

Wilderness and the City: Not such a Long Drive After All

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Over the last few years, the concept of “wilderness” has come under attack by environmentalists deeply committed to sustaining the natural world. Their criticisms are pointed and undeniably strong; moreover as I will argue, very similar critiques could be made of its putative counter-concept, “the city.” Yet in both cases, we need not simply reject the concepts themselves as incoherent; our challenge is rather to develop resources rich enough to show that and why they must stand in a constructive tension. I will close by outlining the possibility and productivity of this development through hermeneutic reflections inspired by the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer.

Over the last few years, the concept of “wilderness” has come under attack by environmentalists deeply committed to sustaining the natural world. Their criticisms are pointed and undeniably strong; and as I will argue here, very similar critiques could be made of its putative counter-concept, “the city.” Yet in both cases, we have too long we suffered the effects of their abstract opposition. We need not reject the concepts themselves as incoherent, but should rather develop resources rich enough to show that and why they necessarily stand in constructive tension. In the following paper, I will outline the possibility and productivity of this development through hermeneutic reflections inspired by the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer.

Our itinerary will be as follows. Having outlined a series of problems with the received view of wilderness, I will argue that we cannot abandon but must rather refine it with an eye to the real problems that have been raised. Gadamer’s account of the hermeneutic universality of language suggests a way of understanding wilderness as a kind of “relative outside”: i.e. as something that we both preserve in many ways beyond human reach and nevertheless grasp as outside or as beyond through language—i.e. through the medium of human culture. I will then turn to the concept of the city, for if “wilderness” must be grasped as a relative outside, then “the city” must be only relatively inside. In less abstract terms, if we must understand “wilderness” as only relatively wild, the same argument reveals that cities are only relatively tame. I will close with a few suggestions about the practical ramifications of this theoretical insight in the hopes of inviting further reflection on the ways in which we both can and must conceive the city as part of the natural—i.e. wild—world.

Problems with the received view of wilderness

An interest in wilderness conservation has characterized the North American environmental movement virtually from its inception. Most know the history: European immigrants not only brought the Enlightenment, but post-Enlightenment Romantic reservations and aesthetic intuitions. These combined in a potent mix with the myth of the frontier, a myth that saw the environment as a salutary challenge to the overly refined manners of more “civilized” areas, a challenge that forced settlers to draw on primitive energies to reinvent themselves, their communities, and their world. Both movements defined themselves as responses to wilderness; both were shaken as the last remaining wild areas were settled; and both cooperated in the activism that produced the first national parks in the United States

(1872) and in Canada (1875).

Since then, other insights have reinforced the wilderness emphasis. Ecologically, it is now far clearer that without the Amazon basin and the vast boreal forests of the former Soviet republics and Canada, we face environmental catastrophe on a scale unprecedented in historical experience. From a scientific perspective, we are the analogue of grave-robbers, looting remote areas of known riches and destroying countless unappreciated treasures along the way. Pedagogically we are vandals as well, destroying the “living museums” of the natural world as it was found by earlier settlers both Aboriginal and European. And even those who don’t shudder with the Romantic’s attraction to wilderness may wonder whether she is right from an anthropological or epistemological perspective. Can we appreciate the significance of human cultures and forms of settlement without the contrasting concept of the wild?

Yet recent critics have raised a series of political, cultural, practical, ecological, and conceptual problems.¹ Valuing wilderness is *politically* problematic, since the much-vaunted frontier appeared open and untrammelled only as the result of the cultural genocide wrought by smallpox, the flu, and the “successful” completion of the Indian wars. Valuing wilderness is *culturally* problematic, since it ignores the extent to which indigenous cultures actively managed the land, and since laws protecting national parks and refuges have been used to prevent Native Americans from pursuing traditional cultural pursuits. Valuing wilderness is *practically*—and, more specifically, *performatively*—problematic: it romanticizes as our “real” home the wilderness where we do not and could not long live; it suggests that virtually all human culture and history represents a fall from an Edenic, pre-settlement state of grace; and it helps us rationalize our inattention to great ecological and environmental justice concerns in poorer and especially in browner neighborhoods close to home. Valuing wilderness is *ecologically* problematic, since it treats human beings as if they were distinguishable from the wild world rather than treating them as an integral part of it. And valuing wilderness is *conceptually* problematic, since wilderness could not be aesthetically appreciated, ethically valued, epistemically understood, or legally protected unless it bore some determinate relation to human intuitions, values, concepts and laws. The concept of wilderness, in short, is thoroughly human and historical, and the notion of a wilderness unconditioned by human beings is incoherent.

The necessity of the concept of wilderness conceived as *relatively other*

Yet if the received concept of wilderness is problematic in all these ways, we cannot follow J. Baird Callicott in doing away with it entirely to focus instead on biodiversity and sustainable development.² Zoos boast stunning local biodiversity, and can easily sustain their populations over the long haul—but would we be happy if elephants and birds had no wild places to roam or fly freely? Indeed biodiversity is not even valuable taken by itself, since we could easily raise it by populating an area with large numbers of non-native or even bioengineered plants. Would we be happy with that even if the newly-established species were able to sustain their populations over time?³ If not, then there is something essential about the concept of wilderness; we cannot renounce it entirely.

How will we cope with this? The fundamental theoretical challenge is to grasp the concept of wilderness as a *relative other*. Why a kind of “relative” other? The argument for this would borrow more from Hegel than I have time to detail here, but very briefly, Hegel argued that there can never be any absolutely other, for just to characterize something as other is already to grasp it as different from the familiar—that is, to know it already in some way. The 20th century objection to Hegel has been that his theoretical claim effectively reduces every “other” to “the same.” On the standard interpretation of Hegel’s view, he thought history was coming to an end with the cultural and historical embodiment of a form of consciousness—Absolute knowledge—that no longer left anything outside. In the argot of the apostles of deconstruction, this reduction of every Other to the Same is both philosophically and politically suspect.

I’m sympathetic to this worry, but I have another set of theoretical and practical concerns. Making too much hay about the absolute otherness of the Other suggests that there’s no way to

appreciate or even identify it at all. Yet this theoretical commitment has two related practical consequences. First, at least on the commonsense view that what is impossible cannot be morally required, we're under no obligation to understand and appreciate the Other; and that means, further, that the Other can make no concrete demands on us. Acknowledging an absolute Other may at most inspire the aesthetic appreciation of our theoretical and practical finitude, but that Other can require no sacrifices of us if we can never really grasp its nature or needs. Such an extravagant respect for the Other paradoxically renders it practically inconsequential.

The middle path opened by the hermeneutic universality of language

So what are we to do? We need to appreciate the integrity of wilderness as something that stands beyond our mastery and even beyond any final comprehension without absolutizing its otherness by suggesting that we cannot grasp it at all. We need, in other words, some way to grasp wilderness as "relatively" other. On Gadamer's account, language serves just this role: It offers a historically and culturally determinate way to comprehend the world—indeed the only way the world can be grasped at all; and yet at the same time it offers the capacity to appreciate the ways in which the world transcends every contemporary perspective on it. A sophisticated account of his argument would demand far more detail, but even a quick sketch suggests its overall plausibility.

Gadamer begins by asserting that we understand the world only in and through language.⁴ As bald assertion, this may appear implausible; but Gadamer, like Heidegger and Hegel, holds that our understanding of the world transcends the bounds of immediate perception entirely. The world as a whole includes what is present, but also what could not be immediately present—e.g. the unseen beyond my limited field of view and the unseeable large and small; moreover its concrete characterization demands attention not only to the ways it is but also to the ways it is not—thus we understand here by reference to there, now by reference to then, and red as not-blue. On both grounds, Gadamer argues, we can understand—i.e. indicate and describe the world—only through language.

Does this mean that we never experience the world itself? Yes and no: we cannot understand or even intend the world immediately, but always grasp it by means of the concepts and presuppositions embodied in language. Yet against any more radical linguistic idealism, Gadamer argues that we do intend and grasp the world *itself* through language; indeed the very function of language, like glasses, is to disappear so the world can appear through it. How does this work, more concretely? Linguistically-embedded presuppositions offer a rough initial orientation or map of the world. But while these presuppositions help us grasp the world, they stand—again like maps—in constant need of confirmation. Like maps, our presuppositions can be wrong, but language itself provides the tools needed for their correction. My linguistic capacity to grasp the world as having a certain character, together with my linguistic capacity to conceive and eventually to recognize that my expectations have not been met, are precisely what enable us to discover the limits of our presuppositions and thus to grasp the world in a new, richer, more concrete or accurate way.

Language thus does not block, but rather makes possible those "negative experiences"⁵—the disappointment of expectations—by which the actual character of the world is more fully revealed. More concretely: having language, I can hold a scientific theory and then come to grasp why new evidence undermines it. A dog may continually react and adapt to her immediate environment, but—assuming that she doesn't have language—she cannot concretely grasp, let alone theorize about, the world beyond her immediate spatial and temporal horizon at all. In my favorite classroom example, a dog may jump to the sound of her leash being taken off the wall in anticipation of a walk. But it would make no sense to say apologetically, "I was just moving this to tidy up, but don't worry: we'll go for a walk next Tuesday." Only in and through language can the world appear as a whole world in the first place, and only through our linguistic ability to grasp what is *not* true, can our characterization of it grow more adequate.⁶

What consequences does Gadamer's view have for our understanding of wilderness? Like "the world," "wilderness" is a determinate concept: It is and must be understood in determinate ways,

and that means in connection to and by contrast with other familiar concepts, categories, and modes of experience. Yet although we understand these concepts in determinate ways as they reveal themselves in culturally- and linguistically-specific contexts, we always intend the *real* world, the wild world *apart* from us, and we thereby acknowledge and hold ourselves alert to the possibility that our present understanding may be inadequate.⁷ Both “world” and “wild” indicate a kind of “outside”—yet not an absolute, but a relative outside that we can characterize, discuss, and gain deeper insights into by continuing to attend to new experiences.⁸ Even the ineffability of wilderness experiences of grandeur is no final objection to the universality of language on Gadamer’s view. Sensitive people clearly do experience such moments, and most of us could if we would but open our eyes; but our very capacity to point to such experiences and communicate them with others draws essentially on language. We can be frustrated by our inability to get across the exact quality of a particular experience, but we gesture in its direction and note the limits of any descriptions in, and only in, language. My dog, again assuming that she does not speak, might have mystical sensations; but she could hardly communicate them to others, let alone reflect on them in a quiet moment a month later.

Indeed in light of Gadamer’s account of the hermeneutic productivity of application—i.e. about how concepts develop as they are applied in new contexts—then the ways in which the concept of wilderness has changed historically no longer seem surprising. Theoretically speaking, we can conceive regions of experience where neither we nor anyone else is in control, for to think about such areas does not by itself tame them. Practically speaking, this means that “wilderness” is a relative concept: it exists in different degrees depending on its local context. New York’s Central Park—built over train lines, traversed by cars and busses, filled with people, and patrolled by police—is nevertheless more wild than any other place for miles around, and is for that very reason a surprisingly rich place for bird watching during migratory seasons.

But what of the city?

Yet mention of Central Park returns us to the theme of the city. If the received concept of wilderness is problematic for the reasons above, then its putative counterconcept, the city, must mirror these incoherencies—as indeed it does. Let me suggest a few ways in which we have inappropriately contrasted “the city” with “the wild,” and then close by gesturing to some practical consequences that the reconception of the city as “relatively tame” might have.

We begin, as with wilderness, facing the same abstract opposition. In many ways both theoretical and practical, the city has been conceived as standing apart from the natural world. Even in the premodern world, city folk and country folk lived vastly different lives, pursued different occupations, had far different standards of living and very different life expectations. The city was traditionally surrounded by walls, and cities erected obstacles to prevent their being flooded with refugees from the country. In the modern era, of course, this purported independence has only been magnified: most city people have no idea where their food grows or how it arrives at the supermarket; we live in great buildings that not only protect but hermetically seal us off from the surrounding world; we travel in small, climate controlled environments powered by processes and resources we neither see nor understand; and government leaders, academics, developers, and the captains of industry regularly congregate under the banner of “development” to dream of ever more impressive ways to build and furnish our modern Towers of Babel.

Nevertheless, cities have always been constructed on formerly wild lands, and they always remain a kind of epithelium. In many ways, cities have not and indeed cannot master their environments. Consider these few:

a) We cannot constrain, but must learn to live with vast geological forces. In Los Angeles where I live, no local building code in or earthquake preparedness conference can entirely free my family from the potentially worrisome effects of a shaking we can neither predict nor control.

b) We cannot constrain, but must learn to live with vast hydrological forces, since the city too is part of the water cycle. Think of the consequences of building vast impervious surfaces such as roofs, roads, and parking lots; or of the attempt to channel the LA River into a vast concrete sluice; or of attempts to constrain the Mississippi River—hubristic in conception and, as New Orleanians could and did foresee—disastrously consequential in practice.

c) We cannot constrain, but must learn to live with the air and the wind. LA and Denver will always face the danger of smog since they have no way to “stir” the atmosphere to eliminate the thermal inversions; and hundreds of East and Gulf coast and cities in the Midwest must face their continuing vulnerability to hurricanes and tornadoes that stir the air (and everything else) entirely too much.

d) Cities interrupt and threaten the food chain at their own peril. Rather than thoughtlessly covering thousands of acres a year of highly productive agricultural land, we must begin to see the city as part of the food cycle and think about ways in which it can learn to feed itself. According to Ivan Illich, Paris was self-sufficient in vegetable production before the Revolution.⁹

e) And finally we cannot constrain, but must learn to live within the climate cycle. The wide dispersal of air conditioning has made us more comfortable at the cost of any awareness of the natural world outside our windows and creates micro-climates that we enjoy at the cost of a global net increase in heat. If we fail to plant vegetation and continue to make roads and buildings of dark materials, then we only increase our discomfort and the perceived need to modify our surroundings in energy-intensive ways.

How, then, could we reconceive the notion of “the city”? I’d suggest that the appropriate metaphor for the city’s relation to its context is not one of independence, much less one of isolation or mastery, but rather that of taming or domestication. We must build cities, for if we do not then urban sprawl will continue to mushroom out of control. But they must be *workable* cities—i.e. not only ones that maximize the short-term convenience of the middle-class and rich, but ones that work in the context of an underlying, overarching, and indeed suffusing wild environment that will never be completely or finally suppressed. As we domesticate or humanize the land by building cities, we must recall what animal trainers have learned: that taming involves not the mastery of animals but the shaping of their own interests. It’s not by accident that we hunt truffles with pigs and herd sheep with shelties. If we come to reconceive cities as cooperating rather than competing with or defying their local environments, we may yet hope that they will survive into a more stable and sustainable future.

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Rolston III, Holmes. "The Wilderness Idea Reaffirmed." *The Environmental Professional* 13 (1991): 370-77.

Endnotes:

¹ To save space and repetition, I have summarized the critics' arguments rather than attributing and detailing them one by one. The articles include J. Baird Callicott, "The Wilderness Idea Revisited: The Sustainable Development Alternative," *The Environmental Professional* 13 (1991) 235-47; William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995) 69-90; Ramachandra Guha, "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: a Third World Critique," *Environmental Ethics* 11 (1989) 71-83; and Michael P. Nelson, "Rethinking Wilderness: The Need for a New Idea of Wilderness," *Philosophy and the Contemporary World* 3 (1996) 6-9.

² J. Baird Callicott, "The Wilderness Idea Revisited: The Sustainable Development Alternative," *The Environmental Professional* 13 (1991) 235-47.

³ I owe these (I think) very telling examples to Holmes Rolston III, in "The Wilderness Idea Reaffirmed," *The Environmental Professional* 13 (1991) 370-77.

⁴ His most famous, albeit somewhat oracular, phrase: "*Being, that can be understood, is language.*" See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd Rev. Ed., trans. W. Glen-Doepel, ed. J. Cumming and G. Barden, rev. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad Press, 1991) 474. All further references to Gadamer will be from this book.

⁵ The experiences are "negative" only in Hegel's sense—i.e. negativity here has a positive connotation. By disappointing expectations, such experiences challenge us to learn and grow.

⁶ Gadamer, 438-56.

⁷ Consider how wilderness is geographically and legally the land *beyond* any private person's disposal, how it is the land we *do not* manipulate in the usual ways, how it is valuable because it *has not been* manipulated and *not been* fully explored, and so on.

⁸ Gadamer, xxxiv-xxxv.

⁹ See Ivan Illich, *H2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness: Reflections on the Historicity of "Stuff"* (Oakland, CA: Heyday Books, 1987).