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Introduction

This book has two goals. The first and primary is to develop a framework for reflection. How are we, as a society, to come to terms with nature, wild and human? This "coming to terms" is not simply a matter of addressing the current ecological crisis. More fundamentally, it is a matter of determining our place in the world of nature and, therewith, our relation to the wild creatures with whom we share the planet and its formative, natural processes. Who are we? Who are they? What makes us different? What do we have in common? Addressing these and related questions requires us to take into account not only "the facts" but, no less, "our values." What do we care about? Is there any reason we ought to care about the well-being of other creatures? Of nature-as-a-whole? What follows attempts to remove some of the confusion and disagreement surrounding these matters and, therewith, our normatively laden relation to nature not by providing a short-cut to the truth but, rather, helping those who care enough to think hard make their way through the labyrinth of complexities involved.

A second, related goal is to develop and defend claims about our relation to nature. Some of these, such as those affirming animal awareness, the inherent purposefulness of natural processes, religious naturalism, and our own, irreducibly communal identity, are integral to the proposed framework for reflection. It makes little sense apart from them. Other claims, such as those about predation and modern agribusiness, are illustrative; their truth, relative to the framework, is wide-open. Still other claims lie somewhere in between. This holds true for both the account given of modern science and, more fundamentally, theistic naturalism. While I believe these valid, especially the latter, it is possible to be a religious believer and, even, believe in divine creation while disagreeing with them, in whole or in part. There is room for variation. This does not mean these claims are unimportant. To the contrary, simply repudiating them, would leave the abstract framework less plausible, unsupported,

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and undeveloped. Thus, those who reject them while retaining the ethical stance of humane holism will need to find analogous support and elucidation elsewhere. That this possibility exists is a good thing, allowing for affirmation of the proposed framework by not only traditional theists but other religious believers and, even, in many respects, those who hold no religious beliefs whatsoever.

The text itself is divided into three Parts. Part I outlines our ethics of nature, establishing the moral standing of wild nature from the standpoint of philosophical ethics; it does this in three steps, engaging, first, questions regarding the moral status of non-human animals, second, the same questions regarding nature-as-a-whole, and, third, methodological concerns regarding plausibility and determinacy – thereby setting the stage for Parts II and III. Part II inquires as to the relevance of religious faith for an ethics of nature and offers in this regard a faith-based stance, theistic naturalism, supporting the conclusions drawn in Part I. Part III considers the relevance of cultural traditions for moral reflection, showing how the ethics and politics of nature come to fruition in contentious, more-or-less plausible ways of life. Since the path forward is long and intricate, let me briefly summarize the argument of and conclusions drawn in each chapter.

Chapter one sets forth two basic principles, one of decency, the other necessity. As regards the first, I argue, following a well-trod path, that some non-human animals, those living a life which goes for them better-or-worse and, thereby, having a well-being of their own, count morally. This "ethics of well-being" does not, however, so I argue, extend the same protection to all selves and sentients. The second principle, that of necessity, justifies us in giving preferential consideration to the life and interests of humans. This rejection of "biotic egalitarianism" is grounded not in claims about moral worth but, rather, the unique, constitutive relation existing, so I argue (in Parts II and III), between all and only human beings. I conclude that we ought, as common sense dictates, to take the interests of non-human selves and sentients into account while granting priority to our own life and interests. What remains unsettled, a matter of great import, is the extent of preference justified and, correspondingly, what decency and necessity require in situations of conflict. While the argument for attributing moral standing to all selves and sentients is as close to rationally compelling as an ethical argument gets, there is no rationally compelling account of how much non-humans count morally compared to humans.

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Chapter two considers the moral standing of nature-as-a-whole and, therewith, all living creatures. After showing that appeals to natural beauty, even if successful, provide at most *de minimis* protection, I argue the same holds for appeals to the objectively determined good of living creatures and natural processes. Efforts to ground an ethics of nature in this manner fail not because there is no such good but due to morally significant disanalogies between these goods and the well-being of selves and sentients. If we are to move beyond an ethics of well-being, we will require an account of moral standing that does not depend, by way of intentionality or sentience, on the living of a life that goes better-or-worse. Here, presuming a truly holistic ethics of nature will ground the moral worth of protected "wholes" in their relation to encompassed, individual selves and sentients, I argue that nature-as-a-whole is entitled to moral respect because it is "sentiotic," a creative, life-sustaining process, the well-functioning of which is not only vital to but constitutive of human and non-human well-being. This "ethics of preservation" rests on paradigmatically moral concerns about well-being indirectly – by virtue of an inherent orientation toward the good of well-being. I conclude that we have a duty to preserve and protect natural processes. Adding this principle of deference to those of decency and necessity generates the ethic of humane holism. This addresses the problem of indeterminacy at one level, by providing an encompassing framework in which to view conflicting interests. At the same time, it introduces additional indeterminacy regarding the object of deference: since this cannot be identified with the beauty or relentless regularity of nature, how are we to ascertain what morality requires of us?

This question is addressed in Parts II and III. Before going there, however, we need to consider the relevance of modern science for our presumptions in Part I regarding animal awareness and, more contentiously, the inherent orientation of natural processes toward well-being. Here, I argue, in chapter three, that scientific theories, while describing the world as it really is, do so in a necessarily abstract manner. Modern science succeeds so well at what it does by systematically ignoring whatever cannot be made an object of scientific study. One consequence is that it cannot confirm or disconfirm either the existence of consciousness, human or non-human, or the inherent purposefulness of nature. It follows that not only grand schemes to scientize ethics but more low-flying efforts to ground an ethics of nature in what ecological and evolutionary theories tell us about the workings of nature are methodologically flawed.

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The ethics of nature cannot avoid, by way of philosophy or science, a reliance on faith-based convictions. This, far from disabling moral reason, enables it and, therewith, as I show in Parts II and III, the effort to live, as morality directs, a truly good, fully human life. I conclude chapter three by explaining why and how the three parts of the text are correlated with three forms of moral reflection: philosophical, religious, and commonsensical, or, cultural.

Part II explores the contribution of religious faith to an ethics of nature. In so doing it provides faith-based reasons for adopting the ethic developed in Part I, humane holism. Chapter four begins this endeavor by clarifying the notion of "religious naturalism," arguing that religious faith assumes this shape when nature, in whole or in part, is taken to provide an indispensable medium of engagement with a fundamental, sacred reality. Examples abound in so-called "primitive religions." Religious naturalism assumes a theistic form when the Sacred is understood theistically, as a Supreme Person. Theism is distinguished from other religious perspectives by its belief that the Sacred is like us personal, yet radically Other. A more precise characterization is achieved by contrasting historic theism with four quasi-theisms: polytheism, pantheism, deism, and emanationism. Having clarified what it means to be a theist, we engage the issue of plausibility: what if any reasons are there for believing that God exists?

Addressing this question is of interest not because it removes the need for faith but, rather, because it calls to mind aspects of and places in nature where theists encounter the living reality of God. Ultimately the appeal of theistic naturalism, like every form of religious faith, rests on charismatically compelling, life-transforming encounters. This, in turn, brings us into the domain of theology: dogmatic, systematic, and imaginative. It is here we engage the basic reasonableness of faith, that is, the operation of critical reason in a context of faith. This dynamic appears in the modernist critique of belief in divine miracles as well as the traditionalist reply. While the resultant interplay of arguments occasionally results in changing images of God and God's creative activity in the world, it typically and quite properly results in more refined, reasonable versions of the faith by which believers are grasped at the start of their quest for understanding: reason and (charismatic) faith work arm-in-arm. This, in turn, allows us to see how belief in a radically transcendent sacred reality can incorporate and learn from an on-going experience of God in nature, be it abstract, as in modern science, or concrete, as in everyday life.

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Chapter five turns to the theological task of developing a faith-based, overtly theistic perspective on nature. I do so by explicating the traditional belief in a *creatio ex nihilo*. This doctrine holds that God created the world freely, out of nothing, and, thus, might not have created it without any loss to himself. The radical freedom of this act is, I argue a mark of love, not indifference. This love, being constitutive of finite reality, is present in all times and places. I analogize it to the sustaining word of a cosmic storyteller. God speaks the world into existence. This is only possible given a self-limitation by God, one that produces a "relative nothingness" from which to create and in which to place the inherently limited, contingent reality of nature. In so doing, God brings into being, along with the world, imperfection and the possibility of natural evil. This possibility is realized with the appearance of finite selves and sentients, creatures with a genuine but limited capacity to experience the unity and good of existence.

That God creates and sustains such a world is justified by the good realized in its existence and, especially, a mutuality of love involving God and his creatures, all of whose stories are treasured by God in the infinite, unlimited fullness of his eternal Being. For this mutuality to be complete requires, in addition, a freedom of response on the part of creation. This, in turn, introduces into creation, along with agency, the possibility of moral evil, a rejection of the love manifest in creation. This possibility becomes a reality in the Fall of humanity, the freedom of nature. In response, God supplements the constitutive grace present in creation with a consequent, restorative grace, thereby allowing to continue the weaving together of our stories, our own broken creativity, with his redemptive love. The wonder of that love consists in its free, unnecessitated availability: like us, God must be able to walk away for there to be a genuine mutuality of love.

Part III asks how an ethics of nature moves from faith-based, generic ideality to a culturally specific determinacy. Here we encounter one of the many paradoxes of modernity: a heightened awareness of the role culture plays in human formation and life co-exists with a desire to escape the constraint of traditional norms and ideals. In response, I argue that our capacity for self-transcendence, through reason and faith, is not only dependent on but inherent in the authority of tradition. That we see this is not incidental to an ethics of nature; it is the methodological analogue of our own constitutive relation to wild nature. Here, there appears a parallel between a holistic ethic of nature and its upshot, ecological conservationism, and a holistic ethic of culture and its upshot, cultural

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conservatism.[1] Bearing this in mind, Part III situates our relation with nature culturally, revealing as it does the commonality and diversity of human nature. Culture, so viewed, becomes the sentiotic flowering of wild nature, which, in turn, becomes the extended body of humanity.

Chapter six develops, toward this end, a relational, communal view of the *imago Dei*: humans are given responsibility to speak for and mirror God in nature. Rather than deny the uniquely god-like quality of human life and freedom, as many do, we affirm this as an essential condition of the above task while denying it leaves us free to abuse the good of other creatures. Everything turns on how we understand the task to which we are called. Here, by way of developing the notion of an irreducibly communal identity, I defend the notion of corporate responsibility, linking it to the existence of communities with a shared, common good. Such thick communities play a vital role in the natural process whereby human selves are formed, that is, enculturation. This process, I argue, occurs in three stages, corresponding to three dimensions of every cultural *ethos*: ecotic, alethic, and teleotic. Unpacking these allows us to see the indispensable role cultural traditions play in human life: apart from the particularities of culture there are no particularized, actual human selves.

Given this, I argue, along lines laid down in chapter two, that cultural traditions, being sentiotic, not only deserve moral respect but, also and crucially, possess a non-derivative normative authority for their adherents. Neither reason nor experience can provide an Archimedean point on which to dry-dock and reformulate the constitutive faith by which we live. Far from precluding critical reflection, this makes it possible. Thus, the natural diversity of cultures, like that of biotic communities, is a good part of creation, essential to the unity of difference that makes for a true mutuality.

Chapter seven turns its attention to that larger unity, the all-encompassing fellowship of creation. Here I argue, contrary to those theanthropocentrists who claim creation was for the sake of humanity alone, that all of nature, in whole and in part, is known and loved by God as integral parts of a single, indivisible whole, the on-going story of creation. This "big hug" theory of creation grounds human dominion in the unique role of humans in that story, not in any greater love for humans on the part of God: human uniqueness and dominion, the *imago Dei*, are part and parcel of God's structuring of nature for the good of

[1] It is important to distinguish cultural conservatism, as developed herein, from both economic and *status quo* conservatism; not only do the latter two positions not follow from the first, they are arguably inconsistent with it.

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all. As argued in Part I, the priority of human life and interests, morally, rests on the special relation in which all and only humans stand to one another, not on human uniqueness, dominion, or an allegedly greater love of God for humanity.

It follows, relative to the encompassing unity of creation, that in wrongfully harming wild nature we harm ourselves, whatever the extrinsic or intrinsic consequences. It also follows, if we are to ascertain what this constitutive harm involves, we will have to engage moral concerns from a culturally informed point of view. By way of illuminating what this involves, I raise questions about the morality of predation, wild and human. As regards predation in the wild, I argue this hard reality is integral to the identity of predator and prey and, therefore, like politics among humans, part of God's good creation. The case as regards human predation is more complex given the need to ascertain what makes for human well-being and, therewith, necessity. Engaging questions about nature hunting and modern agribusiness, I conclude by advocating a political pluralism that is principled and pragmatic, arguing this holds out the best hope for a life in accord with the created nature and good of humanity.

That completes the argument, leaving us with a framework for critical reflection on our constitutive relation to that nature by which we are what we are. Apprehending the shape and force of this framework is not easy. The analyses and arguments offered require an effort to follow and assess; these convolutions and difficulties cannot, however, be avoided. Equally essential, though, is the realization that these analyses and arguments – more points, as Shakespeare put it, than all the lawyers in Bohemia can learnedly handle – will not provide a single, rationally compelling answer to our concerns. There are no such answers. Accordingly, no easy task, we must learn to take analysis and argument seriously, while recognizing their ultimate inadequacy. In the end, we are cast back on charismatic insight and cultural tradition – and, thereby, a multiplicity of reasonable positions, though not an unlimited multiplicity. Ethical maturity requires us to continue our search for clarity while living with the inevitable ambiguity. Hence, the overriding importance of a good will and strong character. We live in anticipation of a future we can never grasp entire, never call our own apart from a love, a faith and hope, that calls into being a nature that is, yet-not-yet.

In a sense, this book leaves us where we began. Though the ethic it proposes, humane holism, strongly suggests the need for change in our lives, perhaps radical change, there are not only no easy answers here – of

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which there are none in any case – there are no concrete proposals, no worked-out agendas for the future. In that sense, the real work remains to be done, the real dialogue to begin. My hope is that what follows will help us move forward by breaking the current conceptual and political logjam. To move the former, we need to see more clearly than is now common what can and cannot be provided by the various epistemic authorities to which appeal is made, be this philosophical ethics, scientific inquiry, spirituality, theological reflection, cultural tradition, whatever. We cannot move forward until we realize, as Joseph Butler (1950: 15) put so well, that everything is what it is and not another thing. The secret of ethics, like nature, lies in the harmonizing of a great many, irreducibly diverse, yet all vital parts. Much the same holds with regard to the prospects of political and social reform. We need to not only affirm cultural diversity in the abstract but, more concretely, nourish into being a genuinely diverse coalition of concerned individuals and communities, one that encompasses deep-cutting differences of interest and conviction. The secret of cultural change, like change in wild nature, lies in a mutually rewarding, symbiotic cooperation, not competition, as good a part of creation as that is.

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PART I

The ethics of nature

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CHAPTER ONE

Moral concerns

POSING THE QUESTION

That we ought to care about nature is evident.[1] Wild nature has unparalleled *instrumental value* – the water we drink, the air we breathe, the silicon chips we rely on. Human life cannot be sustained, let alone achieve well-being, apart from the multifold goods of wild nature. In addition, independent of its contribution to other goods, wild nature itself has value for us – mountain lions and otters, rivers and towering mountains, the wind blowing through pine trees. Even if we left this world to live on self-sustaining star-ships, wild nature would retain this *intrinsic value* for those who knew and remembered the wonders of earth.

That wild nature has this value makes it an obvious *indirect* object of moral concern relative to the good of humans. These concerns may be large – involving the devastation of an entire continent – or small – involving a town's hesitancy to share access to its beach with land-locked others. Such issues arise because natural goods and ills, weal and woe, are unevenly distributed and, on occasion, unfairly appropriated. The colonizing power, state or business, that extracts natural resources without consent or recompense acts unjustly. Even with consent and fair recompense, parties to "the deal" may act unjustly with regard to humans

[1] Rosemary Ruether (1992: 5) observes: "The word *nature* is used in four distinct senses in Western culture: (1) as that which is 'essential' to a being; (2) as the sum total of physical reality, including humans; (3) as the sum total of physical reality apart from humans; and (4) the 'created' world apart from God and divine grace." Similarly, C. S. Lewis (1947: 80f.) lists as contrast terms for "nature" and its correlate "natural": "artificial," "civil," "human," "spiritual," and "supernatural." In what follows I distinguish three progressively narrower usages. In the first, broadest sense, "nature" refers to the entire universe, everything that is other than God: *nature-as-creation* encompasses all finite entities and processes. A second, narrower sense designates the organic processes and inorganic substratum found on earth, *nature-as-biosphere*; like the first, it includes the distinctively human. A third sense, *wild nature*, signifies nature-as-biosphere-apart-from-the-distinctively-human. It is important to keep these distinctions in mind (Bookchin 1991: *xx*): "The greatest confusion has arisen as a result of the many and often-contradictory meanings imputed to the word ['nature']."

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