

This is your Mother Calling

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This year in April I took the Great Lakes Toxic Tour, visiting on the USA side of the Niagara River, the Love Canal, Hyde Park, and other infamous dumps that are threatening the water supply and health of millions.

To see the ghost-community with its boarded-up houses, schools, churches, is to get the eery feeling of what the whole world will be like when we have poisoned it to death. The only way that the human race can do itself in, finally and completely, is by destroying the life-giving and life-supporting environment. To treat it ethically is suddenly of more consequence than treating animals or even other humans ethically. The topic of ethics and environment is no longer one for academic discussion only; it is for everyone a subject of intense and immediate importance.

Ethics is a branch of philosophy which may seem to put it outside the daily concerns of average people with ecological interests. But two points bring it literally down to earth. The first. the insight of Cathy Starrs of Environment Canada who has spent many years attempting to get philosophers and lay-people thinking about environmental issues, is that the common denominator of ethics in practice is the idea of caring, or responsibility in actions. To be ethical toward the environment is to care about it and to take responsibility for it.

Secondly, the developing field of knowledge called ecology urges on ethicists and philosophers a radical idea--all but lacking in the heavy thinkers from Plato to Nietzsche--namely, that the world environment, the Ecosphere, has supreme values. The planet Earth swinging around the sun is at least as important as the people catching a ride on it. The environment merits ethical concern.

Here some may suggest that every thinking person today accepts the importance of environment. True, but only because its deterioration causes human discomfort. The intrinsic value of the world escapes us. Society's focus is determinedly people-centred. We are humanists first and last. We are also utilitarians, seeking immediately the greatest good for the greatest number by drawing on the planetary resource bank as if its assets were unlimited.

Thoreau was one of a small minority who battled against our culture's deeply ingrained utilitarianism. "The world," he said, "is more beautiful than it is useful," which means, I suppose, that admiration for it should be set above what we can get out of it--just as one ought to marvel at Canada's fast-disappearing wilderness and at the forlorn National Parks--before sitting down with pencil and paper to figure out how to make money out of them.

Ecophilosophers in Thoreau's tradition are reappearing. They are attempting to reorganize human knowledge and to re-orient human attitudes toward the reality that has been glimpsed from outer

space: a blue, cloud-swathed planet, a luminous cell, a living world. the Gaia-goddess in James Lovelock's description.

A formidable obstacle to the new ecophilosophy (and also to a science of ecosystems) was identified by Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan's insight that environment is hard to conceive. "We don't know who discovered water," he remarked by way of parable, "but we're fairly certain it wasn't a fish."

Unaware of our life-sustaining milieu, not perceiving the Earth's skin as the larger system that encloses all life including the human race, we proceed blithely along a trail called "progress" that seemed the only way to go when it was first blazed four or five centuries ago. Descartes, Bacon, Galileo, Kepler--heroes who sparked the Age of Enlightenment--bequeathed the attitudes and the mental tools that have brought us to where we are today. Their legacy of science as both knowledge and technique is part of the environmental problem.

Science is a cultural pursuit that has sprung from a particular Western tradition, a certain way of viewing the universe. Therefore science, like the philosophers whose ideas perfected it, is profoundly non-ecological in its assumptions and fundamental premises. For science is far more than a method of solving problems. It begins with a certain view of how the world is, of what is important to know about it, and of what to do with it. At its roots, science accepts the idea of a dead universe whose realities are material and mechanical, a value-free world meant to be turned to human uses. Science is ethically oriented to people, not to the encompassing environment. Hence the technology that science spins off is by and large, environmentally destructive.

Governments support science and scientists because of the public's belief that science/technology will make life easier and better, stimulating the economy, providing jobs. And indeed science/technology has done just that. But the price of material benefits is environmental deterioration. Here is the pronouncement of one philosopher-ecologist, Joseph Meeker: "For four centuries science has been regarded as an instrument for manipulating Nature, rather than as a means by which humanity may participate more knowingly in Nature's processes."

When frustrated and angry because of someone's unacceptable behavior we sometimes ask indignantly: "Just who do you think you are?" The question should be asked of all of us, frequently, and not in anger, for it is the most profound of questions. Who we think we are determines how we act, and what things we will act responsibly and ethically toward. Every society and culture shares beliefs or paradigms that answer the question "Who do you think you are?"

The environmental crisis challenges the traditional paradigm that tells us that each is an autonomous individual, a spark *of* life in a largely "abiotic" world, outside Nature and destined to shape her to whatever forms are desired. Riley Dunlop has called this the Exemptionalist Paradigm, for it assumes that human ingenuity, especially science and technology, exempt people from all the environmental limits that constrain other species. He contrasts this with the realistic Ecological Paradigm that places humanity as part of a larger living system on which its dependence is absolute. Because people are not exempted from ecological constraints they must creatively seek a gentler and softer kind of science/technology in order to develop a symbiotic relationship with the world. Valuing the latter will make of it an ethical object.

In 1985 the Law Reform Commission produced a Working Paper called "Crimes against the Environment". Although the document tiptoes carefully and conservatively into a most important issue, it nonetheless bespeaks the emergence of a new ethical attitude that is cause for optimism. We

should be outraged when the world ecosystem is abused. It ***should*** be a crime to act in ways that depreciate the health and beauty of the Ecosphere.

Unfortunately, for most people the only ethical objects remain, incorrigibly, humans and humans only. At the universities, practical and applied ethics means people-problems in law, medicine, commerce, and science. The Golden Rule does not, however, speak directly to such disasters as the Love Canal.

In Canada and in every country we humans need to raise our sights and make of the world an ethical object, conceiving and perceiving it to be a higher level of integration than people and other organisms that apparently, through some generative miracle, were produced by it.

Rarely do political leaders preach this message. but here are the words of the Prime Minister of Japan as he spoke to the Canadian Parliament in January of this year:

"We must rid ourselves of arrogance toward Mother Nature. Japan's traditional religion teaches that Nature is the mother of all creatures, and all living things are essentially brothers and sisters in the natural universe. Such philosophy is not exclusively that of the Orient but can also be found on other continents. Needless to say, I am not suggesting that religions unique to different peoples should be united under one great Oriental theology. Instead, I submit that it is perhaps high time for us to redirect our thinking towards the basic feelings of awe, intimacy, respect, and love toward nature which mankind has had over the millennia, and to appreciate afresh what they mean to us today. When such reorientation has started on a global scale, what I call the grand enterprise *of establishing a new global ethic* will have begun."

Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone has clearly phrased the ideal and the necessity for the world's people, tying it to the religious roots of all. Current trends suggest that unless the message is taken to heart, unless ethical concern is extended beyond people to the creative world, unless an environmental ethic overrides all others, humanity is in for very hard times.

[Other Ecocentric Texts](#)