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0521811228 - Nature, God and Humanity: Envisioning an Ethics of Nature

Richard L. Fern

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NATURE, GOD AND HUMANITY

Nature, God and Humanity weaves together philosophical, scientific, religious, and cultural considerations to show why non-human animals and nature in general are proper objects of moral concern, and how our well-being depends on harmony with nature-as-created. The book clarifies the task of forming an ethics of nature, thereby empowering readers to develop their own critical, faith-based ethics.

Calling on original, thought-provoking analyses and arguments, Richard L. Fern frames a philosophical ethics of nature, assesses it scientifically, finds support for it in traditional biblical theism, and situates it culturally. Though defending the moral value of beliefs affirming the radical Otherness of God and human uniqueness, his book aims not to compel the adoption of any particular ethic but rather to illumine the contribution diverse forms of inquiry make to an ethics of nature. How does philosophy clarify moral conviction? What does science tell us about nature? Why does religious faith matter? Rejecting the illusion of a single, rationally compelling ethics, Fern answers these questions in a way that fosters both agreement and disagreement, allowing those holding conflicting ethics of nature to work together to end our current, foolish abuse of wild nature.

RICHARD L. FERN taught ethics for many years at the University of Illinois and Yale Divinity School. He is currently taking advantage of an early retirement to write on topics of interest.

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To Sally

In memory of our parents

Alex and Arden Post

Thelma and Ray Fern

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We should understand well that all things are the works of the Great Spirit. We should know that He is within all things: the trees, the grasses, the rivers, the mountains, and all the four-legged animals, and the winged peoples; and even more important, we should understand that He is also above all these things and peoples. When we do understand all this deeply in our hearts, then we will fear, and love, and know the Great Spirit, and then we will be and act and live as He intends.

Black Elk (Brown 1971: xx)

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Preface

This book originated in environmental ethics courses taught at Yale University during the years 1989 to 2000. As such, it owes a large debt to the students, undergraduate and graduate, mostly divinity and forestry, who listened and engaged, agreeing here, disagreeing there, forcing me to re-think and clarify one issue after the other. I trust that what follows repays some of that debt and, especially, makes clear why I asked them to read more than the standard texts, to wade through histories of ecology, philosophical arguments about the moral standing of animals and plants, theologies of creation, socio-political assessments of the environmental movement, so forth and so on. They were a hardy lot and I owe them much.

One thing I learned from them is that deep tensions exist in the way people think about nature. One tension appears in relation to modern science: a respect for and virtually automatic deference to what science tells us about nature is often combined with a no less genuine conviction that there is more to nature than a merely quantitative science can tell us. As to what this “more” might involve, lively affirmations of ecological spirituality appear arm-in-arm with a zealous distrust of religion. In both cases, science and religion, established ways of thinking, are affirmed with reservations, reservations tied to ethical concerns. In the first case, these concerns lead people to look for more in a recognized authority than is there; in the second, to a longing for the icing of faith apart from the hard cake of church and theology.

A third tension appeared as regards ethical concern itself. Many students whose ethical seriousness was evident saw virtually no value in the painstaking analyses and arguments of professional ethicists. At first, being an ethicist, I attributed this opinion to an intellectual vice, a lack of rigor, a prejudice. Attempting to do ethics without engaging moral philosophy makes no more sense than studying natural history while ignoring evolutionary biology. You may learn some interesting things from

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medieval bestiaries but you can certainly never expect to understand, yet alone master the subject. Why, then, I asked myself, do so many, not only students but otherwise learned books, assume it is possible to resolve moral questions about nature without engaging the studied deliberations of ethicists regarding such things as the moral status of animals, species, or nature-as-a-whole?

With time I realized ethical earnestness itself, oddly enough, prevents people from appreciating the seemingly endless analyses and arguments of ethicists, just as a desire to know and experience the deep, spiritual truth about nature can make people dissatisfied with the number-crunching of scientists and metaphysical musings of theologians. This, in turn, keyed my awareness of a fourth and comprehending tension. Whether my students envisioned the future in terms of a left-leaning ecological democracy, a right-leaning enlightened market, a return to the ways of native peoples, or, my own preference, the second coming of bioregional federalism, almost all agreed on the need for strong, morally limed communities – yet, at the same time, had a hard time imagining a life more constrained by oughts or others than the one they were currently living. Once again, they wanted a benefit without the institutional consequences or limitations. Science without numbers, God without sacred texts, ethics without argument, community without constraint.

In part, of course, this is a point about self-indulgence and it may seem I am about to launch into still another critique of modernity. That is not my intent. While there is clearly much to criticize, there is also something right, even profound, about the contradictory impulses of modernity. The tensions which appear are both moral and conceptual and, as such, reveal complex truths about human nature and good, truths that point toward a more wise and rewarding engagement with nature and, no less, ourselves. What I hope to show is not a way to escape these tensions by means of a heightened morality, a re-formulated science, or, even, a new conception of God, but, more modestly, a way to live with them, learn from them, keep them and us in balance.

My students, like all of us, were caught up in a cultural process characteristic of modernity, blinding them to the relevance of one specialized endeavor to another and, more tellingly, the relevance of specialized endeavors – science, theology, even ethics – to the fundamental, ethical task of living, here-and-now, day-by-day, with those we love, a truly good, fully human life, a life of which we can be justifiably proud. That is why they so often failed to see that smashing the world to bits and re-shaping it nearer to the heart's desire, life without limits, is not a live

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option – not only because the enemy is us but, more profoundly, because our critical awareness is rooted in and sustained by the institutions, the patterns of thought and behavior, the nature, our nature, we seek, rightly, to transcend.

That, in a nutshell, is the lesson on which I will expand in what follows. As regards the way in which I do, I need to say three things. First, with regard to the large number of references and footnotes: these situate points made, positions taken, in relation to the larger, often but not always academic literature; if you want to find valuable reflection, supporting or questioning what I claim, this is a good place to look. They do not “prove” the truth of my claims (by appeal to the authority of others) nor, counterwise, “disprove” the claims of those with whom I disagree. The value of this book lies in its overarching, synthetic vision, not a polemical engagement with other positions. While I do not hesitate to draw contrasts or make critical comments by way of developing my own contentious position, I realize that in virtually every case more has been and needs to be said – which leads me to my second and third points.

While I make and depend throughout on substantive, contentious claims about nature, God, and humanity, my primary goal is not to develop or defend any particular view but, rather, illuminate ways of thinking and arguing about such matters. How are we to bring philosophical ethics to bear on our ethical concerns about nature? What can and cannot modern science tell us about nature? What if any relevance does religious faith have to these concerns? How are we to put all this together and go about making the world a better place? My aim as regards each of these methodological concerns is to facilitate disagreement as much as agreement. Where substantive claims enter the picture is predominately by way of opening up this dialogue to those who have for various reasons been excluded in the recent past. Here we encounter a third, broader point and with it, a set of convictions regarding human life and society.

I write under the presumption that traditional biblical theism and, with it, the historic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – by which Western society has been shaped for better and for worse are an invaluable resource in coming to terms with the social and ecological crises of our time. In part, they are required to break the hold of falsely reductionist, sub-human ways of thinking about nature, God, and humanity. More important, they are needed to formulate positive visions of the future, visions of a just and good world erected on the inevitable ruins of yesterday’s society, our society, the shifting sands of history. We need in

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this regard to get people of faith involved, intellectually and socially. This is not an easy matter and here I seek to do only two things: one, reveal a little of what traditional theists can contribute to that endeavor and, two, show to all, especially traditional theists, the value of dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslims. It is only by coming together, honoring our agreements and disagreements, that we can advance, together and apart, our common interest in the good of creation.

That, then, is the project undertaken. In reaching the point where it now stands, I am indebted to many persons, ranging from Brother Brown, who shared with a small boy the mysteries of the Great Pyramid (and gave him his first book of theology), to Kevin Taylor, my editor at Cambridge, who saw value in the project and believed it possible to reduce a typescript three times longer to its current size and cohesion – a task much facilitated by Audrey Cotterell, my incisive copy-editor. The time does not exist (Kevin insists) to mention by name all those who enlightened the way in between, though note must be taken of my inspired teachers at North Hollywood High School, Oral Roberts University, and Perkins School of Theology (SMU), especially Joe Jones, who introduced me to the wit and wisdom of Wittgenstein, that indispensable modern; William Babcock, who put me in touch with the Irish saints, among whose spiritual descendants I was fortunate to be raised; Albert Outler, who uncovered the charismatic roots of apophatic theology; and Herndon Wagers, who insisted I take a closer look at Tillich's doctrine of the Trinity.

My greatest debt, academically, is to the philosophers and theologians with whom I studied at Yale during the 1970s and later taught during the 1980s and 1990s. It was a truly wonderful place to be, full of knowledge and, invariably, fruitful tension. Those familiar with their work will recognize the pleasure of being able to study with such strong and different individuals as Paul Holmer and William Christian, Michael Williams and Karsten Harries, John Smith and Ruth Barcan Marcus. I am sure I would have been unable to digest it were it not for the synthesizing conversations with my fellow graduate students, especially Phil Glotzbach. During those years I absorbed and, hopefully, develop herein something of "the Yale School." In that regard, I owe a special debt to two individuals, Hans Frei and Gene Outka. The position of theistic naturalism is at core an exercise in "figural interpretation," something I would never have imagined myself doing at the time I studied hermeneutics with Frei. In coming to appreciate the "generous orthodoxy" of Frei I have benefited immensely from studying and teaching with Outka. While no

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one in my experience values analytic distinctions more than he, all who know him will agree that in the end he, like his mentor Augustine, gives priority to a “both-and,” insisting, along with Frei and Barth, that God’s “yes” runs deeper than the “no” of human sin.

There are others still. James Wallace, a colleague at the University of Illinois, who taught me there had to be more to moral realism than compelling intuitions. In this regard, I was also fortunate, while a student at the Yale Law School, to study with a number of “Niebuhrian realists,” most especially, Steve Wizner and the late Robert Cover, both of whom, moved by their heritage and faith, gave priority to “people” over “theory,” allowing me to see that the fundamental harmony of faith and reason is not theoretical but practical and, therewith, moral. In putting the material together on which this book is based, I was advantaged greatly by the opportunity to teach with Steve Kellert, whose work on biophilia led me to look deeper into my own, Christian heritage and, in so doing, beyond standard appeals to stewardship. I was also fortunate during this time to meet and converse with Holmes Rolston, who encouraged me and on whose intellectual shoulders I have attempted to climb in my account of sentiosis. I am also much indebted to Peter Singer and Tom Regan, whose work first got me interested in these matters and to whom all the world, wild and human, owes a great debt. They represent a wide range of scholars, many cited in what follows, by way of agreement and disagreement, who have not forgotten the things that matter. This is especially true of Peter Ochs, whose careful, critical reading of the text not only made it better but led me to see more clearly the conceptual underpinnings and motivating concerns of this project.

The reference to origins and ends brings to mind the larger context of my life and with it the personal debt I owe to family and friends, many already mentioned. The most fortunate aspect of my life has been the number of good friends with whom I have been blessed from childhood. The saddest part has been the recurrent movement, the leaving behind of place after place, friend after friend. I cannot mention all, so let me simply say, to one and all, my deepest thanks. In each of you, I experienced a love and forbearance greater than I deserved, a grace greater than I gave in return. The same has proved true with regard to my family. My twin sister Annette and brother Bill, my stepson Clint, have given me much. Above all, without the encouragement and faith of my mother, Thelma Beesley Fern, I would never have dared pursue the education she was denied by the hard necessities of life. Caring for my father, Raymond William Fern, during the final four years of his life, while he struggled with cancer and

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Alzheimer's disease, delayed but greatly strengthened this project, teaching me that God is present in times of sorrow no less than joy – thanks in large measure to the wise counsel and helping hand of our good friend, Gregor Barnum. My wife Sally has been there in good times and bad, making all this possible and, in the process, enriching my life immeasurably. It is to her and, with her, all those, human and non-human, who have opened for me the rich wonder of God's strange creation that I dedicate this book.