

Thinking through wildlands

by Claire Larroque

What do we owe to nature? And to which nature? Moving beyond dualistic praise of the wilderness, the philosopher Rémi Beau invites us to observe ordinary nature. In the indeterminate spaces of wildlands, it might be possible to find the source of a new ethical relationship. But what would be the practical implications?

On: Rémi Beau, *Éthique de la nature ordinaire. Recherches philosophiques dans les champs, les friches et les jardins*, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2017, 342 p., 24€.

The ethics of nature that emerged in the 1970s mainly focused on wild nature or the ‘wilderness idea’.¹ In these philosophies of the environment, the aim was to protect places of outstanding natural beauty against both urban sprawl and damaging agricultural activities. Environmental protection involved turning natural spaces into sanctuaries, removed from human activity: from this perspective, when land was inhabited or transformed by human beings, it stopped having anything to do with nature.

But must nature be intact for its value to be recognised? If areas of unspoilt nature cannot be found, should we really conclude that nature itself does not exist? These are the questions asked by philosopher Rémi Beau in his book *Éthique de la nature ordinaire. Recherches philosophiques dans les champs, les friches et les jardins*. Running counter to the idea that nature lies only in remarkable places, the book invites us to explore ‘ordinary nature’, the nature ‘with which we live in the day-to-day, a nature that is close to us but often invisible’ (p. 22) and that the author strives to make apparent through a rich and rigorous theoretical and empirical investigation. By looking in detail at the many facets of human activity, he reveals another possible relationship with nature:

¹ These ethics of nature called into question one of the assumptions of modern moral philosophy, namely that entering the moral sphere necessary meant positioning oneself within the human community. See in particular Hicham-Stéphane Afeissa (ed.), *Éthique de l’environnement. Nature, valeur, respect*, Paris, Vrin, 2007, vol. 1.

Turning to the ordinary means making two changes to how we look at nature. First, we have to make a geographical shift, from the faraway to the nearby, from the unspoilt nature of the remotest places on the earth to the proximate environment of spaces of human life. Second, we have to change the key points of focus of our reflection, moving from thinking about natural beings, in their radical opposition to human beings, to thinking about the relationships between humans and nature, which make up the daily life of human societies. (p. 235).

Nature in Industrial and Productivist Societies

In the first part of the book, the author retraces the history of how agriculture converted to productivism. He shows how the twentieth-century modernisation of agricultural practices, in pursuit of the ideal of artificialisation, marked a turning point in the types of relationship humans had with nature. While, historically, agriculture lies at the interface between humans and nature, analysing the substantial changes in agricultural activities over the past two centuries reveals a desire to disconnect human practices from natural processes. Technological progress seems to have given farmers the power to free themselves from the vagaries of the weather and to protect themselves from pest damage, while being 'capable of manufacturing agricultural products, like artefacts' (p. 128). R. Beau shows how, by opposing nature and culture, the ideal of productivist agriculture established a relationship of domination towards nature. Yet this modern conception of an external nature that can be entirely mastered by humans has been called into question, especially by environmentalist critiques: if agriculture seems to be exhausting natural resources, is this not a sign that agriculture still depends upon nature and that nature has not been entirely artificialised? It is in this context, marked by rising environmental concerns, that wilderness ethics have insisted on the need to protect natural spaces from human action, while trying to ground the intrinsic value of human nature.²

In order to highlight the mechanisms that have allowed this break with ordinary nature and to set out to encounter it, the author studies the changes in practices and discourse that mark this shift in our relationship to nature. This is precisely what leads him to focus his attention on the indeterminate spaces³ of wildlands.

² By reversing the hierarchy and again placing importance on nature, the ethics of wilderness simply perpetuate the dualist model. From this point of view, they have 'not so much deconstructed the dualism of humans and nature as they have redefined the moral status of the latter while maintaining its radical extraneity. They have turned dualism back against itself in order to impose it, this time positively, on nature; however they continue to consider human beings as external to nature' (p. 17).

³ Wildlands are indeterminate land insofar as they are neither totally artificial nor truly natural. Wilderness lovers are not drawn to this overgrown scrubland which is 'badly exploited or abandoned, and still testify to human presence. They want the imposing verticality of forests or the stunning rigour of the desert, watched from above by birds of prey' (Larrère, p. 12).

Wildlands or the Disregard of Ordinary Nature

The in-depth historical investigation into wildlands conducted in the second part of the book shows that the evolving way they have been perceived is closely linked to agricultural practices and new land management policies. The ‘first agricultural revolution’ at the end of the nineteenth century transformed the systems of land cultivation (land was no longer left fallow) and land ownership (common grazing land⁴ was abandoned) and reconfigured the rural space. The new agriculture was focused on ploughed land and cultivation (*ager*), while non-cultivated land, dominated by grasses (*saltus*) were no longer as important as in previous agrarian systems.⁵ Considered unproductive, moors, wastelands, scrubland, grazing lands, and garrigues were symbols of archaic agriculture:

Landscapes were viewed in more simplistic terms, through the binary lenses of cultivated and non-cultivated, productive and non-productive, utilised and neglected: a set of dualistic oppositions that are not disconnected from the central dualism of modernity, namely the opposition between humans and nature. (p. 160).

Foresters and agronomists alike criticised this disordered nature that they wished to eradicate through reforestation. Their discourse vaunted the merits of forests and defined them as the space of nature proper, which should be maintained but preserved from harmful human actions. By impugning the *saltus*, foresters contributed to the marginalisation of certain natural spaces, as well as the relationship to nature inherent to the activities of those spaces, such as pastoralism. The author shows how the first agricultural revolution marked an initial break with ordinary nature, establishing the negative reputation of wildlands in a long-lasting fashion: ‘we must rid ourselves of wildlands: they are the mark of neglect, negligence, laziness’ (p. 11).

While the fight against these spaces appeared less crucial over time,⁶ with the ‘second agricultural revolution’, the issue of wildlands emerged once again, in a renewed form: now, the fear was fallowisation. Technical innovations linked to the productivist transformation of French agriculture after the Second World War led to the emergence of new wildlands: automation led to the abandonment of any land that was not accessible to agricultural machines and with the rise in productivity resulting from mass use of pesticides, there was a decline in the areas cultivated. Thus ‘the term wildlands no longer related simply to a misuse of land but became instead the social symptom of the desertion of the countryside’ (p. 176). The phenomenon of fallowisation signalled a return of the disorder of nature and was viewed

⁴ In the Medieval organisation of crop rotation, the notion of common grazing land allowed people to put their animals to graze outside their own land, along rights of way, on fallow land, or on all land after harvest.

⁵ R. Beau draws on the agrarian trilogy defined in Antiquity and brought back to light by Paul Vidal de La Blache in the nineteenth century, that defines three types of rural land: *ager* (cultivated land), *saltus* (non-cultivated land), and *silva* (wooded land). See Paul Vidal de La Blache, *Principes de géographie humaine*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2008.

⁶ As intensive agriculture and heightened productivity developed, for a while this set aside conflicts around spaces that were not cultivated or considered not productive enough.

as threatening landscapes with 'closure'. The notion of 'landscape closure' developed by landscape studies in the 1970s argued that above a certain threshold of closure, in other words of fallowisation, a space became condemned to social closure. Fighting against landscape closure, because it led to the social death of a space, therefore meant renewing the fight against wildlands.

Rediscovering and Rethinking Ordinary Nature

However, R. Beau invites us to rethink the theory of 'landscape closure' and shows that it can, on the contrary, allow for the emergence of a new relationship to nature. According to him, we understand this theory in this way because we tend to see continuity between the critique of wildlands in the first agricultural revolution and the critique of fallowisation as landscape closure. Yet he demonstrates that 'formulated in different contexts (...) these arguments which, from a terminological point of view, are targeting the same thing, in fact contain very different propositions' (p. 193). Beau explains that in the theory of 'landscape closure', 'closed' spaces that threaten the countryside with fallowisation are in fact wooded spaces. In this sense, trees rather than lack of cultivation are the true driving force behind landscape closure. Conversely, 'open' spaces are made up of cultivated land but also lawns, heaths, marshes, and bogs; in other words, by some of the spaces that were targeted by the wildlands criticisms of the first agricultural revolution. The fight against 'landscape closure' is not, therefore, an extension of attempts to eradicate non-cultivated parts of the countryside and replace them either with cultivated land (*ager*) or forests (*silva*).⁷ On the contrary, the philosopher shows that, first, it allows uncultivated land to be reframed in positive terms, and second, it reasserts the value of the practices developed in those spaces that testify to some moderation in the relationship to nature. Beau underlines, in particular, the role of the pastoral practices that develop in these indeterminate spaces, thanks to which it is possible to fight against 'landscape closure'. In this sense, focusing attention on spaces where ordinary nature unfolds requires us to set aside dualistic oppositions (nature/culture) and allows us to revisit or reinvent ways of acting *with* nature.

Towards an Ethics of Ordinary Nature

In order to devise the foundations of an ethics of ordinary nature, the author draws, on the one hand, on the philosophical developments of John Baird Callicot's ecocentric ethics,

⁷ 'While replacing wildland with a wood is a way of fighting against fallowisation, it is also a way of contributing to landscape closure. In other words, the reforestation that became a lever for fighting against non-cultivated spaces is now part and parcel of the problem' (p. 198).

briefly formulated by US environmentalist Aldo Leopold as a 'land ethic', and refers, on the other hand, to the ethics of care. The issue at stake here is displacing the focus of environmental ethics from wilderness to the nature with which humans interact every day. He argues in favour of a contextual and relational ethics and, consequently, of the need to reassess the descriptive component of ethics. Our moral relationship to nature would, in this case, take shape in descriptions of practices that connect us to natural beings.

Descriptions of environmental practices and tales of experiences in nature, common in American literature, can take the shape of moral reflection on the environment: this is no doubt the important message that environmental ethics can take from the ethics of care. (p. 80).

In the author's view, in order to know how to act *with* and take care of nature, it is necessary first to observe and understand what humans do with it. One could question this descriptive dimension, though. How can we determine normative criteria for our actions towards nature based on observation and description? Can description alone suffice to provide the foundations or justifications for one action rather than another? R. Beau argues that environmental ethics does not consist simply in inventing new moral principles but rather in proposing a more profound recasting of moral philosophy. The normativity of such an ethics would therefore not lie in its capacity to respond autonomously to the moral problems raised by our relationship to nature. From this point of view, he considers that we should not expect such an ethics to answer the question of whether or not it is moral to act in a particular way in nature based simply on its own normative resources. This is precisely why he reassesses the part played by description in the ethics of nature he puts forward, as, in his view, the central task of environmental philosophy consists in offering new descriptions of the world that do not omit entire areas of the real world, made up of the multiple ties that bind us to natural organisms. It would, however, have been interesting to see the author develop some concrete avenues, based on his proposed method, to show the practical implications of an ethics of ordinary nature.

While 'the wilderness will no doubt still have its admirers' (p. 13), Rémi Beau's book has the great merit of providing many empirical and theoretical insights allowing us to go beyond this conception of nature. Rediscovering ordinary nature, as he suggests, invites us to recognise that we act *with* as opposed to *upon* nature. He draws our attention to the everyday relationships between human beings and the environment, with a view to making the natural part of our social activities visible once again. Far from the idea of a threatening nature that must be mastered and dominated, this study invites to take greater care of the nature surrounding us and, thus, to reach a better understanding of how and why humans and non-humans can come together around nature.

First published in *laviedesidees.fr*, 3 April 2019.

Translated from the French by Lucy Garnier.

Published in *booksandideas.net*, 27 June 2019.