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### THE HUMAN STANDING IN NATURE: STORIED FITNESS IN THE MORAL OVERSEER

The concept of fitness is a biological one but has a spillover into morality. Appropriate conduct fits the situations encountered. In both biology and ethics one wants suitable behavior—right actions. Some will complain that this equivocates on words such as "fit" and "right." A prairie dog's behavior is right in its grasslands niche; a person's conduct is right when one shares scarce resources. The one use just means nonmorally adapted to an ecosystem, like a nut fits a bolt. The other use means *just*, ethically considerate of other persons with moral standing. Granted that prairie dogs are not moral agents, the question remains what moral agency, when it emerges in humans, contributes to human fitness. Perhaps when humans are moral in their social and natural environments this is functionally analogous at a higher level to the nonmoral fitness of animals in habitat? These could both be value optimizing questions in different but homologous ways.

Humans are the creatures that have evolved a conscience. Humans are standouts in the system in which they stand. Humans have status as moral agents. "Every living thing," claimed Bertrand Russell, "is a sort of imperialist seeking to transform as much of its environment as it can into itself and its seed."<sup>1</sup> Such "self-seeking" is only part of the truth, even in the biological world. It is of course, a mistake to treat nonmoral organisms as if they were moral agents, faulting them for aggrandizing selfishness. Still, every species, every organism is a sort of maximizer defending its own program and seeking in reproduction to leave as many copies of itself as it can. That is what the survival of the fittest means. Coyotes try to convert as much of the world as they can into coyotes; oak trees would make the forest into nothing but oaks, pushing out maples and hickories. The Darwinian model, dominating biology (perhaps even blinding biologists to other formative forces) finds that nature selects for those who most successfully reproduce. Always replace another kind with one of your own kind—that is what the "selfish" genes say; and it seems that all genesis hangs on a takeover principle.

Yet that is not the whole picture. Nature has not equipped or even inclined any one form to transform very much of the environment into itself and its seed. Each life form is specialized for a niche, limited to its own sector and so woven into a web that it depends on many other species in a pyramidal, dynamic biomass. Animals with locomotion,

especially the specialists, seek their preferred habitats and avoid elsewhere. Plants flourish in some soils, adapted to particular moisture and light conditions, and ill fit others. Recent biology has emphasized not so much aggression and struggle (sociobiology and allegedly selfish genes to the contrary) as it has adaptedness, habitat fitness, efficiency. If not checked from within, a species' genetic impulses are checked from without by ecosystemic forces that keep every living thing in community. If coyotes converted the world into coyotes, they would starve. An oak tree generates a million acorns to replace itself; all but one of the acorns are eaten, sprout in unfavorable locations to die and rot, or otherwise are deflected into the food chains and nutrient recycling, supporting non-oak forms of life. Willy-nilly, life is symbiosis. Would-be imperialists cannot dominate the world; they can gain only situated environmental fitness. Would-be maximizers can be no more than optimizers.

All this is premoral, so what are we to say when, at the top of the ecosystemic pyramid, there emerges *homo sapiens*, so powerful and unspecialized that, culturally evolving to where humans now are, we almost can transform Earth into ourselves and our seed? Must we, should we, unleash these selfish genes to develop the last acre in our interest? Should we maximize our kind? Or does some other behavior yield a better-adapted environmental fitness? The answer lies in nature's simultaneously equipping us with a conscience coupled with our power, neither such power nor conscience appearing in nonhuman creatures. This conscience can wisely direct the magnificent, fearful power of the brain and hand. Conscientious human activity ought to be a form of life that both fits and befits, however much it also elaborates and extends, what has previously, premorally been the case. An environmental ethic tries to maximize conscience in order to maximize fitness in the environment.

Each life form is constrained by biological forces to flourish within a larger community. The planetary system carries humans most gloriously, but it cannot and ought not to carry humans alone. Human life is constrained by moral forces and ought to flourish within a biotic (as well as a cultural) community. Man is a political animal, as Socrates discovered, awakening to the city as the niche for humans, But that is not all. Man is an earthling; Earth is his residence, as surely as is the *polis*. On that Earth humans ought not so much be maximizers as optimizers—seeking an optimally satisfactory fit. That fit will have two components—a worldview and a storied residence. One begins in theory; the other ends in practice.

### I. The Worldviewer

*Humans* are cognate with the *humus*, made of dust, yet unique and excellent in their capacity to look over the world they inhabit. *Anthropos* means "upward-looker." Each animal is well equipped for its niche. Eagles see better telescopically and gazelles run faster than humans. Animals often have superior agility, perception, endurance, fertility; they have all the capacities they need for the niches they fill, and humans should not disvalue animals because they are not moral or civil. But humans are in the world *ethically*, as nothing else is. Humans are in the world *cognitively* at linguistic, deliberative, self-conscious levels equaled by no other animal. Humans are in the world *critically*, as nothing else is. Humans espouse worldviews, as can nothing else. Only humans can consider, reflect upon, be cognitively right or wrong about the way they are in the world. Ducklings can make mistakes in their imprinting, but theirs is a mistake of instinct, not of reason. Ducklings do not cause ecological crises as a result of mistaken worldviews. Bats are in the world as nothing else, with superior auditory senses. But humans can reflect how bats are in the world; bats cannot reflect how humans are in the world. The bat way of being does not have the scope that the human way has.

Animals are wholly absorbed into their niches, but humans can stand apart from the world and consider themselves in relation to it. Humans are, in this sense, eccentric to the world. Humans are only part of the world in biological and ecological senses, but they are the only part of the world that can orient themselves with respect to a theory of it. Humans can begin to comprehend what comprehends them; in this lies their paradox and responsibility. They have a distinct metaphysical status because only they can do metaphysics. The metaphysics humans do may lead them to experiences of unity with nature, to responsible care for other species, but such unity paradoxically puts humans beyond nature, where nothing else is capable of such experience and caring. When humans assert the value of Earth and its creatures they exceed the animal scope of value. Thus the human capacity for a transcending overview of the whole makes us superior, transcending the rest, and imposes strange duties, those of transcending human interests and linking them up with those of the whole natural Earth.

Humans have little biological role in ecosystems, in the sense that were they subtracted from oak-hickory forests, or African savannas, or Asian steppes, those ecosystems would not be negatively affected; they would rather be improved. Humans are not important as predators or prey; they play no role in food chains or in regulating life cycles. They are a late

add-on to the system; and their cultural activities (except perhaps for primitive tribes) only degrade the system, if considered ecologically. But one human role may be to admire and respect the ecosystems that they culminate, as environmental ethics urges, and not merely to admire and respect themselves, as traditional ethics does. The human role is ethical, metaphysical, scientific, religious, and in this sense humans are unique and superior, but their superiority is linked in a feedback loop with the whole.

Experiences other than the capacity to reason abstractly, to be self-conscious, or to espouse worldviews are also valuable, such as pleasures in exercise, eating, the warmth of the sun, or sexual activity. Humans should value these in themselves and also in animals. In the latter they generate constraints on permissible human interventions. But humans reach vast ranges of valuational experience unshared with the animals. If I am hiking with my dog and come to an overlook, we may both pause and enjoy the rest, but I can look at the scenery. He can look, but not at the view. Perhaps he smells what escapes my detection. But the human considers the canine perception, although not undergoing it, enjoys the exercise, rest, and also the aesthetic experience, all in the midst of a worldview that sets a context of explanation for events in the view. The animal has only its own horizon; the human can have multiple horizons, even a global horizon. In that sense, animals have a habitat; but humans have a world. The human has only a limited understanding of what is going on, but this is less limited than that of the dog and that establishes a superior value richness. "No animal asks such questions about the meaning or purpose of life, because animal life cannot be doubted, it can only be embraced and enjoyed, Man is unique...who asks such questions."<sup>2</sup>

Humans should not "look down on" the "lower" orders of life, but humans alone can "look out over" or "look out for" all other orders of life. They try to see where and who humans are, and comprehensively what others are. They have increasingly seen more of what there is to see in the unfolding of art, literature, philosophy, natural history, science. In this looking out, humans are the ablest form of life, the form in which valuational capacities are most (but not exclusively) developed. This is superiority based on accident of birth. Humans drew human genes; monkeys got monkey genes. But it is also superiority based on evolutionary achievement for which humans have to be grateful. It is no mark of intelligence or morality to refuse a value endowment. Wasted talent is a sin.

Humans have no instrumental value in the ecosystems they inhabit. Yet they are highly endowed with evolutionary achievements. Has this

species without a typical role some atypical role? What is the standing of those who stand on top? One answer, long favored in ethics, is that humans are not to be judged for their instrumentality even in culture, much less in nature, but are to be judged intrinsically. Persons have value in themselves. Their roles are ends, not (just) means to ends. Such a judgment contains truth, but not the whole truth, and, taken for the whole, brings distortion. So judged, the focus of humans can turn inward to the self, except as the ego is checked by the intrinsic value of competing and complementary egos. In this situation, interhuman ethics arises to pull the focus off self-center and bring into focus the community of other persons. The single self must find a situated cultural fitness; it ethically adapts to its neighbors. That is what ethics to date has largely tried to accomplish—honoring the intrinsic worth of persons in their cultures.

Given the assumption that humans have superior intrinsic value, and that they ought to honor such values among themselves, the distortion can also arise that this superior value is one of privilege and not of responsibility. That produces the still largely prevailing untruth that only humans have moral standing, that justice concerns "just us." In result, we have the ethical anomaly that the sole moral species arises to act in its class self-interest. Several billion years worth of creative toil, several million species of teeming life, are handed over to the care of this late-coming species in which mind has flowered and morals have emerged. Toward their fellows, humans struggle with impressive, if also halting, success in an effort to evolve altruism in fit proportion to egoism.

But in this struggle, all the rest of the products of the evolutionary ecosystem are counted as resources. From a narrow, organismic perspective that can seem right, since in the prehuman, world everything is making a resource of everything else, so far as it can. But from a wider, ecosystemic perspective that can seem ridiculously territorial, oblivious to the way that the system has hitherto contained myriads of species in interdependent tension and harmony, with nothing maximizing itself except by optimizing a situated environmental fitness. From this more comprehensive perspective, the contemporary ethical systems, even when they succeed in culture, seem misfits in nature. There is something overspecialized about an ethic, held by the dominant species *homo sapiens*, that regards the welfare of only one of several million species as an object of duty.

In the sense in which we are here revising ethics, the traditional, anthropocentric ethics tries but fails to make humans the sole loci of value, transcending the otherwise valueless world. In this failure, it stunts humanity because it does not know genuine human transcendence—a

transcending overview caring for the others, The challenge now is to learn interspecific altruism.

Humans, with their intrinsic worth, which features moral agency, double back on the world out of which they have emerged. The better answer, found in environmental ethics, is not that humans ought to maximize the high value of their kind, with nothing more, but that humans ought to be ideal observers using the excellent rationality peculiar to their niche, in such way that rationality functions as more than a survival tool for defending the human form of life. This sometimes leads to dominion, but it should also lead to genuine transcendence. Mind forms an intelligible view of the whole and defends ideals of life in all their forms. The novelty in the human presence is class altruism emerging to coexist with class self-interest, sentiments directed not simply at one's own species but at the biological whole. Humans ought to think from an ecological analogue of the original position, a global position that sees Earth objectively as an evolutionary ecosystem. In the occupying of this position, human subjects meaningfully interpret, and play roles in, the storied achievements on Earth. Interhuman ethics has spent the last two millennia waking up to human dignity. As we turn to a new millennium, environmental ethics invites a new awakening to the greater story of which humans are a consummate part

## II. Storied Residence

An ethic in the sense we are developing it is a creative act, not simply the discovery and following of rules and duties. It is writing an appropriate part of an ongoing story. In this dimension, your career is one of environmental interpretation. Life has, and ought to have, other dimensions: a family ethic, a business ethic, a community ethic; but the moral life is not complete without a sensitive approach to one's place—to the fauna, the flora, the geomorphology surrounding one's life. Your role is to enrich your environment by appreciating -it. Classical ethics urges living in one's own space culturally. Environmental ethics urges living in one's own space naturally. Complementary with recognizing intrinsic value apart from the human presence, existential ethics demands adequacy, fitness, in the human presence. Humans ought to have experiences appropriate to the facts, a human subjectivity to fit the world objectivity, spirit incarnate in place, where the passage of consciousness through nature in time takes narrative form.

Prehuman nature is already historical, storied in form. At the long ranges, over millennia that humans have only within the last century

begun to appreciate, evolutionary ecosystems are dramatically eventful in spinning stories on Earth that are never twice the same, although in short-range perception there is seasonal recurrence, recycling, homeostasis, dependable patterns, repeated order. Some say that nature has no history. It is true that plants and animals do not know their own stories. They are historical beings objectively, but do not know this subjectively. Some animals learn and have memories; so that animal life may have precursors of historical consciousness. Still, humans are the only historical subjects living in a historically objective world,

I cannot give you an argument explaining all this history that has gone before—some logic by which there came to be a primeval Earth, Precambrian protozoans, Cambrian trilobites, Triassic dinosaurs, Eocene mammals, Pliocene primates, eventuating in Pleistocene *homo sapiens*. No theory exists, with initial conditions, from which these follow as conclusions. To the contrary, from the viewpoint of the best available theory, natural selection with its descriptions how, and demands that, the fittest survive, the whole story seems some hybrid between a random walk and a tautology. The theory neither predicts outcomes, nor, looking back after the outcomes are known, retrodicts why these events rather than thousands of other courses of events equally consistent with the theory failed to take place. Likewise, passing from science to ethics, I can give you no ethical argument why all these stories ought to have taken place.

The most that I can give is a story, a natural history, and a good story it is. You will have to accept it at that, or invent some further story. You may even come to love the story, and prefer narrative over argument, over some theory by which natural history would follow as an inevitable or statistically probable conclusion. In that sense, I cannot give you an argument that justifies the existence of each (or any!) of the five million species with which we coinhabit Earth. But I can begin to sketch nesting sets of marvelous stories. There is no logic with which to defend the existence of *Trilliums* or mayapples, squids or lemurs; but they each have stories in their niches, and they enrich Earth's story. And that alone may be enough to justify their existence.

What can we say when humans appear to oversee this scene? An emergent feature of high value is the human capacity to tell stories about what is going on. Man has been, from his earliest traces, a great storyteller. In the past these have, at profoundest levels, often been myths about the Earth humans inhabit. Whether and in what sense these myths, even in prescientific eras, have sometimes been true we cannot here examine. At present, an exciting part of the story of science is that the

history of Earth is being better told, despite the fact that the weakest skills of science are the historical ones.

I cannot give you an argument explaining how humans arrived, some logic by which the Earth story eventuates in *homo sapiens*. No theory exists from which we follow as conclusions. That has troubled many in Darwin's century, who have disliked the thought that humans may be here by accident. Likewise, passing again from science to ethics, I can give no argument why humans ought to be here. What I can do is invite you as a historical subject to appreciate the objective story that lies in, with, and under the Earth we inhabit, to enrich the story by telling it. You can be a microcosm of the macrocosm and enjoy your storied residence here. Perhaps you may even come to prefer that role to a lesser one by which humans are empirically necessary as outcomes of a determined process, or statistically probable as outcomes of stochastic process.

Indeed, this much, with nothing more said (though there is much more to say) might justify human existence. Just the telling of the story might make our part in the story seem right, fitting, appropriate behavior. A narrative role might make the story, and the human role in it, seem meaningful, despite the lack of sufficient logical premises or theory with which to reach the human presence as a conclusion. Perhaps you may come to prefer that role to one that considers the human existence alone as intrinsically valuable and treats everything else as a resource.

So much for the global scene. In conclusion, turning to personal presence on the local scene, we can continue the logic of storied residence.

An environmental ethic does not want to abstract out universals, if such there are, from all this drama of life, formulating some set of duties applicable across the whole. An ethic demands a theory of the whole, an overview of Earth, but not a unity that destroys plurality, not the sort of moral law that forgets history. So far from an ethic uncolored by the agent's own history, cultural identification, personal experiences, and choices, an ethic rather requires a theory that can rejoice in that color. The moral point of view wants a storied residence in Montana, Utah, Newfoundland, a life on the tall grass prairie, or on the Cape Cod coastline.

Ethics must be written in theory with universal intent, but the theory must permit and require ethics to be lived in practice in the first person singular. This person will not be the solitary Cartesian ego, isolated from its world, but the subjective I in singular communion with its objective world. The logic of the home, the ecology, is finally narrative, and human life will not be a disembodied reason but a person organic in history. Character always takes narrative form; history is required to



form character. The theory can provide a skeleton but not the flesh. This is true, perhaps more evident in culture, but it is not less true in the human relations with nature. The standing of humans in nature is not, after all, that of detached ideal observers. In dialectic with what was claimed before, now we specify an ideal of humans inseparably entwined with particular times and places. If a holistic ethic is really to incorporate the whole story, it must systematically embed itself in historical eventfulness. Else it will not really be objective. It will not be appropriate, well adapted, for the way humans actually fit into their niches.

No two human careers are identical, because over historical time cultures change and because genetic sets, choices, circumstances, contingencies differ. A contemporary backpacker cannot confront the environment as did Jim Bridger, even if both camp at the same spot in pristine wilderness. An American does not have the same environment as does an Australian. Two New Englanders may walk the same trail together; one knows the wildflowers, the other birds, and their experiences differ correspondingly. Endlessly singular human subjects confront an endlessly singular environment. The practical, applied character of environmental ethics will have to recognize this singularity to do justice to the form of the world and of human life in it.

In the understory of the human story, nature itself is never twice the same. Whatever the annual and diurnal repetitions, each new year, each day is historically different. Whatever their repetitions, each locality, each ecosystem is unique. The formative topographical and biological forces generate distinctive differences in every mix of land, fauna, flora—the Grand Canyon, the Grand Tetons, Okefenokee Swamp, the Finger Lakes. No two waterfalls, mountains, beaches, bays, creeks, or maple trees are identical. Sometimes the differences are trivial and, even when notable, we may want to abstract out covering laws or general trends. Sometimes we think that the idiographic elements, punctuating the nomothetic elements, are noise in the system. But they are not always noise, they may be news, good news—because this historical and topographic variation elevates nature into a providing ground for storied residence.

But these story lines are not simply found, though many lie there to be found. They must also be constructed, as they are detected by complex persons localized in and overseeing the complex ecosystems they inhabit. We write the narratives as we travel, prose mixed with poetry, even when we interpret the environment. With artistry, we paint the pictures we see. Nature can seem loose, open, unfinished, even chaotic; so it is in part. But just this element is freedom on a providing ground,

freeing and providing for persons to be educated (*educio*, led out) to and by their environments.

At times humans in the midst of their world can seem only to stand in kaleidoscopic variety; but life can and ought to be more than that. Kaleidoscopes have beauty, but they spin no stories, have no history. By contrast, persons in nature live careers in their places. Some events are episodes, perhaps valuable without further contributory reference. A person does not have to justify a twilight sunset, a picnic at a waterfall, or a joyous warbler's song by placing these in a narrative career. Still, the world is full of fragments of stories, intersecting, colliding with each other, full of nested sets of story possibilities, only some of which actualize at any length. Superimposed on some of the causal linkages, supported by the ecosystemic webs and pyramids, furthered by cultural lines, and despite wayward paths, many stories develop. A principal characteristic of human life is to develop into biography. In that sense, humans do not want their values in nature, any more than they want other goods in life, to come seriatim, like beads on a string—intrinsic goods without meaningful connection to each other. Humans want a storied residence in nature where the passage of time integrates past, present, and future in a meaningful career. This does not make nature mere instrument in a human story, any more than it makes the fellow persons in our drama merely tools. Rather, we have reached the richest possible concept of life in community, where all the actors contribute to storied residence.

Complementing now the global oversight considered earlier, we seek a local view, not as ideal observers but living participant stories in time and place. We must complement transcendence with immanence. I do not expect or desire, in this sense, that my views will be shared by everyone. My views have been those of Appalachia and the Rocky Mountain West; Henry David Thoreau's views were those of Walden Pond, and John Muir's were those of a thousand mile walk to the Gulf and from the high Sierras. John James Audubon's views were of birds and Rachel Carson's of the sea. A.J. Grout saw mosses as few have seen them before or since. Albert Bierstadt's eye was for landscapes, Paul Ehrlich's is for butterflies. Wendell Berry sees Kentucky and Barry Lopez the arctic. David Brower knew Glen Canyon as the place no one knew. In this sense, an environmental ethic needs roots in locality and in specific appreciation of natural kinds—not always rooted in a single place, but moving through particular regions and tracks of nature so as to make a narrative career, a storied residence. The life of every good naturalist-environmentalist will be more than episodic; life will be stories superimposed over day-to-day events, some of which cohere as puzzle

pieces in a bigger picture. Without such integration, even the richest experiences grow fatiguing and meaningless. This storied residence gives a person standing.

Aldo Leopold concluded his *Sand County Almanac* with a call for a "land ethic" and he concluded his land ethic with a general principle, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."<sup>3</sup> But Leopold's principle belongs, as it is, deeply embedded in his love for the Wisconsin sand counties. It is no accident, but rather essential to the ethic, that the earlier pages of this *Almanac* have remembered a January thaw, the spring flowering of *Draba*, the April mating dance of the woodcock. Leopold's biographical residence is the personal backing to his ethic.

John Rodman warns, "We cannot simply abstract from the last part of this carefully composed book the notion of extending ethics to the land and its inhabitants. The land ethic emerges in the course of the book as an integral part of a sensibility developed through observation, participatory experience, and reflection. It is an 'ethic' in the almost forgotten sense of a way of life. For this reason it would be pretentious to talk of a land ethic until we have let our curiosity follow the skunk as it emerges from hibernation, listened with wonder at the calls of the wild geese, arriving, at a pond, sawed the fallen ancient tree while meditating its history, shot a wolf (once) and looked into its eyes as it died, recognized the fish in ourselves, and strained to see the world from the perspective of a muskrat eye-deep in the swamp only to realize that in the end the mind of the muskrat holds for us a mystery that we cannot fathom."<sup>4</sup>

The landscape is a text to be interpreted, as surely as the cultural heritage recorded in our libraries. Our role is to live out a spacetime ethic, a placetime ethic. In this sense we now want an emotive ethic, but not, as that term usually conveys, an ethic that is nothing but emotion. Emotive environmental ethics lives in caring response to the surrounding natural places and times, an appropriate fit of the tripartite mind—reason, emotion, will—creatively corresponding to the nature in which mind is incarnate. In this ethic, knowledge is power, as also is love, with faithfulness. There is a penultimate place for superior human standing, and the ultimate lesson is that the meek inherit the Earth. The fittest survive.

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## NOTES

1. Bertrand Russell, *An Outline of Philosophy* (New York: New American Library, Meridian Books, 1974), p, 30.
2. Theodosius Dobzhansky, "The Pattern of Human Evolution," in John D. Rostlansky, ed., *The Uniqueness of Man* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Co., 1969), pp. 41-70, citation on p. 42.
3. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), pp. 224-225.
4. John Rodman, "The Liberation of Nature," *Inquiry* 20 (1977): 83-131, citation on pp, 110-111.