

# Political Concepts

## Committee on Concepts and Methods Working Paper Series

54

December 2011

### The Concept of Nature in Libertarianism

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Over the past 25 to 50 years, the discovery of the environment as a relevant object of debate has made a deep impression on normative political thought. Not only has political ecology emerged as a family of genuinely new political theories, one that includes e.g. bioregionalism and social ecology, but most existing political theories, from anarchism via Rawlsian liberalism to religious and authoritarian traditions, have also re-invented themselves as theories embracing ideas like biodiversity, environmental justice, sustainability or stewardship. Only libertarianism seems untouched by the green spirit, and while libertarianism may not be a strong political force in its own right, in mediated forms it was and still is extremely influential. Left-libertarianism in particular now serves as a source of inspiration, for example, for many a theorist of justice, while right-libertarianism has not only influenced neo-liberal thinkers and movements (broadly understood) up to and including the present-day Tea Party in the USA, but also, in the aftermath of the Final Victory of Liberalism heralded in 1989, through discourse with free market advocates, on Third Way social democracy in Europe. While traffic in the reverse direction remained few and far between, (anarchist and) libertarian thought did have a considerable influence on green thought (in particular in the USA: think of Bookchin, Biehl and the social ecology school). It seems that left-libertarianism is in turn now exerting some measure of influence on UK environmental thought (cf. e.g. Andrew Dobson's 2010 *Green Party Manifesto*), and may eventually impact the more socialist version of green thought on the Continent.

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The present paper seeks to move some way towards removing this veil of ignorance covering the eyes of libertarians. It asks a question that precedes any discussion of what, from a libertarian point of view, humans can and should do with, or abstain from doing to, nature: it asks how libertarians understand and understood ‘nature’ in the first place – both explicitly and implicitly. I shall reconstruct the libertarian interpretations of three concepts of nature: metaphysical nature (nature as the essence of things, the realm of necessity), biological nature, and human nature, i.e., that which characterizes and distinguishes humans as unique.

One conclusion that I will draw is that libertarianism, be it classic right-libertarianism or modern left-libertarianism, is truly extremely shallow when it comes to environment, environmental ethics and environmental politics. A second conclusion is that this appears to be an accidental defect rather than a necessary one: there are no reasons why libertarians would not be able to develop a broad understanding and appreciation of nature, or a consistent response to the widest variety of environmental problems, a response that would be widely regarded as ‘taking the environment seriously’. That is not to say that there are no limits – it is quite unlikely that libertarianism will ever endorse humanity’s return to nature and submission to Gaia.

While there are no good reasons for the ‘doubleplusungreen’ character of present-day libertarianism, there are fairly reasonable causes. Throughout the text, I argue that there is an *environmental* explanation: limited resources force libertarians to focus on the most urgent topics on the agenda of political philosophy, and important items are not necessarily urgent. But there is also an *intrinsic* reason in the green potential of libertarians’ *implicit* conceptualizations of nature. Here it turns out that, while the sense for political correctness may lead one to expect that left-libertarians are at least potentially more sympathetic to green points of view, there is in fact a far more important explanatory factor – the difference between the New World and Old World experience of nature.

## A QUICK (AND DIRTY) GUIDE TO LIBERTARIANISM

All concepts are constructs, communicable only by virtue of a shared interpretative background. The term libertarianism has several meanings, its use may therefore cause confusion. What is meant in this text by libertarianism is not what the term used to mean in (continental) Europe, and what it still means in many Latin language societies: anarchism. The meaning used here, as now established practice in Anglo-Saxon political thought, is that of a strand of liberalism that at times comes very close to anarchism but never crosses the border of actually and as a matter of principle rejecting ‘the state’ with its monopoly on violence.

There is a libertarian canon, overlapping mostly with that of classical liberalism: Locke (1632/1690) is an example for many, as is the Adam Smith of *The Wealth of Nations* (1776/1776), rather than the Smith of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759/1759), and as is Herbert Spencer (1820/1884). More recent, widely acknowledged sources of inspiration for libertarians are the founding fathers of the Austrian school in economics, Friedrich von Hayek (1889-1992) and Ludwig von Mises (1881-1973). Note that the classical inspiration does not mean that libertarianism is *identical* with classical liberalism; libertarianism embraces both anarchocapitalism rejecting any state formation and state-minimalists like Nozick – plus anything in between.

Central to libertarianism is, as Peter Vallentyne (2007:187) put it, a ‘concern for individual liberty’, or more precisely individual *self-determination* above all else, which implies a central role in any cooperative venture including the state for the notion of consent (actual or rational, whichever protects autonomy most). While (most) libertarians can justify the state as a necessary instrument for the protection of the rights of individuals, unlike anarchists who are less worried by the wickedness of man,<sup>2</sup> they share with anarchists the conviction that autonomy trumps authority every time – an idea best expressed by the anarchist author, Robert P. Wolff (1990).

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<sup>2</sup> Libertarian authors tend to prefer the classic term ‘man’ over the modern, politically correct, ‘human’. I too will sometimes give in to aesthetic temptation, but like the libertarians, I do so without political prejudice.

With self-determination comes the first of two more (in the present context) relevant families of tenets: most libertarians accept a version of the idea of *self-ownership*, ownership of one's body and mind, including (mediated by the concept of self-determination) ownership of the work of that body (no more and no less). Tied to this is what the late, great Gerald Cohen (1941-2009) called *world-ownership*, or at least ownership of – with a biblical term – the fruits of one's labour, understood as a kind of fair desert, a reward for autonomous ambition and activity, while the absence of such blessings is seen as punishment for inactivity, laziness or irrationality.

Note that there is, within this group of 'Lockean' or 'proprietary' libertarians, dissent over the role and meaning of 'mixing labour': some accept Locke or merely amend his theory on this point, others, confronted with the obvious problem of borders and limits (touch the sea and own all water? Breathe once and own all air?), have abandoned Locke (e.g. Feser 2005), although they do stick to the idea that private property rights are the central object of libertarian thought.<sup>3</sup>

Two further topics on which libertarians are ever more fundamentally divided are initial ownership and ethical foundations. The question of initial ownership distinguishes right- from left-libertarians. While right-libertarians (e.g. Robert Nozick, Jan Narveson, Ayn Rand, Murray Rothbard, Hans-Hermann Hoppe) hold that nature, prior to initial acquisition by the working man, was no one's property, the distinguishing mark of left-libertarianism (e.g. Michael Otsuka, Peter Vallentyne, Hillel Steiner, Philippe van Parijs) is that it thinks of nature as the collective property of all humanity or those in a given area (Otsuka 2003, also cf. Wissenburg 2010). Thanks to this assumption, left-libertarians can express their 'robust concern for material equality' (Vallentyne 2007:187) in the form of a limited redistribution of the fruits of labour to the advantage of those deprived of opportunities by any individual's initial acquisition.

Finally, there are deontological<sup>4</sup> and consequentialist libertarians. The distinction is as fundamental but less 'hot' than that between left- and right libertarianism; the two schools hardly

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<sup>3</sup> Also note (as Daniel Mishori reminded me) that the Lockean theory of original acquisition relates to privatization of 'commons', not 'unowned nature' – more consistent with left- than right-libertarianism (cf. Wissenburg 2010).

<sup>4</sup> The term is misleading, since 'deontology' refers to duties rather than the libertarians' favourite rights.

communicate. The majority of literature consists of ‘internal’ contributions to deontological respectively consequentialist libertarianism. Examples of consequentialists are e.g. the classical utilitarian Miron (2010) and the Millian utilitarian Scriven (1997). Deontologists include Murray Rothbard (2002, 2006) and the face of libertarianism, Robert Nozick (1974), but also Michael Otsuka (2003) and Hillel Steiner (1994). Deontological libertarians typically formulate their views in terms of rights: civil rights which they defend not merely as legal rights (i.e., based on democratic whim or dubious elite decision making) but, overruling any positive law, as first and foremost *natural* rights (Rothbard 2002, 2006; Otsuka 2003).

Note that the traditional third school in ethics, virtue ethics, seems absent – but it is not: there is Ayn Rand (1905-1982), for instance, and more recently Rasmussen and Den Uyl (1991), who defended a broadly Aristotelian foundation for natural rights. The absence of virtue ethics or teleology is not so strange, however, partly because libertarianism is a political not individual philosophy, and partly because teleology seems to be at odds with the notion of self-determination.

As remarked above, the environment is not a particularly hot topic among libertarians. While Murray Rothbard occasionally flirted with environmentalist political movements, others remained silent on or even (as we shall see below, in the case of Jan Narveson) hostile towards the green agenda. If libertarianism and environmentalism are mixed, it is almost exclusively to discuss and promote prudent use of limited natural resources, the classic examples being Julian Simon’s 1981 *The Ultimate Resource* (the extended and updated *The Ultimate Resource 2* dates from 1996; cf. also Hadley (2005), Hale (2008), Pasour (1979), Purdy (2005) and Sheard (2007)). There is only one monograph seriously addressing the compatibility of libertarianism and shades of environmentalism: Tal Scriven’s *Wrongness, Wisdom and Wilderness* (1997), a rule-utilitarian argument for extensionist anthropocentrism as a public (utilitarian) ethic and for ecocentrism as personal wisdom (for epistemological and ontological reasons.)

And yet, nature plays a fundamental role in libertarian thought – no less than *four* fundamental roles, in fact. Understanding these roles may shed some light on the silence on environmentalism. In the next four sections, I shall discuss the libertarian reading of nature as a metaphysical

concept, as that to which natural rights refer; biological nature as the origin of all resources, all<sup>5</sup> artifice and all property; and human nature, both as that which qualifies humans as morally considerable and as that which would distinguish them from other entities, say, beasts and angels.

## **NATURE: METAPHYSICS**

First, there is the nature to which the concept of natural right refers. As we shall see, this nature is more or less a dud – it basically stands for deontology as a meta-ethical foundation of rights. There is no link to medieval or older, more substantive conceptions of metaphysical nature or a shared essence of all individual things, nor to a realm of necessity (the apparent opposite of liberty), nor a realm of causation (Spinoza's *natura naturans*), nor, finally, a unity of nature of which human nature and trees and rocks are emanations (Spinoza's *natura naturata*). And that is remarkable, given the extreme popularity in libertarian circles of phrases referring to 'natural rights' or 'natural law'.

As said above, not all libertarians use the concept of natural rights. Those who do, however, seem to think of metaphysical nature partly as a negative category, partly as *human* nature. It is a negative category in that authors use it to distinguish their most fundamental values (universal (human) rights) from what they are not – and while the latter category is pinpointed, described, identified, the former remains merely indicated, vaguely sketched.

One of the most widely read libertarians, Murray Rothbard, illustrates this well. In *The Ethics of Liberty* (2002, originally 1980), some 25 pages are devoted to the defence of 'natural law' as the foundation of a libertarian ethics – or more precisely natural rights, which Rothbard sees as a special, modern, individualist interpretation of the classical, broader but too collectivist natural law tradition. Virtually all that text is devoted to explaining what 'a rationally established natural law' (Rothbard 2002:3) is not: it is not an attack upon religion and it is not a defence of any religion. It is in a footnote only that we find a positive formulation other than the non-informative

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<sup>5</sup> Even intellectual production requires natural resources and a biological mediator, the brain.

description of following natural law as acting in accordance with ‘right reason’ (e.g. Rothbard 2002:7). Here, Rothbard borrows from Edwin Patterson: natural laws are ‘principles of human conduct that are discoverable by “reason” from the basic inclinations of human nature, and that are absolute, immutable and of universal validity for all times and places’ (Patterson quoted in Rothbard 2002:3n).

The human nature to which natural law refers is, for the most part, a purely mechanical, material phenomenon: the set of properties that, when an entity comes into contact with another entity, determines its reactions (cf. Rothbard 2002:9). What natural law does is that it ‘...elucidates what is best for man – what ends man must pursue that are most harmonious with, and best tend to fulfill, his nature’ (Rothbard 2002:12). But by what standard can right reason determine if a principle or practice serves the good of a human? For Rothbard, ultimately anything and any reason goes: ‘...it is a man’s right to do whatever he wishes to do with his person; it is his right not to be molested or interfered with by violence from exercising that right’ (Rothbard 2002:24).

We shall discuss *human* nature below; for now, what matters is the observation that *metaphysical* nature is redundant in Rothbard’s work, as it seems to be for all ‘natural right’ libertarians from left to right (cf. Widerquist 2009). To illustrate this, let us next consider the case of Michael Otsuka.

Michael Otsuka is quite lucid: what he calls natural rights are ‘...rights that do not depend for their existence on any of the following: their recognition by the laws or officials of any state or the principles of any institution; the presence of any social conventions; or the fact of any actual contractual agreement to conform one’s will to the dictates of the rights’ (Otsuka 2003:3; for similar positions see Nozick 1974, Narveson 2001). Nature is here the opposite of artifice, fortunately of a so specific category of artifice (i.e., only mentally existing conventions) that nature can at least indirectly be identified as non-positivist *morality*, the rules for intersubjective contacts other than those based on actual consent or execution. Note that Hillel Steiner takes a similar position: ‘Being non-conventional, being presupposed by conventional rights, these non-created rights are not inappropriately termed *natural* rights’ (Steiner 1995:228, his italics).

From this point on, however, the ‘nature’ in natural rights becomes vague. Do natural rights exist?

For surely the injustice of murder, mayhem, or involuntary servitude is not contingent on the recognition of such injustice by the laws or officials of any state or the principles of any institution, the presence of any social conventions, or the making of any actual contractual agreement. (...) We do not need to make an enquiry into the conventions, practices, or institutions of the societies in which the Nazis or the Khmer Rouge operated, or the international laws and agreements that existed at the time, in order to condemn their atrocities (Otsuka 2003:3-4).

How are we to identify these natural rights? In the case of Otsuka, who rejects as insufficiently robust the Lockean, Kantian and even Scanlonian hypothetical contracts (made popular by, respectively, Robert Nozick, John Rawls, and Thomas Scanlon and Brian Barry), the answer is ‘coherence’:

...I believe that we need to engage in a familiar form of coherentist argumentation that appeals directly to plausible moral principles that embody substantive values to which we are committed. These principles also gain support from their ability to explain intuitions about cases and withstand the test of counter examples that appeal to our intuitions about other cases (Otsuka 2003:5).

This is not the place for a methodological discussion – but one could argue that Otsuka’s aims can be met equally well if not better in a Rawlsian wide reflective equilibrium, i.e., the equilibrium ideally reached after a process of ‘coherentist’ redefinition between considered judgments of real existing humans, the inferences drawn by human-shaped computer algorithms representing the idea of impartiality, and the body of all existing human knowledge including all theories of ethics. My point is, one does not have to exclusively embrace Otsuka’s methodology to be a libertarian; positions like Nozick’s or Rothbard’s are equally deontological yet more respectively less contractarian. This is also not the place to discuss the dubious enshrinement of

coherence as a yardstick for ethics – while coherence may be appropriate in logic, its absence is not necessarily proof of irrationality in ethics, only of current insufficiency of evidence.

What *is* important in our context is that, first, Otsuka cannot believe that our moral intuitions, the ‘substantive values to which we are committed’ that serve as his meter for good and bad, are socially determined – or they would be further instances of ‘social conventions’ (or worse, they would be biological dispositives pre-empting all ethical discourse). It follows, secondly, that Otsuka must believe there is a universally shared set of values among humans, buried deep inside our initially unexamined moral intuitions – making up at least a part of human nature.

Our overall conclusion can be brief: where nature plays a role in – at first sight – a metaphysical context, it usually turns out to mean the opposite of convention or artifice; it offers an ethical foundation for libertarian political principles. One other way to read nature is as *human* nature (which we shall discuss below). A third reading is that of the realm of necessity (cf. Rothbard’s mechanical universe), the existence of which is at worst neutral, at best positively valued since it allows the free to move around in a predictable, controllable universe where freedom has effective (cf. MacCallum 1967) meaning, where the human being can be a creator, not a slave to the unpredictable random forces of utter chaos.

## **NATURE: BIOLOGY**

A second concept of nature present in libertarian thought is that of nature as a *biological* phenomenon. While all branches of environmental philosophy have generated or adopted an incredibly wide range of interpretations of biological nature, libertarianism has, so far, considered only the narrowest and shallowest possible options, as we shall see.

Probably the most fundamental distinction in green thought is that between the deep and the shallow, or deep and shallow ecology, or green and grey, or (in politics) ecologism versus environmentalism (cf. Wissenburg 1993, 1998; Scriven 1997; Dobson 2007, etc.). The distinction between these two opposites in ethical, meta-ethical, action-oriented and political discourse is

ultimately based on the partly biological distinction between nature interpreted as ecology, an interconnected and interdependent system of living and dead matter, versus environment, the raw resources surrounding humans. Ontologically interpreting nature as (something similar to) ecology is a necessary condition for the ethical attribution of any sort of independent value to nature, i.e., value other than that derived from the meaning of nature as an object relative to a human (or possibly animal) object.<sup>6</sup>

That the ontological understanding of ecology is a necessary condition for its ethical appreciation does not imply that it is also a sufficient condition – obviously, and as illustrated by libertarianism. While only a few libertarians explicitly exclude the ontological possibility of conceiving of nature as an ecosystem, i.e., as ecology, it is clear that many reject the idea that nature might have intrinsic value, or objective value – or indeed value to anyone but humans.

Thus, Hillel Steiner discusses environmental issues only in the context of obligations to future generations:

You don't need to be an expert in statistical extrapolation to perceive the broad outlines of the threat many current activities pose to the eventual inhabitability of this planet. Nor, therefore, is it unwarranted to claim that present persons have moral duties to conserve the environment for their more remote descendants and to restrict their own standards of living accordingly. (Steiner 1994: 259)

There is no real difference here with right-libertarianism. When Murray Rothbard discusses 'Conservation, ecology, and growth', he not only equates 'left-liberal intellectuals' with ecologists (2006:301), but also reduces the latter group's agenda to an anti-growth and anti-materialism campaign ('For the mass of the world's population still living in squalor such a cry for the cessation of growth is truly obscene', Rothbard 2006:304), plus a mistaken attack on the free market in the pursuit of an in itself commendable objective: the conservation of natural

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<sup>6</sup> I will avoid the question whether political ecologism or Naessian deep ecology needs to specifically attribute 'intrinsic' value to nature.

resources; even the fight against pollution is understood as relevant only because it concerns ‘protecting property in one’s lungs, fields, and orchards’ (Rothbard 2006:319). The same reduction of ecologism to resource preservation, using the same terminology, can be found in the work of other right-libertarian authors like Pasour (1979), free-market environmentalists Anderson and Leal (1991), economist Simon, who suggests nature protection adds ‘ambiance’ (1996:191), and MacCallum (2003), and left-libertarians<sup>7</sup> like Hadley (2005) and Sheard (2007). The evidence is indirect: the libertarians’ thundering silence tells us nothing that excludes an understanding of nature as ecology, and little more about his attitude towards *valuing* nature as ecology, i.e. ecocentrism, than that it is apparently irrelevant or – in the case of Julian Simon (1996:565ff.) – misguided romanticism at the expense of human wellbeing.

Jan Narveson is far more outspoken: ‘your particular faith, sensitivities or convictions cannot limit my property rights - I may tear down my house even if it is some famous guy’s birth place, or even if it would harm “ecological integrity” or some such thing that we ordinary folk do not understand’, and: ‘Environmental concern that extends beyond concern for humans is not a matter of right or wrong, but a mere matter of taste’ (Narveson 1998).

Despite the strict, in the case of Nagel even fell, rejection of ecology as an ethical category, I should repeat that this does not imply that libertarians cannot think of it as an ontological category. Anything remains possible, from ecology as the omniversal Hobbesian war of all against all, via ecology as a basically mechanical whole, an aimless composite of interacting entities, to a harmonious system constantly seeking a new equilibrium. In fact, one libertarian even argues that nature should be conceived of *ontologically* as an ecosystem because it is more prudent, i.e. makes more sense of current ecological problems, and even though ecocentrism as a social ethics should be rejected, it still makes sense as a cornerstone of personal wisdom<sup>8</sup> (Scriven 1997). Bruce Purdy moves even further away from the Rothbard-Narveson ‘private conviction’ line; he argues that thinking (ontologically) of humans as part of an ecosystem allows

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<sup>7</sup> More precisely: defenders, in the context of the texts referred to here, of a left-libertarian position.

<sup>8</sup> Scriven’s personal wisdom is not to be confused with Narveson’s personal taste, even though both define a private realm.

the development of a (moral and legal) notion of ‘ecological harm’ to the individual’s ‘right to undiminished ecosystems conditions’ (Purdy 2005:34) – a position that seems to presuppose the left-libertarian dogma of initial collective ownership of nature (cf. Wissenburg 2010).

The point to note is that reflection on the character of nature is simply not part of the immediate (political) agenda of libertarianism. The nature libertarians usually talk about is nature as environment, and even that usually only in a fairly crude way as the physical resources from which most or all artifice originates. In that sense, libertarianism is shallow even by the standards of environmentalism. The fact that some left-libertarians are willing to include in the category of natural resources such unorthodox resources as one’s ‘unchosen germ-line genetic information’ (Vallentyne, Steiner and Otsuka 2005:209; cf. Steiner 1994) and ‘talents and propensity for hard work’ (Fried 2004:86) makes no difference here: even (or perhaps: even more so) on such a broad understanding of biological nature, it remains environment and thereby ‘useable’. The cause (rather than reason) seems to lie in, again, the agenda of the libertarian community: if, when and in so far as nature has a key role, it is as the medium through which self-ownership, thereby individual liberty and autonomy, is transubstantiated into world-ownership, i.e., ownership of the fruits of one’s labor.<sup>9</sup> It is not so much that libertarians want or need to argue that nature has (only) instrumental value, it is that the question of nature’s value is not what concerns libertarians in the first place (cf. Hale (2008) on the related Wise Use Movement). Their primary concern, the promotion and protection of individual freedom and autonomy, forces them to see nature *ceteris paribus* as instrumental, not by definition.

Thus, we find a diversity of characterizations of biological nature in libertarian thought, which all come down to the same, crude thing: nature is just stuff lying about waiting to be turned into something useful. Rothbard refers to ‘natural resources’ (Rothbard 2002: 31, 2006:308) or ‘raw

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<sup>9</sup> Note that ‘fruit’ too is a word libertarians exclusively use in the context of human productivity and self-realization. Given the centrality and omnipresence of the metaphor of ‘fruits of our labour’ in libertarian texts, one could call them the true fruitarians among environmental thinkers. On a more serious note: the utilitarian libertarian, Jeffrey Miron (2010), does not even bother to consider animals as entities with anything more than commercial or emotional value (and the latter can apparently just as well be expressed in monetary terms). He wastes paper nor ink on the status of non-animal nature.

materials' (Rothbard 2006:308). Otsuka, carefully avoiding any reference to their bio- or geological origins, speaks of 'worldly resources' (Otsuka 2003:17ff.). Narveson equates nature simply with resources, only once offering a more picturesque description: 'state-of-nature real estate' (Narveson 2001: 93). Steiner varies between 'land', 'unowned things' (a category that includes but is not limited to the natural environment), and 'raw natural resources'(1994:235-6). Only Miron, for whom the protection of endangered species includes the protection of their 'habitat', conceives of the habitat of animal and human in richer terms: 'Economic development can also deplete nonrenewable resources such as oil and coal, endanger plant or animal species, or destroy green space and unique natural settings' (Miron 2010:71) – although this has no implications for the value of the environment. In that context, Miron believes like Narveson that it is all a matter of taste: 'If markets do not protect such species, it simply means that society does not place that much value on their continued existence. But that doesn't mean that individuals couldn't pay a premium for their preservation, if they really cared' (Miron 2010:69).

There are in fact exceptions to the general rule that the libertarian environment should not be conceived of only as morally neutral resources, with more substantive evaluations being condemned to exile in the sphere of private taste, where religion, art, sports and games already reside.

One example of such a broader interpretation of the environment can be found in Ayn Rand's work. According to Gregory Johnson, in particular Rand's 1943 novel *The Fountainhead* depicts the natural world as having no intrinsic value, as 'merely the stuff from which man creates values' (Johnson 2000:231 ; cf. Johnson 1999). Howard Roark, the book's hero, describes it as 'waiting for the drill, the dynamite and the voice; waiting to be split, ripped, pounded, reborn; waiting for the shape my hands will give them'(Rand 1993:16). Nature is incomplete; humans perfect it – as a teleological Rand characterizes a house on a cliff: 'the purpose for which it had been waiting' (Rand 1993: 124).

While Rand's appreciation of nature (environment) as wilderness may (appear to) be extremely negative, it is still an appreciation of *wilderness*, not of dead or inanimate stock; wilderness is biology, geography and geology in the absence of active human design, control or intervention.

This is definitely a more substantive conception of environment than that used in the self-ownership/world-ownership debate. It is all the more substantive since Rand contrasts wilderness with an alternative environment: an environment turned into landscape or *manscape* (my term, not Rand's, I believe) a human creation merging 'nature' (non-human-directed processes) with human artifacts to become an artifact itself, while its constituent parts may still – within the aesthetical and teleological boundaries set by the manscape – flourish in natural ways. Note that Rand's wilderness and manscape, as more substantive, less utilitarian conceptions of nature, also move beyond the classic oppositions of nature to *agriculture* and nature to artifice: nature is not so much subjugated or denied by human interference, by manscaping, as it is enhanced, perfected, realized. It is also worth noting that sentiments similar to Rand's are totally absent in Rasmussen and Den Uyl's (1991) work; their interpretation of Aristotelian teleology and human natural ends is devoid of any references to the idea of a life in harmony with nature – not as wilderness and neither as manscape.

In an only slightly less literary style, Murray Rothbard expressed the same Randian-Aristotelian sentiment when he used the image of a Robinson Crusoe stranded on a desert island and initially living as a fruitarian to explain the fundamentals of world-ownership: 'But for almost all of his wants, Crusoe finds that the natural world about him does not satisfy them immediately and instantaneously; he is not, in short, in the Garden of Eden. To achieve his ends, he must, as quickly and productively as he can, take the nature-given resources and *transform* them into useful objects, shapes, and places most useful to him – so that he can satisfy his wants' (Rothbard 2002:30).

What the cases of Rand and Rothbard show is that libertarianism is *not* destined to embrace only the shallowest version of environmentalism. Yet whether in particular Rand's position is consistent (as has been doubted by among others Johnson (1999) and in a wider naturalist context Bubb (2006)), and whether alternative but equally substantive conceptions of environment, perhaps even some more appreciative of independent natural processes, fit in the libertarian mould, remains to be seen.

## HUMAN NATURE

Human nature, our third concept of nature next to biology and metaphysics, plays two roles in the libertarian drama: one as that which *characterizes* humans and makes them morally considerable, the other (to be discussed in the next section) as that which would *distinguish* humans from other entities. In either case, human nature is understood as anything humans have in common as biological creatures, and as usual, libertarians do not discuss most of what characterizes humans but focus only on those propensities and properties that directly support libertarian political philosophy. That humans are mostly bald, bipedal and beakless is irrelevant because it cannot serve as a foundation of natural rights (for deontological libertarians) or of wellbeing (for consequentialists).<sup>10</sup>

According to Steiner and Vallentyne (2007), libertarians have almost universally adopted a ‘choice-protecting conception’ of the nature of rights: it is, in some form or other, the capacity to make choices that justifies the moral considerability of humans expressed through rights (or stakes in the ‘stock’ of wellbeing). While that characterization is correct, it is also incomplete – choice is the lowest common denominator in libertarian theories of human nature. In most cases, the libertarian characterizes humans as by nature possessing individual autonomy, having personality or being persons (Barry 1986) – characterizations that combine choice with will, consciousness and rationality.

Choice, Rothbard for example suggests, would be nothing without rationality: ‘And so man, not having innate, instinctive, automatically acquired knowledge of his proper ends, or of the means by which the can be achieved, must learn them, and to learn them he must exercise his powers of observation, abstraction, thought: in short, his reason’ (Rothbard 2002:330; cf. Rasmussen and Den Uyl 1991:65). Michael Otsuka (2003) includes as part of humans’ rationality, universal ethical intuitions that serve as standards for moral reasoning.

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<sup>10</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I shall usually omit references to wellbeing in the remainder of this section; claims made here for natural rights-based libertarianism apply to consequentialist libertarianism as well, provided the necessary (and sometimes significant) changes are made.

Next to choice and rationality, Ayn Rand added ‘will’. In Ayn Rand’s work, man is characterized by ‘volitional consciousness’, the combination of a will and a consciousness controlling that will (cf. Bubb 2006). Rasmussen and Den Uyl (1991:71) seem to have this same concept in mind when they describe man’s autonomy as acting ‘from his own knowledge and understanding and thereby [exercising] control and direction over his actions’.

Finally, it is, if the attribution of rights to make sense at all, essential that (conscious, rational, willing, choosing) humans also have *physical* presence and power, that they have an actual impact on the world outside of their consciousness or imagination. In his critique of libertarianism, Siegfried van Duffel (2004) referred to this quality as sovereignty or ‘natural dominion’; it is a necessary condition if rights are to mean anything (cf. also Barry 1986).

How exactly human nature or the possession of these particular human traits implies natural rights is an entirely different debate for an entirely different occasion – what matters here and now is that they are *supposed* to be sufficient, first, for man to matter, and second, for man to matter to man. It is, first, the presence of choice, consciousness, will and rationality (all thought to be typical of humans only) that makes an existence worth anything to the existing subject. It is, second, presumably (as this would be consistent with the ‘modern’, egalitarian conception of natural rights described above) sufficient to imply mutual obligations and rights in the sense that I should respect your existence in (say) volitional consciousness because I value my own and want you to respect that in me. ‘What is implicit in the Lockean and all natural law classical liberal positions, is the concept of an equal liberty – that the only moral justification of the limitation of a person’s liberty lies in the existence of a like freedom of action of others’ (Barry 1986:13).

Libertarian literature is relatively silent on what else constitutes human nature, again probably because this might seem irrelevant, relative to the libertarian’s primary political concerns. Thus,

little or nothing is said on the genesis of preferences,<sup>11</sup> on the existence of and mastery over the passions, on the balance between nature and nurture, on the relation between body and mind<sup>12</sup>, or on the distinction between basic physical needs and all further wants, desires and aspirations.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the left-libertarian attribution to fortune (and to the public treasury) of talents, handicaps and genetic make-up suggests that for them, none of these random attributes are (or should be considered) even part of the essence of an individual. Human nature as an independent realm of causation (cf. Spinoza's *natura naturans*) is relevant and therefore explicitly discussed; but human nature as a biological or psychological consequence, the (pre)determined automaton part of us, remains a blank spot – to not even mention the notion of a unity of nature of which humans, trees and rocks are mere emanations (cf. Spinoza's *natura naturata*).

Again, there is an exception. Libertarianism is dominated by deontological and consequentialist ethics, two schools which, while incompatible, exist surprisingly peacefully alongside each other, firmly convinced that the other's position is really just a special case of one's own (cf. Miron 2010). There is, however, a minority group arguing for virtue ethics or at least an Aristotelian naturalist anthropology and teleology as the backbone of libertarian political ideology. In the past, this group was represented by Ayn Rand (cf. Barry 1986, Johnson 1999, 2000; Bubb 2006); in more recent years, by Rasmussen and Den Uyl (1991:29; cf. Kraut 1997). In both cases, the flourishing of the human individual through excellence in his or her innate capacities or virtues justifies and (because) is best served by a libertarian order founded on the natural right to property, thus guaranteeing maximum individual freedom and maximum room for autonomy and personal responsibility. 'One is only obligated to restrain one's actions in such a way that the moral territories of others are not penetrated without permission' (Rasmussen and Den Uyl 1991:128).

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<sup>11</sup> For libertarians from Rothbard to Otsuka, it seems that anything goes; any preference is intrinsically legitimate. Only Thaler and Sunstein's (2003) libertarian paternalism, if it can be called libertarianism at all, questions the validity of 'original' preferences.

<sup>12</sup> Libertarian literature neither supports nor rejects the validity of the two complementary concepts of body and mind (or psyche); it uses both concepts without prejudice. Belief in the existence of a third party, the soul, is an entirely different matter; the soul belongs in the sphere of personal taste, along with religion, art and other RPGs.

<sup>13</sup> A rare exception to this rule is Roberts Nozick's work (1981, 1989).

## “...THAT THOU ART MINDFUL OF HIM”

What *characterizes* man need not be what *distinguishes* him from allegedly ‘lower’ beings like animals – or indeed from supposedly ‘higher’ beings like, in Kant’s philosophy, angels, in Nozick’s work aliens, or even robots – hence the title of this section: a reference to an Isaac Asimov novella in which two robots establish their moral superiority.<sup>14</sup> Some of the most interesting contributions to libertarianism have been developed in order to limit natural rights (or moral considerability, or eligibility for inclusion in the calculus of wellbeing) to humans – with remarkably little success.

Deontological libertarians prefer a ‘choice-protecting conception’ of the nature of rights over an ‘interest-protecting conception’ (Steiner and Vallentyne 2007). Under the assumption that only adult humans can make choices, the first perspective excludes the Easter bunny as well as biosystems, the weather, children and all other real-existing animals. There are, however, problems with the choice-protecting view. Not only is it built on an empirically dubious assumption (the *Great Ape Project*, for example, has called into question much of what we assumed distinguished us from apes), but from a philosophical point of view, so-called marginal cases also present one with fairly disturbing dilemmas. Finally, not all libertarians are deontologists. From a consequentialist point of view, where ‘the capacity for wellbeing is sufficient for moral standing’ (Vallentyne 2005:403; cf. Vallentyne 2000), the interest-protecting conception is the more obvious choice – but it is far less easy to limit interests (especially interests in wellbeing) to grown humans.

The libertarian baseline position is to assume that it is self-evident that humans are rational (and conscious, and have a will, etc.) while animals are not. The natural rights that humans thereby gain protect them against slavery, forced organ donation, random killing and being used as cattle. Animals, on the other hand, can be legitimately conceived of as resources. Such is, for instance,

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<sup>14</sup> Asimov’s title is in turn a reference to a psalm.

Murray Rothbard's attitude towards sea life: 'Even now there is a simple but effective technique that could be used for increasing fish productivity: parts of the ocean could be fenced off electronically, and through this readily available electronic fencing, fish could be segregated by size. By preventing big fish from eating smaller fish, the production of fish could be increased enormously' (Rothbard 2006:315; cf. Rothbard 2002:29ff.). No matter that fish will swim below the fence, no matter that we would rather eat big fish and no matter that all fish have to eat and most must eat fish – no matter what other empirical blunders Rothbard makes here, the point is: fish are livestock, humans are not. Human rationality (et al.) also has disturbing consequences for the status of children: 'Abortion should be looked upon ... as the expulsion of an unwanted invader from the mother's body', says Rothbard (2002:98), probably supported by a vast majority of non-libertarians; but the same premises and logic also lead him to conclude '...that a parent does not have the right to aggress against his children, *but also* that the parent should not have a *legal obligation* to feed, clothe, or educate his children ... the parent should have the legal right *not* to feed the child, i.e., allow it to die' (Rothbard 2002:100; his italics). Equally strong though in practical terms usually less radical positions have been defended by libertarians from left to right, like Narveson (2001), Otsuka (2003) and Steiner ('...minors ... strictly speaking ... cannot have *rights*' - Steiner 1994: 245; his italics).

But let us focus on animals once more. Some libertarians, while remaining extremely skeptical about animal or species rights, admit the hypothetical possibility that they can be given 'a clear legal and philosophical basis, and not just emotional expression' (Simon 1996:457). As among others Graham and Nobis (2007) argued, the absence of the qualities and capabilities that make humans unique do not prove the absence of *all* interests, needs or (by implication) moral rights of animals. In other words, having reason to protect 'choice' in itself does not exclude that 'interests' are morally considerable as well. If libertarians however adopt the alternative interest-based view, a threat to humans immediately appears: even if interests are limited to an interest in wellbeing, and even if each non-human can and will experience far less wellbeing than any human, there still are far, far more mice than men – not to mention other beings with an interest in wellbeing (Vallentyne 2005). Then again, the choice perspective raises the question of our obligations to 'marginal humans', those marginal cases of humans who temporarily or permanently lack either volitional consciousness or whatever other quality makes humans

uniquely valuable. No libertarian would want to argue that man's natural rights cease the moment he drops into a coma or worse, simply takes a nap.

Enter Robert Nozick (1974). In between the rock of marginal cases and the hard place of animal numbers, Nozick argued that the distinction between humans and animals is a matter of qualities, context and degree. Choice (rationality, volition, consciousness, autonomy) is not the only set of qualities that characterizes and distinguishes humans, and that justifies the attribution of natural rights. While (for example) sleeping, unconscious or comatose, humans have no 'choice'; yet we do not take away their right to vote and we do not abuse our advantage to (say) unburden them of their momentarily apparently morally unprotected organs because other qualities, other aspects of human nature give rise to other moral rights – in the context of sleeping, for instance, due to the continued capacity for sentience, a right to awaken; in all three contexts mentioned, due to being alive, a right not to be killed.<sup>15</sup> *Mutatis mutandis*, entities possessing those same qualities have by definition the very same rights implied by that quality, be they human, tiger or gnat.<sup>16</sup> While there is more to life (and to the nature of beings) than wellbeing or the quality of sentience alone – allowing for a weighting of qualities and a reduction of the severity of Vallentyne's paradox of mice and men – it remains true that human nature contains unique qualities, unique both for the species (which is not so remarkable: bats and blind fish have their own unique qualities) and unique in implying extra natural rights over and above those enjoyed by other species.

Nozick admits that moral theory (not just libertarianism) is underdetermined when it comes to distinguishing humans. More research is needed, and that research will also have to find a reply to the question whether a theory allowing for more than one moral divide between more than two categories of animals might allow one '...on the other side of human beings' (Nozick 1974:46) –

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<sup>15</sup> This is not the place to take this argument further, but it should be noted that a right not to be killed does not imply a right not to be eaten or more generally be used as a resource after death. Social taboos aside, consistency demands that the libertarian who rejects involuntary organ donation by life but accepts organ harvesting after death (since a dead subject is no longer a subject of rights), tolerates cannibalism as well.

<sup>16</sup> Instead of using the concept of rights, which some authors would want to be enforceable and/or owed to a 'full' moral subject, the same claim can be expressed in terms of impersonal duties, i.e., duties owed not *to* a subject but *per se* (or in more romantic terms, to oneself or to the universe).

Nozick thinks here of aliens claiming superiority over humans, but one could just as easily make the same case for genetically enhanced humans.

Thus, libertarianism seems anthropocentric but on closer inspection the signals turn out to be mixed. There is a richer understanding of human nature at work in at least some libertarians' work than one limited to choice (rationality, volition, consciousness, autonomy) alone; human nature can include qualities shared with other entities – memory, identity, the capacities for morality, commitment and empathy, even life. For example, Ayn Rand, discussing the uniqueness of man (cf. Mack 2003, Bubb 2006), initially characterized 'life' as the quality that imbues an entity with value, – a position that would, without further qualification, commit her to a form of biocentric ethics – while in later work she developed the notion of volitional consciousness as the sufficient condition for moral considerability, life remaining a necessary condition.

Since libertarianism, especially left-libertarianism, can conceive of humans as biological and not just intellectual creatures, it is not irrevocably committed to anthropocentrism, but remains open to sentientism or zoocentrism (cf. Scriven 1997).<sup>17</sup> It can understand humans as part of an ecosystem – Scriven argues that this is even the prudent thing to do – but it will always focus on the *individual* entity as a carrier of qualities that make it morally considerable; libertarianism can never be ecocentric. The capacity for mutation and evolution of libertarianism's *ontological* conceptions of nature is definitely less limited than that of its *ethical* conceptions.

## **NATURE: LIBERATION OR NEGATION?**

The overwhelming impression one gets of libertarianism, if one sticks to the letter of the text, is that it has the shallowest of shallow appreciations of nature. There is no explicit

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<sup>17</sup> I will not offer an opinion here on the relative chances of success for a more sophisticated or enlightened understanding of human self-interest, and for extending the circle of moral relevance to animals, as 'greening' strategies for libertarianism. Both paths are open, consistent and compelling.

acknowledgement even of the fact *that* nature plays so many fundamental roles, no analysis of concepts, no reflection where (most notably in the case of Rand) inconsistencies emerge. We have also seen, however, that there are traces of more substantive, more robust conceptions of nature under the surface: Rand's and Rasmussen and Den Uyl's teleological human nature for example, or the intuitively disturbing 'annexation' by nature of genes and abilities in Steiner and Otsuka, or finally the 'extensionist' movement towards inclusion of animals in recent years. A second conclusion then must be that the libertarian silence on concepts of nature is accidental rather than necessary.

Above, I have already discussed one main reason for libertarianism's environmental shallowness: not every item can be number one on the agenda of any theorist or school of thought. Libertarianism, a first and foremost politico-economic philosophy, by definition focuses primarily on human political and economic interests. Hence the priority of questions of autonomy, freedom and self-rule, market and voluntary associations versus the state, natural versus conventional human rights. The liberation of humans takes priority over that of nature. We could call this – slightly ironically – an environmental explanation, since it a matter of prudent use of limited, slowly or non-renewable resources.

There is an intrinsic explanation too, however. Through the cracks of a 'resourcist' discourse, in some authors (e.g. Rand, Nozick, Scriven, Parfy, Vallentyne) as yet underdeveloped *substantive* conceptions of nature became visible – flashes promising a potential for a more robust conceptualization of nature. What unites these potentially green libertarians is not their membership cards of the left- respectively right-libertarian movements: initial common ownership of nature or initial non-ownership is irrelevant. Instead, what unites them seems to be a 'New World' rather than 'Old World' understanding of (in particular biological) nature.

Tal Scriven described the Enlightenment understanding of nature as a form of 'red in tooth and claw' thinking: '... nature, as a whole, is devoid of any teleological ends; it is brute mechanism, holding no good clues about what we ought to value, and, furthermore, it is generally hostile to our legitimate goals as individuals and societies' (Scriven 1997:7). In this typically European, Grotian, 'Old World' view, we recognize the discourse of strict environmentalism, of nature as

physical natural resources waiting to be tamed, killed, cut down, dug up and made useful. Any value or meaning given to this nature is – to use a Narvesonian description, tolerable only as long as that conviction is professed in the private sphere as a personal taste and no more. This type of libertarianism is and remains anthropocentric, with really no room for duties and rights *of* nature and *regarding* nature.

Scriven also described an alternative understanding of nature, ‘...a distinctively American understanding of the significance of the wilderness experience and wilderness narrative ... revered by a long line of thinkers ... The wilderness experience is not a mere escape from the senselessness and fragmentation of modern life (...); it is an opportunity, to use an unfortunately tired phrase, to “find oneself”’ (Scriven 1997: 185). American authors from Thoreau to Leopold have given voice to a nature that is not necessarily an enemy or a thing waiting to be used – the \Wilderness Experience:

Everything has a story in the wild, and one that makes sense and has a meaning. These are not the stories of other times and other people fancifully burgled and fenced into the present. These are the stories of real living beings pursuing their own goods. The narratives of Thoreau, Muir, and Leopold are not those of long-gone tribal cultures but, rather, those of serious students of nature and of what science tells us about the interdependence as well as about the individuality of living things (Scriven 1997:188).

It is this visualization of nature that shines through when libertarians focus, for a moment, on nature in another context than that of property rights to be defended against the lazy, greedy and violent. It is through the extension of moral considerability to animals and the extension of the notion of (natural) resources to something more than direct, material, profitable needs, that other appreciations of ‘environment’ can be moved from the realm of personal taste to that of public interest. The latter is now exclusively reserved for Narvesonian nature as resources – as if that ‘Old World’ interpretation of nature is not just as much a mere ‘taste’ or ‘preference’ as any other. As long as their political agenda tempts libertarians to focus on resources only, no ‘New World’ libertarianism-for-nature will be forthcoming, no liberation of biological nature from the bounds of necessity. Nor can we expect an answer to the question if an extended libertarianism

catering to the interests of animals *and* humans will not ultimately allow, even necessitate, the negation or abolition of uncontrolled wilderness.

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