

AN EXCHANGE OF GIFTS: TOWARD THE EVOLUTION OF WESTERN ETHICS

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The thought I offer you is that most problems wildlifera face today are products of a worldview that has dominated Europe for four centuries and North America for three. It comprises three main themes, which have strongly interacted: Christian theology, capitalism, and science. Like all worldviews, ours is stubbornly conservative and hard to change. It must be, because deep changes in any worldview shake the foundations of our individual characters and social institutions. Yet worldviews can and do change, usually almost imperceptibly, but sometimes very fast: this is the mechanism of cultural evolution. I believe our worldview must change and that it can do so if we give ourselves time. The elements and directions of necessary evolution - or revolution - are within the very traditions that have caused such environmental and social havoc.

Christian theology posits a God who, having created the universe, stands above and outside of the physical world. Thus there are separate sacred and secular dimensions of the world. Humans, midway in a hierarchy with God and His Son at the top, angels and the heavenly host in upper echelons, and the beasts and plants at the bottom, combine elements of the divine and the profane. The main task of life is for the individual to achieve salvation, assisted crucially by the church with its doctrines, rituals, and interpreters. Humans, Judaeo-Christian theology teaches, were given dominion over earth and its creatures, and instructed to be wise stewards. Time, in the Christian belief structure, is linear. Humankind was created, fell from grace, now struggles for redemption, and will end at Armageddon. The individual's life, too, is linear from birth to death.

In consequence, dominant Christian teachings today contribute to our environmental crisis. The separation of the everyday world from the sacred permits a discounting of the importance of our interactions with nature to an extent impossible in, for example, a traditional Native American worldview in which all living things, even rivers and hills, were sacred. The idea that humans are "in God's image" and superior to animals and plants has been perverted too easily into a much more proud, harsh, and extreme "stewardship" than biblical writers seem to have contemplated. And the assumption that time marches linearly on has helped engender a one-shot, get-it-now, view of life.

Capitalism arose out of the ashes of the disin-

tegrating feudal economic system of guilds, small merchants, and limited world trade. The flowering of technology and invention in the 15th through the 17th centuries nurtured capitalism; conversely, the existence of capital fertilized the growth of technology. The essence of capitalism is the use of accumulated profits to convert materials, through labor, into a new form which commands a profitable price in the market. Capital is highly mobile and can be concentrated, like light gathered by a magnifying glass, to accomplish immense work. The idea of private property is essential to capitalism, because exclusive use of land and raw materials is necessary for labor to be exploited and profits to be made.

One of the consequences of capitalism is that money, and therefore energy, can be concentrated at any place on earth (or the moon) where profitable enterprise seems likely. Another is that people now play two distinct economic roles, once fused in traditional barter and subsistence economics. A person produces one highly specialized good, such as a cigarette lighter or the curing of headaches, and uses the wages earned to buy necessary and desired goods other specialists produce. Opportunities to apply one's skill as a specialized producer often are in motion across the region, continent, or world: welders out of work in Oklahoma went to Alaska to build a pipeline, and now are in south China. Thus we have a society of highly mobile people whose scurryings use resources, apply intense pressures on environments, and create a sense of non-commitment about the fate of nature (or society) in the places where they are transients.

The third major dimension of Western thought is science and its partner, technology. Science as we know and practice it arose with the blending of three earlier traditions: abstract reasoning (math and logic) as developed by thinkers from Plato to Descartes; observation and experimentation, to which Galileo and Francis Bacon contributed so much; and the artisan-craftsman tradition of mechanics and invention. Up to now, modern science has included the firm belief that mind is separable from matter and, hence, that the observer is separable from the observed. Adoption of the Cartesian principle of duality (mind and nature separate) and the Baconian emphasis on "vexing" nature through experimentation to learn its functioning, made the reification of nature, and its acceptance as a mechanism, inevitable. Because it merely involves

manipulating things, science is seen as non-moral. Ethics are not involved with manipulations of natural "objects" whether they are chemicals or chameleons, atoms or aardvarks. Even the obvious exceptions, as forced on scientists by antivivisectionists and their successors, are founded predominantly on the view that it is inhuman to inflict cruelty, not that the animals so maimed had any rights or value in themselves.

In sum, and combining the synergistic contributions of science, Christianity, and capitalism, Western people have a worldview in which:

- 1) People are separate from and superior to nature;
- 2) Nature, being comprised of soulless things, has only utility value and can be manipulated at will to satisfy human ends;
- 3) The business of religion is salvation, while the business of secular life is the satisfaction of wants. The two are in separate compartments, or in positively reinforcing relationships;
- 4) Ethics is a matter of relationships between people. When we do see behavior toward animals (such as pets and experimental animals) as involving morality, we usually are trying to improve the human self-image, not to give other creatures due respect.

I hope I have shown that the roots of our relations toward nature go very deep. The valiant but inadequate effort at nature education in today's public schools cannot counteract the all-pervasive and powerful counter-education provided from the pulpit, the laboratory, and the market place. To change our views at their very core, God must be brought back to earth, and a Franciscan humility adopted as a basis for human stewardship of earth. Life must be made sacred again, which means that morality has to be instilled into business, economics redefined not as the management of infinite expansion but as the sharing and husbanding of the physical wealth of earth and the sacred labor of persons. In science the art of synthesis must grow to balance the habits of analysis. Mind and body need to merge again into the truth of the wholeness of nature. And technology must serve a stable economy and populace, not an ever-growing one.

Concerned philosophers, historians, poets, and scientists have proposed a number of new systems of relating to nature that seem more suitable for our long-term survival and that of other creatures.

The simplest change is a newly enlightened self-interest. "What's best for the most people in the long run" is an old slogan of traditional conservation, and if followed vigorously would greatly improve prospects for wildlife. Enlightened self-interest, however, is always limited by what we think to be in our interest at any given time; in practice, little margin is left for error or ignorance.

Another strategy is a rediscovery and redefinition of the stewardship role envisioned in Christian teachings. My own preference would be to use the model of St. Francis of Assisi, who saw God as immanent in all of nature, rather than Benedictine stewardship which emphasized the manipulation of nature for human ends. In any case, Christian writings are a rich but neglected source of perspectives toward our environment.

A third model is respect for life, an attitude based on the idea that all animals and plants are sentient, have interests (that is, can be helped or hurt), hence can suffer, and hence are morally considerable. Paul Taylor (*Respect for Nature*) recently explored both the philosophy and practice of this view and offered criteria by which we might decide what to do when the interests of humans and non-humans clash. A weakness of this idea lies in its concern solely for individuals and its neglect of the needs of systems of interacting individuals. If all individuals of all species are equally worthy of respect and care, do you arithmetically tally the cumulative unit values of all krill, for example, and conclude that they are worth more than whales that feed on them?

A logical alternative is to have respect for systems as well as individuals. Gregory Bateson wrote extensively on this, giving the evidence for the existence of higher and higher levels of organization and relationship in nature: mind (of one person) being subsumed in a larger Mind (of a culture) which is part of a yet larger MIND of a culture-nature synthesis, and so on.

About 10 years ago the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess and several colleagues in the U.S. (Bill Devall and George Sessions, to name two) developed a philosophical-political position called "deep ecology." The framework of this idea can be stated simply:

- 1) Human and non-human beings have equal inherent worth, independent of utility.
- 2) Diversity of life forms is itself of inherent worth.
- 3) Humans have no right to reduce natural richness or diversity except to meet vital human needs.
- 4) Human life, culture, and evolution all could occur at much lower levels of human population. The proper flourishing of non-human life depends on a decrease in our numbers.
- 5) Fundamental human policies, institutions, and ways of living will have to be changed radically to put these principles into effect.

"Deep ecology" is a revolutionary movement, criticizing those who think incremental change at the margin will solve our problems.

Finally, another possible action is a return to, or a reinvention of the view, held by most of preindustrial humanity, that all beings are equally enspirited.

Such a belief would profoundly affect our ways of behaving toward nature--as John Muir's life abundantly proves.

My own view, which isn't important, but might interest you, is still in process. Like many professional wildlifers, I came to an interest in ethics and philosophy fairly late. But one element of my deepest beliefs is that my life, and the earth I live on, are gifts. They must be, because I cannot in good conscience say I earned or deserve them. The deer and the salmon and I are equal in the gift of life given to us. And, because the power of gifts lies in their circulation and the consequent formation of relatedness, or community, we all must return our gifts both with our living and our dying.

Through its life's activities the deer gives form to the community of plants where it lives and gives to the mountain lion its supple strength. The salmon returns lost nutrients from the sea to the land and rivers, giving life to sculpins and gulls and bears. What can I give? No more or less than they: the talents given to me, and the time of my life.

Robert Frost understood something of the significance to our nation of this giving of ourselves to the land, and wrote of it in his poem *The Gift Outright*:

"The land was ours before we were the land's.
 She was our land more than a hundred years
 Before we were her people. She was ours
 In Massachusetts, in Virginia,
 But we were England's, still colonials,
 Possessing what we were still unpossessed by.
 Possessed by what we now no more possessed.
 Something we were withholding made us weak
 Until we found out that it was ourselves
 We were withholding from our land of living,
 And forthwith found salvation in surrender.
 Such as we were we gave ourselves outright
 (The deed or gift was many deeds of war)
 To the land vaguely realizing westward,
 But still unstoried, artless, and unenhanced,
 Such as she was, such as she would become."