

Philosophical Aspects of the Environment

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"Philosophy bakes no bread," runs an old lament. Yet the hand is joined to the mind; action rises from belief. Ecology, when it becomes human ecology, thrusts man into a *logic* of his *oikos*, his home; ultimately it turns on a state of mind. The activist will soon become impatient with just "thinking." We concede that we often must act with unclear heads and, sometimes, understanding comes after action. But "Act now, think later" is a slogan the inadequacy of which has been amply demonstrated in environmental transactions. Granted that, untranslated into pragmatic proposals, even the soundest ego-logic is useless; ponder, on the other hand, the mischief done by a faulty one. *Environmental* competence presupposes a mindset.

Nature is perhaps the most ancient philosophic category, yet the genius of many centuries has, ultimately, hardly left nature less enigmatic. We begin in one discipline, whether philosophy or physics, or biology or geology, only to find interfaces with many, whether geography, or economics, or politics, or art, or religion. We know, only to find the unknown vaster. We search, to find that the search returns upon ourselves, for the measure of nature requires the measure of man. Of late, this perennial quest has been thrown into fresh ferment. What is the temper of this ecological reevaluation?

Ecology, The Ultimate Science?

Ecosystem science is being often offered as an ultimate science that synthesizes even the arts and the humanities. "Although ecology may be treated as a science, its greater and overriding wisdom is universal," claims Paul Shepard, introducing an influential anthology, *The Subversive Science*.¹ Its first law and commandment is the dynamic steady requisite between organism and environment, homeostasis. Popularly, this yields needed recycling. Pragmatically, few will quarrel with insistence on a balanced budget. Philosophically, though, if proposed as an ultimate principle relating man to nature, there arise some crucial questions.

How far is man so continuous with nature that he must accept environmental limits? Is the steady state, for instance, compatible with unending progress? Does it compel a no-growth economy, or even a reduction of our standard of living? To answer, we need an inventory of potential resources in materials and energy, but also we employ axioms about an ever-advancing technology, limitless scientific development, what counts as betterment, and the wits of man in bypassing nature's limits. The presumptions of ecological spokesmen are strikingly reminiscent of the debate about geographical determinism—the belief that the physical environment significantly limits and fixes the character of a society. Man must submit to and operate within certain natural, ecological givens.

Doubtless he must. Yet much of the Western genius lies in its sense of man's discontinuity with nature, a vision awakened in us by the Hebrews and Greeks, and climaxing somewhat paradoxically in modern science as it uses man's knowledge of his natural connections to achieve an omnipotence through technology. This mindset regards as a tragic, oppressive mistake man's immersion in cyclic natural rhythms, his submission to the web of nature. Precisely this led to the stagnation of preliterate societies. A requisite of modern society is that man discover his uniqueness — his linear history, creativity, progress — by which increasingly he masters nature, turns it to his advantage, and remolds his environment to his liking. Against this, the ecological mood recalls us to a wisdom of relatedness, of man's necessary linkage to biological communities, to an affirmation of our organic essence. Can we reaffirm this without compromising man's enormous adaptive capacities in his relationships with nature?

Nature approximates but never long maintains a steady state; evolution is superimposed on equilibrium, rather as a melody develops against a rhythm. Disequilibrium generates the novelty of process. Evolution too has profoundly influenced our outlook, and mustn't we blend the vector with the circle to get the spiral? in human history, might not homeostasis, however necessary, be but a half truth, true only when complemented by man's advancing environmental competence as he civilizes his

¹Paul Shepard and Daniel McKInley, eds., *The Subversive Science* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969) p. 4f.

planet — a transformation that may well involve continual disequilibriums, studied replacements, and alterations of the natural ecosystems?

Ecology as an Ethical Science

He who would be a philosopher of nature must soon learn the naturalistic fallacy. The disciplined logic of modern philosophy has found itself unable to move from an *is* to an *ought*, from a *scientific description* to a *moral prescription*. Alternately stated, science is value-free; nature is amoral. In a classic inquiry, John Stuart Mill asks whether one ought "follow nature?" If nature means the sum of all phenomena including human agency, then man trivially follows nature; he cannot do otherwise. Natural laws are unexceptionable. If nature excludes human agency, then all human actions consist in altering nature and all useful ones in improving nature, and the advice to follow nature is by definition irrational; human agency is inevitably nonnatural. Moreover, much or perhaps most of what nature does, if regarded as morally prescriptive, is immoral. Mill recounts at length nature's ferocity, brutality, and indifference. Study nature though he may, and allowing all prudence, Mill can find nothing there which is right at all. "Conformity to nature has no connection whatever with right and wrong."²

But the ecologist has recalled another philosophical heritage. Western thought has been ambivalent; other sages, with different logic, have confronted nature to discover a larger wisdom. Lest we listen with short memories, let us recollect this other legacy, illustrated for instance in the Romantics, whose love of nature infected so many of the pioneers of the conservation movement. Emerson, for instance, in an equally classic appraisal, argues that nature yields commodity, beauty, wisdom, and discipline. When poetry and mysticism complement science, nature educates the character and serves as the touchstone of values. Though the vision proves complex and demanding, it is in environmental encounter that Emerson discerns the essence of morality. "Right is a conformity to the laws of

² John Stuart Mill, "Nature" in *Collected Works* (University of Toronto Press, 1989), vol. 10, pp. 372-402, cf. p. 400.

nature so far as they are known to the human mind."³

Though the minority paradigm in recent philosophy, how remarkably has this claim been reappearing with the ecological turn! Ian L. McHarg, for instance, insists: "We must learn that nature includes an intrinsic value system."⁴ In an article significantly entitled "The Steady State: Physical Law and Moral Choice," Paul B. Sears writes, "But morality today involves a responsible relationship toward the laws of the natural world of which we are inescapably a part."⁵ Roger Revelle and Hans H. Landsberg introduce a prestigious study: "Science has another, deeper significance for our environmental concerns . . . This is the building of the structure of concepts and natural laws that will enable man to understand his place in nature. Such understanding must be one basis of the moral values that should guide each human generation in exercising its stewardship over the earth. For this purpose, ecology . . . is central."⁶ In deservedly a seminal essay, Aldo Leopold's "Land Ethic," we are urged, "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."⁷ Exceeding prudence and pragmatism, man's alignment with ecological law has become the great commandment. Ecology is an ethical science.

Ecology and Evolution

However prophetic these insights, correcting as they do the contemporary devaluation of nature, their confidence and exuberance do

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, facsimile of the first edition (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1968); *Journals* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1910), vol. 3, p. 208.

⁴ Ian L. McHarg, "Values, Process, and Form," in Robert Disch, *The Ecological Conscience* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 21.

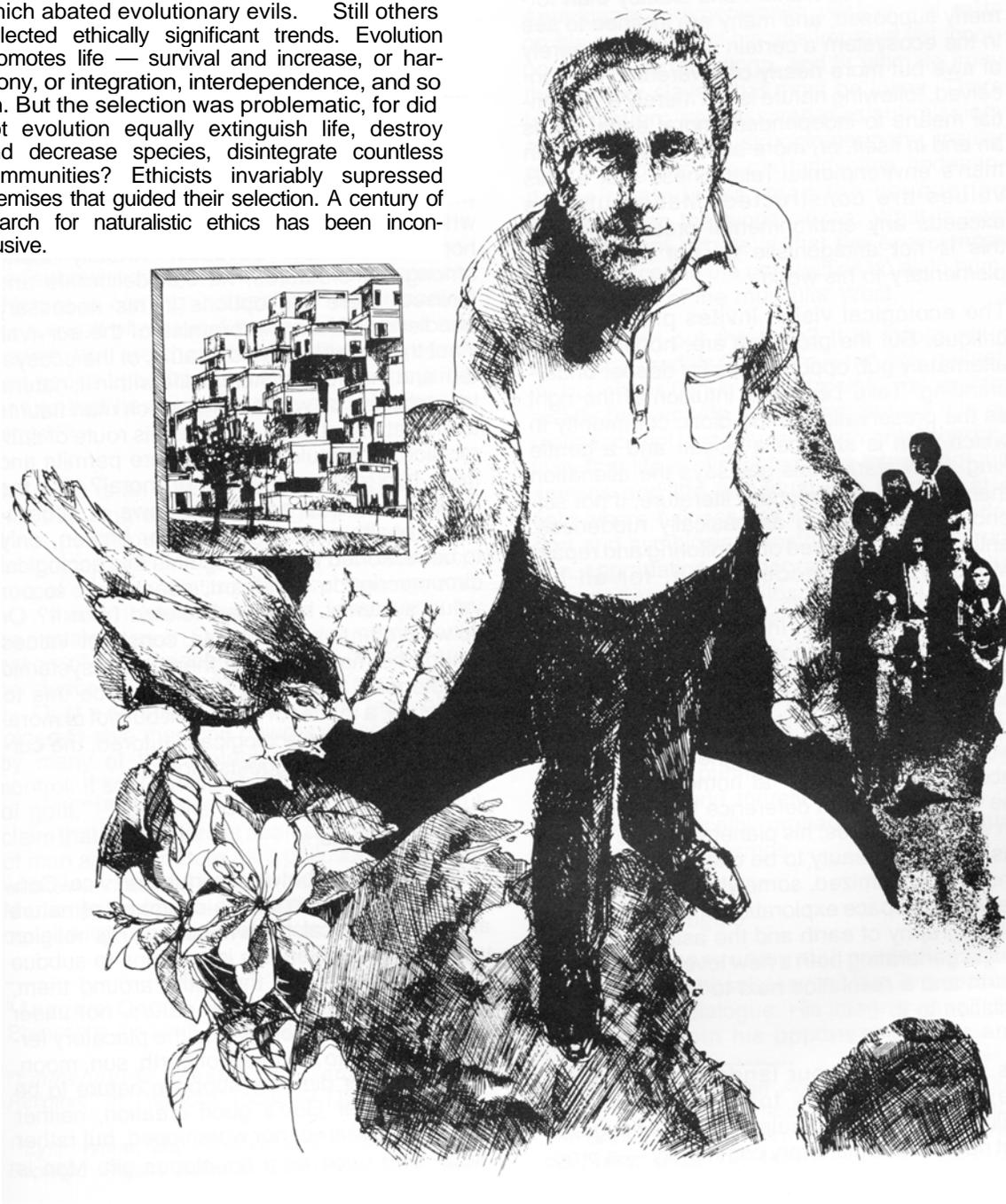
⁵ Paul B. Sears in *The Subversive Science*, p. 396.

⁶ Roger Revelle and Hans H. Landsberg, eds., *America's Changing Environment* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), p. xxii.

⁷ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 224f.

well to be chastened by the fires of a related query. After Darwin, it first seemed to the tough-minded that the new science endorsed a kind of ruthless egoism, a gladiatorial "tooth and claw" ethic; then, oppositely, repulsion from this prompted others to search for an ethic which abated evolutionary evils. Still others selected ethically significant trends. Evolution promotes life — survival and increase, or harmony, or integration, interdependence, and so on. But the selection was problematic, for did not evolution equally extinguish life, destroy and decrease species, disintegrate countless communities? Ethicists invariably suppressed premises that guided their selection. A century of search for naturalistic ethics has been inconclusive.

The search for an ecological ethics must resurvey this ground, and that remapping has largely yet to be done. Whether or not it succeeds will rest largely on its reappraisal of nature.



The post-Darwinian world was, for all its law, yet an odious chaos and jungle. Though it partially anticipated it, the previous debate did not yet know the interdependent ecosystem. Only in recent decades have we been able adequately to set these conflicts within a dynamic web of life. Even predation, we now see, is beneficial to a species. Nature's savagery is much less wanton and clumsy than formerly supposed, and many are inclined to see in the ecosystem a certain wisdom not merely of awe but more nearly of reverence. So conceived, following nature is not merely a prudential means to independent moral ends, but is an end in itself, or, more accurately, it is within man's environmental relatedness that all his values are constructed. Man doubtless exceeds any environmental prescription, but this is not antagonistic to, but rather complementary to his world.

The ecological vision invites philosophical critique. But the problems are, hopefully, and alternately put, opportunities for deeper understanding. Take Leopold's intuition of the right as the preservation of the biotic community in which man is at once a citizen and a gentle king. How starkly this gainsays the alienation that characterizes modern literature, if not science, seeing nature as basically rudderless, antipathetical, in need of monitoring and repair! More typically modern man, for all his technological prowess, has found himself distanced from nature, increasingly competent and decreasingly confident, at once distinguished and aggrandized, yet afloat on and adrift in an indifferent if not hostile universe. His world is at best a huge filling station, at worst a prison, or "nothingness." Not so for ecological man; he is "at home" in his world, he confronts it with deference to a community in which he shares; his planetary home is seen as a thing of beauty to be cherished. The new mood is epitomized, somewhat surprisingly, in reaction to space exploration prompted by vivid photography of earth and the astronauts' nostalgia generating both a new love for spaceship earth and a resolution next to focus on reconciliation to it.

As we reengage our landscape, we must develop a calculus for an ecosystemic utilitarianism—the greatest good for the greatest number in a planetary community—a prog-

ram that is likely to occupy ethicists for a generation but which is already urgently needed. How do we balance the need for electric power against the worth, for us and for our children, of wild rivers? How do we set the right to life of endangered species against the right to life of men who wish living and leisure space or resources? How in a hungry world do we justify a preservationist mentality with its dislike of pesticides and herbicides? In the most pressing and unanswered of the specific issues, how do we calculate the expense of environmental protection against its social costs, especially to the underprivileged? We do not know, and we flounder.

Man unexceptionally obeys natural laws, whether of gravity, of health, or of ecosystemic homeostasis. But because, virtually alone among the creatures, he can deliberate and foresee, there are options in his necessary obedience. Given the premise of the survival, if not the excellence and beauty, of the ecosystem and the worth of human life within it, natural law provides us with a norm which man flaunts to his detriment. Man chooses his route of submission, or should we say nature permits and frees him to be prudent — or moral? Like the laws of personal health, the laws of ecosystemic health may be obeyed or broken, only to be reckoned with at length. Is this ecological circumscription irrelevant, even alien, to our value systems, neatly articulated from it? Or do we prefer to say that man, construct values though he may, must set them in ecosystemic obedience? Some will swiftly reduce this to prudence, a matter of intelligent but not of moral action. But to the ecologically tutored, the current reappraisal suggests more.

God, Man, Nature

How thin the line between virtue and vice! Consider Western man's virile conquest of nature and its ecological transvaluation. His religion urged him with Genesis injunctions to subdue his earth. Reversing the faiths around them, the Hebrews put man over nature, not under it; they forbade astrology and the placatory fertility sacrifices to the baals of earth, sun, moon, and stars. Nor did they suppose nature to be evil, but rather God's good creation, neither to be hated, feared, nor worshipped, but rather "kept" and used as a bounteous gift. Man is

the dominant creature, at once in nature and yet, under God, over it. The hierarchy is God – *man* – *nature*. This vision blended with and transformed the Greek rationalistic bent to sustain the medieval centuries.

In the secularizing of the modern age, though the monotheism lapsed, the axioms about man's dominion persisted. Comte's scientific positivism taught that "Civilization consists, strictly speaking, on the one hand, in the development of the human mind, on the other, in the result of this, namely, the increasing power of Man over Nature."⁸ Emmanuel Mesthene, among the most persuasive of the apologists for technology, can ably rejoice that in our era man has broken his bondage to "the bruteness and recalcitrance of nature," no longer submissive to its hostility and indifference. "Nature is coming increasingly under control as a result of restored human confidence and power. We are therefore the first age which can aspire to be free of the tyranny of physical nature that has plagued man since his beginnings."⁹

But there is an inverse account which worries that this long entrenched legacy is obsolete, if not pernicious. In a celebrated address to scientists, Lynn White charged: "Modern science is an extrapolation of natural theology and . . . modern technology is at least partly to be explained as an Occidental, voluntarist realization of the Christian dogma of man's transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature . . . Over a century ago science and technology joined to give mankind powers which, to judge by many of the ecologic effects, are out of control. If so, Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt"¹⁰ Or, take C. J. Glacken's forceful claim that our posture is aberrant. "The concept of man against nature as a philosophy has lost whatever creative force it had in the past... Man's technological innovative, conservative, conserving, humane role can be understood

⁸Auguste Comte, *Early Essays on Social Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1911), p. 144.

⁹Emmanuel G. Mesthene, "Technology and Religion," in *Theology Today* 23 (1967): 481-495.

¹⁰Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of *Our Ecologic Crisis*," *Science* 755 (1987): 1203-1207.

much better in an ecological setting than in one of contrast and antithesis."¹¹

The ambivalence has long been there. Nature is wilderness yet paradise, demonic yet divine, asset yet enemy, jungle yet garden, harsh yet healing, means for man yet end in itself, commodity yet community, the land provoking man's virility yet evoking his sentimentality. The American's commonwealth violates yet rests on his continent, all his arts improve yet incorporate his surroundings, and in ultimate irony the pioneer slays what most he loves. There is oscillation: aggressiveness/submission, exploitation/respect, struggle/harmony, insular man/man grafted to his landscape, independence/relatedness, man the conquering engineer/man the biotic citizen. What is new in the current debate is that the ecosciences are underscoring the continuities so as to humble the pride of the muscular West.

Can we sort out the truth? It is axiomatic in ecological models that there is not only mutual-ity but opposition in counterpoint. The system resists the very life it supports; indeed it is by resistance not less than environmental conductivity that life is stimulated. The integrity of the species and the individual is a function of a field where fullness lies in interlocking predation and symbiosis, construction and destruction, aggradation and degradation. Man's inclusion generates a philosophy, an *ought*, an intentionality, a transcendence. Yet for all his options, man remains an insider. He is not spared environmental pressures; for him they precipitate his uniqueness and define his integrity. But if we do not inhibit this truth with its complement we fall into an anthropocentrism. Man is most optimistically the sole locus of values in a world merely tributary to him, or most pessimistically, orphaned, autonomous, lost in a hostile cosmos.

A Creative Struggle

Kept in its environmental context, man's humanity is not absolutely "in" him, but is rather "in" his world dialogue. His integrity rises from transaction with his opponent-partner and

¹¹C. H. Glacken, "Man Against Nature: An Outmoded Concept," in Harold W. Heffrich, J., ed., *The Environmental Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970). 127-142.

therefore requires a corresponding integrity. If we cannot derive values even from ecological facts, neither ought we to so locate values in man as to deny them to the nature which encompasses him. Thus the technological antagonism of man and nature is an ecological half-truth and when taken for the whole, inverts the true constitution of experience, which is that human nature is deeply rooted in, indebted to, and conditioned by nature, and that man's valuation of nature, like his perceptions, is drawn from environmental intercourse, not merely brought to it. Can we achieve a synthesis which preserves the dichotomy as a creative struggle exhibiting the excellence both of man and of the world within which he is set?

Could it be that the human presence is most noble when reciprocal to planetary community, when man's mastery over nature interpenetrates his submission? He may and must moderate or mind his world, yet the more competently and effectively he manipulates, the more urgently he must respect the worth of his empire. If he profanes nature, he profanes himself. Surely it is cardinal that his dominion be a commonwealth that provides for the integrity of all its component members, and that he govern in love.