

Scholar's Session on David Wood
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David Wood is arguably the one among us who has understood most clearly what it means to think after Derrida.¹ I mean this “after” in the various senses that David has himself articulated when discussing what it would mean to think after Heidegger: in the wake of and in some sense beyond, but also in the style of and as a continuation. Perhaps these two senses come together in a colloquial expression like “he takes after his father.” David “takes after” Derrida. In many places, he equates the thinking that he performs with deconstruction; he even admits that, for him, the fate of the future of philosophy is inseparable from that of deconstruction. But in the same gesture, he problematizes this very equation and its components: “*the future,*” “philosophy,” and even the “is.” And he doesn’t hesitate to mark the limits and dangers of deconstruction as a strategy, either in Derrida’s writings or his own. What David shows us is that we must think differently after Derrida, after deconstruction, but it is only in thinking this “after” again and again – only through the creative repetition of “the” entire tradition – that we can claim to be thinking at all. “Philosophy does not have a tradition,” as he says; “*it is a tradition.*”² His work, then, is not the advocacy of deconstruction as a position, nor is it simply a contribution to “the scholarship,” addressed only to those already convinced of the value of certain philosophical figures. Richard Kearney describes David’s *Thinking after Heidegger* as “the sort of book that gives continental philosophy a good name.” I must say that I doubt this is true. Those who are already suspicious of continental philosophy’s legitimacy would be even more threatened by David’s presentation. This is because he convincingly demonstrates, without ever

needing to argue for it directly, that the path of future thinking can find its element only in the renewal of the tradition the links Hegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Derrida. We can learn to think again only by interrogating what it means for thinking to have a tradition, to be historical, what it means to repeat without merely repeating, what it means to make the history of philosophy “sing.”

To think, according to David, is to think again, and this thinking again is a matter of responsibility. But I must confess at the outset to a recognition of my own inadequacy in fulfilling the responsibilities of commenting on David’s work. This is not only because a certain aura already attached to his name by the time I began my graduate studies and before I had ever met him. And it is not only a consequence of my following on the tracks of Ed Casey, with his own aura and his incomparable gift for poetic prose. The real difficulty is philosophical, in that David’s interrogation of the tradition already thematizes the problem of responsibility and of what a truly ethical reading would require. To meet this ethical imperative requires – as Heidegger tells us in *What is Called Thinking?* – that we “go to [the other’s] encounter” rather than simply going counter to it by engaging in criticism (whether positive or negative). David returns to this contrast many times, finding here the key to a responsible relation to the tradition, that is, the key to the problem of repetition.³ The goal of going to the other’s encounter is to disentangle the “essentially unarticulated,” and to treat it not as a “remediable shortcoming” but as the exposure of an essential limit of articulation as such. David’s greatest gift to us would therefore be what remains unthought in his work, what conditions and structures this thinking but to which he himself remains essentially blind.

If my responsibility today is to disclose this unthought gift, I am afraid that I will fall short of the task. But I would like to pose a question to David that I hope will prove illuminative, and this concerns the transformation of thinking in its confrontation with environmentalism. According to David, the future of philosophy must pass through deconstruction; and, further, deconstruction must pass through vegetarianism and arrive at what David now calls “econstruction.”⁴ In fact, a work in preparation is entitled *Econstruction: The Implausible Convergence of Environmentalism and Deconstruction*. The suggestion here, to be blunt, is that philosophy must become a form of environmentalism.⁵ Now, this strikes me as a singularly radical claim. I am unaware of any thinker, past or present, who has made a more radical claim about the relationship between thought and nature. But this is also a very difficult thought to follow, and I have some difficulty following David’s way of thinking it through. What becomes of thinking in this transformation, what becomes of responsibility, and is the relationship between the two still recognizable? Several more specific questions follow: Does coming to terms with humanism allow us to “overcome” it, or does a certain vestigial privileging of the human remain strategically necessary for thinking? How are we to understand our relationship with “our environment” once this environment is figured as a “resistance to conquest” (TAH 58), and therefore less as a milieu, an *Umwelt*, than as an interruption of any possible milieu? Lastly, if philosophy is to renew itself by a thinking of the limit, a thinking of its own limits, what is the relation between these limits and the alterity of nonhuman animals and of “nature” itself?

To develop these questions, I will first review David’s renewal of philosophy as the continual interrogation of its own limits, as what he calls “liminal interrogation,” the “step back,” or “negative capability.” By pushing thinking up against its limits, David clears the stage

for the re-entrance of certain concepts, concepts that we might have thought to be permanently tainted by their association with the metaphysics of the subject. Two of these concepts are particularly significant for his project: experience and responsibility. It is in working through the strategy and the risks involved in the recuperation of these concepts that David also shows us how deconstruction has itself remained entangled in a vestigial humanism. The central task confronting philosophy today, after humanism, is to think through our relation to our own animality and to the natural conditions from which we emerge but that remain perennially at the margins of our reflective grasp. I will suggest that the language of alterity misleads David's efforts here to think the other animal and nature responsibly, and that a more fruitful direction is suggested by his own figure of the Mobius strip. Nevertheless, the convergence of philosophy with environmentalism leaves me perplexed concerning philosophy's precise role in diagnosing our environmental ills and the contribution it is expected to make in responding to them.

David's thought gestures to a blurring of the boundary of the natural and symbolic that emerges in the operations of language. If deconstruction is to become econstruction, perhaps it is precisely this boundary, continually breached by an animality within language, to which our attention must be turned. The resistance of nature is not, in the end, something that appears only in or as the limits of our conceptual projects; it can perhaps be given a positive sense as the tricky and unassimilable but fecund productivity of symbolic expression. The rustling of nature is therefore found within culture as much as outside of it. But to develop this suggestion, we must first ask what David means by "philosophy."

The Step Back

The culmination of the philosophical project, for David, lies in what he calls, following Heidegger, the “step back,” or following Keats, “negative capability.”⁶ Heidegger introduces the “step back,” *Schnittzurück*, as a contrast with the Hegelian *Aufhebung* (TAH 90). But recalling David’s many references to that famous line in which Nietzsche describes his style as “a dance, an overleaping mockery of symmetries,” I’m inclined to think of the “step back” as a dance move. After all, there is nothing negative about “negative capability,” since it distinguishes itself precisely as a saying *yes* to limits. In going to the other’s encounter, one takes a step *back* that allows the other to lead. There is nothing passive about the notion of dancing, even when the other leads. And it is this leading that allows us to think along with, and to think after, the other. David himself draws a connection between dance and the performativity of philosophy (PAL 133). So, it is the dance of the “step back” that allows us to “shake” presence, that is, to make it tremble (TAH 33-34, TSB 144).

But David would insist that the notion of dance here not be confused with learning a series of standard moves, that is, with fixed techniques. If anything, we must think of this as a dance that moves back and forth between two extremes, which he calls “operational thinking” and “deconstruction.” Operational thinking is our means of actualizing ideality in the world, that is, of constructing all sorts of complex systems – symbolic, economic, technological, and so on – by establishing fixed sets of conceptual relations in hierarchical layers of increasing complexity (TSB 3). The deconstructive move is a step in the opposite direction, “maintaining links, input, feedback, from levels of engagement presupposed by conceptuality, but not wholly captured in concepts” (TSB 3). Deconstruction is not at war with this operational thinking, but only with its hegemony, only with the supposition that each of the layers of conceptuality that such thinking

constructs can operate in a closed and autonomous fashion. There are other terms that we could substitute here for “operational thinking”; for instance, David speaks of the “world of calculation” and the limits of calculability, of idealization or of representation and their limits, etc (TAH 16, 186-7). In each case, philosophy does not oppose such operations, but only the naturalization of their products, the replacement of conditioned and temporal processes by a reified and autonomous present.

But we must complicate this picture a bit more. What we have described so far is a back-and-forth movement between a tendency toward conceptual closure and an opposite movement toward relationality and conditionality. But this opposite movement, the philosophical step back that holds open relationality and conditionality, has its own tendency toward reification of which David is well aware. This is the tendency to turn disruption and interrogation into techniques or fixed concepts. Thinking has its limits, thanks to our finitude, our reliance on language that we can never master, and the difference that is constitutive of every identity. Consequently, the recursive operation of trying to think these limits opens up abyssal dimensions to which we can never suitably bear witness (TAH 103). We can see, then, Heidegger’s reasons for distinguishing the step back from the Hegelian *Aufhebung*: there is no “overcoming” of metaphysics, calculation, representation, operationalism, or subjectivity.⁷ We are left with the necessity of “working through,” but this cannot proceed without remainders of all sorts. Our efforts to think otherwise will inevitably remain entangled in what we might seek to overcome, including a certain drive toward mastery and technicity.

David recognizes that we will never truly twist free of metaphysics, but he suggests that we approach this “limit” from the opposite direction. Rather than interpreting our debt to

presence, representation, metaphysics, as evidence of philosophy's demise, he suggests that we must affirm our limits as limits and learn to work with them strategically. This approach opens an entirely different perspective from which to read, as we can see for instance in David's engagement with Heidegger and Derrida on the question of presence.⁸ We must hesitate over every charge that a particular thinker has fallen back into metaphysics, once we recognize the possibility of this thinker's having staged the very confrontation with this limit in a strategic way. If we affirm the limit as limit, we will recognize a certain danger in supposing that we have ever exhausted the possibilities that a manner of thinking or of writing may offer us for "shaking" presence (TAH 102).

The Recovery of Experience and Responsibility

By the "step back," then, David names a means of working through the loss of our ability to work things through. And this "working through" has many remainders, unthinkable or impossibilities, which our stepping back affirms. "Experience" becomes the name, in David's vocabulary, for one of these sites of impossibility. He has in mind the kind of experiences that "shatter our maps," such as the abyssal experience of sacred horror (TAH 19, 15). David presents this concept of experience as an exemplar of how thought might redeploy metaphysical language in a way that opens it to its own outside. This outside appears as an "interruption of experience" in a double sense: on the one hand, it is the interruption of the "domesticated sense of experience" (TAH 32), the experience of the "things themselves" to which phenomenology had hoped to return. But on the other hand, this collapse of experience as a privileged ground or

origin opens us to “experience as interruption,” that is, to the experience of the breakdown of intentionality, of language, and of our knowledge of the other.⁹

This recovery of experience already involves us in a notion of responsibility, of the ethical. First, certain fundamental experiences of interruption – such as sacred horror or our astonishment that anything exists at all – can inspire the transformation of our *ethos*, of our very manner of being in the world. Second, these experiences place a certain ethical demand on us in calling for that attentive patience that has been the hallmark of phenomenological description. And, lastly, experience is ethical precisely as the opening of thought to its outside, to a negotiation with alterity. As David writes, “If negotiation with alterity is the locus of the ethical, ‘experience’ is the essentially contested marker of that site” (TAH 25).

“Essentially contested,” he notes, because this recovery of experience also has strategic risks that must be negotiated, and here David distinguishes between Derrida’s development of deconstruction and his own. These risks are especially salient in the ambivalent character of experience in both Derrida and Blanchot, an ambivalence that, as David writes, is “between a recognition that concepts like ‘experience’ and ‘subject’ are instruments that we must preserve – even in their own transformation – and a sense that we need to effect or record a radical break with traditional metaphysical thought – an abyssal exposure of the *loss* of meaning, of any unity of experience, and of the very idea of the subject” (TAH 29). But this latter path of abyssal exposure or absolute loss is a misunderstanding of our strategic situation in that it ends up implying a kind of positivity of the abyssal as such. If the impossibility of experience is nothing other than the impossibility of a certain closure of experience, then abyssal thinking remains dependent on the very notion of experience that it calls into question and cannot “spin free.”

Experience and abyssal thought must continue to dance together, which gives us not a positive truth but instead a “way,” a way that affirms openness rather than mourning the lack of closure. In this sense, as David will claim, deconstruction and responsibility are “each nothing other than *experience regained*” (TAH 26).

Along with experience, then, we have also rescued a sense of responsibility from the conflagration of metaphysics, and it is just such a responsibility that David performs in his repeated and patient layering of the same key texts with his own improvisational repetitions. In *Thinking after Heidegger*, such responsibility entails both recognizing the ethical character of reading and responding to the tradition and subjecting the scope of the ethical to continual displacement by disarming every attempted return to calculability and good conscience.¹⁰ *The Step Back* emphasizes the connection between the reflexive gesture of this responsibility and its opening of thought toward our concrete engagement with the world. There David writes that:

Negative capability . . . liberates philosophy from the naivete of those established discourses and practices it finds itself faced with, and it protects philosophy from its own tendency to a new kind of positivism – that of conceptual construction. In such liberation and protection negative capability can be seen to have a fundamentally ethical dimension, not in the sense of prescribing or proscribing first order rules or virtues. But rather in focusing our attentions on the space of possibility within which our practical engagement in the world takes place. (TSB 4-5).

Going to the other’s encounter is no longer limited then to an exigency of textual hermeneutics, but also concerns our negotiations with worldly alterity: political identities, disciplinary divides, military engagements, environmental catastrophes. If there is a necessity in “going through” a

philosophical position in order to recognize its importance and limitations¹¹ – as Heidegger goes through Hegel, Derrida goes through phenomenology, and David goes through Derrida – then we must recognize a parallel “going through” in our efforts to think responsibly about our worldly engagements.

As with the rehabilitation of experience, this return to responsibility must negotiate strategic risks. One danger is the need to avoid a return to “good conscience,” either in the obvious form of calculable ethical principles or, more subtly, in the temptation that our very avoidance of “bad” good conscience can become a form of good conscience in turn.¹² But there is also a danger from the other extreme, the danger of an infinite or excessive responsibility that David associates with Levinas and sometimes Derrida as well.¹³ In this excessive responsibility, the duty of an infinite task that we will always fall short of fulfilling, David detects the odor of lingering guilt.¹⁴ The middle path between these dangers, on his view, is the recognition of an “indeterminate” responsibility, understood as a “recursive modality,” a constant interrogation of our responsibilities that moves between our conceptualizations and calculations and the finite worldly engagements to which our experiences of obligation are tied (TAH 35-36, TSB 145, 148). For David, consequently, “There is no Other as such, no pure alterity” (TSB 69), and ethics will always find itself entangled with ontology.¹⁵

Animal Others

This brings us to the problem of the animal, which we reach from two directions: both from the direction of ethics and from the direction of ontology. Concerning ethics, if we recognize that there is no pure alterity, no “Other as such,” then we widen our conception of alterity to include

any interruptive challenge to our efforts at closure. The other will not be restricted, then, to the other man, but will instead be “the dimension of initial and permanent ruination of all presence” (TAH 142). To the extent that such an interruption can be motivated by the address of an animal, as Derrida describes his experience of being looked at by his cat, then the nonhuman other must be recognized as a legitimate locus of alterity. On the other hand, we also arrive at the problem of the animal by following the critique of humanism through to its conclusions (TAH 138 ff., TSB 47-50). As is well known, Heidegger finds the humanistic tradition to harbor a metaphysical privileging of subjectivity. But, as Derrida has shown, Heidegger’s own thinking is not entirely pure of humanistic tendencies. Heidegger’s judgment that the animal is “poor in world,” for instance, evidences “a certain anthropocentric or even humanist teleology” in his thought.¹⁶ Despite Levinas’s reputation as the thinker of radical otherness, his writings on the animal also tell a “tale of missed opportunity, of aborted radicality.” For him, the animal’s alterity is analogically derivative from that of the human.¹⁷ Furthermore, by defining human existence in contrast with the animal’s struggle for survival, Levinas merely repeats the characteristic gesture of humanism. Since being human requires a rupture with the “chomp or die” economy of nature, ethics is “against nature.”¹⁸

David sees a lesson in these failures to twist free of humanism, namely, that the concepts of “man” and “animal” are not innocent descriptions, not merely biological taxa at all. They are, instead, metaphysically charged categories engaged in all sorts of boundary maintenance and border patrol. Consequently, the categories of “man” and “animal” deserve the deepest scrutiny that philosophy can muster (TAH 136). If “the very issue of what it is to be human is precisely what is at issue deep down in all of philosophy” (TAH 147), then any post-humanist renewal of

philosophy must go through the question of the animal.¹⁹ This investigation reveals that there are no “animals as such,” that no single line demarcates a boundary between animals and humans, and no single map captures our various historically situated manners of relating.²⁰

The problem of the animal other raises certain peculiar difficulties with the language of alterity. As we have seen, David rejects the “absolute Other” who would place on me an infinite obligation, even while he affirms the ethical weight of alterity as interruption. In *Thinking After Heidegger*, for instance, he describes our encounter with alterity as the “explosive interruption of intentionality, of any recuperative, assimilative recognition of an alter ego” (TAH 18).

Furthermore, qua interruption, the alterity of the other seems absolutely distinct from any situated object of my knowledge or my practical relations. David writes:

the alterity of the other has nothing to do with my understanding of the other’s qualities, and everything to do with the interruption wrought by his or her very existence to a narcissistic world in which all needs and desires are first mine. The shattering of that economy is the incalculable opening of ethics. (TAH 18-19)

This language of alterity remains very Levinasian. Nevertheless, David will insist that this other cannot be an *absolute* other, that the ethical force of this other actually requires a certain analogical transfer or continuity with me. Following Derrida’s critique of Levinas, David writes that “the ethical force of references to ‘the infinitely other’ not only is not compromised by, but actually requires, the recognition that this infinitely other is not an absolute other, that the other is in some respects like me” (TAH 120). Paradoxically, David holds together the other-as-interruption and the other as in some sense appearing within my field, as having a certain kinship

with me. This paradoxical structure reappears when we consider the problem of our continuity with other animals.

In “The Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” Derrida affirms an “abyssal rupture” between “we men” and “what we call animals,”²¹ David does not explicitly reject this position, but he offers some qualified reasons for thinking that the abyss can be bridged. First, as every phenomenologist knows, we encounter other animals as embodied beings with whom we share different degrees of pre-reflective “pairing.” No reasoning is required for me to empathize, at a certain corporeal level, with the pain of a fellow creature. That this bodily pairing extends at least to other mammals is clear, and perhaps some degree of this empathy extends to all living things and is even at the basis for our recognition of them *as* living.²² As Bentham points out, and Derrida cites approvingly, the capacity for suffering is shared by all living creatures. This seems to offer us some sort of bridge over the abyss. David presses the case for continuity even farther, following out the implications of Derrida’s refiguring of “animal life” as “a multiplicity or organization of relations between living and dead.”²³ With this non-biological account of life, we seem to discover a level of kinship that would span not only animal and human, but that would apply equally well to “writing, to ‘culture’ in general, perhaps to philosophy itself” (TC 138).

In pointing out this continuity, David’s point is not to deny the fact that there is, in *some* sense, an “abyssal rupture” between “we men” and “what *we call* animals.” The point is rather that, if we are the ones doing the calling, if we are the ones inscribing this rupture through the imposition of categories that legitimate violence, then this abyss is nothing natural or inevitable. In fact, we can come to recognize in our culture’s meat-eating practices the symbolic effort to

establish, police, and reinscribe our absolute difference from other animals (TC 138).

“Carnophallogocentrism,” David writes, “is not a dispensation of Being towards which resistance is futile, it is a mutually reinforcing network of powers, schemata of domination and investments that has to reproduce itself to stay in existence” (TAH 151). The critical vigilance of deconstruction should encourage our resistance to the reproduction of this systematic domination. This is why David declares that “vegetarianism is deconstruction” (TAH 150-51).

The unitary and categorical division of man from animal is therefore a product of our practical and symbolic actions, and as such it can be contested. In fact, our relations with other animals are historically embedded and diverse, even as they are spanned by our common participation in life. The shape of the “abyssal rupture” will therefore depend on our “mode of mutual engagement” (TC 137): are we talking about house cats, mountain lions, garden pests, protozoans in a drop of rainwater, or unnameable critters that scurry out from under my feet in the rainforest? In some cases, a common being-in-the-world may provide the basis for reciprocity and identification, as in David’s example of the Amazonian Wari’ and the jaguar. But this also suggests an opposite extreme, namely, that the “deepest abysses” arise “where we have very little engagement with other life forms” (TC 138). This seems to be a well-founded insight, phenomenologically speaking. But it also demonstrates that we must avoid conflating the “alterity” of another form of life with an immediate ethical valence. If our responsibility to other forms of life cannot hinge on being “like us,” neither should their difference from us be its main criterion. In fact, the “abyss” between our own forms of life and those of other species seems to have little if anything to do with alterity in the ethical sense. What, then, does the language of

alterity add to our understanding of responsibility here? Can we still speak of the other animal as “the Other par excellence” (TAH 151)?

David’s discussion of our responsibilities to all other forms of life also runs the risk of what he calls, referring to Derrida, a “hyperbolic expansion of obligation” (TAH 128). In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida asks: “How would you ever justify the fact that you sacrifice all the cats in the world to the cat that you feed at home every morning for years, whereas other cats die of hunger at every instant?”²⁴ David has a number of problems with this move: It ignores the situated character of the actual obligations that we take on, sometimes without having willed them, and sometimes by merely allowing others to form expectations of us. It involves a kind of hubris, exaggerating our sense of our own importance, and it situates us in a strange no-where and no-when, a space seemingly detached from any particular obligations. But, as David puts it, “to live somewhere at some time is to find oneself with specific obligations” (TAH 129).²⁵

But if living somewhere at some time means finding ourselves with *specific* obligations, won’t most of these obligations be species-specific? “Much of that to which we do violence has no name, will never know our name, and does not address us,” as David rightly points out (TC 143). If my obligations to my own children, my own neighbors, my own cat have a specificity that is beyond the need for justification, how could such obligations be extended to the thousands of nameless and faceless species that our way of life extinguishes each year? How could an “objective compassion” for “life itself” show up in my sphere of concerns, if this life-in-general never directly interrupts my own narcissistic self-involvement; or how could it compete with those concrete others who do (TC 140-141)? Any attempt to convey a responsibility to these faceless and nameless others with the language of alterity runs of the risk of the same hyperbolic

extension that Wood has criticized in Derrida. One response to this dilemma would be to insist on a certain strategically unavoidable humanism; if there is no “pure” overcoming of metaphysics, perhaps there is also no pure way of smoothing over the “abyssal rupture” between man and animal. And, if this is so, can we ever repudiate the embeddedness of our obligations within a way of life specific to us, whether we call this “human” or not?²⁶

The Resistance of Nature

But perhaps there is an alternative to “strategic humanism” that would involve the development of an entirely different logic of responsibility, one that no longer relies on the language of alterity. David’s development of a material logic of boundaries could be the basis for this alternative account. Deconstruction’s destabilization of all attempts to draw a clear boundary between inside and outside rebounds on the very distinction between nature and signification, so that, in David’s words, “something like the structure of the trace is already operative ‘in nature,’ if we can say that.”²⁷ This opens a path for recognizing, first, the radical dependency of our subjectivity on a certain material outside, on an “inhuman, prehuman, nonhuman” exteriority that is not captured by alterity (TSB 127).²⁸ Secondly, it allows us to speak of a resistance of the environment or the “real” to our attempts to impose ideal and categorial boundaries on it. In David’s words, “What we call the environment is resistance to conquest” (TAH 58).²⁹ Like language, nature conditions us without our ever being able to fully grasp those conditions. If we can speak, then, of our radical dependency on nature in terms of interconnection, of “inter-esse” (TC 143), this kinship will reveal itself only to a kind of peripheral glance, rather than with the frontality of a face.

How do we make this leap from the alterity of other animals to nature as a site of resistance to conceptual mastery? The link concerns the motivations behind our construction of categorial boundaries between human and animal and the sacrificial practices that perennially renew this divide. We eat other animals as a rejection of our own animality that would symbolically free us from the constraints of our natural conditions. If the animal names the condition of being subject to nature's economy of survival, as for Levinas, then it is only by overcoming this condition that we can be fully human (TC 132).³⁰ This trope of a break with nature echoes throughout the history of philosophy, but we find it in a particularly concentrated form in the phenomenological tradition, perhaps as a consequence of this tradition's founding opposition to naturalism. We could mention Husserl's insistence on the difference between transcendental and mundane perspectives, the freedom of Sartrean consciousness, perhaps even the ontological difference itself. The problem of the animal brings this break with nature into sharper focus: Scheler, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty all agree that, while the animal may have an *Umwelt*, an environment, only Man has a *Welt*, a world, and it is this transition to the perspective of a world that makes philosophy and an orientation toward being as such first possible.³¹ Philosophy, on this view, requires a break with the vital values of natural relations, regardless of how we frame the alternative to which we accede in passing beyond nature. But this *Aufhebung*, this "going through" of the mundane, the ontic, the environment always leaves a remainder. As David writes,

If 'going through' were a form of exclusion, of rejection, of elimination, the philosophical move away from the everyday, whether it be called bracketing out,

reflection, meditation, etc., would always raise the question of the status of what has been left behind. (TAH 82-83)

If for Plato there is no form of dirt, then perhaps the dirt itself is what is excluded by the founding gesture of metaphysics. The convergence of philosophy with environmentalism would therefore demand from it the ultimate confrontation with its own limits. To seek some sort of rapprochement, then, between phenomenology and naturalism will be no small undertaking. It would be to make good on Merleau-Ponty's call for a transcendental philosophy integrated with the real.³²

Keeping in mind that there is no pure overcoming of metaphysics, this convergence of phenomenology and naturalism will certainly not involve an elimination of the distinctiveness of levels such as the transcendental or the ontological. "All philosophers who aim at scope and depth," David writes, "generate some version of the distinction between empirical and transcendental concepts," and it is hard to imagine how we can philosophize without them (TSB 142). Yet these levels are bridged or entangled through "double inscription," through the operation of concepts – such as causality in Kant, truth in Nietzsche, justice in Derrida – that function both empirically and transcendently. Double inscription leaves us in an indecidable situation with respect to the distinction between levels, since they can neither be cast aside nor rigorously separated. David's most recent writings propose to capture this sense of opposition and continuity in the topological figure of the Möbius strip, a band that has been cut, twisted, and reattached.³³ If we think following the model of this figure, the empirical and transcendental may be opposed at any given point while still remaining ontologically continuous.³⁴

If we apply this Mobius thinking to the relation between humans and nature, as David suggests (OWE 9), it is clear that the “return” to nature that he effects is not simply a kind of back-door naturalism. Nature could operate as a transcendental signified only if we considered it to have some pure and founding presence apart from the shifting operations of signifying boundary construction. If the purity of every boundary between “inside” and “outside” is compromised without being effaced, then the natural and the symbolic can participate on a single surface that does not erase their differences. Nature is neither “inside” nor “outside” the text. More basic than the distinction between natural and symbolic will be the functions of a material boundary logic according to which this very distinction is constantly subject to being redrawn. Nature enters history (TSB 173); it “becomes visible both as constructed and as participating in its own construction” (TSB 6). Therefore, “nature,” as a level of resistance to our “progress,” always appears within a signifying contextual frame, a frame that is neither arbitrary nor simply given (TSB 175-76).

If we are to follow David, then, in bringing together deconstructive phenomenology with a kind of naturalism, neither of these terms will go unchanged; perhaps they will be locked into a perpetual becoming. David offers an example of this when he reinterprets intentionality as an “indirect natural relation” (TSB 160). A fresh peach or a glass of cold beer looks inviting only to the kind of being who is capable of eating and drinking such things. The structure of our desires, and of intentionality more generally, is rooted in the natural structures of our bodies and their relations with an environment. Furthermore, what we call “consciousness” and “self-consciousness” depend on and continue a primitive organic capacity for demarcating and protecting the integrity of our own bodily boundaries. And as David shows us again and again,

our individual and social identities, our political and military struggles, and our economic models echo the logic of these corporeal and material boundary negotiations. This doesn't mean that intentionality and politics are reducible to causality; rather, the "naturalization of consciousness" entails an "expansion of our sense of the natural" (TSB 161), which must hereafter include meaning, identity, and value among its emergent properties. Nature in this richer sense has its own "concrete logic," a liminal logic that makes possible ruptures and transformations just as well as relations of symbiosis and interdependence (TSB 158).

I am very sympathetic to the concrete logic of nature that David is proposing to us, and to his suggestion that the human relationship with nature be figured topologically as a Mobius function, an ontological continuity that nevertheless admits of opposition at any point. However, by way of conclusion, allow me to pose two questions about the relationship between this philosophy of nature and environmentalism in our usual sense of the term. The first question concerns the shift from everyday situations of boundary negotiation to what David calls "emergency" situations. He introduces this notion as a diagnosis of Deep Ecology's position on human population reduction. If we believe that the choice with which we are faced is between an active lowering of the human population and full-out environmental collapse, then we may be willing to impose draconian measures.³⁵ On the one hand, David associates this binary logic, this forcing of a yes/no choice, with an underdeveloped capacity for negotiating complexity. Ecophenomenology is a site of resistance to such tendencies. But, on the other hand, we also must avoid a binarism *between* binary logic and negotiative thinking. This means that, in any particular case, it is necessary to decide whether we are really dealing with a life-or-death situation. David suggests that we can find the resources for this phronesis in phenomenology.

But what can phenomenology tell us to resolve such questions? Although David initially seems skeptical about whether our population has reached a breaking point, in a later essay he identifies the “explosive growth of human population,” as the main effect forcing “zero-sum choices in which we gain and other animals (indeed entire species) lose” (TC 143). Here he links our population growth to increasing competition for scarce resources, a Malthusian position that may be ripe for deconstruction. But my point here does not concern the question of population specifically. What I am wondering is how negotiative thinking will ever bring us to a decision about when decisive action is called for and when it is not. How will phenomenology, or econstruction, help us to decide whether the house is really on fire, whether we are just now smelling the smoke, or whether the rumors of its immanent combustion are merely exaggerated. What I am asking, to put this another way, is whether econstruction is a “frog philosophy.” I don’t mean this as a bestial slur against the French. I mean, does deconstruction leave us in the situation of the proverbial frog, sitting in the pot of water on the stove that is slowly heating, unable to decide when to jump until, at last, we have been cooked? Negative capability teaches us that it is pathological to always demand certainty (TSB 194), but it probably cannot tell us with any certainty when we should. When the stakes are high – as they certainly seem to be with the current predictions concerning global climate collapse, loss of biodiversity, and the list goes on – I wonder whether our openness to the “recursive possibilities of exposure” is a sufficient prophylactic against boiling ourselves alive.

I borrow this story of the boiling frog from David, who uses it to dramatize his account of how calculations, idealizations, and technicization have squeezed critical reflection out of our lives and the academy (TSB 190). But according to scientists who have measured such things –

the irony here is important! – this frog story is apocryphal. In scientific fact, if the water in which the frog is placed is gradually heated by 2 degrees Fahrenheit per minute, the frog will become increasingly agitated in its attempts to escape.³⁶ I suppose this is a case of how our projections onto animals tell us more about ourselves than about them.³⁷ But it also raises my second question, which concerns the relationship between econstruction and science. Philosophy and science have a long and complex history, of course, and distinguishing between the two is a favorite philosophical pastime in which David occasionally engages.³⁸ But if we are to follow a convergence between philosophy and environmentalism, then thinking through this relationship with the natural sciences in particular becomes more pressing. According to David, econstruction helps us to think environmentalism “not as a positive science, but as a challenge to any science blind to its necessary ideality” (OWE 2). But won’t this be a challenge to all natural science, given that, on David’s view, the positive sciences demonstrate a “constitutive incapacity” to account for their own conditions of possibility (TAH 11, 17)? At one point, David seems to draw a distinction between a good and a bad form of science (TAH 52 ff.). The bad form, which follows a rule-governed model of thought and remains naive about its own use of language, believes that it is arriving at some truth about the world. By contrast, the good form of science, as David describes it, “is not knowledge or wisdom, but a critical investigation that continually questions all that we take for granted” (TAH 53). It breaks with the “natural attitude” and arrives at a “discursive” or “textualist” epistemology (TAH 53, 56).

But this “good” science sounds an awful lot like philosophy, and not very much like science as it is actually practiced, the science that provides David with his various statistics about species losses and environmental degradation, as well as with his language of biodiversity,

scarce resources, populations, etc. Isn't this just a quite traditional philosophical legislation of what science should look like, even if it updates the standards? How, then, can we imagine anything like the "interdisciplinary" dialogue – or the breaching of disciplinary levees -- that David calls for in an editorial about "Greening Vanderbilt"? Interdisciplinarity in environmental studies is almost always understood as an exercise in collaborative problem-solving. But if philosophy is about problematizing rather than problem-solving, if it is about "making easy things difficult, not making difficult things easy," as David puts it (TSB 8, 193), then it isn't surprising that philosophers are so rarely invited to take a seat at the interdisciplinary table. Do science and philosophy perform a kind of Mobius twist of their own, and if so, how can we think their difference as well as their continuity?

I close with a suggestion that I hope will bring together some of these strands of thinking. Nature, *physis*, is the oldest and the richest of those "fundamental words" that David wishes to renew for us today at the limits of our thinking. This nature, which David calls "the potential for creative adaptation and transformation" (TSB 226n45), is indeed too important to be left to the natural sciences. I would suggest, then, another sense in which reconstruction is a "frog philosophy." Like coyote, fox, spider, and the others that David lists, frogs and toads are also "boundary negotiating operators" (TC 138) – think of the frog as enchanted prince or the toad as witch's familiar. David is uncertain whether such symbolic operators offer us anything more than human projections. But if we are not the masters of our own language, and if nature and the symbolic operate as obverse and reverse of a Mobius dance, then perhaps such language preserves and protects a certain privileged truth of nature. Donna Haraway alludes to this when she speaks of coyote as "a figure for the always problematic, always potent tie of meaning and

bodies” and of the world itself as a “coding trickster.”³⁹ This element of nature as a fecund productivity and a coding trickster may remain essentially occluded from the positive sciences, because of their relationship to language. It may also require something more from philosophy than the step back, than the affirmation of our limits as limits. It may require an active attention to the manners in which nature and animality already inhabit our language and art, the ways that they already express themselves through us and take up our voices and words to their own effect. When David cites poetry in order to manifest the alterity of the other animal, the snake and the lizard confront us in or through the words of Lawrence and Roethke.⁴⁰ To call this mere ventriloquism would be to assume that all language is mastered, that it is our possession rather than possessing us. And so perhaps there is a rustling of nature, a restlessness, harbored as the other side of language. Perhaps to carry thought to its limits would precisely involve offering this rustling our voice.⁴¹

NOTES:

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1. I thank Janet Fiskio for her insightful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.
 2. Wood, *The Deconstruction of Time*, 2nd ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 5. Hereafter cited textually as DT.
 3. See, e.g., “Heidegger and the Challenge of Repetition,” in TAH, 61-77; TAH 83, 104. Wood returns to this contrast again in his forthcoming *Time after Time* (chpt. 7).
 4. Concerning the convergence of deconstruction with vegetarianism, see “Comment ne pas manger: Deconstruction and Humanism,” in TAH 135-152. On “econstruction,” see “On the Way to Econstruction,” a version of which was presented as the keynote address at the 2005 meeting of the International Association for Environmental Philosophy (hereafter cited textually as OWE).

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5. And perhaps also that environmentalism must become, if not a form of philosophy, at least essentially philosophical.
 6. On the “step back,” see also TAH 66, 75, 92, 131; “Introduction” to *The Step Back* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 1-8 [Hereafter cited textually as TSB]. On “negative capability,” see TAH 91, 168, 177, 181-2, 187; TSB 1, 6-7, 69, 194.
 7. Concerning Heidegger’s reservations about any “overcoming” of metaphysics, see TAH 66, 74; TSB 110.
 8. See in particular “Heidegger after Derrida,” TAH 93-105.
 9. Although my citations here are all drawn from *Thinking after Heidegger*, this deployment of “experience” also appears in *Philosophy at the Limit* (e.g., 2 ff.) and *The Step Back* (e.g., pp. 114 ff., 135-36).
 10. See, for instance, TAH 3.
 11. See, e.g., TAH 121.
 12. This danger emerges, for instance, in David’s reading of Charles Scott, “Dionysus in America,” especially at TSB 113-114. See also TAH 130.
 13. Although David is repeatedly critical of Derrida on this score, he also notes a shift in Derrida’s later thinking away from the “hyperbolic expansion of obligation” and toward a modal account of responsibility. See TAH 205n18.
 14. Concerning the critique of excessive responsibility, see TAH 35 and especially ch. 8, “Much Obligated,” 125-134; TSB 59, 63; and especially ch. 8, “Responsibility Reinscribed (and How),” TSB 139-48.
 15. This position is developed in “Where Levinas went Wrong,” TSB 53-68.
 16. Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington & Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 55. Wood makes reference to this passage at TAH 138.
 17. See TAH 138; TSB 57, 60; and Wood, “Thinking with Cats,” in *Animal Philosophy: Ethics and Identity*, ed. by Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco (London: Continuum, 2004), esp. 131-32. Hereafter this essay will be cited textually as TC.
 18. This remark is found in Richard Kearney’s “Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard Cohen (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 24. Cited by Wood at TSB 60.

19. Some obvious parallels can be drawn here between David's thinking and the insights of Giorgio Agamben in *The Open*, which David does not cite. There Agamben writes that "if the caesura between the human and the animal passes first of all within man, then it is the very question of man – and of 'humanism' – that must be posed in a new way" (*The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004], 16).

20. See TAH 136, TC 136.

21. Derrida, "The Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," trans. by David Wills. *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (2002), 398 ff. This essay is the main topic of discussion in TC.

22. On this point, one could consider the arguments of Elizabeth Costello, the central figure of J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), which Wood cites appreciatively in this context (TC 214n26).

23. Derrida, "The Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," 399; cited by Wood at TC 136, 138.

24. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 71. Wood cites this passage at TAH 128, among other places.

25. See also the criticisms of this "hyperbolic expansion" in relation to both Derrida and Levinas in TSB 144-46.

In the context of this discussion, David considers the specificity of Abraham's ethical relation to Isaac, noting that the sacrifice was not actually carried out. For David this is crucial: "death always appears as a risk, as something offered up, but never completed" (TAH 130). But hasn't the plight of the ram vanished in this interpretation of the story? We would also need to consider in this light the case of another biblical human sacrifice that has many parallels with the story of Abraham and Isaac and that is ultimately carried out, namely, the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11). My thanks to Janet Fiskio for bringing this example to my attention.

26. I think there is the suggestion of such a "strategic humanism" at several points in David's recent writings, including his hints toward an enlightened self-interest ("our inter-est, our inter-esse, our being-connected, being-related, is in need of enlightenment even for the sake of our own survival," TC 143), and the argument for a "renewed privilege of the human" based on our distinctive capacity to respond (OWE, 7-9).

While the turn to Derrida to make this argument is original, it is worth noting that the general position is already present in the environmental philosophy debate. See, for instance, Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, trans. David Rothenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 166-171.

27. "On the Way to Econstruction," op. cit., 4.

28. This development of a material logic of boundaries that replaces the transcendence of the face can be found in “Dionysus in American” and “What is Ecophenomenology?,” both in *The Step Back*.

29. See also TSB 175, where “natural resistance” is identified as one of the three modes of “contrariety” that function as “constitutive impediments to progress.”

30. David may himself fall prey to the temptation of this line of thought when, in *Thinking After Heidegger*, he describes the distinctively human condition by saying that “we are not complete as natural beings and that it is only by acquiring culture that we become human” (TAH 75).

31. See my “‘Strange Kinship’: Merleau-Ponty on the Human-Animal Relation,” in *Phenomenology of Life - From the Animal Soul to the Human Mind, Book I. In Search of Experience, Analecta Husserliana 93* (2006): 17-32.

32. Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. Alden Fisher (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1983), 224.

33. See TSB 112, 147, 172, 197n5, 199n26, 211n8; “On the Way to Econstruction,” 9.

34. I am struck by the similarities between this Mobius model and what Merleau-Ponty has called “chiasm” or, writing specifically about our relations with other animals, a non-hierarchical *Ineinander*. Although these parallels cannot be explored here, Wood’s ideas could enter into fruitful dialogue with the reading of animality in Merleau-Ponty that I develop in “How not to be a Jellyfish: Human Exceptionalism and the Ontology of Reflection” (in *Phenomenology and the Non-Human Animal*, edited by Christian Lotz and Corinne Painter [under review with Springer Academic Publishers]).

35. For the record, I think that one would search in vain to find any suggestion of such draconian measures in the writings of Arne Naess, who coined the term “deep ecology.” Naess would accept the fundamental claims that David lists at TSB 161: (a) nonhuman life has intrinsic value; (b) biological diversity promotes the quality of human and nonhuman life; and (c) the current scale of human interference is unsustainable and contrary to these values. But he explicitly and repeatedly rejects the position that individual human rights be subordinated to those of species or more encompassing ecological wholes.

Interestingly, Wood himself echos all three of these same “deep ecological” points in his conclusion to “Thinking with Cats,” 142-43. And Wood’s proposal there of an “objective compassion” is very similar to what Naess calls “identification.” In short, Wood’s project parallels Naess’s own thinking in a number of ways that must await later investigation.

36. See Whit Gibbons’s “Ecoviews” commentary from 18 November 2002, online at <<http://www.uga.edu/srel/ecoview11-18-02.htm>> .

37. Cf. TC 138.

38. See especially “Thinking at the Limit” and “The Voyage of Reason” in TAH.

39. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 201.

40. See TAH 152 and TC 131.

41. I am suggesting an alternative interpretation of David’s injunction that we “give voice to the voiceless” in OWE 8. An argument along similar lines is suggested by Coetzee’s character, Elizabeth Costello, in her lecture on “The Poets and the Animals,” in *The Lives of Animals*, 50 ff.