

Lessons from the Wilderness: Breaking the Environmentalist Pro-Choice Alliance

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ABSTRACT: Though contemporary environmentalism tends to be thoughtlessly pro-choice, questions about respect for nature's ways that are too uncomfortable to be raised in relation to sexual conduct are taken seriously when they bear on environmental concerns. Lamenting an environmentally destructive dualism between man and nature, deep ecology seeks to rediscover the kinship between all living things. The kinship is in fact established by DNA on a microscopic level and by procreation on a behavioral level. A careful examination of reproduction, as the feature distinguishing living from non-living things, shows that it imparts a moral structure to all life, a structure that is therefore biocentric rather than merely anthropocentric. The honest deep ecologist will not be able to avoid this conclusion for long.

BACK IN THE 1960S, hippies who would “make love, not war” and radicals who threw rocks and occupied buildings, maintained a light-hearted alliance. This odd convergence of aestheticism and utilitarian violence could survive the glaring inconsistency in their attitudes towards violence, so long as their utopian dreams were vague and no one was over thirty. I fear that the greater inconsistency lay with the hippies who imagined that hedonism was an antidote to violence. Hardened radicals knew that hippies were just useful idiots.

The sexual revolution continues to be supported by an alliance between the naïve and the mendacious.¹ The dynamics of contemporary

¹ For instance, the redefinition of monogamy to mean “emotional monogamy” (i.e., emotional loyalty without sexual exclusivity). See K. Bonello & M. Cross, “Gay Monogamy: I love you but I can't have sex with only you,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 57 (2010): 117-39. A summary of this article may be found in Liz McCoy, “Monogamy: How the Story Unfolds for Gay Couples,” *Gay Couples Study Newsletter* (Spring, 2010) 3,4,6 (www.gaycouplesstudy.org/)

environmentalism are perhaps a little less ugly: people may disagree over how serious the problems are, but most recognize something of a dilemma, in that there is a demand for new technology to correct and prevent environmental damage even though technology is largely responsible for causing that damage in the first place. If runaway technology is to blame for the crisis, how can we expect technology to fix it? As technology comes under scrutiny for its role in polluting the environment, one would hope that reproductive technology would also come under scrutiny. Unfortunately, the assumption that over-population is a primary cause of environmental destruction is rarely questioned within environmentalist circles.² Even less questioned is the assumption that contraception and abortion are appropriate means of population control.

Though today's environmentalist discussion is pitched in ways mostly hostile to the pro-life cause, the tension that many environmentalists are now willing to admit, between a felt need to control the environment and a sense that human attempts to control nature have only backfired, is the same tension that advocates of reproductive technology are trying so desperately to ignore. Questions about respect for nature's ways that are too uncomfortable to be raised in relation to sexual conduct do get taken seriously when they bear on environmental concerns. The tension is not about technology *per se*, but about the place of human beings in the world. The ecological question concerns human beings in relation to the primarily inanimate universe, while the sexual question invites a fresh examination of the significance of procreation, which is the distinguishing characteristic of living things. In the case of ecology, the question comes to a head over technology because technology gives us great power over nature, yet we find that we are not able to manage this power competently. Furthermore, dependence on technology becomes an addiction that controls us. Technology is less

News letter%20-%202010%20-%20Spring.pdf accessed 4/3/2014). See also Scott James, "Many Successful Gay Marriages Share an Open Secret," *The New York Times* (28 January 2010). If infanticide were to gain wider acceptance, there would no doubt be less need to equivocate about what constitutes a life, a potential life, a human or a person.

² Though it failed to detonate, Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (New York NY: Ballantine, 1968) succeeded in causing a great deal of long-term damage.

central to the controversy over sexual practices, which began with divorce, was aggravated by developments in reproductive technology, and most recently has come back to questions about marriage. As with the ecological crises, an assertion of autonomy leads to a dependence that takes control and undermines autonomy. Addiction to sex without responsibility touches deeper instincts than, say, addiction to automobiles does, so the attempts to rationalize away misgivings tend to be more desperate and less honest.

The first lesson from the wilderness is that our call is not first to assert our will, but to respond; even our outwardly directed actions are done in response to what comes our way. This is not easy to see in an urban environment. Civilization can have the misleading appearance of an autonomous, human construct, where the laws of nature are seen as external constraints within and around which we must work to achieve the ends we set. But if our ends and nature's ways are so at odds, then either the laws of nature are not good or the ends we set are not good. If the laws of nature are not good, then human civilization is an island of morality in a hostile world, which is exactly the separation from nature that many environmentalists are seeking to overcome. And if the ends we set are not always good, then either freedom is not good, or freedom is not the same as a capacity to set ends.

One need only contemplate building a fire without matches to appreciate how deep our dependence on technology goes. There is no separating the power to bring about a desired end from a dependence on the means. Francis Bacon famously said that knowledge is power. We are only now learning that this is not the kind of knowledge that makes one free. This throws open the question of what freedom really is. Is it a capacity to set ends? Or to harness means? Or is it, rather, a capacity to serve the good for its own sake?

Traditionally, there have been two strands in what is now called environmentalism: conservation, which is concerned with the wise use of resources, and preservation, which is concerned with such things as preservation of wilderness and protection of endangered species. Conservation is primarily utilitarian, preservation more aesthetic. After a brief period of harmony in the days of Theodore Roosevelt, the two strands suffered a bitter schism in the controversy over damming the

Hetch-Hetchy Valley.³ Over the past few decades they have been moving a bit closer together, as fears grow that human beings are becoming an endangered species. The confidence of the Progressive era has given way to anxiety about the future. So long as there is panic, be it over population growth or global warming, the utilitarian side will have an advantage. Fear has long been a mainstay of opposition to restrictions on abortion, for the simple reason that there are no pro-abortion arguments that are not utilitarian. But with regard to the environment, many people are coming to suspect that the roots of our ecological crisis lie in utilitarian thinking and in the preoccupation with means that accompanies science's exclusive focus on efficient causes.

The hypothesis that today's problems are the consequences of deeply held but false assumptions about our relation to the natural world is known as "deep ecology." Deep ecology shares the aesthetic grounding of preservationism but sees it in explicitly moral terms as affirming a proper ordering of nature that cannot be violated without dire consequences. Insofar as deep ecology begins with a critique of contemporary civilization in terms of efficient causes – a dualistic view of the world that causes us to treat the environment as "other" – it will remain stuck in the utilitarian mentality that it wishes to overcome. The problem with a false view of the world is not that it makes us ecologically insensitive, but that it is false. The utilitarian temptation is to value results over truth. But if, amid the fears of impending disaster and the vilifying of one's ancestors now fashionable in the Western world, deep ecology has truly been touched by natural beauty, then it may offer some grounds for hope because natural beauty stirs in us feelings with subtle moral overtones that, though quieter, are less brittle than either fear or anger. Unfortunately, those feelings lack definition because the place of the aesthetic sense in the moral faculty is always ambiguous. Beauty stirs in us the love of truth, without necessarily pointing us towards it.

John Ruskin's observations about what he calls the "landscape instinct" may shed some light on the nature of this confusion:

It was, according to its strength, inconsistent with every evil feeling, with spite,

³ See Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959).

anger, covetousness, discontent, and every other hateful passion; but would associate itself deeply with every just and noble sorrow, joy, or affection. It had not, however, always the power to repress what was inconsistent with it.... And as it only acted by setting one impulse against another, though it had much power in molding the character, it had hardly any in strengthening it; it formed temperament, but never instilled principle; it kept me generally good-humored and kindly, but could not teach me perseverance or self-denial....⁴

Here we see both the strength and the weakness of the aesthetic sensibility. It supports every noble instinct, but it does not strengthen character. Where is this more true but in our sexual inclinations?

The aesthetic view, of which Ruskin's "landscape instinct" is a prime example, is a prelapsarian view. It is a vestige of a state in which perseverance and self-denial did not have to be learned. If we lived in perfect innocence, we would see moral goodness as pure beauty, without having to contrast it with evil. In this paper I will use the term "aesthetic" in this strongly moral sense and never in the sense of "merely" aesthetic, and thus as opposed to morally good.

The aesthetic good is the good of a thing in relation to itself. The moral good is the good of relations between things. In this life the two remain distinct, but the distinction is one that arises out of the nature of creation. The moral good is peculiar to the case where there is multiplicity, where there is differentiation between things. This is why the Buddhist Nirvana, in which all distinction is an illusion, proves to be amoral in the sense that it transcends even the distinction between good and evil.

Normally we speak of the aesthetic good as applying to things and the moral good as applying to actions; things are beautiful, actions have moral weight. But this is just another way of distinguishing internal relations from relations between things since internal relations are what make a thing a thing while the actions we commonly speak of as moral are interactions between distinct things. In other words, relations between things are moral insofar as the totality remains *many* things, and they are aesthetic to the extent that they bind the totality into a *single* thing.

⁴ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, v.2, Part IV, Ch. 17, §18. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, *The Works of John Ruskin* (London UK: Longmans, Green & Co., 1903-1912) 3: 291.

The hedonist may think that the pleasure of sexual intercourse is its aesthetic aspect and procreation its utilitarian aspect. From a biological point of view this is exactly backwards, for the function of sex is to achieve reproduction with individual variation. The desire and pleasure associated with sex serve the end of perpetuating the species, and thus are utilitarian. That is rather obvious, but it may not be so obvious that the unitive function of sex is also utilitarian, again from a biological point of view.⁵ Stable families are optimal for maintaining a species whose young take two decades or more to mature. It seems to me that the unitive and the procreative functions of conjugal love stand to each other in the same relation as the moral and aesthetic aspects of the good. The unitive function is moral inasmuch as it fixes a relationship between two people, ordered to the good of each other; the procreative function is aesthetic insofar as it generates a single thing, good in itself.

The pain of childbirth and the uncertainties of raising a family provide natural opportunities for learning the perseverance and self-denial that Ruskin's landscape instinct is not able to foster. Adam's curse is for rehabilitation as well as punishment. Nevertheless, those lessons can often be avoided with the help of the ingenuity that allows us to avoid many natural hazards. Were it not for the confusion of languages at Babel, civilization might even be able to construct an artificial environment, impervious to all of nature's lessons, as in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Huxley recognized that his soft totalitarian nightmare had to depend on a complete separation of sex from procreation. Nature has too many surprises.

The functional connection between sex and procreation is self-evident, but the psychological connection between sexual and parenting instincts is both subtle and fragile, especially in men. Given the extremely long and complex process of child rearing for human beings, it is altogether rational to conclude that faithful monogamy is "natural" for our species.⁶ And because we are rational, it is also "natural" that our practice of faithful monogamy should be secured through deliberate

⁵ I am not concerned here with the sacramental union, which is unique to human beings.

⁶ For the case against polygamy, which seems to have developed from experience rather than *a priori* reasoning, see the biblical stories of Abraham, Jacob, David and Solomon.

commitment as well as instinct. Maintaining the psychological link between sexual and parenting instincts becomes for us a paradigmatic case for cultivating that healthy union of instinct (or emotion) and reason that characterizes moral freedom.

It is the need for deliberate commitment that makes marriage a matter of moral responsibility for human beings. But, as I hope to show, the activity of life for all living things, which is everywhere dependent on reproduction, is also good in the absolute sense, in that it establishes a structure balancing the good of relations with the good of things in themselves. If we are to move from an “anthropocentric” ethic to a “biocentric” ethic the place to begin is with the good of procreation, the profound good common to all life.

Attempts to divorce sex from procreation, whether by technological means such as abortion or through disordered (e.g., homosexual) relationships, set human freedom at odds with the order of nature. But we can't for this reason dismiss such attempts out of hand, because to some extent human freedom does include a freedom from the constraints of nature. The question becomes one of sorting out what the proper limits of this freedom are, limits that may be determined on either utilitarian or aesthetic grounds. The original arguments for use of contraception within marriage and for relaxed divorce laws proceeded along these lines. The damage to the “social environment” that followed these concessions ought to have invited reconsideration of their wisdom. As we all know, however, discussion was cut off by the assertion of a right to privacy. Right to privacy arguments are far less popular when it comes to polluting the physical environment. In the wake of repeated failures to prevent technologically-induced environmental disasters, there seems to be more openness in the environmentalist context to asking the question that is so hard to ask with regard to sex: whether nature has something to teach us that will save us from our own bad choices.

The idea that nature has something to teach us is an important step towards affirming a standard of goodness, existing in nature, that can guide our freedom. But if freedom has to be guided, isn't it less than free? In trying to sort out the relation between freedom and goodness, it should first be noted that any idea that we form of goodness will have a notion of freedom embedded in it; for the difference between “is” and

“ought” lies in the non-coercive nature of “ought.” Goodness is also tied to awareness since the idea that something *ought* to be implies a judgment, or at least the possibility of judgment. The interconnection between goodness, freedom, and consciousness was familiar territory for ancient philosophers, but there is a great gulf separating us from them that arises from the gulf fixed in the seventeenth century between efficient and final causes, such that final causes are banished from the study of the physical world and cast into the never-never land of metaphysics. When Francis Bacon rejected the appeal to final causes as an anthropomorphism,⁷ he set up the dualism between man and nature that today is blamed for our ecological crisis. Ironically, though not inconsistently, the technological program that Bacon set in motion is now attacked as anthropocentric since it treats the world as an object to be manipulated for human ends.

So, here is the problem: we want to learn moral lessons from nature without anthropomorphizing her (it?); yet traditional morality seems to be an exclusively human concern. What does it mean to speak of goodness apart from a subjective determination by a human being that a thing is good?

In an attempt to establish a criterion of goodness apart from human subjectivity, Holmes Rolston III inquires about the possibility of value without an evaluator.⁸ He distinguishes three types of value: instrumental, intrinsic, and systemic. Starting with the observation that “humans are able to value,” he attempts to excise the human element by examining how things in the non-human world may be valuable in themselves. Offering himself as a nature guide, he surveys the natural world and notes, for instance, that animals value food (instrumental value). Even

⁷ “[W]hilst aiming at further progress, [the human understanding] falls back to what is actually less advanced, namely, final causes; for they are clearly more allied to man’s own nature, than the system of the universe, and from this source they have wonderfully corrupted philosophy.” *Novum Organum* (1620) I.48.

⁸ Holmes Rolston III, “Value in Nature and the Nature of Value” in Robin Attfield and Andrew Belsey, *Philosophy and the Natural Environment*, Royal Institute of Philosophy supplement 36 (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 13-30. The terminology is a little awkward, since words like “goodness” and “morality” are taboo. Ironically, the only term left seems to be “value,” the favorite of moral relativists. Rolston is clearly no relativist.

plants, by their ability to repair themselves, show that they implicitly “value” their own lives, an example of intrinsic value. For this reason and because the DNA sequence prescribes a norm for what an individual *ought* to be, he describes the organism as “an axiological system, though not a moral system.” The species, too, has a value, because it perpetuates the form, of which the individual is but a “receptacle.” An ecosystem, even if it is not a well-defined entity, can be said to have a “systemic value” because it is “valu-able, able to create value, ...bringing into existence these phenomena that, when we arrive, the human consciousness is also able to value.” When it comes to the value of the earth as a whole, Rolston falls back on the sense of wonder: “when Earth’s most complex product, *Homo sapiens*, becomes intelligent enough to reflect over this cosmic wonderland, everyone is left stuttering about the mixtures of accident and necessity out of which we have evolved.” Some may also be left stuttering about the glib assumption that intentionality can be produced unintentionally.

Setting himself in opposition to the idea that, “we humans, arriving late on the evolutionary scene, ourselves products of it, bring all the value into the world,” Rolston would purge teleology of anthropomorphism. But he is evidently committed to staying within the confines of the Baconian program, which rejects all teleology as anthropomorphic. No wonder he is left stuttering.

Rolston’s “value” in nature still depends on human beings arriving upon the scene eventually. He has not at all succeeded in freeing goodness from its dependence on knowledge. It simply cannot be done. Nor can there be knowledge without a knower. There can, however, be an intelligible universe before the appearance of intelligent creatures to realize that intelligibility. I would suggest that the relation of potential value to realized value that Rolston is looking for corresponds to the relation of intelligible to intelligent. The value that he is trying to establish is that of the intelligibility of all things. What snags him is the temporal element.

The Baconian program is locked into the strict sequence of time because the forces of nature, those agents of efficient cause to which it confines its inquiry, are also temporal by nature. Final cause – purpose, meaning, “value” – has no essential connection with time. For our present purpose it is not necessary to work through all the implications

of this atemporality. We need only observe that to act with a purpose is to leap, mentally, out of the present moment and into the future, so to speak. This is true when an injured plant heals itself, no less than when Martin Luther King speaks of his dream. Rolston is trying to see how the system can generate value. In fact, though, it is “value” – that is, goodness – that is driving the system.

The existence of this elusive stuff called “value” is in fact an axiom of Darwinism, and so of course it won’t prove to be a consequence of it. The notion of survival value is an implicit affirmation of the old scholastic notion that being is good. In this sense, Darwinism is also a dogmatic, moral system. One can make survival value morally neutral by reducing it to a tautology – we do not claim that surviving is good, but only that those who don’t survive aren’t around to compare themselves with those who do. But this is not true to how organisms live. Denying that being is good is one of those things, like denying the existence of the outside world, that someone may do as a thought game, but no one actually lives it.

We do not need to depend on evolutionary genealogies to find a common moral ground for all living things. The structure of the world as it is now proclaims that ground. Amid the hierarchical structures of systems within systems, the most sharply defined entities are living organisms. All entities within an organism – cells, organs, organ systems, etc. – yield their autonomy in service to higher levels, culminating in the integrity of the whole organism. The organism itself becomes the ground from which social structures are built up, but no higher level structures have a unity comparable to that of the organism. It is for this reason that the moral aspect of the good for humans is most fully expressed at the social level, while it is the individual that is good in itself.⁹

⁹ There is a likely physical reason why we do not find that individual organisms are subsumed into higher and higher level units (i.e., that a community is less of a unity than is an organism, and that there is no “world soul”). The kind of self-stabilizing mechanisms that are essential to organisms depend on the electromagnetic force. At larger levels of the structure the gravitational force comes to predominate. Lacking positive and negative polarity, gravitational systems cannot restore themselves when perturbed; they can know equilibrium, but not homeostasis. See Allan Wolter, “Chemical Substance,” *St. John’s University Studies: Philosophical Series* 1 (1961): 87-

This arrangement, whereby the structural hierarchies culminate in the middle ranges of size, underscores the abiding goodness of multiplicity. If at every level the integrity of the elements were subordinated to the whole, it would be simply a matter of multiplicity resolving itself into the aesthetic good of unity at ever higher levels, so that ultimately unity would swallow multiplicity. It seems instead as though the absolute good retains something of the tension (like the Stoic *tonos*) between unity and multiplicity that we see in the world, but with a slight asymmetry, giving priority to unity. This asymmetry corresponds to the priority of being to the intelligibility of being.

There are no absolutely autonomous entities, for everything is tied to everything else. But the purposeful behavior of an organism turns in on itself, so to speak and reinforces its relative autonomy. In caring for itself, the organism implicitly affirms that it is a self. This adds another dimension of unity to an organism that no inanimate object, even one so perfectly self-contained as a diatomic gas molecule, can experience. Pope John Paul II speaks of the “original solitude” of human beings as arising from the fact that our capacity for rational thought puts a distance between us and the rest of the universe.¹⁰ Man is a body among bodies but set apart by his self-awareness. Taking this idea in a weaker sense than John Paul II intended, we could speak of an “original solitude” in all organisms, due to the implicit sense of self that purposeful behavior generates. As much among other organisms as with human beings, sexual reproduction breaks this solitude by making organisms communal beings (at least briefly, and for some species permanently) as well as individuals.

We can now begin to see why intelligibility is good. The link between intelligibility and goodness in the above argument has been the unity that I have called aesthetic goodness. To be intelligible, a thing must be a coherent entity: one that can act as a unit and be perceived as a unit. Intelligibility is in this way a perfection of being. The coherence that allows it to act as a unit establishes its integrity, and in being perceived as a unit that integrity is affirmed. If all distinction were

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¹⁰ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston MA: Pauline Books, 2007), pp. 148-50, 152, audiences 5.4-6, 6.3.

resolved into unity, intelligibility would be lost since cognition depends not simply on perceiving a unity but also in distinguishing a thing from its surroundings. Among living things, this tension between distinction and unity is sustained through reproduction; it establishes the kinship of all things while securing the distinctness of individuals, and it further sets the foundation for social structures.

The human capacity for rationalization should never be underestimated. Hence, for instance, we are told that patriarchal culture has oppressed the earth, and so solidarity with homosexuals, women and all other marginalized and oppressed people is ecofriendly.¹¹ Reasoning of this sort is well enough suited to mustering an alliance of the good guys but is probably more helpful for deflecting blame than for actually fixing anything. It is in fact a rather striking example of the dualism, the exclusion of the “other,” that it claims to be overcoming. To break free of the dualism separating human beings from nature it will be necessary to do more than imagine a non-dualism. It will be necessary to listen to nature instead of just to ourselves. This is the empiricism that Francis Bacon recommended in the first place! But Bacon ruled out final causality. In doing so he set us on the track of looking for critiques based on efficient causes and sent us down the road of seeking whom to blame. The environmental crises of our day are calling us to listen. But, given human nature, it is not surprising that we still are doing more talking than listening. However, the still, small voice of nature is persistent, and what it speaks is true.

¹¹ Daniel Spencer, *Gay and Gaia: Ethics, Ecology and the Erotic* (Cleveland OH: Pilgrim Press, 1996), pp. 4 et passim.