The debate within environmental philosophy over anthropocentrism – its character, moral relevance, defensibility, avoidability and possible meanings – has consumed a great deal of ink, but arguably the eclipse of deep ecology and the rise of debates over the Anthropocene have rather sidelined those discussions in recent years. In this book, however, Keith Peterson works to give a novel and nuanced treatment of the ills of anthropocentrism, or at least certain aspects of it as conceived within the customary worldviews and practices of Western capitalist societies. In doing so he draws centrally on ecofeminist and political ecology critiques and trains his primary attention on a feature that is widely acknowledged but has tended to be backgrounded in much environmental ethics literature: the asymmetry of human dependence on the natural world, and how our customary anthropocentric orientations deny or ignore this. As such, some of the key starting premises of the book draw on the work of the late Australian ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood, whose critique of the various types of antagonistic dualism embedded in conventional anthropocentric perspectives remains of enduring worth.

In terms of organisation and themes, the book starts with a brief introduction to give context, and is then split into three parts, dealing respectively with ‘the conditions under which environmentalists and others generally think about the nature of humankind (philosophical anthropology), how they think about the value of nonhuman nature (metaethics and value theory), and how they understand more-than-human nature generally (ontology and epistemology)’ (p. 4). Unsurprisingly, Part Two is the longest of these, with three chapters dedicated to the axiological issues, while Part Three is shortest, consisting of one full length chapter on metascientific stances and ecological ontology and a fairly brief summarising conclusion. The two chapters of Part One can loosely be described as respectively the negative and positive sides of Peterson’s philosophical anthropology: Chapter One draws upon Plumwood’s account of dualism and her ‘liberation model’ (p. 30) of analysing and opposing it, then critiques alternative environmentalist models of human agency that draw upon neo-Kantian idealism or reductionist naturalism. Chapter Two opts to sketch ‘some elements of a philosophical anthropology for critical environmental philosophy’ that will fit with ‘Plumwood’s criteria for a liberation model of anthropocentrism’ (p. 48), and fulfilling this exercise takes the form of a nonreductive version of naturalism, drawing on the work of figures such as Michael Tomasello and Marjorie Grene as well as early twentieth century German philosophical anthropologists, and to a lesser extent Mary Midgley. The central idea here is the creation of a model of human agency that sits between the excesses
of naturalism and social constructivism, a characterisation of ‘humankind as an unfinished animal’ (p. 57) that is naturalistically based in evolutionary theory and ecology, but which strongly focuses on the role of culture as necessary for completing the development of each human being towards being able to perceive, think, learn and act. Humans are thus uniquely flexible in their interactive receptivity and learning within the socio-natural world, as well as in the centrality of this flexibility and learning to their subsequent development. This in turn denotes that values cannot be simply read off in some supposedly given hierarchy from a conception of the natural, but rather that felt conflicts of values are necessary parts of the human condition, articulated through language and actions, and fundamentally connected to goal-directed action in the world. Importantly, Peterson sees this conception of humankind as undermining the customary nature–culture and needs–interests dualisms, and thus paves the way for Part Two’s discussion of values.

Given these themes of action, goals and embodied values, I was finding myself wondering why no mention had been made of the American pragmatist tradition, especially given that George Herbert Mead and J.J. Gibson – both strongly influenced by William James – had been invoked, but the axiological discussion of Part Two brings such thought into play, beginning with Chapter Three. Indeed this reviewer was delighted to see that Peterson utilises pragmatist insights in a most fruitful manner, as a way of framing and understanding environmental values, rather than simply using the pragmatic method as a short-cut for bypassing values talk and merely discussing policy issues. The key starting point for his treatment here is recognition that the ‘problem of prioritisation arises from the pervasive experience of value conflict for an acting being’ (p. 79), and sets this question of concrete conflicting values as the proper focus of ethics, as against the conventional tradition of what Peterson calls the ‘propertarian approach’ under which ‘it is the constitution of a being – its special properties – that should primarily determine our moral responses to it’ (p. 80), a perspective that he also sees as bound up with the dualisms of contemporary capitalism via the conceptual connection between ‘property’ and ‘properties’. Accordingly, Peterson sets about challenging the priority of the propertarian approach by invoking Anthony Weston’s conception of ‘enabling environmental practices’ (pp. 85–90), and in Chapter Four works to develop a new schematic typology and set of axiological explanations, distinguishing kinds of values (goods vs moral values), their relations and proper prioritisations. Chapter Five is then devoted to developing the resultant scheme into more political terms, using the bridging notion of an ethos to bring the prior reflections into connection with the eco-socialist critiques of Joel Kovel and John P. Clark, connecting back to the problem of anthropocentrism’s denial of human dependency: the ‘value derangement of Modernism… may stem from the learned inability to affirm relations of dependence as necessary and valuable’ (p. 134).
This broader focus leads fairly naturally into Part Three, largely devoted to working through Chapter Six’s key question of the metascientific stance – that is, put simply, where the developed position should stand on the role of the sciences in relation to knowledge production, history, social science and politics, and what sort of model is ideally needed to replace the current status quo so as to ‘inform a more nuanced metascientific stance that recognizes natural and social dependencies in their multiple form’ (p. 146). Here Peterson rejects environmentalism’s two most popular and characteristic options, namely the ideas of clashing worldviews (e.g. mechanistic vs organic) or of a movement led by existing science, instead regarding both of these as tacitly embedding another type of human–nature dualism. He opts instead for a sophisticated new model that draws on the works of Helen Longino and Charles Taylor, though scarce space prevents me from giving greater detail. Suffice to say that the result is well worth attending to, as indeed is the volume overall.

Summing up, this is a very detailed, effective and impressive work of environmental philosophy that features wide ranging scholarship and connects anthropological, axiological, political and metascientific considerations together in a persuasive and well worked out way. Though I was a little surprised not to see more of the earlier pragmatist reflections on the framing and use of values incorporated into the scholarship (e.g. Weston 1992; Minteer 2012; Stephens 2009; Dedeurwaerdere and Six 2016), the ways in which Peterson interconnects the insights of this and other traditions into a coherent, persuasive and original whole is both admirable and well worth reading.

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References