

The Unnatural Steward: Humanity's Relationship Toward the Earth

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“The land is Mine;
you are but strangers resident with Me.
Throughout the land that you hold,
you must provide for the redemption of the land.”
Leviticus 25: 23-24

Throughout the millennia, human beings have wrestled to survive and to flourish on our blue-green jewel of a planet. As our cultures matured, shaped by the climate and the terrain of their homes, we also fashioned different notions of what it means to live on the Earth. How, exactly, are we to treat our planet? What do we owe the earth, and what does it owe to us? What is our place in the world, what are our responsibilities and our privileges?

As the ages passed, three general ways of understanding the proper contours of humanity's relationship to the earth emerged: as a machine to be used and discarded at will, as a living organism of superior worth to humanity itself, or somewhere in the middle — subject to the kind of human use that is constrained by larger ethical considerations. All three viewpoints can claim an ancient and venerable pedigree within Western Civilization, and all three are quite incompatible. In an age in which the choices that our societies make about how we use the earth's resources, how we care for the diversity of living species, how we tend delicate and endangered bioregions, and how we respond to our own exploding population, underlying assumptions about what is proper in our treatment of the planet can have serious — and possibly life-threatening — implications for our own survival and the well-being of other living things. It is time, once again, to consider what we owe the earth and what we may legitimately expect from it.

The Earth as Machine

One view, rooted in some Stoic thinkers, sees the earth as a machine to be used for human pleasure and asserts that irrational creatures lack rights. According to this viewpoint, the earth is nothing more than the dirt on which we walk, its nonhuman residents are unthinking, mobile sources of protein, entertainment, or danger. That all was made for the sake of mankind influenced certain early Christian thinkers (notably Origen, Aquinas, and Calvin). In the early modern period, this mechanistic understanding of the world as a bag of tools ready for any human purpose reached its clearest expression, particularly in the words of Rene Descartes, who sought to find a practical philosophy by

means of which, knowing the force and the action of fire, water, air, the stars, heavens, and all other bodies which environ us, as distinctly as we know the different crafts of our artisans, we can in the same way employ them in all those uses to which they are adapted, and thus render ourselves the masters and possessors of nature (Discourse on Method, Part VI).

For Descartes, there was a wall of separation between humanity, on the one hand, and all other creatures and objects on the other. Consistent with his own premises, he thus held that animals were automata, and that “there can be no suspicion of crime when [people] eat or kill animals.”

The Stoics, Descartes and his followers weren't entirely wrong. Humanity is indeed different from other living things (in our ability to conceptualize, to communicate across generations, to engage in introspection and to manipulate tools and technology, to name a few distinguishing traits). How we act does have a disproportionate influence on the world around us, and our willingness to see beyond what is and to strive for what might be, using the scientific method, has resulted in better and healthier lives for millions of people. Few of us would surrender the benefits of modernity to return to life in the wild, and an understanding of the earth as something to be used to heighten human pleasure is part of what has allowed us to fashion comfortable and civilized life.

Yet, there are clear dangers to this mechanistic viewpoint. Our interventions in the world often have unintended and disastrous consequences, even if we look only at the impact of those actions on people. Loss of farmland across North America is but one example of our sovereignty over nature exacting a frightening and unanticipated cost. As frightening as the results of our interventions may be, we ought to appreciate more than just cost-benefit considerations. As the late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel noted:

Human beings have indeed become primarily tool-making animals, and the world is now a gigantic tool box for the satisfaction of their needs... Nature as a tool box is a world that does not point beyond itself. It is when nature is sensed as mystery and grandeur that it calls upon us to look beyond it. The awareness of grandeur and the sublime is all but gone from the modern mind. The sense of the sublime — the sign of inward greatness of the human soul and something which is potentially given to all — is now a rare gift. Yet without it, the world becomes flat and the soul a vacuum (God in Search of Man, pp 34ff).

Isn't the world impoverished when a species disappears unnecessarily? Isn't a beautiful glen or a majestic mountain something of intrinsic worth, something to be cherished and protected? We humans have a limited notion of self interest, and we endanger our own children and grandchildren for the sake of our short-term desires. Seeing the earth as a big bag of toys encourages rapacity and endangers human survival and the balance of life on earth. The time has long passed when this was an acceptable way to see our role in the world.

Earth as Organism

A second, corrective, approach to human relations to the rest of reality asserts that the earth constitutes a living entity, often referred to as *gaia*. This personification of the earth, sometimes intended as metaphor and sometimes quite literally as a real individual, asserts that the earth functions as an organism to maintain its own balance. As humanity grows and claims more and more of earth's resources, the earth will act — rightfully — to control this threat to its own functioning, just as a cell acts to expel a source of danger. All living things together form a coherent organism. Humanity, in this view, threatens the biosphere and will be removed, by nature, in a surgical strike to defend itself.

While there were certainly ancient civilizations which perceived the earth as a divinity (often a goddess), and that goddess was often seen as hostile to human interests and security, this philosophical approach that recognizes humans as but one small part of the web of nature, properly curtailed by the general good of the biosphere, is a modern innovation with much to commend it: we are indeed part of the physical universe. Not having chosen to be born, we did not fashion this world, and the cosmos makes its own limits and priorities felt all the time. To disregard our membership in (and dependence on) the totality of living things courts disaster. Yet there is something ironic to the view that we are merely subservient to *gaia*, that nature is morally superior to the needs of humanity. The irony becomes especially clear when we stop to ponder just how unnatural such a viewpoint is: What other species sublimates its own desires for the common good of the biosphere? What other living creature denies its own pleasure in order to learn to think like a mountain (the famous phrase of the naturalist Aldo Leopold)? To be truly natural would be to follow our impulses and do as we please. The advocates of the *gaia* position are, intellectually, the least natural of the three opposing viewpoints.

That unnatural stance fails for another reason as well: only people can articulate what is “good” for the earth, and that assertion must always reflect the viewpoint of some particular person. Who can say whether or not the earth is better off with living things or without? With mammals dominant rather than roaches? Perhaps the earth is indifferent, or would even like an extra strip mall? Only people argue about such things and seem to express strong preferences. The earth just keeps circling the sun. Imputing preferences I to nature confuses “ought” and “is” in a way that makes for a tyranny of what currently exists, imposing the current momentary balance as a rigid fixture for all time.

Unnatural and unreasonable, such an approach also fails in that it has little possibility of appealing to the vast majority of human beings whose choices will fashion our collective response to the environmental crisis that threatens our health and security. While the general acceptance of the *gaia* hypothesis might curtail human greed and shortsightedness, it has little chance of gaining that assent. And its many flaws — not least its lack of compassion for human suffering — would raise serious problems of their own, were it ever adopted. This second path, it seems, is not a feasible choice either.

The Middle Path: Stewardship

There is one remaining way to understand our relationship to the earth. Its pedigree is as ancient as the Bible, the foundation code of all Western civilization, and as current as most conservation organizations. Because it is so embedded in our culture, because it is so reasonable, it stands the greatest chance of receiving an attentive hearing from the vast numbers needed to make real environmental change.

That middle path is stewardship, the notion that humanity is the caretaker of the earth and of all living things. Rooted in a religious view of the world, stewardship asserts that the purpose of all creation, humanity included, is to sing God's praises, through deeds of goodness, through establishing a just and righteous society, by cultivating gratitude to our Creator for the marvel of being alive. That task doesn't fall just on humanity, as the psalmist reminds us, "the heavens declare the glory of God (Psalm 19:2)." The purpose of Creation, then, is not mankind. Nor are we Creation's pinnacle, recall that the Sabbath day is created after humanity. We exist to make the world sacred and decent.

A part of creation, we are also apart from creation. "What is man that you are mindful of him... You have made him little less than divine (Psalm 8:5,6)." Our added gifts, of consciousness, of speech, of law, are intended to assist us in our task of serving as God's agents in the world. The Biblical view of our role in relation to the rest of Creation is that we "till and tend" the world on God's behalf, for the sake of God's majesty.

This ideal of stewardship balances the two views previously mentioned. It shares with the mechanists the belief that human well-being is the proper vantage point from which to judge morality, but it links that sense of well-being to a solidarity with all of Creation and a desire to avoid unnecessary suffering for all living things. It shares with the gaiiaists a sense that holiness and wholeness emerge from the wonder and the miracle of God's world, but it refuses to deify any part of creation, humanity included. Existence is what is; morality, what ought to be. Humanity's role is to bridge that gap, to work toward the repair of the world as a healing, holy place.

Stewardship sees humanity legitimately using the bounty of the world for moral ends, as God's agents. We are God's hands in the world, to care, to improve, and to love Creation. But the world is not, ultimately, ours to abuse. We tend it in God's name, and therefore must show God's tender mercies to Creation else we violate our charge.

Note, then, that the steward is at once someone who stands outside of nature, taking instruction and direction from a sense of morality and of reverence that is highly unnatural. Yet, the steward is also profoundly and gratefully a part of Creation — it is that very embeddedness that allows us to act in the world on God's behalf. A little lower than the angels, sharing the finitude of all flesh-and-blood, we are precisely located to know both world and holiness and to bridge those two realities in a single whole.

Our task, then, is to act responsibly, to assure that the beauty and majesty of the world not

be lessened by our deeds, to see that all of God's creatures can know, at whatever level, the goodness of Creation, to make visible the unity of God through the solidarity of all created things, and to justify the assertion that humanity uniquely reflects God's image by our unique responsibility for caring for God's world.

An old rabbinic legend records that God took the first human being through the Garden of Eden. After the tour, God then said, "Look at my works! See how beautiful they are — how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it (Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 1 to 7:13)."

Our distinction as people, our very claim to preeminence in the world, rests on our ability to distinguish good from evil, to restrain our desires, to consider the whole and the holy. In caring for creation, in acting as God's stewards, we vindicate God's judgment in the goodness of creation, we reveal the divine image within the human heart, and we assure a rich future for our children and for our children's children.

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