**Highlight: The Challenge of Biocentrism**

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At first glance I might appear to be an unlikely person to be critical of the environmental movement in any way. A sometime countryman, I usually know where the wind is and what phase of the moon we’re in. I take good care of my small woodland, and I love my dogs. My personal predilections carry over into public policy, too. I champion the goals of reducing the waste stream, improving air and water quality, preserving the forests, protecting wildlife. I think of environmentalism as in some form a necessary and inevitable movement.

But by current standards that does not make me much of an environmentalist, for I am profoundly unhappy with the direction of current environmental philosophy, and most especially because I am a Christian. My trouble stems partly from the determination of mainstream environmentalism to blame Christianity for whatever ecological trouble we are in. This is a piece of historical nonsense that apparently thrives on repetition, so that every time it appears in print more people feel free to quote the source as authoritative, and each reference has a further multiplier effect.

Although a canard of this sort cannot surely be traced to a single source, probably the closest we can come to its origin is an essay by the late, formidable medieval historian Lynn White, Jr., called “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” which appeared in Science in 1967 and has since enjoyed virtually eternal life in anthologies.1 It is cited as evidence of the need for an alternative religion, as for example by George Sessions, premier philosopher of the currently popular “Deep Ecology” movement: “The environmental crisis [is] fundamentally a crisis of the West’s anthropocentric philosophical and religious orientations and values.”2

It is not so much that White himself blamed Christianity; he was far too careful a historian for that, and he wrote, moreover, as a Christian and an active churchman. But his essay was used by others to promote darker purposes.

To be sure, White gave them ammunition. He traced the modern technological exploitation of nature back through the ages to the famous “dominion” passage in Genesis 1:28, which gives humanity some form of supremacy over the rest of creation. Because, he argued, technology is now ecologically “out of control,” it is fair to say that “Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt” for this result. We need to reject “the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man.” We must overcome our “orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature.” White even gave his blessing to the counterculture’s espousal of alternative religions: “More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one…. The hippies … show a sound instinct in their affinity for Zen Buddhism and Hinduism, which conceive the man-nature relationship as very nearly the mirror image of the Christian view.”

Is Christianity really the ecological culprit? And did White really say that it is? The answer to both questions is no.

Many scholars have concluded that Christianity made an important contribution to the rise of science and technology in the West, but to make it the only cause would be too much. Yes, the doctrine of creation separates nature from God, makes it not itself divine, and suggests strongly that inquiry into its workings is a pious study of the mind of the Maker. That way of looking at the world surely abets the scientific and technological culture. But it is not a sufficient condition for the appearance of that culture, which did not arise in lands dominated by Eastern Christianity but only in the Latin West, and then only after a millennium. Nor is it a necessary condition, for science flourished without benefit of Christianity in China, ancient Greece, and the medieval Islamic world.

Neither can we say that it is chiefly Christian lands that are environmentally heedless. Ecological destruction like overgrazing and deforestation, sometimes enough to cause the fall of civilizations, has been committed by Egyptians, Persians, Romans, Aztecs, Indians, and even Buddhists. This probably comes as a surprise to no one except those gullible Westerners who romanticize other cultures of which they know very little. There is, for example, a noted Western ecologist who, despising his own civilization, extols “the Eastern and gentle Pacific cultures in which man lives (or lived) a leisurely life of harmony with nature.”3 That could only have been written by someone who knows nothing of the sorry, violent history of those peoples.

What, then, does produce the technological society? And what causes ecological pillage? As to technology, we may guess at primitive origins in simple artisanship and the domestication of animals; the natural human quest for labor-saving devices; trade and commerce with other societies where these developments are further advanced; or just the natural momentum of technological change, once started in however small a way. Other likely suspects include geography, climate, population growth, urbanism, and democracy. To this mix add the idea that the world is an intelligible order ruled by general principles, which we received from the ancient Greeks, mediated powerfully (as A. N. Whitehead asserted4) by the medieval insistence on the rationality of God; or perhaps the rise of purely secular philosophy celebrating human mastery over nature, as in Bacon, Descartes, and Leibniz. That is quite a list. Given this wealth of candidates, it would be impossible to sort out what the primary influences really are, and even White acknowledged that the causes are finally mysterious.

As for the causes of ecological harm, we may cite first the simple fact that there are more people on the earth than ever before, and their search for food and shelter frequently assaults the world around them. It is, notably, not only the factories of the developed nations, but the daily gathering and burning of wood for fuel by rural people in the Third World, along with the depredations of their domestic animals, that have damaged the world’s soils and dirtied its air (which in the Third World is far more polluted than ours). Of course industrial development has caused ecological damage, but much of that is the result of ignorance and error, mistakes often quite correctable. Noisy voices in the environmental movement attribute the damage to corporate greed, and the more fanciful among them go searching for deeper roots in capitalist culture, which in turn they find spawned by Christian theology in some form. It is simpler and surely more accurate to say that human self-seeking is a constant in our natures that no culture, no matter what its religion, has managed to eliminate.

Lynn White really did not blame Christianity for our environmental difficulties. By “orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature” he did not mean, he said later, that arrogance toward nature is orthodox Christian doctrine, only that presumably orthodox Christians have been arrogant toward nature. By “the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man,” he meant, he claimed, that some Christians have regarded it as an axiom, not that it is a matter of true faith.5 Qualifications like these really vitiate the apparent argument in his “Historical Roots” essay, which was that Christians were heedless of nature because they were Christians. But on reflection, after absorbing the storm, White retreated to saying only that Christians, like human beings everywhere, found it possible to misappropriate certain elements from their religious tradition to serve their selfish ends.

Having talked with White at some length about his essay, I believe that, although he may have been pleased at the notice it received, he was also disturbed at the way it was used. He was only half joking when he wrote me about the “theology of ecology,” saying, “Of course I claim to be the founder!” But surely he would disown many of his offspring.

The Christian Approach to Nature

What is the real orthodox Christian attitude toward nature? It is, in a word, stewardship. We are trustees for that which does not belong to us. “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein” (Ps. 24:1). The implications of this idea for environmentalism are profound and, I think, wholly positive. They have been spelled out in different ways by many writers, including Douglas John Hall in The Steward, Loren Wilkinson and his colleagues in Earthkeeping in the Nineties, and my own book of twenty years ago, Ecology and Human Need.6 The rough historical evidence suggests that this theoretical obligation has not been without its practical results. For example, some Christian lands in Europe have been farmed in an ecologically stable manner for centuries. Rene Dubos says flatly, “The Judeo-Christian peoples were probably the first to develop on a large scale a pervasive concern for land management and an ethic of nature.”7 Clarence Glacken, one of the most patient and exhaustive historians of these matters, concludes from his survey of the vast literature, “I am convinced that modern ecological theory … owes its origin to the design argument,” the idea so prominent in Christian theology of all ages that the complexity of the world is the work of a creator God.8 Lynn White knew this, too. And in the past it has been common for even the ecological critics of Christianity to say that the Christians’ problem is only that they did not take their own doctrines seriously enough.

What is new in our world today is a rejection of this semi- or pseudo-irenic view and its replacement by a root-and-branch attack on the doctrine of stewardship itself by that increasingly powerful and pervasive school of environmental thought known as biocentrism, of course, and one must be careful not to overgeneralize. But it is fair to say of nearly all varieties that they find the idea of stewardship repulsively anthropocentric, implying as it plainly does that human beings are in charge of nature, meant to manage it for purposes that they alone are able to perceive. Stewardship, says Richard Sylvan (ex-Routley), means “Man as tyrant.”9 May we think of ourselves as the earth’s gardeners? Bad metaphor: gardening is controlling the earth’s fecundity in a way that nature, left to its own devices, would not do. Human design is wrongly imposed.

The problem is simply compounded by Christian theism, which places human beings at the apex of nature by design of the ultimate giver of life. Made, as we say, in the image of God, we give ourselves license to claim that our interests as a species take precedence over those of the rest of creation; stewardship of the creation means mainly that we should manage it so that it sustains us indefinitely. Nature is made for us, as we are made for God. Here, say the biocentrists, is the bitter harvest of anthropocentrism: human selfishness, parochialism, chauvinism, “speciesism” (the awful term Peter Singer uses of those who reject animal rights), moral naïveté, a profanation of nature, self-importance and pride carried to their extreme. Regarding humankind as of more inherent worth than other species is, says Paul Taylor, like regarding noblemen of more inherent worth than peasants. A claim to human superiority is “a deep-seated prejudice, … a wholly arbitrary claim … an irrational bias in our own favor.”10 Lynn White was right after all: it is simply arrogance.

Rights in Nature

What do the biocentrists propose instead? Their most fundamental proposition is that nature itself, the life process as a whole, is the primary locus of value. Within that process all species have value, intrinsic value, just because they are, because they would not be if they did not have an appropriate niche in the ecology of the whole. And if they have intrinsic value, we must say that they have rights of some sort, claims on us for appropriate treatment, an integrity of their own that is not available for our mere willful disposition.

Notice that the alleged rights of non-human entities do not depend on their possession of any attributes, like rationality or language or even sentience. That would be subtle anthropocentrism, say the biocentrists. It would make a semblance to human characteristics the test of value — a mistake made by many of the animal-rights advocates and one that separates them from the biocentrists. We must say instead that all entities have value simply in themselves. They have their own purposes, or “good,” which they value, either consciously or unconsciously. Their value, and their consequent rights, depend solely on their essential need to be themselves, on their own “vital interests.”11

This is, incidentally, the way a biocentrist would dispose of the animal-rights argument that human infants or mentally defective human beings may be surpassed by animals in certain qualities, such as intelligence or adaptability, and yet we would not (or most of us would not) deny human rights to these human beings; so why not give animals rights? The answer, says the biocentrist — and here, for once, I would agree — is that rights inhere in a class or species, and not in the possession of certain qualities that individuals in that species possess. My difference, as I will make plain in a moment, is that I would not extend rights below the human level.12

Intrinsic Value in Nature

Since the assertion that the natural world has rights we must honor begins with the claim that the natural world has intrinsic value, let us spend a moment on this prior claim. No one, to my knowledge, has worked harder or with greater care to establish this idea — that natural entities have value independent of human beings (or, for that matter, independent of God, whom he does not mention) — than Holmes Rolston.13 If, as I will claim, even his most careful and gracefully expressed formulations cannot stand, then one may suppose the biocentrists’ foundations generally are weak.

To Rolston, the ability to support life is a natural good that the earth possesses without us, which means that the human experience of satisfaction is not necessary to have a “good.” The earth is able to produce value without us. We recognize the presence of that objective value when we value our natural science, “for no study of a worthless thing can be intrinsically valuable.”14 Organisms are living beings and hence have a good for themselves, maintaining their own life; and this good is a value that can claim our respect. In fact, “the living individual … is per se an intrinsic value.”15

Rolston admits that the human participant supplies value to an object: “No value can in principle … be altogether independent of a valuing consciousness…. If all consciousness were annihilated at a stroke, there would be no good or evil…. no right or wrong; only impassive phenomena would remain.” However, “to say that something is valuable means that it is able to be valued, if and when human valuers come along, but it has this property whether or not humans … ever arrive.” The value is already in the thing, hence “intrinsic.” Rolston does not like any account of value in natural things that depends on human psychology. He wants the value to emerge from nature directly, so that we can value the object “for what it is in itself.” Value may increase with the attention of human beings, but it is present without them. Thus his theory is “biocentric.”16

On the contrary, I argue that, with the important theistic exception noted below, we human beings supply the value, that nature is valuable because we find it so. There is no value without a valuer. Values are for someone or something. A thing can provide value to someone, and in that sense it possesses value, i.e., the capacity to provide value for someone. That is not the same as “intrinsic” value, which is value in and for the thing itself, whatever anyone makes of it. The mere fact that we value studying a particular thing does not make that thing intrinsically valuable; it makes it valuable for us. Someone may find it valuable for his peace of mind to finger worry beads, but that does not mean that we must accord those beads intrinsic value. Some elderly recluses have been known to save newspapers for years, valuing the accumulating mountain highly. But that does not make those old papers intrinsically valuable. Mosquitoes or bacteria may have a goal or drive for themselves in perpetuating their life; but that is quite different from having an intrinsic value that other, conscious beings are required to acknowledge.

The attempt of Rolston and other biocentrists — J. Baird Callicott, for example — to distinguish between human appreciation of nature’s intrinsic value, and the value that human beings add to nature by appreciating it, strikes me as hairsplitting. It is much more compelling and credible to say simply that a natural object may generate value for us not by itself but only in conjunction with our situation. We supply the value; the object contributes its being. Value is not a term appropriate to it in isolation, by itself.

The Amorality of Nature

The discussion of value takes a different course if we are theists who accept the doctrine of creation as the foundation of our environmental philosophy, or theology. We may rightly say, as James Nash does, that all creatures must reflect their Maker in some way and that a presumption of value in their favor is not unreasonable.17 This is not to say that natural entities have intrinsic value; their value still depends on the valuer. But here the valuer is other than human beings. God bestows the value, which still does not belong to the object as such.

This is a well-developed idea with impeccable Thomist credentials, yet it does not solve our ecological problem. If anything, it makes the problem more difficult. To say that “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” establishes well our obligation to respect the natural world; it is the foundation of our stewardship duty, of course. But we still face, and in a peculiarly painful form (for it raises the ancient problem of theodicy), the observable amorality of nature and its frequent hostility to us. That nature is full of what we perceive as violence and ugliness is beyond dispute. It is the realm of the food chain, of brute struggle and painful death. Surprisingly, no one has put it more candidly and vividly than Rolston himself:

Wildness is a gigantic food pyramid, and this sets value in a grim, deathbound jungle. Earth is a slaughterhouse, with life a miasma rising over the stench. Nothing is done for the benefit of another…. Blind and ever urgent exploitation is nature’s driving theme.18

Worse yet, from our point of view, nature is frequently hostile to our human lives. From violent storm to volcanic eruption to drought to killer viruses, to say nothing of the cosmic possibilities that could end our lives in one great, sudden bang, the natural world is certainly not unambiguously our friend.

Can one read an ethic out of this natural behavior? Not likely, or at least not an ethic that any Christian could for a moment tolerate. It is not that nature is immoral, for to say that would be to read our human values into this world. But nature is certainly amoral, and we would not begin to derive our ethical standards from its actions. Nevertheless, the biocentrists, bound to locate value primarily in this amoral world, find something to cherish there, something that rises above the brutality of the food chain, something that relativizes the ugliness. Some choose the harmony that they profess to see behind the apparent chaos, the patterns that repeat themselves, the balances that are restored. Other biocentrists admire nature’s vitality, fecundity, and regenerative power, its strength, endurance, and dynamism, even in the midst of its fury. New life emerges from rotting carcasses and burned forests. “Ugliness,” says Rolston, “though present at time in particulars, is not the last word…. Over time nature will bring beauty out of this ugliness.”19

But seeing it that way is a matter of choice. Harmony in an ecosystem is only apparent, superficial. There are emergent forces that triumph, species that disappear, balances that are permanently upset. To see harmony is to look selectively. Harmony, like beauty, is mostly in the eyes of the beholder. If it is natural power and regenerative strength that enthrall us, we can love the rapid reproduction of cancer cells or the terrible beauty of a tornado. We can love what kills us. Over time, nature means to destroy this world. The death of our sun might be beautiful if there were anyone to see it, I suppose, even though it would mark the end of planet Earth. We can appreciate the natural facts any way we choose. To say it once again: we supply the value.

But what shall we say to those theists who reply that surely God must value what he has made? Can we discern what God intends for the creation?

Faced with the puzzle of natural evil and the ancient lineage of the problem of theodicy, and bearing in mind the centuries of false prophets who have claimed to know God’s will all too well, I think we must be very, very modest in answering this question. Given the centrality of the divine-human drama in Christian faith, given its proclamation of the redemptive event addressed to humankind, I am certainly willing to say — more than willing, in fact, insistent upon saying — that our focus must be on human life, and that our task with the earth is to sustain the conditions for human life for as far into the future as our wits and strength allow. But I am not willing to go much beyond that. I am not willing to guess at what the earth’s good is, or, to put it better, to guess at what God intends for the earth, which by definition would be its good.

A Calculus of Rights

The biocentrists are much less modest. They do claim to know the good of nature. If I may turn the tables on them, I would say they are far more daring, even impudent, in their claims to know the purposes of nature (or of God with nature, if they are theists) than are traditional Christians. Building on their theory of intrinsic value in natural entities, the biocentrists tell us that there are severe limits on what we may do with the natural world. In search of a strong position that will have sufficient force to restrain human selfishness, many of them, though not all, adopt the language of rights. Nature has rights, and thus has claims against us, much as we human beings claim rights that other human beings may not transgress.

But at once they plunge us into a realm of competing rights. Whose rights take precedence? When may they be violated, and by whom? May we eat meat? experiment on animals in laboratories? spread agricultural pesticides? use antibiotics? dam rivers? May a cat kill a mouse? In order to solve these conflicts and save the whole concept from reduction to absurdity, its defenders propose an inequality of rights, or even a complete disjunction between our obligations to one another and to the natural world.

Constructing a calculus of variable rights for different levels of existence is no simple task, however. Nash, who calls himself a Christian biocentrist and who, for his theological care, deserves to be exempted from many of the faults of the larger movement, does it by using “value-creating” and “value-experiencing” as the criteria for relevant differences, with rights diminishing as we descend a scale established by the relative presence of these capacities. Thus he hopes to solve conflicts of rights by “appropriate adjustments for the different contexts.”20 Rolston similarly would have the rights of animals and other natural entities “fade over a descending phylogenic spectrum.”21 These systems give priority in rights to human beings, a lesser preference to creatures merely sentient, and still less to non-sentient entities.

More radical versions of rights in nature take a Schweitzer-like approach, avoiding all killing of “lesser” forms of life except under threat to our own lives, and then only with a profound sense of sorrow for this necessary evil. How many times have we heard it said in recent years, with wondering admiration, that American Indians, those supposed ecological paragons, apologized to their game before killing it? An Irish pacifist once told me, with appropriate sardonic tone, that political assassination in Ireland was so common it was considered a normal part of the political process rather than murder in the sense of violating the sixth commandment; “but,” he added, “it is doubtful whether the victims appreciated the distinction.” And so also the caribou, slain by an Indian arrow tipped with a profound apology.

Faced with these tangles, even the biocentrically inclined must be tempted to give up on rights language. Rolston verges on the cynical when he admits that rights may after all be merely “a cultural discovery, really a convention” that does not translate to ecosystems, but that it may be politically useful to use the term anyway. “It is sometimes convenient rhetorically but in principle unnecessary to use the concept of rights at all.”22 What matters is the power of the restraint, and the language may be adjusted as necessary.

Reining in Rights

With all due respect to the intellectual strength and agility of the biocentric arguments, I would slice through their Gordian tangles by limiting “rights” to intrahuman affairs. “Rights” is a political and social term in the first instance, applicable only to human society, often enshrined in a fundamental document like a constitution, or embedded in the common law. As a metaphysical term, the transcultural phrase “human rights” applies to that which belongs to human beings by their very nature, i.e., not by their citizenship. Theologically, we guarantee human rights neither by our nature nor by our citizenship but by the radical equality of the love of God, the concept of “alien dignity,” a grace bestowed on us that does not belong to our nature as such. In none of these forms has nature participated in rights.

Biocentrists sometimes seek to redress what to them are these deficiencies in the history of ideas by what I will call the argument from extension. “Rights,” they point out, originally applied only to male citizens; but just as rights were gradually extended to women, to slaves, and finally to all other human beings, so it is a logical extension of this political liberalism to extend rights now to nonhuman creatures and even to agglomerations like ecosystems. Or, if the forum is not politics but Christian ethics, one could argue that the command to love our neighbors must now apply to non-human “neighbors,” our “co-siblings of creation,”23 or that the justice we are obliged to dispense to the poor and oppressed must now be extended to oppressed nature, or even that the enemies we are asked to love may include nature in its most hostile modes.

Although I appreciate the generous spirit of this line of argument, I think it involves a serious category mistake. Non-humans cannot have the moral status that only human beings possess, by our very natures. It is not irrelevant that the command to love our neighbors, in its original context, does in fact not apply to non-humans. An “extension” amounts to a substantial misreading of the text. Our obligations to the natural world cannot be expressed this way.

Another use of the idea of extension, one that occurs in Nash and in a different way in Paul Santmire,24 is to argue that ultimate redemption is meant not only for humankind but also for the natural world, indeed the whole cosmos. That would imply much about our treatment of nature, our companion in cosmic redemption. The Incarnation confers dignity not only on us but on the whole material world: the divine takes on not only human flesh but material being in general. Certain New Testament passages are suggestive here — Romans 8:18 – 25, Colossians 1:15 – 20, Revelation 21:1 — and Eastern Orthodox theology has formally incorporated this notion.

This is a theological idea of considerable gravity, and it deserves to be taken seriously. Nevertheless the doctrine is only vaguely expressed and appears to faith as hope, a hope made legitimate by faith, but a hope without details. Indeed, if we are to be scientifically honest, it is a “hope against hope,” given the secular geological wisdom about the death of planet Earth in fire and ice. The doctrine of eschatological renewal cannot tell us much about the care of nature beyond what we already know from our stewardship obligation, that we are to preserve this world as a habitat fit for humanity. The natural details of a redeemed environment are beyond our ken. Our trust in God for the eternal Presence beyond death does not require the preservation of these rocks and rills, these woods and templed hills. Again we find ourselves behind the veil of ignorance: we simply do not know nature’s divine destiny.

In short, and in sum thus far, I believe it would be more consistent, more logical, and conceptually much simpler to insist that nature has neither intrinsic value nor rights. And I believe this is true whether we are secular philosophers or Christian theologians, whether we speak with the tongues of men or of angels.

Policy Consequences of Biocentrism

It is time now to ask what is practically at stake in this agreement. What are the policy consequences of the biocentrists’ position, for which they seek the vocabulary of rights or other strong language? What is denied to us thereby that would be permitted from the viewpoint of Christian humanism?

Since the biocentrists will not allow us to use nature as we see fit for ourselves, but insist that it has rights or at least claims of its own against us, their general recipe is that it should be left alone wherever possible. There is of course disagreement about the details and the exceptions, but the presumption is in favor of a hands-off policy. That is the prima facie rule: Let nature take its course. The burden of proof is on us to show why we should be allowed to impose our wills on natural processes.

Concretely this means we should take the necessary measures to protect existing species for their own sakes, not because they might offer something to us in the form of, say, aesthetic pleasure or possible future medicinal benefits. The Endangered Species Act should be vigorously defended and enforced; and its conflicts with human desires — the spotted owl vs. the timber industry, the snail darter vs. the Tennessee dam — should be settled in favor of the species threatened. The state will have to intervene to protect the species and the land, which means limitations on a landowner’s use of his own property. After all, the wild animals and plants on the land should have their freedom, too.

Especially should we preserve and expand wild lands, the necessary larger habitats needed for these species, even though human beings may desire the land for other purposes, like farming. When it comes to such conflicts, mankind ought to lose. Arne Naess, founder of the Deep Ecology school (which is a form of biocentrism tending to argue the equal worth of all natural entities), says with astonishing frankness, “If [human] vital needs come in conflict with the vital needs of nonhumans, then humans should defer to the latter.”25

We should also leave alone those injured wild creatures that we are tempted to save — the baby bird fallen from its nest, the wounded animal we come upon in the forest, the whale trapped by the ice. Intervention in the natural processes is wrong whether the motives are benevolent or not. The species is strengthened by the premature extinction of its weaker members. Respecting nature’s integrity means not imposing our soft-hearted human morality upon it. We should let forest fires burn and have their way with the wild creatures.

We should not build monuments in the wild. No more Mount Rushmores, no Christ of the Andes, no railroads up Mount Washington, and probably no more wilderness roads or ski lifts.

We should suspend genetic engineering in agriculture and animal husbandry and not permit there anything we would not permit among human beings. We should not take animal lives in teaching biology or medicine, and certainly not in testing cosmetics. Zoos and botanical gardens are suspect; better that the species there displayed should live in the wild. We should not keep pets. (There go my Springers.)

What about recreational hunting or fishing? Some biocentrists frown upon it as human interference with nature and unnecessary to our diet besides; but others would permit it as simply a form of predation, which is a fact of nature and not subject to our moral scrutiny. And by this same token there would be no moral obligation for us to become vegetarians. In fact, and rather awkwardly, even plants have a “good of their own” in the biocentric theory, which leads to some mental agility to sort out their permissible uses. It is all right to eat them, of course, for that is nature’s way; but “frivolous” uses (Halloween pumpkins? Christmas trees?) are questionable. One suspects that even flower gardens would be a dubious activity, which may be why the biocentric literature rarely if ever mentions them.

Although we are in principle to leave nature alone, we are obligated to restore that which we have harmed. This form of intervention is acceptable because it is guided by the principle that pristine nature, before human impact, is somehow ideal. Here again the calculus of permissibility has to be rather finely tuned. It might be wrong to plant trees in a natural desert, for example, but obligatory to plant them if human activity had contributed substantially to creating that desert. Obviously this principle can be carried to extremes. Paul Shephard has seriously suggested that we in this country all move to the coasts and restore the land between to its pre-human condition, in which we would be permitted only as hunter-gatherers, like our most primitive ancestors. Few biocentrists would go anywhere near this far, but the principle is there. The argument is about the movable boundaries.

Stalking the Elusive Limits

My criticism of these limits begins with their vagueness and ambiguity, which is spiced with a generous dash of arbitrariness. Species, we are told, should be allowed to exist until the end of their natural “evolutionary time”; but how can we know when that time has arrived? We human beings should not take more than our “due” or occupy more than our “fair share” of land or exceed our “limits” in technological grasp; but these terms cannot even begin to be specified. What can be done with any creature turns on its degree of neural complexity, or some other hierarchical principle; but such distinctions will never be clear and are subject to a lot of pure arbitrariness. In the end I suspect that these measures are not in nature, but in ourselves. The lines are drawn according not to objective natural differences but to human preferences: human beings supply the values.

The matter of species disappearance is also confused. Leaving nature alone means allowing natural extinctions. Are we then to allow species to vanish, intervening only to save those threatened by human activity? (Yes, says Rolston. New life arises from the old when the demise is natural, but artificial extinction is “without issue.”26) Or is it our responsibility to preserve as many species as possible, no matter what threatens them? Isn’t domestication, far from being harmful interference with the wild, a useful way to preserve species? In defense of all of us dog owners, I note that many creatures have thrived because of the human presence — mice and rats, famously, and raccoons, and of course all species bred as pets or for agricultural utility.

The degree of simplicity of life is another matter of confusion. Some biocentrists would allow a fairly complex civilization. Others, like the bioregionalists, would turn their backs on the global economy and live in a locally sustainable way, even reverting to a simple agricultural economy. The movement as a whole can offer us very little real guidance about our permissible impact on the natural world. While it would allow us to feed and clothe and house ourselves, it would require of us some degree of self-limitation because of our exceptional talents, including particularly our talent for reproducing ourselves. But it is very difficult to tell what this directive might mean beyond the generalized complaint that we are too clever and thus exceed our space too readily. We have to pretend we are less, in effect, so that the other creatures may be more; but how and how much are quite unspecifiable.

The practical problems with the theory are many and are mainly intractable. They are also mostly unnecessary. Inevitably, once rights for non-human entities are proposed, the situation becomes impossibly complex. Absent this proposition, matters become much clearer, though solutions are seldom completely evident. We are still in for a process of experiment, of trial and error, mistake and correction. We have a lot to learn, mostly from science. But with a focus on human welfare we will have a reasonably clear idea how to use our knowledge; the complexities will be simpler, the conflicts easier to resolve.

Biocentric Fatalism: Many Must Die

There is one final, serious problem with biocentrism, and that is its fatalism. Biocentrists take their cues as to what ought to be from what is, and thus base their views of an acceptable future on what will happen if we let the natural world follow its own laws as far as possible. If an organism exists, the biocentrist presumes it has an important ecological niche and should be left alone. “Natural kinds are good kinds until proven otherwise.”27 If it is an ecological misfit, it will perish naturally anyway, and we should not regret its demise. Death may be bad for individuals, but it is good for the system.

Should this ecological “wisdom,” if that is the word, be applied to Homo sapiens? Because the whole direction of biocentric thought is to answer this question affirmatively, and because the consequences are so fearsome for most people’s sensitivities, it is hard to find candid replies. When they do come out, ordinary ethical opinion, unenlightened by this new environmental realism, is apt to be appalled. Should we curtail medicine so that more of us may die “naturally” and earlier? Yes. Should we refrain from feeding the hungry, so that population will not exceed its boundaries? Yes, said the “lifeboat school,” and especially its helmsman Garrett Hardin, whose bluntness is plainly an embarrassment to the current generation of biocentrists. Or consider J. Baird Callicott’s rendering of William Aiken’s questions as direct statements: “Massive human diebacks would be good. It is our duty to cause them. It is our species duty, relative to the whole, to eliminate 90 percent of our numbers.”28

Even Lynn White, that most humane and Christian man, walked up to the edge of this moral abyss. Human beings are crowding out earth’s other species, our “comrades” on the planet, and a balance needs to be restored. How shall we do this? Shall individual human beings be sacrificed, in defiance of traditional Christian ethics, if some killing will save many species? White hesitated, he said, to “light candles before the saints requesting a new Black Death” to give us, like fourteenth-century Europe before us, a “tragic respite” from our ecological peril. Almost visibly he drew back from the fearful answer; and yet with only slight obliqueness he said it: Many must die.29

To be sure, and to be fair, many biocentrists recoil from the social implications of their theory. It is only the biocentric egalitarians, for whom all life is of equal value, who are driven to these fearful antihuman conclusions. For the others, their schema of hierarchical differentiation allows them to claim a different level of moral behavior among human beings, different from that between human beings and the natural world, and certainly different from natural amorality. Callicott insists that “humanitarian obligations in general come before environmental duties.” Rolston calls it “monstrous” not to feed starving human beings, though he would let overpopulated wild herds die.

But the boundaries between nature and culture are blurred and repeatedly crossed, as the examples of White and Hardin show well enough. Callicott acknowledges that the conflicts are a “difficult and delicate question.” Nash calls them “immensely complicated.” Rolston says that ecological “fitness” means and implies different things in nature than it does for human beings, but (let the reader beware) the two meanings have similarity, too; they are “homologous” or “analogous.” “This biological world that is also ought to be; we must argue from the natural to the moral…. So much the worse for those humanistic ethics no longer functioning in, nor suited to, their changing environment.”30 Apparently one can, in a way, import ethics from nature to culture.

And that is precisely the ethical problem. Without a secure anchor in humanism, Christian or otherwise, biocentrism risks great moral evils. At the extreme, it appears actually indifferent to human destiny. Paul Taylor says that as members of a biotic community we must be impartial toward all species, our own included: that in fact we are unnecessary to other species that would be helped by our extinction. Thomas Berry is similarly minded: “The human species has, for some thousands of years, shown itself to be a pernicious presence in the world of the living on a unique and universal scale.”31 Since species must be allowed their “evolutionary time” and then die, and because this process is “good,” the human species, too, must expect to perish; and from nature’s point of view, that will be normal. If nature were capable of regret, there would be no regret for our passing. The ecosystem will survive as well or better without us at the top of the food chain. But since nature is amoral, we must say that our extinction is of no moral significance in nature.

Would God care? The whole direction of our faith says that God would indeed care, which suggests strongly that we should oppose biocentrism and not anticipate the demise of our species with equanimity. I admit that this is a conviction of faith. What God really is about I would not dare to say I knew.

Whether such modesty is becoming or not, it eludes the biocentrists, who seem to know more than I do about the ultimate principles that rule the universe. Here, for example, is Carol Christ:

We are no more valuable to the life of the universe than a field [of flowers]…. The divinity that shapes our ends is an impersonal process of life, death, and transformation…. The life force does not care more about human creativity and choice than it cares about the ability … of moss to form on the side of a tree. The human species, like other species, might in time become extinct, dying so that other lives might live.32

Rolston is only moderately more hopeful: the evolutionary system is “not just a random walk” but “some kind of steady, if statistical heading.” In the extinction of some species and the appearance of new ones “a hidden principle seems to be at work, organizing the cosmos in a coherent way.” But that is scant comfort to human beings, who come very late to the story and are only “shortsighted and arrogant” if they think it was meant for them.33 Rolston is quite fatalistic about our destiny: recognizing that there is nothing necessary or inevitable about our appearance on earth, we will simply have to accept the overall course of evolution as good, no matter where it eventually goes.34

James Gustafson, a justly celebrated ethicist, has written similarly that we should not count on humanity’s being at the apex of creation nor consider that human good trumps the good of non-human nature. Our disappearance would not be bad “from a theocentric perspective,” which acknowledges that “the source and power and order of all nature is not always beneficent in its outcomes for the diversity of life and for the well-being of humans as part of that.” “The Divine … [is] the ultimate source of all human good, but does not guarantee it.” Such ruminations have led Nash to characterize Gustafson’s “God” as “a nonconscious and nonmoral ordering power without intention, volition, or cognition…. This power sustains the universe, apparently unintentionally, but lacks the purposive, benevolent, or redemptive qualities to seek the good of individuals, the human species, otherkind, or the whole cosmos…. This perspective seems close to atheism or pantheism.”35

The ecological ethic emerging from biocentric fatalism, such as it is, is simply to enjoy the earth’s fecundity, to laugh and weep and celebrate all life, whether it is our life or not. “Humanity’s highest possibility is to bear witness to and participate in the great process of life itself.”36 And so the biocentrist love affair with a mysterious Natural Process cultivates, inevitably, indifference to the human prospect.

It is, of course, a bit odd for biocentrists to view humanity as just another species serving out its evolutionary time, when with the same voice they must also acknowledge that we are a very special species, endowed with enormous power over the environment. We cannot renounce this power, either. It is ours to use for good or ill, and so they urge us to use it in a self-limiting way to preserve the rest of the environment and to care for the other creatures of the earth. Notice that the message is anthropocentric in spite of itself: our great power engenders our great responsibility. But that, of course, is precisely the Christian ethic of dominion and stewardship.

I do not know where the human story will end. But, as I think William Faulkner, that great literary icon of my college generation, said in accepting the Nobel Prize, “I decline to accept the end of man.” I think that my efforts ought to be bent to perpetuating human life, and that that goal ought to be the overriding test of our ecological conduct. In arguing otherwise, large sections of the environmental movement are on the wrong track. In the name of its own humanistic faith, Christianity ought to criticize these environmentalists, rather than scramble to say, “Me, too.” What is historic and traditional in our valuation of Creation is a perfectly sufficient guide to sound ecology.

Notes

1   Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” Science, 155 (March 10, 1967): 1203 – 7.

2   George Sessions, “Introduction” (to Part II, “Deep Ecology”), in Michael Zimmerman, ed. Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1993), 161.

3   Paul Ehrlich and Richard L. Harriman, How to Be a Survivor (New York: Ballantine, 1971), 129.

4   Alfred North Whitehead, Science and the Modern World (New York: Macmillan, 1950 [original 1925]).

5   Lynn White, “Continuing the Conversation,” in Ian G. Barbour, ed., Western Man and Environmental Ethics (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1973). Also private conversations.

6   Douglas John Hall, The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990). Loren Wilkinson et al., Earthkeeping in the Nineties: Stewardship of Creation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991). Thomas Sieger Derr, Ecology and Human Need (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973 and 1975).

7   Rene Dubos, A God Within (New York: Scribner, 1972), 161. See pp. 157 – 61 for his argument against White’s thesis.

8   Clarence Glacken, Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century (Berkley: University of California, 1967), 423.

9   Richard Sylvan, “Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental Ethic?” in Zimmerman, Environmental Philosophy, 13 – 14.

10 Paul Taylor, “The Ethics of Respect for Nature,” in Zimmerman, Environmental Philosophy, 78 – 80.

11 Biocentrists and animal-rights activists are further and seriously separated by the former’s giving priority to species, and the latter’s focus on saving individuals. A biocentrist, who is indifferent to suffering in the wild (just part of the natural ecosystem, which is good), would allow, even encourage, the death of weaker individuals so that the species as a whole may flourish. For this a leading animal-rights advocate, Tom Regan, has fastened upon biocentrism the charming sobriquet “eco-fascism” (The Case for Animal Rights [Berkeley: University of California, 1982], 262). But biocentrists reject this “humanitarian ethic” as misplaced in nature. It is not a true environmental ethic. Thus Mark Sagoff: “Mother Nature is so cruel to her children she makes Frank Perdue look like a saint” (“Animal Liberation and Environmental Ethics: Bad Marriage, Quick Divorce,” in Zimmerman, Environmental Philosophy, 89 – 92).

12 Not all biocentrists reject the argument from defective human beings, however. Kenneth Goodpaster uses it to deny that “moral considerability” should be restricted to humans because they are rational. He extends moral status beyond humans, and beyond animals, too, to all that is alive (“On Being Morally Considerable,” in Zimmerman, Environmental Philosophy, 54, 56).

13 Systematically in Holmes Rolston, Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

14 Ibid., 9.

15 Ibid., 100.

16 Ibid., 112 –16.

17 James A. Nash, Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 99. See also his essay “Biotic Rights and Human Ecological Responsibility,” in The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics, 1993, 137 – 62.

18 Rolston, Environmental Ethics, 218.

19 Ibid., 240 – 41.

20 Nash, Loving Nature, 176, 181; “Biotic Rights,” 150 – 51, 158 – 59. Nash would not award rights to abiotic entities, only organisms; and thus he rejects the term “rights of nature,” though granting, like Rolston, that “the term remains rhetorically valuable” (“Biotic Rights,” 148).

21 Rolston, Environmental Ethics, 48.

22 Ibid., 50 – 51.

23 Larry Rasmussen’s phrase, defending the extension of neighbor love even to inorganic nature; in Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, ed., Tending the Garden: Essays on the Gospel and the Earth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 199. For an antitheological version of the extension argument, see J. Baird Callicott, following his hero, the much-cited Aldo Leopold, In Defense of the Land Ethic (Albany: State University of New York, 1989), 80 – 82.

24 H. Paul Santmire, The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985). Nash, Loving Nature, 124 – 33.

25 Arne Naess, “The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects,” in Zimmerman, Environmental Philosophy, 203. George Sessions is less severe but, as a “biocentric egalitarian,” will give us no more than equality with nature: non-human entities have “equal inherent value or worth along with humans” (“Deep Ecology and Global Ecosystem Protection,” in Zimmerman, Environmental Philosophy, 236).

26 Rolston, Environmental Ethics, 155. That is not, strictly speaking, quite true. Nature has a way of restoring devastated land, whether it be laid waste by a volcano or an atomic bomb test. Extinction of species on a grand scale is simply the way of nature, and always has been, since well before human life appeared.

27 Rolston, Environmental Ethics, 103.

28 Hardin’s essay “The Tragedy of the Commons” (Science, December 13, 1968) is still routinely cited and anthologized, as are the conclusions he drew from it in another essay, “Living on a Lifeboat” (Bioscience 24, 1974). But harshest of all is Exploring New Ethics for Survival: The Voyage of the Spaceship Beagle (Baltimore: Penguin, 1973), which is virtually invisible today. The quotation from William Aiken is from his essay “Ethical Issues in Agriculture,” in Tom Regan, ed., Earthbound: New Introductory Essays in Environmental Ethics (New York: Random House, 1984), 269; cited in Callicott, In Defense of the Land Ethic, 92. This is not Aiken’s position, though Callicott’s alterations make it appear to be so. Aiken says that these statements, which in his essay are questions, would be those of a position he calls “eco-holism,” an extreme stance that he suggests may be ascribed to Paul Taylor among others, and which he rejects in favor of a more humanistic one. On page 272 he outlines a scale of comparative value much like Nash’s, one that favors human beings.

29 Lynn White, “The Future of Compassion,” The Ecumenical Review 30, no. 2 (April 1978): 108.

30 Rolston, Environmental Ethics, 329; Rolston, “Challenges in Environmental Ethics,” in Zimmerman, Environmental Philosophy, 136; Nash, “Biotic Rights,” 159; Callicott, In Defense of the Land Ethic, 93 – 94.

31 Taylor, “Ethics of Respect for Nature,” 71, 81. Berry, in Zimmerman, Environmental Philosophy, 174.

32 Carol Christ, “Rethinking Theology and Nature,” in Irene Diamond and Gloria Freman Orenstein, eds., Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1990), 68.

33 Rolston, Environmental Ethics, 185 – 86, 195 – 98 (quoting in part P. C. W. Davies).

34 Ibid., 344 – 45.

35 James Gustafson, A Sense of the Divine: The Natural Environment from a Theocentric Perspective (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994), chaps. 1 and 3 in the unpaginated manuscript. Nash, Loving Nature, 233 – 34, n. 10, commenting on Gustafson’s Theocentric Ethics, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 106, 183 – 84, 248 – 50, 270 – 73.

36 Michael Zimmerman, “Deep Ecology and Ecofeminism: The Emerging Dialogue,” in Diamond and Orenstein, Reweaving the World, 140. Zimmerman, like Naess and Sessions, is a “biocentric egalitarian”; thus: “Humanity is no more, but also no less, important than all other things on earth” (ibid.).

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. How does Derr’s position on the environment differ from Hoffman’s?

2. What are the elements of Derr’s Christian approach to nature?

3. Do you agree with Derr that biocentrism leads to impractical and dangerous extremes? Why or why not?

4. Do you agree with Derr’s claim that the environment has neither rights nor intrinsic value? Why or why not?