed Ecology Also Repositions Ecopoetics

If influence asymmetry makes ethics irrelevant to ecology, it makes poetics timely and valuable. Technocracy, the market, and the ethical all operate in domains governed otherwise than by influence asymmetry. Poetics is (in general, and *self-consciously* in ecopoetics) a mode of seeing, thinking, and doing under the aspect of influence asymmetry, and thus a mode available to us in our ecological situation. If ecology occurred in the realm of intersubjectivity rather than umbrasubjectivity, if our ecological condition were not influence-asymmetrical, then the *techne* that is the ideal of technocracy, the market, and the ethical might suffice. I could expect my decisions to be salient, my actions to be efficacious, my principles to be adequate. I could seek to discover a solution to any ecological occasion. Because ecology is governed by influence asymmetry and umbrasubjectivity, it turns out that *poesis*, not *techne*, is apt. I cannot expect my decisions to be salient (I cannot *decide* not to contribute to climate change), my actions will be inefficacious (my composting will not slow global warming), my principles will prove inadequate (I cannot live up to my principle not to contribute to climate change the way I can live up to my principle not to murder another human). Instead of seeking to *discover* a *solution* to each arising ecological *occasion*, I can and must seek to *imagine* an *alternative* to existing ecological *conditions*. The randomness effect, umbrasubjectivity, and influence asymmetry obligate me to *poiesis* rather than *techne*.

From *Techne* to *Poiesis*

I am not alone in alleging a convergence of the ecological and the poetic. To cite as corroboration only one networked group of Canadian ecopoets, Jan Zwicky (b. 1955) draws on the same Greek *techne/poesis* dichotomy to which I have just appealed, asserting that "To hope for a techno-fix is to imagine, yet again, that calculative rationality can control the world; it is hubris. Humility means recognizing, clearly, that we don't understand everything" (52). Darren Bifford (b. 1977) makes a related case, contending that "poetry is important for the cultivation of ecological responsibility because metaphor enables ontological insight" (192). Bifford adds:

> there is a particular resonance of metaphorical thinking (call it: poetic practice) with the development of a cogent ecological sensibility: by asserting the existence of relationships between things that, spoken nonmetaphorically, are unrelated, metaphor facilitates the deep acknowledgment of a diversity of forms of life. (194)

Don McKay (b. 1942) identifies in a "practice of geopoetry" (10) a different but equally perspective-granting "deep acknowledgment" (Bifford 194), in this case of an earth time that far exceeds the duration of a human individual or the human species, giving as one reason for the ecological urgency of poetry that it introduces "otherness, or wilderness into consciousness without insisting that it be turned wholly into knowledge, into what we know, what we own" (20). The views of Zwicky, Bifford, and McKay are not identical with one another, nor is any of them identical with the case made in this paper, but all three share a sense that ecology calls for *poiesis*.

Without eliding the distinction made between ecopoetics and ecopoetry, and that I have explored elsewhere,[2] it is possible to invoke instances of ecopoetry in support of this paper's claim about ecopoetics. For example, in "Let Me Pause for a Moment" by American poet Jennifer Atkinson (b. 1955), the speaker pauses neither "for the ancient/ Calving ice" nor "for the new ice/ Prickling the salt-bog sedge" (lines 1-2 and 7-8, p. 34); she further suspends concern "for now about the spill,/ The slow recovery, the threat/ of polar meltdown" (lines 13-15, p. 34) For the moment designated in the poem's title, she looks at a block of floe ice that has on it

> Sprawled across its deck, a harbor seal
> And, like sealing wax on a contract,
> Her blood and newborn pup
> Steaming in the cold spring air.
> (Atkinson 34)

The poem's speaker reorients herself to time, making, through the contrasting geological time of the calving ice, the historical time of the new ice and the oil spill, and the immediate moment of seal and pup, a deep acknowledgment of the "earth time" that McKay describes.

Atkinson's ecopoem does exactly what Rachel Blau DuPlessis says "experimental writing of all sorts" does (28): it "exerts a continuous destabilizing pressure and, in both analytic and formal ways, creates an arousal of desire for difference, for hope. If consciousness must change" (DuPlessis 28), as this paper has tried to argue it must, "if social forms must be reimagined, then language and textual structures must help cause and support, propel and discover these changes" (28). "weather or not" by the American poet Evie Shockley (b. 1965) is experimental, and propulsive, along the lines of DuPlessis' insight. In Shockley's prose poem, "generation why-not had voted its con-science and a climate of indifference was generating maelstromy [sic]weather. we acted as if the planet was a stone-cold player, but turns out the earth had a heart and it was melting" (5) starting with the tropical pacific islands and the arctic ice. But "meanwhile, in the temper-temper zone, the birds were back and i hadn't slept—had it been a night

---

[2] See H. L. Hix, *Demonstrategy* (forthcoming, 2019).

or a season?" (Shockley 5). Continuing its play on the double entendre of "climate," the poem ends, "there'd been an arab spring, but it was winter all summer in america" (5). Shockley's poem conjoins the reimagining of language and textual structures that DuPlessis invites, along the lines that Bifford describes, namely, with an assertion of "the existence of relationships between things that, spoken nonmetaphorically, are unrelated" (194).

If, as a correlative of the *randomness effect*, there were a *catastrophe effect*, it would appear to us as though there were less than no time left. Which would be, as it ever has been, a call to poetics. Wendell Berry's contention, quoted at the outset, that "A good solution has to begin with a description of the problem that is full, clear, and reliable" (Berry qtd. in Olmstead, n.p.) has for sister this insight, framed by Audre Lorde (1934-1992) specifically in the context of poetics: "The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives" (36).

Works Cited

Atkinson, Jennifer. *Drift Ice*. Etruscan Press, 2008.

Barthes, Roland. "The Reality Effect." *The Rustle of Language*. Translated by Richard Howard, University of California Press, 1989, pp. 141-48.

Bifford, Darren. "Metaphor and Ecological Responsibility." *Lyric Ecology: An Appreciation of the Work of Jan Zwicky*. Edited by Mark Dickinson and Clare Goulet, Cormorant Books, 2010, pp. 192-96.

Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. In *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated by Donald A. Cress. Hackett Publishing Company, 1980, pp. 43-100.

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. "Reader, I married me: Becoming a Feminist Critic." *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work*. University of Alabama Press, 2006, pp. 15-33.

Guattari, Félix. *The Three Ecologies*. Translated by Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton, Continuum, 2008.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious*. University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Hix, H. L. *Demonstrategy*. Etruscan Press, 2019.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton University Press, 1983.

Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 1984.

Mackey, Louis H. *An Ancient Quarrel Continued: The Troubled Marriage of Philosophy and Literature*. University Press of America, 2002.

McKay, Don. *The Shell of the Tortoise: Four Essays & an Assemblage*. Gaspereau Press, 2011.

Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

Mouffe, Chantal. *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. Verso, 2013.

Olmstead, Gracy. "Wendell Berry's Right Kind of Farming." *The New York Times* (1 October 2018), n. p. www.nytimes.com/2018/10/01/opinion/wendell-berry-agriculture-farm-bill.html. Accessed 17 March 2019.

Plato. *Republic*. Translated by G. M. A. Grube. Revised by C. D. C. Reeve. *Plato: Complete Works*. Edited by John M. Cooper, Hackett Publishing Company, 1997, pp. 971-1223.

Povinelli, Elizabeth. *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*. Duke University Press, 2011.

Sen, Amartya. *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. Oxford University Press, 1981.

Shockley, Evie. *semiautomatic*. Wesleyan University Press, 2017.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. Edited by J. Lyndon Shanley, Princeton University Press, 1989.

Zwicky, Jan. "A Ship from Delos." Robert Bringhurst and Jan Zwicky. *Learning to Die: Wisdom in the Age of Climate Crisis*. University of Regina Press, 2018, pp. 41-71.

ECOZON@

Vol 10, No 1