

Ethics and Ecology

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In April of the year 1912 the Titanic on her maiden voyage across the Atlantic crashed into an iceberg and went down at sea. Long before the crash those in command had abundant evidence that icebergs lay ahead. The course had been set, however, and no one wished to alter its direction. Confidence in the survival capacities of the ship was unbounded. Already there were a multitude of concerns in carrying out the normal routine of a voyage. What happened to that "unsinkable" ship is a kind of parable for us since only in the most dire situation do we have the psychic energy needed to examine our way of acting on the scale that is now required. The daily concerns of the ship and its passengers needed to be set aside for a more urgent concern for the well being of the ship itself. Microphase concerns needed to give way to a macrophase issue. So now there was a need to recognize that the planet Earth is threatened in its survival by our industrial economy. Already the well-being and basic functioning the planet in its air, its water, its soil and its basic life systems have been so disrupted that a biologist as extensively acquainted with the life functioning of the planet as Peter Raven of the Missouri Botanical Gardens has addressed scientific groups under the title *We Are Killing The Earth.* Other knowledgeable scientists such as Norman Myers, E. O. Wilson, and Paul Ehrlich have told us the same thing. Recently a group of Concerned Scientists. Recently over a thousand of the most illustrious scientists have issued *A Warning to Humanity.* The introduction states: "Human Beings and the Natural World are set on a collision Course. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and Animal Kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know."

Such is the situation in which we find ourselves just now. We have an ethics and a jurisprudence that begin with the human and determines our conduct in our relations with each other and our individual relations with the human community. These are our primary concerns. We work out our patterns of conduct simply by considering our inherent nature as intelligent compassionate beings. As such we must govern our actions by our reasoning faculty in relation to our own individual well being and the well being of the community, understanding by "community" the "human community."

The natural world surrounding us is simply the context in which human affairs take place. Our relations with this more encompassing community are completely different from our relations to the human world. In the presence of the human, the natural world has no rights. We have a moral sense of suicide, homicide, and genocide, but no moral sense of biocide or geocide, the killing of the life systems themselves and even the killing of the Earth.

Clearly there is something strangely wrong with such a position. There is thus no continuity in the ordering principles of the universe. In the medieval period there was a distinction made between the *lex naturae* and the *lex naturalism*. The law of nature was

the physical law governing the non-human world. The natural law was the law governing human activities which were guided by reason.

This supposes that there is a radical discontinuity in the governing principles of the universe. It also supposes that the natural world is somehow lacking in a spiritual mode of being, that the human did not emerge out of the normal evolutionary processes of the natural world or that the human is not integral with the natural world. This position does not accept the fact that the universe, in the phenomenal order, is the only self-referent mode of being and that all other modes of phenomenal being are universe-referent, that all beings in the universe constitute a single community of existence, a universe community that is totally coherent with itself throughout its vast extent in space and its sequence of transformations in time.

Since all living beings, including humans, emerge out of this single community there must have been a bio- spiritual component of the universe from the beginning. Indeed we must say that the universe is a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects. This has been recognized from an early period by the indigenous peoples of the world.

If the universe is from its beginning a single universe then there is a continuity in the inner governance of the universe. However distinctive the various modes of being, their very distinctive qualities are such precisely because of their relation to the larger community of beings. The most obvious thing about the universe is that there is an absolute coherence within its total structure and functioning. While Saint Thomas is not consistent in the larger context of his thinking in this regard, he does give a remarkable presentation of the coherence of the universe in Question 47 article I of the First Part of his *Summa Theologica* where he is concerned with the distinction of things. There he asks why are there so many different modes of being in the universe. He answers that because the divine could not image forth itself in any single being the divine created the great diversity of things so that the perfection lacking to one would be supplied by the other and the whole universe of beings participates in and manifests the divine more than any single being whatsoever.

Obviously in this view the supreme sacred community is the total universe, not any single mode of being in the universe. The purpose of the universe is caught up in the total community not in any single mode of being. Whether we consider the final cause or the efficient cause, the material cause or the formal cause, we find that the universe is intelligible only in the unity of its being. Although this view of Saint Thomas was not presented with an evolutionary understanding of the universe, it does indicate the coherence of the universe.

The difficulty is that our western civilization has never taken this unity of the universe seriously because of our anthropocentrism both in our biblical religious and our Greek humanist traditions. We see the human as a princely resident on a planet that is completely lacking in any inherent rights that must be respected by humans. If there are any rights toward the natural world obliging the human it is obligations that the we owe

to themselves, not to the non-human world. The universe as such has no psychic, moral or spiritual dimension.

We have never felt any sense of the primary sacred community being the universe itself rather than the human community or some part of the human community. Because of this separation from and exaltation of the human in relation to the other components of the universe and of the planet Earth our western civilization has been destitute of any ethical obligations toward the non-human world. There has also been an attitude that the natural world owes to the human all the support that the human needs for a certain life fulfillment.

Even beyond all this there seems to be in the western psyche a deep hidden rage against the human condition, an unwillingness to accept life under the conditions that life is granted us, a feeling of oppression by the normal human condition, a feeling that the pains of life and ultimately death are something that should not be, something that must be defeated. Although much of this has arisen in more recent centuries this radical discomfort with earthly existence originates in Saint Paul's invention of original sin and in the millennial promises of transcending the normal human condition contained in the Book of Revelations of Saint John. This discomfort with our existence on this planet is emphasized in our religious prayers, especially the prayers of the Mass where we are constantly asking to be relieved from the sorrows of time into the bliss of eternity, our true home. This dissatisfaction with Earth was made bearable by faith and the expectation of things to come in some eternal transearthy mode of existence.

This oppression of the temporal order was enormously intensified by the experience of the Black Plague in the mid-fourteenth century when in the years between 1347 and 1349 something close to a third of the population of Europe died. In some cases such as Florence it seems that something close to half the population died within three months. Since there was no knowledge of germs at the time, the most obvious cause seemed to be a moral cause. The world had grown wicked and was being punished. Henceforth the main problem was to be redeemed out of the world rather than to learn to live creatively within the world. This is when revivalist preaching of death, judgment, heaven, and hell came into being. The morality plays such as *Everyman* were invented, plays based on the principle that the only things truly worthwhile were the things that we could take with us at death, that is our virtues. Everything else was proportionately devalued. We dealt with the sorrows of time by escape from time into eternity.

Somewhat later as the first glimmerings of science began to appear over the horizon Francis Bacon would propose that we deal with the sorrows of life by learning how to control the world about us rather than by escaping from the world about us by some salvation program. As our modern sciences developed in succeeding centuries the natural world was seen as purely mechanistic in its functioning. This again led the religious traditions to emphasize the spiritual dimension of the human over against the non-spiritual mode of non-human beings.

Thus when the North American continent was discovered and being colonized the biblical tradition, the Greek tradition and the modern intellectual traditions, all three were in agreement that the human was a special being living on a planet to be used for human benefit. There is little wonder then that we had no ethical discipline to guide us in any effective manner in our relation with the wonderful continent before us.

That the natural world was a divine communication was so over-ridden by the verbal communication of the bible, by our cultural traditions, and by our recent enlightenment philosophy, that we could not consider that the human constituted a single sacred community with the natural world that would prosper or decline, live or die, be redeemed or not-redeemed as a single sacred community. Nor could we even consider that the various beings of the natural world had inherent rights to their own proper mode of being that should be recognized by ourselves and incorporated into our ethical teachings.

We were caught up in our commitment to transcendence, to a transcendent personal creative deity, to a transcendent spiritual mode of the human - with a transcendent destiny; then with Descartes caught up in a transcendence of mind that left the natural world soulless since there was only mind and extension; and finally a transcendent technology that was no longer subject to the basic biological law that every mode of being should have opposed modes of being or conditions so that no single being or group of beings could overwhelm the entire life community.

Strangest of all, our entire western civilizational tradition prevented us from recognizing that any damage that we did to the outer world of nature would be a damage to our own inner life. The devastation of the forests, the extinction of species, the poisoning of the waters, the pollution of the air, the blocking out of our vision of the stars; we could not understand that this was something more than damage to our physical being; it was also a soul-damage, a ruin within, a degrading of our imagination, our emotional life, even diminishing of our intellectual life for all these phases of our inner life needed to be activated by our experience of the outer world.

All this while, during this twentieth century especially, the two institutions that claim to be our ultimate guides as regards reality and value, the universities and the religious establishments have offered no adequate ethical guidance. The reason for this is quite simple. Neither had an integral or a functional cosmology. Neither could deal adequately with the place and role of the human in the universe. The pathos of this situation is beyond reckoning.

Now we have a devastated North American continent, even a devastated planet that is finally providing in the stark reality before us the critique that has been needed. If we will not learn ourselves then the universe itself will teach us by the penalties that it is imposing upon us.

These lessons were primordial lessons that the earliest humans learned in the beginning of the human venture, lessons that even today the indigenous peoples of the world can teach us. Here I would like to quote a passage concerning the Bushmen of Africa that was

written some time ago by Laurens Van Der Post. The passage describes a communication being made by a tribal elder to a young boy, a communication that we might take as a primary lesson in ethics for ourselves.

"Remember Little Cousin, that no matter how awful or insignificant, how ugly or beautiful it might look to you, everything in the bush has its own right to be there. No one can challenge this right unless compelled by some necessity of life itself. Everything has its own dignity, however absurd it might seem to you, and we are all bound to recognize and respect it as we wish our own to be recognized and respected. Life in the bush is necessity, and it understands all forms of necessity. It will always forgive what is imposed upon it out of necessity, but it will never understand and accept anything less than necessity. And remember that, everywhere, it has its own watchers to see whether the law of necessity is being observed. You may often think that deep in the darkness and the density of the bush you are alone and unobserved, but that, Little Cousin, would be an illusion of the most dangerous kind. One is never alone in the bush, one is never unobserved."

In this passage we can clearly observe that the natural world is experienced not simply as so many objects simply for human manipulation but rather as a community of subjects, each of which has rights to be revered by humans under some awesome penalty. Every being is seen as having will and power, not the type of will or power precisely as is had by the human, but will and power of a even more pervasive and more powerful modality. We can observe also that there is a pervasive order to be observed, a discipline that includes the entire order of things. The natural world has rights, inherent rights that must be respected by humans under severe penalties, for there are forces that can eventually deal with any assault on these rights.

Indigenous peoples are capable of such statements because they live in a functioning universe, in a cosmos. We no longer live in a universe, we live in cities or nations or civilizations or cultural traditions. We do not live in a significant manner with the wind or the rain or the stars in the sky. We recognize the dawn and sunset and the seasons of the years, yet these are only incidental to the major concerns of life. Our laws are the laws of human or of divine origin, they are not laws primarily of cosmological origin.

The inadequate self critique in our western civilization is finally giving way to a more adequate critique presented not by verbal analysis but by that monstrous devastation of the natural world that we witness throughout the planet but which is nowhere more severe than on the North American continent. As I look back over my own life from the opening year of the First World War and wonder at all the desolation of this continent and of the larger devastation throughout the Earth wrought by my generation I am at a loss as regards how to explain it.

The difficulty is that the assault on the natural world has been carried out by good persons for the best of purposes, the betterment of life for this generation and especially for our children. It was not bad people, it was the good people acting for good purposes

within the ethical perspectives of our cultural traditions that have brought such ruin on this continent and on the entire planet. At the microphase level these persons were acting admirably. At the macrophase level these persons have ruined this continent and a great part of the planet and no one and none of our social institutions seems able, not exactly to stop them, but even to provide some ethical judgment on what is happening. Biocide and Genocide are not terms within our ethical vocabulary.

My own description of what has happened is that my generation has been autistic. My generation has been so locked into itself that it was totally without any capacity for rapport with the natural world. My generation could not get outside itself and the outer world could not get in. There was a total barrier between the human and the non-human. This is what needs to be explained. This autism did not begin with the modern centuries. The support for what has happened existed within that part of our tradition that did not emerge from Rene Descartes or from Francis Bacon or from Isaac Newton.

The barrier between the western mode of consciousness and the natural world, and the consequent ethical deficiency in western conscience, began in some manner with the biblical emphasis on the perception of the divine in historical events rather than within cosmological manifestation. The entire biblical experience could be described as a movement from the cosmological to the historical which began with the Exodus experience. It was further strengthened by the historical redemption experience of Christianity; then by the emphasis on the human mode of being in the Greek humanist tradition. When in modern centuries the scientists gave us a natural world that came into being by purely random processes and without any spiritual meaning then the alienation of the human from the natural world was complete.

It is not easy for us to move beyond those basic points of reference that have guided us in the past, for these have given us our human identity and directed our religious and cultural traditions over the past millennia. These traditions have determined our language, our intellectual insights, our spiritual ideals, our range of imagination, our emotional sensitivities. Yet these traditions, the classical traditions of the Eurasian and American worlds, are all proving inadequate in dealing with the disintegrating influence which we are now having on the life systems of the earth, influences that imperil the human community itself. Yet we experience a kind of paralysis in our critical judgment of what is happening and what we need to do at this time to avoid an extensive crash of the biosystems of the planet.

In recent times as our religious traditions diminish in their influence over our lives, it is the human that dominates the scene. Nothing is superior to individual or community human values. Our legal system fosters a sense of human rights over that of natural beings. Our economics is based on our mechanistic exploitation of the earth in all its geobiological systems. Relatively trivial human rights prevail over urgent rights of natural systems simply for survival. Disengagement from such basic commitments to the human requires an ethical stance and a courage of execution seldom found in the course of human affairs.

All of these considerations acquire heightened significance when we reflect that we are not simply in another period of historical change or cultural modification such as these have taken place in past centuries in the human order. What is happening now is of a geological and biological order of magnitude. We are upsetting the entire earth system that, over some billions of years and through an endless sequence of groping, of trials and errors, has produced such a magnificent array of living forms, forms capable of seasonal self-renewal over vast periods of time.

Most amazing is the inability of our religious or educational establishments to provide any effective religious or ethical judgment on what is happening. Yet such judgment is what two of our eminent scientists have proposed in order to cope with ecological devastation we now face. E. O. Wilson Professor of Biology at Harvard, has said: "In the end it will all come down to a decision of ethics, how we value the natural world in which we have evolved and now - increasingly - how we regard our status as individuals." Paul Ehrlich, Professor of Biological Sciences at Stanford, has suggested that "scientific analysis points, curiously, toward the need for a quasi-religious transformation of contemporary cultures."

The religious orientation of western society has also made us vulnerable to superficial attitudes toward the difficulties that we experience. When in a position of great danger, we are prone to believe that we will be saved by some trans-earthly intervention within the functioning of the planet. Such intervention will provide a remedy in the present as it has, supposedly, done on so many occasions in the past. The most glowing presentation of such expectation is to be found in the apocalyptic literature with its vision of the millennium wherein the human condition will attain a glorious existence. Sorrow will be eliminated. Justice will reign. Peace will pervade the land.

The means of dealing with this situation over the greater part of human history was through some inner discipline that would enable us to absorb the stress inherent in any earthly existence. Then, we began to envisage the possibility of understanding and controlling the processes of nature and thereby bringing about relief from the human condition through our own efforts. Nature now began to be looked at as the obstacle to be overcome or the resource to be exploited. The ideal of a transformed society continued to be energized by a vision of the millennium. Only now the millennial experience was to be sought not through divine intervention but through scientific insight and technological skills.

We know the story of the formation of the modern world, the dominant intellectual framework and its beginnings in the 17th century with the publication of Descartes' philosophy and then its development in the 18th century with Newtonian physics. This mechanistic view of the world encouraged the growth of technological invention and industrial plundering, culminating in the 1880's when the electronic and chemical research centers were established, scientific technologies were advanced, and the modern commercial corporations were formed. The objective was to make human societies as independent as possible from the natural world and to make the natural world as subservient as possible to human decisions. Nothing was to be left in its natural state.

Only now can we appreciate the consequences of this effort to achieve human well-being in a consumer society by subduing the spontaneities of the natural world to human manipulation. We begin to realize that the devastation taking place cannot be critiqued effectively from within the traditional religions or humanist ethics. Nor can it be dealt with from within the perspectives of the industrial society that brought it about.

We find ourselves ethically destitute just when, for the first time, we are faced with ultimacy, the irreversible closing down of the earth's functioning in its major life systems. Our ethical traditions know how to deal with suicide, homicide and even genocide, but these traditions collapse entirely when confronted with biocide, the killing of the life systems of the earth, and geocide, the devastation of the earth itself.

We have a radically new problematic. To appreciate this fully we must understand that the misuse of our scientific-technological powers has not itself come ultimately from the scientific tradition, although this is the general accusation made against the empirical enquiry into the functioning of the natural world. The danger and the misuse have come ultimately from the deficiencies of the spiritual and humanist traditions of western cultural development. These traditions themselves have an alienating emphasis. Both our religious and our humanist traditions are committed to an anthropocentric

exaltation of the human.

We have always had difficulty in accepting the human as an integral component of the total earth community. We see ourselves as a transcendent mode of being. Only humans have rights. All other earthly beings are instruments to be used or resources to be exploited. Now after centuries of plundering the earth for our own advantage, we begin to reflect on who we are and what has happened both to the planet and to ourselves. A sudden reversal has taken place. Our bright, new, antiseptic, mechanical world is collapsing about us or dissolving in its own toxic wastes.

The present urgency is to begin thinking within the context of the whole earth, the integral community of non- living and living components. When we discuss ethics we must understand it to mean the principles and values that govern that comprehensive community and the manner in which the community of the entire natural world achieves its integral expression. Human ethics concerns the manner whereby we give expression at the rational level to the ordering principles of that larger community.

The ecological community is not subordinate to the human community. Nor is the ecological imperative derivative from human ethics. Rather our human ethics is derivative from the ecological imperative. The basic ethical norm is the well-being of the comprehensive community, and the attainment of human well-being within this comprehensive community. The Earth is not part of the Human Story, the human story is part of the Earth Story.

When we are faced with change at this order of magnitude we find that we are dealing with a profound reversal in our perspective on ourselves and on the universe about us. This is not a change simply in some specific aspect of our ethical conduct. Nor is it merely a modification of our existing cultural context. What is demanded of us now is to change attitudes that are so deeply bound into our basic cultural patterns that they seem to us as an imperative of the very nature of our being, a dictate of our genetic coding as a species. In clinical language we are into a deep cultural pathology. We can no longer trust our cultural guidance in any comprehensive manner. In this situation we must return to our genetic structure and rethink who we are, where we fit into the community of existence and what our proper role might be within this community.

Our genetic coding is more comprehensive than our cultural coding. It is integral with the whole complex of species codings whereby the earth system remains coherent within itself and capable of continuing the evolutionary process. For a species to remain viable it must establish a niche that is beneficial both for itself and for the larger community. The species coding of the human carries within itself all those deeper physical and spiritual spontaneities that are consciously activated by the genius of human intellect, imagination and emotion. These cultural patterns are handed down as traditions which form the substance of the initiation rituals, educational systems and life styles of the various civilizations.

Our cultural traditions are constantly groping toward their appropriate realization within the context of an emerging universe. As things change, the traditions are forced into new expressions or into an impasse that demands a new beginning. The norm for radically restructuring our cultural codings forces us back to the more fundamental species coding which ties us into the larger complex of earth codings. In this larger context we find the imperative to make the basic changes now required of us.

We cannot obliterate the continuities of history, nor can we move into the future without guidance from existing cultural forms. Yet, somehow we must reach even further back to where our genetic coding connects with the species codings of the entire earth community. Only then can we overcome the limitations of the anthropocentrism that binds us.

Perhaps a new revelatory experience is taking place, an experience wherein human consciousness awakens to the grandeur and sacred quality of the earth process. Humanity has not participated in such a vision since shamanic times, but in such a renewal lies our hope for the future for ourselves and for the entire planet.