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Enviromental Ethics

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All living things interact with their surroundings. The surroundings, both biotic and abiotic, are collectively called the environment. For most living things, the range of responses to the environment which they may exhibit seems to be limited and controlled by innate patterns of response elicited by particular stimuli. For some species, specifically those with more advanced reasoning capabilities, the range of responses goes beyond the inherited, innate patterns to include a wide variety of other possible actions. Man, of course, is such a species.

Over a period of time, it has become clear that humans are capable of actions that may enhance or detract from the quality of life. Humans have increasingly sought to detach themselves from their environment and frequently make decisions or perform acts which, that seemingly desirable in the short term or for humans specifically, have the capacity of damaging or destroying the life-support systems of the environment on which humans depend. It becomes necessary, therefore, to find a way of distinguishing between desirable activities and undesirable activities, to create a morality of appropriate and inappropriate behavior.

What I hope to do here is to explore some criteria which might be used to evaluate the appropriateness of human interactions with the environment or to develop, as it were, an acceptable pattern of behavior - an environmental ethic. I will try to do this in a way so as to avoid suggesting how we should bring the ethic about. I will try instead, to pull together some of the elements that I think need to be a part of that set of beliefs. The development of such an ethic will need to occur on two levels, personal and societal.

On a personal basis, I wish to live a satisfying life and to pass that possibility on to those I love. I want to develop an ethic consistent with that desire. Development of a personal ethic consistent with survival, however, will not, in itself, be sufficient. Since society at large is still behaving in accordance with a set of values which will destroy all life on the planet, and since I have no way of stepping aside that the society self-destructs, society must also be redirected. Society must also develop a set of beliefs values and behavior consistent with planetary survival.

A personal ethic would most likely spring, as a matter of consequence, from a societal ethic. A societal ethic, however, will not arise, as a matter of course, from a personal one.

For my part, I find life in the natural world to be both beautiful and fulfilling. I have been unable to find any of man's creations capable of evoking in me the level of feelings which Nature evokes on a regular basis. On a personal level, then, I would preserve the environment as a stage on which to act out my own

existence in the richest possible setting. This suggests that in the course of living I must not destroy the richness.

Meanwhile, what I will call society, meaning simply the average daily activities of the human race, views the natural world as pleasant or pretty at times, but generally considers it as space to do something in or as a substance to do something with. Even though society is bound absolutely and inexorably to the environment, it has developed a view of Nature that assures the destruction of Nature and, therefore, the destruction of society. As a practical matter, society must be "saved" if I am to save myself.

It must be stated at the onset that if man is to develop a different ethical basis for his behavior, that development will come about by evolution and not by revelation. What I am attempting to do here is to bring together a series of evolutionary ideas that I have come across or thought of in three decades of examining the topic.

Listed below are seven principles which I will examine more fully:

1. We need to develop a concept of sufficiency or "enoughness."
2. We must recognize the inherent rights of nature and natural systems to survive intact.
3. We must limit human numbers to the true carrying capacity of the Earth.
4. We must develop an economic system based on equality of exchange, not profit. (as traditionally defined)
5. We must develop an industrial process that maximizes recycling and minimizes through-put of materials.
6. We must develop an economic system that favors life-sustaining processes.
7. We must live consciously so as to be aware of the results of our collective needs.

Each of these principles has, of course, many corollaries, some of which may deserve the status of a principle.

Principle One: We need to develop a concept of sufficiency or enoughness. There may have been a time when the search for sufficiency was not relevant, but that is unlikely. Gluttony has probably always caused both the environment and the glutton significant harm. That either or both may have recovered is not adequate reason to believe the act or acts of over-indulgence inconsequential.

In an effort to establish an ethical basis by which to judge how much wealth is enough and how much is excessive, one might turn to Immanuel Kant's (1985) concept of categorical imperatives. That concept, which holds that we can only

accept an action as right if we can will that the action be universally accepted, is not generally applied to environmental matters. This is supposedly done, or more accurately not done, because the categorical imperative rests solidly on the inherent dignity of man as a rational being. His dignity is independent of whatever else we may hold to be true of his character or utility. Since the environment is not rational, it, by this definition, lacks inherent dignity, and it is for that reason that efforts to apply the concept to the environment have been rejected as inappropriate.

It can be shown that while the environment cannot be said to be rational, it can be seen that rational man cannot exist without it. Consider the example of gluttony. We may find, that while many gluttons would likely recover from these excesses as easily as would a single glutton, the ability of the environment to recover its former quality when damaged by the gluttony of many, is lost. Therefore, man is destined to suffer as a direct result of his gluttony acting on the environment. Thus, as Robinson Jeffers (9) put it, "We must love organic wholeness, not man apart from that."

Through the excessive accumulation of material wealth a person limits the ability of others to acquire such material wealth. This is so, even though in a philosophical sense no inherent threat to a person's dignity seems to exist, by willing that wealth be universally acquired. The threat does exist, however, because the ability to acquire wealth is limited by the availability of resources in the environment. Any behavior that we would will to be universally acceptable must, therefore, take into account his dependency on the environment on which his life depends. Just as Kant (1985) argued that suicide had to ultimately be held to be wrong because it was an affront to the dignity of life, any act that leads to the destruction of earth's life sustaining ability must also be wrong. If taking one's own life is wrong, taking the lives of millions cannot be less so. It follows then, that the destruction of the Earth's ability to sustain life is wrong.

One might suspect, as well, that a more forceful case exists for extending the realm of ethical behavior to include environmental matters. In arguing that "I should never act otherwise than I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law," Kant (1985) poses a proposition for which the conditions are unattainable.

What appears obvious is that one could never know anything to be universally acceptable without having a complete knowledge of the universe. Unless we accept the assertion that considerable knowledge of the Universe was known to Kant which is not now known to us, we must, I think, recognize that categorical imperatives, by definition, cannot yet exist. All imperatives are thus prudential, i.e., prudent if their outcomes are desirable.

When a person's whole world was limited to a few hundred square miles of African veldt, it was unlikely that her concepts of right and wrong would have taken into account the impact of her actions on polar bears (hence eskimos)

or the ozone layer (hence all terrestrial life). In one case the possibility of an impact was unknown, and in the other, it did probably not exist.

For some small band of humans wandering the veldt, we can see that even the most philosophical of them could hardly imagine their connection to polar ecosystems. Furthermore, because of their number and lifestyle, all waste products from their culture would have moved smoothly into the bio-geochemical pathways of the ecosystem, posing no threat to the ozone layer.

Then what we must come to accept is that as our knowledge of the biosphere increases, we will have to continue to reevaluate what is prudent. A prudent ethic of "take only what you can eat," that served the small population of hunters and gatherers quite well, would decimate remaining wild populations if practiced by the present human population.

Not only have we not developed a philosophy of enoughness, we often encourage the behavior of excess with economic favors. For example, we allow a glutton to give tax sheltered donations for the purpose of alleviating some of the harm done by the gluttony. This practice simply further rewards the abuser. Allowing someone to destroy a natural system and then to attempt restoration codifies the behavior as acceptable. Would we grant a man who takes the life of an entire human community the same honor? Suppose that he murdered, pillaged and burned a town and then offered later to rebuild and repopulate it. Would we then condone his earlier act? I think not. It is even less likely that we would hire him to perform the dastardly act and then later, praise him for the rebuilding effort.

The above principle is derived, at least in part, from Edmund Burke's observation that "Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without." Our task is to define enoughness, within and without.

Principle Two states, we must recognize the inherent rights of nature and natural systems to survive intact. In order to do this, we will need to move far beyond our current view of nature as the backdrop for human activities. There are certainly pragmatic reasons for doing so. Eugene Odum suggests that there is more information of a higher and more sophisticated kind stored in a few square yards of forest than there is in all our libraries (Miller 1982). This alone calls for its preservation.

Our recognition of nature cannot, however, be based on a value drawn from some perceived good that nature can do for us. This would allow destruction to occur in the future, as was done in the past, whenever we failed to recognize the value, present or not.

Our ethic should recognize the inherent right of nature in much the same way that we grant certain inalienable rights to any human, irrespective of his stature.

Leopold (1966) said that:

[A] thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of a biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.

Leopold offers a good place to begin working on principle two.

One of the most easily grasped, *Principle Three*, is that of carrying capacity. Principle Three states that we must limit human numbers to the true carrying capacity of the Earth. This principle may give us a means of integrating the first two principles. How much is enough? Perhaps that can be best evaluated by asking whether the level of activity or consumption would tend to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the natural system if ALL humans demanded as much. If so, one would not have exceeded the maximum acceptable level.

As Garrett Hardin (1980) notes, we often fail to use the concept of carrying capacity correctly by failing to recognize all of the elements in need of consideration. He points out that while we can expand the amount of food available and thereby allow a starving population to expand well-fed, we have not altered the carrying capacity of the environment since we cannot expand the areas of wilderness, free flowing rivers, solitude, etc. Application of the second principle to the idea of carrying capacity will almost certainly show the earth's human population to already have surpassed its true carrying capacity.

A study by Vitousek, et.al., (1986) indicates that the human race already usurps over 40

Principles Four and Five are closely intertwined and yet separate in fundamental scope. Principle number four states that we must develop an economic system based on equality of exchange, i.e., no profit. This principle, is an extension of a concept set forth by Adlai Stevenson (1965) in the mid-60's. Speaking before the U.N. on world development, he said:

We cannot maintain it (the Earth) half fortunate, half miserable, half confident, half despairing, half slave to the ancient enemies of man, half free in a liberation of resources undreamed of until this day. No craft (Earth), no crew can travel safely with such vast contradictions. On their resolution depends the survival of us all.

I believe that the inherent truth of Stevenson's statement is obvious to anyone with the courage to consider it. While the truth is abundantly clear, the ethical solution is less easily arrived at. The reason for this difficulty is that the mere reading and understanding of this statement smacks of equality, equality in a world that thrives on economic superiority, where more is better, where enough is almost never achieved.

I suspect that each of us may also recognize another aspect of this equation. That aspect is that profit only exists where unequal trades occur. When the worker demands just compensation for his work, i.e., to be paid for the value added by his/her effort, the employer balks. After all, the employer must get his profit between the cost of production and the sales price. The employers value as a person, his self image, is based on his ability to make a substantial profit for himself and his stockholders. In addition, our system says that next year that margin of profit must grow. Thoreau (1966) mused:

If I devote myself to other pursuits, and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them setting on another man's shoulders. I must get off him first, that he may pursue his contemplations too.

The present trend of enslaving foreign workers to produce American goods is a glaring statement of quite the opposite of Thoreau's urging. Our shipments of hazardous waste to the third world for cheaper disposal are quite the same. If we pay the true costs for our goods, all down the line, we shall not likely break even, let alone make money. We need to develop an economy that reflects this concept. That economy would accept that our gain in trade will not be in the form of profit, but rather in the acquisition of some item that we can't produce efficiently for one that we can or for food we can't grow for that which we can. If we give a person in accordance with what we have gotten, the fair exchange will yield no profit. It is by cheating others slightly on each exchange that we profit slightly. If we profit slightly often enough, we can become wealthy.

In order that those who have had their monies taken unfairly from them may use the money, they must now retrieve the money from those who have unjustly acquired it. The money is borrowed and interest is paid for its use, thereby tipping the balance even more. Furthermore, society often provides tax breaks for investors of wealth such that they are not taxed on their ill-gotten money. This allows for the money to be "put back" into the economy to build factories to further the process of transferring the wealth from the many to the few.

As time goes by and the predictable outcome is achieved, the policy makers make bold pronouncements as to how this trend will be reversed by greater investment. We, I would argue, are not accurately interpreting the information. Wendell Berry (1987) put it this way:

We do now have an apparent surplus of people in this country: the unemployed and the allegedly "unemployable". But if our society cannot usefully contain all its members, then the fault may lie in the social pattern and not in its members. That there are too many may be a perception of a bad way of life. If too many people are in the wrong places, using too much power, consuming too many goods,

accumulating too much wealth, then, inevitably, there will be too many elsewhere who will be poor, weak, and useless.

The *Fifth Principle*, that we must develop an industrial process which maximizes recycling and minimizes through-put of materials seems so obvious as to be unworthy of mention. In and of itself perhaps it is, but it gets inextricably intertwined with principles 1 and 6. It is, of course, linked to the others as well. In a finite world, and surely most responsible thinkers would acknowledge that it is finite, a limit exists to every resource. We may not know what that limit is, but knowing that a limit exists should cause us to establish public use policy such that the resource can serve as many individuals as possible for as long as possible.

During the early 70's, a bit of wisdom was floating about which was attributed to an African chieftain. It stated that the Earth belonged to three groups: those now dead, those now living, and those yet to be born. Of these groups, the largest is that group yet to be born. This contention is almost certainly true. Barring a nuclear holocaust or destruction of the Earth by environmental stupidity, the future populations of humans, though smaller at any given time, are capable of sustaining themselves until our life giving star falters. This would speak, then, of countless billions of humans yet to be born.

Bearing the aforementioned in mind, we need to use every bit of ingenuity to maximize the recycling potential of our industrial processes. Thus, we can prevent the dissipation of the resources throughout the environment where they would remain unavailable until a new era of geophysical activity concentrates them. Processes which cannot be made to conform to the needs of such industrial realignment must be abandoned. Once implemented, this new wave of redesigned industrial processes would make most forms of environmental pollution obsolete.

Implementation of this principle will turn our claims of durability, reusability and recyclability from advertising cliches into working realities. Madison Avenue will then need to learn how to make honest ads.

The sixth principle states that we must develop an economic system that favors and encourages life-sustaining processes such as maximizing biological diversity, producing clean air and water and maintaining soil fertility. In December of 1988, the world's people were pouring huge amounts of resources and heartfelt grief into Armenia to alleviate the suffering of earthquake survivors. Our present mentality led us to rush to rebuild the shattered cities on the pulverized rubble of the past. While this no doubt brought temporary relief to the survivors, it guaranteed that we will, necessarily, repeat the process many times as the young earth continues to flex and bend.

Let us learn to use the precious resources to build in areas least likely to be smitten by the cataclysmic acts of nature. We need to abandon our arrogan-

t policy of pouring massive resources into trying to overwhelm these natural processes and work to avoid confronting them.

The process of redesigning the Earth's economic structure around its life supporting systems will call for our best intellectual effort. We will need to work toward creating an economy that will gainfully employ people doing what truly needs to be done and that allows for optimal fulfillment of the hopes and aspirations of the workers.

Principle Seven, restated, is that we must live consciously so as to be aware of the results of our collective needs. This last of the seven principles set forth in this discussion has its roots in a number of related ideas. As stated, I suppose it springs most directly from a Zen Buddhist monk's article on "Being Aware." In that article, Thich Nhat Hanh (3) recounts a story about a man astride a horse that is galloping very rapidly. Another man, standing beside the road calls to the rider as he flashes past, "Where are you going?" The rider shouts back, "I don't know. Ask the horse!"

Duane Elgin captures much the same idea in *Voluntary Simplicity* (Elgin 1982) when he calls for us to live more consciously, being aware of what things and what persons our lives touch and what effects we have on them.

Since I am now teaching the children of the children whom I first taught, I can now speak of having been studying this issue for an entire generation. What I have seen is not at all new, of course, but it is seen at a different time and in new circumstances. I think that most, if not all, of the people. I have occasion to meet, want to preserve the human species and, day-to-day, do not believe that they are involved in its destruction. They are simply doing their thing to earn a living. If there are those about, particularly intuitive perhaps, who know that they are involved, either directly or indirectly, in our destruction, they really believe that no other choice exists for them. In a stanza from the old poem, *Good Intentions*, St. Clair Adams (Morris and Adams 1921) says: ¶POEM¶I've met few men who are monsters When I came to know them inside; Yet their bearing and dealings external Are crusted with cruelty, pride, Scorn, selfishness, envy, indifference, Greed - why the long list pursue?

Indeed, we each know one - are one! But, as he adds: ¶POEM¶The good that they would they do not; But the evil they would not they do.

We are caught up in a self-constructed trap that we continue to curse and build! What is more important is that we pay the highest rewards and grant the most prestige to the best trap builders. Call it the way we view the situation, our perspective, a paradigm, or a world view. By whatever name we call it, the result is that we have elevated the most destructive individuals to positions of respect and scarcely acknowledge those among us who offer real hope.

In *Entropy*, Jeremy Rifkin (1982) says that our current view of who we are

and what we are all about dates to the mechanistic philosophies of Newton around 1700. This philosophy, he points out, leads one to believe that growth is inevitable, that bigger is better, and that more of almost anything is to be sought. Our institutions are then established to further our view of this philosophy. For more than a quarter of a century I have been judged a good teacher because my students can join the ranks of people working to dismantle the planet. How tragic. Virtually every one of us finds himself or herself astride that galloping horse, not knowing where we are going, but glad to be in the race.

When we look back can we see the Earth laid bare by the horse's appetite, pulverized by its hooves, and contaminated by its sweat. Only when we are honest with ourselves can we recognize the over-population, starvation, species eradication, pollution, toxic wastes, homeless people, and the long list of other social ills as a direct result of a flawed philosophy. Only when we are conscious of our activities on a day-to-day basis can we hope to take the reins and make the horse go where we wish to have it go.

Like the call of the American Heart Association for Americans to cut their fat intake from 37

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