

Ethics and the Sea

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The ocean is an immense, mystical, mysterious, powerful, and beautiful body of water, in the words of Tony Topalian (Sea Wind, April-June, 1988). Furthermore, it is a liquid part of the immense, mystical, mysterious, powerful, and beautiful world. In other words, the ocean is one essential ecosystem (home-system) of the greater Ecosphere (Home-sphere) that, like a bubble-film, clings to the surface of the planet. From it-- in some magical way--organic life has come.

The human species, one life-form among millions, lives in the bubble-film at the interfaces of air-land, ocean-air, and ocean-land. Evolutionary history suggests that the molecules-that-reproduce-themselves-and-form-protoplasm were first encouraged to do so at the ocean-land and ocean-air shores. Thus, the ocean mothered organic life, and continues to nurture its ever changing variety today.

As animals dependent on sight, humans see those things that block and reflect the light within transparent air and water. From this they have supposed that objects observed within the Ecosphere and the sectoral ecosystem that comprise it are indeed

separate and self-supporting. The fiction follows that marine fishes exist as things-in-themselves apart from the ocean, and that dandelion flowers and floating seeds are not a part of the air.

On land the same fiction holds that people exist alone, surrounded by substances that do not have much value--air, water, land, and the products thereof.

Pressing on with this logic (that turns out to be ill-logic), the Ecosphere with its ocean, land, and air components is divided by one-eyed science into two classes: those objects that are abiotic, inorganic, inanimate and dead, and those that are biotic, organic, animate, and alive. Primary importance is attached to the second category. Small wonder that people direct their moral concerns and ethical activities first to themselves and then, with a little enlightenment, to look-alikes: the large animals.

The truth is that life is not a function of smart replicating molecules nor of their aggregations as protoplasm. Life is a function of the Ecosphere and its three-dimensional, sectoral ecosystems--seas and continents and their regional and local sub-divisions--for these larger enveloping systems over eons of time brought forth living things and provided for their support and reproduction.

Without the so-called abiotic, no biotic would exist; without the so-called inanimate, nothing would be animated. The inorganic provides for the organic, and on the wheel of life mortality, the down-side, provides for vitality, the up-side. The world is your body, said the philosopher Alan Watts, and

he was right. How long will a body last without internalizing the energy and materials that the world so beneficently provides?

The Ecosphere with its volumetric ecosystems is greater, grander, and more creative than any of the lesser components. The ocean is more important than the fishes that swim in it, the air is more important than the birds that fly in it, the land is more important than the people that walk on it. This is the truth that few believe.

Morality and ethics express human values, and human values enter consciousness as the sense of importance. Peoples' expressions of right and wrong are translations of what they believe to be important: it is wrong to kill people; one shouldn't kill more than six ducks a day; it is OK to pour pollutants into the ocean and kill the inshore waters. These value judgments signal the conventional hierarchy of importance.

If only people are thought to be important, as many religions teach, then ethical action will be homo-centric and let the world be damned. If only living things are considered important, ethical action will be bio-centric, expressing in its higher form a reverence for all creatures great and small, but still by default letting the greater world be damned.

When the essential ecological message is understood, that the Ecosphere, the home-sphere, the Home of all homes, is of surpassing importance, then ethics will be eco-centric and people will not allow the world to be damned. Then love and respect for the world will bring sensitive, compassionate, ethical treatment of its land, atmosphere, and seas.

The land will be maintained in beauty and health because it is venerated, and not for the crops it produces. The air will be kept clean, fresh, and unpolluted, not because of anti-asthma campaigns and fears of greenhouse gases but because of its intrinsic value. And the ocean will be revered not for the riches of its waters but as the mysterious heart of the planet that continually draws us back to its shores.

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