Releasement and Reappropriation: A Structural-Ethical Response to the Environmental Crisis

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the problem of alienation from nature, considered through the phenomena of reification and de-objectification. I propose understanding alienation as the result of a distorted relation between the subjective and the objective and I suggest a tentative solution via the combination of two ethico-political practices: releasement and reappropriation. In doing so, I put forward a structural-ethical critique and response to our current ecological crisis.

KEYWORDS

Alienation, reification, de-objectification, releasement, reappropriation

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the problem of alienation from nature as one of the main prompters of the environmental crisis, and puts forward a political response to this. I propose understanding alienation as the result of a distorted relation between the subjective and the objective and I suggest a tentative solution via the combination of the ethico-political practices of releasement and re-appropriation. In doing so, I aim at preventing two tendencies, encapsulated, following Alasdair MacIntyre, in the vices of boastfulness and self-depreciation – both damaging to the extent that they 'focus attention on us and obscure our relationship to others' (2001: 151). Such tendencies tend to emerge in our responses to the ecological problem and both need to be prevented. If boastfulness exaggerates what we do and disavows others' contributions to our actions (including nature's inputs), self-depreciation renders more difficult the possibility for others to recognise our own contributions to their development

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or flourishing (MacIntyre 2001: 151). Nevertheless, instead of defending my case from the perspective of virtue ethics, I will seek a political reformulation of MacIntyre's insights from the viewpoint of critical theory.[1] In particular, climate ethics appears an insufficient answer to our problems because it fails 'to consider any structural drivers of climate change as rooted in our economic form of life' (Blumenfeld 2022: 3; see also Boscov-Ellen 2020).

Paraphrasing Kant, we could say that an ethical approach that lacks a rigorous critique of capitalism runs the risk of remaining empty, whereas a critique of capitalism that proceeds without paying any attention to the ethical question can end up blind. In order to avoid the one-sidedness of either position, I call for a 'structural-ethical critique' (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018: 130), capable of guiding our response to the current ecological crisis. Ultimately, I will claim, the praxis of releasement and reappropriation provides a good ground for a reconciliation of our condition of dependence on nature with our status as free, independent subjects – offering the possibility of overcoming the reified opposition between freedom and dependence, as well as the unsustainable relations to nature that such opposition produces.

ALIENATION: REIFICATION AND DE-OBJECTIFICATION

Our alienation from nature is a problem that, according to Hailwood, 'continues to resonate in the context of our current environmental woes' (2015: 1). Following Hailwood's pragmatist case for studying alienation in a plural manner, I propose seeing it as unfolding in the phenomena of *reification* and *de-objectification* – two damaging cases of estrangement, that need to be confronted to attain a more sustainable form of life. Indeed, my argument is that, by interrupting and impeding a dialectical relationship between the objective and the subjective, reification and de-objectification point to a form of alienation that is particularly useful for understanding our fraught relation to nature. By subjective, I am broadly referring to the realm of subjectivity, the domain of intersubjective self-conscious beings, which includes their inwardly experienced relations. By objective, I am alluding to the objective world, our natural surroundings (as in Marx's objective conditions of production), and to the human process of objectification of the world (as in Hegel's objective spirit).[2] In that sense, 'objectification elaborates the thought that, as living creatures,

1. MacIntyre's thought has been used to address the problem of sustainability by Barry 2012. For an attempt at extending MacIntyre's virtue ethics, so as to include the non-human world, see Hannis 2015.

2. I am aware that, within environmental ethics, the terms subjective and objective resonate with the debate on the existence of natural intrinsic value. While I am not directly addressing the problem of valuation here, my approach coincides with attempts at admitting 'some inescapable blending of the subjective and objective,' and with the questioning of a subjectivity that 'has eaten up everything'. For a classic discussion of this issue, see Rolston 1982.

human beings necessarily have a metabolic relation with nature' (Zambrana 2018: 80).[3] The deployment of the terms subjective and objective does not aim at reproducing a harsh dichotomy between subject and object; rather, it is done on the understanding that the subjective and the objective co-emerge and that 'the separation of subject and object is both real and a semblance' (Adorno 2005: 246).[4] The subject is always already an objective being and the objective is partially a result of a process of objectification enacted by subjects themselves. Nevertheless, I work with the distinction between the subjective and the objective for reasons both practical and normative: first, for the sake of conceptual clarity; second, for the sake of a normative argument in favour of a politics that addresses the problems deriving from fetishistic subjectivity and fetishistic objectivity.

Let me begin with a discussion of alienation as reification. What would it mean to say that our relation to nature is alienated because it is reified? According to Rahel Jaeggi's recent study, rather than signalling a failure to attain a 'state of oneness with oneself and the world', the phenomenon of alienation should be seen as referring to a failure in our relation of appropriation of ourselves and the world (2014: 1). In particular, alienation as reification pertains to 'a condition in which relations take on an independent existence (*Verselbständigung*) that stands over and against those who constitute them' (2014: 5). Following the arguments made by ecological Marxists, we can claim that in modern capitalist societies, social production – that is, our collective transformation of nature – suffers precisely from this problem. This is the case because capital itself (an objectified and alienated form of our social dependence) acquires an autonomous, independent existence, whose valorisation becomes the purpose of production. As Marx has argued, capital appears to workers as 'an alien power that dominates and exploits' them (1996: 571), transforming their cooperation in a form of objective domination. In capitalist societies, governed by market imperatives, the material elasticity of objective conditions of production is put in service of infinite growth, and the purpose of production is only accidentally the satisfaction of needs. To that extent, the production process remains outside the realm of democratic deliberation and is structurally impelled not to respect nature's limits. According to Saito, this reification of production is precisely the angle from which we should look at

3. In the Marxist tradition, the word objective can also refer to a thing-like condition – that is, to the fetishistic dimension of our social relations in capitalist societies. However, because Marx distinguishes between objectification and alienation, seeing 'the actualization of capital, not the process of objectification' as 'the matter at hand' (Zambrana 2018: 80), his critique of economic objectivity should not be confounded with a critique of objectification in general.

4. Adorno maintains that the separation is 'true, because in the realm of cognition it lends expression to the real separation, the rivenness of the human condition, the result of a coercive historical process; untrue, because the historical separation must not be hypostasized, not magically transformed into an invariant' (2005: 246).

the problem of the metabolic rift: indeed, he tells us, production, 'by the logic of reification, organizes a social practice increasingly hostile to nature, resulting in a crisis of sustainable human development' (2017: 119).

Rather than the abstract claim about humanity's inner tendency to destroy the earth, what we have here is a historically concrete argument on the reified movement of capital as having reorganised the transhistorical metabolism between humans and nature in ways that undermine the fundamental material conditions for human livability. Subjected to the unending requirement of reproducing capital, individuals are not free to appropriate their metabolic relation with nature; the possibility of a conscious and rational organisation of our relation with nature is proscribed in favor of capital's generation of profit. We can also identify the logic of reification as present in the very dichotomy established between production and reproduction. The forced hyperseparation – to use Plumwood's useful term (2003: 49) – of the productive and reproductive realms (concerning both social and natural reproduction) has been historically produced, again, in service of capital's interests.[5] The givenness in which this duality of production and reproduction appears, the institutionalisation of a structural division between the two, participates in a reification of social relations, and in particular, in a reification of socio-natural reproduction in its entirety. Certainly, this reification can only function under the premise of a 'profound forgetting of nature', a forgetting that characterises our economic system and that explains its failure 'to see externalised nature as a collaborative partner or to understand relations of dependency on it' (Plumwoood 2002: 30). The materiality of life is constantly negated by the abstraction of the social form of capital – a disavowal that enhances the possibility of crises. Importantly, as we will see, our failure to appropriate our relation to nature holds in it a moment of necessity – but certainly not a moment of absolute determination.

In addition to reification, in modern capitalist societies, there exists a second form of alienation affecting our relation with nature: de-objectification. As Fischbach underlines, alienation for Marx does not merely refer to the subject's loss of the object, rather, it 'is an objectification that is at the same time a loss of the object – it is the production of an always already lost object' (2006: 15). Modern alienated subjects must be seen not only as deprived of objectivity in general, but also of the objectivity of their own being (Fischbach 2006: 18). In short, the problem of alienation is not only that it reifies social relations, but also that 'the very activity of objectification leads to non-objectivity' (Fischbach, 2006: 18). Capital puts subjects to work – that is, it engages them in a process of objectifying nature – but only to rob them of this very activity. Thus, in the activity in which the subject is supposed to affirm her objectivity, she is deprived of it. As a consequence, subjects are left with nothing but their

5. For an insightful periodisation of socio-ecological regimes of accumulation, and their differential moulding of the separation between production and reproduction, see Fraser 2021.

pure activity. Paraphrasing Hegel's famous words in the *Science of Logic*, we could say that the result is 'subjectivity, pure subjectivity – without any further determination'. Cut-off from nature through primitive accumulation, as well as from the objectivity that they create through their own labour, subjects are left only with one thing: their labour power. In other words, they are reduced to a being whose 'essential dimension' is activity –although an activity in general, that is, an activity that appears as 'an abstraction from any particular activity' (Fischbach 2006: 22). Alienation as de-objectification helps us understand why, under capitalist relations, humans are sentenced to a life of pure subjectivity and impeded from a real connection with objectivity, including their own. By radically undermining our objective being, modern capitalism pathologically and ideologically constitutes us *only* as subjects, or rather, as de-objectivised ones. As counterintuitive as it may sound, this reduction to pure activity is what 'seals [the] powerlessness' of the subject, 'since it is itself deprived of relations to objectivity which are nonetheless indispensable for its own operation' (Fischbach 2006: 23).

If in alienation as reification what fails is the subjective reappropriation of the objective, in alienation as de-objectification, what occurs is the de-objectification of the subjective. Thus, addressing our alienation from nature requires more than a reappraisal of the subjective, it demands a more robust problematisation of the relation between the subjective and the objective.

RELEASEMENT: A CAPITULATION THAT IS NOT ONE

What is to be done in response to alienation as reification and alienation as de-objectification? My call is for a structural-ethical response to the problem of alienation from nature, informed by two interrelated movements: releasement and reappropriation. Releasement, I maintain, must play a fundamental role in any form of environmental politics: for our dependence on nature to be acknowledged, accepted, and finally, freely experienced, it is necessary to nurture a specific *ethos,* capable of promoting a letting be of ourselves, of others and of nature. Importantly, such *ethos* should not be taken to be an individual enterprise; rather, it should be politically cultivated, imbued in our collective practices and institutions. Despite the notion of releasement [*Gelassenheit*] being usually associated with the Heideggerian (Heidegger 1959) rather than the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, I am here suggesting a mobilisation of the idea in a way that resonates with the latter. In his study of Hegelian recognition, Williams contends that the practice of releasement is at the centre of reciprocal recognition: in its accomplishment, 'the other is not eliminated, but rather released and allowed to be (*entlassen*)' (1992: 155). As an ethico-political practice, I see releasement as capable of responding to the vice of boastfulness that MacIntyre has warned us against – that damaging tendency to exaggerate what

we do and to understate the collaboration of others and of nature. Releasement is an active passivity, a partial renouncement of the hyperbolic sovereignty that characterises the modern subject. It is vital to note that this exacerbated sovereignty is not coming *ex nihilo*; it is not a psychological problem occurring in our individual minds with no relation to reality. It is, as a matter of fact, the result of the capitalist form of life, the logical effect of subjects that are materially reduced to pure activity.

Boastfulness is then a direct consequence of a damaged relation with nature, a consequence of our de-objectification. Hence, to enable releasement as an ethical predisposition will require more than an attitudinal change – it will need the disruption of a social order that relies on the separation of human beings from their means of reproduction and from their own objectivity. Notably, I hold releasement to be a promising move *vis-a-vis* the problem of relapsing into extreme notions of mastery and transparency, a problem to which the other practice that I will be defending, reappropriation, can lead us inadvertently. Indeed, as Jaeggi claims, the reappropriation of our relations should be thought of as a process of learning rather than as one in which we deploy full control (2014: 65). At the same time, and in addition to this, I maintain that an emancipatory form of releasement must stay away from the logic of self-sacrifice. If reappropriation, as we will see, will need to avoid the sacrifice of the objective, releasement will need to avoid the sacrifice of the subjective. However, to prevent that from happening, we need a particular take on the notion of limits.

To put it briefly, I believe that releasement, as the letting be of nature, cannot gravitate around the practice of self-limitation because the centrality of the latter surreptitiously reproduces an idea of the subject as pure activity. In other words, it still works under the premise of a de-objectified subject. Let me explain this point by referring to Kallis's book, *Limits*, where a case is made for a politics of 'self-limitation – the establishment of self-imposed and deliberately chosen limits' (2019: 5). Although the argument is attractive in a context of social and ecological disaster, I see the strategy as unintentionally falling under a paradigm that repeats the logic behind the mastery of nature. To begin with, Kallis's defence of a form of liberation that passes through the control of 'those instincts that would enslave us or threaten to destroy us', (2019: 129) reminds us of a Kantian view on freedom as mastery and repression of our inner nature. Kallis not only argues in favor of self-limitation, but does so by positioning himself against an understanding of limits as existing outside of us; believing so, he suggests, will lead us to a view of limits as something 'we must either overcome or succumb to' (2019: 5).

In contrast to that, I would like to suggest that overcoming or succumbing to limits external to us is not negative as such; what matters is the *how* and the *why* of that overcoming and that succumbing. A rational overcoming of external limits is what the notion of free reappropriation can do and a necessary succumbing to limits is what the notion of releasement aims at achieving.

For comprehensible reasons, Kallis is interested in arguing that 'the limit resides in the subject and the intention, not in nature, which is indifferent to our intentions' (2019: 60). Consequently, the latter are the ones to be limited.[6] Nevertheless, in my view, neither the position that sees nature as imposing limits and humans as impotent in face of them, nor the positions of mastery (either of external or internal nature), are sufficiently satisfying. Alternatively, I want to suggest that the right (although always precarious) combination of releasement and reappropriation, is a third way between these two options.

In particular, the practice of releasement sees nature and others as necessarily limiting our actions and projects. Kallis argues that 'by thinking of limits as something objective out there, we disguise that they are ultimately about us and our own wants' (2019: 60). As an example of the unsuitability of thinking in terms of external limits, he proposes considering the problem of water contamination. Kallis suggests that water contamination is not a problem *per se*; rather, it becomes a problem if we desire 'a clean public supply available to all', and stops being one if 'we are fine with a world where everyone has to buy expensive bottled water because rivers are contaminated' (2019: 119). Although I find the need for a collective normative commitment to sustainability crucial in the debate, I see the search for this normativity as residing only in the depths of subjectivity as inadequate. Inadvertently, Kallis's example reproduces the 'logic of centrism' denounced by Plumwood (2002: 120). The practice of releasement, I suggest, is less indebted to that vision and does not rely on a view of nature as acquiring value the moment we explicitly grant it to it. In our search for a more sustainable relation with nature, objective limits must be seen as existing. If the plants in my garden receive an excessive or a meagre amount of water, they will find an objective limit to their flourishing. That limit, Kallis could tell us, only becomes a limit if I personally (or we collectively) care about plants not dying. While this is partially true, it remains one-sided as an approach, and somewhat trapped in a logic that reinforces the problematic vision of the subject as fully sovereign – even if in this case she is declared sovereign precisely to master herself.

Nature (which includes our own objectivity) must be seen as able and entitled to limit us, as subjects. Nonetheless, the response to the limits imposed by any constitutive externality need not be a choice between domination and submission; what is called for is an appropriate understanding of the implications of that relation. Rather than a monological model regarding limits (what a discourse on self-limitation is at most capable of achieving), we should encourage a variety of dialogical models (Plumwood 2002: 33) capable of facilitating new relations to limits and to our condition as dependent and finite beings. In that sense, the admission of external limits can be enabling and restoring, rather

6. Kallis's position is informed by Castoriadis's notion of autonomy, in particular by his reading of Greek tragedies as a reminder of limits. In that sense, Kallis is not suggesting living within limits as an individual endeavour but as a collective project.

than oppressing and restricting. As Saito explains, the acknowledgement of external limits did not 'prompt Marx to fall into apocalyptic pessimism,' instead, 'he began to argue more passionately for a rational interaction with nature through the transcendence of the reified power of capital' (2017: 142). In sum, for our alienation from nature to be overcome, we do not need a picture of a limitless nature on one side and an equally limitless (but self-limiting) subject on the other. What we need is a practice of releasement that makes room for the objective; not a politics of repression of our nature, but an acknowledgment of ourselves as irremediably natural beings. Releasement also implies us, the setting free of one's own self – a practice that can be truncated if our conception of freedom is an identification of it with self-limitation. As MacIntyre asserts, 'it is insofar that I am overprotective of myself in resisting disclosure to just such others that I am liable to become a victim of my phantasies' (2001: 95), especially, but of course not only, the phantasy of one's absolute independence from one's natural surroundings.

This overall attempt at overcoming alienation as de-objectification through the practice of releasement might not be completely at odds with maintaining some weak forms of estrangement. As Hailwood has argued, forms of estrangement which do not imply the forgetting of nature could help us in retaining a view of nature's otherness (2015: 191), of its non-identity. Letting be, liberating us from the need to control, constitutes an essential moment in the political reconfiguration of our relation to nature; and the establishment of non-reifying practices of estrangement and distancing might represent fruitful practices towards achieving that goal.

REAPPROPRIATION: TOWARDS A FREE ASSOCIATION OF REPRODUCERS

If releasement refers us to the subjective giving way to the objective, reappropriation alludes to the objective soliciting the subjective. Reification is in some way an objectification gone astray, and the practice of reappropriation a pertinent response to that deviation. Furthermore, as a political praxis, reappropriation addresses the vice of self-depreciation that MacIntyre also warned us against. Not only is self-depreciation a wrong to one's own self, it also disables others from appreciating our participation in their lives and accomplishments, damaging the social nexus itself. Again, this depreciation – which materialises in a strong feeling of powerlessness – is not a simple misconception of one's own abilities, it ensues from reified social relations, which appear alien to us and independent in their existence. As we saw, such reification, the 'impeded appropriation of the world and self' (Jaeggi 2014: 152), hurts in a systematic manner our relation to nature. As a response, the practice of reappropriation participates in the constitution of a dependence on nature that is expected to

remain laborious and active, a purposive interaction between the subjective and the objective.

Yet, I suggest that, for the notion of reappropriation to retain its emancipatory potential, it must be disjoined from the notion of private property. In his critique of bourgeois private property, Marx himself gestured towards a view of appropriation freed from the restricted terms under which capitalist relations kept it. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx presents '*communism* as the positive transcendence of *private property*, *as human self-estrangement,* and therefore as the real *appropriation* of the human essence by and for man' (1977: 296).[7] In a powerful passage, Marx suggests that the equivalence of appropriation with private property impoverishes us, because it reduces appropriation to possessing and to having. 'Private property', he claims, 'has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it … when it is *used* by us' (Marx 1977: 300). It is important to note, as Sayers does, that Marx rejects a view of communism as the absolute negation of any notion of property. Instead, Marx proposes seeing communism as a dialectical overcoming of bourgeois property, whereby individuals regain control over their lives – only this time as properly social individuals, not detached from their communities but embedded in them (Sayers 2011: 116). In other words, what matters to Marx is to overthrow the principle of private property, so that true individual and common appropriation can arise. In the same vein, my defence of the need to reappropriate our relation to nature draws a vision of that relation as inevitably mediated by our wills and desires, but avoids yielding reappropriation to the institution of private property. In fact, as mentioned earlier in this paper, the common reappropriation of our means of reproduction is the minimum step to be taken for our relation to nature to be a free experience, rather than an alienated one.

The normative commitment to sustainability, and the rational intercourse with nature that is needed to attain it, can only be upheld when private interests – or the interest of capital as a whole – are replaced by a conscious reappropriation of life's conditions. Necessarily, the free and collective reappropriation of our relation to nature implies an expropriation of the expropriators, but one that includes the unfair appropriation of reproductive labour and nature, equally characteristic of our social order. Following a well-known formula, I would argue in favor of a free association of *re*producers, so to render explicit the contributions of reproductive labour and nature in the maintenance of our collective form of life.

Although the exact contours of such association need to be determined by the specific individuals that participate in it, I hold some basics to be crucial in the attainment of a society in which what is at the centre is the free satisfaction

7. Tellingly, after making such remarks, Marx immediately declares: 'this communism, as fully-developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully-developed humanism equals naturalism' (1977: 300).

of needs – a principle at the core of ecological politics. Apart from the common property of the means of production, and the overcoming of the value-form, an unalienated socio-natural reproduction would involve a number of provisions. First, there is the problem of labour, the activity in charge of mediating our relation to nature and on which environmental theories should have something to say. To begin with, for our alienation from nature to be amended, the current division of labour would need to be considerably altered. As Marx explains, the overcoming of private property is intrinsically linked to the division of labour – he indeed calls them 'identical expressions' (Marx 1976: 46.). Division of labour is a term that refers to a number of social realities (such as the division of production in a variety of activities) but it is here understood as the confinement, limitation and social hierarchisation of labour – the effects of which preoccupied modern philosophers such as Schiller, but which are mostly addressed as a reality to be overcome by Marx himself (Sayers 2011: 136).

Despite not being in a position to fully explore this problem here, I would like nonetheless to propose that such reconfiguration passes inevitably through a discussion of how socially necessary labour is to be distributed and organised. While the solution might not need to accept Marx's romantic view of an individual hunting in the morning and criticising after dinner, it would certainly require a rectification of the division between manual and intellectual labour, as well as the gendered and racialised demarcations of the labour force. For now, let me simply suggest that, at the very least, the reappropriation of our conscious transformation of nature (that is, of our labour activity) should result in a common sharing of burdensome work, as well as in a problematisation of the distinction between the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom.[8]

Irremediably, in any given society, there will exist jobs that, despite not suffering the social devaluation that they suffer in our days, will be judged as 'routine and repetitive, dirty and dangerous' (Kandiyali 2022). Even if the list of jobs that would entail such a burden must remain revisable and open to discussion, following Kandiyali, I take as a minimum starting point the proposal of all individuals being required to partake in their performance. Although 'this would not necessarily make everyone's contributions equal, for people may still elect to perform this work on a full-time basis', it would be required that no one is exempt from performing it, as is now the case (Kandiyali 2022).

8. Marx famously declared: 'The realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production … Freedom in this field can only consist in socialised man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature' (1998: 807). Nonetheless, as Neuhouser argues, the defence of a true realm of freedom as appearing only once we have abandoned and overcome a material realm of necessity, implies a 'quasi-Kantian ideal of freedom,' which 'represents an abandonment of the more earthbound conception of spirit that informs Hegel's social philosophy' (2020: 126) and Marx's in turn.

Apart from burdensome work, many activities that belong to the now freely appropriated reproductive realm would also need to be socialised – as socialist feminists have been arguing for a long time (Federici 2012). Such transformation would not entail a complete overcoming of specialisation; rather, it would set the conditions for truly free specialisation to develop. Sharing our objective dependencies would reinforce rather than diminish social freedom and would set the ground for true singularity to arise.

Two more things need to be said regarding the reappropriation of our relation to nature. The first has to do with the problem of rejecting the mandate of reproducing life – life's reproduction being an important topic for ecological thinkers. Indeed, it is my understanding that any politics of reappropriation needs to maintain possible refusal as one of its fundamental moments: reappropriation is by definition a positive moment that includes its negation within it. In that sense, refusal is not the same as releasement; rather, it is the moment of negativity within the relation of appropriation. I am referring, among other things, to the logic of political de-identification capable of putting forms of life into question. If the traditional strike is one clear example of such moment in the realm of production, new forms of strike, such as feminist or climate strikes, direct our view to a larger horizon of transformation of our dependencies. While different in their tactics and objectives, I see them as transpiring an emancipatory logic that surpasses their specificities and as showing that the reappropriation of our collective and individual reproduction asserts from within the possibility of not reproducing. In short, I believe that it is essential for the defence of life's reappropriation to come accompanied by the option of consciously interrupting life whenever we deem it appropriate (Lewis 2019). To that extent, an abstract defence of life cannot function as the normative commitment behind emancipatory environmental politics. Rather, as Neuhouser puts it, life should be 'elevated to freedom' and self-consciousness 'filled with the aims of life' (2016: 47). Of course, this negative moment of repudiation of life is in itself insufficient for social freedom to emerge. Ultimately, true reproductive freedom – the freedom aimed at by a free association of reproducers – will only emerge once social reproduction is aimed at consciously and sustainably by all members of society.

Accordingly, the last thing to be mentioned concerning the reappropriation of our relation to nature is its need for democracy. Following Fraser, I would claim that the principle of parity of participation in social life must be fully integrated into the reappropriation process (Fraser 1999). Not only do individuals need to be able to subjectively reappropriate their objective dependence; they need to do so under a schema that recognises their radical political equality. Hence, I hold democracy to be fundamental in addressing unsustainability. As Plumwood has shown, there are reasons to believe that in a centralised society, 'it would be relatively easy to lose ecological correctiveness' (2002: 65). With her thought experiment of an EcoRepublic, a 'future ecological and global

version of Plato's great rationalist utopia', Plumwood shows that the crucial reflexivity and feedback mechanisms that are needed to respond to ecological disasters or imbalances, would be lost if a technocratic, top-down system was implemented. Rather than a scientific or political elite that addresses all by itself the perils of natural depletion, we need a radically democratic polis capable of responding to the challenges of a sustainable form of life.

CONCLUSION

To recapitulate, in this paper, I have put forward a structural-ethical response to the problem of alienation from nature. I first suggested that alienation from nature can be grasped as a twofold phenomenon: as reification and as de-objectification. If in the case of reification, we appreciate a rigidification of the objective and an absence of the subjective, in the case of de-objectification, we have a loss of objectivity itself, as well as a relapse into a limitless subjectivity that is pure activity. To respond to these problems, I have defended the double praxis of releasement and reappropriation. If releasement gives place to the objective, reappropriation enables and activates the subjective. Together, as political practices, releasement and reappropriation can help us to overcome – at least in a partial way – an alienation from nature that inevitably leads to an unsustainable form of life. Because, as Marx and Engels once declared, humans must be in a position to live in order to make history (1976: 41), it is paramount for the purpose of human freedom, to transform the alienated and unsustainable forms of dependence that currently constitute our relation to nature into nonalienated and sustainable ones.

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