17 RELATIONALITY, RECIPROCITY, AND FLOURISHING IN AN AFRICAN LANDSCAPE

Michael Hannis and Sian Sullivan

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Introduction

Human flourishing does not happen in isolation. It is dependent on, and in large part constituted by, relationships—with specific others, with multiple communities, and with the world(s) in which one lives. At the interhuman level this theme of relationality has been explored under many labels, including capabilities approaches and relational autonomy.[1] More recently the same insight has informed environmental virtue ethics, which extends the idea of identity-constituting community beyond the human, asking what it is to flourish as part of such a community.[2] What is the relationship between the flourishing of human beings (individually and/or collectively) and the flourishing of the nonhuman world? What kinds of relationships with "others-beyond-the-human" characterize a flourishing human life—and what are the virtues of character that build and nurture such relationships? Such questions break down the false dichotomy between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, freeing environmental ethics to make

1. Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011); Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, eds., *Relational Autonomy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

2. Ronald Sandler and Philip Cafaro, eds., *Environmental Virtue Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); Ronald Sandler, *Character and Environment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Rosalind Hursthouse, "Environmental Virtue Ethics," in *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems*, Rebecca Walker and Philip Ivanhoe, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007: 155–172); Brian Treanor, *Emplotting Virtue: A Narrative Approach to Environmental Virtue Ethics* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014).

meaningful contributions to broader debates rather than staying bogged down in meta-ethical speculation.[3]

A fully flourishing human life requires connection and relationship not only with humans but also with the rest of the world. This kind of relationship cannot be built with homogenized categories such as "nature" or "biodiversity."[4] It requires approaching and understanding animals, plants, forests, rivers, and mountains *as themselves*, rather than *as a class of things* defined only by their shared "nonhuman-ness." Recognizing "otherness" is important in this process, as is recognizing commonality.[5] But both are beginnings, preliminaries to the development of a mature reflective relationship with the "nonhuman." Connection and relationship are still less likely to emerge from thinking about "natural capital" or "ecosystem services." Here the enforcement of commensurability works to *remove* distinctiveness and difference, as more and more domains of the world become abstracted into numbers, absorbed into spreadsheets, and offset in frequently marketized exchanges. Trees become carbon, carbon becomes dollars, and "the world" becomes subsumed into "the economy," rather than the other way round.[6]

One way to resist this culturally hegemonic urge to abstraction is to reflect on direct experience. It seems impossible to directly *experience* "biodiversity" or "natural capital." By contrast, both firsthand and scholarly evidence confirm the transformative potential of real experiences of entities beyond the human, and indeed of the damage caused by the lack of such experience.[7] Another is

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3. Michael Hannis, *Freedom and Environment: Autonomy, Human Flourishing, and the Political Philosophy of Sustainability* (New York: Routledge, 2015); John Dryzek, "Political and Ecological Communication," in *Debating the Earth* (*Second edition*), John Dryzek and David Schlosberg, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005: 633–646); Kerry Whiteside, *Divided Natures: French Contributions to Political Ecology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

4. Kate Soper, *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Donald S. Maier, *What's So Good About Biodiversity?* (New York: Springer, 2012).

5. Simon Hailwood, *How to Be a Green Liberal* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2004); Robert E. Goodin, *Green Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992); Adrian Martin, Shawn McGuire, and Sian Sullivan, "Global Environmental Justice and Biodiversity Conservation," *Geographical Journal* 179, no. 2 (2013): 122–131.

6. Sian Sullivan and Michael Hannis, "Nets and Frames, Losses and Gains: Value Struggles in Engagements with Biodiversity Offsetting Policy in England," *Ecosystem Services* 15 (2015): 162–173; John O'Neill, *Ecology, Policy and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993); Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957).

7. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Random House, 1996); Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin, 2005); Glenn Albrecht, "'Solastalgia': A New Concept in Health and Identity," *Philosophy, Activism, Nature* 3 (2005): 41–55.

to learn from the experience of others: for example, through close attention to different cultures. Anthropologists have described many understandings of the relationships between humans and the nonhuman world, and these frequently include ideas about nonhuman agency, personhood, and moral status, which can seem challenging to a "Western" mindset. This chapter presents some preliminary reflections from the "ecocultural ethics" component of a research project called *Future Pasts*, supported by the United Kingdom's Arts and Humanities Research Council.[8] In this project we seek to bring ethnographic detail and perspectives from the "anthropology of sustainability" (Sullivan) into dialogue with environmental philosophy and ethics (Hannis).

Ontology, Particularity, and Ethnography

From an anthropological as well as postcolonial perspective, the Western hierarchies of value associated with other-than-human natures, while universalizing, are understood to in fact be highly *particular*, embedded in, and made possible by particular cultural and historical contexts.[9] Importantly for human relationships with natures beyond the human, they restrict the attribution of agency, intentionality, and communication to human actors (and often only some human actors), while backgrounding the possibility that other entities might also enjoy such capacities. This restriction, so characteristic of "the West," is strongly associated with the Enlightenment period and the ushering in of modernity but, as emphasized by Matthew Hall, is rooted in hierarchies of value

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8. We gratefully acknowledge support from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (ref. AH/K005871/2), as well as fieldwork support from the National Museum of Namibia and Save the Rhino Trust, Namibia (See http://www.futurepasts.net). The ethnographic material presented here derives from multiple interactions, discussions, and observations. We are indebted to the following individuals for material used from key recorded and transcribed interviews: Welhemina Suro Ganuses (WSG), Ruben Saunaeib Sanib (RSS), Sophia Obi |Awises (SO|A), Nathan ≠Ûina Taurob (N≠ÛT), Christophine Dâumu Tauros (CDT), Michael |Amigu Ganaseb (M|AG), Emma Ganuses (EG), the late Salmon Ganuseb (SG), Max Haraseb (MH), !Nosa Ganases, Martin !U-e So-Oabeb (M!UO). Invaluable translation and logistical support was provided by Welhemina Suro Ganuses, Filemon |Nuab, Ezegiel |Awarab, Elfriede Gaeses, Andrew Botelle, Eugène Marais, and Jeff Muntifering, for which, many thanks.

9. Cf. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Exchanging Perspectives: The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Ontologies," *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 3 (2004): 463–484; Phillipe Descola and Janet Lloyd, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Towards an Anthropology of Nature beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Sian Sullivan, "Nature on the Move III: (Re)countenancing an Animate Nature," *New Proposals: Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Enquiry* 6, nos. 1–2 (2013): 50–71.

asserted in classical antiquity.[10] This universalizing framework involves fundamental assumptions about the "known" nature of reality. It prescribes what entities can exist, into what categories such entities can be sorted, and by what practices they can be known.

From a cross-cultural perspective, cultural and historical differences generate *plural ontologies*. This plurality, combined with power/knowledge relations infusing historically and culturally situated "regimes of truth"[11] has significant implications for who and what might be meant when the term "we" is invoked, as well as for what entities might socially be brought within the realm of moral considerability by this "we"[12] and thus for what constitutes appropriate ethical practice in relation to these entities.[13] In particular, while the modern ontology of "the West" may be *universalizing*, it frequently does not translate well across different cultural contexts. It is itself particular, rather than universal.[14]

Ethnography, the attempt to understand in detail the makings of social reality in different cultural contexts, without necessary recourse to "the West" as the measure of all things, can add detail, complexity, and nuance to the understanding of different ontological ideas about relationships between humans and other-than-human entities. It seems, however, to have been relatively underutilized in environmental philosophy, apart from quite broad brushstrokes such as Baird Callicott's *Earth's Insights*.[15] From a Foucauldian perspective, ethnography can also enhance possibilities for the destabilization of knowledge categories and practices that seem problematic for the flourishing of diversity, through assisting

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10. Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011), 19–26, after Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 2006); see also Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), and further discussion in Sian Sullivan, "(Re-) Embodying Which Body? Philosophical, Cross-Cultural and Personal Reflections on Corporeality," in *Law, Philosophy and Ecology: Exploring Re-Embodiments*, Ruth Thomas-Pellicer, Vito de Lucia, and Sian Sullivan, eds., Routledge Law, Justice and Ecology Series (London: GlassHouse, 2016).

11. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* Alan Sheridan, trans. (London: Penguin, 1991 [1975]); Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–531.

12. Cf. Kevin Gary Behrens, "An African Relational Environmentalism and Moral Considerability," *Environmental Ethics* 36, no. 1 (2014): 63–82.

13. As noted in Workineh Kelbessa, "Can an African Environmental Ethics Contribute to Environmental Policy in Africa?" *Environmental Ethics* 36, no. 1 (2014): 46.

14. Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe.*

15. J. Baird Callicott, *Earth's Insights: A Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

with diagnosis of their objects of knowledge, the subjugation of knowledges with which these objects are associated, and the "regimes of truth" that naturalize certain ontologies and associated ethical possibilities over others.[16]

Many indigenous communities globally—by which we mean cultures that have retained some degree of long-term, continuous ancestral connection with land areas—seem to conceive of an expanded zone of moral considerability and reciprocity that includes entities beyond the human[17], as they are embedded and constituted in specific and shifting relational settings[18]. These cultural contexts are frequently also associated with localities now celebrated as "biodiversity hotspots,"[19] where ecosystems characterized by high diversity and the incidence of endemism and rarity remain, within the broader context of a global anthropogenic extinction event. Human cultural arrangements in these contexts have clearly been associated with the maintenance of relationships with diverse natures beyond the human, despite immense modern pressures to transform such cultural landscapes in the interests of economic growth. As Gorenflo et al. state, "the tendency for both [biological and linguistic diversity] to be high in particular regions suggests that certain cultural systems and practices, represented by speakers of particular indigenous and nonmigrant languages, tend to be compatible with high biodiversity."[20] Understanding the ontologies that have made it possible for human cultures in these contexts to maintain particular relational sustainabilities thus seems relevant for learning how to live in more accommodating ethical relationships with many kinds of selves, only some of whom are human.[21] Of particular relevance, as emphasized by Eduardo Kohn, are the ethical perspectives and practices that may arise when people live as if other kinds of being could see "us," and thus act as if the way(s) that "they" saw "us" mattered. As Kohn writes,

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16. See, e.g., Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Enquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777–795.

17. Sian Sullivan, "Folk and Formal, Local and National: Damara Cultural Knowledge and Community-Based Conservation in Southern Kunene, Namibia," *Cimbebasia* 15 (1999): 1–28; Kohn, *How Forests Think*; Behrens, "An African Relational Environmentalism"; Kelbessa, "Can an African Environmental Ethics?".

18. Cf. Sarah Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies: Natures Cultures Spaces* (London: SAGE, 2002); Noel Castree, "A Post-environmental Ethics?" *Ethics, Place and Environment* 6, no. 1 (2003): 3–12.

19. As reviewed in L.J. Gorenflo, Suzanne Romaine, Russell A. Mittermeier, and Kristen Walker-Painemilla, "Co-occurrence of Linguistic and Biological Diversity in Biodiversity Hotspots and High Biodiversity Wilderness Areas," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 109, no. 21 (2012): 8032–8037.

20. Ibid., 8037.

21. Kohn, *How Forests Think*; Sullivan, "Nature on the Move III."

> [h]ow other kinds of beings see us matters. That other kinds of beings see us changes things. If jaguars also represent us—in ways that can matter vitally to us—then anthropology cannot limit itself just to exploring how people from different societies might happen to represent them as doing so. Such encounters with other kinds of being force us to recognize the fact that seeing, representing, and perhaps knowing, even thinking, are not exclusively human affairs.[22]

Here we seek to illustrate such reflections with detail from one very specific ethnographic context, in which one of us (Sullivan) has worked intermittently since 1992. This is a landscape in west Namibia, known locally as Hurubes, especially by elders from Khoe land-associated lineages (*!haoti*) known as ||Khao-a Dama, ||Ubun, and !Narenin, who are part of the spectrum of Khoe and San peoples spread throughout southern Africa who speak languages characterized by click consonants.[23] ||Khao-a Dama, in particular, trace their histories over at least a number of generations to Hurubes, although their dwelling practices have been significantly constrained by a series of evictions that (perhaps ironically) have often sought to clear the area of local people in the interests of the conservation of indigenous fauna.[24]

In what follows, and based on field research conducted primarily in 2014–2015, we offer brief descriptions of several knowledge and value practices through which ||Khao-a Dama (and other Khoe and San peoples) have conceived of agency and intentionality as located in entities beyond the human. Through this information we seek to contribute to broader explorations of moral obligations and nonhuman agency in a relational environmental ethics that refracts the oft-posited anthropocentric/ecocentric dichotomy.[25] Key recorded interviews and discussions are referenced here by using a coding system that includes the initials of the interviewee(s) and the place and date of the discussion; interviewee names are listed in footnote 8. The inclusion of full interviewee names is preferred by

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22. Kohn, *How Forests Think*, 1.

23. See Wilfrid Heinrich Gerhard Haacke, "Linguistic Hypotheses on the Origin of Namibian Khoekhoe Speakers," *Southern African Humanities* 20 (2008): 163–177.

24. For a historiography of land clearances in this area see Giorgio Meischer, *Namibia's Red Line: The History of a Veterinary and Settlement Border* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

25. See also Paul Cloke and Owain Jones, "Grounding Ethical Mindfulness for/in Nature: Trees in their Places," *Ethics, Place and Environment* 6 (2003): 195–214; Robert Melchior Figueroa and Gordon Waitt, "Cracks in the Mirror: (Un)covering the Moral Terrains of Environmental Justice at Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park," *Ethics, Place and Environment* 11, no. 3 (2008): 327–349.

interviewees and respects the value placed on "being known to know," given multiple layers of knowledge suppression and displacement—from colonialism through apartheid to market-oriented restructuring—that have shaped people's experience in west Namibia. We are not making a comment here on what is becoming known as "African relational environmental ethics" more broadly[26], although the knowledge and value practices we describe might indeed intersect with this approach. We touch on practices relating to ancestors, to different kinds of animals, to a particular class of plants imbued with the power to act to intervene in human fortune and misfortune, and to rain, which under certain contexts is personified as what might be thought of as a supernatural or spirit being called *|nanus*.

Relating with . . .

The Agency of Ancestors

For elderly ||Khao-a Dama people with associations with Hurubes, moving through the landscape involves greeting and offering practices that connect people alive today with people now physically dead, who were previously associated in some way with these landscapes. While often attenuated through displacement, acculturation, and the variously disruptive effects of modernity, such practices remain current and significant.

Ancestors are communicated with through a practice called *tsē-khom*, understood as "speaking with the ancestors in the day-time,"[27] (thus distinguished from a different practice of communicating with one's ancestors during nighttime healing events in order to understand the causes of sickness)[28]. *Tsē-khom* usually involves the offering and smoking of tobacco, through which ancestors, or *kai khoen*—i.e., big or old people—in the realm of the spirits of the dead are also able to enjoy this smoking. Through *tsē-khom*, ancestral agencies are requested to act in the present to open the road so that travelers can see the best way to go. They are asked for guidance regarding the most appropriate ways to do things,

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26. See, for example, Behrens "An African Relational Environmentalism"; Kelbessa, "Can an African Environmental Ethics?"

27. N≠UT, CDT, M|G, |Giribes, May95; WSG, Mai, 030314, CDT, M|AG, Hoanib, 070414; RSS, Hurubes/Palmwag, multiple dates 2014–2015 including RSS, Khow, 171114, RSS, Barab, 201114, RSS, Barab, 211114, RSS, SO|A, Kai-as, 221114, RSS, SO|A, Uru, 231114; Khamdesca-Hobatere, 031114; WSG,!N-D, 121114.

28. Translated literally as *tsē* = "to separate" and *khom* = "to keep holy" in Sigrid Schmidt, "Spirits: Some Thoughts on Ancient Damara Folk Belief," *Journal of the Namibian Scientific Society* 62 (2014): 144 (after Krönlein, *Wortschatz der Khoi-khoin [Namaqua-Hottentotten]* [Berlin: Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft, 1889], 325).

and their support is evidenced through the intuitions people receive in response to queries that may arise as they are traveling. The ancestors are also asked to mediate the activities of potentially dangerous animals such as lions, who are understood very much as other ensouled beings who assert their own agencies and intentionality (see below). Ancestors thus greeted include recent family members whose graves are located in places traveled to and through; unidentified dead (or what Schmidt refers to as "the invisible representations of anonymous dead')[29]; and sometimes a more broadly referenced ancestor-hero known as Haiseb. The latter is considered to have been a real person who was associated with the doing of wonderful and clever things[30], who lived in the distant past and with whom large cairns found throughout the dryland environment from the Cape to the Kunene River are associated.[31]

Ontologically, the ancestors are spirits or souls (i.e., *gagas*[32]) that have left humans whose bodies have died. As spirit beings they have ontological reality in the present: they are not simply people who lived in the past, nor are they entities that require worship. They are understood more as specific types of entities that, through pragmatic relationship practices, are called upon to intervene—to assert agency—in the present, so as to influence outcomes. Sometimes this influence includes intervention in the agency of other nonhuman agents, such as lions, a species with which humans here continue to live in close contact, as they have done throughout the remembered past.

. . . Animal Agencies

Lions are a key and formidable predator, encounters with whom may result in the loss of human life, or the life of herded livestock. Nonetheless, people in the past sought them out, in order to scavenge meat from their kills,[33] and lions figure in people's realities as animals imbued with agency and intentionality. Just as Kohn

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29. Ibid., 135.

30. RSS, Barab, 211114; RSS, SO|A, Kai-as, 221114; RSS, SO|A, Uru, 231114; EG, WSG, !N-D, 191014; WSG, multiple conversations.

31. See also Sigrid Schmidt, *Hai||om and !Xû Stories from North Namibia: Collected and Translated by Terttu Heikkinen (1934–1988)* (Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2011); Schmidt, "Spirits"; Sigrid Schmidt, "Some Notes on the So-Called Heitsi-Eibeb Graves in Namibia: Ancient Heaps of Stones at the Roadside" *BAB Working Paper* 3 (2014). https://baslerafrika.ch/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/WP-2014-3-Schmidt.pdf.

32. Cf. Adi Inskeep, *Heinrich Vedder's "The Bergdama": An Annotated Translation of the German Original with Additional Ethnographic Material* (Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2003), 329.

33. RSS, SO|A, ≠Habaka, 141114.

describes for Runa interactions with jaguars,[34] lions are conceived as being able to see, recognize, and represent the people they encounter and interact with. The proximity of lions to humans is indicated by calling to lions as "big brother," "big head," or as a "big dog" (since dogs are seen as also socially close to humans)—names that denote respect and proximity. In non-ordinary states of consciousness associated with healing, Khoe and San reality also embraces the perceptual possibility of shapeshifting between lions and humans.[35] This perception is potentially evidenced by rock art inscriptions of therianthropes—chimerical figures that are part human and part animal—including a famous rock engraving of a lion with a human hand emerging from its tail, found at the World Heritage Site of Twyfelfontein in west Namibia (as shown in Figure 17.1).

Animals generally, though, are considered to be cognate with humans not so much because of their biological and morphological similarities, as in natural history and evolutionary perspectives (although these are important), but because like humans they are animated by a soul that passes from them when they die, with this animation conferring to individuals a sense of self. It is this soul—or *gagas* (as above)—that gives humans and animals their unique "wind" or "breath," confers their abilities to move as well as to assert agency and intentionality, and also informs the qualities of action and behavior from which humans learn how to act appropriately[36]. In the West, by contrast, the conceptual removal of "soul" from animals was notoriously achieved by Descartes's affirmation that they were merely "soulless automata," an ontological strategy that has arguably sanctioned ruthless instrumentalization of animals by justifying moral indifference.[37] In the ||Khao-a Dama context, asking whether or not animals have a soul is responded to as a derisory question.

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34. Kohn, *How Forests Think*.

35. For discussion of conceptual and material mutability in KhoeSan thought, see Mathias Guenther, *Tricksters and Trancers: Bushman Religion and Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Sian Sullivan and Chris Low, "Shades of the Rainbow Serpent? A KhoeSān Animal between Myth and Landscape in Southern Africa: Ethnographic Contextualisations of Rock Art Representations," *Arts* 3, no. 2 (2014), 215–244.

36. RSS, Barab, 211114.

37. Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (London: Penguin, 1968 [1637]), 75–76. See discussion in Alf Hornborg, "Animism, Fetishism, and Objectivism as Strategies for Knowing (or Not Knowing) the World," *Ethnos* 71, no. 1 (2006): 21–32, 24 (after Neil Evernden, *The Natural Alien: Humankind and Environment* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985], 16–17); Peter Harrison, "Descartes on Animals," *Philosophical Quarterly* 42, no. 169 (1992): 219–227; J. Baird Callicott, "Ecology and Moral Ontology," in *The Structural Links between Ecology, Evolution and Ethics: The Virtuous Epistemic Circle*, Donato Bergandi, ed., Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, 296 (Dordecht: Springer 2013), 112; Sullivan, "(Re-) Embodying Which Body?"

FIGURE 17.1 Petroglyph therianthrope consisting of a lion with a human hand emerging from its tail, at the Twyfelfontein UNESCO World Heritage Site, southern Kunene, west Namibia.

Sian Sullivan personal archive, March 21, 2014.

For ||Khao-a Dama elders, soul animates animals at the top of the food chain, such as lions, but it also confers vitality and agency to much smaller creatures such as insects. Social insects such as harvester ants who harvest seeds subsequently gathered by people, and bees from whom people harvest honey, are valued extremely highly. These creatures are so valued not only for how hard they work to gather important foods that are then shared with humans, but also for the *egalitarianism* with which they share both this work and the resulting foods. Great care is taken by people when gathering seeds or honey from harvester ants' nests and beehives respectively, so as to ensure productivity in future years. Human action thus supports the harvesting work done by harvester ants, and neither seeds from harvester ants' nests (seen as the "home"—*oms*—of the ants in a manner that is parallel to the homes, or "*omti,*" of humans) nor honey harvested from beehives should be gathered in such a way as to leave nothing for the future sustenance of these social insects.[38]

38. Sullivan, "Folk and Formal."

These practices might be interpreted as simply examples of "resource taboos," which in a utilitarian manner act to safeguard human sustenance from one year to the next.[39] But this interpretation does not mesh well with the ontological reality informing such practices. This is because although humans are of course seeking to eat from the multiple kinds of selves with which they live, since these selves are conceived as variously able to also see, represent, and act, an expanded sense of reciprocity and relationality arguably informs these contexts.[40] As Viveiros de Castro writes for Amerindian contexts, the assumed shared hypostasis of soul as animating embodied existence acts to attenuate the emergence of objectification and instrumentalization practices.[41] Associated human behaviors, which (may) consciously realize and sustain the flourishing and abundance of socioecological assemblages rather than of individuals only, arguably recall Arne Naess's concept of self-realization, meaning realization of the ecologically connected relational Self (with a capital *S*).[42]

. . . Plants as Agents

Plants, in contrast, are not necessarily considered to be animated by soul in the same way as humans and other animals, mostly because they do not move as animals do. Nonetheless, they are definitely considered to be alive, and to die, just as humans do[43]. Some plants, however, are conferred with special properties of agency: a suite of plants considered to be "*soxa*," i.e., as particularly potent. A cluster of these plants are considered to act in a protective manner, especially against "bad thoughts" or envy ("*surib*"[44]) seen as a cause of sickness when directed toward someone, especially a person who is vulnerable, such as a child, or someone who is already ill or elderly. Importantly, a key aspect of such plants is that they will not work—indeed, they will not stay with the human person seeking their protection—unless something small—a five-cent piece, a piece of a person's clothing—is given to them in exchange. This direct material exchange between human person and potent/*soxa* plant binds the matter and healing

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39. See, for example, William Forbes, Kwame Badu Antwi-Boasiako, and Ben Dixon, "Some Fundamentals of Conservation in South and West Africa," *Environmental Ethics* 36, no. 1 (2014): 5–30, 10–14.

40. Cf. Kohn, *How Forests Think*.

41. Viveiros de Castro, "Exchanging Perspectives."

42. Arne Naess, "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World," *Trumpeter, Journal of Ecosophy* 4, no. 3 (1987): 35–42

43. MH, Kham, 021114; RSS, Barab, 211114.

44. Schmidt, "Spirits," 142

action of the plant to a person[45]. Through this material exchange, the agency of particular plants matters in their ability to act in relation to a human self.

. . . The Personified Agency of Rain

Our last example extends agency and intentionality further still, to include the actions of biophysical entities. For ||Khao-Dama and other related Khoe and San peoples, it is the personified, supernatural force behind the phenomena of rain—known here as *|nanus*—that asserts agency in selecting those humans who become healers[46]. Healers are thus known as *|nanu-aob* or *|nanu-aos*—meaning literally man or woman of the rain. When individuals are called by *|nanus* they experience a psychological transformation precipitated by a loss of a sense of self. They go into the field and wander around, lost to the normal world of everyday waking ego consciousness. On realizing that they have disappeared, people of their community go looking for them, singing the songs of healing dances called *arus*. It is when nascent *|nanu-aob/s* hear the threads of the familiar songs of the *arus* that they are able to re-enter the social world, having been "opened" by *|nanus* so that they can see sicknesses of the people. Through virtue of their selection by *|nanus*, combined with ritualized practices of consumption of particular rain- and healing-associated substances—such as the *soxa* plant *tuhorabeb* ("*tu*" = rain[47]) which assists with being able to see[48]—healers are conferred certain powers of perception that permit them to see and cure sickness. These powers are independent of other forms of leadership so are not necessarily consistent with any sort of political authority.[49]

This final example takes us toward what "we" might conceive as the "ontological edges" of modernity, to extend a currently lively seam of work in the humanities that explores and opens up some of these ontological edges. This exploration includes work encouraging recognition of the biologically grounded ontologies of being of nonhuman species toward more sensitive attunements with other-than-human presence,[50] as well as work that takes seriously the

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45. WSG, Mai, 030314.

46. M!UO, Outjo, 061114; CDT, !Nosa, Ses 251114.

47. Cf. Schmidt, "Spirits," 147.

48. N≠UT 1995–1996; !Nosa, Ses 251114. The identity of this plant is known but protected for intellectual property reasons.

49. Cf. Pierre Clastres and Robert Hurley, *Society against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988).

50. See, for example, Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Vilém Flusser and Louis Bec, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* (New York: Atropos, 2011 [1987]); Marder, *Plant-Thinking.*

socioecological and ethical demands of materiality.[51] But for anthropologists and others working in variously "non-modern" cultural contexts there is a whole *other* ontological edge that demands to be taken seriously, as gestured toward in the example above of the personified agency of rain. This is the diverse world of both ancestors and spirits, which in many cultural contexts are known and encountered as agency-enacting entities with ontological reality.[52] As Kohn writes, "spirits are their own kind of real" emerging "from a specifically human way of engaging with and relating to a living world that lies in part beyond the human."[53] Since the spirit realm has its own future-making logics and habits, Kohn remarks additionally that how this reality is treated "is as important as recognizing it as such."[54] In other words, there may be further vistas to explore in an expanded relational and reciprocal ontology, with implications for future flourishings.

Flourishings

We have been able here only to skate over the surface of the above ethnographic examples. In doing so, however, we suggest that the knowledge practices we describe illustrate an expanded sphere of moral agency and considerability, associated with relations of reciprocity with other-than-human entities, relations that may be fruitful for engendering multi-species abundance. A *milieu* of relationality and reciprocity such as that described above, with an ontological assumption of distributed agency accompanied by keen awareness that "difference makes a difference,"[55] might thus act to discourage excessive interference with, and instrumentalization of, other-than-human natures, and conversely to support the flourishing of both human and other-than-human diversities. What ethnography and environmental anthropology can offer to a relational environmental ethics, then, is a deeper understanding of how people might live in specific relational contexts with different kinds of agency-asserting entities, only some of

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51. See, for example, Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Gabrielle Hecht, *Being Nuclear: Africans and the Global Uranium Trade* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); Mark Jackson, "Plastic Islands and Processual Grounds: Ethics, Ontology, and the Matter of Decay," *Cultural Geographies* 20, no. 2 (2013): 205–224.

52. Cf. Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe*; Kohn, *How Forests Think*.

53. Kohn, *How Forests Think*, 217, 216.

54. Ibid., 208, 216.

55. Kohn, *How Forests Think*, after Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000 [1972]).

whom are human.[56] A hope is that through such cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural engagements, pluralistic perspective and dialogue might inform a shift in *trans*cultural solidarities and shared values that responds to the contemporary global "wicked problems" associated with multiple environmental crises and accompanying cultural displacements.[57]

Knowledge, Value, and Symbiosis

In particular, the kinds of practices and associated narratives we gesture toward above indicate that something has been lost in the "disenchanted" modern reality most readers of this collection probably inhabit.[58] This loss makes it harder to work out what it is to really act on the basis of relationship with the non-human. Of course there have been "gains," too: modern humans know a great deal about subjects like evolution, genetics, mathematical ecology, and molecular biology. But this knowledge arguably brings "us" no closer to understanding our own relationships to the rest of the world. It has in fact become commonplace to remark on the danger that scientific prowess can *increase* human separation from the world.

This line of thought can easily run into the quicksand of the old debate between "reductionism and holism."[59] Some varieties of environmentalism have been keen to pin the blame for present ecological problems on modern Cartesian reductionism, in the process downplaying the importance of detailed empirical and experimental methods of environmental observation in non-modern contexts.[60] But this is not the whole story, as evidenced by nuanced debates in environmental aesthetics about the potential role of ecological knowledge in

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56. Cf. Figueroa and Waitt, "Cracks in the Mirror"; J. Baird Callicott, "Ecology and Moral Ontology."

57. Cf. Patricia Mazzarella, "Introduction," in *Transcultural Dimensions in Medical Ethics,* Edmund Pellegrino, Patricia Mazzarella, and Pietro Corsi, eds. (Frederick, MD: University Publishing Group, 1992), 1–12; Edmund Pellegrino, "Prologue: Intersections of Western Biomedical Ethics and World Culture," in Pellegrino, Mazzarella and Corsi, eds. *Transcultural Dimensions,* 13–19; Valerie A. Brown, John A. Harris, and Jacqueline Y. Russell, eds., *Tackling Wicked Problems: Through the Transdisciplinary Imagination* (London: Earthscan, 2010).

58. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 1993 [1963]); Patrick Curry, "From Enlightenment to Enchantment: Changing the Question," in *Law, Philosophy and Ecology: Exploring Re-Embodiments*, Ruth Thomas-Pellicer, Vito de Lucia, and Sian Sullivan, eds., Routledge Law, Justice and Ecology Series (London: GlassHouse, 2016).

59. As discussed in, e.g., Donato Bergandi and Patrick Blandin, "Holism vs. Reductionism: Do Ecosystem Ecology and Landscape Ecology Clarify the Debate?" *Acta Biotheoretica* 46, no. 3 (1998): 185–206.

60. Paul Richards, *Indigenous Agricultural Revolution* (London: HarperCollins, 1985).

properly appreciating and valuing "nature."[61] Does a scientific understanding of exactly what is going on in a forest, for example, just distract attention onto mechanistic details, or does it in fact facilitate a deeper appreciation of the complex interconnected whole? There is no right answer—both may potentially be true. In any case, perceiving and appreciating *relationship* requires properly apprehending both the details *and* the whole. It might be argued that such apprehension cannot be done with the "rational" mind alone. Alternatively, it might be observed that, as has often been noted, there can be many rationalities.[62] From this latter perspective, perhaps scientific ecological knowledge is just one of the rationalities that can potentially help develop the skill—the virtue—of perceiving and experiencing coherence and interconnectedness, of seeing both the wood and the trees. After all, as an anthropology of nature suggests, scientific ecology derives from one of a number of possible ontologies.[63]

This is not, however, to say that environmentalists are necessarily wrong to mistrust "reductionist" scientific paradigms. The existence of multiple anthropogenic ecological crises does strongly suggest a significantly reduced capacity for *symbiosis* between modern humans and our nonhuman companions. (Re) building this capacity for symbiosis is perhaps the most urgent challenge facing humanity. John Barry describes ecological virtue as "a mean between a timid ecocentrism and an arrogant anthropocentrism," centered on "modes of character and acting in the world which encourage social-environmental relations which are symbiotic rather than parasitic."[64] The *absence* of such virtue leads to the destructive modes of social organization we see today, which arguably position humanity as a parasite rather than a symbiont. As Barry's more recent work argues, change requires excavation of the political, ethical, and ontological underpinnings of this destructive modern story of the human/nonhuman relationship.[65] Having other stories to compare it with, particularly ones in which symbiosis is more clearly valued (as, perhaps, in those recounted above), can help with this project.

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61. See, e.g., Holmes Rolston III, "Does Aesthetic Appreciation of Landscapes Need to Be Science-Based?," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 35 (1995): 374–386, and discussion in Emily Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), chapter 4.

62. John S. Dryzek, *Rational Ecology: Environment and Political Economy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987); Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988).

63. Cf. Descola and Lloyd, *Beyond Nature and Culture.*

64. John Barry, *Rethinking Green Politics* (London: SAGE, 1999), 33–35.

65. John Barry, *The Politics of Actually Existing Unsustainability* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Egalitarianism and Reciprocity

Valuing symbiosis entails a very different understanding of how egalitarianism, obligation, and reciprocity may work to sustain community. Maintaining a calculative balance sheet of entitlements and obligations between individual "economic actors" does not nurture community. Anthropologist David Graeber argues that it is a modern innovation to interpret mutual obligations in terms of an ethical imperative to "pay one's debts."[66] Non-capitalist cultures, Graeber suggests, would see people who attempted never to be "in debt" as effectively placing themselves outside the community by rejecting the social fabric of reciprocally obligated relationships, thereby choosing instead to define their identity atomistically, and to deal with others as strangers.

To reject such atomism, and to instead celebrate the webs of mutual obligation as importantly constitutive of community, is to embrace a more complex, multidimensional understanding of reciprocity. Possession and exercise of what Alasdair MacIntyre calls *virtues of acknowledged dependence* can allow individuals to understand and discharge their own responsibilities as members of a community, a "network of giving and receiving."[67] These networks form a kind of organic scaffolding supporting community: the exercise and transmission of relevant virtues thus maintains the coherence and integrity of such networks, of the social arrangements within which individual flourishing lives can unfold. Such networks are also essential for individuals' understanding of their own autonomy—as MacIntyre argues, "acknowledgement of dependence is the key to independence."[68]

Expanding this idea to consider virtues of acknowledged *ecological* dependence we suggest supports an "ecological eudaimonism" in which dispositions of character that tend to maintain the integrity of the nonhuman world are explicitly recognized to also be beneficial for the human individuals who exhibit them. These dispositions are beneficial not only because such integrity is itself important for human flourishing, but also because recognition and acknowledgement of our dependence upon nonhuman worlds contribute to our understanding of ourselves.[69] Ecological virtues include traits and dispositions related to aesthetic, emotional, and spiritual perceptions of the natural world, as well as those related to the "rational" perspectives of environmental science. Moreover, what Rosalind

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66. David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (New York: Melville House, 2011).

67. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (London: Duckworth, 1999) 9, 99.

68. Ibid., 85.

69. Michael Hannis, "The Virtues of Acknowledged Ecological Dependence," *Environmental Values* 24 (2015): 145–164.

Hursthouse calls "right orientation to nature" includes respect not only for living things but also for inanimate natural features and phenomena and for the integrity of whole natural systems themselves.[70] This "right orientation" is considered to be a virtue not because it entails respect for the *telos* of living things, but rather on the eudaimonist basis that a human life characterized by a right orientation to nature will be a more flourishing one.[71] Such an orientation would not of course see *all* human impact as ethically problematic, but *would* involve a reflective and respectful approach to the human use and consumption of "nature."

So what is it to flourish as part of a broader community conceived in this way? How is individual flourishing related to the flourishing of the broader community of humans, nonhumans, and "land" (as Aldo Leopold would have it)?[72] How might seven billion or more human beings live in this kind of dynamic reciprocity with the nonhuman world? However this last question is to be answered, it will surely require a very different trajectory from that suggested by recent calls for humanity to embrace its role as "the God species."[73] Acknowledging and assuming nonhuman agency may be a key part of telling a new story that avoids such hubris. For these purposes, nonhuman agency need not necessarily be taken as literally or objectively "true as scientific fact." A heuristic interpretation may still do the job of opening up the required extra reciprocal dimensions, of stretching the imaginative muscles required to really perceive the complex webs of interconnections between living (and nonliving) things.

This is not, however, to suggest that in describing the realities of people mentioned in this text we are merely sharing metaphors or analogies. Theirs are sophisticated practices and narratives that embody accumulated cultural knowledge of "how to live a good life," and as Brian Treanor notes, ecological virtue is in large part developed by and through narratives.[74] Here, and in ideal terms, a life characterized by appropriate relationships with animals, plants, ancestors, and spirits is understood as a better life, a more flourishing life, than one characterized by inappropriate relationships with these agencies. It is also a life perhaps more likely to bring about the flourishing of others, human and nonhuman alike.

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70. Hursthouse, "Environmental Virtue Ethics." 165–166

71. Hannis, *Freedom and Environment*; Hursthouse, "Environmental Virtue Ethics" 165–166; Allen Thompson, "Natural Goodness and Abandoning the Economy of Value: Ron Sandler's Character and Environment," *Ethics, Place and Environment* 11, no. 2 (2008): 218–226.

72. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968 [1949]).

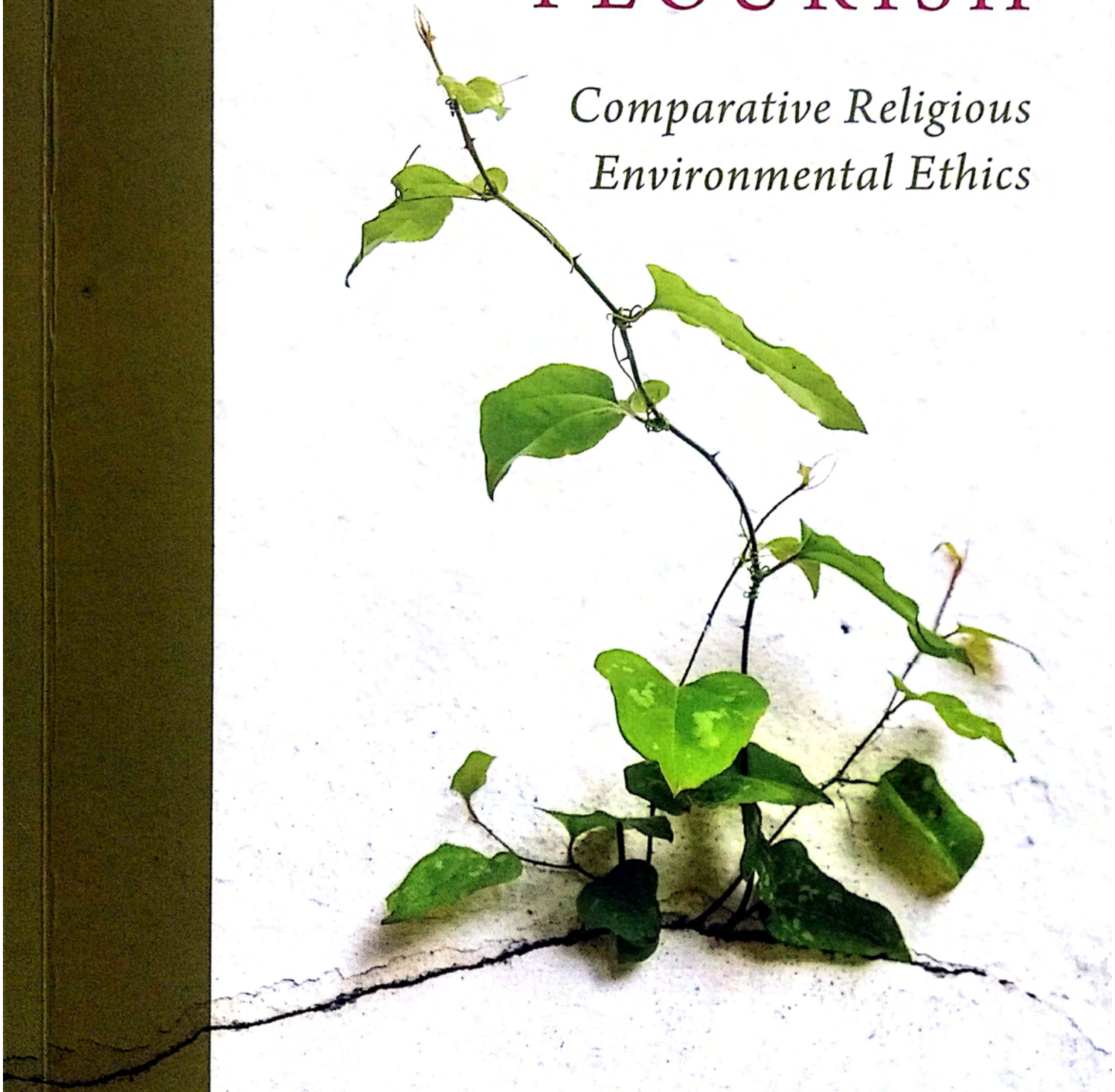
73. Mark Lynas, *The God Species: How Humans Really Can Save the Planet* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012); discussed in Michael Hannis, "Another God Delusion?" *The Land* 11(2012), 10, http://www.thelandmagazine.org.uk/articles/another-god-delusion.

74. Treanor, *Emplotting Virtue.*

A eudaimonist ecological virtue ethics may be well equipped to understand the ethical implications of the deep relationality that seems to be involved in worldviews such as these. Cultivating ecological virtue, on a eudaimonist model, can help bring about a good life for oneself, but without entailing individualism or indeed anthropocentrism. This is because, as with the case material shared here for Khoe peoples in west Namibia, the focus is on relationship with diverse others, interconnection, symbiosis, and the sustenance of abundance into the future.

THAT ALL MAY FLOURISH

Comparative Religious Environmental Ethics



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