

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Representation

Book Section

How to cite:

Saward, Michael (2006). Representation. In: Dobson, Andrew and Eckersley, Robyn eds. Political Theory and the Ecological Challenge. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp. 183–199.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [\[not recorded\]](#)

Version: [\[not recorded\]](#)

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://www.cambridge.org/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521838108>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

11 Representation

Michael Saward

‘Political theory’ is a wide and diverse body of work; in this book’s title, it comes across as inert, the receptor, the thing that is acted upon. The active ingredient, the ‘challenge’, is ecological. There is, of course, no given, bounded body of political theory to be acted upon, but rather a shifting set of arguments and assumptions. And the ecological challenge is in fact many challenges – to conventional views of the state, social justice, democracy, progress, individualism and more. Which of a range of possibilities to pick when it comes to ‘representation’? How to represent the problem of representation?

Political representation is normally discussed in terms of how accurately elected representatives reflect the interests of voters. In this chapter, I argue that representation happens in many more Places than just elected legislatures, and in many more ways than the accurate capturing of human interests. I start from the view that representative claims are made by a great variety of political actors, and that representation involves the active portrayal of constituencies rather than simple reflection of them. From that base, it quickly becomes clear that adding some ‘proxy’ representatives of nature into conventional legislatures (Dobson 1996), for example, is just one part of the ecological challenge, and probably not the most important part. Broader portrayals or representations of nature matter in politics, and they matter beyond just parliamentary politics.

The concept of political representation we need will move us beyond the influential style of analysis of the (deserved) contemporary classic on political representation, Hannah Pitkin’s *The Concept of Representation* (Pitkin 1967). Pitkin sets up the problem of representation in a distinctive way. She describes her basic task as a metaphorical search for ‘a rather complicated, convoluted, three-dimensional structure in the

^o The author would like to thank Karin Bäckstrand, Andrew Dobson, Robyn Eckersley, Phil Sarre and Grahame Thompson for helpful comments on previous versions of this chapter.

middle of a dark enclosure' (1967: 10). Political theorists – Hobbes, Burke, Madison and others – have given us photographs of this structure, she says, taken from various angles. These photographs offer different images or interpretations of representation. 'Yet', says Pitkin, 'there is something there, in the middle in the dark, which all of them are photographing; and the different photographs together can be used to reconstruct it in complete detail' (1967: 10–11). There is, in other words, an essence of representation, a full view of it, three-dimensional and complete.

It is easier to admire Pitkin's work than to share her confidence. I suspect that in fact any way or style of capturing the problem of representation is more like a freeze-frame – one fragmentary, passing moment amongst others – than the definitive three-dimensional photograph. Pitkin is searching for a master metaphor which points to the essence of representation. The problem is that the metaphor – rich and compelling as it may be – remains a metaphor. Metaphors substitute for essences, or so we often like to think, precisely because those essences are so elusive. The trouble is that there are always other metaphors which depict their object in a different light, with different emphasis. We cannot reach a point where we say: 'this is the right metaphor, this captures it, the work is done.'

The elusiveness of the concept of representation itself is repeated for the world of representations in which we live. No one picture or representation of a thing, a person, an animal or whatever can securely be thought to capture its essence. That sounds limiting and negative. But there is another side to the coin. Metaphors or representations do crucial work for us. We use them to find entry points to gaining some understanding of processes, phenomena, people. But they do more even than that. Often our metaphors *create* our entry points; what we cannot imagine, what we cannot evoke with metaphor, we find difficult to see and therefore study. In his writing on representation, Derrida (1982) implies that we have to construct the concepts that bring into focus the objects of our study in order to study them.

Both the necessity and unreliability of such representations are crucial to carry into a discussion of political representation and the ecological challenge.

A New Approach to Political Representation

My approach is informed by a view of political representation which is based on three key background assumptions. First, in the words of Dennis Thompson, 'we must understand representation not as a

relationship between constituents and representatives at particular moments, but as a *process* in which the relationship between citizens and representatives continues over time' (1988: 136). Second, we should see that representation as a process centres upon the practice of making *claims to be* representative, and varied efforts to substantiate and to contest those claims; and third, that 'constituents' and 'representatives' need *not* be members of electoral districts and elected parliamentarians or councillors respectively – only by narrow political science conventions do we confine discussion of political representation to parliamentary politics and electoral processes.

Representation is always something in the making rather than something achieved or completed, not least because it is tied up with an economy of *claim-making* rather than fact-establishing. A representative claim is a claim to represent, or to know what represents, the interests of someone or something. The claim could be expressed in a variety of ways. For example, I could claim to represent the interests of a person, or the needs of a country or region, or the needs of non-sentient nature. I could claim to embody the desires of my co-religionists, or that a painting accurately represents a particular landscape (and so on). Any claim can be and normally is subject to dispute, and may be accepted, ignored or rejected by individuals or groups.

Representative claims differ enormously from one to the next, but there are common elements at an abstract level. Claims have a *maker* – the one who asserts them. The maker puts forward a *subject* – perhaps herself, perhaps a symbol, perhaps a social group or party – as standing for or signifying an *object*, such as a human electoral constituency or an endangered species. The object of a representative claim is a concept, an idea of a real thing rather than the thing itself; the latter is more helpfully understood as the *referent*. Finally, claims have an *audience*, which may accept or reject claims. Critics may argue that to put all these elements together is to pack too much into a conception of representation, but it seems to me that all are vital. If we drop the maker or audience, for example, and concentrate on signification (subject as signifier, object as signified), we catch the technical side but miss vital political and cultural aspects of representation.

An example of a conventional representative claim would be: the member of parliament (M) offers herself (S) as the embodiment of constituency interests (O) with respect to a legally defined set of people in a constituency (R) to that constituency (A). Or: the green party (M) offers itself (S) as the protector of the interests of endangered species (O) with respect to the animals in question (R) to governments and the broader media and public (A).

Contained within the notion of the representative claim is an argument that aesthetic and cultural modes of representation are themselves political, and need to be seen as an integral part of what political representation is all about.

There is an indispensable *aesthetic* moment in political representation because the maker has to be an artist, to operate aesthetically, to evoke the represented. If for example an electoral constituency's interests were transparent, then a representative could simply 'read off' those interests and act on them. But the signified, or the object, is not the same as the collection of people who make up the constituency (the referent). It is a picture, a portrait, an image of that electorate. The 'interests' of a constituency have to be 'read in' via a subject or signifier, not 'read off'. This is an active, creative process, not one of passive reception of signals from below. The business of political figures, parties, lobby groups and social movements is aesthetic *because* it is political.

And political representation is necessarily *cultural* in the sense that there are cultural limits to the types of subject – object links that can plausibly be made in a given context. Potential audiences of representative claims have cultural codes which will make them receptive to some claims and unreceptive to others. In Stuart Hall's terms, '[c]odes fix the relationship between concepts and signs [subject and object in my terms]. They stabilise meaning within different languages and cultures' (Hall 1997: 21). These are codes which would-be political representatives can exploit.

A full account would require exploring the representative claim much more. For example, we would need to think about how an audience may or may not hear a message as it was intended, or dispute it by constructing its own alternatives. But my focus here is green political theory representations of 'nature' – constructions of nature as an object, intended for professional or political audiences. Constructions of nature, like those of other phenomena, are aesthetic creations using cultural resources. Green challengers to 'grey' or 'brown' political theory and politics question existing representations of nature and offer new ones. I turn now to specific examples and to raise some questions about them in the light of the preferred approach to political representation.

Green Political Theory and the Challenge to Representation

Selected works by Andrew Dobson, John Dryzek, Robyn Eckersley and Robert Goodin examined here are sophisticated green attacks on conventional representative democratic institutions. What I want to do is to

deploy elements of the framework outlined above to shed light on some lesser-noticed aspects of what is going on in the ecological challenge's representations of nature especially.

Dobson invokes a 'species' as having interests which might adequately be represented when 'assured of the conditions to provide for its survival and flourishing' (1996: 137). Faced with the question of which animals are to be represented, and to what extent, Dobson invokes the rich metaphor of the 'hierarchy of moral considerability' which his proposed special parliamentary representatives for non-human animals – the proxies – should debate and decide for political purposes. Finally, he offers us a representation of future generations, people who will exist and who will 'want both a viable environment in which to live and the possibility of satisfying their basic needs' (1996: 132). In short, here are 'representations' of another sort, choices about the depiction of potential new 'constituencies' – one might say choices about how to constitute constituencies. The theorist (M) puts forward proxy representatives carrying hierarchies and flourishing conditions assumptions (S) as defining and standing for the needs of animals and of future generations (O) with respect to animals and presumed future people (R) for consumption by a human political audience (A). The assumptions about flourishing and needs look general and reasonable, but in theory they are not the only ones that proxies might come up with. They are the theorists' creations, his preferred representations of the problem. The creations are theoretical, but they are also political in a deep way: they involve particular claims about what interests are, how they need to be construed. And those particular claims play their role in making a new potential political constituency visible, of defining it through representation.

Let me turn to Eckersley's essay, 'Deliberative Democracy, Representation and Risk' (2000). This piece is an account of the limits of conventional representative machinery in the face of pressing ecological problems and demands. Future generations and other species form 'communities of fate' which have the potential to be harmed by political decisions and industrial processes. Therefore they are interests that ought to be represented within our political structures. Future generations and other species cannot represent themselves, so they must be represented in some other way. Eckersley considers positively the potential of a modified version of deliberative democracy to assist in bringing about a more ecologically sensitive democracy.

There are two points here. The first is an interesting tension in Eckersley's account of representation. On the one hand, she places weight on the idea of stretching elected representatives' imaginations, as

a way of ensuring that the interests of future generations and other species are taken on board in decision-making. On the other, she tends to regard the interests of these constituencies as real and singular. Admittedly this needs to be read between the lines of her account, but there are plenty of relevant lines to read. For example, she refers to ‘the perspectives of differently-situated others’, ‘the concerns and interests of differently-situated others’, of adopting ‘the standpoint of differently-situated human and non-human others’ (2000: 128–9). The main challenges to representatives being able to imagine these interests, she argues, are epistemological and motivational. The epistemological challenge is how to know, to recognise, those interests. An institutional mechanism that can help us to meet this challenge is ‘mandatory state-of-the-environment reporting’ (2000: 129). In short, there is an emphasis on the singular knowability of the interests concerned. Here, I want to suggest, is an example of *unidirectionality*. A unidirectional approach to representation proceeds from the assumed given character of the represented to the adequacy of the representatives’ perception of that character. In the terms of the model, two things are happening. First, the distinction between object and referent is glossed over – future people (R) have determinate interests (O) just because they will exist. And second, the process of knowing those interests involves *discovery* by appropriate technique (state-of-the-environment reporting). The maker and the subject are set aside, missing therefore the necessarily constitutive role played in these elements of representation. My argument will be that representation should instead be seen as bidirectional (or multidirectional), recognising the interpretative and selectively creative role of makers and subjects in representation. Using Eckersley’s own terms, I am suggesting that the imagination or ‘enlarged thinking’ of her subjects, the elected representatives, stretches beyond the role of knowing by discovery what is already there (the interests of future generations, for example), to actively evoking one or more potential versions of what is there to be represented. It might be protested that techniques like state-of-the-environment reporting have a scientific status that overcomes the partiality and selectivity of representations; I shall say more on scientific representations of nature in a moment.

I now turn to some brief comments on discursive and decentralist green challenges as exemplified in works by Goodin and Dryzek.

Goodin, like the other green theorists, wants to find a way to make nature’s interests figure in political decision-making. Beyond general comments in favour of decentralist and participatory democracy, he builds a conception of democracy in which the internalisation of the interests of others plays a central part. Interests, whatever their

source and whoever or whatever bears them, should be represented; if their bearers cannot represent themselves, then a notion of interests 'encapsulated' by others who can, becomes acceptable, even desirable.

Goodin argues that 'In so far as natural objects have objective values that can properly be construed as interests, those ought be politically represented just as any others' (1996: 837). So, values in nature are *objective – there*, given, regardless of human recognition or not. Again, the necessary gap between object and referent is closed off – the concept of what value natural objects may have is collapsed into the material of those objects themselves. These values, according to Goodin, require an 'appreciator' to turn them into interests, to represent them politically. Goodin the theorist is the maker of this representation, and the appreciator is his subject. The appreciator's skills are subjective, of course, and Goodin recognises this fact. But the values, on his account, are objective, to be discerned rather than creatively construed (as I argue they can only be). His model offers us a transmission belt, transferring objective values to the passive receptor that is the appreciator. The very idea of an appreciator implies such one-way traffic – an appreciator has (merely) to see what's already there.

Nature, then, has interests that ought to be represented. These are to be discovered, appreciated. Then they need to be internalised. The one-way traffic continues at this point. To 'internalise' implies that there is a single external reality to be transferred – there is something specific outside that can be brought inside our heads. There is no guarantee, Goodin writes, that 'people will necessarily internalise nature's interests completely or represent them perfectly' (1996: 844). The idea that in principle these interests *could be* represented 'completely' or 'perfectly' reinforces their presumed single and unalterable character. These interests require no active mediation and little interpretation; the appreciator's role remains that of a passive receptor. Interests are to be *read off* nature, not *read into* it (my words, not Goodin's).

My suggestion is that Goodin emphasises too much the objectivity of nature's value and interests, and that this leads to an overly unidirectional view of the transmission of those interests into politics. To be sure, we are dealing with matters of *emphasis* here rather than black-and-white distinctions. Nevertheless, it leaves aside the necessarily creative role of the representative, one that requires the incumbent to construct, reconstruct, choose, depict and portray that which needs to be represented ('nature', in this case). The process is two-way, as I have tried to argue above. The representative / politician must be a maker of representations, an artist, even if a bad or unwitting one. Much less is given, much less is capable merely of being 'read off' than Goodin presumes.

In other words, we have here (I suggest) an example of a problematic *objectivity assumption* along with one of *unidirectionality*.

Let me turn to Dryzek's radical analysis and prescription. As a discursive democrat, for whom unconstrained communication is the ideal political mechanism, Dryzek seeks to deepen and extend radically the meaning and spaces of political communication, seeking 'a more egalitarian interchange at the human / natural boundary' (2000: 145). Nature is not only a source of 'interests', which are 'affected'. In Dryzek's eyes, nature is an agent too; it is not 'passive, inert, and plastic'. Instead, this world is truly alive, and 'pervaded with meanings' (2000: 148). This agency means we must recognise and respect nature in wholly new ways. For Dryzek, the key metaphor here involves 'listening' – 'we should listen to signals emanating from the natural world with the same sort of respect we accord communication emanating from human subjects, and as requiring equally careful interpretation' (2000: 149).

My main point here, echoing others above, is that listening implies a passivity on the part of the listener, mere receptiveness of what is given. Dryzek's listener is blood brother to Goodin's appreciator in this key respect – he or she is the subject within the representative claim being made. 'Effective listening' is hearing and heeding the 'feedback signals' from nature; it is largely passive, though it is a role that no doubt requires attentiveness and acquaintance. Essentially unidirectional like others, Dryzek's analysis closes down the object-referent gap and implies that nature largely determines what the subject-listener hears. Interestingly, the maker is a voice outside the text, too. The theorist here adopts the classic silent stance of the author, setting to one side his role as maker of the representation involving the listener and nature. This is understandable – it is a deep convention of academic and other writing – but it is worth noting that it has the effect of reinforcing the objectifying character of the claims being made. That is not to denigrate his efforts; as I shall try to argue below, this analysis can prompt a clearer view of the political role of (in this case green) political theory.

Dryzek's account moves on to the political institutional corollary of all this – the idea that the state, as we know it, is so constrained by anti-ecological imperatives that it is not likely to be a good 'listener' in the present sense. Elected representatives within the state are no different from other state personnel in this respect. Accordingly, Dryzek adopts the bioregional paradigm, where 'redesigned political units should promote, and in turn be promoted by, awareness on the part of their human inhabitants of the biological surroundings that sustain them' (2000: 157). The connection between listening to nature and living close to it in reconfigured units is explicit: people who are close to nature are

'in day-to-day contact with particular aspects of the ecosystem, and therefore in a much better position than distant managers or politicians to hear news from it' (2000: 157).

In essence, the listening in Dryzek's account is presented as an unmediated relation between listener and nature. Literally, those closer to particular places can 'hear' them better. Dryzek explicitly separates the 'listening' aspect of democracy from its representative aspect (2000: 154), and makes it clear that 'unlike the situation in aggregative liberal democracy, this communication does not have to be mediated by the material interests of particular actors' (2000: 154). Interestingly, Dryzek suggests that we ought to be careful not to 'anthropomorphise' (2000: 151). He is keen to avoid aesthetic representations, which would require and emphasise a gap between nature and listener. But one can argue (and I would) that to anthropomorphise is one mode of using metaphors as coded subjects to 'get at' (to make audible, as a parallel to making visible) nature's messages. It is one example of a move that is essential or unavoidable if one is to even attempt 'readings' of nature. Such metaphors, or representations, far from distorting messages from nature, make 'listening' possible. Dryzek of course uses his own metaphors – notably that of the 'feedback signal', an electronic metaphor for nature which, precisely because it belongs to a different realm, brings into view a conception of the object we wish to understand.

Like Rousseau, Dryzek is suspicious of representation in two of its aspects, aesthetic and conventional-political, and he would like to transcend both. His prescription is radical indeed, favouring a highly decentralised, bioregional politics. In essence, Dryzek has a dream of political authenticity, of direct politics, more or less spontaneous and unmediated. Ultimately, it seems to me, this sort of work taps into deep-seated Garden of Eden metaphors – back to nature means back to a simpler, more authentic, more tuned-in human nature, of something roughly analogous to humanity before the Fall. The Rousseauian links are evident enough: a vision full of politics, but of spontaneous orders of politics, relatively free of the corrupting artifice of aggregative representative institutions as we know them.

Representation, Metaphor and Institutional Design

Let me try to take stock of these selective comments on green writings on representation and offer some observations on some key characteristics of the green thinking identified with respect to representation: unidirectional approaches, objectivity and authenticity claims.

The first major criticism was that of *unidirectionality*, the problem of seeing representation as a one-way process, where the representative is a mere receptor or reflection of some primary object or person or group. Representation, I have argued, is best seen as bi- or multidirectional: representative and represented are in a shifting and mutually constitutive relationship. Real things, people, animals and species exist. To be sure, there are limited sets of ways in which these referents could be described or accounted for. But that leaves plenty of scope for competing representations or constructions of them as objects. Making these representations or constructions is what politicians, artists and political theorists do. Representation works in two directions: the referent's material reality conditions the range of what can be said about it, and makers and subjects create representations within that range.

Overlapping with that point, I criticised some greens for assuming that an *authentic* presence of 'nature' or its interests was 'out there', if only we could listen carefully enough, or get close enough to it. By contrast, my preferred approach holds that identity in representation is authored rather than authentic, that it is necessarily partial and selective. I was also critical of a further closely related green tendency to see nature or the environment as possessing '*objective* interests'.

Do these criticisms amount to a rejection of green political thinking? Not at all. But they might point to a different approach, one more in tune with a broader and thicker conception of political representation. I turn now to how we might deal with metaphors of nature as representations, and subsequently comment on the politics of green thinking.

Stressing the constructedness of our representations or conceptions of nature does carry some tricky judgements. I do think that the 'epistemic' dimension of representing non-humans and other species is sometimes overemphasised. There is more to be said for an alternative, 'interpretive' approach, which allows more space for accepting and exploring a plurality of competing representations (reading in possibilities rather than reading off certainties). However, it makes little sense to press this point to the bottom. Raising the epistemic questions does at least have the virtue of leading us to ask 'how do you know?' and invites critical discussion of different forms of knowledge generation. This, for example, can lead us to key issues about the status of scientific knowledge.

Clearly, natural phenomena (like volcanoes) exist and have an impact beyond cultural representations of them. As I have indicated, I do not argue that there is no referent, or extra-discursive reality. Certain forms of knowledge of them in this respect can have a particular, if contingent, validity. A 'more valid' representation of nature in this respect means one that is more efficacious, gains more purchase on the phenomenon in

question when applied or assumed. I would go so far as to say that a strong consensus in the broader scientific community regarding validity is a strong indicator of validity. Producing broad and deep consensus among specialists with expertise is a powerful thing. The scientific, causal debates about global warming have largely been settled recently by the sheer degree of scientific consensus on causes and likely consequences of climate change.

Which representations of 'nature'/nature we may rely upon more is a relative and difficult matter, though. As suggested, the claims of scientific knowledge rest upon assumptions about the social dimension of creating scientific knowledge and on the Popperian fallibilist view that science proves nothing but offers 'conjectures and refutations'. There is no escaping representations, then – we cannot 'see' nature *without* metaphors or mediating representations which characterise it and bring it into focus – and no *non-contingent* means to judge relative validities, even if we agree with Soper's excellent account of these issues when she observes that, even if there is a lot of culture in nature, there is some nature which is also not just culture (Soper 1996).

Having said that, some metaphorical representations of nature have had great material consequences because people have acted upon them. Other ways of seeing nature have had less impact, including until recent times metaphors favoured by greens (such as the idea of 'partnership' discussed by Plumwood in this volume). There are many and varied ways in which 'nature' can be, and has been, represented. The power of metaphors of nature often grows from a sliding from one meaning of 'nature' – nature as 'the essential quality or character of something' – to another, namely 'the external, material world itself' (Demeritt 2002: 777–8). Sliding from the first to the second meaning can lead us to believe that when we gaze into the external world we are accessing some sort of essence. This is a powerful tool, and one of course that has been exploited by classic political theorists such as Hobbes and Rousseau, and continues today in arguments that, for instance, the free market is a 'natural' way for people to interact and to meet their needs.

Dominant metaphors can tell us a great deal about the societies that hold to them. They can also tell us a great deal about what can or should be done to the 'nature' which the metaphors make visible. We can look at these on a grand historical scale. Three main metaphors – 'the book of nature, man as the microcosm, and the world as machine' – have informed Western views of nature, according to Mills (Mills 1982: 237). In terms of the preferred model of representation, these metaphors are subjects which are put up by those who use them (makers) to signify their object (nature). In the Middle Ages, the dominant metaphor of the

book of nature implied, for example, that nature had an author, that its meanings could be read, that it had varied levels of meaning, and that physical nature bore legible marks of the authorial hand or presence. This theocratic view gave way in the Renaissance to a more anthropomorphic view in which humanity rather than God provided the dominant metaphor. Man, or more specifically the human body, was the measure of all things. Mills invites us to

consider how much of the language we still habitually employ derives from just such an anthropomorphic view of the world. We speak of mountains as possessing 'brows', 'shoulders', 'backs', and 'feet', and rivers have 'heads' and flow through 'gorges' out into 'mouths'. We refer to a 'neck' of land, an 'arm' of the sea, a 'vein' of mineral ore, and the 'bowels' of the earth. (1982: 242)

Finally, into the modern era, the metaphor shifted to that of the 'earth machine'. Clocks and later computers became the source of concepts for nature. Viewing nature through mechanistic metaphors implies that nature is made and can be remade, and that it can be controlled and tinkered with.

By looking at dominant metaphors we can learn a great deal about the societies which harboured and developed and lived by the metaphors: 'Nature is no more a book or a giant human being than it is an extraordinarily complex machine. That certain societies should find such views of it convincing, however, is highly informative and provides us with a direct means of knowing their central needs and aspirations' (Mills 1982: 249). Without assuming that these metaphors were unchallenged or unambiguous, we can also learn what might, and often did, follow from their prominence. A machine, for example, can be owned and used and dismantled and changed and sold and controlled – a machine metaphor determines nothing in itself, but it carries the potential to facilitate domination and commercialisation of nature. A machine implies a maker of the machine and a purpose, so religious views of nature might be at home with the machine metaphor, too. My point is that metaphors underpin belief, and belief underpins actions. The metaphors of nature we have and use condition what we can do with and to nature.

That is probably too much the grand sweep of history approach. From a more modest but probably a more fruitful perspective, we inhabit a messier and dynamic world of competing and overlapping metaphors. Among the ones that green political theorists and others often address critically are:

- economic metaphors, concerned with nature's 'richness' and involving 'producers' and 'consumers'

- pyramidal metaphors with ‘humans as the pinnacle of evolution’
- sex-typing metaphors such as ‘mother nature’, carried over into ideas of, for example, ‘virgin nature’
- mechanistic and cybernetic metaphors
- wild nature as an agricultural crop (‘harvesting the fish crops’) (Meisner 1992: 2)

The green temptation is to find better, alternative metaphors, such as Nature as home, Nature as musical (‘harmony in diversity’), Nature as a living being, and so on (Meisner 1992: 2). Metaphors are nothing if not suggestive and multifaceted, and any one metaphor will outrun attempts to characterise it or interpret its implications in one direction. Thus there is no single, unambiguous good or bad, helpful or dangerous metaphor from a political ecological point of view. It is just not that simple. Meisner, in his thoughtful account of the issue, seeks new metaphors which are ‘both evocatively powerful and cognitively practical; they must evoke positive feelings about nature, and suggest a conception that leads to humility, respect, and non-exploitative ways of living’ (1992: 9). He recognises how elusive such metaphors are likely to prove, though he favours, for example, ones which see nature as alive, as process rather than as thing, as partner rather than as possession (1992: 8) (see Plumwood, this volume).

We have seen how powerful the temptation is for all of us – green political theorists are hardly the exception – to seek to break the boundaries of representation, to find directness, engagement, contact, authenticity, as I have suggested Dryzek does. The desire to escape from, or to fix upon ‘better’, metaphors is a recognition of the power of the material consequences of metaphor or representations, and at the same time a tilt towards overcoming the undesirable contingencies of the play of representations in political life.

Because we cannot escape representations in a larger sense, it is a positive thing from a green point of view that radical political efficacy does not require such an escape. Representation is a rich concept, and it can readily encompass the mutual constituting and indeterminacy present in all relations between one who represents and one who is represented. At the same time, the concept is rich enough to point us to claims and practices well beyond traditional parliamentary representation, as I indicated at the outset. Animals can be engaged with, looked for, traced, understood and appreciated in new ways by humans opening up themselves to new ways of ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ them (see, for example, Hinchliffe et al. 2004). But to do this is to tap into new ideas of what it

means to represent, and to make representations, in the senses of both what it can involve and who can do it. We live in and by representations, and representation making is a necessary human activity, not one that diminishes in importance just through physical proximity to or familiarity with 'nature' or anything else. The desire to move beyond a politics of representation to a direct engagement with nature is understandable enough, but it is misconceived. Our need to 'make up nature' does not go away just because we are close to it (or even because we *are* it).

Politics brings varied representations into play. Perhaps, instead of 'enfranchising constituencies that are affected' – the traditional, parliamentary way of looking at representation – we could look to multiple representations or constructions of the affected (nature), putting new interpretations and perspectives 'into play', politically. Perhaps, too, this is the real task of green parties and pressure groups – makers of provocative new metaphors of nature, creators of portrayals that can win hearts, minds, votes and actions (see also Eckersley 2003).

It is here that the point about politics and theory, which I mentioned in the context of the green critique, comes into its own. Looked at from a particular angle, one can say that what Eckersley, Dobson, Goodin and Dryzek variously offer is a compelling set of metaphors or representations of nature: mysterious constructions about nature alive, pervaded with meanings, speaking to us if only we can listen, replete with interests that are comparable to our own, a set of forces demanding our attention and deserving our respect. In short, what we have gained from these writers are metaphors which link conceptions of nature with political prescription. These are potentially powerful *political* arguments, aesthetically compelling and culturally resonant representations of nature. That will not be news to anyone, but I mean the claim in a strong way: dressed and presented and published as political theory, they are in fact a highly sophisticated form of political argument, the home for which ultimately (in a well-functioning democracy) ought to be the cut and thrust of daily political life, in the parliamentary politics of representation to be sure, but well beyond there to the local and international, formal and informal political spaces where representation happens, representations are made and power is generated.

From a green perspective, forging and refining and arguing for metaphors of nature which prompt pro-ecological actions is the right approach. I am engaged in something much less than that task here. A prerequisite to the success of such efforts is an open society which allows a richer variety of representations to become available. A dynamic process of making and remaking representations of nature – on a crude level, this overlaps with a 'the more, the better' view – is a positive thing

for various reasons. We might adapt J. S. Mill's argument, that we can only know the rightness of one argument by testing it against others, to say that the efficacy of making nature visible through one metaphorical representation can be teased out and tested by way of contrast with another or others. We could say that unmasking metaphors which facilitate environmental destruction is all the more easy when alternatives can be evoked or created or deployed in argument (it is fortunate, for example, that by the time the former premier of the Australian state of Tasmania described the Franklin River, the proposed damming of which provoked a major environmental dispute in the early 1980s, as a 'brown, leech-ridden ditch', there was a strong environmental movement to argue for alternative images and portrayals of the wild river and Tasmanian wilderness more generally). We might cite the imaginative power of metaphor as a contributor to processes of 'reflective democracy' (Goodin 2003), where citizens and politicians are invited or induced to reflect upon the interests and needs of human and non-human others by exposure to provocative depictions and accounts. In my limited way here, I have pointed out how green political theorists themselves offer potent metaphors with real political resonance.

I suggested at the outset that questions of democratic institutional design lurk within my comments. If democratic representation happens in but also well beyond elective and parliamentary domains, then our thinking about innovative democratic designs can and should follow suit. We might start, for example, from the premise that institutionalising multiple modes of representing a range of shifting human and non-human interests is perfectly democratic, and that seeking means to test openly in argument varied representations of nature requires new democratic thinking. This is a complex topic indeed, and these are very brief comments – I have written elsewhere how varied devices, placed in sequences, might evoke and draw in to democratic processes more interests and needs and phenomena than merely living human constituencies, and indeed alternative representations of the latter too (Saward 2003). Alongside a representative parliament, why not a citizens' jury to evoke statistical representation, local forums to evoke representation-in-place, a parliament of Dobsonian proxies of nature and future generations, and the precautionary principle to capture assumed needs and interests whose character at present eludes the reach of our understanding? Representative politics is much more about portrayal and image making in argument than it is often assumed. Green political theorists, I have suggested, are engaged precisely in these political debates than more conventional readings of their work might indicate. Their work on political ecology might pose one major

challenge in particular to mainstream political theory – how to imagine in detail a democracy that revels in representative politics in the broader and deeper sense, since the metaphors and representations we invoke are critical to shaping political outcomes, for ‘nature’ and for us as a part of it.

References

- Alcoff, L. (1991). ‘The Problem of Speaking for Others’, *Cultural Critique* (Winter): 5–32.
- Ankersmit, F. R. (1996). *Aesthetic Politics*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- (2002). *Political Representation*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Barry, J. (1999). *Rethinking Green Politics*. London: Sage.
- Becker, H. S. (1986). ‘Telling About Society’, in *Doing Things Together*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. J. B. Thompson. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Cohen, J. (1968). ‘Commentary: Representation and the Problem of Identity’, in J. R. Pennock and J. W. Chapman (eds.), *Nomos X: Representation*. New York: Atherton Press.
- Demeritt, D. (2002). ‘What Is the “Social Construction of Nature”? A Typology and Sympathetic Critique’, *Progress in Human Geography* 26: 766–89.
- Derrida, J. (1982). ‘Sending: On Representation’, *Social Research* 49.2 (Summer): 294–326.
- Dobson, A. (1996). ‘Representative Democracy and the Environment’, in W. M. Lafferty and J. Meadowcroft (eds.), *Democracy and the Environment*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Dryzek, J. S. (2000). *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Eckersley, R. (2000). ‘Deliberative Democracy, Representation and Risk’, in M. Saward (ed.), *Democratic Innovation*. London: Routledge.
- (2003). ‘Ecocentric Discourses: Problems and Future Prospects for Nature Advocacy’, paper presented to the Second Tamkang International Conference on Ecological Discourse, Tamsui, Taiwan.
- Goodin, R. E. (1996). ‘Enfranchising the Earth, and Its Alternatives’, *Political Studies* 44: 835–49.
- (2003). ‘Democratic Deliberation Within’, in J. S. Fishkin and P. Laslett (eds.), *Debating Deliberative Democracy*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hall, S. (1997). ‘The Work of Representation’, in S. Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage and The Open University.
- Hinchliffe, S., Kearnes, M. B., Degen, M., and Whatmore, S. (2004). ‘Urban Wild Things: A Cosmopolitical Experiment’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23.5 (October): 643–58.

- Latour, B. (2003). 'What if We Talked Politics a Little?', *Contemporary Political Theory* 2.2 (July): 143–64.
- Mansbridge, J. (2003). 'Rethinking Representation', *American Political Science Review* 97.4: 515–28.
- Marin, L. (2001). *On Representation*, trans. C. Porter. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Meisner, M. (1992). 'Metaphors of Nature: Old Vinegar in New Bottles?', <http://trumpeter.athabascau.ca/content/v9.4/meisner.html> (accessed 11 December 2003).
- Mills, W. J. (1982). 'Metaphorical Vision: Changes in Western Attitudes to the Environment', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 72: 237–53.
- Pitkin, H. F. (1967). *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Przeworski, A., Stokes, S. C., and Manin, B. (1999). *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Saward, M. (1998). *The Terms of Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- (2003). 'Enacting Democracy', *Political Studies* 51: 161–79.
- Seitz, B. (1995). *The Trace of Political Representation*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Soper, K. (1996). 'Nature/"nature"', in G. Robertson et al. (eds.), *FutureNatural*. London: Routledge.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. London: Macmillan.
- Thompson, D. (1988). 'Representatives in the Welfare State', in A. Gutmann (ed.), *Democracy in the Welfare State*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Young, I. M. (2000). *Inclusion and Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.