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Down to Earth Ethics: Exploring Relation and Environmental Responsibility

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

DOWN TO EARTH ETHICS: EXPLORING RELATION
AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
PROGRAM IN THEOLOGY

BY

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the question of direct engagement with the natural world as a way of establishing certain moral and ontological truths, truths that can be important for addressing ecological challenges. I first attempt to demonstrate the obstacles that an ethics built upon relational encounters faces in the modern West by considering the practical and ideological factors that structure our current views and relationships with the natural world. I argue that the problem is not necessarily a cosmopolitan lifestyle, but a modern worldview that has adopted the objectification of the earth and its living entities, a view which has obstructed our awareness of values in the natural world. To challenge this predominant worldview, I draw on the works of Albert Schweitzer, Martin Buber, and Aldo Leopold which demonstrate an ethics that is relational in nature, action oriented, and bound up in the mystery of life and being. They support the proposition that the heart of ethical responsibility in general, and the motive to care for nature in particular, are caught up in the unfathomable puzzle of relation. The implications of this for environmental ethics are profound and I spell these out. If these three authors are correct, today's science, philosophy, and religious dialogue need to be supplemented with engaged encounters with life. In the final section I consider gardening, small farming, and ecosystem restoration projects as practical methods for realizing the ethical and ontological boons that these thinkers envisioned.

INTRODUCTION

Winona LaDuke, a Native American and Harvard graduate, has made the bold assertion that the only sustainable ways of living upon this earth are indigenous ways.¹ She bases her claim upon the premise that indigenous cultures abide by a “natural law,” a way of life that engenders relationship, reciprocity, and gratitude. Similarly, Audrey Shenandoah, Clan Mother of the Onondaga Nation in New York, has stressed that indigenous peoples of the world have a “basic principle of respect, a deep love for the land, a very real connection, a relationship to all of those elements that are mentioned in [their] thanksgiving.”² These authors, uniting their voices with others, believe that the modern world is out of step with a natural order, something which has both led to our current environmental problems and frustrated our efforts to solve them.

Reflection on these views reminds us to be wary of romanticization. Indigenous ways have never been easy, convenient, or glamorous, nor are such communities a future

¹ Winona LaDuke, “Voices from White Earth” in Susan Armstrong and Richard Botzler *Environmental Ethics: Divergence & Convergence*, 248.

² See Audrey Shenandoah’s keynote address at the fall 1990 “Spirit and Nature” symposium at Middlebury College, reprinted in Steven Rockefeller and John Elder work *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a religious Issue*, 20.

likelihood for modern humans.³ Yet, honest reflection should also cause us to stop and consider: In what meaningful way do we encounter nonhuman life today? Certainly not in the meat or produce sections of the local market. By the time nature reaches the aisles of the grocery store, it confronts us not as living being, but as an object, a commodity of consumption. Our relationship with the natural world is secondary, mediated by city life and technology.⁴ Urbanization and a division of labor into narrow tasks and disciplines has successfully replaced subsistence living for exchange economies which demand specialization. The tradeoff has been one way of life defined by intimate contact with living things for another defined by modern convenience and security.

From this perspective, one would be hard pressed to say that the trade has not been worth it. It means we have climate controlled environments, inoculations against disease, refrigeration and plumbing. It means literacy rates have increased and mortality rates have decreased. And yet, indigenous peoples the world over, despite these obvious benefits, declare that modern civilization has lost something basic to human nature. Could today's estrangement from the living world deprive us of something real and

³ There is also the debate that indigenous cultures like the Native Americans were simply less empowered to do damage to their environment, and that they would have given greater technological advancements. It is not my intention to engage this debate. It can be safely said, however, that many such groups like the Lokota, the Salish-speaking people and the Mistassini Cree have developed complex myths and rituals to maintain respect for the earth the living things on it. While these people had the knowledge and skill to exploit their resources, the myths and rituals they believed in regulated hunting practices so as not to overtax animal populations. Refer to David Kinsley's text *Ecology and Religion*, chapters 1-4. See also John A. Grim, "Native North American Worldviews and Ecology," in *Worldviews and Ecology*, 41-54.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, 283-317.

important? Referring to the respect and obligation the Lakota Indians felt for living things, Luther Standing Bear wrote the following nearly eighty years ago:

This concept of life and its relations was humanizing and gave to the Lakota an abiding love. It filled his being with the joy and mystery of living; it gave him reverence for all life; it made a place for all things in the scheme of existence with equal importance to all.... In spirit the Lakota was humble and meek.... His religion was sane, normal, and human.⁵

Standing Bear's reference to nature's humanizing effect is particularly noteworthy. It suggests that direct engagement with natural world and the ethical life are interconnected. Recent studies have suggested that Standing Bear's observation was not misplaced. According to a three year study lead by Netta Weinstein, a University of Rochester psychologist, immersion in nature made people less greedy and self-interested, and more concerned with community values. Weinstein concludes: "Our results suggest that, to the extent our links with nature are disrupted, we may also lose some connection with each other."⁶

Such findings are troubling considering that the modern industrial world is caught up in an economic system and way of life that obstructs sustained intimate contact with nature. The world is steadily on the move toward a modern urban lifestyle. According to U.S. census figures, 6% of the U.S. population was urban in 1800. By 1900 that statistic had risen to 40% and by 2000 it was 79% of the population.⁷ Still, many societies across

⁵ Luther Standing Bear, "Nature," in *This Sacred Earth*, edited by Roger Gottlieb, 40.

⁶ Weinstein, et al. (2009). "Can Nature Make Us More Caring? Effects of Immersion in Nature on Intrinsic Aspirations and Generosity." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 35, 1315-1329.

⁷ U.S. census figures taken from www.census.gov/population/censusdata/table-4.pdf (accessed 8/31/2011).

the globe remain rural and are physically closer to nature. However, the United Nations World Population Reference Bureau has estimated that, whereas in 1800 only 3% of the world population was urban, by 1900 it was 14%, and by 1950 it was 30%. In 2008 the urban world population reached 50%, and the U.N. projects that by 2050, 70% of the world population will be living a modern urban lifestyle.⁸

Objective and Method of the Dissertation

The aim of this dissertation is to explore the question of direct engagement with the natural world as a way of establishing certain moral and ontological truths, truths that may be important for addressing our current environmental struggles. To achieve this objective, the work is divided into three distinct movements. The first part, contained in Chapter One, attempts to demonstrate the formidable obstacles that an ethics built upon relational encounters faces in the modern West. Before any argument for the importance of relation in the ethical life can be made, it is essential to have some appreciation of the factors that limit it as a possibility from the start. Above, I have taken a brief look at the practical impediments we face such as an exchange economy founded upon a division of labor that rewards specialization and narrowness at the expense the “bigger picture,” and the trend toward urbanization that accompanies it. However, these practical factors have deep theological and philosophical roots that must also be examined. How we view the earth and its living beings largely determines what sort of relationship we expect to exist between us and the natural world. I hope to show that the problem is not necessarily a

⁸ U.N. statistics taken from www.prb.org/Educators/TeachersGuides/HumanPopulation/Urbanization.aspx. Accessed on 8/21/2011.

cosmopolitan lifestyle, but a modern worldview that has adopted the objectification of the earth and its living entities, a view which has obstructed our awareness of values in the natural world.

The second part, comprising chapters two, three and four, will examine the works of Albert Schweitzer, Martin Buber and Aldo Leopold, in the attempt to show that all three demonstrate an ethics that is relational in nature, action oriented, and bound up in the mystery of the other. Consequently, these thinkers are also critical of a world which bases the whole of reality solely on the logic of rational investigation and the material facts of science. They support the proposition that the heart of ethical responsibility in general, and the motive to care for nature in particular, are caught up in the unfathomable puzzle of relation. The implications of this for environmental ethics are profound and the final chapter will spell these out. If our goal as environmental educators or religious professionals is normative and not just descriptive, if our hope is to increase awareness and care for all life, what philosophical arguments, scientific analyses, or even religious doctrines say will not be sufficient to generate sincere motivation. In fact, they may have little more than rhetorical effect. If these three authors are correct, today's science, philosophy, and religious dialogue need to be supplemented with engaged encounters with life.

The third movement of this dissertation, contained in the fifth chapter, attempts to place the essentialness of engaged encounters established in chapters two, three, and four and into the frame of praxis. It highlights the need to focus on concrete practices that can

plunge us into natural relationships and re-attune our inherent aptitude to perceive being. After drawing the important connections between Schweitzer, Buber, and Leopold on the matter of relational ethics, I will consider gardening, small farming, and ecosystem restoration projects as practical methods for realizing the ethical and ontological boons that these thinkers envisioned. I conclude in this section that gardening activities can renew our appreciation for an enlivened world, relieve us from the estranging effects of technology, and address the long standing antagonism toward nature in major streams of modern Western societies. It is an approach to environmental ethics that is tangible, accessible, and that can directly work on the habits and character of the person.

Contribution of the Dissertation

There are three primary contributions that this dissertation makes. The first is that it challenges the popular rational, empirical, and doctrinal approaches for doing ethics and attempts to reestablish the central importance of relation as a resource for certain ethical and ontological insights. Specifically for the field of environmental ethics, it suggests that, in order to enlist others in the effort to care for the natural world, there needs to be more than purely reflection on intrinsic value and on enlightened self-interest. I attempt to make the case that the subtle awareness of inherent value is discerned in “the other,” not figured out through rational thought or from the material facts of the world.

Related to the matter of relationship spoken of above, the second contribution of this dissertation is to highlight the place that the specific practice of cultivation can play in establishing the virtues and character necessary to grapple with the ecological

challenges we face today. There are many efforts underway to establish the moral importance of the natural world. Often these start with wilderness values that many in today's urban environments have difficulty relating to. An ethic built upon the engaged practices of cultivation, instead, works on the inner person, on habits and personal perception. Central to this is the idea that as perception or awareness of life begins to alter within the gardener, so too will the general commitment to the broader environment and Earth.

Finally, this dissertation contributes to our knowledge of Albert Schweitzer, Martin Buber, and Aldo Leopold, particularly with respect to an environmental ethic built upon the mystery and wonder of relation. These three individuals have each been the topic of studies concerned with environmental ethics, but most often they are merely cited for their symbolic metaphors and provocative aphorisms. Some have suggested this is because of their abstruse style falling somewhere between theology, philosophy, and mysticism. Whatever the reason, all three figures have been labelled by certain critics as being too poetic. By pulling Schweitzer, Buber, and Leopold together, this work attempts to add clarity to the metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical dimensions of the proposition that nonhuman entities are centers of value capable and worthy of human compassion and consideration.

CHAPTER ONE

NATURE AND WESTERN THOUGHT

This chapter is divided into two general sections. The first examines the ancient and medieval West with specific attention to the way in which reason as a mode of knowing and theocentrism as a way of interpreting the cosmos shaped early perspectives of nature. While neither reason nor theocentrism are necessarily contrary to positive value in nature, when coupled with an emphasis on extreme transcendence they tend to discourage relation with and interest in the natural world. The second section turns to the period of Modernity and focuses on four characteristics that mark the transition away from the cosmos as an intelligible reality and toward the world as an inert object incapable of conveying relational knowledge.

Nature and the Early Western Perspective

The Intellectualization of Nature

Theoretically, all cultures can trace their beginning to a primal relationship in nature. This state of existence is marked by what Morris Berman calls “original participation,” an epistemological disposition where humans learn of their surroundings, not by objectification or rational reflection, but more so through an emotional identification.¹ Feeling and empathy more than any other qualities serve as the standard

¹ Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World*, 71.

for truth. An example of this might be seen in C. G. Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Jung retells the following conversation he had with a Pueblo Indian:

“See,” Ochwiay Bianco said, “how cruel the whites look. Their lips are thin, their noses sharp, their faces furrowed and distorted by folds. Their eyes have a staring expression; they are always seeking something. What are they seeking? The whites always want something; they are always uneasy and restless. We do not know what they want. We think they are mad.” I asked him why he thought the whites were all mad. “They say that they think with their heads,” he replied. “Why of course. What do you think with?” I asked him in surprise. “We think here,” he said, indicating his heart.²

Berman speculates that this knowledge through participation and emotional identification was the norm in the West up until some point between Homer and Plato. It is here, he argues, that Greek epistemology took a turn away from original participation.³ The Homeric period was one driven by animism and divine fate, the gods themselves mirroring the wide spectrum of human emotion. The message preached by Socrates and his pupil, Plato, on the other hand, was centered on the principle of reason; truth was rationally discerned, not felt.

If such an epistemological transition did take place in the West, it was not wholly without warrant. Since ancient times, cultures were increasingly aware of, and fascinated with, the mathematical complexity of the cosmos. Indeed, there appeared to be a rational order to the universe, and such a universe for Plato was far more stable than the one

² Steven Rockefeller, “Faith and Community in an Ecological Age” in Rockefeller and Elder, (eds.), *Spirit and Nature*, 152-153.

³ Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World*, 71. Berman makes this argument based on the idea that the *Iliad* (ca. 900-850 B.C.E.) contains no reference to internal states of mind. The *Odyssey*, in contrast, which is believed to be written a century or more after the *Iliad* contains terms that refer to soul. Berman cites this as the introduction of the dualism between self and the outer world in the West.

guided by the divine caprice of the Homeric gods.⁴ A god of truth must reflect the ideal of perfection, not the human weaknesses of emotion or instinct, and humans found personal and societal harmony by living in conformity with that truth through reason. This is the message that Socrates lived and eventually died for. He was accused by the Athenians of inventing new gods because he felt the ancient Greek gods were fickle and inappropriate standards upon which to base a model life.⁵

Berman sees this time in Greece as the beginning of “nonparticipating consciousness” in the West, where one acquires knowledge through objective observation rather than through an experiential immersion. With this new epistemological disposition, a barrier developed between the knower and the known. He laments: “Whereas my premodern counterpart felt, and saw, that he was his experiences ... I see reality in terms of the inspection and evaluation Plato hoped men would achieve. I thus see myself as an island....”⁶ Berman believes that the Socratic period initiated a devastating rupture between humans and an enlivened world. It challenged the notion that knowledge and truth had any basis in relationship, and while it was limited to only a small number of intellectuals at that time, it set in motion an epistemology which would lay the foundation for the modern intellectual West.

⁴ Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 18.

⁵ For a description of the charges against Socrates, refer to Plato’s dialogue *Apology*. In Plato’s work *Euthyphro*, Socrates argues that the question of what truth is cannot be settled by an appeal to the gods since they all disagree with each other. Plato’s point is that ultimate truth cannot be conveyed in a belief system of competing divine standards. In his *Republic*, Plato argues for a single god of truth which mirrors the transcending universals of virtue and justice.

⁶ Berman, *Reenchantment of the World*, 77.

Not all scholars view ancient Greece as necessarily setting the scene for a future of human alienation from nature. In *Passage to Modernity*, Louis Dupré stresses that the Greeks lived in a cosmos permeated with order and meaning.⁷ Nature was not a brute fact or a random event, but was part of a bigger picture, a profound harmony that was saturated with intelligibility. Dupré confesses that the eventual mathematization of knowledge occurring at this time did place a permanent barrier between a method based upon reason and one based upon our direct engagement with the “real-in-itself.”⁸ In other words, human understanding of the relationship between people and the natural world did undergo a paradigm shift among these intellectuals. However, Dupré stresses that unlike the view of modern philosophy and science, the locus of intelligibility itself was the cosmos, and the mind simply participated in it. With modern idealism, on the other hand, intelligibility is ascribed to the mind thus making the universe’s meaning, value, and existence contingent upon the phenomenal experience. The Greeks did not question the crucial role of the cosmos; nature had an essential place and inherent reason for being, independent of human thought and experience.

Despite his rational approach, Plato was still steeped in the mystical universe of his time. Carolyn Merchant of U.C. Berkeley highlights that, just as the human soul followed a cyclical migration that was purposive and eternal, the earth too possessed similar attributes for Plato.⁹ In his work *Timaeus*, the demiurge, or first cause, organizes a

⁷ Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 22.

⁸ Ibid., 23.

⁹ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, 10.

world out of pre-existing matter called *chora* and endows it with a female soul, the *anima mundi*.¹⁰ The world is, in essence, animate and gives meaning and life to all other living things upon it. This female world soul also accounts for the motion in the universe and acts as the bridge between the perfect and timeless Ideas, or Forms, and the lower world of decaying nature. In Merchant and Dupré's view, all of this suggests that nature, for classical Greece, was vibrant and of interest to human affairs.

Morris Berman admits this strength of the Greek worldview. Both Plato and Aristotle, despite their epistemological differences elsewhere, lived in the same cosmic reality. They sought to uncover the mystery of the ideal, and while their methods differed, both found Form revealed in a thing's teleological qualities, that is, in the thing's final end, or function. Their investigation of a thing was more concerned with the question of *why* it existed than of modern science's exclusive interest in *how* it exists or *what* it might be good for. For modern-day science, *why* is not just an irrelevant question, it is meaningless since it cannot be known. For the Socratics, on the other hand, the non-material was the essence of reality.¹¹ In other words, to identify the essence of a thing was to locate its eternal purpose, meaning, and inherent worth.

Plato's mythical cosmos may be considered the remnant of an earlier worldview and cultural tradition rooted in direct participation with the "real-in-itself." His works demonstrate a rational methodology enriched by ancient mythology. His views of the

¹⁰ For an in depth look at the ancient view of *anima mundi*, refer to Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 23. See also Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, 10.

¹¹ Morris Berman, *Reenchantment of Nature*, 27.

anima mundi and of a holistic and harmonious cosmos were not the products of rationalism, but more likely wedded to it. Plato's nature mysticism is not enough to redeem his rational agenda for Morris Berman. Though Greek thinkers sought to be intellectually in tune with the mythical cosmos, in a physical and emotional sense they were increasingly alienated from its rhythms and influence. The original participation, marked by its primary relationship, was gradually being replaced by a participation with the cosmos that was cerebral and detached. Though this would not take place on a mass level until the scientific and industrial revolutions of Europe, Berman believes that Plato's philosophy represents the "canonization of the subject/object distinction in the West," and the result has been a steady loss, not simply in the awareness of, and interest in, nature, but in general truth.¹²

Merchant agrees with Dupré that Plato's imagery of the world soul as a "nurturing female" was rich, but she recognizes along with Berman the important changes taking place with this view in classical Greece. Rather than focusing on the transition from original participation to rational participation in the cosmos as Berman does, Merchant is concerned with the hierarchical implications of the rational model. Although Plato views the earth as endowed with a female soul, his perspective of the female in general places it below the male principle. Perfection is associated with reason and is masculine in nature. While the idea of a female world soul tends to endow the earth with meaning and an

¹² Ibid., 72. Berman is critical of the popular view that historical thought is marked by progress, that we live in an enlightened day compared to those who have gone before. It is modern consciousness, with its beginnings in classical Greece, that has gone astray, not the ancient animism ridden off today as naïve and superstitious. See also Berman, *Reenchantment of Nature*, 70.

inherent worth, it is also, under Plato's rational hierarchy, of secondary importance since absolute truth is in the world of Forms, not in the world of matter, or shadows.

Furthermore, Plato's gender hierarchy leaves the door open for nature's potential exploitation by the ruling, masculine principle of Idea. Merchant notes that for the ancient Greeks, the female world soul remained superior to humans, but that would eventually change.¹³ By the sixteenth century, figures like Francis Bacon, still drawing on this ancient imagery, would interpret the natural world as passive, inert and meant for controlling and subduing by the rational mind. Though Plato did not expect the natural world to be placed below the superiority of the rational mind, for the earth too was a rational order, his hierarchical system would play a part in structuring the objectifying worldview of the Enlightenment.

The Stoics continued a worldview similar to that of classical Greece.¹⁴ The natural world was alive, intelligent, and responsible for the generation and nourishing of all rational and non-rational being. Like the Socratics, the Stoics accepted the imagery of an enlivened cosmos. At the same time, they too tended to define their relationship with the natural world in terms of mental participation in a rational order. The "original participation" that Berman emphasizes, and the epistemological engagement with the "real-in-itself" that Dupré speaks of, was increasingly eclipsed by the rise of the intellectual West.

¹³ Carolyn Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

One area where the Stoics differed from the Socratics was in their metaphysical outlook on matter. The Stoics were materialists and associated the divine with matter itself. In this sense they departed from the heavily dualistic vision of Plato's otherworldly Forms. Perhaps it was due to their turn from transcendence to the divinity of the material world that inspired their strong humanitarian vision. This focus on the physical, however, did not prevent them from adopting a view of human control over nature. Merchant writes that the rational capacities of humans meant that they were endowed with the responsibility to transform natural resources for the proper ordering of existence.¹⁵ Though everything in the universe had its proper place and purpose it was not in a continual state of harmony. It was the role of the rational human to, where necessary, bring that harmony into fruition.

Nature and the God-Centered Universe

Despite their detached, intellectual approach to the natural world Socratic and Stoic thinkers shared a definite cosmic optimism. As intellectuals they may have favored speculative investigation, but as humans living in ancient civilizations they were still bound to the productivity of soil, to the warmth of fire, and to the guidance of the stars. The created order was predictable and bountiful in that it fulfilled its purpose by providing for the good of humans. In many ways the Christian era continued in this same vein with the notable difference that nature's value and good were decidedly theocentric. As an example, the early Christian theologian Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130 - 200) portrayed

¹⁵ Ibid., 23.

the natural world as God's gracious gift to humanity. Contrary to the view of Plato, Irenaeus held that the cosmos was divinely created *ex nihilo*, or out of nothing.¹⁶ It was beautiful, full of goodness, and intended to fulfill God's purposes for human life: "For the Creator of the world is truly the Word of God: and this is our Lord, who in the last times was made man, existing in this world, and who in an invisible manner contains all things created, and is inherent in the entire creation, since the Word of God governs and arranges all things."¹⁷ For Irenaeus, the Creator's inherent presence in creation is what endows it with sacredness and meaning.

This strongly theocentric understanding of nature's value is not without its complications. Louis Dupré believes that a loss of sacredness in nature necessarily follows the Christian picture of reality.¹⁸ For the Stoics, the cosmos was divine, self-emerging, and self-sustaining. For Plato, the creation of the world from pre-existing matter, and its endowment with an eternal soul, gave it an inherent and eternal meaning. These worldviews portrayed nature as partly, if not wholly, divine, and thus important for manifesting eternal truths. Dupré worries that the Christian understanding of *Genesis*, on the other hand, deprives the world of any intrinsic necessity. After all, existence, meaning, and value rest upon a separate, transcendent principle rather than within the thing itself; the creation could only be of secondary importance.

¹⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, 2:10:4. Irenaeus was among the first Christians to express the view that physical matter was created by God from nothing.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5:18:3.

¹⁸ Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 29.

The sweeping nature of Dupré's claim is problematic. As noted above, it is nature's very association with the Divine Creator that makes it important and sacred for Irenaeus. That said, there is a certain logic behind his thinking, and it may be argued that theocentrism did open the door more widely to the possibility of estrangement from the natural world. Because the Creator is the arbitrator of value, it will wholly depend on how one interprets God's interest in and relation to the material world. Again, for Irenaeus, that valuation is high and his cosmic view as a result remains optimistic. Many thinkers throughout Christian history, however, have refused to ascribe such high value to the natural world, and a theocentric worldview has given them the leeway to do so. Scholars note that a general negativity toward the created order was on the rise in the Early Christian Era; some believe it was due to Christianity's emphasis on heaven and the impending Kingdom of God.¹⁹ Whether the emergence of Christianity was the cause of this pessimism is debated, but there is little question that it found itself shaped by its influence.

In contrast to Irenaeus, the Christian writer Origen (ca. 185-254) adopted this pessimistic outlook.²⁰ Largely influenced by the Christian philosopher Plotinus, Origen saw the cosmos as a great chain of being beginning with ineffable Good, or God at the

¹⁹ While Paul Santmire tends to view Early Christian thought as embracing a diversity of attitudes toward the created order, cosmic pessimism and optimism included, Albert Schweitzer is convinced that Christianity was a primary cause of pessimism due to the strong eschatological vision of Christ. The otherworldly expectations of Jesus and the early Church caused them to despise the created order. In Schweitzer's view, only after the Church abandoned its hope in the impending Kingdom of God did a theology arise that was life affirming. He attributes this to the revival of Aristotelianism and Stoicism of the late Medieval period. See Cicovacki, 36.

²⁰ Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature*, 49.

head, and from there decreasing in spirit, perfection, and being. Below God and the angels was the created order, with inspirited humans at the top. Soulless animals, plants, and elements, made up the remainder, being farthest removed from God.²¹ This view does not by itself desacralize nature if one understands the chain of being as a system that links the lower orders to the higher realm of God, for the higher would ennoble the lower. For Origen, however, it was a system that emphasized separation and that clarified the locus of status and worth.

Origen was also influenced by gnosticism. Though he accepted that the world was created by a gracious God to catch and materially encase fallen human spirits from plunging into nonbeing, he shared the gnostic view of God's extreme detachment from the physical world and a strong human superiority over nature due to divine rational capacities.²² The combined effect of these two views made it clear for Origen that the created world had no purposeful end in itself, but was purely meant as an instrument for God's work on behalf of rational creatures. In his work, *Against Celsus*, he declares that all created things are meant by God to "serve the rational being and his natural intelligence."²³ Arguing on behalf of nature's non-instrumental value, Celsus urges that

²¹ The human objective, for Origen, was very similar to the gnostic view. Hans Jonas writes, "Origen, whose proximity to gnostic thought is obvious in his system (duly anathematized by the Church) viewed the whole movement of reality in terms of recovery of metaphysical Unity." The goal of life was to return to the transcendent heaven from which our divine soul or spark fell. Refer to Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 61. See also Santmire, *Travail of Nature*, 45.

²² According to gnostic doctrines, the material world is a creation of wicked beings who are intent on trapping and damning the human race and their divine souls. The very idea that the cosmos is bountiful and good would be an insidious attempt to distract one from escaping its influence. See Santmire, *Travail of Nature*, 32-35.

²³ Origen, *Against Celsus*, 4:78.

the created order is a good as much for “plant, trees, grass, and thorns” as it is for humans.²⁴ Origen corrects this position by emphasizing that God’s work revolves around the redemption of the sparks of the human race, and that the created world is intended solely for this effort:

Rational beings which are the primary things have the value of children who are born; whereas irrational and inanimate things have that of the afterbirth which is created with the child. I think, moreover, that just as in cities those who are in charge of the stalls and the market-place are concerned only with men, though dogs and other irrational animals share the surplus food; so providence primarily cares for the rational beings, while the fact that the irrational animals also share in what is made for men has been a subsidiary result.²⁵

Where nature appears to have an eternal meaning and value as an oracle of divine truth for Irenaeus, it has a purely instrumental value relative to human physical welfare for Origen. A theocentric understanding of creation is capable of upholding both interpretations of the natural world.

One of the most influential thinkers of the Early Christian period to have a lasting impact on the West’s perspective on nature was St. Augustine (354-430). Also influenced by Neo-platonic dualism and deeply concerned with personal salvation, Augustine’s attention was drawn toward personal introspection and guilt rather than to the outward workings of the cosmos.²⁶ His carnal view of the body and its lustful drives has tended to link him to the pessimistic climate of the age. It is argued, however, that Augustine must

²⁴ Ibid., 4:78.

²⁵ Ibid., 4:74.

²⁶ Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988, 108.

be looked at with attention to the difference between his earlier and later writings.²⁷

Whereas the earlier Augustine, perhaps still influenced by his initial interest in manichean gnosticism, painted a somber picture of fallen nature, the later Augustine saw a cosmos of complexity, goodness, and beauty, designed by God for the good of humans:

The manifold diversity of beauty in sky and earth and sea; the abundance of light, and its miraculous loveliness, in sun and moon and stars; the dark shades of woods, the colour [sic] and fragrance of flowers; the multitudinous varieties of birds, with their songs and their bright plumage; the countless different species of living creatures of all shapes and sizes, amongst whom it is the smallest in bulk that moves our greatest wonder – for we are more astonished at the activities of the tiny ants and bees than at the immense bulk of whales.²⁸

It should be noted that the subject heading of this chapter in the *City of God* is labelled:

“The good things of which this life is full, even though it is subject to condemnation.”

Augustines’ portrayal of the created world is positive, yet still tied to imagery of the earth as fallen because of human sinfulness. It is beautiful and inspiring, yet purely instrumental for the good of humankind.

Such optimism respecting nature is not typically the way history has come to think of St. Augustine let alone the Middle Ages some believed he influenced. Christianity has always been couched within a naturalist/anti-naturalist tension: is knowledge of God to be found by transcending this fallen and depraved world, or does the world’s inherent order and goodness disclose the truths of its Creator to the human

²⁷ Paul Santmire, *Travail of Nature*, 60-62.

²⁸ Saint Augustine, *City of God*, 22:24. trans. Henry Bettenson, 1075.

mind?²⁹ Louis Dupré remarks on this debate, “The battle gradually intensified and even after Augustine’s death the anti-naturalist polemics were constantly refueled by ever new ammunition taken from the saint’s inexhaustible arsenal.”³⁰ Paul Santmire agrees with Dupré’s assessment, claiming that if Augustine’s later views affirmed God’s good creation, it was his earlier views that appeared to shape the centuries following his death. He states, “Although the thinkers of the Middle Ages, by and large, considered themselves to be disciples of Augustine, they showed little commitment to the ecological motif that shaped Augustine’s mature thought. Perhaps they never understood it as such.”³¹

Regrettably, Dupré and Santmire fail to identify exactly who these “anti-naturalists” are. Rather, it is likely that these authors are generalizing about the period pejoratively referred to as the Dark Ages, popularly characterized as a time when the Christian West turned from science, intellectual activity, and natural philosophy toward the extreme otherworldly striving of asceticism. Whether the early Middle Ages can be so easily labeled has been questioned by scholars. Certainly the most prominent Middle Age thinker to use Augustine’s ideas was Thomas Aquinas, and as we will see in the pages ahead, he can scarcely be considered anti-naturalist. Still, there is a certain logic behind

²⁹ As we will see in the second chapter of this work, Albert Schweitzer strikes a balance between these two views by limiting knowledge of God to the exercise of the will. Interaction with Divine mystery has its origins in compassionate exercise of the will toward forms of life. He rejects both the idea that one must transcend the world to know God, and that nature discloses God to the human mind. The Divine is found through ethical practice.

³⁰ Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 33.

³¹ Santmire, *Travail of Nature*, 75-76.

the idea that attitudes toward the natural world may have become more negative during this period. Anxiety is a fact that accompanies every period of time, but how it is dealt with largely depends on one's interpretation of life meaning and purpose. Imagery of the earth as fallen, corrupt, perhaps under the power of evil itself, gave the West a way to cope with general anxiety: withdrawal from the material order, hope in transcendent truths and salvation, and commitment to the spiritual needs of the soul. These goals might encourage a rigorous asceticism that had the effect of pointing the individual inward rather than to the outward goods of the natural world.

If an anti-naturalist disposition was the norm during the early Middle Ages, its influence would eventually be challenged. Scholars agree that the High Middle Ages saw a resurgence of the cosmos as an intelligible and enlivened system.³² Indeed, Elizabeth Johnson calls this period the zenith of Christian appreciation for the natural world.³³ One might say that outward reflection on the wonder of the cosmos breathed new life into the West. John of Salisbury (1159 C.E.) envisioned a political society modeled off nature's examples of community manifest in creatures like bees and ants.³⁴ Nature was not dark and misleading, but the very structure upon which to build the civil life. Alan of Lille (ca. 1128 - 1202 C.E.) portrayed nature as a manifestation of God's overflowing goodness which was wrongfully desecrated by a world of human sinfulness.³⁵ Perhaps nowhere is

³² Elizabeth Johnson, "Losing and Finding Creation in the Christian Tradition", in *Christianity and Ecology*, 6. See also Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 33; Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 70.

³³ Johnson, "Losing and Finding Creation in the Christian Tradition," in *Christianity and Ecology*, 6.

³⁴ Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 70-71.

³⁵ Santmire, *Travail of Nature*, 82-83. See also Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 10-11.

the cosmic optimism during this period more apparent than in the influential works of Thomas Aquinas. Drawing on St. Augustine and the West's rediscovery of Aristotelian philosophy, Aquinas envisioned the created universe as part of all that emanates from God, has a purpose, and an inherent goodness.³⁶ Influenced by the Stoic understanding of natural law, Aquinas recognized God's creation as a structured moral order that was open to investigation by the rational mind.³⁷ Contrary to the extreme transcendence that flavored much of the early Middle Ages and would reemerge again in modern times, Aquinas' theocentrism envisioned God as a creator whose presence is diffused throughout a rational and stable cosmos.

That said, Aquinas' high regard for the created order is still embedded in an hierarchical system that is strongly anthropocentric.³⁸ Unlike the views of some Early Christians like Irenaeus who entertained the possibility of cosmic redemption, once earth and its creatures have fulfilled God's eternal purpose for rational beings they will fade from existence, returning to the Empodoclean elements of earth, air, water and fire from

³⁶ William French, "Grace is Everywhere: Thomas Aquinas on Creation and Salvation," in *Creation and Salvation*, 118.

³⁷ William French, "Natural Law and Ecological Responsibility: Drawing on the Thomistic Tradition," in *University of St. Thomas Law Journal*, Winter 2008, v.5 n.1., 31.

³⁸ William French, "Grace is Everywhere," in *Creation and Salvation*, 116-117. See also Santmire, *The Travail of Nature*, 90-92; Johnson, "Losing and Finding Creation in the Christian Tradition," in *Christianity and Ecology*, 7.

which they were composed. For Aquinas, only rational beings are intended for salvation, and once redeemed and perfected they will no longer need material sustenance.³⁹

Despite this strong instrumental understanding of nature, few Christians can match Aquinas' portrayal of the cosmos as an intelligible and truth bearing reality. The earth was not simply a sphere to provide for the material well-being of humans, as Origen supposed, but an oracle for transmitting divine truths. As an example, Aquinas teaches that much of what we know about God comes from the perfection manifest in the creation, specifically through its creatures. Each creature possesses some attribute of perfection unique to its kind, and thus reflects a portion of God's perfection.⁴⁰ Rather than relying on the method of apophatic theology which doubts that God can be positively known at all, Aquinas' characterization of God is tied to the rich diversity, beauty, and order of the natural world, thus giving it a sacramental quality; the natural world was an essential vehicle to finding and comprehending the Divine. While his scholastic style of thinking comes off as highly structured and cerebral, there is little question that Aquinas understood the importance of knowledge obtained through direct engagement with the natural world.

To summarize this section, the ancient Greek, Stoic, and Christian emphasis on the intellect and the rationally ordered universe challenged an experiential knowledge

³⁹ Ibid., 121. Aquinas' doctrine that the creation will revert back to the basic four elements at the end of time can be linked to Aristotle's view that the world was first created from earth, air, water, and fire. His view that only rational beings are intended for salvation also correlates with Aristotle's speculation that, while the vegetative and sensitive souls end at death, there seems to be something eternal about the intellectual soul.

⁴⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Prima Pars, Q.13, Articles 1-3. See also French, *Creation and Salvation*, 122.

based on direct engagement with the thing itself. Reason was increasingly replacing relationship as the means to interpret the natural world. For the Socratics and Stoics, this interpretation remained centered in the rational cosmos itself. For the Christians it was centered in a rational Creator. In both cases, humans typically saw themselves as humble participants in a rational order. The spread of theocentrism throughout the Western world likewise increased the possibility for nature to be seen as merely a temporary backdrop for a human-centered event of far greater, eternal meaning. It should be said at the same time that these ancient civilizations continued to be directly influenced by the elements within which they were immersed, a fact which must have tempered their thoughts to some extent. The mystery and wonder of the cosmos was never far from their formal reasoning.

This would change dramatically with the rise of Modernity. Pushed further and further into a certain transcending remoteness, the faculty of reason and a heavily dualistic interpretation of theocentrism would contribute to the anti-naturalist tone of Western Enlightenment. With such strong affirmations of nature's wonder, beauty, and epistemological importance emerging in the late Medieval period, one wonders how just a few short centuries later it would give way to the rigid mechanical view of Modernity. Thomas Berry believes that the catalyst for the change was the Great Plague of 1347-1349 which is said to have eradicated more than one-third of Europe's population. Berry comments: "This was a traumatic moment for the Western world. The deep aversion to the natural world that resulted has profoundly conditioned the Western

cultural tradition ever since.”⁴¹ Whether the push toward mechanism can be summed up so easily is difficult to say, but it is reasonable to assume that the pervasive effects of the Plague resulted in an emotional alienation from the cosmos.

In the next section, I will show that human alienation toward the natural world also occurred on metaphysical and epistemological levels during the Enlightenment. The universe was increasingly portrayed as a passive and inert object. I will concentrate on four characteristics of Modernity that highlight this transition: humanism, suggesting that the human mind is the locus of meaning; mechanism, where all physical reality is to be understood in terms of matter and motion; a philosophical interest in the practical utility of nature; and the rise and fall of natural magic in the 16th and 17th centuries. All of these would have the effect of limiting the potential for the human being to see relation with the natural world as a place where value, responsibility, and personal meaning could be found.

Nature and Modernity

Modernity and Humanism

We have seen that for the Socratics, for the Stoics and some early Christians, the physical world was intelligible, either because it was inherently so or because it reflected the goodness and rationality of a divine creator. The rational human mind was also important to these traditions, but its function was usually secondary to the reality of the cosmos. The cosmos was a unified hierarchy of being and that was the context for

⁴¹ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, 77.

understanding the human condition and the capacity to reason. By late Medieval and early Modern times, however, thinkers increasingly rejected the idea that harmony and truth were formal parts of the physical universe. William of Ockham (1285-1349), who was a victim of the Great Plague, argued the position that formal reality did not exist distinct from the human mind.⁴² Plato's view that universals resided in an independent realm and Aristotle's view that they were found within the physical world of objects were both insufficient. Aquinas' belief that parts of perfection were manifest in God's creatures and throughout the cosmos was likewise mistaken. In his work *Ordinatio*, Ockham declares, "I maintain that a universal is not something real that exists in a subject, either inside or outside the mind, but that it has being only as a thought-object in the mind."⁴³ Under this view, universals are mere concepts created in the mind through the process of categorizing individual objects; they do not exist independent of individual cognition.

On the surface, this assertion appears reasonable and benign, yet Philotheus Boehner, a late Ockham scholar at the Franciscan Institute of St. Bonaventure, insists that the effects of this new outlook on the age were nearly as transforming as was the Copernican revolution in astronomy.⁴⁴ The cosmos could no longer exist as the intelligible purveyor of universal truths under Ockham's epistemology. In essence, his relegation of "universals" to the abstractions of human thought elevated the status of the

⁴² William of Ockham, *Summa totius logicae*, I, c. xiv-xvi, in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Philotheus Boehner, 32-40. See also Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 39.

⁴³ William of Ockham, *Ordinatio*, D. II, Q. viii, prima redactio, in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Philotheus Boehner, 41.

⁴⁴ Philotheus Boehner, *Philosophical Writings*, xxvii.

rational mind while at the same time demoting the influence of the natural order. Besides its part in relaying basic empirical facts through the senses, the material order was insignificant epistemologically.

Louis Dupré believes that this paradigm shift introduced by Ockham, which consisted of adopting a different notion form, helped to set the stage for the humanist movement of the Enlightenment. Instead of it being inherent in the world itself, form became an ideal in the mind to be achieved.⁴⁵ In art, corporeal nature could be improved upon by the mind's higher, spiritual standard. Unlike classical art, the objective was not to imitate nature, but to perfect it.⁴⁶ In literature, the poet could create form from the mind *ex nihilo*, just as God created the universe.⁴⁷ The cosmos was not a given reality full of universal truth, but an open field intended for the individual expression of truth. Mind, no longer the tool to discern truth from the world, became the primary avenue for creating and introducing truth into the world.⁴⁸ Nature was less and less an enlivened, soul influencing cosmos bearing a truth of its own. At best it was art whose worth was subject to personal interpretation, and at worst it was an empty canvass waiting for improvement by the divine human mind. The relationship between Western civilization and the natural world was steadily moving from subject-subject to subject-object.

⁴⁵ Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 44.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁷ Louis Dupré references a quotation from the Italian poet Dante who claims to create prose *ex nihilo*. See *Passage to Modernity*, 45.

⁴⁸ Schweitzer takes a position similar to this. Refer to footnote 93 in chapter two.

Even the term *subject* underwent a transformation, according to Dupré.

Associated with the Greek word *hypokeimenon* (what lies under something), *subject* originally referred to the elementary principle of being.⁴⁹ As such, it extended to all things accepted as living. Dupré argues that the term eventually came to stand for the ultimate source of meaning and value. Because the ancient perspective of the cosmos was teleologically robust, that is, endowed with an inherent meaning and purpose, the concept of subject under this new view was still associated with the natural world. As the human mind gradually emerged during modern humanism as the primary source of meaning and value, however, the notion of subject became bound exclusively to human mental capacities. Consequently, all other bodies of the physical universe were objects in relation to it.

Whereas the universe in ancient times had been the locus of truth and was intellectually prior to the human, fusing truth directly to divine mental capacities in modern times meant that the individual emerged as a subject of greater importance. This can be seen in the burgeoning of ideas in this period regarding individual rights and human dignity. As Immanuel Kant would eventually argue, human beings were not intellectually bound to the cosmos or even to God, but were capable of being a law unto themselves. Truth was what existed in the human mind, all else was irrelevant. The noumenal world, or the world as it exists independent of the categories the mind imposes upon it, was beyond human understanding or experience. Reality, Kant argued instead,

⁴⁹ Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 112.

was the phenomenal world, or the world as it is constructed and organized by the human mind. This placed the locus of truth in the mind's eye rather than in some physical or formal reality distinct from the observer.

This transfer of universal truth to the individual was not without its problems. With truth more and more dependent on an internal rather than an external reality, on the mind rather than the cosmos, the issue became one of epistemological certainty. No longer accepting a harmonious created order or a singular religious authority, the individual for the first time felt the burden of truth. How could one be certain that the experiences and expressions of the mind represented truth and not merely personal whimsy? Unlike the pragmatists and post-modernists of the 21st century, modern thinkers were not yet prepared to give up on the idea of universals, only to rethink their representation in the world. Yet the threat of relativism brought on by humanism loomed large and opened the doors to the pervasive skepticism that defined much of modern and post-modern thought.

Faced with this burden of truth, René Descartes joined in the turn away from participation with an intelligible and enlivened cosmos toward the rational mind for answers. Pushing skepticism to its radical conclusions, he relegated truth to the recesses of the mind where, like mathematics, ideas must be logically necessary to be valid.⁵⁰ But then wouldn't all of reality and sense experience fail his rigorous standard of truth? Descartes felt he had logical proof for the existence of a good and perfect supreme being

⁵⁰ Carolyn Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 203.

who would not deceive his sense experiences. Wholly transcendent, this Being freely created the material universe *ex nihilo* and placed it into perpetual motion, leaving it to operate according to certain mathematical principles. In effect, only those properties in nature that were quantifiable such as extension, mass, and motion had the power of truth behind them.⁵¹ All else that we might experience in nature was simply the cause of subjective feeling. The true essence of a thing was nothing more than the sum of its quantifiable properties. This is in stark contrast to the ancient belief noted earlier that the non-material principle associated with a thing's final cause was the key to understanding it.

While this move provided Descartes with the certainty in the physical world he was looking for, the consequences of his philosophy on attitudes toward nature were predictable. There was no mysterious, awe inspiring, or spiritual quality to the natural world, only properties we had yet to observe and quantify. Though dualisms between the human mind and the natural world had certainly existed previously in the ideas of Plato, Plotinus, Ockham and others, Descartes' radical division between the form giving human mind and a passive and undefined universe is likely the philosophical apex of the subject-object distinction. The result was an extreme epistemological alienation between humans and the physical universe. The natural world had nothing to teach other than to lay itself open for scientific study. It could have no *telos* to define its meaning or purpose, nor any inherent vitality or mystery, for none of these are quantifiable. Commenting on

⁵¹ Ibid., 204. See also Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 177.

Descartes' favoring of quantifiable properties over other less tangible experiences in nature, Dupré writes:

By regarding some properties as inherent in nature itself and others as attributable to nature only as the cause of subjective sensations that do not correspond to the original substance, we detach the observer from nature in such a way that he ceases to remain an integral part of it.⁵²

To understand the weight of this observation, consider the indigenous perspective raised at the beginning of this chapter, that nature has something to teach us that is basic to our being human, that it can have a humanizing effect upon us. The indigenous perspective is simply not tenable in Descartes' universe where the individual comes off as distinct and intellectually self-sufficient from nature. Similarly, consider the ancient Greek and Stoic views that the cosmos had an inherent meaning and purpose that was connected to one's own personal fulfillment. Descartes' dualistic universe has no purpose other than the one rational humans define for it. If our current world is steeped in Cartesian dualism as scholars suggest, then Morris Berman captures the root of our environmental troubles: "[O]nce natural processes are stripped of immanent purpose, there is really nothing left in objects but their value for something, or someone, else."⁵³

Modernity and Mechanism

For René Descartes, the humanist and mechanist perspectives went hand in hand. Descartes' rationalism grounded truth in supposed first principles that were logical and certain. A view of the universe that was empty of abstract qualities, composed instead of

⁵² Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 77.

⁵³ Berman, *Reenchantment of the World*, 40.

the quantifiable properties of mass, extension, and motion, was an important part of maintaining epistemological certainty.⁵⁴ Not only did this eliminate any possibility for inexplicable phenomena like animism, magic, miracles, or a mythological world soul, it also assigned divine mystery to complete transcendence. God had done his work and departed, had created matter and placed it into motion at the dawn of existence. Again, this ensured for Descartes that everything in the physical universe was mechanical, mathematical, and accessible to the rational mind.

Francis Bacon (1561-1626), who was born 35 years before Descartes, also adopted a mechanical orientation toward the universe.⁵⁵ While he rejected the rationalist approach to truth, particularly the view that one should apply mathematics to the study of nature, he agreed with the voluntarist position that nature possessed no purpose independent of that which might be assigned to it.⁵⁶ Only humans possessed a purpose, and part of that was to fulfill the divine injunction to control and dominate nature for practical use.⁵⁷ Bacon's acceptance of a mechanical worldview was not so concerned with epistemological certainty as it was with the manipulation of nature for the betterment of humankind. He states, "But if my judgement be of any weight, the use of History Mechanical is, of all others, the most radical and fundamental towards natural philosophy; such natural philosophy I mean as shall not vanish in the fumes of subtle or

⁵⁴ Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 102, 194-195.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁵⁶ Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 52.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

sublime speculations, but such as shall be operative to relieve the inconveniences of man's estate."⁵⁸ Bacon's empirical investigation of the machine-like world was more practical than philosophical in intention.

That said, however, Bacon's mechanical approach to scientific investigation did contribute to, and have profound implications for, the West's metaphysical view of the universe. Unlike Aristotle's empirical approach to scientific investigation which accepted the inherent order of the cosmos at face value, Bacon believed that unraveling the mechanical relationships in nature required one to place it under artificial conditions: "For like as a man's disposition is never well known or proved till he be crossed, nor Proteus ever changed shapes till he was straitened and held fast; so nature exhibits herself more clearly under the trials and vexations of art than when left to herself."⁵⁹ Science under Aristotelian methods was primarily concerned with the categorization of natural objects. For Bacon, science is the quest for an understanding of the underlying mechanics of nature which have the potential to increase humanity's capacity for manipulation and power. Studying life under natural conditions is not sufficient to disclose its inner workings, or secrets. Vexing it, placing it under duress imposed by human technology and experimentation reveals its true character.

⁵⁸ Francis Bacon, *De Dignitate et Augmentis Scientiarum*, in *Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, Douglas Devon Heath, 429.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 429. See also Morris Berman, *Reenchantment of the World*, 30-31, and Louis Dupre, *Passage to Modernity*, 72-73.

Berman notes that this severe approach to the study of the universe would surely be a problem if nature were alive and had a good of its own. In fact, he thinks that Bacon himself was aware of the severity of his approach on a living world:

Although it may be reading too much into Bacon, there is a dark hint that the mind of the experimenter, when it adopts this new perspective, will also be under duress. Just as nature must not be allowed to go its own way, says Bacon in the Preface to the work, so it is necessary that ‘the mind itself be from the very outset not left to take its own course, but guided at every step; and the business be done as if by machinery.’ To know nature, treat it mechanically; but then your mind must behave mechanically as well.⁶⁰

Berman believes that with the flowering of the scientific revolution, technology and experimentation developed as a new mode of cognition, a new way of understanding the world. Combined with the high material demands of an emerging economy it altered Western consciousness such that people began to see the world mechanically, to view nature simply as an intricate mechanism.

The roots of mechanism are not established in sixteenth century thought, but go back to the ancient philosophy of atomism espoused by such thinkers as Leucippus (ca. 460 B.C.E.), Democritus (ca. 460 B.C.E.), Epicurus (341-270 B.C.E.), and Lucretius (98-55 B.C.E.).⁶¹ Atomism subscribes to a theory of reductionism: to understand the essence of an object, one needs only to break it into the distinct parts of which it is composed. It stands in opposition to the more holistic views found in Aristotelianism and scholasticism which suggest the essence of an object might be more than simply the sum

⁶⁰ Berman, *Reenchantment of the World*, 31.

⁶¹ Carolyn Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 200-201.

of its parts. Carolyn Merchant notes that the works of these ancient atomists gradually rose in popularity during the 17th Century as the West regained interest in material explanations of the universe.⁶²

What separated these early atomists from 16th and 17th Century mechanists, however, was the activity of matter itself. For the ancients, individual atoms were active and mobile, possessing an inherent energy or power.⁶³ For the later mechanists, motion in matter was purely corporeal and, in at least the case of Descartes and Hobbes, nothing more than the continued movement of God's first push at the beginning of creation. For the staunch mechanist, the material universe really was as essence-less as a mechanical clock. Motion was nothing more than physical matter imposed upon by outside energy. This strict view of the natural world was difficult for many to embrace throughout the scientific revolution. Even Isaac Newton, as I will show in the pages ahead, was troubled by the proposition. Could the mystery of life, of vital motion, be so easily disposed of, he wondered? That this disposition is accepted almost without question by science and technology today indicates the extent to which the mechanical view has shaped the modern perspective of reality.

Just as humanism resulted in an epistemological distancing from nature, so too mechanism caused metaphysical estrangement. In modern mechanism, nature is dead and inert, a field where cause-effect and physical laws explain all of existence. This is

⁶² Ibid., 201. See also Steven Rockefeller, "Faith and Community in an Ecological Age, in *Spirit and Nature*, 149-150.

⁶³ According to Merchant, this was at least Pierre Gassendi's interpretation of the ancient atomists. Gassendi's own understanding of atoms was that they possessed internal energy. See Merchant, 201.

accepted as a metaphysical truth, even if one's subjective experiences with the natural world suggest otherwise. Because the mechanical standard of truth rests in what is quantifiable and logical, modern science has emerged accepting only a positivist interpretation of reality. Contrary to the indigenous perspective voiced at the beginning of this chapter, there is no need in mechanism for gratitude or humility toward life. It is dismissed *a priori* since the world is full of inanimate objects, not empowered living subjects.

Environmental ethics struggles to make headway today because it stands in opposition to several hundred years of the earth machine model. The very suggestion that living things have an inherent good that we ought to respect is perceived as unsupportable at best, as naïve and superstitious at worst. What may come across to us as consciousness, or capacity, or intelligence, or flourishing in nature is better thought of as instinctive and heteronomous. And if personal wonder and awe at the characteristics of the natural world and universe persuade us to question the rigor of this view, mechanism contains one last reprove: What may come across as mysterious in the world will eventually be explained through more sophisticated technology and refined experimentation. I hope to raise the possibility in the chapters ahead that the above approach is no substitute for the epistemological importance of relationship. It is only here that the mysterious concepts of *being*, *subject*, and *inherent value* can be recognized.

Modernity and Nature's Utility

While Francis Bacon and René Descartes differed in their individual approaches to establishing truth in the world, both reflected a mechanical attitude toward the universe. Similarly, they both understood the power of this new model for going beyond pure contemplation to a transformation of the physical world for the good of civilization. As mentioned earlier, Descartes' work was primarily philosophical, but it did not end there for him:

Through this philosophy we could know the power and action of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens and all the other bodies in our environment, as distinctly as we know the various crafts of our artisans; and we could use this knowledge—as the artisans use theirs—for all the purposes for which it is appropriate, and thus make ourselves, as it were, the lords and masters of nature.⁶⁴

Descartes confesses at the beginning of *Discourse on Method* that his purpose is to ground truth in the world so as to engage in scientific investigation with absolute certainty. His deep philosophical musings, then, were done, at least in part, with the intent of providing certainty for future practical investigations. As I will show later on, they were also deeply motivated by political and religious factors as well.

This practical attitude toward knowledge was new in the intellectual West. For ancient and medieval thinkers, knowledge had been an intrinsic good, an end in itself; the life of philosophical speculation was the crux of living a fulfilled human life. If any principle could be said to unite the ancient Greek thinkers it is their general acceptance of

⁶⁴ René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, 6:62, in *Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, 142-143. See also Morris Berman's *Reenchantment of the World*, 25.

the idea that human happiness is directly linked to the life of contemplation. Practical sciences and crafts, in contrast, were viewed as lower activities and only important as enabling the higher ends of intellectual investigation. This disposition toward knowledge began to reverse in the modern period; knowledge became a tool for bringing about some physical utility.

As with Descartes, the aim of enhancing knowledge for Francis Bacon was to improve the condition of human civilization. In Bacon's work *Valerius Terminus*, he argues that the true aim of knowledge is found, "not in any plausible, delectable, reverend or admired discourse, or any satisfactory arguments, but in effecting and working, and in discovery of particulars not revealed before, for the better endowment and help of man's life."⁶⁵ Both Bacon and Descartes approached the world as something to be acted upon, not simply contemplated. As noted above, however, Bacon opted for "effecting and working" in contrast to "admired discourse" and "satisfactory arguments." Unlike Descartes, he distrusted *a priori* assumptions, and so detested mathematics and rational approaches to truth.⁶⁶ He was reproachful of the past's insular quest for speculative knowledge, stating that it had disregarded the God-given right to discover nature's secrets which would empower humans to exercise control over it.

While Bacon's goal of knowledge and power over nature was practical in its aims, it was also grounded in religious conviction and vision. In contrast to the human

⁶⁵ Francis Bacon, *Valerius Terminus*, in *Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, Douglas Devon Heath, 194-195. See also Rene Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 71.

⁶⁶ Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 70.

contrived “Idols of the Mind,” Bacon stressed the need to submit to the “oracles” of God, i.e. the physical creation.⁶⁷ By pursuing this divine calling we could potentially restore the paradise of God through practical efforts.⁶⁸ Louis Dupre comments on Bacon’s belief: “If a desire for power that conflicted with their contemplative vocation caused the downfall of the rebellious angels, man fell through an opposite desire for pure (as opposed to practical) knowledge that interfered with his calling to dominate nature.”⁶⁹ In Bacon’s view, God had given humanity dominion in the Garden of Eden, something which Adam and Eve exercised until the Fall. Through the Fall, however, nature became rebellious and human interest mistakenly turned toward speculative thought, toward the rational ideals of Heaven rather than the physical harmony of Eden. The pathway back to paradise consisted of regaining physical mastery over nature, and modern science was the vehicle Bacon envisioned to accomplish this end.

Greatly contributing to the emphasis of nature’s practical utility was the blurring of the ancient distinction between the artisan and the scholar. The idea of nature as technologically useful was certainly not new. Since ancient times artisans had been involved with harnessing nature’s power to improve the human condition. Yet until the High Middle Ages, technology and intellectual speculation were viewed as two distinct endeavors with entirely different objectives. Again, philosophical speculation was thought to be higher while the crafts were part of the lower laboring class. In the Modern

⁶⁷ Ibid., 71.

⁶⁸ Carolyn Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 170.

⁶⁹ Dupre, *Passage to Modernity*, 71.

era, however, craftsmen began to recognize the power of mathematics and mechanical philosophy to accomplish their goals. At the same time, mainstreams of philosophy began to shift away from an inherently meaningful interpretation of nature adopting instead the rising mechanical view of the universe. Dominant philosophers began to see the power of technology for furthering speculative thought.⁷⁰ This blending of artisans and scholarship in the 16th century gave shape to the scientific revolution of the 17th century.⁷¹ One could say that the result of this merger was modern-day science: the furthering of knowledge through technological experimentation with the final intent of achieving practical ends.

Morris Berman notes that Bacon aimed for this combination of craft and intellectualism in England, but had little success in dismantling the traditional paradigm.⁷² Part of the problem was simply envisioning what an appropriate merger of theory and practice would look like. Though technology had always been influential in the world, it had never been, before this age, a mode of cognition. Berman suggests that the practical investigations of figures like Galileo and Newton substantiated the contemplative musings of Bacon and Descartes. Combining the rationalist and empiricist approaches to truth, Galileo employed technology and mathematics to his study of earthly objects and the heavens.

⁷⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 289-290.

⁷¹ Morris Berman, *Reenchantment of the World*, 58.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 57.

Perhaps Galileo's greatest contribution to modernity was to show that heavenly bodies and earthly objects operated under the same set of physical laws.⁷³ This contradicted the ancient view that the heavens moved according to separate, more perfect laws of motion. This conclusion was threatening for a variety of reasons. First, it foreclosed on the long held belief that the heavens were a realm of truth and Godly perfection in contrast to an imperfect temporal world. For many Christians and non-Christians in ancient, medieval, and even in modern times the heavens were divine, providing signs, wonders, and guidance. Under Galileo's investigations the planets were simply bodies in motion, unencumbered by wind resistance and friction.

The second reason Galileo's conclusions were threatening relates to technology. The means for arriving at his conclusion involved using the telescope, and this suggested that technological instruments were capable of deriving truths about the universe. When the Church found fault with Galileo's conclusions much of the controversy involved his use and acceptance of the telescope for investigation.⁷⁴ Because the earth was mechanical and God had done his work and disappeared, Galileo could accept scientific investigation as uniquely true. There was no divine mystery in the physical world to contend with. Berman worries that Galileo's practical and tool-oriented approach to investigation marks the culmination of a nonparticipating consciousness in the Western world. It was no longer relation, intuition, and emotional experience which relayed truth about existence.

⁷³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 257-263. See also Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 66.

⁷⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 260. See also Morris Berman, *Reenchantment of the World*, 40.

Objective observation and rational speculation aided by specific tools for probing phenomena were all one needed to understand reality.

If humanism caused an epistemological alienation from the cosmos and mechanism caused a metaphysical one, the practical orientation of philosophy and craftsmanship in the 16th and 17th centuries served to fill the teleological void that they left, namely, to clarify human purpose and relationship with nature; nature existed to be objectively investigated and controlled for human benefit. During the modern era nature continued to transition from a pre-established order to an inert system whose meaning and value would be determined by human need. The utilitarian interests of Francis Bacon and René Descartes are laudable. That humans have benefited from the practical investigation that these individuals envisioned is beyond dispute. What is questionable about this instrumentalist view is whether it is as faithful to the whole of reality as they asserted, or whether it has left us impoverished in certain respects. In the chapters that follow, I hope to show that Albert Schweitzer, Martin Buber, and Aldo Leopold argue for a broader understanding of reality than the one founded upon the mechanical and practically-oriented assumptions of modernity. While largely accepting science as important in its own right, they move toward re-establishing inherent meaning in the world, and this is accomplished, in major part, through their emphasis on relational experience. Before turning to these figures it is helpful to consider one last factor which gave shape to the philosophical and scientific disposition of the modern West, namely, the influence of alchemy and other forms of natural magic.

Modernity and Natural Magic

In this final section I turn to the tradition of 16th and 17th Century alchemy because of the significant part that it played in defining the scientific and technological mindset still accepted today. Like other forms of natural magic, alchemy revered the ancient idea of *anima mundi*, or a cosmic world soul which accounted for life and activity in the universe. Drawing on Neoplatonic philosophy, alchemists accepted a hierarchical structure to the cosmos where the earthly and the heavenly were connected by various levels of being.⁷⁵ The celestial heavens influenced earthly existence. Because of this chain of being, the alchemists believed it was possible to manipulate the inherent structure of natural objects directly.

Similar to the ideas of Origen and gnosticism, alchemy accepts that the human soul emanated from the Divine. The chain of being extends from base matter to the Divine intellect itself. Though the elementary properties of matter are inactive they are yet endowed with an active soul, or occult properties that give them consciousness.⁷⁶ These properties are the very medium through which the celestial heavens could control the material world. It is also the way that humans believed they could intervene in the rhythms of the natural order. Morris Berman asserts that, beyond simply turning things into gold, alchemy was a psychic discipline, a process of mind tuning in to mind with the effect of transforming material nature.⁷⁷ The goal was not to develop the “midas touch”

⁷⁵ Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 105.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁷⁷ Berman, *Reenchantment of the World*, 92.

and become wealthy, but to ascend to the Divine intellect itself through knowledge and practice. For some groups like the Rosicrucians, a secret Christian society, the intent was likewise humanitarian.⁷⁸ The alchemist sought to accelerate physical processes, enabling nature to fulfill its inherent teleology. Because the human body is composed of the elements of nature, the potential existed for curing the body of ailments which disrupted its natural functioning.⁷⁹ The *Fama Fraternalis* (1614), a Rosicrucian proclamation, described a secret Christian fraternity dedicated to wandering the land and freely healing the sick through alchemy.⁸⁰

There is little doubt among scholars that Francis Bacon was influenced by the alchemists. While formally rejecting alchemy as a mode of scientific investigation, he seems to have accepted its motives and its general attitude toward the manipulation of nature. Recall that for Bacon one of the motives of science was religious, to restore the the original paradise where humanity held dominion over the natural order. Many alchemists had the same goal in mind. Dupré writes that Philippus Paracelsus (1490-1541), an early and prominent alchemist, foresaw the use of natural magic to manipulate and heal nature so that its Edenic state might be restored.⁸¹ Similar to Paracelsus, Bacon maintained that the fallen world could be redeemed by force. For alchemists that force was the magical mind, and for Bacon it was practical investigation.

⁷⁸ Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 197.

⁷⁹ Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 53.

⁸⁰ Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 197.

⁸¹ Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 54.

Though the objective of redeeming fallen nature has disappeared today, ancient alchemy still shares a significant point with modern-day science, namely, that human interference with natural processes is key to achieving a certain harmony. In fact, Berman and Merchant agree that the concept of dominating nature so prominent in Bacon's thinking and in today's technological and scientific mindset emerged in part from the magical tradition.⁸²

Despite these similarities between mechanism and alchemy, their respective metaphysical outlooks on reality were in opposition. Animism and a universe of dead matter in motion could not coexist within the same metaphysical worldview. For this reason, it is surprising to find that alchemy, though ancient in its roots, was increasingly popular throughout the 16th and 17th centuries in various parts of Europe, precisely the time when mechanism was making its modern debut. Dupré asserts that until the 17th century alchemy grew in tandem with mechanical physics and offered a competing interpretation of science.⁸³ One advantage that it maintained over the yet undefined mechanical and technological view of reality was that it accepted a scientific approach still steeped in a meaningful and enlivened universe; though mechanical physics could measure the primary qualities of the material world, it struggled to offer any broader explanation of life and purpose.⁸⁴ A soulless science was, at this point in history, unimaginable for many scholars.

⁸² Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 109, and Berman, *Reenchantment of the World*, 100.

⁸³ Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 52.

⁸⁴ Berman, *Reenchantment of the World*, 99.

Even Isaac Newton (1642-1727), so focused on an atomistic description of the universe, was disturbed by the assertion that matter was inert and that motion was simply due to a first cause. A discovery of Newton's personal manuscripts in the early 20th century revealed an enormous volume of work entertaining the belief in *anima mundi*, or a "world soul" which gave life and motion to the universe.⁸⁵ While Newton accepted mechanical physics as a way to measure the effects of the physical world and to establish physical law, he did not think it was sufficient to explain how such effects were produced. It is one thing to describe forces such as gravity, i.e. to measure their influence on objects. It is another to identify the essence of gravity, to explain precisely what it is. This was a point of contention for his critics. Berman explains, "Newton, they argued, has not explained gravity, but merely stated its effects, and thus it really is, in his system, an occult property. Where is this 'gravity' that he makes so much of?"⁸⁶ While privately Newton believed the answer to the question of gravity rested in alchemy and the *anima mundi*, publicly he reinforced mechanism and clarified the objective position of modern science:

[H]itherto I have not been able to discover the cause of those properties of gravity from phenomena, and I frame no hypothesis; for whatever is not deduced from the phenomena is to be called a hypothesis, and hypotheses, whether metaphysical or physical, whether of occult qualities or mechanical, have no place in experimental philosophy.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Ibid., 117-118.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 43.

⁸⁷ Isaac Newton, *Mathematical Principles*, Book III, General Scholium, 547, trans. Andrew Motte, University of Californian Press, Berkeley, CA, 1946. Refer also to Morris Berman, *Reenchantment of the World*, 43.

While secretly harboring a belief in the vital characteristics of matter and the cosmos, Newton eliminated metaphysical questions from the practice of science. It was not the place of the scientist to speculate on why things worked in the world, only to describe how.

Newton is believed to have been deeply involved in alchemical experiments until 1696 when he became master of the Mint in London.⁸⁸ Berman believes that due to the mounting pressure against alchemy in the West, Newton repressed his interest in it and gradually became the staunch mechanical philosopher that history has judged him to be. Concerned with his great and lasting influence in the West, Berman writes:

Newton was the magician who succeeded. Instead of remaining some sort of isolated crank, he was able to get all of Europe 'to join in the grand obsessive design,' becoming president of the Royal Society and being buried, in 1727, amidst pomp and glory in Westminster Abbey in what was literally an international event. With the acceptance of the Newtonian world view, it might be argued, Europe went collectively out of its mind.⁸⁹

Berman sees the end of natural magic in Europe at this time as the final stand of original participation in Western consciousness. Mechanism's hegemony over truth would certainly be challenged by the romantics of the late 18th century, by transcendentalist and naturalist philosophers like Emerson, Thoreau and Muir, but these would not be influential enough to topple its pervasive grip on modern science, industry, and economics.

⁸⁸ Berman, *Reenchantment of the World*, 121.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

While interest in alchemy and other forms of natural magic were on the rise together with mechanism in the 16th and early 17th centuries, it began to decline sharply throughout the 17th century under the impact of the rising prestige of the mechanistic worldview. One can only speculate on the reasons for this decline. The obvious view by today's standards is that the mechanistic approach to science had greater practical success. Regarding the decline of the various forms of natural magic, Dupré writes: "Their appeal decreased as the mechanistic theory presented a conception of a homogeneous universe that explained more phenomena and explained them better."⁹⁰ Morris Berman would likely take issue with this explanation of alchemy's decline, yet it does capture the new standard of proof that was emerging in the Western world. In the wake of successful scientific investigation and technological innovation, natural magic may have increasingly appeared untenable by rational and empirical standards.

Galileo's work provides an example of this. His application of mathematics and technology to scientific investigation gave a reason behind the motion of objects and planets. As mentioned earlier, alchemy, astrology and other forms of natural magic grounded their understanding of manipulation and power over objects on a Neoplatonic hierarchy of being, where all things are connected from one level of being to another. Higher orders controlled lower ones. Achieving or understanding a higher state of being was key to manipulating the lower. The planetary heavens had anciently been viewed as participating in higher being, that is, operating according to superior laws. When a rock is

⁹⁰ Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 57.

thrown on earth its motion quickly comes to an end because it operates according to an imperfect law. The planets and stars in the heavens, by contrast, never cease moving because they act according to a higher, more perfect law. When Galileo confirmed Copernicus' ideas about the solar system and declared that the heavens operated under the same physical laws as earthly objects, he dismantled the ancient hierarchical view and subverted much of natural magic's claim to power over the physical world. The widespread turn away from natural magic and toward mechanism may have been due, in good part, to the power of mechanism to rationally and empirically explain what had previously been mysterious and unknowable.

To end there, however, would not tell the whole story, for the abandonment of natural magic and the drive to establish a viable mechanical theory were also generated, in part, by changing political and religious interests. Berman believes the mechanical worldview took shape in response to, and as a political and philosophical tool against, the disconcerting rise of animistic magic during this period. He highlights that Bacon consciously took aim at traditions that saw mystery and awe in nature.⁹¹ It was not that Bacon thought they were entirely phony, but rather he believed they were morally depraved. Carolyn Merchant highlights Bacon's role as Attorney General under the rule of James I in exposing and condemning witchcraft in early 17th C. England.⁹² The language Bacon employed regarding the probing of the feminine natural world mirrors

⁹¹ Berman, *Reenchantment of the World*, 106.

⁹² Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 168.

that which he used to interrogate the women involved in witchcraft. In his essay *De*

Dignitate et Augmentis Scientiarum, Bacon writes:

For you have but to follow and as it were hound nature in her wanderings, and you will be able, when you like, to lead and drive her afterwards to the same place again. Neither am I of the opinion, in this history of marvels, that superstitious narratives of sorceries, witchcrafts, charms, dreams, divinations, and the like, where there is an assurance and clear evidence of the fact, should be altogether excluded. For it is not yet known in what cases, and how far, effects attributed to superstition participate of natural causes; and therefore howsoever the use and practice of such arts is to be condemned, yet from the speculation and consideration of them (if they be diligently unravelled) a useful light may be gained, not only for the true judgment of the offenses of persons charged with such practices, but likewise for the further disclosing of the secrets of nature. Neither ought a man to make scruple of entering and penetrating into these holes and corners, when the inquisition of truth is his sole object—as your majesty has shown in your own example; who, with the two clear and acute eyes of religion and natural philosophy, have looked deeply and wisely into those shadows, and yet proved yourself to be truly of the nature of the sun, which passes through pollutions and is not defiled.⁹³

For Bacon, the interrogation and examination of both nature and the participants of natural magic, particularly those involved in witchcraft, were related tasks. Both were a threat to the good of society and both were in possession of secrets that should be exposed to illuminate truth in the world.

In France, the reaction against alchemy and particularly against Robert Fludd and other Rosicrucians, was waged by mechanists Marin Mersenne (1588-1648), Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655), and René Descartes (1596-1650). Unlike Bacon, these men viewed natural magic as a fraud which had no power in the physical world other than to

⁹³ Francis Bacon, “De Dignitate et Augmentis Scientiarum,” in *Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. and trans. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, Douglas Devon Heath, 428. See also Carolyn Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 164-172.

spread disorder and chaos. In 1623 when the secret Rosicrucian society announced its presence in Paris through a published proclamation, Mersenne, a Minorite friar, worked to refute it.⁹⁴ He accused Fludd of being a wicked magician who spread the false doctrine that salvation could be had without faith, and that by giving power to matter through a world soul the alchemists were refusing the power and transcendence of God.

Mersenne employed the help of Pierre Gassendi in his attack against Fludd. Rather than attacking Fludd on religious grounds as Mersenne had done, Gassendi challenged the logical foundation of Fludd's alchemical assumptions.⁹⁵ Himself a Minorite and a professor of mathematics at the Collège Royale, Gassendi pointed out that Fludd had no way to validate the hierarchical and ensouled nature of the cosmos nor alchemy's belief that human souls were part of God's emanation.⁹⁶ Berman sees this argument as potentially the earliest manifestation of scientific positivism, i.e. the view that something is true only if there is some empirical or rational foundation for it.

Like Mersenne and Gassendi, René Descartes was concerned with finding a more secure epistemological foundation for knowledge, and in 1619 he was certain that the key to this new foundation lie in mathematics. Troubled by philosophy's inability to provide any certain knowledge, Descartes lived a quiet life of contemplation in southern Germany. Merchant notes that while he was there, he is believed to have attempted

⁹⁴ For an account of Mersenne, refer to Berman, *Reenchantment of the World*, 109, and Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 195-198.

⁹⁵ Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 199-200.

⁹⁶ Berman, 110, and Merchant, 200.

contact with the Rosicrucians thinking that they might have the answer to his problem.⁹⁷

If true, it suggests that at least earlier in his life he was not entirely opposed to their metaphysical views. However, when his return to France in 1623 coincided with the distribution of the Rosicrucian proclamation in Paris, rumors began to circulate that he was associated with the secret society. Descartes promptly informed Mersenne that he was not associated with the group. Corresponding with Mersenne and Gassendi, he worked to develop a mechanical philosophy that would stand up against naturalism and animistic magic.⁹⁸

In this section, I have attempted to capture the unique relationship between alchemy and mechanical physics during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and particularly the way the former helped give shape to the latter. As noted above, Western science and technology were influenced by the alchemical tradition's extreme manipulation and domination of nature for the benefit of humans. While it is true that Western craftsmanship had always sought to control nature even without the influence of natural magic, what alchemy brought to the control of nature was religious vision and zeal. It was a holy vocation where the higher soul had the obligation to restore and perfect the lower material world. This same zeal is expressed in the writings of Francis Bacon.

What mechanism did not adopt from alchemy, however, was the vitalism that accompanied the obligation to control and harmonize material nature. Because the

⁹⁷ Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 203.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 195.

mechanists did not view nature as living, they were free of the ethical restraints that existed in alchemy. For example, Henry Cornelius Agrippa, a 16th century practitioner of natural magic, stressed that the alchemist must operate within a framework of respect for living being. He argued against the maiming of living organisms, even to the point of condemning the practice of mining because it injured and exploited the bowels of the earth.⁹⁹ A soulless world, on the other hand, could not be harmed.

Aside from sharing a view of manipulation over nature, alchemy and mechanism remained at odds with each other. This was due specifically to the fact that mechanical physics developed partly in response to the threat of natural magic. The religious and political backlash against natural magic gave some impetus to the mechanistic ideas of Bacon, Mersenne, Gessendi, Descartes, and Newton. Had it not been for the increasing stigmatization of natural magic during the seventeenth century, the philosophical and practical foundations of modern science may have been established upon less rigorous grounds and more open to the possibility of truths that are discerned through relation. Expressing his faith in material causality and his suspicion of occult properties, Descartes' writes:

And anyone who considers all this will readily be convinced that there are no powers in stones and plants that are so mysterious, and no marvels attributed to sympathetic and antipathetic influences that are so astonishing, that they cannot be explained in this way. In short, there is nothing in the whole of nature (nothing, that is, which should be referred to purely corporeal causes, i.e. those devoid of thought and mind) which is incapable of being deductively explained on the basis

⁹⁹ Ibid., 33-34.

of these selfsame principles; and hence it is quite unnecessary to add any further principles to the list.¹⁰⁰

In other words, apart from the human mind, all earthly things can be understood and explained in mechanical and rational terms. In contrast, the inexplicable phenomena of the universe exist only in the soul's imagination and as a result of the human will.

This insular epistemological approach has left no room for the possibility of relational knowledge. Berman also believes that it was not developed from the incontrovertible evidence that Descartes' rationalism had aimed at. He explains: "The success of the mechanical world view cannot be attributed to any inherent validity it might possess, but (partly) to the powerful political and religious attack on the Hermetic tradition by the reigning European elites."¹⁰¹ Berman's point is that Descartes' conclusion regarding the self, God, and the physical world did not simply develop in the purity of his rational thought which he professed, but in the religious and political climate of his day. Newton, too, was under pressure to suppress his speculation about *anima mundi* and its possible role in explaining the vital motion of the world. He published those things he could safely write about, and in the process of doing so he helped to drive modern-day science into the narrow box of positivism where relational knowledge has no part.

¹⁰⁰ René Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, 4:187, in *Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, 278-279. See also Carolyn Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 205.

¹⁰¹ Berman, *Reenchantment of the World*, 112.

Conclusion

Kenneth Stamp, a former historian at U.C. Berkeley, declared that the historian accepts *a priori* the position that knowledge of the past is essential to comprehending the present. This chapter proceeds from a similar assumption. To appreciate the unconventional ideas of Schweitzer, Buber, and Leopold, and what they have to offer environmental ethics today, it is important to recognize our modern context and the historical factors that have given shape to it. Environmental ethics today struggles against a host of factors that capture the essence of our present world. A rampant materialism and an uncompromising science objectify everything except that protected under the guise of rights. Humans aside, all things exist as an object to be probed, played with, or otherwise possessed. This instrumental approach to the world has spawned a technological firestorm that far outstrips our capacity to understand its lasting effects on human beings, let alone on the life around us. These attributes of the modern world did not emerge in isolation, but have grown out of the long, complex history of Western civilization.

In this chapter, I have focused on a few of the historical factors that ushered in our current worldview, and I have tried to emphasize the point that, as these historical variables unfolded, the idea of relation as a standard for moral and ontological truth became an increasingly impossible position to hold. Greek philosophers portrayed the world as something to be contemplated more than to be experienced, and in doing so they challenged the epistemological role of relation; truth was established in the mind, not discerned by the heart. With the rise of theocentrism, truth and meaning were dependent

on a transcendent God, and this increased the possibility for civilization to see the world as merely a backdrop to human history. That said, the ancients were still influenced by a mysterious and intelligent cosmos. As the humanism and mechanism of the Enlightenment became increasingly pervasive, however, the natural world was stripped of its mystery, meaning, and vitality. Truth rested in the heavens above and the human intellect below; all else was basic material fact purely instrumental to individual well-being.

The central aim of this dissertation is to establish the possibility that life in relation, i.e., one which intimately engages the natural world, is important to establishing the moral and ontological truths which will temper material consumption, and give greater ethical control and meaning to modern science and technology. Friendship comes with its own code of ethics. Certainly we may objectify those we stand in relation to, but natural affection serves as a continual reminder that such actions constitute a form of betrayal. In the following chapters, I will examine how Albert Schweitzer, Martin Buber, and Aldo Leopold ultimately return to an ethics that is relational in nature, action oriented, and bound up in the incomprehensible mystery and beauty of life.

CHAPTER TWO

ALBERT SCHWEITZER AND REVERENCE FOR LIFE

Considered one of the great 20th century polymaths, Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) was an accomplished academic and musician. He was known to philosophers for his “Reverence for Life” ethic, to theologians for his controversial and influential work “Quest of the Historical Jesus,” and to musicians for his organ playing and monumental book on Johann Sebastian Bach. In spite of these remarkable accomplishments, he was popularly recognized as the one who, at the age of 30, gave his formal academic career up to establish and operate a hospital at Lambaréné in equatorial Africa. For Schweitzer, a fulfilled human life meant action. At the age of 30, he studied medicine and left his home in Germany for the African continent. Though his academic work would have a profound impact in a variety of circles, it was this life of service and compassion that he considered his most important contribution to the world. In a 1950’s interview with the well-known publisher and peace activist Norman Cousins, Schweitzer explained, “I decided I would make my life my argument.”¹

Schweitzer’s strong humanitarian and political views, coupled with his life of action, were a powerful voice, and he was duly praised. He was elected to the French Academy of Moral and Political Sciences and awarded such accolades as King Gustav

¹ To access portions of the interview, go to www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/unitarians/schweitzera.html. Accessed from the web on 07/06/12.

Adolf's Prince Charles Medal, the British Empire's Order of Merit, West Germany's *Pour le Mérite*, and the Nobel Peace Prize. A 1950's opinion poll showed that Americans considered him the greatest non-American who had ever lived. This popularity would be short-lived, however. In the late 50's and early 60's as he became more vocally opposed to nuclear testing, to the arms race, and to the democratization of Africa nations, Schweitzer was portrayed as a threat to democracy and progress. In a 1963 article, *Time* magazine said he was out-of-touch, "hardly knowing or caring that a continent and a century have passed him by."²

Schweitzer's work on ethics has similarly suffered a fair amount of criticism. Raised in the village of Gunsbach, close to the French-German boarder, he was inspired and awestruck by the hills and woods of the region. In 1969 when a monument was created celebrating his remarkable life, Schweitzer asked that it be located by a big rock that overlooked the Munster valley. He gave the following reason: "It is there I should like to remain in stone, so that my friends could pay me a visit, devote a thought to me, and could listen to the murmur of the river, the music that accompanied the flux of my thoughts. It is on this rock that civilization and ethics was born and the Jesus in his epoch emerged to me. There I feel completely at home."³ Whether in the hills overlooking Munster valley or on the African waters of the Ogowe River where the concept of "Reverence for Life" first came to him, Schweitzer was influenced by his relational

² "Albert Schweitzer: An Anachronism," *Time*, June 21, 1963. See also Predrag Cicovacki, *Albert Schweitzer's Ethical Vision*, 7.

³ Predrag Cicovacki, *Albert Schweitzer's Ethical Vision*, 3.

experiences with the natural world, and this wonder and mysticism pours through into his works, a fact which remained distasteful to some of his critics.

Schweitzer's encounters with nature are of great importance to this dissertation and to environmental ethics at large. He recognized the centrality of a basic mystery grounded in life and realized in relation, and the importance it had for moral knowledge. He understood the ontological significance of an ethics that is discovered through engagement with life, something he seems to arrive at in his later years. He pointed out the limitations of mechanical science, of rigid philosophical thinking, and of dogmatic religion to fully inform the moral life, a fact which did not make him popular in any of these circles. For philosophers, he came off as too mystical and religious, and for theologians either too philosophical or too pantheistic. Today, Environmental ethicists often refer to his "Reverence for Life" ethic, but almost as if to cover their historical bases, without any real depth or engagement. This is a tragic error. Schweitzer's recognition of the power of mystery contained in every life and the human capacity to recognize and be taken in by it taps into the question of every concerned conservationist and ecologist, namely how to generate in others a sincere concern for life around them.

Schweitzer's ethical vision might be thought of as placing mind and heart into a working relationship, and as a result, restoring the ethical motivation and cosmic meaning common in forms of ancient Western and Eastern thought. At the same time, however, he was riding high on the wings of Modern philosophy. He identified his own work as a

rationalist project, for he too was concerned with epistemological certainty.⁴ As we will see, however, his understanding of rationalism is much less rigid than that of modern enlightenment thinkers like Descartes. Enabled by the ideas of Kant and Schopenhauer, Schweitzer was inspired by the great elevation of the human being as a creature of dignity and volition, and the profound effect that this had on the sense of individual freedom and responsibility. Where modern philosophy had fallen short was in its attempt to remove skepticism by denying the foundational mystery of life in the cosmos. Modern philosophy had to be complex, profound, and systematic to be credible, and as a result, the simplicity of wonder and its play upon the emotions were dismissed as vacuous.

In this chapter, I examine Albert Schweitzer's "Reverence for Life" ethic and how it aims at empowering the modern world with the capacity to see being, to recognize its value, and the significance that this has for personal meaning. It is divided into three main sections. The first section sets the foundation for understanding the ethic by identifying Schweitzer's metaphysical outlook on the world and on the individual. In essence, it examines the background and conditions within which "Reverence for Life" takes place. The second section will address Schweitzer's understanding of epistemology. By what faculty and method do we come to know truth and the real in the world? Specifically in this case, how does one arrive at a reverence for life? In the final part of this chapter I will discuss the ethical ramifications of Schweitzer's ethic. I will consider

⁴ Schweitzer does qualify his use of the term "rationalism," and I will discuss this in the section on epistemology.

the unique perspective that it brings to the table of environmental ethics today and the distinct challenges that it faces.

Schweitzer's Metaphysical Outlook

Christianity and the Kingdom of God

To grasp Schweitzer's metaphysical perspective, it is perhaps best to start with his strong religious understanding of the world grounded in Christianity and the ethics of Jesus. Predrag Cicovacki makes the assertion that Schweitzer's project can be understood as the attempt to provide a rational basis for living out the ethics of love as exemplified by Jesus.⁵ Whether the whole of his work can be summarized in this single objective is difficult to say, but there is no question that Schweitzer's philosophical activity is inspired by a deeply religious vision. The substance of this vision departs from the doctrines of extreme transcendence, embracing instead a worldview that binds meaning, responsibility, hope, and union with the Divine in the here and now.⁶

The roots of Schweitzer's worldly emphasis can be traced back to Early Christianity and the impending Kingdom of God. Schweitzer contends that Jesus and the Early Christians eagerly, and mistakenly, awaited the rapid arrival of the Kingdom of God. Their pessimistic view of life existence with its evils resulted in a certain worldly denial, and yet a zeal in living out the ethics of love was generated by the hope and joy with which they anticipated the end of times. They were happy, confident, and engaged

⁵ Cicovacki, *Albert Schweitzer's Ethical Vision*, 8.

⁶ In this regard, Schweitzer's shares the approach of the Liberation Theologians, centering theological and ethical attention on God's work in the world.

with their fellow human beings as they lived out their expectation. As time passed and the long awaited Kingdom of God did not come, however, the embarrassed Church turned its focus to the resurrection of Jesus (Orthodox Christianity) and to personal redemption through the atonement (Western Christianity).⁷

This transition from a concern with immediate and earthly matters to a focus on transcendence occurred as the Church sought to cope with an uncertain vision of the future. As Schweitzer writes:

The abandonment of eager expectation meant that Christianity lost the joy that characterized it in the days of Paul and the early Church. It started in bright sunshine but had to continue its journey in the chilly gloom of a vague and uncertain hope. The idea of the Kingdom of God is no longer at the center of faith, and this has led to a far-reaching impoverishment.⁸

The impoverishment that Schweitzer alludes to are the personal and societal tragedies that accompany turning away from the most basic facts of living reality, facts which contribute to meaning, self-realization, and ethical responsibility. For example, he believed that the new focus on individual salvation meant the loss of motivation to care for and support the community and civilization. He explains:

Originally, the dominant thought of the Kingdom of God meant that believers shared with one another the blessings of a new creation. But now the experiences of the individual took precedence over that of the community. Each separate believer is now concerned with his own redemption. He cares nothing for the future of mankind and of the world.⁹

⁷ Schweitzer, "Kingdom of God," in *Albert Schweitzer's Ethical Vision*, edited by Cicovacki, 58-60.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

It is not that the moral life ceased to be important with this transition, but it took on a transcendent and alien quality. In a sense, Jesus' ethic of love was abnegated to some impossible, unfathomable ideal, ceasing to be a reality for people. It is because we view Christ's words as some transcending ideal that we revere them but do not live them. We are, after all, only ordinary. "Yet that is precisely what he asks us to do," says Schweitzer, "to see his demands as ordinary."¹⁰

Schweitzer's metaphysical view of the universe begins with removing the spiritual and divine from its remote and impossible sphere, and relocating it in the earthly. His intent is to make happiness, meaning, responsibility and the spiritual life immanent in the world. This religious vision is immersed in the life reality that surrounds us rather than distracted by a world to come. He writes, "Only as it comes to be understood as something ethical and spiritual, rather than supernatural, as something to be realized rather than expected, can the Kingdom of God regain, in our faith, the force that it had for Jesus and the early Church."¹¹ The energy, hope, and ethical power needed to live the ethics of love accompanies the zeal engendered by an impending Kingdom of God. Schweitzer stresses that the Kingdom must foremost exist within in our hearts. Only then can it come to pass in the world.¹²

¹⁰ This quote is taken from Albert Schweitzer's first sermon on Reverence for Life in 1919. It is reprinted in Meyer and Bergel, *Reverence for Life*, 64.

¹¹ Cicovacki, *Albert Schweitzer's Ethical Vision*, 69.

¹² *Ibid.*, 73.

Schweitzer's World Optimism

Because Albert Schweitzer is exclusively concerned with affecting the present, his metaphysical life view is flavored by a certain world optimism, or what he calls “world and life affirmation.” Like the Stoics discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, Schweitzer departs from the extreme pessimism and world-denial expressed by the Gnostics and early medieval Christians, embracing instead the idea that human involvement in earthly matters is good, fulfilling, and inspiring. In fact, he would likely view the cosmic optimism of Irenaeus as an enigma, since he perceives Christ and the early Church as despising and turning away from a world and life affirmation due to the expectation of God’s Kingdom and the end of times.¹³ In Schweitzer’s view, the rise of the Christian faith had much to do with the growing sense of Western pessimism in ancient and early medieval periods.

Schweitzer praises the Stoics, as well as Lao-tse and the Taoists, for their positive stance toward the created order, a position that he heartily agrees with. He is criticized by some scholars for being overly optimistic with regards to the natural order. It is, after all, “red in tooth and claw.”¹⁴ Schweitzer is not, however, naïve or in denial regarding the brutality of nature and the creative/destructive cycles of the earth. It is not that the cosmos is a perfect demonstration of harmony and goodness, but that humans possess the

¹³ Cicovacki, *Albert Schweitzer's Ethical Vision*, 36.

¹⁴ James Gustafson makes this observation in his work *Sense of the Divine*. Here he compares Schweitzer to the hopeless optimism of the Jains who aim for a harmony that is out of touch with the real world.

ideals and freedom of will to rise above it. It is in the will that he locates this optimism, not in the observed facts of the physical world.

This leads to an important way that Schweitzer departs significantly from Stoic metaphysics, demonstrating instead his relatedness to modern skepticism. He is drawn to the idea that stoicism is a nature-based philosophy that brings us into spiritual relation with the world.¹⁵ On the other hand, like William of Ockham discussed in the first chapter, he is skeptical of the idea that truth is discernible in the cosmos itself. For traditions like stoicism and taoism, the Logos and Tao are accessible to the human mind. In other words, truth and morality are apparent within the natural order. But Schweitzer writes in *Indian Thought and Its Development*, “No ethics can be won from knowledge of the universe. Nor can ethics be brought into harmony with what we know of the universe.”¹⁶ True to the metaphysical skepticism of his time, Schweitzer rejects the view that eternal truth and morality have any empirical grounding. As Ara Paul Barsam explains:

Schweitzer views the world as parasitic, full of death and apparent cruelty. For him, creation is at best “ambiguous:” In the words of Andrew Linzey, “it seems to affirm and deny God at the same time.” Outside us, the will-to-live manifests itself as a creative-destructive force, leaving the physical world absent of a morally affirmative telos.¹⁷

¹⁵ Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel, 112

¹⁶ This quote originally comes from the introduction of Schweitzer’s book *Indian Thought and Its Development*. It is quoted here in Predrag Cicovacki’s source book *Albert Schweitzer’s Ethical Vision*, 40.

¹⁷ Ara Paul Barsam, “Albert Schweitzer, Jainism, and Reverence for Life,” in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel’s work *Reverence for Life*, 221.

While restoring meaning in the world is important for Schweitzer, he initially turns away from any metaphysical position that bestows inherent purpose and meaning on the cosmos. This is at least true in his earlier writings. As I will argue in the pages ahead, however, he seems to soften on this view in his later writings.

Reality is Will

Mike Martin is critical of what he believes is a contradiction between Schweitzer's metaphysical skepticism and his life affirming optimism.¹⁸ How can the optimistic attitude of life affirmation coexist with absolute skepticism about cosmic purposes? Schweitzer's answer to this problem is contained in the discovery of the inner will-to-live. He declares in his book *The Philosophy of Civilization* that, "true philosophy must start from the most immediate and comprehensive fact of consciousness, which says, 'I am life which wills to live, in the midst of life which wills to live.'" ¹⁹ The term "fact of consciousness" is central here because it is a truth discovered from within, not from an outward observation of the world. Schweitzer borrows this conception of truth and will from Schopenhauer who speculates that the essence of the world can only be discerned through an analogy with the self. With Schopenhauer in mind, Schweitzer writes in the *Philosophy of Civilization*, "Myself, looked at from the outside, I conceive as a physical phenomenon in space and time, but looked at from within, as will to live. Everything, accordingly, that meets me in the world of phenomenon is a manifestation of

¹⁸ Mike W. Martin, "Rethinking Reverence for Life," in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel's work *Reverence for Life*, 168.

¹⁹ Albert Schweitzer, "The Philosophy of Civilization," in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel's work *Reverence for Life*, 72.

the will to live.”²⁰ One can discern here the elements of Immanuel Kant’s phenomenal experience, or world of the mind. One can also see the similarity to René Descartes’ rational first principle based on the *cogito ergo sum*. Inward recognition of the will-to-live for Schweitzer transcends the outward facts of the world and lays the “rational” foundation for his ethics.

Schweitzer accepts that the world is full of violence, destruction, death, and disease together with the goods of health, love, sacrifice, and kindness. But all of these are material facts of the world and convey nothing with respect to truth and morality.²¹ He tends to accept, at least in his earlier writings, that there exists a fact-value distinction in the physical world. Like the Hindu traditions of the East that view the *atman*, or self, as the key to understanding the universe, Schweitzer maintains that self-understanding is the first essential step to obtaining genuine knowledge of the world. And so, regardless of whatever empirical evidences there might be to the contrary, life affirmation in the world is confirmed by the mysterious will-to-live within us:

Neither world- and life-affirmation nor ethics can be founded on what our knowledge of the world can tell us about the world. We observe nothing leading to meaning. The last fact that knowledge can discover is that the world is a manifestation of the universal will to live.²²

²⁰ Albert Schweitzer, “The Philosophy of Civilization,” in Predrag Cicovacki’s work *Albert Schweitzer’s Ethical Vision*, 125.

²¹ At the end of this chapter, I hope to show that Schweitzer later in life softens on his view toward empiricism and the ability of the cosmos to relate truths of existence. He seems to come to the recognition that physical relationship is an essential component of his ethical vision.

²² Quoted in Cicovacki, *Albert Schweitzer’s Ethical Vision*, 107.

This acceptance of inward reality over outward observation locates Schweitzer among ethical idealists like Plato and Immanuel Kant. What is metaphysically real is that which is discernible within.

While Schweitzer can claim that knowledge of our personal will-to-live is independent of any empirical facts in the world, it must be admitted that his knowledge that there exists other will-to-live in the world can only be true through observation. This is the root of Martin's accusation that his system is inconsistent. He feels there is a disconnect from what is inwardly true to what is outwardly obligatory, i.e., that because we are a will-to-live we ought to respect other will-to-live. Is this imperative also an immediate fact of consciousness, an inward truth? Why should it be chosen over the egoist maxim, "I must kill and destroy other will-to-live in order to preserve my own will-to-live"? As we will see in the next section on epistemology, Schweitzer draws upon Kant's categorical imperative to universalize reverence for life toward all will-to-live. In short, he will claim that a person "regards existence as he experiences it in himself."²³ In other words, a recognition and reverence of our personal will-to-live leads us to universalize such reverence toward all will-to-live that we observe in the world. For Schweitzer, this process is natural and reasonable: "World and life affirmation and ethics are given in our will to live, and they come to be clearly discerned in it in proportion as it learns to think about itself and its relation to the world."²⁴ One needs but think upon the

²³ Albert Schweitzer, "Indian Thought and Its Development," quoted in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel's *Reverence for Life*, 222.

²⁴ Albert Schweitzer, "Philosophy of Civilization," in Predrag Cicovacki's source book *Albert Schweitzer's Ethical Vision*, 108.

mystery of will-to-live in the universe to arrive at the proper disposition toward the world.

Mysticism and the Limitations of Philosophy and Science

Perhaps it goes without saying that Schweitzer's skepticism about what can be understood in this world leads him to be critical of overly enthusiastic philosophical systems and scientific attitudes. What is important is truth, not the technique of the system of thought or the rigor of the experimentation, and this constitutes a failure of modern academics. Here again he praises ancient Western and Eastern philosophy for their primary concern with elemental matters of existence, where a mysterious world will (the Logos, the Tao, the *anima mundi*, or other) places ethical claims upon humanity to serve it.²⁵ This had been philosophy, or the quest for truth, in its purest sense, when humans were concerned with who they were and their relation to a wondrous world.

Schweitzer believes that gradually intellectualism began to lose its interest in basic concerns of existence, focusing instead on disciplines which were of secondary importance. Truth was reduced to the accumulation of brute facts, of observation of primary qualities, and these simply were not sufficient to provide any sort of meaning to life:

But philosophy philosophized about everything except civilization. She went on working undeviatingly at the establishment of a theoretical view of the universe, as though by means of it everything could be restored, and did not reflect that this theory, even if it were completed, would be constructed out of history and science only, and would accordingly be unoptimistic and unethical, and would remain

²⁵ This thought of Schweitzer's comes from his autobiographical work *Out of My Life and Thought*, reprinted in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel's book *Reverence for Life*, 113.

forever an 'impotent theory of the universe,' which could never call forth the energies needed for the establishment and maintenance of the ideals of civilization.²⁶

Philosophy and science no longer examined life as if they were immersed within it. They now stood apart from the world as one who "contemplates it from the outside."²⁷

Schweitzer's thoughts here echo the concerns of Louis Dupré and Morris Berman raised in the first chapter. What had always been intuitively recognized as being, as inherently valuable life, or as Schweitzer calls it, "will-to-live," was set aside by a systematic philosophy and an objectifying science that reduced all things to the material facts of existence.

Schweitzer contends that the significance of this turn to secondary matters means that today we are much more progressed materially than we are spiritually.²⁸ Concerned with this one-sided development, his philosophical vision emphasizes not simply that we should be aware of respecting life, but more inclusively, how we can restore individual meaning and self-fulfillment.²⁹ The world is awakening, he argues, to the crisis of meaning that modernity has left to us, and while postmodern thinkers respond with the death of metaphysics and the philosophy of the absurd, Schweitzer seeks to restore metaphysical meaning. But, he warns, "neither cautious academics nor fantastic

²⁶ Schweitzer, "Philosophy of Civilization," in Cicovacki's source book *Albert Schweitzer's Ethical Vision*, 91.

²⁷ Schweitzer, "Out of My Life and Thought," in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel's book *Reverence for Life*, 113. See also Cicovacki, 104.

²⁸ This thought comes from Schweitzer's *Philosophy of Civilization*, quoted in introduction of Predrag Cicovacki's source book *Albert Schweitzer's Ethical Vision*, 9.

²⁹ Mike Martin, *Albert Schweitzer's Reverence for Life: Ethical Idealism and Self-Realization*, 1.

‘metaphysics’ can give a worldview.”³⁰ For Schweitzer teleological meaning lies in an academics that is open to mystery and wonder in the universe, and a metaphysics that is grounded in the unencumbered operations of the will.

As a physician, Schweitzer is aware and appreciative of the advancements made by modern science and technology. He admits that he has gained much from academics’ narrow focus on secondary matters. He believes, however, that such advancements are not incompatible with greater humility before a mysterious world, and that sincere knowledge cannot blithely set aside such wonder:

You may seek to explore everything around you, you may push to the farthest limits of human knowledge, but in the end you will always strike upon something that is unfathomable. It is called life. And this mystery is so inexplicable that it renders the difference between knowledge and ignorance completely relative.³¹

A science which assumes, as Descartes and Bacon did, that mystery in the world hinders truth and is nothing but the whimsical imagination of the human mind is in denial of the basic facts of existence. Schweitzer declares that there is no difference between the scholar examining microscopic life and the illiterate peasant stirred by the blossoms of spring.³² Both of them meet life and are taken in by its wonder. But when the scientific mind becomes proud and assumes that mystery is nothing more than the naïve consolation of the superstitious mind, it has itself become ignorant of the world:

³⁰ Schweitzer, “Philosophy of Civilization” in Cicovacki’s work *Albert Schweitzer’s Ethical Vision*, 105.

³¹ This quote comes from Albert Schweitzer’s first sermon on “Reverence for Life.” It is taken here from Martin Meyer and Kurt Bergel’s text *Reverence for Life*, 67.

³² *Ibid.*, 67.

The unlearned person who, at the sight of a tree in flower, is overpowered by the mystery of the will-to-live which is stirring all around knows more than the scientist who studies under the microscope or in physical and chemical activity a thousand forms of the will-to-live but, with all his knowledge of the life course of these manifestations of the will-to-live, is unmoved by the mystery, ... puffed up with vanity at being able to describe exactly a fragment of the course of life.³³

Humble, sincere thinking is Schweitzer's remedy for the modern academic mind. It is a kind of thinking that accepts the metaphysical reality of mystery in the universe rather than banning it, and even tries to pursue its essence to unfathomable depths. This process is an essential part of fostering reverence for life.

It is reasonable to ask how Schweitzer, himself skeptical of metaphysical truths in the world, can be so comfortable with, and place so much significance in, the unfathomable mystery of life. Without any observable facts upon which to build information, isn't science and philosophy justified in remaining agnostic with respect to such mystery? The answer to this lies in what he calls "resignation," a detachment from what we cannot control and an inner freedom from the modern drive for certainty. Here we simply submit to the unintelligible reality of the cosmos. The ancients adopted fantastic and unsupportable worldviews to explain the mystery that they knew existed. This will not do for Schweitzer. Modernity more cautiously tries to build a worldview without the help of mystery at all, for it was inscrutable and wholly transcendent. More recently, recognizing the emptiness of the modern worldview, philosophy has cast it off as well. Schweitzer, in contrast, trusts the mystery he experiences, but admits that it does

³³ Albert Schweitzer, "Philosophy of Civilization," in Martin Meyer and Kurt Bergel's *Reverence for Life*, 71.

not reveal a worldview to save us from skepticism. Only when we realize it is futile to solve the mystery can we make our way through the “desert of skepticism about knowledge of the world ... with calm confidence.”³⁴ The trick to overcoming skepticism is learning to feel comfortable with the unfathomable.

One great obstacle, however, inhibits our ability to resign to mystery, and that is the lack of intellectual and physical freedom in our modern world. As I will illustrate more thoroughly in the next section on epistemology, Schweitzer believes that the modern mind, for all its cognitive optimism, has surrendered genuine thought, and because we largely adopt the metaphysical assumptions of modernity, this has led to the collapse of our humanity. We are beyond seeing the mystery of life in the world, or at least beyond reflecting on it for very long. Schweitzer is convinced, however, that deep down we all feel as he does about “reverence for life.” To overcome the tainted lens that the modern West uses to look at the world, we must accept and ponder the mystery of our own and others’ will-to-live.

Removing the distorted lens of Modernity is one thing. It is another to control the social structures established over hundreds of years that have been built upon and are supported by that lens. Offering a Marxist informed analysis of our current circumstances, Schweitzer contends that we are limited by social factors that stunt our

³⁴ Albert Schweitzer, *Philosophy of Civilization*, in Cicovacki’s source book *Albert Schweitzer’s Ethical Vision*, 113. In essence, Schweitzer argues that Western thought ceased to progress because it got hung up on skepticism and certainty. As we let go and trust the mystery a more holistic picture of reality and responsibility emerges.

mental health. Urbanization, the modern division of labor, and market forces tend to draw us away from recognition of the will-to-live which saturates the natural world:

The lack of freedom that results is made worse still because the factory system creates continually growing agglomerations of people who are thereby compulsorily separated from the soil that feeds them, from their own homes, and from nature. Hence comes serious psychical injury. There is only too much truth in the paradoxical saying that abnormal life begins with the loss of one's own field and dwelling place.³⁵

Schweitzer admits that Modernity and the structures of modern civilization have brought us great things, but they must be put into their proper context. Inasmuch as thought about our and others' will-to-live continues to be inhibited by the structures of Modernity, civilization will be kept from the moral life, from meaning, and from self-realization.

Because this process deals with human fulfillment and the mystery of life, it is a "spiritual" endeavor for Schweitzer. Life meaning and ethical motivation are dependent upon our ability to rise above the materialism that defines our relationship to the natural world, embracing instead a spiritual relationship with the world.³⁶ Schweitzer's metaphysical view is spiritually inhabited, but again, the spiritual is removed from any transcendent sphere and made part of the struggle to live and thrive here and now. To reclaim the spiritual, our allegiance can no longer be chained to the philosophical and physical structures that are blindly accepted in the world today. He declares, "Spiritual freedom, then, we shall recover only when the majority of individuals become, once

³⁵ Albert Schweitzer, "Decay and the Restoration of Civilization," in Cicovacki's book *Albert Schweitzer's Ethical Vision*, 92.

³⁶ Albert Schweitzer, "Out of My Life and Thought," in Martin Meyer and Kurt Bergel, *Reverence for Life*, 115.

more, spiritually independent and self-reliant and discover their natural and proper relation to those organizations in which their souls have been entangled.”³⁷ In short, only reflection on the mystery of life in us and our surroundings will restore spirituality and give us the energy and vision to address our modern challenges.

Metaphysical questions address what is real and important. For Schweitzer, reality is undoubtedly associated with the spiritual. But that spiritual vision of reality is non-dualistic and inherently connected to the natural world through the exercise of the will. Life-meaning, self-realization, and moral responsibility are not independent of the physical world. On the other hand, while the will affirms that the world is a matter of positive concern, nature itself is empty of any moral content.³⁸ What is metaphysically true for Schweitzer are basic facts of consciousness, or ideals. The instinctive will-to-live within oneself is what is real and undeniable. It is contemplation on this ideal that leads to proper disposition with the outer world. Finally, the role that mystery plays in all of this is crucial. The mystery of life is beyond the power of philosophy or science to explain, yet it remains a basic fact of living experience. The influence of wonder and awe drives us to essential ethical virtues such as humility and gratitude. Despite the intentions of past ethics, Schweitzer holds that the mystery of life with its accompanying tensions is

³⁷ Albert Schweitzer, “Decay and the Restoration of Civilization,” in Cicovacki, *Albert Schweitzer’s Ethical Vision*, 98.

³⁸ Again, this is true at least from the earlier writings of Schweitzer. He tends to ascribe greater revealing power to nature in later writings. I will raise this issue in the final section on the ethical ramifications of his thought.

not ours to solve, to systematize, or to abandon all together. An appropriate ethics must simply resign to its influence.

Schweitzer's Epistemological Approach

Rooted in Rationalism

Having examined Schweitzer's metaphysical assumptions about humans and the world, I now turn to the way in which he arrives at the principle "Reverence for Life" and its connection to mystical union with the Divine. As I have already noted, Schweitzer refers to his philosophical work as rational. Influenced by Kant, on whom he wrote his doctoral dissertation, he is concerned with the need to supply some sense of certainty to ethical obligation. In his autobiographical work *Out of My Life and Thought*, he writes, "I declare myself to be one who places all his confidence in rational thinking.... To renounce thinking is to declare mental bankruptcy.... When we give up the conviction that we can arrive at the truth through thinking, skepticism appears."³⁹ True to the rationalism of Modernity with its humanistic perspective, Schweitzer held the conviction that the undeniable truths of morality could not be established in the world of empirical data, but must be founded upon certain ideals of the mind. In his first sermon on "Reverence for Life" given in 1919, he argues that the loss of moral principle among people today is due to a lack of ethics founded in rational thought.⁴⁰

³⁹ Albert Schweitzer, "Out of My Life and Thought," printed in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel's text *Reverence for Life*, 110.

⁴⁰ Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel's book *Reverence for Life*, 65.

Schweitzer shows his closest connection to the formal rationalist thinking of Modernity with the introspective conclusion that he is a life which “wills to live.” Similar to Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum*, the principle of will-to-live establishes for Schweitzer a solid, intelligible first principle upon which to build his “Reverence for Life” ethic. Will-to-live, in fact, is far more basic a truth than “I think, therefore I am,” according to Schweitzer, who calls Descartes’ conclusion “paltry” and “arbitrarily chosen.”⁴¹ René Descartes intended to rest all epistemological certainty upon the one undeniable truth of mind, namely, that he is a “thinking thing.” But for Schweitzer, this fails the test of sincerity to real world experiences. After all, how can Descartes conclude he is a thinking thing unless he has something to think about? For Schweitzer, reality and ethics is established by the substance of thought, not by the mere act of thinking. He writes:

[T]he simple fact of consciousness is this, *I will to live*. Through every stage of life, this is the one thing I know about myself. I do not say, “I am life,” for life continues to be a mystery too great to understand. I only know that I cling to it. I fear its cessation - death. I dread its diminution - pain. I seek its enlargement - joy.⁴²

Schweitzer’s understanding of rationalism is far less rigorous than that of the Enlightenment thinkers, who were more concerned with being logically systematic. Where his concern and focus was on elemental matters, their concern was secondary and detached from life-meaning.

⁴¹ Schweitzer’s “Philosophy of Civilization” in Marvin and Meyer’s book *Reverence for Life*, 72.

⁴² Schweitzer, “The Ethics of Reverence for Life,” printed in Marivn Meyer and Kurt Bergel’s book *Reverence for Life*, 127.

While Schweitzer wants to establish an ethics grounded and supported in rational thinking, he also believes that love is the essence of morality, and that the two must be in agreement. He praises Schopenhauer for encouraging “man” to do what has never been done before in philosophical ethics: “Listen to his own heart.”⁴³ Similar to the Native American perspectives raised in the first chapter of this dissertation, Schweitzer acknowledges that morality is not simply derived from cold logic, but is connected to inner heartfelt affirmations. Inasmuch as ethics disregards these affirmations due to uncertainty, it is too logically minded: “[I]t is only in proportion as we all become less rational, in the meaning given it by ordinary calculation, that the ethical disposition develops in us and allows problems to become soluble which have hitherto been insoluble.”⁴⁴ Notice here that Schweitzer takes aim at rationalism in its ordinary use. His idea of rational thinking, on the other hand, is accepting of basic realities of existence and attempts to be at home with knowledge of the heart.

Fusing Mind and Heart

What Schweitzer envisions is a balanced approach between mind and heart. Ethics from the heart alone is just as problematic as ethics from a staunch rationalist perspective, for whereas the latter is caught up in a detached system of thought, the former is abstruse and withdraws into intuitionism. This is the problem with the ethics of love. Mike Martin asks why Schweitzer did not simply refer to the principle of love

⁴³ Schweitzer, “Civilization and Ethics,” in Predrag Cicovacki’s source book, *Albert Schweitzer’s Ethical Vision*, 127.

⁴⁴ Schweitzer, “Philosophy of Civilization,” in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel’s book *Reverence for Life*, 83.

instead of reverence. After all, he draws upon Jesus and the ethics of love so frequently in writing. Martin notes that in a communication to his colleague Oskar Kraus, Schweitzer confesses that the idea of love had become vague and distorted. Love did not “convey the importance of reasoning, self-realization and other values having great importance to Schweitzer.... Reverence for life names a new moral perspective intended to clarify what genuine spiritual love is.”⁴⁵ The sort of love Schweitzer envisioned is ratified by rational investigation.

If the collaboration of reason and heart is necessary for securing a proper ethical disposition in the world, how precisely do they relate and support each other? While Schweitzer is scant on the details of this throughout his writings, he does give a brief explanation in his first sermon on “Reverence for Life.”⁴⁶ Heart and mind do not necessarily interact in Schweitzer’s view as much as they both confirm, following separate paths, the essence of goodness and ethics. Heart knowledge, says Schweitzer, is informed by love and relationship. While it is typically associated with those in our inner circle, the ethics of Jesus demands that it be broadened to include strangers and even enemies. Universalizing such love is problematic, however, since it is established through relations and too often limited to specific beings. The concept of love, therefore, must be qualified.

⁴⁵ Mike Martin, *Albert Schweitzer’s Reverence for Life: Ethical Idealism and Self-Realization*, 11.

⁴⁶ See Schweitzer’s first sermon on “Reverence for Life,” printed in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel’s work *Reverence for Life*, 65-69.

Examining the idea of love specifically with reference to the love one should have for God purifies it as a principle. Schweitzer argues in this early writing that God is a remote and unfathomable being, “who needs nothing from us, as if he were a creature we confront in daily life.”⁴⁷ Consequently, our typical understanding of compassionate love is inappropriate here. Instead, love for God is better thought of as a reverential disposition. Schweitzer concludes that ethics, when understood by the heart, “means that out of reverence for the incomprehensible, infinite, and living One whom we call God, we should never consider ourselves strangers toward any person, rather we are to coerce ourselves into being helpful to him and to share his experiences.”⁴⁸ The danger of love as an ethical norm is its tendency to be too narrowly focused on those closest to us. In response, Schweitzer attempts to universalize love toward all being by drawing on reverence for God. In this way, he believes, the heart arrives at universal reverence for life.

For Schweitzer, arriving at a knowledge of ethics through the pathway of reason means avoiding the pitfalls associated with any system of thought which attempts to explain all things. Of course, we long for knowledge, but we must be accepting of our limitations, for ethics rests on the recognition of unfathomable mystery in the cosmos. Writes Schweitzer: “Every worldview that fails to start from resignation in regard to knowledge is artificial and a mere fabrication, for it rests upon an inadmissible

⁴⁷ Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel, *Reverence for Life*, 66.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

interpretation of the universe.”⁴⁹ As reason ponders the inexplicable riddle of life it is seized by the wonder and awe that it encounters. The diversity of life is staggering, which only renders the similarity that all life shares even more haunting. Says Schweitzer, “The dissimilarity, the strangeness, between us and other creatures is here removed.”⁵⁰ Similar to my own being, there is a will-to-live in all life forms that deserves reverence and compassion.

Here Schweitzer believes reason has arrived at the same principle as the heart, *universal reverence for life*. Avoiding both the secondary questions of strict rationalism and the fuzzy and unfounded claims of mystical intuitionism, Schweitzer hopes to show that physical emotions and sound thinking are not at odds with one another, but converge on the same point: “When reason plumbs the depths of questions, it ceases to be cool reason and begins to speak the melodies of the heart.”⁵¹ Schweitzer admits that taking reason in this direction will be an uncomfortable endeavor for many, for it comes across as “sentimental” rather than rational. Regardless, he believes it only confirms what is already evident within each one of us when we are honest with ourselves.⁵² Fear of being too sentimental in our emotions and thought has caused us to don masks of rationality, whereby we deceive each other into accepting that all intelligent and true discourse has nothing to do with emotions and wonder in the world.

⁴⁹ Albert Schweitzer, “Civilization and Ethics,” in Predrag Cicovacki’s source book *Albert Schweitzer’s Ethical Vision*, 108.

⁵⁰ Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel, *Reverence for Life*, 68.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵² Albert Schweitzer, “Philosophy of Civilization,” in Meyer and Bergel’s book *Reverence for Life*, 81.

Arriving at Reverence for Life

How exactly does Schweitzer cognitively establish his “Reverence for Life” principle? As I have already highlighted throughout this chapter, he begins with an examination of the inner truth reveal through the will. This shows his preference for idealist and rationalist interpretations of knowledge and existence. Ethics begins with the “immediate fact of consciousness,” the will to live within myself. Because René Descartes mistakenly denied his conscious experience, the basic truth of will-to-live escaped him. Drawing more so on Immanuel Kant and his use of the synthetic *a priori* constructs of the mind, Schweitzer develops his “will-to-live” philosophy as a necessary truth for every individual because it is the inescapable way we encounter the world. The benefit of this approach, according to Schweitzer, is that it builds an ethics that is compelling and binding for all rational minds: “The primary characteristic of this ethic is that it is rational, having been developed as a result of thought upon life.... We may say that anyone who truly explores the depth of thought must arrive at this point.”⁵³ It is important to consider this statement with respect to Schweitzer’s particular understanding of rational thinking; he does not infer the unbending rationalism of Modernity.

Will-to-live is inherently connected to the principle of reverence for Schweitzer. As I reflect upon my will to live I become conscious of the instinctive reverence for my life.⁵⁴ This reverence comes with the moral obligation to protect and nurture my life, to

⁵³ Albert Schweitzer, “The Ethics of Reverence for Life,” in Martin Meyer and Kurt Bergel’s text *Reverence for Life*, 129-130.

⁵⁴ Ara Paul Barsam, “Albert Schweitzer, Jainism, and Reverence for Life,” in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel’s text *Reverence for Life*, 222.

seek happiness and fulfillment. Thus, for Schweitzer, both the will-to-live and the ethics of reverence involve self-understanding. Only when this basic foundation is secure can one proceed to apply reverence to all life. This leap begins with developing an awareness of other will to live in the world. Schweitzer is aware of the many obstacles, philosophical and social as described in the first chapter of this dissertation, which prevent us from seeing being in the world. The only remedy for this blindness is intellectual honesty and resignation to mystery. We might manipulate life and seek to know its bounds, but we are unable to create it or to comprehend its origins and essence. It is dwelling upon this thought that inspires wonder and engenders empathy for other being:

Life means strength, will coming from the abyss and sinking into it again. Life means feeling, sensitivity, and suffering. And if you are absorbed in life, if you see with perceptive eyes into this enormous animated chaos of creation, it suddenly seizes you with vertigo. In everything you recognize yourself again.⁵⁵

As I recognize that everything around me is will-to-live, the reverence I am bound to show my own life is extended to all life. Mike Martin explains that when I experience kinship with other life, my disposition toward that life falls in line with how I view my own will to live.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ From Schweitzer's first sermon on Reverence for Life, reprinted in Martin Meyer and Kurt Bergel's text *Reverence for Life*, 67. Schweitzer speaks of showing empathy toward beetles and even snowflakes, which raises the concerns of anthropomorphization and the practicality of his ethics. I will address both of these issues in the final section of this chapter on the challenges that face Schweitzer's Reverence for Life.

⁵⁶ Mike Martin, *Albert Schweitzer's Reverence for Life: Ethical Idealism and Self-Realization*, 33.

Universalizing Reverence

The extension of reverence to all living being needs greater justification than this. After all, isn't the fact that I must take life in order to live just as apparent and mysterious as the existence of other will to live? Could not the egoist say that reverence for my own life rationally justifies competition with and destruction of other life? Why should empathy and not self-interest shape my disposition toward other will-to-live? Ara Paul Barsam believes that Schweitzer's response to this problem lies in Kant's categorical imperative: "To turn the will-to-live into will-not-to-live would involve a self-contradiction."⁵⁷ In essence, if one recognizes and reverences their own life because of their will-to-live, but then proceeds to disrespect and destroy other will-to-live, they make an exception of their own sacred nature. To be rationally consistent and ethically upright, they must reverence all will-to-live. This Kantian approach commits Schweitzer to an absolutist position, and raises difficult questions regarding survival and making judgements of value. I will return to this challenge in the final section on the ethical ramifications of Schweitzer's view.

Despite Schweitzer's strong preference for Kantian rationality and duty, he departs from him in some very significant ways. The most obvious is that Kant does not recognize any human duties toward nonhuman life because freedom and dignity are only associated with the rational mind. Kant was right, in Schweitzer's view, to recognize that a rational mind stands above nature. The capacity to recognize other will-to-live and to

⁵⁷ Ara Paul Barsam, "Albert Schweitzer, Jainism, and Reverence for Life," in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel's text *Reverence for Life*, 223.

universalize reverence stands in sharp contrast to the brutality of the created world. In this sense, humans transcend, or are alien to the natural world. This fact does not, however, endow us with inherent value and special status as Kant had concluded, only special responsibility:

The world is a ghastly drama of will-to-live divided against itself. One existence makes its way at the cost of another; one destroys another.... But in me the will-to-live has come to know about other wills-to-live. There is in it a yearning to arrive at unity with itself, to become universal.... Why does the will-to-live experience itself in this way in me alone? Is it because I have acquired the capacity of reflecting on the totality of Being?... To these questions there is no answer. It remains a painful enigma for me that I must live with reverence for life in a world which is dominated by creative will which is also destructive will.⁵⁸

Ethics has its beginning for Schweitzer in the inner will-to-live, not in the objective facts of nature, one of them being that humans possess rational minds. In essence, thoughtful reflection on feeling takes precedence over thoughtful reflection on mind. This highlights the difference that Schweitzer points out between elemental and secondary concerns.

Kant's emphasis, instead, is on the mind. He stands apart from both the natural world and the human being, and notes the difference between their objective qualities. He observes that humans are rationally free and can universalize ideals, whereas nature is wholly bound-up in instinct. Because emotion and feeling are natural qualities they play no part for Kant in the moral life. Schweitzer comments, "Kant actually makes it his object to block the natural sources of morality. He will not, for example, allow direct

⁵⁸ Schweitzer, "Philosophy of Civilization," in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergels book *Reverence for Life*, 75.

sympathy to be regarded as ethical.”⁵⁹ As a result, Kant’s categorical imperative provides a good infrastructure to handle ethical questions, but his rejection of relation and basic emotion makes his reason based approach soulless and empty of any ethical content. Schweitzer, in contrast, does not stand apart from the world and the human being, but within the revealed truth of his own inward experiences, and these affirm will-to-live, reverence, and sympathy.

Ethical Mysticism and Unity with Being

The final stage in Schweitzer’s “Reverence for Life” ethic is indeed the ultimate stage of the religious life itself, namely, union with infinite Being. It is not, however, a Beatific Vision that he has in mind, for he rejects the pursuit of any monistic identification between persons and God; there is no loss of consciousness or identity in Schweitzer’s mystical experience.⁶⁰ Recall that Schweitzer’s religious view of the universe avoids the unapproachable transcendence present in some strands of Christianity, stressing instead that spiritual fulfillment is part of the here and now. The religious life is, for Schweitzer, the ethical life put into practice. In his 1936 article, “The Ethics of Reverence for Life,” Schweitzer writes:

Ethics alone can put me in true relationship with the universe by my serving it, cooperating with it, not by trying to understand it.... Only by serving every kind of life do I enter the service of that Creative Will whence all life emanates.... It is

⁵⁹ Schweitzer, “Philosophy of Civilization,” in Predrag Cicovacki’s source book *Albert Schweitzer’s Ethical Vision*, 118. This selection is taken from Schweitzer’s chapter on Kant titled, “The Optimistic-Ethical Worldview in Kant.”

⁶⁰ Barsam, *Reverence for Life*, 5.

through community of life, not community of thought, that I abide in harmony with that Will. This is the mystical significance of ethics.⁶¹

We see here Schweitzer's frustration with Modernity's cognitive optimism. It is not increasing knowledge, but meaning and goodness, that we should be concerned with.

We also see in this quote that Schweitzer, despite his frequent critiques of mysticism, ultimately comes back to it. However, this mysticism should be distinguished from the world-denying and ascetic sort. It is not based on a meditative path or physical isolation from the world. This is active, or what Schweitzer calls "ethical mysticism," and it is dependent upon entering into relation with other beings.⁶² This is where Schweitzer parts with Arthur Schopenhauer who has contributed so much to his thought, particularly the vision of will-to-live and its application to all life. Schopenhauer's reasoned approach to will-to-live leads him to a transcending ideal, to supra-ethical devotion, and thus, to the world—and life—denial of the ascetics. He feels pity for suffering will-to-live as it strives in this brutal existence, notes Schweitzer, but it is only deliberative in the end, for what real help can he give?⁶³ Schweitzer guards against this pessimism by combining the religious life and mystical union with direct engagement of other will-to-live:

I am thrown, indeed, by reverence for life into an unrest such as the world does not know, but I obtain from it a blessedness which the world cannot give.... If I save an insect from a puddle, life has devoted itself to life, and the division of life against itself is ended. Whenever my life devotes itself in any way to life, my

⁶¹ Schweitzer, "The Ethics of Reverence for Life," in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel's text *Reverence for Life*, 132.

⁶² Ara Paul Barsam, "Albert Schweitzer, Jainism, and Reverence for Life," in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel's text *Reverence for Life*, 216-217. Also refer to Barsam, *Reverence for Life*, 5.

⁶³ Schweitzer, "Philosophy of Civilization" in Predrag Cicovacki's source book *Albert Schweitzers Ethical Vision*, 127-128.

finite will-to-live experiences union with the infinite will in which all life is one, and I enjoy a feeling of refreshment which prevents me from pining away in the desert of life.⁶⁴

Schweitzer attests that giving oneself in service to other life offers respite in an otherwise unforgiving existence.

In the first section of this chapter, I noted that Schweitzer understood the importance of restoring an inherently meaningful vision of existence, though he wanted to avoid any mythical worldview that was not substantiated in the real world. Through reverence to life and mystical union with the Divine, Schweitzer believes he has done just that. There is no inherent world meaning in the chaos of physical nature with its destructive and creative tension. There is, however, life meaning that we discover through union with other being. The key to personal and cosmic meaning is not found in philosophical theory, religious dogma, scientific discovery, or even the impression of nature upon our senses. It is found in the compassionate exercise of the will.⁶⁵

Commenting on Schweitzer's approach to personal fulfillment, Mike Martin writes, "[S]elf realization combines striving for excellence with sharing in others' lives.... Because we are social creatures whose lives are intimately interwoven with others, sincerity involves forming personal projects of love—projects that express caring in a highly personal manner."⁶⁶ Unlike the ancients and moderns who stressed that human

⁶⁴ Schweitzer, "Philosophy of Civilization," in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergels book *Reverence for Life*, 75.

⁶⁵ Schweitzer, "Out of my Life and Thought," in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel's book *Reverence for Life*, 115.

⁶⁶ Mike Martin, *Albert Schweitzer's Reverence for Life*, 2.

fulfillment was found in the exercise of the higher faculties of thought, Schweitzer focuses on caring relationships.

For Albert Schweitzer, rational thinking is really just the beginning of the epistemological journey for humans. Where he starts with introspective thought, he eventually ends with truth manifest through our relationships with other life. What is ultimately true and meaningful in the world is oneness and love, union with other being and the Divine. Indeed, departing ways with his contemporary, Karl Barth, Schweitzer would argue that religion is based on ethics and not vice versa.⁶⁷ For Barth, ethics is wholly bound up in the Christian picture of transcendence, top-down in its orientation. For Schweitzer, in contrast, the Divine is found as one engages in the ethical life with others. The key to moral knowledge and union with the Divine is open to anyone. It simply involves self-understanding, resignation and honesty, and finally active caring. In the end, we only know truth, meaning, and God as we proceed to do.

The Ethical Significance of Schweitzer's Reverence for Life

An Ethics Based on Relationship and Action

In this final section, I consider the usefulness and challenges that Albert Schweitzer's reverence for life ethic presents environmental ethics. Perhaps the most significant contribution is his attempt to demonstrate that the ethical life and engagement with the living world are not two different subjects. In the first chapter of this dissertation I raised the idea that engagement with nature and the ethical life might not be the distinct

⁶⁷ Schweitzer, "Religion in Modern Civilization," in Cicovacki, *Albert Schweitzer's Ethical Vision*, 78-79.

realities that much of modern Western history has portrayed them to be. Albert Schweitzer's reverence for life ethic confirms this idea. While he disagrees with the view that there is a built-in harmony in nature which reveals our specific moral obligations, when compassionately engaged with other life we are nonetheless cosmically and ethically grounded. What begins with inward reflection on my own will-to-live and recognition of my instinctive reverence for that will, ultimately leads to active caring and mystical union with the Divine as I contemplate the wonder and mystery of life in the world. Schweitzer's final maxim, put most simply, is laid out in his *Philosophy of Civilization*: "It is good to maintain and to encourage life; it is bad to destroy life or to obstruct it."⁶⁸ Those looking for further guidelines will look in vain, for reflection on will-to-live reveals nothing more than the fact that all life is sacred.

The great potential for Schweitzer's ethics at large, and environmental ethics in particular, lies in his emphasis on action and relationship. As discussed in the first chapter, Morris Berman understands the history of the Modern West, from ancient to present times, as steadily departing away from relationship as the way to interpret the world. The new standard of an objective, rational mind was setting in. In Berman's view, relational knowledge established through emotional identification gives a truer picture of reality than the rational or empirical investigation of the facts of the world. Schweitzer would not embrace Berman's praise and retrieval of the animistic traditions. What he does instead is strike a balance between the two. He confirms the appropriateness of the

⁶⁸ Schweitzer, "Philosophy of Civilization," in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel, *Reverence for Life*, 72.

influence of the heart; our emotions and feelings fostered through relationships should be ethical guides rather than treated as obstacles to the moral life. Additionally, ethical mysticism suggests that persons are actively engaged in nurturing relationships with other life. It is through such relationships that union with the Divine is realized. Schweitzer interweaves with relation the importance of mind and honest thinking. When approached sincerely, heart and mind arrive at the same standard of truth. In this way, Schweitzer attempts to avoid the one-sidedness of both rational and mystical approaches to ethics.

Perhaps the most obvious power behind Albert Schweitzer's reverence for life is the element of action. As an ethicist, his interest was not the systematization of ethics, but discerning the germs of ethical motivation. Modernity, despite its philosophical sophistication, had failed in this regard creating only "impotent" theories. Schweitzer's ethic, in contrast, had to be one grounded in desire and action. His frustration with the cerebral nature of academics comes through in a 1905 letter to H el ene Bresslau, his future wife, where he writes, "I am simply a Privatdozent--a human who lectures, who does not act."⁶⁹ Ethics is more than about deliberation; it has ontological and spiritual ramifications that are manifest only when it is inhabited. In the same letter he declares, "I have given up the ambition to become a great scholar; I want to be more -- simply a human."⁷⁰ We see early on the deep desire to dedicate his work to the service of other life and the self-fulfillment he expects to gain from it.

⁶⁹ This letter from Schweitzer to Bresslau is printed in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel's work *Reverence for Life*, 61. A "Privatdozent" is a position similar to assistant professor.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

Schweitzer felt, however, that this ambition to be human was in continual competition with the structure of the modern world. Rather than allowing us to realize our basic humanity, convention keeps us corralled into systems of thought and behavior that stifle our best intentions to be ethical, to be human:

[S]ociety is ... something which checks the progress of ethics again and again by arrogating to itself the dignity of an ethical teacher. To this, however, it has no right. The only ethical teacher is the one who thinks ethically and struggles for ethics.... The collapse of civilization has come about through ethics being left to society.⁷¹

Though scholars do not typically associate the ideas of Schweitzer with the virtue ethics tradition, there is little question that he believes doing is an essential part of one's becoming. "Doing" includes both independent thinking and actively serving.

The Challenge of the Ego and Elitism

Schweitzer's focus on relationship as a mode of understanding, particularly through the mystical experience with other life, connects him to the ideas of Morris Berman discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation. For Berman, the emotional identification achieved through direct relations informs one's picture of reality. Though Schweitzer recognizes the reality of life all around him, it is questionable whether or not the subject/object dichotomy ever breaks down. For Berman, and for Buber discussed in the next chapter, it is possible to shed the subject/object lens through which we view the world. Does Albert Schweitzer's mystical union with being arrive at the same principle as Berman's original participation? The answer to that question lies in what Schweitzer

⁷¹ Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel, *Reverence for Life*, 89.

means by the unity and oneness achieved in mysticism, and unfortunately, though he refers to it often, he fails to describe exactly what a mystical encounter is like. As Ara

Paul Barsam explains:

Although some of Schweitzer's writings have a mystical character, they do not primarily provide descriptive reports of individual experiences as do those of most other mystics. His writings offer reflections on the role of mysticism in ethics and society, which differs from the concerns of the individual mystical experience.⁷²

Again, it is safe to say that Schweitzer does not have in mind a loss of self-awareness like one might find in Buddhist traditions with their focus on *anatman*. The personal will-to-live is the gateway to truth in the world. Self-knowledge is the beginning of all understanding for Schweitzer, not loss of self.

The extreme importance of "thinking" in Schweitzer's ethics, even if not the staunch Cartesian rationalism of Modernity, would likely lead scholars such as Berman to label his approach as cerebral and detached. Schweitzer inherits the humanistic perspective common in the Enlightenment, where truth is introduced into the world through the mind. Locating truth in the substance of thought, regardless of what the thought is, inevitably commits one to the elevation and distinction of the faculty of the mind. This ultimately drives a wedge between the knower and the known. Schweitzer hopes to overcome this separateness between humans and nature with a profound sense of empathy, but his relation to the world is always contingent upon an analogy with himself. One cannot simply be open to the truths of the world since nature does not

⁷² Barsam, *Reverence for Life*, 5.

directly impart wisdom. Truth is a matter of careful introspection and deliberate thought upon the mystery of life in the world. To put it differently, there is no escaping the egocentric predicament for Schweitzer.

Mike Martin suggests that Schweitzer's argument attempts to show how reverence for life develops within us naturally.⁷³ But it seems clear that Schweitzer's idea of thinking is not exactly basic to our being. In fact, it even comes across at times as elitist: "The primitive person, it may be argued, knows no such reverence for life," he says, basing his judgement upon his experience with the cultures of Africa.⁷⁴ This reveals the real disagreement between Berman and Schweitzer's positions. For Berman, original participation is natural, unsophisticated, and therefore, more likely to thrive among indigenous peoples who are not caught up in philosophical systems of thought and rigid social structures. It is Western civilization, with its attachment to reason, that has deviated from reality. For Schweitzer, on the other hand, the history of philosophical investigation, despite its great mistakes, has made progress in discovering the nature of humans, the nature of the world, and the essence of the moral life. It is not that primitive persons are incapable of recognizing reverence for life, but that they must follow the appropriate steps, beginning with the inner will-to-live within themselves. Modern philosophy, in Schweitzer's view, has helped us arrive at this sophisticated understanding of will.

⁷³ Mike Martin, *Albert Schweitzer's Reverence for Life*, 7.

⁷⁴ Schweitzer, "The Ethics of Reverence for Life" in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel's book *Reverence for Life*, 130.

The Challenge of Ethical Feasibility

Schweitzer's conclusion that all life is sacred commits him to an uncompromising position. One is never justified in obstructing or taking the life of another. He writes in the *Philosophy of Civilization*:

Someone is truly ethical only when he or she obeys the compulsion to help all life which he is able to assist and shrinks from injuring anything that lives. Such a person does not ask how far this or that life deserves one's sympathy as being valuable, nor, beyond that, whether and to what degree it is capable of feeling. Life as such is sacred to him. Such a person tears no leaf from a tree, plucks no flower, and takes care to crush no insect.⁷⁵

The problem that this presents is glaring: Since life must be taken in order to survive, how can one reasonably live and still be ethical? Schweitzer does provide some guidance here. He offers the simple rule that one should violate the sacred reverence for life only out of necessity. This rule of survival does not justify the taking of life. An ethic that provides justification and peace for killing is in danger of relativism and moral blindness:

Ordinary ethics seeks compromises. It tries to dictate how much of my existence and of my happiness I must sacrifice, and how much I may preserve at the cost of the existence and happiness of other lives. With these decisions it produces experimental, relative ethics. It offers as ethical what is in reality not ethical but a mixture of nonethical necessity and ethics.⁷⁶

Schweitzer worries that when society begins to excuse certain actions as necessary, it wanders down an increasingly dim path that conceals the absolute sacredness of all life.

Taking life is always inexcusable.

⁷⁵ Schweitzer, "Philosophy of Civilization," in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel *Reverence for Life*, 73.

⁷⁶ Schweitzer, "Philosophy of Civilization," in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel *Reverence for Life*, 79.

Mike Martin finds the exceptionless nature of Schweitzer's ethic unhelpful for a number of reasons.⁷⁷ In his view, Schweitzer's ethic does not take into account issues such as self-preservation and the protecting of the innocent which are themselves part of the broader moral life. Like the absolutism of Kant's deontological ethics, "Reverence for Life" leaves one without help in making necessary judgments of value. Martin also questions whether it is possible to have a functional environmental ethic today without the ability to rank life forms. How could one ethically choose to save endangered species over invasive ones? Schweitzer will contend that such decisions involve information that is beyond our ethical knowledge. We only know that each individual life is sacred. As such, not even a utilitarian determination can justify a ranking of value. Appealing to some common sense, Martin declares, "If we are sane and morally competent, we know that persons have greater moral value than protozoa."⁷⁸ We might use protozoa for medical experimentation, but we would never do so to a human without consent. Here Martin infers the existence of certain capacities that should allow us to prioritize the value of life. Schweitzer's "Reverence for Life," however, is unconcerned with the facts of the observable world like sentience, intelligence, central nervous systems, or rational ability. What matters ethically is only that which is confirmed within, namely, that all will-to-live are shown the same reverence as my personal will-to-live.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Mike Martin, *Albert Schweitzer's Reverence for Life*, 21-22.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁷⁹ Schweitzer, "Philosophy of Civilization," in Meyer and Bergel *Reverence for Life*, 72.

Paul Ara Barsam notes that Schweitzer himself tended to demonstrate a certain hierarchy in his own personal decisions.⁸⁰ For example, he killed fish to feed an injured pelican he was nursing back to health.⁸¹ He killed mosquitos in Africa only because they were carriers of the deadly malaria virus. Writes Barsam:

Schweitzer's examples often reveal a consistent preference of human life to other life, and mammals to more elementary life-forms. Though (consciously or unconsciously) his examples reveal a practical, species-informed hierarchy, he was not offering the reader universally valid rules as to which specific life to preference in a given scenario.⁸²

Schweitzer hopes to see individuals engaging in private thinking about how to navigate their existence in a creative/destructive world full of living beings. All people have the responsibility to think about and act according to a reverence for life. When a hierarchy of value is put into place, on the other hand, convention tends to take over as the ethical teacher and our responsibility to think is taken from us. Humans begin to conform to standards without any further thought. Individuals must decide and bear the responsibility for their choice, says Schweitzer, who adds that the decision to preference one life over another will ultimately be subjective and arbitrary.⁸³

⁸⁰ Ara Paul Barsam, "Albert Schweitzer, Jainism, and Reverence for Life," in Meyer and Bergel's work *Reverence for Life*, 236.

⁸¹ Barsam, *Reverence for Life*, 34-35.

⁸² Barsam, "Albert Schweitzer, Jainism, and Reverence for Life," in Meyer and Bergel's work *Reverence for Life*, 236 - 237.

⁸³ Schweitzer, "Out of My Life and Thought," in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel *Reverence for Life*, 117.

The Challenge of Excessive Guilt

The result of choosing one life over another should always cause pain and regret.⁸⁴ Martin is critical of Schweitzer's overly excessive guilt mongering which he believes tended to distort his ethical aspirations: "[Schweitzer] says that reverence for life forbids all killing, and that we are guilty each time we kill. Yet he also acknowledges that we must often kill in order to survive. Something is wrong here!"⁸⁵ Shouldn't striving to live an ethical life result in a peaceful conscience? Is it practical and healthy to suggest that we should feel continuous guilt as we eat, commute, shower or take antibiotics for illness? Guilt for Schweitzer is not a negative and unhealthy emotion we should strive to escape. Indeed, he argues that past ethics has wrongly sought to lessen it:

The system of ethics hitherto current has hindered us from becoming as earnest as we ought to be by the fact that it has utterly deceived us as to the many ways in which each one of us, whether through self-assertion or by actions justified by suprapersonal responsibility, becomes guilty again and again. True knowledge consists in being gripped by the secret that everything around us is will-to-live and in seeing clearly how again and again we incur guilt against life.⁸⁶

The natural guilt one experiences when observing death for personal survival is a witness to the sacredness of life. To avoid this guilt would be to avoid the truth that will-to-live is all around and affected by us.

If such guilt is an important part of moral seeing, it is hindered in a society that leaves the task of harming and destroying life for wants and needs almost entirely to

⁸⁴ Ibid., 117.

⁸⁵ Mike Martin, *Albert Schweitzer's Reverence for Life*, 21.

⁸⁶ Schweitzer, "Philosophy of Civilization," in Meyer and Bergel *Reverence for Life*, 87.

industry and factory farming. Interestingly, Martin notes that Schweitzer always made it a point to be present when animals were harmed or slaughtered for the good of the Lambaréné community.⁸⁷ Martin suggests that this was to ensure it was done mercifully, but part of Schweitzer's intent to view the killing must have had spiritual significance. This focus on guilt is similar to certain Native American ceremonies that dwell on the primal sacrifice of life. John A. Grim of Bucknell University writes that the "spirit sickness" of the Salish peoples of the Columbia River plateau region is a consequence of the meditation on the life of animals and plants that they depend upon for survival.⁸⁸ Recognition of the solemn link between the human and nonhuman worlds is central to the Native American emphasis on gratitude. Perhaps Schweitzer's acceptance of this sober reality is likewise the reason he elevates gratitude to the status of a cardinal virtue.⁸⁹

The Challenge of Pantheism

Schweitzer's reverence for life ethic has been criticized by a number of scholars, including Oscar Kraus, Emil Brunner, Jackson Ice, and Mike Martin for lacking a definitive understanding of God.⁹⁰ While some have suggested he was agnostic with respect to the Divine, others felt he was pantheistic due to his grounding of the spiritual in the material world. Schweitzer writes, "The Essence of Being, the Absolute, the Spirit of the Universe, and all similar expressions denote nothing actual.... The only reality is

⁸⁷ Mike Martin, *Albert Schweitzer's Reverence for Life*, 40.

⁸⁸ John A. Grim, "Native American Worldviews" in Mary Evelyn Tucker and John A. Grim's book *Worldviews and Ecology*, 47.

⁸⁹ Mike Martin, *Albert Schweitzer's Reverence for Life*, 67.

⁹⁰ Ara Paul Barsam, *Reverence for Life*, 33, and Mike Martin, *Albert Schweitzer's Reverence for Life*, 8-9.

the Being which manifests itself in phenomena.”⁹¹ Mike Martin categorizes his work as “biotheism,” a nature centered spirituality where union with life results in the manifestation of the “infinite Will to Live” in this world.⁹²

Ara Paul Barsam believes that Schweitzer carefully tried to avoid the problems raised by pantheism.⁹³ One does not find the Divine in nature. Rather, through service to other living beings one is led to the Creator. Schweitzer was greatly influenced by the writings of Goethe whom he categorized as “mystical and pantheistic.”⁹⁴ He departs from Goethe because God is portrayed as identical to nature for him. Similar to the Stoics and Taoists who believed a natural harmony was discernible in the cosmos, Goethe suggested that ethics is given by “God-Nature.” Schweitzer, though drawn to Goethe’s natural philosophy, denies any inherent goodness or harmony in the natural world. Because truth is inwardly derived and dependent on the will, mind and God still stand apart from the material world. Similar to Descartes’ defense against natural magic, then, Schweitzer grounds truth in a transcending mind and will, thus avoiding the problems of a pantheistic and cosmic mysticism. Such mysticism stands in contrast to his ethical mysticism: “All ethical piety is superior to any pantheistic mysticism, in that it does not find the God of

⁹¹ Quote from Schweitzer, taken here from Mike Martin, “Rethinking Reverence for Life,” in Meyer and Bergel’s book *Reverence for Life*, 168.

⁹² Martin, *Albert Schweitzer’s Reverence for Life*, 32.

⁹³ Barsam, “Albert Schweitzer, Jainism, and Reverence for Life,” in Meyer and Bergel *Reverence for Life*, 217-218.

⁹⁴ Schweitzer, “Goethe: Four Studies,” reprinted in part in Cicovacki’s source book *Albert Schweitzer’s Ethical Vision*, 201.

love in nature, but knows about him only from the fact that he announces himself in us as the will to love.”⁹⁵ The Divine is found within as a result of service to other.

Schweitzer’s Evolving Thought

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing Schweitzer’s “Reverence for Life” ethic is due to the fact that his ideas dodge any precise interpretation, at times even appearing contradictory. For example, he asserts that morality must be built upon a rational foundation for reasons of certainty, and yet declares elsewhere that a proper ethic is not rational but “irrational and enthusiastic.”⁹⁶ He is profoundly spiritual, suggesting that ethics cannot escape the religion of Jesus, yet extremely vague when it comes to mystical experience and nature of the divine. If his thought evades any clear systemization, eluding both philosophers and theologians, it should at least be recognized that his interests were moralistic more than they were academic. He writes, “From an inner necessity, I exert myself in producing values and practicing ethics in the world and on the world even though I do not understand the meaning of the world.”⁹⁷ Proceeding to live the moral life is more important to Schweitzer than being able to clearly systematize its abstruse nature.

It is also important to recognize that Albert Schweitzer was a prolific writer whose letters, sermons, and published works span a period of approximately sixty-five

⁹⁵ Albert Schweitzer, “Out of My Life and Thought,” in Meyer and Bergel *Reverence for Life*, 121.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁹⁷ Schweitzer, “Philosophy of Civilization,” in Cicovacki’s source book *Albert Schweitzer’s Ethical Vision*, 110.

years. It would be unrealistic to expect that his ideas did not vary or evolve during that period of time. While it is not the aim of this dissertation to track such changes in his thought, it is relevant to my topic to point out the extent to which he appears to have softened on his ideas about the influence of relationship on the ethical life. This final section will concentrate on this issue.

Mike Martin describes Schweitzer's "Reverence for Life" ethic as "an empirically-oriented 'natural ethic' that focuses on nature as we experience it."⁹⁸ He is contrasting it with an ethic that is transcendent or divine in its structure. Nonetheless, this classification of "Reverence for Life" is somewhat puzzling considering the great effort Schweitzer makes to ground his moral thought in the inward truths of reason and experience, not on the outer world. Indeed, ethical knowledge is grounded in the contemplation of inner will-to-live, yet Schweitzer tends to recognize the moral influence of the outer world, particularly through personal relationships. This points to a tension in Schweitzer's thinking. Martin asks what we should do if we simply do not feel empathy for all life forms. Schweitzer suggests we should first contemplate on the sameness between us and other life. This again highlights the importance of analogy and empathy. The second thing we should do is remember moments where we experienced kinship and union with other life.⁹⁹ Where the former emphasizes his more inward rational approach, the latter admits that relation, or union, is morally informative.

⁹⁸ Mike Martin, *Albert Schweitzer's Reverence for Life*, 32.

⁹⁹ Martin, "Rethinking Reverence for Life," in Meyer and Bergel *Reverence for Life*, 174.

Schweitzer stresses that the Greeks and Taoists were wrong to assume that humans can glean wisdom directly from nature, yet he tends to contradict this with the idea that relationships, or moments of kinship in nature, can be morally informing. While formally he tries to maintain an is-ought gap, in less guarded moments he seems to depart from it, for example, when he talks of being “overpowered by the mystery of will-to-live stirring all around.”¹⁰⁰ He wants to say rational reflection on inner will-to-live comes before mystical experience of union with other life, that it depends on this self-knowledge. Ara Paul Barsam, who looks at the events and figures in Schweitzer’s life that might help to define him as a person, believes that long before he encountered Kant’s categorical imperative and Schopenhauer’s will-to-live, the young Albert was shaped by his lived experiences in the countryside of Gunsbach, Germany.¹⁰¹ If true, his later rational musings on the will-to-live were the attempt to order the relational experiences of his youth.

The famous experience which led Schweitzer to the principle of “Reverence for Life” confirms his latent acceptance of nature’s power to inspire the human mind. In great detail, he explains how, “unforeseen and unsought,” the concept flashed upon his mind at sunset while his boat was passing through a herd of hippopotamuses along the

¹⁰⁰ Albert Schweitzer, “The Philosophy of Civilization,” in Martin Meyer and Kurt Bergel’s *Reverence for Life*, 71.

¹⁰¹ See Barsam’s article, “Albert Schweitzer, Jainism, and Reverence for Life,” in Meyer and Bergel *Reverence for Life*, 211. The area of Gunsbach where Schweitzer grew up is now part of France. For a more complete account of Schweitzer’s childhood experiences in nature, refer to his *Memoirs of Childhood and Youth*, printed in Meyer and Bergel, 91-107.

Ogowe River in Africa.¹⁰² Why provide such detail of the natural surroundings unless he believed it played some role in bringing the principle to his mind? The aura that surrounds this experience comes across as far removed from the cool introspection of will-to-live.

Schweitzer must have understood this tension in his writing. In a 1936 article titled, “The Ethics of Reverence for Life,” published seventeen years after his first introduction of the principle, Schweitzer confesses the importance of relationship in the developing the ethical life. He briefly critiques the history of ethics, from Plato, the Stoics, and Lao-tse to modern thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, and Spinoza. Remarkably, he concludes that throughout the history of thought, David Hume and Adam Smith were the most correct with their views that ethical motivation was grounded in sentiments, a position referred to today as moral sense theory.¹⁰³ Their error was the refusal to broaden that view toward all life. Given Schweitzer’s stress on introspective thinking as the correct way to knowledge and truth, one would not expect him to favor Hume’s staunch empirical outlook. Hume was the unbending skeptic of the Enlightenment who grounded truth, inasmuch as it could be known at all, on the immediate impressions of the senses. His moral convictions stressed that ethical knowledge was the result of feelings and emotions that the outer world caused within us. They were not rationally derived, but discovered through experience.

¹⁰² See the introduction of Predrag Cicovacki’s source book *Albert Schweitzer’ Ethical Vision*, 13-14.

¹⁰³ Meyer and Bergel, *Reverence for Life*, 134.

Schweitzer's endorsement of Hume's ethical ideas is a remarkable adjunct to his earlier insistence on the reasoned investigation of the personal will-to-live.

Contemplating the foundations of sympathy in the 1936 article on "Reverence for Life,"

he writes the following:

In part, we depend upon the knowledge received through our senses. We see others; we hear them; we may touch them or be touched by them. And we may then engage in activities to help them. In other words, there is a natural, physical aspect to the matter which anyone must recognize.¹⁰⁴

Shying away from his earlier position that nature is morally uninformative, Schweitzer provides the following examples of sympathy and love in nature: the adoption of an orphaned baby monkey by another; the protection that a flock of geese offer to one that cannot fly; and street sparrows leaving bread crumbs for a fellow bird with injured legs.¹⁰⁵ He argues that we are *compelled by nature* to recognize the mutual dependence between living things. Rather than being skeptical about any teleological meaning in the world, Schweitzer seems to be favoring its creative characteristics over the destructive. Or perhaps he has just become more at ease with the destructive/creative tension in life.

As if confessing a certain softening of his previous views, Schweitzer writes explaining the origin and nature of ethics, "We have dared to say that it is born of physical life, out of the linking of life with life. It is therefore the result of our recognizing the solidarity of life which nature gives us."¹⁰⁶ What, then, of his emphasis

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 135.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 136-137.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 137.

on thinking? “Our recognition of [the solidarity of life] expands with thought.”¹⁰⁷ The ethical life begins with the mystery conveyed in relation and grows more profound and universal with rational contemplation. As we will see in the next chapter, Albert Schweitzer shares this vision of the ethical life with Martin Buber.

Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation is to explore the idea that direct engagement with life is a way to establish certain moral and ontological truths, truths that would be central to developing a concern for the well-being of the natural world. The first chapter sought to demonstrate that relational knowledge in early Western history was gradually replaced by a standard of truth that was rational, objective, and increasingly transcendent. By the time of the Enlightenment, humanism had relocated truth from an enlivened cosmos to within the human mind, and mechanism had reduced nature to nothing more than dead matter in motion. Mystery and wonder were dismissed as irrational and vacuous. With no life and *telos* of its own, the physical world’s sole good was found in its usefulness for the material improvement of humankind.

These are the conditions that Albert Schweitzer found himself up against in the early 20th century. His “Reverence for Life” ethic seeks to restore the basic truth that the essence of life in any form is caught up in an unsolvable mystery, and that dedication to its service is key to moral and spiritual enlightenment. He is deeply religious in his vision, yet departs from the radical otherness by which much of the Christian tradition

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 135.

had come to understand relation with God. Happiness, meaning, responsibility, and spiritual communion are intertwined with practical ethics, not with asceticism, rapture, or beatific vision. He expresses gratitude for the success of modern science, yet feels that it should recognize with greater humility the unsolvable mystery of life. Similarly, he stresses that modern-day philosophy must learn to accept the limitations of knowledge.

That said, Schweitzer is immersed in Enlightenment thought. Influenced by Kant and the tenets of humanism, he sees truth as largely inward. Reverence for will-to-live involves self-understanding, and this takes precedence over the outer facts of the world. Again, that which is inwardly true is the mysterious will-to-live within myself. Schweitzer, consequently, develops a mild rationalism that is compatible with the existence and influence of mystery in the cosmos. This inwardness tends to place him at odds with the indigenous view raised in chapter one, that nature has a certain epistemological value. Again, he is critical of the stoic and taoist acceptance of inherent harmony and order in the cosmos. Yet, he recognizes later in life that ethics is “born of the physical life, out of the linking of life with life.” Though Schweitzer’s objective was never to restore the centrality of relation in the ethical life, he comes to recognize its fundamental importance. And appropriately so, for it is plain that the mystery of will-to-live around him makes its mark upon his life and thought. He ultimately concludes that ethics finds its beginnings in such relation, that it expands with rational introspection on the will-to-live, and that it achieves a fullness of meaning when put into action.

CHAPTER THREE

MARTIN BUBER AND I-THOU

Of Martin Buber, the socialist philosopher Heinz-Joachim Heydorn has said, “Outside of Albert Schweitzer I know no one who has realized in himself a similar great and genuine deep identity of truth and life.... Buber has accomplished what one can only say of a very few: he has reached the limits of his own being ... and through this has made the universal transparent.”¹ The comparison of Buber to Schweitzer reveals remarkable similarities that will continue to surface throughout this chapter. The two men grew up in the same intellectual climate of late 19th and early 20th century Europe and were concerned with the sociopolitical conditions of their era. It comes as no surprise that they shared an interest in the same issues and found solutions in similar places. Considering they were born a mere three years apart and died in the same year, it is remarkable that there is so little discourse between them.

Martin Buber (1878-1965) was born and raised in Vienna. At the age of three his mother left the family and he was sent to live with his paternal grandparents who were actively engaged in the Jewish intellectual life. While in their home, he was educated in the Jewish tradition and immersed in *Haskalah*, or the rational enlightenment that flourished in 18th and 19th century Eastern European Judaism.² This contributed to his

¹ Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 6.

² C. Wayne Mayhall and Timothy B. Mayhall, *On Buber*, 7.

love for learning and contemplation. At the same time, however, he grew skeptical of the Enlightenment's insular drive for certainty which elevated and isolated the mind from the real world. Like Schweitzer, Buber was deeply moved by his experiences with the natural world, experiences that according to rigid modern standards had no real epistemological validity. In *Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, Buber writes "Early I foresaw that ... no matter how I resisted, I was inescapably destined to love the world."³ Buber would go on to develop this interest while doing his dissertation work on German mysticism at the University of Vienna.

In this chapter, I examine Martin Buber's concept of the I-Thou encounter and how it ties morality, truth, and self-realization to relationships and community. Similar to the last chapter, it is divided into three general sections. The first section will examine Buber's metaphysical outlook. I will define the I-Thou encounter and explore the philosophical and religious factors that give shape to it. I will show that, in a manner very similar to Schweitzer, Buber constructs an understanding of humanity, morality, religion and God that is firmly rooted in the tangible world. In the second section I consider Buber's epistemological outlook. I examine the importance of dialogue and action as a way of realizing self, understanding responsibility, and finding the Eternal. Finally, I will look at the ethical ramifications of Buber's thought; what unique quality does it bring to environmental ethics discourse today and what are the distinct challenges it faces? Buber is often noted in environmental ethics writings, but never in a very thoroughgoing

³ Quoted in Donald L. Berry, *Mutuality: The Vision of Martin Buber*, 3.

manner. He is typically admired as one who upholds the possibility of subject to subject encounter with the natural world, but the details and significance of this encounter for a practical environmental ethics is not explored. Rather, his ideas tend to be treated as having more theoretical than practical value. My hope in this chapter is to clarify Buber's position such that his ideas can be applied to the final discussion of this dissertation on engaged practices that bring us more directly into relation with the natural world.

Buber's Metaphysical Outlook

The I-Thou Encounter

Metaphysics examines the question of what is real. For materialists like Thomas Hobbes and Karl Marx, reality consists of the material facts of the world. For idealists like Plato and Kant, reality is closely linked to eternal forms or mind. Schweitzer's insistence that the inward investigation of the will to live is more true to reality than the outward facts of the world seems to place him in the idealist camp. Martin Buber does not fit into either of these categories. Instead he posits that there are two distinct realities for humans: the world of objectified experience and the world of relation. The first can be objectively observed, measured, and spoken about through concepts and ideas. For Buber, this objectified world includes both outward and inward experiences, and so he would lump idealism and Schweitzer's introspective will-to-live together with the brute facts of the material world. In both cases the observer stands apart from the object or idea and examines it from a distance.

The world of relation, on the other hand, is not an objectifiable experience. It is not sought out by a scientific or a contemplative mind, but happens between two beings. Buber argues that this two-fold quality of the world is based upon a two-fold disposition within human beings. The I-It disposition is how an individual relates to a world of objects and ideas. The I-Thou disposition is how a person relates to other subjects. Buber is not suggesting that all relationships between beings are of the I-Thou type. Inasmuch as a person or being stands before us as a thing to be contemplated, understood, figured out, or observed, it is viewed through the lens of I-It. The I-Thou encounter is more rare and of a different kind. Buber writes, “A being to whom I really say ‘Thou’ is not for me in this moment my object, about whom I observe this and that or whom I put to this or that use, but my partner who stands over against me in his own right and existence and yet related to me in his life.”⁴ What we learn in the I-Thou moment is that the thing we stand in relation to is a unique being with inherent value. What we discover in the other is not an objectifiable property but a moment of mutual regard and a sense of each other’s equality.

Buber believes that I-Thou encounters can be categorized into three distinct categories: 1) life with nature; 2) life with humanity; and 3) life with spiritual beings.⁵ In each group the encounter is defined by the capacity for dialogue between the beings. Though Buber was primarily occupied throughout his life with relation between human

⁴ Quote from Buber, taken here from Donald L. Berry, *Mutuality: The Vision of Martin Buber*, 13.

⁵ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Smith, 6.

beings and the importance of speech and dialogue, he was frank and unapologetic about the capacity for mutual relation with nature, even if only in a limited sense. In various stories about a horse, or a cat, or other animals, Buber explains how the objective I-It barrier breaks down and exposes a deeper connection between beings. Donald Berry comments on these examples with creatures: “The horse, the cat, and the dog are able to regard the human person in a speaking sort of way, announcing themselves, as it were. As the two beings move toward each other, they become present, each to the other, not as objects, but as partners.”⁶ Buber notes how the eyes of creatures, in particular, have the ability to communicate in this deeper sense.⁷

Buber does not limit the possibility of relation in nature to animals. In perhaps the most famous lines of *I and Thou*, he declares:

I consider a tree.

I can look on it as a picture: stiff column in a shock of light, or splash of green shot with the delicate blue and silver of the background.

I can perceive it as movement: flowing veins on clinging, pressing pith, suck of the roots, breathing of the leaves, ceaseless commerce with earth and air—and the obscure growth itself.

I can classify it in a species and study it as a type in its structure and mode of life....

In all this the tree remains my object, occupies space and time, and has its nature and constitution.

It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is now no longer *It*. I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness.⁸

⁶ Donald L. Berry, *Mutuality*, 12.

⁷ I return to idea that creatures' eyes have a certain communicative power in the last section on ethics.

⁸ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Smith, 7.

In the I-Thou moment, the person becomes fully aware that the other is being which possess a dignity in its own right. It ceases to be a natural resource for human consumption. It is no longer a tool simply for fixing carbon in the atmosphere, for producing oxygen, or for preserving biodiversity. The peculiar state of mutual relation has transformed it into a unique subject, an end in itself.

Is the tree, then, cognizant of self and others? In response to this Buber writes, “I have no experience of that. But thinking that you have brought this off in your own case, must you again divide the indivisible? What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself.”⁹ In other words, our own conscious state is metaphysically puzzling and cannot be reduced to basic material qualities. We may appear comfortable speaking of it, but it always remains a mystery and part of the indivisible. Consequently, we are in no position to definitively say what is or is not present in a tree, neither consciousness, soul, nor dryad. Like the sacred will-to-live for Schweitzer, I-Thou encounters give us nothing to objectively quantify, measure, or analyze. They only make us aware of the bold presence and value of the other.

Buber suggests that the instant we attempt to control and define the encounter we lapse into the I-It attitude and lose the moment. Of such mystical encounters, Maurice Friedman writes, “The only true accompaniment of such experience is silence, for any attempt at communication places the ecstatic back in the world of multiplicity.”¹⁰ Yet, it is our nature to attempt to express the experience, to bring the “timeless over into time,” as

⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 28.

Friedman puts it. For Buber, the best identifier of an I-Thou experience is the presence of real love. Real love does not possess a Thou as its object, but exists between an I and a Thou. It is an understanding and acceptance of the whole being. Consequently, Buber argues that it is hate, not love, that is blind; hate only knows a portion of the other. Unlike hate, real love is not a feeling. Feelings are objective states that happen within one, not between one and the other. Says Buber, “Feelings accompany the metaphysical and metaphysical fact of love, but they do not constitute it.”¹¹ To speak of love that one has experienced, then, is to recall a past I-Thou encounter, not some subjective emotion.

It is inevitable that every I-Thou encounter will lapse into the I-It disposition. Buber explains that it is the I-It world defined by its space, time, and substance that we live in, that we work and relax in. Without turning the world into objects and ideas we would never survive. Its consistency and predictability allow for security and technological advancement. There is a striking similarity between Martin Buber’s I-It disposition and Morris Berman’s non-participating consciousness spoken of in the first chapter of this work. In both cases they represent a departure from relation toward an objectified view of reality where the individual stands apart from and observes the object. For Berman, however, the move from the original participation of the ancient Greeks to the non-participating consciousness of the Socratics and Modernity was a historical transition, by no means essential to the human being. For Buber, on the other hand, the I-It and I-Thou are both important modes of perception, both necessary parts of how each

¹¹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Smith, 14.

human interacts in the world. They are traits of consciousness. Though Buber is critical of our over-reliance on the I-It, fully doing away with this mode of engagement is not just unwise, it is impossible.

What Buber hopes for is the moderation of the I-It world by I-Thou encounters. While the world of objects tells one of the material facts of existence, it provides no existential meaning. For this, one must have I-Thou relations. He writes of the I-It, "You cannot hold on to life without it, its reliability sustains you; but should you die in it, your grave would be in nothingness."¹² Though the I-Thou encounter is destined to be but a moment, the love and awareness realized in the event endures and acts as a personal guide as one strives to navigate the meaninglessness of the I-It world.

Here Buber shows his orientation with modern philosophy. Like Descartes, Hobbes and other Enlightenment thinkers, Buber recognizes that, from the I-It perspective, the physical world is no more than matter in motion. The mistake of mechanism, however, was to suppose that the I-It disposition was the only valid experience of the world. Many modern thinkers trusted that meaning could still somehow be had in a world composed of purely physical cause and effect. The radical skepticism of some Post-modern thinking was then poised to proclaim the death of metaphysics. For example, Alfred Ayer's book *Language, Truth, and Logic* which appeared in 1936 and was influenced by the prominent minds of the Vienna Circle such as Rudolph Carnap and Kurt Godel, declared that the only valid use of language was that which referred to things

¹² Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Smith, 32.

that could be proven analytically or synthetically, that is, by empirical evidence or by the rules of logic. All metaphysical questions, including statements about God, human identity, or ethics, were meaningless. Buber's reaction to the existential angst growing in this period was to point out the necessity of the I-Thou for personal meaning, direction, motivation, and responsibility. It also solidified the notion of human freedom threatened by the rise of determinism. He writes, "So long as the heaven of Thou is spread out over me the winds of causality cower at my heels, and the whirlpool of fate stays its course."¹³ The I-Thou reminds one that the ontologically real and important things in life are bound to relation.

Although the I-Thou encounter cannot be found by seeking, Buber believes that one can be positioned to facilitate such encounters.¹⁴ When describing the meeting with a tree, he stresses that both will and grace are necessary conditions.¹⁵ It is by will, by an act of faith and engagement, that I open myself to the possibility of encounter, whether it is with creature, human, or God. It is through grace that the other responds. The problem with the world today, for Buber, is that it is so caught up in the lens of It, imposed by the Enlightenment worldview and sustained by deep-seated social and economic structures, that it fails or refuses to open up to the other. He declares, "We only need to fill each moment with experiencing and using, and [the Thou] ceases to burn."¹⁶ A world of

¹³ Ibid., 9.

¹⁴ Ibid., 32.

¹⁵ Ibid., 7.

¹⁶ Ibid., 34.

unbridled self-interest and diversions keeps us from the I-Thou meeting. Commenting on Buber's work *Between Man and Man*, Wayne Mayhall and Timothy Mayhall observe, "If a person fails to enter into relation with the *Thou*, the distance between them 'thickens and solidifies.'"¹⁷ Turning from the I-Thou has a cementing effect on one's disposition.

In summary, the metaphysical assumptions behind Martin Buber's thought are that existence is comprised of two modes of reality. The I-It is temporal, while the I-Thou reveals something eternal.¹⁸ The I-It presents an ordered world of matter and motion, but it does not reveal the underlying world-order.¹⁹ What is real, for Buber, is not the outward experience of physical reality, nor the inward inspection of ideas. Genuine reality is that which exists between two living beings, and modernity had too narrowly defined the sphere of beings. As if in response to the concern of Enlightenment skeptics, Buber writes of the I-Thou, "No deception penetrates here; here is the cradle of the Real Life."²⁰ As we will see in the next section, Buber's understanding of the I-Thou encounter was influenced and supported by his acceptance of the Jewish Hasidic worldview.

Hasidism and the Problem of Evil

Maurice Friedman, one of the preeminent scholars on Martin Buber, highlights that 18th and 19th century Judaism was revolutionized by two great movements, namely, *Haskalah* which was tied to the intellectualism of the Enlightenment, and *Hasidism*

¹⁷ C. Wayne Mayhall and Timothy B. Mayhall, *On Buber*, 32.

¹⁸ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Smith, 33.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

which was a mystical tradition.²¹ As noted in the introduction of this chapter, Buber was raised in a home with strong *Haskalah* influence. He leaned, however, toward a truth grounded in the emotional experiences of his childhood. This led to his study of German mysticism and eventually to his adoption of the Hasidic Jewish tradition which he devoutly studied for five years.

Hasidic creation teaches that immanent within everything there exists *Shekinah*, or Divine glory that was separated from a transcendent God at the beginning of time and spread throughout creation.²² Strikingly similar to Gnostic and some Early Christian imagery, Hasidism maintains that this divine spark in all things fell from heaven and yearns to reunite with God.²³ For Buber, this makes God transcendent, yet at the same time bound to the world. He identified this Divine immanence with the notion of *presentness*: “A kind of natural sacramentality by which nature is penetrated with and by holiness without being violated thereby.”²⁴ Hasidism provided Buber with the religious framework for understanding how all things, both human and non-human, could stand in relation to each other. Grete Schaeder clarifies, “That the world is God’s creation and that all creatures are created interrelated to one another explains the fact that a tree also could

²¹ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 31.

²² *Ibid.*, 17.

²³ C. Wayne Mayhall and Timothy B. Mayhall, *On Buber*, 60.

²⁴ Donald L. Berry, *Mutuality: The Vision of Martin Buber*, 27.

become a Thou.”²⁵ Through Hasidism, Buber’s interest in mysticism had found a home in the Jewish biblical tradition.

While the idea of *Shekinah* shares some similarities with the Gnostics and certain Christian views, Buber departs from their rigid dualism. For them the created world was miserable, perhaps even evil. The goal was for the good to rid itself of evil, for the spark to transcend its earthly prison. In the first chapter we saw how this dualism contributed to the extreme cosmic pessimism of the Gnostics and of Early Christians like Origen. In Hasidism, however, good and evil are not irreconcilable entities.²⁶ For example, Hasidism denies that any natural impulses are evil. What is evil is the human who fails to control the impulse and to use it at the right time and in the right way. Evil, for Buber, is the directionlessness and self-centeredness of the I-It that fails to open itself up to the Thou.²⁷ It is the individual who masters the I-It and who disregards and is uninformed by deep relationships.

The goal of Hasidism is not to escape and survive evil through personal redemption or some apocalyptic event, but to redeem evil in the world. Mayhall and Mayhall explain, “Where the prophetic faith, the faith of Judaism, sees the possibility of the participation of men in the progressive redemption of creature and creation, the apocalyptic faith denies every possibility of redemptive dialogue between inherently

²⁵ Quoted in Donald L. Berry, *Mutuality: The Vision of Martin Buber*, 28.

²⁶ C. Wayne Mayhall and Timothy B. Mayhall, *On Buber*, 70.

²⁷ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 103.

oppositional principles at war in the midst of men.”²⁸ Similar to Albert Schweitzer’s world and life affirmation, Schaefer speaks of Martin Buber’s “world-rejoicing existentialism.”²⁹ Though full of difficulty and strife, the tangible world is where humans can bring about the glory of God. It is within the dynamic of relation that humankind helps to redeem *Shekinah*, both their own and the other. It is in the hallowing of the world that humans partake of the love of God and work to bring about His redemption. Hasidism gives to Buber the imagery to describe worldly purpose and human obligation as part of everyday living.

The Eternal Thou

Not only does Buber identify cosmic purpose and meaning in the here and now, he also understands humankind’s relationship with God in the concrete. Again, the foundation for this is in the Hasidic notion of *Shekinah*. As described in the last section, though God’s essence (*Elohim*) is removed from the created world, God’s presence “lingers in the midst of men as if in exile, disposed, scattered and transient.”³⁰ The opportunity to encounter the Divine, consequently, does not rely on God’s condensation into the world of matter, for traces of the Divine have been scattered throughout the created order since the beginning of time. As helpful as Hasidism is for providing imagery of God’s immanence in the world, it should not be mistaken for real knowledge of God which comes only through encounter. Buber stresses that the Bible itself is not

²⁸ C. Wayne Mayhall and Timothy B. Mayhall, *On Buber*, 71.

²⁹ Donald L. Berry, *Mutuality: The Vision of Martin Buber*, 26.

³⁰ C. Wayne Mayhall and Timothy B. Mayhall, *On Buber*, 57.

intended to disclose God's nature.³¹ Rather, it is meant to be a historical record of God's personal encounters with others throughout time. It sets a standard for relation. Hasidism, then, does not provide knowledge of God, but merely a framework for understanding how He engages with humans in the world.

While Buber argues that we must encounter, or "realize," God in our lives, he warns that we cannot do so by simply turning our ideas of God into a living reality.³² This is a common mistake of the intellectual West. Whether it is rational proof of God's existence as offered by St. Anselm, Descartes, and Spinoza, or the empirical evidence of William Paley, all are necessarily misconceptions. God's relation to a person does not have its foundation in the investigations of the human mind. Buber declares, "If to believe in God means to speak of him in the third person, I do not believe in him. If it means to say Thou to him, I do."³³ As much as Buber is fond of many of Immanuel Kant's ideas, he is critical of the philosopher's reduction of the Divine to practical reason within humans. All characterizations of the Divine wrongly attempt to place God within the world of I-It. Buber stresses, on the other hand, that God cannot be objectified, only responded to.³⁴ Nietzsche's famous line from *The Gay Science* that "God is dead ... and

³¹ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber and the Eternal*, 29.

³² Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 52.

³³ Quoted in Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber and the Eternal*, 42.

³⁴ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber and the Eternal*, 15. This also highlights why Buber had such difficulty with the figure of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Buber recognized Jesus as one of the greatest Jewish prophets. He lived out Divine love perhaps better than any other. Yet, to accept that God became flesh in the form of Christ is to accept that God could condescend into the world of I-It and be objectified by the human mind. For Buber, God exists such that He can only be experienced, not objectively known. This topic will be further explored in the next section.

we have killed him” mirrors Buber’s critique of rational and empirical argumentation for God’s existence, for a God who is not intimately encountered is not a living God.³⁵

Even Albert Schweitzer’s understanding of God would be problematic for Buber. Both men were concerned with making God’s presence a reality in the physical world. For Schweitzer, however, God’s being is bound up with the exercise of individual human will. In a sense, God is manifest in the world through human will as if there were no external, transcending Divinity. Buber will not depart from the idea of a personal God who meets one through grace in the world. Mayhall and Mayhall comment, “In Buber’s writings the Thou clearly represents the personal God of the Judeo-Christian tradition with his particularly unique characterization of this God based on Jewish mystical and Hasidic teachings.”³⁶ Whether one has an I-Thou encounter with another human, a horse, or a tree, the Eternal Thou is also present and manifest.³⁷ While Schweitzer’s approach illustrates the significance that individualism plays in his thought, Buber prefers to use the language of “person” instead of “individual.” Where individuals are independent and self-sufficient, persons exist in relationships and communities. Will is a necessary component of relation for Buber, but it must be accompanied by the grace of the other.

Ethics and the Kingdom of God

Martin Buber’s acceptance of Hasidic metaphysics and personal relation grounds his understanding of spirit in the concrete world. Maurice Friedman explains that for

³⁵ C. Wayne Mayhall and Timothy B. Mayhall, *On Buber*, 86.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁷ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Smith, 6.

Hasidism, there is no separation between religion and the moral life since knowledge of God is confirmed through moral actions toward others in the world: “If we comprehend ourselves in the God-world fulness in which we live, then we recognize that ‘to realize God’ means to make the world ready to be a place of God’s reality.”³⁸ Holiness means to play a part in the redemption of the world. In the I-Thou relation, the shards of divine spark scattered throughout creation are made manifest to the righteous person, desiring to be reunited with God. In a sense, humans assume a role of savior, acting as the mediator between created being and Creator. Mayhall and Mayhall explain, “These sparks belong to the man of holiness and, in becoming their conduit and escort, the man receives his inner enjoyment of them.”³⁹ Buber wants to clarify that his is a redemption that takes place in the world and is gradual, not a moment of redemptive history at the end of time.

Like Schweitzer, Buber is concerned with restoring a religious and ethical zeal. The religious zeal of the Early Christians, according to Schweitzer, was mistakenly grounded in a belief on the impending Kingdom of God. Schweitzer sought to restore that fervor by focusing instead on the Kingdom of God as it might be realized in the everyday. Hasidism does something similar in that it turns religious zeal away from the hope of a coming messiah to the immediate love of God in the present.⁴⁰ God’s people are engaged in His work of love here and now. The Kingdom of God, then, is a work that the righteous are continually bringing forward.

³⁸ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 53.

³⁹ C. Wayne Mayhall and Timothy B. Mayhall, *On Buber*, 58-59.

⁴⁰ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 18.

Whereas Schweitzer believes that Jesus was mistaken about the immediate coming of the Kingdom of God, Buber does not believe Jesus ever intended it. Commenting on Buber's position, Friedman writes, "By the kingdom of God [Jesus] meant no other-worldly consolation, no vague heavenly blessedness, and also no spiritual or cultic league or church. What He meant was the perfected living together of men, the true community in which God shall have direct rule."⁴¹ Buber believes that Christianity's favoring of the apocalyptic view over the prophetic was due to the sharp division between spirit and flesh that first began with Paul and continued on throughout Christian history.⁴² In effect, this division between temporal and spiritual, combined with the narrow focus on faith, took away from Christ's message the essential component of cultural rootedness and relation.⁴³

Buber's Epistemological Approach

The Inborn Thou

Epistemology relates to the question of how one comes to understand truth. Because of this it often turns first to a consideration of human nature. For example, Aristotle famously taught that humans are rational animals, and this implied something about the best way to approach knowledge and learning.⁴⁴ John Locke maintained the

⁴¹ Ibid., 44.

⁴² C. Wayne Mayhall and Timothy B. Mayhall, *On Buber*, 80-81.

⁴³ Buber believed that modern Judaism has no historical or cultural importance in a world where faith is the only real requirement for redemption. He saw this as the core of anti-Semitic feelings in Western history. See Mayhall and Mayhall, 71.

⁴⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1:13.

idea that we are born with a blank slate, or *tabula rasa*, a view which supported his acceptance of empiricism.⁴⁵ Albert Schweitzer, as we have seen, gravitated toward the school of rationalism since truth for him was bound to inner contemplation of the will-to-live. Martin Buber also believes that human nature is an important factor when considering how we come to know truth in the world. Departing from rational and empirical schools of thought, however, he upholds the idea that humans are first and foremost relational beings; knowledge of truth has its foundation in relationship. He establishes this point by arguing for the *a priori* of relation, or the Inborn Thou.

Buber contends that the most basic attribute of human life is our innate desire for relationship with others. He establishes this principle by looking at the mental development of a baby. A baby does not at first engage its senses with a world of objects, but instinctively tries to treat everything as a Thou, “to give relation to the universe.”⁴⁶ Early on, the baby has not yet developed an awareness of itself. Unaware of its own being or that there is any distance between itself and the outside world, it nonetheless longs for relation. This is the Inborn Thou that, according to Buber, must exist as an innate human condition. As one responds to the infant, the child becomes aware that it is being addressed. It is only after this moment that it becomes simultaneously aware of itself and the distance between itself and others. Only now, Buber believes, can the baby enter into

⁴⁵ John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II.

⁴⁶ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Smith, 27.

relation with itself, only now does it exist as an “I” in a world of space and time, and only now is the rational and empirical investigation of the I-It world possible.⁴⁷

What this means for Buber is that we are not first and foremost reasoning and categorizing beings. We are not first aware of material objects through our senses and only secondarily aware of persons or beings. The faculty of objective investigation develops only as a consequence of the Inborn Thou. One must first say Thou before developing the ability to say I or It. This shows Buber’s discrepancy with modern thought which attempts to secure truth in universals like reason and sense experience. In the process of doing so mainstreams of modern philosophical and theological understandings discredited the role that relation plays in establishing knowledge. Buber intends through the Inborn Thou to reestablish the foundational epistemological importance of relation. It is not simply one means among many for knowing the truth of life, but the primary way we come to be persons and to develop a deeper understanding of life and meaning.

Genuine Dialogue and Knowledge

Buber’s epistemology centers on genuine dialogue established through the I-Thou relation. This, of course, is not dialogue in the Socratic sense. For Plato, the dialogical method was a rational investigation of eternal ideas between two humans. Plato teaches in the *Meno* that all humans once lived in a world of perfection or Form, and are reborn

⁴⁷ Ibid., 29-30. Again, this demonstrates the separation between Buber’s I-Thou and Morris Berman’s notion of original participation. The I-Thou for Buber, while a fundamental part of the human condition, naturally leads to the I-It disposition. It occurs as every infant becomes aware of itself in response to the other. Berman, on the other hand, believes that cultures which still confront the world in original participation do so without any real duality between subject and object.

into this world with only hidden memories of that perfection.⁴⁸ The dialogical method was the attempt through rational argumentation of unlocking one's memory of the eternal Forms. Knowledge in this sense is nothing more than inner remembrance. For Buber, on the other hand, truth is that which occurs between two beings in the I-Thou relation. Dialogue in this sense is more of a presence. Maurice Friedman writes, "Genuine dialogue can ... be either spoken or silent. Its essence lies in the fact that 'each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them.'"⁴⁹ Dialogue is a sincere and honest communication that opens oneself up to the other. Where it occurs between humans and the nonhuman world it is a penetrating, yet silent encounter.

Buber's relational understanding of knowledge is a radical departure from the way one is typically thought to experience reality. The common sense reality of the "God's eye point of view" is that everything exists as it is experienced by our senses, whether external and internal states of affairs. What we stand apart from and objectively examine is what has universal validity. Our relations, on the other hand, are frequently dismissed as emotional, subjective, and biased. Friedman writes, "According to this earlier and still popular way of thinking, we know the external world of the senses directly and other selves only mediately and by analogy."⁵⁰ From this perspective, to have a knowledge of

⁴⁸ See Plato's dialogue *The Meno*, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/meno.html> (accessed 07/15/12).

⁴⁹ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 87.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

others one must successfully draw a comparison to the self. We see here the approach of Schopenhauer and Schweitzer as demonstrated in the last chapter. Schweitzer accepts that the world is full of will-to-live that he must reverence, but more reliant on the unique role of reason, he understands this reverence primarily by drawing upon an analogy with himself, with the reverence that he feels for his own will-to-live.⁵¹

As mentioned in the second chapter, Schweitzer accepts the egocentric predicament, that one cannot escape knowing the universe through the lens of the self. It is perhaps here that Buber most clearly departs from Schweitzer's "Reverence for life." Most of the time we are tied to the objective perceptions of the self. For Buber, this is the I-It disposition. However, in the I-Thou encounter we escape for a brief moment the confines of the self and experience a shared reality with the other. This reality is not in the self or in the outside world, it is "in between." Buber does not accept that one is left to understand others simply by way of analogy, for the I-Thou meeting gives a picture of being in completeness. It reveals intrinsic value. Though its content is empty of any material or objective facts, it directly conveys to a person's understanding what is right, meaningful, and true.

For Buber, then, one can, and must periodically, escape the lens of the human mind and enter into relation. He agrees with Kant's assertion that the only way of knowing an object is in relation to a knowing subject, but where Kant limits knowledge to the categories of thought that one imposes upon the world, Buber admits that aspects

⁵¹ I will return to this point in the next section on ethics where I discuss the criticism that Buber's philosophy commits the blunder of personification.

of the world as it is in itself can be discerned through relation.⁵² For example, Buber would agree with Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative, that humans should be treated never simply as a means, but at the same time as ends in themselves. For Kant, however, this principle is based on the idea of dignity grounded in his observation of rational freedom.⁵³ For Buber, on the other hand, concern for the other as an end grows out of relation, not categories of rational thought. Consequently, where Kant must limit his ethics to rational beings, Buber can open it to all life which may be encountered and known through love. Real love is not subjective and biased as Kant had thought, but part of an independent reality revealed in the "in between."

This again highlights the importance of open and sincere dialogue. Buber writes, "How we are educated by children and by animals! We live our lives inscrutably included within the streaming mutual life of the universe."⁵⁴ Because of their simple disposition for dialogue, for openness and sincerity, children and animals have the special capacity to draw one into the I-Thou, to help one acknowledge meaning and responsibility. Similar to Luther Standing Bear's perspective on human relations in nature raised at the beginning of this dissertation, Buber also believes that such relationships help to make us human. They contain the nucleus of the moral life. Friedman writes, "As it is only in genuine relation that we find direction, so it is only in relation that true ethical decision takes

⁵² Friedman, 163-164.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁵⁴ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Smith, 16.

place.”⁵⁵ Dialogue is one’s key to the universe, and is therefore, for Buber, the only true good.⁵⁶

Realization and the Role of Reason

Due to the ontological and ethical significance of genuine dialogue, Buber is concerned with modern standards of learning that prevent it from taking place. Like Schweitzer, he is critical of approaches to knowledge that strive to systematize truth, for in the attempt at providing certitude they only succeed in creating a false sense of security. In his early work *Daniel*, Buber identifies groups who adopt a false technique of systemization.⁵⁷ The empiricists, or “world-knowers,” deny any reality beyond material fact. The rationalists, or “mind-knowers,” ascribe all truth to the presence of mind. The “knowers of mystery” are so otherworldly-focused that the present world ceases to have meaning or significance. All of these Buber categorizes as orienting theories which inhabit the I-It world, and they all aim to alleviate epistemological insecurity.

It is not that empirical, rational, or mystical methods are all bad. It is our natural tendency to try and stake down the details of life and experience. The problem occurs when something becomes an all-encompassing system that aims to ratify its method by claiming freedom from any skepticism. Like Schweitzer, Buber argues that we must instead become at ease with uncertainty. After all, the I-Thou relation is not of the kind that can be pinned down in any objective fashion. It is not figured out, but realized, and

⁵⁵ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber and the Eternal*, 58.

⁵⁶ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 206.

⁵⁷ C. Wayne Mayhall and Timothy B. Mayhall, *On Buber*, 18-19.

systems of thought close one off to it as a possibility. Buber argues that the realizing person stands in opposition to the orienting person. Of this distinction, Maurice Friedman writes, “The orienting man places all happening in formulas, rules, and connections; the realizing man relates each event to nothing but its own intrinsic value.”⁵⁸ Though this intrinsic value is realized in the abyss of uncertainty, Buber did not feel that humans were abandoned to a world of complete doubt. Worse than the inability to secure the details of the world is an utter loss of meaning and purpose for life. Buber writes, “There is a purpose to creation; there is a purpose to the human race, one we have not made up ourselves, or agreed to among ourselves; we have not decided that henceforth this, that, or the other shall serve as the purpose of our existence. No. The purpose itself revealed its face to us and we have gazed upon it.”⁵⁹ With meaning that no system or technique can provide, one faces the inevitable uncertainties of existence with a calm reassurance. The power of mutual relation turns the innate skepticism of the I-It world into a benign detail of existence.⁶⁰

Martin Buber argues that reason is a human property, an important faculty for living.⁶¹ It is not, however, the foundation of any system of thought or way of knowing. It cannot provide a basis for knowledge of certain truths. This again illustrates the

⁵⁸ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 38.

⁵⁹ Quoted in C. Wayne Mayhall and Timothy B. Mayhall, *On Buber*, 6.

⁶⁰ Donald L. Berry, *Mutuality: The Vision of Martin Buber*, 67.

⁶¹ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber and the Eternal*, 41.

difference between Buber and Albert Schweitzer's earlier thought.⁶² Though Schweitzer rejected Descartes' rigid rationalism and over-concern with skepticism, he still established his "Reverence for Life" ethic on a inwardly derived first principle of sorts: "I am a life which wills to live in the midst of life which wills to live."⁶³ Schweitzer calls this the immediate fact of consciousness, albeit one shrouded in the incomprehensible mystery of life. Buber, in essence, takes one step further into the dark by maintaining that one cannot reason their way to intrinsic value, for example, even when contemplating mystery. Intrinsic value is only to be experienced and understood in relation. Reason, in cooperation with other properties, may perform an important function in determining how to live out the knowledge of intrinsic value, but it does not establish the truth of it.

Symbolism and the I-Thou

A significant obstacle for Buber's concept of relational knowledge is that there is no way of demonstrating or debating it because of its seemingly abstract and personal nature. Should one even qualify it as knowledge or just disregard it as the product of subjective emotion? Buber stresses that the I-Thou experience is no play of emotions or imagination.⁶⁴ Rather it is the very locus of the real life. Like Schweitzer, he accepts Kant's idea of the phenomenal world, the world in which we impose the categories of

⁶² Recall that Schweitzer later affirmed that reverence was born in the life of relation, and that thought played an important role in expanding the concept.

⁶³ Albert Schweitzer, "Philosophy of Civilization," in Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel's work *Reverence for Life*, 72.

⁶⁴ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Smith, 8.

space, time, and causality.⁶⁵ For Kant the world we experience is the world we organize and create through the *a priori* constructs of the mind.⁶⁶ Buber acknowledges this as the I-It. It is not, however, the world as it is in itself. Kant calls the world as it actually exists independent of mind the noumenal, and he argues that it is beyond reach.⁶⁷ While Buber accepts the phenomenal-noumenal distinction, he departs from Kant because he sees real truth as inhabiting the noumenal, and as being accessible to human experience.

Admittedly, one has no direct, objective access to it, but is somehow grasped by it in moments of relation. The space in between beings, in between egos, in the moment of relation is the real life precisely because it is truth that exists independent of the categories that one imposes upon the world. It is the place where one encounters being as it is in itself, not as it appears in the mind's eye; we are essentially drawn out of our phenomenal reality by the other. Kant's refusal to acknowledge the epistemological importance of relation left him limited to what could be known in the phenomenal sphere of I-It.

Maurice Friedman points out that while dialogical meeting is unpredictable, relation can be spurred on by symbolism in the I-It world of sensation such as writing, ritual, and art.⁶⁸ In other words, the I-Thou encounter cannot be forced, but it can be

⁶⁵ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 34.

⁶⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. J.M.D. Meiklejohn, www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4280/pg4280.html (accessed 07/17/12). Kant discusses the *a priori* constructs of the mind under the section "Transcendental Doctrine of the Elements."

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, "Preface to Second Edition."

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

primed, and this demonstrates the helpful role that the I-It can play.⁶⁹ In fact, such expressions of self and art are often the limited efforts of those to bring a onetime I-Thou meeting into the world of I-It. Friedman explains, “Only silence before the Thou leaves it free and unmanifest. But man’s greatness lies in the response which binds Thou into the world of It, for it is through this response that knowledge, work, image and symbol are produced.”⁷⁰ Through poetry, symbol, story, and other forms of creation, the I-Thou finds its way into human expression. These forms do not objectify the I-Thou, but fulfill their function inasmuch as they remind one of a past I-Thou meeting or lead one into a new encounter.⁷¹

For Buber, symbol is not a concrete representation of some abstract or eternal idea, but a conceptual representation of a concrete reality.⁷² Again, by accepting Kant’s phenomenal-noumenal distinction, he turns the tables on what is the true sphere of reality. Reality is the world independent of our objective experiences, and symbols are but physical shadows which vaguely reflect that reality. One might criticize him for refusing to accept the obvious marks of a physical reality demonstrated by scientific knowledge and progress. Buber is not blind, however, to the success of these methods and does not call for their end.⁷³ He only rejects that they constitute ultimate reality. Science works

⁶⁹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Smith, 7.

⁷⁰ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 62.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 167.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 172.

within the constructs that a knowing mind imposes upon the world, and as such, only knows the symbols of reality. Direct knowledge of reality occurs between beings. Similar to Schweitzer, then, Buber desires a science that recognizes and accepts its limitations in revealing truth.

Buber applies this same principle of reality to religion and ethics. Revelation is not an inward enlightenment but what occurs between humans and God in a moment of relation.⁷⁴ It is not objective knowledge bestowed in purity from heaven but the compilation of symbols and other forms of human expression that represent past and encourage future dialogue with God. Buber does not limit his understanding of true religion or morality to a specific culture or philosophy. All religion and ethos, no matter how grand or basic, have their beginning in the I-Thou relation.⁷⁵ Again, this is the seat of reality. One might ask, then, why cultures and religious traditions are so different. Buber identifies two factors. The first is simply that humans and cultures have different abilities and imagery at their disposal for symbolizing the Eternal. Friedman writes, “Every great culture rests on an original response, and it is this response, renewed by succeeding generations, which creates for man a special way of regarding the cosmos.... But when this living and continually renewed relational event is no longer the center of a culture, then that culture hardens into a world of I-It.”⁷⁶ In their infancy, conceptualizations ought

⁷⁴ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber and the Eternal*, 50.

⁷⁵ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 201. See also *Martin Buber and the Eternal*, 64.

⁷⁶ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 66.

to be much the same, but over time with cultural enrichment they take on a unique form of their own.

This captures the second factor for religious and cultural differences. Religion, ethics, and culture are alive inasmuch as their symbolism is continually renewed through dialogue. Buber differentiates between religion and religiousness.⁷⁷ Religion is symbolism and custom whereas religiousness is the transformed and energized quality of a person who has encountered the Divine. A person may inherit a tradition, but if its symbolism and ritual fail to direct one into a meeting with the Eternal then it can never be experienced as reality. The truth of religion, the rightness of ethics, and the greatness of culture are all proportional to the closeness they preserve with the Eternal in the primal I-Thou encounter.

The Ethical Significance of Buber's I-Thou Encounter

An Ethics Rooted in the Tangible World

In this final section on Martin Buber, I consider the significance that his I-Thou philosophy has for ethics. Perhaps the greatest import for Buber's relational model is that, like Albert Schweitzer's "Reverence for Life" ethic, it is firmly rooted in the physical world. For example, the moral life is what it means to be fully human, that is, to live with meaning. It is about redemption of the life around us through the kind of dialogue and service aimed at well-being. It is the very process of performing this service that harbors secrets of personal happiness and meaning. Buber's focus on dialogue has as much

⁷⁷ Ibid., 41.

ontological significance as it has ethical. It is through dialogue that one becomes aware of the other, learns responsibility, and realizes that personal meaning is connected to the service of creation. He is wary of morality based upon maxims or building character.⁷⁸

When ethics becomes rational reflection upon duty, justice, happiness, or virtue, it obscures the connection to the real world source from which meaning originates, namely the life of relation. It draws one into reflection of ideals and transcending perfection, presuming to have a knowledge which can alleviate the inherent tension of the ethical and religious life. Friedman writes, “Gnosis, like magic, stands as the great threat to dialogical life and to the turning to God. Gnosis attempts to see through the contradiction of existence and free itself from it, rather than endure the contradiction and redeem it.”⁷⁹

So long as ethics presumes knowledge that aims at utopia it remains theoretical and detached from everyday reality.

Traditional models of ethics also fail to recognize that proper ethical motivation occurs in tandem with this self-realization. Following the steps of Søren Kierkegaard, Buber is critical of the Greek maxim to “know thyself” because it treats self-realization as a matter of private introspection.⁸⁰ Friedman argues that traditional philosophical ethics are built upon this same foundation suggesting that the good is inherent to a person’s

⁷⁸ Ibid., 204-205.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 114. Buber’s concern with magic was that it presumably gave to humans the power of the Divine. Where gnosis seeks to secure redeeming knowledge, magic attempts to take redemption by force, by harnessing and objectifying the powers of God. Both undermine the principle of relation at the heart of redemption.

⁸⁰ C. Wayne Mayhall and Timothy B. Mayhall, *On Buber*, 37.

being and need only be intellectually uncovered.⁸¹ As I demonstrated in the last chapter, this reflects the individualistic approach of Albert Schweitzer. For Buber, on the other hand, one really knows self only when encountering the other; the good is not deep within one but between beings in the act of relation. Only then does one find the desire to care for the good of others. Friedman writes, “In Kant the ‘ought’ of reason is separated from the ‘is’ of impulse. In Buber ‘is’ and ‘ought’ join without losing their tension in the precondition of authentic human existence—making real the life between man and man.”⁸² For Kant, the influence of impulse was a distraction to pure moral reasoning. It meant that morality would be heteronomous, or caused by outside forces. Even love was an obstacle. Buber, on the other hand, is content to speak of real love as the one and only motivation for the moral life. All else is powerless to change human behavior.

It is within this context that Martin Buber understands human guilt. When one experiences the I-Thou, recognizes the inherent value of being, and is called to responsibility, the failure to answer the call produces guilt. Speaking on Buber’s understanding of conscience, Friedman writes, “When it is not stifled, conscience compares what one is with what one is called to become and thereby distinguishes and decides between right and wrong. Through this comparison, also one comes to feel guilt.”⁸³ The newly found motivation we feel to be responsible and to change faces the opposition of our egoistic self-assertion and the I-It world. It meets deeply entrenched

⁸¹ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber and the Eternal*, 86.

⁸² Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 200.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 103.

temperament and habits, and must now work to overcome them.⁸⁴ Guilt for both Albert Schweitzer and Martin Buber is necessary and important. For Schweitzer, it should never be eliminated because it plays the essential role of fostering temperance and gratitude. For Buber, on the other hand, it is a harrowing reminder of what God has called one to become; it is existential guilt. And inasmuch as we are faithful to the expectations of the I-Thou encounter our guilt subsides.

Martin Buber's understanding of the moral life is also rooted in the everyday world in that it is part of what it means to be religious. As I have shown, Buber does not believe in an escape from this world to some transcendent realm of perfection. Instead, God is encountered in the here and now, and that encounter itself is ripe with ethical significance. Buber writes, "Always it is the religious which bestows, the ethical which receives."⁸⁵ This does not mean that standard norms are unimportant. Maurice Friedman argues that, for Buber, traditional ethical principles such as the ten commandments are inferred in the I-Thou encounter.⁸⁶ They are not, however, absolute. To illustrate, the significance of Moses receiving the ten commandments was not that God wrote them with His own finger on tablets of stone, but that He instilled them within Moses upon the encounter. The commandments are the symbolic human expression of what was revealed in the I-Thou meeting on Sinai, and what was revealed was the intrinsic value of being. It

⁸⁴ Buber is likely drawing, in part, on Kierkegaard's transition from the aesthetic to the ethical life here. Only when a person recognizes what they are capable of becoming do they fight against the aesthetic impulse and strive to be ethical.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber and the Eternal*, 51.

⁸⁶ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 204.

is, again, for this reason that Buber would agree with Immanuel Kant on the second formulation of the categorical imperative: Everyone deserves to be treated as an end. For Buber, however, only the I-Thou encounter can make this real and clear, not rational investigation or spelled-out doctrines of conduct.

Taoism and Non-Action

Another great ethical strength of Buber's thought is that it yields to the natural flourishing of the land and the community. True to his heritage, Buber is profoundly informed by the ideas of a gracious God, a good land, and a strong community.⁸⁷ Recall that it is these very spheres that provide the possibility for I-Thou encounters, and evil is nothing more than that which prohibits the I-It from ever becoming I-Thou. In 1901 when Buber met with Theodor Herzl who was active in the Zionist movement, Herzl led him to a map on the wall which laid out the economic development of the new Palestine.

His finger glided over the deserts and there were terraced settlements; it glided over an empty plain and there arose in powerful rows the factories of a hundred industries;... Finally his finger returned to the Jordan, and Herzl recited to him the plan to erect a mighty dam that with its energy would supply the total economic life of the land. And his finger tapped on a point of the map, and he cried: "How much horsepower has Niagara? Eight million? We shall have ten million!"⁸⁸

Buber humored Herzl's excitement, but the very idea of such a homeland was alien to him. It was still a land of promise and message, not a modern industrial utopia, and its establishment meant preserving the conditions where genuine relationship and true

⁸⁷ For an appreciation of what land means to the Jewish nation, refer to Walter Breuggemann, *The Land*.

⁸⁸ Retold by Maurice Friedman in *Martin Buber and the Eternal*, 103.

community could flourish.⁸⁹ Buber did not reject modernization and technology, but it had to exist as a means and not an end, and it had to be limited the moment it became an obstacle to the life of relation.⁹⁰

To appreciate Martin Buber's non-obtrusive position it is helpful to recognize the connection of his thought to Eastern philosophy, particularly Taoism and the principle of *wu wei*. Commonly translated as non-action, *wu wei* is often misunderstood by Western thinkers as a passive and indifferent attitude toward the world. Recall that Schweitzer was critical of Eastern mysticism because of its isolating, world-denying, and ascetic quality. It was a mysticism that revealed enlightenment and oneness, but did nothing to encourage responsibility and ethical action. The non-action of *wu wei*, on the other hand, implies an action which does not force or impose itself, but facilitates and frees the natural progression of a thing. It is an action which, because it surrenders to and aids the Tao, appears as non-action.⁹¹ An example might be a ruler who works hard, follows the laws, pays a tax, and thus rules by example, without compulsion or force. Another example might be Gandhi's nonviolent direct action. It is not an indifferent, otherworldly attitude, but a redemptive and hallowing disposition. The non-action of Taoism takes direct aim at egoistic self-assertion, the desire to treat all things as instrumental to one's end. It stands in stark contrast to a modern world where technological, scientific, political, and economic success are all based upon the exercise of power and dominion.

⁸⁹ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 47.

⁹⁰ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber and the Eternal*, 104.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 112. Refer also to Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 30.

While Albert Schweitzer and Martin Buber found elements of truth in Eastern philosophy, they both were cautious of a mysticism that led one toward an otherworldly monism. They were also skeptical of worldviews that posited a natural, rationally discernible order to the universe. Recall that this is Schweitzer's difficulty with Taoism. He rejects that there is a built in harmony to the world. His world and life affirmation are grounded in the will, not in any ennobling characteristic of nature. Buber takes a similar position with respect to the world, but only as it is seen from the I-It perspective. He writes, "The Tao is the path of things, their manner, their peculiar order, but it exists as such in things only potentially. It comes out only in the contact with others. Then it becomes active."⁹² Nature possesses order and harmony but it only reveals its truth in the I-Thou. This is consistent with his belief that the reality of the noumenal reveals itself only through genuine dialogue.

Buber's perspective also gives credibility to the ancient understanding of an enlivened and ordered cosmos. Inasmuch as the ancients were speaking from the perspective of relation and not objective observation, as Morris Berman believes, they were expressing their understanding of reality revealed through dialogue. In contrast to Schweitzer's rational elitism identified in the last chapter, Buber maintains that the modern world is at a greater disadvantage than the primitive person. Friedman comments on this, "The world of the primitive man, even if it was a hell of anguish and cruelty, was preferable to a world without relation because it was real."⁹³ Despite the fact that they

⁹² Quoted in Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber and the Eternal*, 110.

⁹³ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 59-60.

were without the security of enforced laws and elected governments, without the lifesaving convenience of running water and inoculations, their relationship to each other, the cosmos, and consequently to the Eternal, was primal and endowed with truth and meaning because it was grounded in relation.

This takes us back to the first chapter of this dissertation where Native American voices like Wynona LaDuke and Andrey Shanendoa urge that the modern individual has lost something basic to human nature. Buber agrees, and declares that the key loss lies in the reality, meaning, and responsibility revealed through I-Thou encounters. Friedman comments, “Our culture has, more than any other, abdicated before the world of It.... The evil which results takes the form of individual life in which institutions and feelings are separate provinces and of community life in which the state and economy are cut off from the spirit, the will to enter relation.”⁹⁴ Buber does not advocate a return to primitive culture, but the removal of the complex obstacles to relation.

The Challenge of Biased Love

In Tolstoy’s novel *Anna Karenina*, Anna finds herself torn between responsibility toward her husband and son, and the feelings of romantic love she has developed for another man. When her husband comes to suspect her infidelity, she apologizes but stresses that her love for this other man is genuine and deep. To this her husband reprovingly replies, “Anything is justified in the name of love.” This captures the danger of making love the foundation of any ethic. Does love sometimes excuse unethical

⁹⁴ Ibid., 62.

behavior? Can it be over-consuming and blinding to reality? Does its focus on the one cause neglect and irresponsibility for the many? It is these concerns that lead Kant to categorize love as a basic impulse, not a higher moral guide. It convinces Schweitzer to favor the language of reverence, for love had become vague, distorted, and did not convey the importance of reason.

Buber's reply to these concerns is that compassionate feelings which at the same time encourage harm or disrespect to others, which misconstrue reality, or selfishly preference one over the many are not grounded in genuine dialogue and its atmosphere of real love. Instead they are distorted images of what was once real love and has unfortunately succumbed to the world of It. While all I-Thou subjects are bound to become I-It objects, real love remains pure in the Eternal Thou which cannot become an object. It continues pure if the Eternal is its steadfast guide, and it degrades if it becomes centered solely in the object. Whether or not love is objectified depends on the disposition of the person. Recall that love is not a feeling for Buber, but the unobjectifiable essence of encounter. When the attempt is made to bring the I-Thou encounter into the world of I-It, it is met with negative temperaments and bad habits. It uncomfortably challenges those temperaments and habits, presenting the individual with a choice. It can be accepted, thus leading to personal change, or rejected. Genuine love is not selfish, cruel, or biased, Buber maintains, but it can be warped by a self-serving and objectifying mind that refuses to fully submit to it.

Buber believes that real love does not plunge one into exclusiveness and distortion, but thrusts them into the outward reality of being. Of the I-Thou encounter, he writes, “Nothing is present for him except this one being, but it implicates the whole world.”⁹⁵ The I-Thou relation is a small moment with a single being, but its influence transfers to the whole world. It does not end with the one individual, but broadens outward. This is the immediate influence of the I-Thou, but it has to gradually transform human character and desires to be a consistent and true force in the world of It. This again highlights the importance of frequently reacquainting oneself with the I-Thou reality.

Despite its interpersonal and exclusive appearance, Buber’s dialogue finds its end in community. He states, “[O]nly men who are capable of truly saying *Thou* to one another can truly say *We* with one another.”⁹⁶ The life of community has its beginning in I-Thou relation. In true community, the obstacles to I-Thou are removed and persons experience a continuous ebb and flow between the worlds of It and Thou. It is here in community that the full realization of the person is obtained.⁹⁷ Buber feels this stands in opposition to the wave of modern Western history. With its focus on the individual and personal salvation, Western history has tended to portray the organic community as part of fallen nature; the “city of man” is a necessary evil that will one day be abolished, for

⁹⁵ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Smith, 32.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 209.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

evil cannot be redeemed. Buber believes, on the other hand, that through relation the community and world can be hallowed and redeemed as God is realized in the world.

While Buber accepts the real potentiality of attaining this state of community, he is also fully aware of the great challenges that hinder it, particularly in modern times. He acknowledges that humans are in a significant way sociologically determined, and consequently “in the grip of incomprehensible powers.”⁹⁸ Two of the evils that he mentions are the loneliness of modern people who exists in urban masses but do not really encounter each other, and a scientific and technological progress that outstrips the human capacity to place it into a meaningful context.⁹⁹ While Buber does not accept Karl Marx’s analysis of class struggle and revolution, he does acknowledge the changing circumstances of modern labor and its grave consequences for human existence.

Friedman comments on Buber’s position:

In times when the relation with the Absolute enters into every sphere of existence men see meaning in their work, but in times like ours when life is divided into separate spheres men experience work as an inescapable compulsion. The nature of work itself is perverted in the modern world by the divorce of technical means from value ends, I-It from I-Thou. The modern industrial worker has to perform meaningless and mechanical work because of an inhuman utilization of human power without regard to the worthiness of the work performed.¹⁰⁰

For Marx, the meaninglessness of work and existence is a problem that can be remedied through revolution and communitarianism. For Buber, it is a problem caused by a lack of dialogue and can only be remedied as the I-Thou takes hold of and transforms the world

⁹⁸ Ibid., 119.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 119.

of It through loving action. Neither politics, economic reform, nor philosophical and religious ideals will end up making any difference if not informed by the spirit of Thou and its mantle of love.

The Challenge of Pantheism

Martin Buber's notion that the sphere of nature is an important locus of I-Thou experience has tremendous implications for environmental ethics today. Though widely reproved by critics and passed over by scholars, Buber never retracted or downplayed his ideas of I-Thou encounter with nature during his life. All that said, he did not elaborate greatly on the topic. Donald Berry attributes this to the fact that he felt the great need of the moment was for the improvement of inter-human relations, an idea confirmed by the reality that Buber lived in a time and place of terrible conflict and war.¹⁰¹ Given the change in world circumstances, Berry now asks, "It may be given to our time, when ecological consciousness has been increasingly raised, to identify the programmatic issues of the natural, and to outline the manner in which the way of dialogue can sanction a responsible care for the earth needed now with urgency."¹⁰² One of the great religious barriers to this effort is the problem of pantheism.

Martin Buber refused to accept the idea that the created world was an obstacle to be overcome; it was not an impediment on the path toward relationship with God. On the contrary, it was the path.¹⁰³ Friedman explains, "God is immanent within the world and is

¹⁰¹ Donald L. Berry, *Mutuality: The Vision of Martin Buber*, 3-4.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 25.

brought to perfection through the world and through the life of man.”¹⁰⁴ The failure to recognize this meant that the religious person had to reorder the world as a place of pure instrumentality or contemplation, a task that has been underway in the Christian West for hundreds of years.¹⁰⁵ The result, according to Buber, has been the acceptance of an uncompromising duality between the sacred and the profane. Buber’s notion that the profane needs to be sanctified and hallowed raises the fear that nature itself is a locus of eternal values and an object of worship. Buber clarifies, “Of course God is ‘wholly Other’; but He is also the wholly Same, the wholly Present. Of course He is the *Mysterium Tremendum* that appears and overthrows; but He is also the mystery of the self-evident, nearer to me than my I.”¹⁰⁶ Friedman argues that Buber’s Hasidic understanding of God’s immanence is more appropriately labeled “panentheism,” the idea that God permeates all of creation while yet remaining separate and distinct from it. It stands apart from pagan traditions that revere the natural world on one hand, and from traditions that remove every trace of the sacred on the other.¹⁰⁷

Nature, then, is a sacrament for Buber. It is not equivalent to God, but a place where both Divine encounter and the work of redemption occur. Unlike some of the more progressive Christian eco-theologians, Buber does not suggest nature is the only, or even primary, place we encounter the Divine. It may be an important part however. Friedman

¹⁰⁴ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 29.

¹⁰⁵ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 74-75.

¹⁰⁶ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans., Smith, 79.

¹⁰⁷ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 118.

writes, “God’s imparting of Himself to man starts as indirect through nature and becomes more and more direct until man is led to meet YHVH Himself, who is at one and the same time the complete unity and the limitless person.”¹⁰⁸ A person might encounter the Eternal in nature, but it is a limited and partial meeting which ideally leads one on to direct dialogue. Consequently, nature is not the end of communion, but a partial and important step that guides one on toward the Eternal God.

The Challenge of Personification

Buber’s notion of mutual relation with nature has been highly criticized for committing the basic error of personification, that is, projecting human qualities onto non-human objects. With Buber in mind, Bryan Fair calls it “indulging in the pathetic fallacy,” a philosophical blunder which gives human feeling to nature.¹⁰⁹ Other scholars such as Will Herberg and Hermann Levin-Goldschmidt see it as evidence that Buber is not perceiving some reality, but rather stuck in a mystical monologue which he then projects onto the world.¹¹⁰ Donald Berry points out that some of Buber’s thought is appropriately labeled “romantic whimsy,” and that one must distinguish between his earlier and later writings.¹¹¹ Recall that Buber did his dissertation on German mysticism and, like Schweitzer, was influenced by the works of Jacob Boehme and Johann Goethe. The German mystics stressed unity with nature, and in early works such as *Daniel*, Buber

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 244.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Donald L. Berry, *Mutuality: The Vision of Martin Buber*, 2.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 2. See also Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 169.

¹¹¹ Donald L. Berry, *Mutuality: The Vision of Martin Buber*, 15.

talks of oneness with even the elements of earth and water. For example, it is with a piece of mica that the character Daniel first becomes aware of unity with nature and also realizes that his “I”, or self-realization, is dependent on this moment of unity.¹¹²

Berry categorizes three shifting areas in Buber’s thinking. His initial interest was in mystical unity between humans and the world at large. That shifted toward the second position, namely, a self-realizing unity between humans, God, and the world. Lastly, Buber arrives at the concept of meeting and mutual relation.¹¹³ In this final stage, which is represented by the foundational work *I and Thou*, Buber tries to depart from the notion of mystical unity and embrace instead a shared reality that still preserves one’s personhood and is grounded in the everyday. His idea of relation in *I and Thou* makes a clean cut from the inanimate world, establishing the principle that reciprocity only occurs where there is life. Reflecting on the earlier experience with the mica, Buber now writes:

There is so much that can never break through the crust of thinghood! O fragment of mica, it was while contemplating you that I first understood that I is not something “in me”—Yet I was associated with you only in myself; it was only in me, not between you and me that it happened that time.¹¹⁴

Here Buber attempts to distinguish between an inward inspiration that is sparked by the world of objects and an outward realization that occurs only between two living things.

Donald Berry believes that to understand the broad spectrum of mutual relation contained in *I and Thou*, one must think of kinds of mutual relation rather than degrees.

¹¹² Ibid., 16-17.

¹¹³ Ibid., 27.

¹¹⁴ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Kaufmann, 146-147.

Buber himself uses the concept of “thresholds.” Certainly the model he upholds for fulfilled dialogue and reciprocity is grounded in the encounter between two persons who can address each other as “Thou.” No threshold separates modes of being here. The first threshold of mutual relation separates humans and the animals. The pre-threshold sphere includes the botanical species. The sub-threshold sphere represents the insurmountable difference between humans and the dead universe, from “stones to stars,” where no encounter takes place.¹¹⁵

Berry believes that the limits of Buber’s relation in nature essentially correspond to the capacity for awareness. He writes, “In the sphere of nature real mutuality is kept from being full by the inability of the mica, the tree, the cat, to have a world, to step over the threshold to us in faithful speech, although the closer the natural thing or being is to human freedom the fuller is the possibility of relation.”¹¹⁶ Berry bases this categorization on the description of Buber’s relational experiences with animals. For example, while animals do not verbally speak “Thou” to humans, Buber was captivated by their ability to communicate with the eyes:

An animal’s eyes have the power to speak a great language.... Sometimes I look into a cat’s eyes.... The beginning of this cat’s glance, lighting up under the touch of my glance, indisputably questioned me: ‘It is possible that you think of me? Do you really not just want me to have fun? Do I concern you? Do I exist in your sight? Do I really exist?’¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Smith, 126.

¹¹⁶ Donald L. Berry, *Mutuality: The Vision of Martin Buber*, 96.

¹¹⁷ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Smith, 96-97.

In this example, Buber believes reciprocity has taken place, and yet, the threshold between human and creature is never fully crossed.

Relation between a person and a tree attains even less of a fullness. Nonetheless, Buber is adamant that it does take place in its own way, and that it is not simply a happening within him. In *I and Thou* he writes, “The tree is no impression, no play of imagination, no value depending on my mood. But it is bodied over against me and has to do with me, as I with it—only in a different way.”¹¹⁸ Though the tree cannot respond, Buber maintains that there still exists the reciprocity of being itself, “a reciprocity which is nothing but being in its course.”¹¹⁹ The tree becomes a Thou for Buber and stands in relation to him as he breaks from the phenomenal world of It and slips into the reality of the “in between.” It is in this meeting that Buber becomes aware of intrinsic value and understands responsibility. He is thus able to declare, “I find that our relationship to the domestic animals with whom we live, and even that to the plants in our garden, is properly included as the lowest floor of the ethical building.”¹²⁰ No rational investigation can arrive at this conclusion. No religious belief can make it real. No scientific study can inspire the motivation to see it through. All of these depend, for Buber, on the direct encounter with being.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 8.

¹¹⁹ Buber makes this claim in a 1957 postscript to the second edition of *I and Thou*, nearly forty years after the original publication. Despite sharp criticism throughout his life, he continued to uphold the possibility of relation with non-sentient life. See Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Smith, 126.

¹²⁰ Quoted in Donald L. Berry, *Mutuality: The Vision of Martin Buber*, 13.

Through the I-Thou relation Buber has arrived at the same ethical conclusion as Albert Schweitzer, but in a much different way. With possible exception of ethical mysticism, which Schweitzer fails to elaborate on, there seems to be no way to escape the reality the mind imposes upon the world. The best he can do to understand other beings is to draw an analogy with himself. Schweitzer's ethics is, in effect, one of empathy. Buber stresses that the I-Thou does not imply empathy, which is just an inversion of the person's feelings and desires onto the other. Friedman writes, "Though the Thou is not an It, it is also not 'another I.' He who treats a person as 'another I' does not really see that person but only a projected image of himself. Such a relation, despite the warmest 'personal' feeling, is really I-It."¹²¹ Buber does not suppose what another feels or desires based on his own experiences, but in the I-Thou realizes the actuality of the other's being apart from the I-It of self.

If one accepts Buber's I-Thou encounter as a real possibility the threat of personification is nullified, for the I-Thou claims to reveal the truth of the other. The question is whether such a possibility, particularly in nature, actually does exist. Due to the rigid standards of modern thought, Buber believes that society today is at a particular disadvantage for recognizing the validity of the I-Thou meeting. Yet he declares:

The clear and firm structure of the I-Thou relationship, familiar to everyone with a candid heart and the courage to pledge it, has not a mystical nature. From time to time we must come out of our habits of thought in order to understand it; but

¹²¹ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 61.

we do not have to leave the primal norms which determine human thinking about reality.¹²²

Similar to Schweitzer's claim about "Reverence for Life," Buber declares that the reality of I-Thou is apparent to all who are honest with themselves. It is not reason that objects to the I-Thou, but an intellectualism that limits all spiritual experience to personal whimsy or emotion thereby closing one off to the possibility.

Wayne Mayhall and Timothy Mayhall relate that when doubting scholars would ask Buber about the possibility of proving the I-Thou in nature, he would often respond with a question of his own, such as, "Have you yourself ever had an experience, such as coming around the bend of a winding mountain road, where you were compelled to pull to the side to take in the view of the awe-inspiring valley thousands of feet beneath your feet?"¹²³ The effect of the question was to transport people to a real moment that provided awareness and personal meaning which they had no way of grounding in rational or empirical investigation. It was not proof. To know the I-Thou one can only exercise faith and attend to it. Buber confesses to his critics:

I have no teaching. I only point to something. I point to reality. I point to something in reality that had not or had too little been seen. I take him who listens to me by the hand and lead him to the window. I open the window and point to what is outside. I have no teaching, but I carry on a conversation.¹²⁴

This illustrates the real limitations of attempting to qualify or categorize the I-Thou encounter into degrees or kinds, a limitation which Buber himself stressed. The noumenal

¹²² Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, Postscript, trans. Smith, 130.

¹²³ C. Wayne Mayhall and Timothy B. Mayhall, *On Buber*, 7.

¹²⁴ Quoted in Donald L. Berry, *Mutuality: The Vision of Martin Buber*, 89.

is beyond rational investigation, and the moment we begin analyzing the encounter we risk confusing what is merely symbolic expression for reality itself. To know the I-Thou one must commit the whole self to the grace of genuine relation.

Conclusion

Caught up in the wonder of relation, yet grounded in the everyday world, Martin Buber's I-Thou philosophy is an important source for the study of ethics today. Like Schweitzer, he restores the essential role that mystery plays in establishing moral knowledge, spirituality, and personal meaning. Accordingly, he too is critical of the intentions of modern philosophy and science to objectively disclose the contents of reality in a purely logical or empirical manner. Buber radically challenges the modern views expressed in the first chapter of this dissertation, namely, that truth is dependent upon the human mind and that the physical world can be understood in purely mechanical terms. Such perspectives represent the world of I-It, not the reality and mystery contained in the I-Thou.

Whereas such mystery is connected to introspection in Schweitzer's "Reverence for Life" ethic, for Buber it is always relational. Where Albert Schweitzer eventually comes to recognize the significance of relation in informing the ethical life, Martin Buber makes it the primary focus of his work. The *Inborn Thou* suggests that we are, before anything else, relational beings whose purpose, sense of responsibility, and personal identity are necessarily contingent upon intimate encounters with those living entities that exist apart from us. Again, reality is not what happens in an objectifying mind, but what

occurs in the “in between” of relation. In this sense, Buber more fully captures the contention of indigenous peoples expressed in the first chapter of this dissertation, that the modern industrial West is caught up in a way of life that impedes truths that are basic to our being, truths known only through the ineffable tenets of relation.

Martin Buber’s I-Thou philosophy is an invaluable resource for our world today as we specifically grapple with ecological concerns. It suggests that moral knowledge and the motivation to care for the natural world are linked to intimate encounters with it, not to masses of empirical data, to sophisticated philosophical arguments, or to the traditional tenets of religious belief. Though important endeavors in their own right, these methods do not speak to the core of a human as relation does. They cannot prove inherent value nor effectively work upon the human conscience. Real knowledge of inherent value is confined to the phenomena of love and friendship, and it is the person who fails to respond to such sentiments that must face a remorse of conscience. In essence, Buber’s ideas prove nothing in an objective sense, but rather encourage us to exercise a particle of faith, to openly and sincerely engage with the multiplicity of life around us where we can experience these truths of relation for ourselves. As voices and educators for the health and well-being of the natural environment, Buber’s insights suggest that we need to encourage practices that will plunge us and others into rich encounters with the natural world. The final chapter of this work is dedicated to examining a few of the practices that may accomplish this.

CHAPTER FOUR

ALDO LEOPOLD AND THE LAND ETHIC

Considered by many “the father” of ecology and the founder of wildlife management science, Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) is also one of the greatest naturalists of the 20th century. Born and raised in the Corn Belt region of the midwestern United States, Leopold spent his youth hunting wildlife and exploring the outdoors. These experiences ultimately shaped the course of his life and work. Of his childhood memories he wrote, “[M]y earliest impressions of wildlife and its pursuit retain a vivid sharpness of form, color, and atmosphere that half a century of professional wildlife experience has failed to obliterate or to improve upon.”¹ Like Schweitzer and Buber, his rich experiences in nature as a youth generated a sensibility for life and existence that would challenge the increasing scientific and technological vigor of modernity. Leopold stresses throughout his work that human progress cannot be estimated simply by way of new gadgetry or an increased standard of living, but is instead fused to the acceptance of membership in the biotic community.

As a writer, Leopold stands in stark contrast to the two previous thinkers discussed in this dissertation. None of them fit easily into any category, but as a scientist and naturalist, Leopold stands apart from Schweitzer’s and Buber’s philosophical styles;

¹ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation from Round River*, 127-128.

neither does he share their religious vision. Where the latter two are comfortable discussing and evaluating various philosophical and religious ideals, as well as introducing their own views in a semi-structured fashion, Leopold remains the cautious scientist who dares to express his affections, but often only in the relative safety of poetic form. He is conscientious in his awareness of modernity's intellectual skepticism and careful to avoid the presumption of absolute truth; often he refers modestly to his own biases and aesthetic tastes. That Leopold discovered ethical and aesthetic value in nature is beyond dispute, and notwithstanding his unobtrusive style, there is an underlying intimation in his writings that upon immersion and study of the land community others will feel the same.

In this chapter, I explore Leopold's thought with the intent of demonstrating how he aims at restoring both an awareness of life's inherent value and a renewed understanding of human meaning, all through the principle of what he calls the "land community." Like chapters two and three, it examines the metaphysical, epistemological and ethical significance of his ideas. In the first section I will demonstrate how Leopold subverts the popular view that reality is defined by such factors as human history, politics, religion, economy, or technology. All of these, important in their own right, are subordinate to humans as part of the biotic community. At a fundamental level, the "land community" is what is real. In the second section I will examine Leopold's empirical approach to truth which combines direct encounter of life with wonder and perception. Leopold was a scientist who was struck with awe before nature's marvels. He believed

that real science should leave one humbled as it only reveals more questions and greater complexity. His empirical approach to knowledge is reliant on the importance of a personal relationship to the natural world. In the final section I will consider Leopold's ethical vision. He was willing to go where modern science was not, namely, in the direction that both his study and his affections took him. Leopold had the ethical insight to know that any lasting change in human treatment of the land would require both increased understanding and love.

Leopold's Metaphysical Outlook

Land the True Reality

Aldo Leopold lived during a time in the United States that witnessed the great exodus from the farm to the city.² Though appreciative of modern conveniences, he worried that civilization was less and less in touch with the reality of life. For example, in *Sand County Almanac*, Leopold writes of two "spiritual dangers" that result from leaving the farm.³ The first is the assumption that food comes from the store, and the second that warmth comes from the furnace. Too easily we forget that every basic need and material want has its origins in land and its biotic processes. As modernity endeavors to achieve freedom from the grasp of nature, Leopold stresses that forgetfulness of our dependence upon it makes contemporary society presumptuous and negligent. Concerned with this, he buys an old Wisconsin farm which acts as a "refuge from too much modernity." He

² Ibid., 13. Leopold refers to the 1890s as the decade of lighthearted turn from rural to urban living. From 1800 to 1900 the urban population had risen from 6% to 40%. It would rise to 79% by 2000.

³ Ibid., 6.

writes, “On this sand farm in Wisconsin, worn out and abandoned by our bigger-and-better society, we try to rebuild, with shovel and axe, what we are losing elsewhere. It is here that we seek—and still find—our meat from God.”⁴ As we will see in the pages ahead, Leopold accepts that the land is not just materially essential for human life, but ontologically significant as well.

Truth and reality for Leopold, then, is bound to the recognition of our membership in the land community. The idea that civilization with its transcending ideals, its laws and history is somehow separate from the land mistakenly treats nature as the mere backdrop to the realm where real human living takes place. Leopold argues instead that the land in large part determines these factors. As an example, he writes on human politics, “It is commonly assumed that men select their form of government. It may be argued with equal logic that the form is in the long run dictated by habitat, by population density, and by pressure of predatory neighbors.”⁵ As a wildlife manager, Leopold was extensively familiar with the dynamics of species and their populations within the larger biome, and he saw in human history the same biological factors at work. Speculating with his ecology students at the University of Wisconsin, Madison in 1941 on the causes of the growing world crisis, he suggested that all populations have their thresholds, and that while humans have created tools to raise carrying capacity and ethics to avert predation, even then civilization might have reached the limits of growth: “Perhaps the present

⁴ Ibid., xviii.

⁵ Leopold expresses this idea in a to his ecology students at as they began their spring 1941 semester. Refer to “Ecology and Politics[1941]” in *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays by Aldo Leopold*, 285.

world-revolution is the sign that we have exceeded that limit, or that we have approached it too rapidly.”⁶ While this remained only an idea and was never formally put into print by Leopold, it demonstrates his conviction that human reality is somehow deeply connected to complex biological processes.

Leopold highlights in his writings the paradoxical schism between civilization and nature. So long as human living is at odds with nature and its processes, it is at odds with itself. As an example, he points to 1915 when the Wisconsin government ended the protection of state forests because it was not a “good business proposition.” Leopold argues, “It did not occur to the Governor that there might be more than one definition of what is good, and even of what is business. It did not occur to him that while the courts were writing one definition of goodness in the law books, fires were writing quite another on the face of the land.”⁷ Good law is that which recognizes the importance of the “land mechanism.”⁸ Real history is what occurs on the scales of geological time rather than what happens within modern civilization’s transient existence.⁹ A true property right is not simply established in the books of human law, but through the work of evolutionary

⁶ Ibid., 284.

⁷ Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 11.

⁸ Leopold often referred to the complex interconnections and balance within ecosystems as the “land mechanism.” This term conveys a certain intricacy, predictability and stability. Yet despite its tone, it should not be understood as evidence that he was caught up in the extreme mechanist vision of the Enlightenment. As we will see, nature, for Leopold, is very much alive and possessed of an interest and value of its own. He does not hesitate to say that there is a wonder and mystery at work in the natural world that is beyond the purely material investigation of modern science.

⁹ Leopold captures this idea in “Marshland Elegy” printed in *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation from Round River*, 103.

history and natural selection.¹⁰ For Leopold, it is primarily land that shapes human life and history.

Citizenship in the Land Community

Because land is the true reality, it defines the vision that humans can and should strive for. Leopold taught that the principle of conservation is a state of harmony that exists between humans and the earth, and he likens this harmony to a cherished friendship where all things benefit from interaction. He believed that these mutually benefiting communities have existed in the past. He writes, “There once were men capable of inhabiting a river without disrupting the harmony of its life. They must have lived in thousands upon the Gavilan, for their works are everywhere.”¹¹ One might debate whether such harmony is a realistic portrayal of the world. Does it not overlook the fact that nature is a brutal and unforgiving taskmaster? Francis Bacon’s and René Descartes’ concerns voiced in the first chapter of this work come to mind here. Leopold is not unaware of these concerns. He appreciates that we are better fed, better housed, and better clothed than our predecessors, yet he wonders, together with the Native American’s mentioned in the first chapter of this work, whether all this progress is not subject to a

¹⁰ Observing an upland plover on his farm, Leopold writes, “There he sits; his whole being says it’s your next move to absent yourself from his domain. The county records may allege that you own this pasture, but the plover airily rules out such trivial legalities. He has just flown 4000 miles to reassert the title he got from the Indians, and until the young plovers are a-wing, this pasture is his, and none may trespass without his protest.” See *A Sand County Almanac*, 37.

¹¹ Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 158. Leopold also refers to the more recent marsh settlers of Wisconsin’s Baraboo range who cut hay in the highlands and sustained the integrity of the marshlands, something he believes they could have gone on doing indefinitely without any real negative impact to the environment. This changed when later settlers drained the marshes with the intent of farming them. As the peat beds dried they caught fire and dismantled the ecosystem. Refer to *A Sand County Almanac*, 106.

law of diminishing returns, causing us to lose connections that are a core part of life and being.¹²

The harmony that Leopold envisions between humans and the natural world is not some utopian garden of Eden or Jain ideal of peaceful coexistence. Rather it represents a balanced biotic system composed of diverse populations of species. Competition and death is a natural and necessary part of maintaining the health of the system. Leopold avoided talk of absolute good for individual beings. For example, the good for a rough-legged hawk is not the good for a field mouse.¹³ However, the common good for all living things is the healthy state of the larger biotic organism which requires the continual recycling of elements.¹⁴ Even disease was something that Leopold came to understand and appreciate:

Soon after I bought the woods a decade ago, I realized that I had bought almost as many tree diseases as I had trees. My woodlot is riddled by all the ailments wood is heir to. I began to wish that Noah, when he loaded up the Ark, had left the tree diseases behind. But it soon became clear that these same diseases made my woodlot a mighty fortress, unequaled in the whole county.¹⁵

Leopold goes on to describe the diverse species that rely upon his diseased trees for food and forage.

This positive portrayal of the natural world stands in stark contrast to Albert Schweitzer's understanding of the cosmos. Both men might be considered world

¹² Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 116. See also Leopold's comments in the introduction of his work, page xvii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

¹⁴ See Leopold's discussion of the odyssey of an atom in *A Sand County Almanac*, 111-115.

¹⁵ Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 78.

optimists, but recall that for Schweitzer the natural world with all of its cruelty and pain was an amoral and ambiguous place, devoid of any real truth or goodness. Although both believe reverence and love toward life is fundamental to ethics, Schweitzer's philosophical individualism prompts him to view the good of each separate being as the subject of the moral life. Thus, despite nature's competitive and destructive dynamics, the human will can act contrary to these patterns and bring good into the world.

In contrast, Leopold's "Land Ethic" accepts that the biotic community takes precedence over the individuals of which it is comprised. This is not to say that Leopold was unmoved by the good of individual life. On one occasion, lightning struck and killed an old oak tree on his farm. Leopold wrote, "We mourned the loss of the old tree, but knew that a dozen of its progeny standing straight and stalwart on the sands had already taken over its job of woodmaking."¹⁶ There is no question that Leopold throughout his writings demonstrates affection and concern for individual beings, but it is always resolved within the framework of the larger land organism. Loss of individual health and life is a cause of sorrow, but it is never meaningless, for it is through this ageless struggle for life that the "collective immortality" of species and systems is won.¹⁷

Where bringing forth harmony for Schweitzer means to stand above nature's destructive laws, for Leopold it means to stand within and accept the dynamics of the biotic community. To stand above presupposes some higher meaning or purpose than the rest of world, something Leopold did not accept. He writes, "Above all we should, in the

¹⁶ Ibid., 9.

¹⁷ Ibid., 7.

century since Darwin, have come to know that man, while now captain of the adventuring ship, is hardly the sole object of its quest, and that his prior assumptions to this effect arose from the simple necessity of whistling in the dark.”¹⁸ All efforts to elevate human meaning, purpose, and destiny throughout history were mere conjectures that should have been corrected with a knowledge of the land mechanism. Leopold does believe that humans have evolved into distinct and special creatures with the capacity to reason and understand, but this merely endows us with the responsibility to recognize our kinship with other beings and to strive to maintain the land community. Where Schweitzer and Buber departed from transcending ideals by relying on an understanding of God’s immanent presence in the world, Leopold leans more on evolution to ground his ethics in the concrete.¹⁹

Leopold accepted that the human species was part of the natural community just as any other species. Unlike some scientists and philosophers who claim that humans have effectively separated themselves from the natural world through culture and technology, Leopold felt that such separation was bad for both nature and humans.²⁰ Instead, he envisions a state of existence where humans strive to flourish, but at the same

¹⁸ Ibid., 117.

¹⁹ I will return to this idea in the third section of this chapter.

²⁰ This captures the difference between conservationist and preservationist ethics. Where conservationists see a place for human interference in nature, preservationists believe humans should leave natural areas untouched and unmanaged. Holmes Rolston III is an example of the position that humans have left the realm of nature and should be considered distinct. Leopold seemed to recognize there was a place for both human involvement in some areas and more stringent protection in others.

time accept their role as managers and protectors of the biotic community. With playful allusion to Judeo-Christian creation he writes:

Acts of creation are ordinarily reserved for gods and poets, but humbler folk may circumvent this restriction if they know how. To plant a pine, for example, one need be neither god nor poet; one need only own a shovel. By virtue of this curious loophole in the rules, any clodhopper may say: Let there be a tree—and there will be one. If his back be strong and his shovel sharp, there may eventually be ten thousand. And in the seventh year he may lean upon his shovel, and look upon his trees, and find them good.²¹

Not all creation is beautiful and good, however. A pine endemic to the region is better than one of foreign origins. Leopold does not hesitate to reserve the word “weed” for invasive species that have been introduced from foreign lands which destroy local populations and ecosystems. In his view, such invasions of exotic species reduce biological diversity and consequently lessen ecosystem health and integrity. The community system is the standard of value, not individual life itself, and so the maxim “live and let live” cannot always apply. Humans have the responsibility to both reduce their damaging impact on the natural world and to proactively maintain the integrity of the land.

The Ontological, Cultural, and Religious Significance of Land

A dimension of metaphysics pertains to what it means to be human, and the answer inevitably is connected to what one accepts as real. For Schweitzer, the answer lay in the recognition of our will to live and the contemplation of the mystery of life. For Buber, human meaning is realized primarily in the I-Thou relation. It should come as no

²¹ Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 86.

surprise that Leopold locates at least part of human meaning in the studied engagement with the land community. He believed that the joy of pursuing and studying wildlife and environments was akin to human physiology: “A man may not care for golf and still be human, but the man who does not like to see, hunt, photograph, or otherwise outwit birds or animals is hardly normal. He is supercivilized, and I for one do not know how to deal with him.”²² For those who may contend it is purely a question of subjective preference, he replies, “It is not merely an acquired taste; the instinct that finds delight in the sight and pursuit of game is bred into the very fiber of the race.”²³ Leopold felt that the value of wildlife went far beyond simple material and aesthetic goods. Rather, it had ontological significance and was, therefore, an elemental part of social welfare.

Not only is the good of human being reliant on direct engagement with the natural world, so too is healthy culture. “Wilderness,” says Leopold, “is the raw material out of which man has hammered the artifact called civilization.”²⁴ He is not simply referring here to material stuff like homes, roads, and bridges, but the philosophical, religious, and social material that gives shape to culture. Easy examples of this are primitive cultures where ritual, myth, and social and ethical expectations are inextricably linked to human relations with the land and the wildlife. The great cultural diversity that exists throughout the world mirrors the diversity of species and geography on earth, and these cultures, in

²² Leopold, “Goose Music” in *A Sand County Almanac*, 227. For an in-depth look at the deep mark hunting makes on the human condition, refer to Jose Ortega y Gasset’s classic work, *Meditations on the Hunt*, 1972.

²³ *Ibid.*, 227.

²⁴ Leopold, “Wilderness” in *A Sand County Almanac*, 264.

Leopold's view, are important stores of knowledge for how to ethically live with wilderness.

Two obstacles, however, threaten the preservation of cultural values. The first is the disappearance of wilderness. So long as culture remains in contact with the primal influences that gave it shape, it retains its health.²⁵ As these influences degrade, however, custom begins to lack meaning and importance, as do the social and ethical norms that go with it. Buber essentially makes the same claim about culture as it loses its connection to the Divine and the I-Thou relation. Without rootedness in the source that gives birth to it, culture becomes empty tradition that eventually gives way to modern civilization's profane sameness. This is the second danger to healthy culture that Leopold mentions, namely, "The world-wide hybridization of cultures through modern transport and industrialization."²⁶ To paraphrase Karl Marx, capitalism beats down the door of every "backward" nation and fashions a world in its own likeness and image. Where the first danger removes the source and inspiration for culture, the second entices the culture away from the source by the promise of progress and a higher standard of living.

Unlike the approaches of Albert Schweitzer and Martin Buber, Aldo Leopold's worldview is not bolstered by any religious vision or distinct metaphysical definition of God. Although considered atheist by some, Leopold often referred to Biblical imagery and story throughout his writings. Perhaps to goad his Judeo-Christian readers, he asks, "Who wrote the great hunter's poem about the sheer wonder of the wind, the hail, and the

²⁵ Leopold, "Wildlife in American Culture," in *Sand County Almanac*, 213.

²⁶ Leopold, "Wilderness" in *Sand County Almanac*, 264.

snow, the stars, the lightnings, and the clouds, the lion, the deer, and the wild goat, the raven, the hawk, and the eagle, and above all the eulogy of the horse? Job, one of the great dramatic artists of all time.”²⁷ Leopold did not profess any belief in organized religion or mystical experience with the Divine. He was, however, most comfortable discussing the wonder, awe, and mystery with which the natural world humbled and worked upon the human mind.

As noted above, the sacred was a product of culture for Leopold, and living culture radiated from human interaction with the natural world. To what extent, then, Leopold would say one experiences something sacred through nature, like Schweitzer’s “ethical mysticism” or Buber’s “Eternal Thou,” remains an open question. He writes:

I heard of a boy once who was brought up an atheist. He changed his mind when he saw that there were a hundred-odd species of warblers, each bedecked like to the rainbow, and each performing yearly sundry thousands of miles of migration about which scientists wrote wisely but did not understand. No ‘fortuitous concourse of elements’ working blindly through any number of millions of years could quite account for why warblers are so beautiful. No mechanistic theory, even bolstered by mutations, has ever answered for the colors of the cerulean warbler, or the vespers of the woodthrush, or the swansong, or—goose music. I dare say this boy’s convictions would be harder to shake than those of many inductive theologians.²⁸

Where Leopold was willing to stand up for the wonder and mystery in wilderness which played upon his affections, he was not ready himself to ascribe it to the transcending heavens of organized religion. That said, neither was he absolutely dismissive of religion’s sincere claim that the sacred is revealed as one experiences the natural world.

²⁷ Leopold, “Goose Music,” in *Sand County Almanac*, 230.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 230-231.

On the contrary, he encouraged the possibility: “There are yet many boys to be born who, like Isaiah, ‘may see, and know, and consider, and understand together, that the hand of the Lord hath done this.’ But where shall they see, and know, and consider? In museums?”²⁹ Leopold did not share in some religions’ complex assemblage of doctrines, but he did stand with believers in the basic conviction that there was mystery in the world and universe that modern science could never solve.

The Illusion of Modern Progress

To summarize Leopold’s metaphysical outlook, the land mechanism frames the response of what is important and enduring. Living within the land’s bounds has ontological, cultural, and religious implications. The modern world, on the other hand, defined by its scientific and technological progress, tends to distort what is real. Leopold is not critical of the desire to improve the human condition. Indeed, he recognizes that such progress has allowed him the leisure to be a professor and explore the outdoors: “These wild things, I admit, had little human value until mechanization assured us of a good breakfast, and until science disclosed the drama of where they come from and how they live.”³⁰ His concern, however, was that having improved the human condition, the wheels of progress were now out of control and taking on a life of their own. A measure of progress and safety was only rational, but Leopold knew that wildlife and ecosystems could not survive the uninhibited advance of the machine age.

²⁹ Ibid., 231.

³⁰ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, xvii.

Not only did this kind of progress destroy the natural world, it also took a toll on human well-being. It is natural to strive and compete for material security, and this deep drive is the source of motivation to improve the human condition. Leopold's trouble, however, is that modern progress exploits this natural desire to abnormal extremes. Progress now far surpasses the condition of need and feeds an unhealthy materialism that looks increasingly like a neurosis. Leopold writes, "But wherever the truth may lie, this much is crystal clear: our bigger and better society is now like a hypochondriac, so obsessed with its own economic health as to have lost the capacity to remain healthy."³¹ He adds, "Nothing could be more salutary at this stage than a little healthy contempt for a plethora of material blessings." The solution to "too much modernity" for Leopold and his family was an occasional escape to the old sand farm in Wisconsin where the idea of progress could undergo scrutiny by things that were "natural, wild and free."³²

Leopold's Epistemological Approach

Childlike Investigation

In a statement that would scare any determined seeker of truth, Leopold once wrote, "Education, I fear, is learning to see one thing by going blind to another."³³ Almost pragmatist in its appearance, this comment could infer that there is no sure path to truth. It is certain, however, that Leopold believed some forms of education were better

³¹ Ibid., xix.

³² For a more thorough appreciation of Leopold's view on modern progress and its toll on human and natural life, refer to the introduction of *Sand County Almanac*.

³³ Ibid., 168.

grounded in reality than others. Knowledge of the land community was the best education, and one nobody could safely do without. He writes, "I once knew an educated lady, banded by Phi Beta Kappa, who told me she had never heard or seen the geese that twice a year proclaim the revolving seasons to her well-insulated roof. Is education possibly a process of trading awareness for things of lesser worth? The goose who trades his is soon a pile of feathers."³⁴ Where intellectualism and book learning play an important role in modern society, they are also tangential to genuine human flourishing for Leopold.³⁵ In this sense, ecology was more than a mere science about the material facts of the world, it was a science closely linked with the struggle for human survival and meaning.

The best method of learning, according Leopold, is much more childlike and foundational to existence than the modern effort to increase the mind's information content and intellectual capacity. It involves the ordinary exploration of the natural world. Leopold writes, "When I call to mind my earliest impressions, I wonder whether the process ordinarily referred to as growing up is not actually a process of growing down; whether experience, so much touted among adults as the thing children lack, is not actually a progressive dilution of the essentials by the trivialities of living."³⁶ For Leopold, knowledge of the real is established by the unconfined investigation of the

³⁴ Ibid., 20.

³⁵ Contrary to the ancient view that human purpose and happiness reside in the contemplation and knowledge of ideals or forms, Leopold believes they are contained in our exploratory relationship with the natural world.

³⁶ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 127-128.

senses, and children are the purest learners in this respect since they are relational explorers and are not yet caught up in matters of secondary importance. We can relate this to Morris Berman's assertion from the first chapter of this work that the history of Western education has gradually transitioned from original participation where natural relation with the cosmos was the norm, to a nonparticipating consciousness where an unnatural and cerebral investigation took over.

Writing about these natural and unnatural approaches to learning, the Native American, Luther Standing Bear, in his 1933 book *Land of the Spotted Eagle* explains that the difference between the Indian mind and modern Western mind toward nature was a matter of childhood education:

I have often noticed white boys gathered in a city by-street or alley jostling and pushing one another in a foolish manner. They spend much of their time in this aimless fashion, their natural faculties neither seeing, hearing, nor feeling the varied life that surrounds them.... In contrast, Indian boys, who are naturally reared, are alert to their surroundings; their senses are not narrowed to observing only one another.... Observation was certain in its rewards; interest, wonder, admiration grew, and the fact was appreciated that life was more than mere human manifestation; that it was expressed in a multitude of forms.³⁷

For Leopold, the childlike allure toward nature, or what Standing Bear calls the "Indian point of view" of every true student, should provide the foundation and context to all additional learning.

Empiricism and the Limits of Science

As a theory of knowledge, Leopold's approach falls into the category of empiricism since truth is established through the unconfined investigation of the senses.

³⁷ Standing Bear, "Nature," in Roger S. Gotlieb, *This Sacred Earth*, 41.

On the other hand, it differs greatly from the rigorous empiricism of Francis Bacon in that it emphasizes natural observation and holism above mechanical experimentation and reduction. To know a thing, according to Bacon, requires one to break it down into its component parts. This sort of investigation is not irrelevant for Leopold, but he is more concerned with understanding how individual life fits into the larger ecosystem. One could say this is only a difference between physics and ethology, but for Leopold it was more significant. It seemed that all study of science was expected to fall in line with reductionist thinking. Leopold laments:

It is important, of course, to study bones; otherwise we should never comprehend the evolutionary process by which animals came into existence. But why memorize the bumps? We are told that this is part of biological discipline. I ask, though, whether a comprehension of the living animal and how it holds its place in the sun is not an equally important part. Unfortunately, the living animal is virtually omitted from the present system of zoological education.³⁸

Like Schweitzer, Leopold recognizes a mystery in life that cannot be unraveled by simply breaking an organism down into anatomical parts like bones, organs, molecular structures, and subatomic particles. The monopoly of the reductionist process causes one to miss the marvel of the whole altogether. The truth of existence, on the other hand, lies somewhere with the wonder of the undivided system, and that is discovered as one intimately engages the living creatures and ecosystems of the world.

This points to the way science in its current form is limited by its own organization and rules of conduct. Comparing the living world to an orchestra, Leopold suggests that professors are the ones who take on the responsibility to know the

³⁸ Leopold, "Natural History," in *Sand County Almanac*, 205-206.

individual instruments that make up the whole. Each professor spends a lifetime dissecting and examining one instrument, for that is how to become a professional.

Leopold adds:

A professor may pluck the strings of his own instrument, but never that of another, and if he listens for music he must never admit it to his fellows or to his students. For all are restrained by an ironbound taboo which decrees that the construction of instruments is the domain of science, while the detection of harmony is the domain of poets.³⁹

The result of this approach is that science knows much about the material makeup of separate organisms, but too often neglects studying their relationship to the larger land organism. Perhaps even more tragic in Leopold's view is the fact that modern science is unmoved by the ineffable harmony of the orchestra that would otherwise regulate it as a discipline. Science is the servant of a progress defined by increasing power over nature, and consequently, so too is the scientist. That the instruments are steadily disappearing and the orchestra is disbanding is of little importance to both progress and to the experimenter whose mind is trained to behave mechanically.⁴⁰

Similar to Albert Schweitzer and Martin Buber, then, Leopold calls for a science which approaches investigation with greater honesty and humility, one that rejects the popular mechanical assumption that all mysteries of the world, given time and sophisticated instrumentation, will be explained. Leopold points out, in fact, that such puzzles only become increasingly intricate and complex with each added detail that

³⁹ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 162.

⁴⁰ Recall that it was Francis Bacon who declared that in order to treat nature mechanically the experimenter's mind would inevitably have to behave mechanically, as if leaving the mind to go its own way might cause one to reconsider the severity of the experimentation on the being.

science unveils. More than any other people who lived before and who might have been impressed by the harmonious or mathematical structure of the universe, contemporary society should be awestruck by the recently discovered complexity of the land organism. “Ecological science has wrought a change in the mental eye,” writes Leopold. “The incredible intricacies of the plant and animal community—the intrinsic beauty of the organism called America, then in the full bloom of her maidenhood—were as invisible and incomprehensible to Daniel Boone as they are today to Babbitt.”⁴¹ Leopold felt that, where in the past we saw only the surface of things in the wild, science now uncovers profound interrelationship. In his view, the aim of science should be to discover and disclose the wonder of the living universe to the unseeing and indifferent masses of the modern world.

The Presence of Wonder and Awe

As mentioned above, Leopold is convinced that science will never do away with “mystery” in the world, for nature study seems to reveal only greater complexity and to spawn more questions and awe. Scientific investigation, despite its incredible growth, is still dwarfed before the intricacies of the land organism, and Leopold is pleased that this is so. As he puts it, “What a dull world if we knew all about geese!”⁴² It is the mystery that keeps interest in nature study alive. By reference to mystery here, Leopold means nothing more than the unsolved questions science has yet to uncover. However, Leopold

⁴¹ Leopold, “Conservation Esthetic,” in *Sand County Almanac*, 291. The name Babbitt here refers to a character in a novel by Sinclair Lewis. The term in Leopold’s day signified a person who subscribed to the materialistic ideals of middle-class society.

⁴² Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 22.

also refers to a wonder that is beyond the reach of science and the rational mind. Despite his educational background in, and general acceptance of, contemporary science, he does not conform to Descartes' purely mechanical understanding of the universe, where mystery or wonder is nothing more than the outdated superstition of the innocent past. For Leopold, the aesthetic whole is still mysteriously greater than the sum of its parts, just as the harmony produced by an orchestra is beyond the isolated sounds of its individual instruments.

Leopold does not make any great effort to explain the existence of this mystery in the world. Indeed, he is aware of the empirical limitations that come with any attempt to do so, a truth that persuades scientists to leave such musings to the pens of poets. At one point in his writing, however, Leopold references the phenomenal-noumenal division of Immanuel Kant's transcendental idealism when contemplating whether the mystery of beauty is purely the product of a subjective mind. Eliminate the ruffed grouse from the autumn landscape, says Leopold, and every ecologist knows an absolute tragedy has occurred, even though the presence of the grouse does very little to affect the overall health and integrity of the ecosystem:

It is easy to say that the loss is all in our mind's eye, but is there any sober ecologist who will agree? He knows full well that there has been an ecological death, the significance of which is inexpressible in terms of contemporary science. A philosopher has called this imponderable essence the *numenon* of material things. It stands in contradistinction to *phenomenon*, which is ponderable and predictable, even to the tossings and turnings of the remotest star.⁴³

⁴³ Ibid., 146.

Here Leopold speculates that there is mystery beyond the comprehension of the rational mind, and it cannot simply be ridden off as a subjective bias. He suspects that there is an underlying objectivity to the beauty and wonder which stirs human affection and inspires the mind.⁴⁴

Recall that for Albert Schweitzer, the noumenal world was beyond the reach of the human mind and only phenomenal experiences were relevant to existence. Thus, his “Reverence for Life” ethic was founded on analogies that he would draw between himself and other beings.⁴⁵ For Martin Buber, the I-Thou encounter was a point of transition from the phenomenal to the noumenal, the truth of reality being contained in the “in between” of relation. No analogy was necessary here, for to experience the I-Thou was to know the “thing in itself.” Leopold appears to subscribe more to Buber’s notion that the noumenal is at least minimally available to human cognition. He does not go so far as Buber, who proclaims it is the seat of all reality. Certainly the phenomenal world of science and measurability is of great importance to Leopold. As we will see in the next section, however, the mystery of the aesthetic which Leopold associates with the noumenal does generate the ontological and ethical significance of his “Land Ethic.” Science explains many puzzles, but it does not engage with questions of ethics, beauty, human meaning, or love. Like Buber, Leopold locates these in the inexpressible realm of

⁴⁴ More recently, Edward O. Wilson has argued that the disposition of love for natural surroundings is an engrained human trait. Refer to his work *Biophilia*, Harvard University Press, 1984.

⁴⁵ This is at least true regarding standard encounters with others. It is possible that Schweitzer’s Ethical Mysticism infers the realization of the noumenon, but this is impossible to say with any certainty since he did not explain what it entails or is like.

the noumenal world, and one comes to recognize them through the aesthetic experience. What is a spiritual matter for Buber seems to be an aesthetic one for Leopold, yet in both cases there is a reliance on mutual relationship.

Comparing Leopold's notion of mystery and beauty with Martin Buber's I-Thou encounter reveals some intriguing similarities. Recall that for Buber, the I-Thou moment was beyond the measure of time since time is a category imposed upon the world by an objectifying mind as Kant had argued. Because one is no longer an objective observer, but a participant in the I-Thou relation, it is impossible to record the passing of time. Leopold ponders the same mystery of timelessness that is sometimes contained in aesthetic encounters. For example, he writes of his adventure fishing on the Alder Fork in Wisconsin, and in much detail describes the cunning and struggle involved in hooking three great trout. At the end of it all, he writes, "I shall now confess to you that none of those three trout had to be beheaded, or folded double, to fit their casket. What was big was not the trout, but the chance. What was full was not my creel, but my memory. Like the white-throats, I had forgotten it would ever again be aught but morning on the Fork."⁴⁶ Leopold is not engaged in dialogical relation with a specific being here, but he is caught up in an overwhelming aesthetic and timeless encounter with his greater surrounding.

In an example that applies more directly to Buber's understanding of relation, Leopold recounts his mysterious moment with a wolf which he shot and killed. Leopold

⁴⁶ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 43.

and his companion observed the wolf as it crossed a turbulent stream and met a handful of grown pups on the other side. He writes:

In those days we had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf. In a second we were pumping lead into the pack, but with more excitement than accuracy.... When our rifles were empty, the old wolf was down, and a pup was dragging a leg into impassable slide-rocks.

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.⁴⁷

This important event represents a moment of conversion for Leopold, and while he explains it through the logic of ecology, it is evident from the story that logic was not the catalyst for the experience. It was more emotional, mysterious, and internally penetrating. He understood, however, the need to give it an intellectual foundation for his readers: “The evolution of a land ethic is an intellectual as well as emotional process.... I think it is a truism that as the ethical frontier advances from the individual to the community, its intellectual content increases.”⁴⁸ This conclusion makes sense. Ethics may have its origins in mystery and affection, but it must be given a rational foundation to be debated among philosophers, scientists, politicians, journalists and the general public.

Though the encounter is given an ecological defense, Buber would say that an I-Thou relation had taken place between Leopold and the wolf, perhaps facilitated by the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 138-139.

⁴⁸ Leopold, “The Land Ethic,” in *Sand County Almanac*, 263.

creature's eyes.⁴⁹ Leopold henceforth became a vocal opponent of the slaughter of predators throughout his life, and while he grounded this position on the rationale of ecology, its truthfulness likely retained its vivacity in the inexpressible mystery of the dying wolf. Also similar to Buber's I-Thou encounter, this episode with the wolf had ontological and ethical significance for Leopold. A moment's gaze into its eyes had caused him to question his life meaning and sense of responsibility. He was trained as a wildlife manager whose primary responsibility was to oversee the harvest of nature, predators included. He had upheld the bounty program, which paid hunters for the killing predator species. This remarkable moment, however, made him question his training, his professional duties, and his own attitude toward the value and place of all life. Recall that Buber's understanding of conscience and guilt is established by the mystical I-Thou relation and what it reveals about what one is and is becoming. This fits Leopold's experience. His failure to live up to the standard he discerned through the mysterious encounter with the wolf caused him to regret what he was and to direct his efforts toward becoming something different.

To summarize, Leopold's recognition of mystery in the world is associated with the wonder of the direct experience of the otherness of animals and of nature in general. He is convinced that, while elusive, this mystery cannot be dismissed as the product of whimsy or subjective emotion, but has a universal component. As we will see in the final

⁴⁹ Recall that Buber believes the eyes of creatures have the particularly unique capacity to draw one into an I-Thou moment. See Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Smith, 96-97. Also see Emmanuel Levinas on the significance of face to face encounters for installing a sense of responsibility for others, in *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.

section of this chapter, this universal component has implications for environmental ethics that highlights the importance of establishing an engaged relationship with the natural world.

Standing in Relation to Land

Leopold argues that the veiled riches of the land do not disclose themselves to the rigid experimenter who merely attempts to tease out truth in the laboratory, nor to the devoted student who incessantly hunches over botany and zoology textbooks, but to the meticulous and faithful observer who stands in relation to the land, who lives in and with it.⁵⁰ The *Sand County Almanac* is primarily about Leopold's personal encounter with the species that made up the land community of his farm. To do justice to this idea of standing in relation to the land, a selection from his book is appropriate here. In the following passage, Leopold writes about the "sky dance" of the male woodcock which he observes each spring on his farm:

I owned my farm for two years before learning that the sky dance is to be seen over my woods every evening in April and May. Since we discovered it, my family and I have been reluctant to miss even a single performance.

The show begins on the first warm evening in April at exactly 6:50 p.m. The curtain goes up one minute later each day until 1 June, when the time is 7:50. This sliding scale is dictated by vanity, the dancer demanding a romantic light intensity of exactly 0.05 foot-candles. Do not be late, and sit quietly, lest he fly away in a huff.

The stage props, like the opening hour, reflect the temperamental demands of the performer. The stage must be an open amphitheater in woods or brush, and in its center there must be a mossy spot, a streak of sterile sand, a bare outcrop of rock, or a bare roadway. Why the male woodcock should be such a stickler for a bare dance floor puzzled me at first, but I now think it is a matter of legs. The

⁵⁰ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 180.

wookcock's legs are short, and his struttings cannot be executed to advantage in dense grass or weeds, nor could his lady see them there. . . .

Knowing the place and the hour, you seat yourself under a bush to the east of the dance floor and wait, watching against the sunset for the wookcock's arrival. He flies in low from some neighboring thicket, alights on the bare moss, and at once begins the overture: a series of queer throaty *peents* spaced about two seconds apart, and sounding much like the summer call of the nighthawk.

Suddenly the peenting ceases and the bird flutters skyward in a series of wide spirals, emitting a musical twitter. Up and up he goes, the spirals steeper and smaller, the twittering louder and louder, until the performer is only a speck in the sky. Then, without warning, he tumbles like a crippled plane, giving voice in a soft liquid warble that a March bluebird might envy. At a few feet from the ground he levels off and returns to his peenting ground, usually to the exact spot where the performance began, and there resumes his peenting.⁵¹

Leopold writes further about the unsolved questions of the male woodcock's sky dance such as whether the musical twitter is vocal or mechanical, or where the elusive female is hiding out during the show.

The above passage from *Sand County Almanac* helps to clarify several ideas that Leopold was working with throughout his life. Perhaps foremost, it exemplifies his method of empirical investigation which relies on patient and meticulous observation. Leopold is always the cautious scientist who notes every detail and searches for patterns of behavior that might explain a given species' life history and distinctive niche within the larger ecosystem. At the same time, he is able to convey the childlike gaiety with which he pursues his education. Back to his orchestra example, one might say he is driven by the joy of the music as much as by his methods or by the promise of professional success. Indeed, there is no clear division between science and recreation for

⁵¹ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 32-33. For the complete discussion of the sky dance, refer to pages 32-36.

Leopold. He writes, “[T]he boundary between recreation and science, like the boundaries between park and forest, animal and plant, tame and wild, exists only in the imperfections of the human mind.”⁵² The world does not really consist of such categories. More correctly, it is a need of the human mind to see it that way.

This passage also clarifies what Leopold means when he speaks of the hidden riches of land. By the standard of the modern world, he confesses that his Wisconsin sand farm is poor. There are no great stands of forest and no precious ores or rich soils to make it economically profitable. There is, on the other hand, rich species diversity which displays its ancient stability and beauty in countless everyday dramas.⁵³ The treasure involves the knowledge that your plot of ground is home to a mystery of species, interrelationships, and a land mechanism formed over eons of time, all awaiting your exploration and trusting in the sensitivity of your attention. This last point is perhaps not so significant until one becomes grasped by the wonder and beauty of the system. Ethics emerges as one experiences the inexpressible. This is the birth of the “Land Ethic” for Leopold. He writes, “No one would rather hunt woodcock in October than I, but since learning of the sky dance I find myself calling one or two birds enough. I must be sure that, come April, there be no dearth of dancers in the sunset sky.”⁵⁴ Leopold understood that people cared for and protected what they loved, that they could only love what they knew intimately, and that they only really knew what they had stood in direct relation to.

⁵² Leopold, “Wilderness as a Land Laboratory,” in *The River of the Mother of God*, 289.

⁵³ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 199.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

One might conclude from this that farmers and hunters, due to their lifestyle choice, live in relation to the land. However, basic exposure to the natural world, although necessary, is not a sufficient condition for perceiving its riches. Like the scientist who must control the lab environment for accurate results, so too the modern farmer seeks to control the farm environment for the greatest productivity. The natural land mechanism is often seen as an enemy to successful farming. Another reason that farmers today do not live in direct relation to land is that they have adopted the norms of the modern urban lifestyle. Leopold writes, “The drama of the sky dance is enacted nightly on hundreds of farms, the owners of which sigh for entertainment, but harbor the illusion that it is to be sought in theaters. They live on the land, but not by the land.”⁵⁵ In essence, Leopold believes that most farms today are only places to work and to make a living, having lost the added advantage of being places to experience the mystery of life and beauty.⁵⁶

Unlike the farmer, the modern hunter realizes the recreational capacities of the land. However, rather than employing that excitement for exploring and submitting to its mystery, the hunter too often discerns the need to outwit and overcome the wilderness, the measure of success being determined by the number and size of the day’s kill. Because of this insular objective, the typical hunter plays in the land, but fails to stand in relation to it. Ironically, as hunters do not put forth the effort to patiently observe the land,

⁵⁵ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁶ Leopold notes the exception of the organic farm which he views as a growing desire to get back to the natural harmony of the land. I will address organic farming in the third section of this chapter.

they are less effective at achieving their one objective. Leopold writes, “Every woodcock and every partridge has his private solarium under [blackberry] briars. Most hunters, not knowing this, wear themselves out in the briarless scrub, and, returning home birdless, leave the rest of us in peace. By ‘us’ I mean the birds, the stream, the dog, and myself.”⁵⁷ Leopold was a hunter, but he did not envision himself as a conqueror of wilderness, only a small cog in the wheel of the land mechanism.⁵⁸

Leopold is pleased, of course, with activities that get people back into nature and away from the illusory safety of modern civilization with its material tokens of progress. He writes, “Your true modern is separated from the land by many middlemen, and by innumerable physical gadgets. He has no vital relation to it; to him it is the space between cities on which crops grow.”⁵⁹ Any time away from the illusion of modern progress is a step in the right direction for Leopold. The problem is that activities in nature like farming, hunting, and vacationing do not fully establish a relation to the land because the “middlemen” of progress are still dragged into the woods. “It is, by common consent, a good thing for people to get back to nature,” writes Leopold. “But wherein lies the goodness, and what can be done to encourage its pursuit?... A gadget industry pads the bumps against nature-in-the-raw; woodcraft becomes the art of using gadgets. And now, to cap the pyramid of banalities, the trailer.”⁶⁰ Even for those with pure motives who

⁵⁷ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 67.

⁵⁸ For a discussion on the proper vision of hunting, refer to Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on the Hunt*, 1972.

⁵⁹ Leopold, “The Land Ethic,” in *Sand County Almanac*, 261.

⁶⁰ Leopold, “Conservation Esthetic,” in *Sand County Almanac*, 280-281.

hope to gain an appreciation for the land's wonder, the ever-present connection to gadgetry makes it a frustrated experience of "seeking but never quite finding." The land is what is metaphysically real for Leopold, and because knowledge of the real is dependent on the willingness to stand in relation to the land, the distraction of modern technology gets in the way.

Ethical Significance of Leopold's Thought

An Ethic Grounded in Studied Relation

Perhaps the most significant ethical message of Leopold's thought is that one needs to be intellectually and physically engaged with the land organism to develop properly the ethical insight necessary to care for it. "I talk here about the pleasure to be had in wild things," says Leopold, "about natural-history studies as a combination sport and science."⁶¹ It is this sort of relationship that leads to knowledge, appreciation, and eventually to love for the thing itself. Leopold believed that the motivation of love alone would persuade humans to curb their behavior and to sacrifice for the good of the land.⁶²

As a wildlife manager, he knew that there were other ways of approaching responsible care for the land that would have greater appeal to modern civilization. For example, it was commonly argued, as it still is today, that nature is made up of precious resources, and thus, its wise management is simply a matter of prudence and efficient use. Personal experience had taught Leopold, however, that this sort of reasoning would fail to

⁶¹ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 203.

⁶² For a more recent discussion on this, see Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia*, Harvard University Press, 1984.

protect the land from the pressure of the profit motive.⁶³ He writes, “A system of conservation based solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lopsided. It tends to ignore, and thus eventually to eliminate, many elements in the land community that lack commercial value, but that are (as far as we know) essential to its healthy functioning.”⁶⁴ Scientists attempt to solve this problem by working within the profit motive. For example, Leopold points out that despite having developed an affection for a given species, scientists must first create an economic rationale to argue for its continued existence: “At the beginning of the century songbirds were supposed to be disappearing. Ornithologists jumped to the rescue with some distinctly shaky evidence to the effect that insects would eat us up if birds failed to control them. The evidence had to be economic in order to be valid.”⁶⁵ Leopold blames this doomed approach to land and species conservation on the widely accepted fallacy of economic determinism where profit is the final arbitrator of all decisions.

The question for Leopold was how to get people to care for something that had no apparent economic value, and the solution lay somewhere with those aesthetic and ethical interests that people cherish and, consequently, choose above the profit motive. He cites beautiful architecture and the rearing of children as examples; people sacrifice their

⁶³ Leopold discusses how farmers would rather choose immediate profit over the local government’s offer of free machinery and services that would mitigate soil erosion problems of southwest Wisconsin and improve soil productivity. See Leopold’s “Land Ethic,” in *Sand County Almanac*, 244-246.

⁶⁴ Leopold, “The Land Ethic,” in *Sand County Almanac*, 251.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 247.

resources and energy for these things.⁶⁶ Because inspiring beauty and loving relationships tend to keep the profit motive in check, Leopold concluded that the land and its species must be seen in the same light. He did not believe this required a great stretch of the imagination, for it had been the natural result of his own experience on his farm in Wisconsin.⁶⁷ It required no conceptual mind shift, only a reprieve from the blinders of modernity and a leap of faith into a studied relation with the land.

This idea of “studied relation” is ethically significant, and as I have explained elsewhere in this chapter, it entails more than simple exposure. Leopold explains to his wildlife ecology students, “We love (and make intelligent use of) what we have learned to understand.... Once you learn to read the land, I have no fear of what you will do to it, or with it.”⁶⁸ The basic ethical assumption underlying Leopold’s statement is that moral sentiments hinge on knowledge gained through immersion in the land organism. The quality of the education is important, and this is something that has caused some critics to label him as elitist.⁶⁹ Though cultures of the past may have benefitted from their close association with the land and were often aware of a basic balance, Leopold stresses that only an understanding of land as a biotic mechanism allows one to appreciate its full beauty and to develop the affection and values necessary to care for it. Specifically,

⁶⁶ Leopold, “Round River,” in *Sand County Almanac*, 201.

⁶⁷ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 10.

⁶⁸ Leopold writes this as part of a two-page course description for his wildlife ecology students at the University of Madison, Wisconsin. Refer to “Wherefore Wildlife Ecology?” in *River of the Mother of God*, 337.

⁶⁹ Harold Fromm, “Aldo Leopold: Aesthetic ‘Anthropocentrist,’” *The Isle Reader*, (2003) <http://hfromm.net/professional/LEOPOLD.htm> (accessed 3/7/2012).

Leopold notes the importance the theory of evolution has played in bringing forth an appreciation of the biotic mechanism. In his essay on the “Land Ethic,” he explains, “An ethic to supplement and guide the economic relation to land presupposes the existence of some mental image of land as a biotic mechanism. We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in.”⁷⁰ Leopold saw this studied relation of the land fused with scientific knowledge as the key to establishing a viable conservation ethic.⁷¹ This challenges the popular idea expressed by writers like Vandana Shiva, Winona LaDuke, and Luther Standing Bear that indigenous wisdom has a better grasp on the workings of nature and on our ultimate responsibility for it. It also suggests that relation is not sufficient to create a viable environmental ethic without a measure of empirical knowledge about the natural world.

Evolution of the Ecological Conscience

Leopold saw the emergence of a conservation ethic in the modern world as a real possibility validated by the history of social evolution. Looking to the history of ethics, he understood the trend of social morality to originate in personal relationships with family and to eventually include community, nation, and humanity at large.⁷² The extension of the social conscience from people to the “land community” was still lacking, but the growing interest in conservation during Leopold’s time signaled that it loomed on

⁷⁰ Leopold, “The Land Ethic,” in *Sand County Almanac*, 251.

⁷¹ In his essay “Conservation Aesthetic,” Leopold writes, “That thing called ‘nature study,’ despite the shiver it brings to the spines of the elect, constitutes the first embryonic groping of the mass-mind toward perception.” Refer to *Sand County Almanac*, 290.

⁷² See Leopold’s discussion of the “Ethical Sequence” from his essay “Land Ethic,” in *Sand County Almanac*, 237-239.

the horizon. Just as social ethics works to free age, gender, and race from the control of economic self-interest, an emerging land-use ethics will eventually work toward the same for the natural world as modern civilization comes to realize that the concept of community ought to include the soil, water, plants, and animals.

Leopold, of course, did not believe that responsible care for the land was a new idea in modern times. He identifies 1865 as Wisconsin's birthyear of mercy for things "natural, wild, and free," because it was the year that John Muir attempted to buy the family farm from his brother with the sole intention of preserving the wildflowers that had inspired him as a child.⁷³ Leopold discerned in this event a remarkable expression of inherent value that largely escaped Western society, and it was worth celebrating. Yet, the idea that such value and responsibility for the Earth existed was ancient. He notes that Biblical prophets like Ezekiel and Isaiah condemned the destruction of land, and not simply for human centered reasons.⁷⁴ Despite these ancient affections for the land community, the idea had not taken root in the collective mind, and it could not do so until undergoing the scrutiny of the thinking community.⁷⁵ "No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions," writes Leopold. "The proof that conservation has not yet touched these foundations of conduct lies in the fact that philosophy and religion have not

⁷³ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 17.

⁷⁴ Leopold, "Land Ethic," in *Sand County Almanac*, 239.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 263.

yet heard of it.”⁷⁶ Again, what has its beginning in personal affection must ultimately win the approval of the intellectual community before gaining broader social acceptance.

There are a number of reasons why Leopold believed the “Land Ethic” was positioned to gain broad social approval, and they are all related to the recent understanding of evolution and ecology. As already mentioned, the availability of ecological knowledge opened the door for increased wonder, appreciation, and admiration of the land organism and its dynamics, and this paved the way for an ethic based on deep engaged experience and affective sentiments. Furthermore, a knowledge of human evolution situated human beings in their proper place, namely, as citizens of the “biotic community” rather than as “conquerors” standing above it. Ecology also teaches that the historic role of conqueror is always self-defeating. Leopold writes, “It is implicit in such a role that the conqueror knows, *ex cathedra*, just what makes the community clock tick, and just what and who is valuable, and what and who is worthless, in community life. It always turns out that he knows neither, and this is why his conquests eventually defeat themselves.”⁷⁷ With a better sense of the land organism and the human relation to it, Leopold felt the modern world was poised to consider the moral axiom that emerges from this understanding: “A thing is right,” he says, “when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it does

⁷⁶ Leopold, “Land Ethic,” in *Sand County Almanac*, 246.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 240.

otherwise.”⁷⁸ As the social conscience comes to understand and appreciate the land organism it will accept this as a basic imperative.

The stability and integrity of the land is determined by the diversity of its species and their interrelationships. Pristine ecosystems have a rich complexity of species interaction where populations remain in check. As this diversity begins to lessen the biotic equilibrium is thrown out of balance and the capacity of the ecosystem for self-renewal is endangered. This recognition that each species has evolved a distinct role in the ecosystem and has its own life history makes the threat of extinction particularly odious for the ecologically minded. Leopold writes of the extinct passenger pigeon, “For one species to mourn the loss of another is a new thing under the sun.”⁷⁹ Before we understood the complexity of the land organism, what a species was, how it came about, and what niche it filled could hardly be appreciated. Each species is a unique book of evolutionary history, so to lose one is to lose a part of the mystery of the earth story.

It is this view of the land that Leopold hopes will take hold of the social conscience, and of particularly landowners. Leopold writes, “If the private landowner were ecologically minded, he would be proud to be the custodian of a reasonable proportion of such areas, which add diversity and beauty to his farm and to his community.”⁸⁰ Instead, landowners typically had to be enticed with money and tax breaks to behave responsibly. Even on the farm, however, he believed a change was happening.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 262.

⁷⁹ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 117.

⁸⁰ Leopold, “Land Ethic,” in *Sand County Almanac*, 249.

Leopold relates the story of two farmers who made a grand effort one snowy day to transplant wild tamaracks onto their farm. This particular species of tree had no economic value and had been an object of eradication since the 1840s. Leopold wondered:

How then can one interpret its meaning? I call it Revolt—revolt against the tedium of the merely economic attitude toward land.... These two farmers have learned from experience that the wholly tamed farm offers not only a slender livelihood but a constricted life. They have caught the idea that there is pleasure to be had in raising wild crops as well as tame ones.⁸¹

Leopold saw this as part of a rising movement that stood in contrast to traditional land ownership, a movement that demonstrated the human desire to be part of the land mechanism for recreational and aesthetic reasons in addition to economic ones. New farming crusades going by the labels of “biotic” and “organic” were just beginning to take hold during Leopold’s lifetime, and he praised their holistic interest in maintaining the interrelationship between the soils, the plants and the animals.⁸² The ecological conscience was gaining traction.

The Challenges of Anthropocentrism and Biocentrism

With all of Leopold’s focus on the land and its species, there is still the concern that it is really only grounded upon, and tailored to, his own anthropocentric interests. If true, this would be a significant obstacle for making the claim that he views the natural world as possessing inherent value. Harold Fromm argues that this is so, and that the biocentric and nature based ethics that derive from Leopold’s material fail to portray him

⁸¹ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 203.

⁸² Refer to “Land Ethic,” *Sand County Almanac*, 259-260.

for what he really believed and was at heart.⁸³ Fromm argues that Leopold's naturalist writings are riddled with unresolved contradictions between empathy for life and heartless sport hunting, between a desire for mass perception on one hand and the preservation of his personal elitist desires in nature on the other.

The argument for Leopold's anthropocentrism is based, to begin with, on the notion that all species are survivalist at root, caring about their own well-being out of necessity. The biocentrism that he views as emerging from Leopold's thinking can only be supported by "well-fed, bourgeois anthropocentrists, more or less freed from the struggle for survival, and now with time on their hands for romancing the wild from which they have been emancipated by the technology that keeps them alive with little effort, but which they frequently profess to hate," says Fromm.⁸⁴ Leopold does entertain the thought that all of his talk on the ethics of the land community may have some underlying motivation in personal survival. Pondering the individual as a member of community, he writes, "His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in the community, but his ethics prompts him also to co-operate (perhaps in order that there may be a place to compete for)."⁸⁵ Hobbsian in its appearance, this latter comment suggests that Leopold did consider the possibility that the development of ethics was associated with the principle of self-interest.

⁸³ Harold Fromm, "Aldo Leopold: Aesthetic 'Anthropocentrism.'"

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Leopold, "Land Ethic," in *Sand County Almanac*, 239.

On the other hand, he also believed that humans were unique in their intellectual ability to understand the land community and to assume the enlightened role of its protector. Regarding the capacity to mourn the loss of a species, Leopold writes, “In this fact, rather than in Mr. Du Pont’s nylons or Mr. Vannevar Bush’s bombs, lies objective evidence of our superiority over the beasts.”⁸⁶ In other words, humans now have the knowledge and intellect to surpass the simplemindedness of “eat or be eaten” competition, and Leopold wonders if this enhanced ability is not part of an unfolding evolution, of an ethic based on an evolving community instinct that will be for the good of the whole land organism. Far from being anthropocentric, then, Leopold sees the enlightened future of *homo sapiens* as being land and life centered.

Another reason why some believe that Leopold is fundamentally anthropocentric is that his writings fail to support the principles of some biocentrists like Bill DeVall and George Sessions who have built their ideas upon his thought. As an example, Fromm points to the ease with which Leopold takes life as he pursues his enjoyment of hunting. This is contrary to the principle of “biocentric egalitarianism” espoused by such deep ecologists.⁸⁷ Were Leopold truly biocentric, he would face the internal struggle one sees in the life of Albert Schweitzer. Fromm is correct, Leopold does not support a biocentric ethic, but by representing it as a choice only between anthropocentrism and biocentrism, Fromm defaults to the former and disregards the fact the Leopold is ecocentric in his

⁸⁶ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 117.

⁸⁷ Harold Fromm, “Aldo Leopold: Aesthetic ‘Anthropocentrist.’” For a critical examination of biocentric egalitarianism, see William French, “Against Biospheric Egalitarianism,” in *Environmental Ethics*, 17 (1995): pp. 39-57.

approach. Where a biocentric view considers the value of individual life, an ecocentric view places that life value within the context of broader categories such as species and ecosystems. Leopold mourns the loss of an individual, but he recognizes that it is part of the economics of nature of which he too is connected. As marvelous as any being appears, then, it is secondary to a lineage and a larger organism that are themselves the basis of a more profound and essential reality. Leopold's focus on a community of interdependent parts leads him away from the individualist thinking of his day.

The Challenge of Personification

Another potential criticism of Leopold's work is that it is riddled with personification of the land and its creatures. Fromm writes, "When John Muir talks about "thinking like a glacier," or when Leopold talks about "thinking like a mountain," they are engaging in quintessentially anthropocentric appropriations of reality, for to think like glaciers or mountains is already to have nothing to do with those things and everything to do with people."⁸⁸ Leopold recognizes that he is limited to making arguments based on analogies, but as a scientist he is comfortable with this, for all of science is limited to making inductive arguments; science can never know the thing it studies in itself, yet it still gains important insights from making comparisons. Leopold is not giving mountains human qualities, but in his poetic fashion asking how our understanding might change if we could think on the scale of geologic time and in terms of multiple species that make up a living system of interdependent parts.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

Leopold is attempting in his writing to draw his audience out of their human centered view of reality, to conceptually “walk in the mountain’s shoes” so to speak. This, however, is the very thing some critics believe he cannot do because it bestows qualities upon nature that are distinctly human conceptions. Fromm argues that the qualities of health, integrity, stability, and wholeness that Leopold applies to land are mere social constructions that do not actually exist in nature. Leopold does appropriate these terms for use in his land ethic, and perhaps with ill effect, but one must consider if the principles of biodiversity, equilibrium, and self-renewal which he connects to these ideas are equally human centered and mind-dependent. Is the tragedy of deforestation or desertification simply in the mind’s eye, and if not, are we at loss to apply concepts and language to it? Leopold did not think so. Again, analogies, even if imperfect, can be helpful.

At the same time, and as I have discussed elsewhere, Leopold did not believe that the mysterious was entirely out of reach. There was something about the aesthetic and engaged experience that was objective and true even though it could not be adequately explained or described. Leopold’s poetic form, which admittedly does humanize the natural world, was his attempt at giving voice to that mystery. Fromm responds, “But aesthetic response is the most powerfully anthropocentric interest of all, produced as it is by the very nature and operation of our bodies and psyches: our metabolism, sense mechanisms, heart rate, sexuality, braincells, and enculturation in temporal human

societies.”⁸⁹ It is clear Leopold feels the aesthetic moment is something more, even tied to human meaning and inherent value. He writes, “Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language.”⁹⁰ This ineffable experience is key to the love that Leopold believed could develop between modern civilization and the land. Again, he explains, “It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value. By value, I of course mean something far broader than mere economic value; I mean value in the philosophical sense.”⁹¹

Leopold gives personality to the land and its creatures because he has been grasped by them in such a way that gives credence to the possibility of mutual relation. Like Buber, he falls to the critique of personification only if we reject that such encounters really do reveal something about the being as it exists in itself. Buber will argue that Leopold has escaped his phenomenal reality and gazed for a brief moment upon the noumenal, and this has confirmed the inherent value of life around him and made him responsible for it through love. Love and inherent worth are part of that ineffable reality, for Buber, that one accepts as true even when it cannot be analyzed or described. The anthropomorphism that accompanies Leopold’s poetic form, is his limited attempt to give voice to the mysterious reality he has encountered in the other, to engage

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 102.

⁹¹ Leopold, “Land Ethic,” in *Sand County Almanac*, 261.

in symbolism, as Buber would say. Like much of poetry and narrative, it is relatively fanciful, yet somehow we know, perhaps because somewhere we too have had such encounters, that it captures an element of truth about the presence of life.

Conclusion

Aldo Leopold's "Land Ethic," particularly viewed through the ethics of relation, has profound implications for our world today as we face a host of ecological challenges. While such challenges are caused by a number of variables, including advancing technology, expanding industry, and mass consumption, the root problem in Leopold's view is that we still fail to understand and appreciate, in spite of Darwin's insights, that the land community is the only true and lasting reality. It shapes history, spawns culture, contributes to human meaning and well-being, and conveys something mysterious, perhaps even sacred. It gave birth to human civilization, and despite our thoughts to the contrary, it contains our future. Similar to the critiques of Schweitzer and Buber, then, Leopold views uninhibited progress as a doorway into forgetfulness of these vital and down-to-earth truths. That said, he recognizes, at the same time, his dependence on progress to fully appreciate the biotic community. While Schweitzer and Buber concretize their ethics by making relation with God an earthly reality, Leopold makes his ethics concrete by elevating the prominence of the biotic community as discovered through studied relation. Without any empyrean or eschatological perspective to guide his vision, he views the prolonged health and stability of the biotic system as the one true

good. If our ecological problems continue to blossom, it is fundamentally because we fail to internalize this reality.

As one trained in the sciences, Leopold places a high value on knowledge gained through the investigation of the senses. From this perspective he stands in contrast to Schweitzer's mild rationalism and Buber's mild mysticism. That said, Leopold himself is not rigidly mechanical in his empirical thinking. Unconfined investigation is holistic and childlike, not reductionistic and codified. It accepts and gives voice to mystery in the world rather than repudiating it. Consequently, he shares in Schweitzer's and Buber's call for a science of greater humility.

Perhaps most importantly for the purposes of this dissertation, Leopold's empirical approach requires intimate encounter with the land. Though helpful in gaining a general knowledge of the material facts of the world, it is not enough to study books, to listen to lectures, or to confine oneself to the lab. Part of realizing the bigger picture of reality means being grasped by the natural world's beauty, organic harmony, and wonder. There are inexpressible, yet basic truths regarding inherent value, moral responsibility, and personal meaning that manifest themselves as we experience the complete and performing orchestra, i.e. the land in its full aesthetic proportions. Only such encounters can engender the love that Leopold understood as the one last hope for the land in a world of rampant technology and unfettered consumption.

Leopold's personal encounters with the natural world, including their timeless, meaning-giving, and moral qualities are compatible with Buber's understanding of the I-

Thou relation. His life-changing encounter with the dying wolf is particularly noteworthy in this regard. And yet, Leopold's land ethic adds a dimension to Buber's I-Thou that is lacking, namely the importance of "studied relation." Buber makes it seem that the material facts of the world have no real impact on the I-Thou encounter. Leopold, on the other hand, suggests that studied attention to the biological facts of the natural environment can be a catalyst for such moments. In other words, the aesthetic encounter can be primed by a knowledge of the natural environment; to know and appreciate the life-history of a given species may help to draw one into the aesthetic moment. This difference aside, Leopold's "Land Ethic" corroborates what has been concluded in the previous two chapters, namely, that we need to encourage practices that will plunge us and others into rich encounters with the natural world.

CHAPTER FIVE

SCHWEITZER, BUBER, LEOPOLD, AND THE GARDEN

The central aim of this dissertation has been to propose the possibility that direct engagement with the living world is a crucial ingredient for establishing the moral and ontological insights that are necessary for its prolonged care and preservation. I began with a brief consideration of Native American peoples and their witness to the idea that intimate relation with the natural world has a humanizing influence bringing in its wake the virtues of gratitude, humility, respect, and reverence. Such experiences are not unique, but rather a norm for many aboriginal cultures around the world still connected to their hunting and farming roots.¹ My final intent in this work is to consider a few practical activities that might reacquaint the modern West with the simple truths of its pastoral past, truths that can play an important role in developing the motivation and insight to care for the natural world.²

The major obstacle to an ethics grounded in the epistemological significance of relation is a modern worldview that labels this intuitionist-like approach to truth as naïve, superstitious, or overly sentimental.³ The first chapter attempted to place this concern into

¹ Refer to Introduction, footnote 3.

² Jerry Mander, *In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations*, 191-193. Mander argues that Indigenous cultures hold the key for living sustainably and respectfully on the Earth.

³ See the introduction “Indians Shmindians” in Mander’s book, *In the Absence of the Sacred*, 1-7.

perspective, mapping out how and why the Western world steadily departed from the possibility of relational knowledge. Mechanism, in the attempt to eliminate skepticism, made every aspect of the physical world, save the human mind, predictable and knowable. Humanists in the Enlightenment dealt with skepticism by declaring the truth to be mind-dependent. The brazen demeanor of some dominant Western thought sounded the death knell of the natural world as a channel of metaphysical knowledge, for it was stripped of any inherent meaning, mystery, or relational capacity. This is the worldview that the Enlightenment has passed on to us, and that we have clinged onto with good reason. That we are materially better off than our ancestors is beyond dispute. A question that this dissertation raises, however, is whether the definition of progress sketched out in the Enlightenment serves the full need and reality of the human experience.

The very purpose of drawing on the ideas and writings of Albert Schweitzer, Martin Buber, and Aldo Leopold is to challenge this popular worldview, to propose an alternative interpretation of reality from some of the greatest, and sometimes neglected, lives and minds of the twenty-first-century. As stated earlier, how we view the earth and its living beings will determine what sort of relationship we expect to exist between us and the natural world, and as it now stands, an ethic built upon the truth conveying qualities of relation has little hope of success. The popular worldview, upheld as it is by technology and urban living, has effectively closed most of the modern world off to the possibility. Schweitzer, Buber, and Leopold radically challenge the Enlightenment view, making a strong case for both the presence of an inexpressible reality in the world and the

subtle truths that accompany it. Their ideas on the mystery of life, on intimate relation, and on human meaning disturb modernity's blinders and open us up to the ancient possibility of an enlivened and mysterious cosmos.

This final chapter is divided into two general sections. The first section will focus on the cross-comparisons between Schweitzer, Buber, and Leopold discussed in chapters two, three, and four. I hope to demonstrate that, despite the apparent differences in their backgrounds and respective methods, these men share striking similarities in essential ways that stress the importance of intimate practices that bring us into relation with the life around us. With this as a foundation, the second section will reflect on a few specific practices like gardening, small farming and local ecosystem restoration. I argue that time in the soil is a practical way to open others up to the mystery, the value, the sense of responsibility, and the self-realization that Schweitzer, Buber, and Leopold discovered when engaging their living surroundings. In this section, I will also address the challenges that come with seeing these practices as a gateway into environmental responsibility, namely, that they perpetuate the problem of dominion and are overly romantic and anachronistic.

Schweitzer, Buber, and Leopold's Unified Voice

Indispensable Sensation of Wonder

The differences that separate the methods and worldviews of Schweitzer, Buber, and Leopold are so marked that any argument for their uniformity almost seems laughable. Schweitzer is Christian and somewhat rationalist where Buber is more

mystical, enlightened by the precepts of Jewish Hasidism. In fact, Schweitzer's instinctive "will-to-live" almost seems to be the inverse of Buber's "Inborn Thou." Where the one begins with introspection and moves to union, the other stresses that union lays the foundation for personhood. This difference is perhaps expectable, not necessarily because they have experienced union and personhood differently, but because of the distinctive lenses through which they interpret their personal experiences. For example, Mayhall and Mayhall suggest that, "For the Jew, faith moves from union. For the Christian, faith culminates there."⁴ While these traditions are far more varied and diverse than this overly generalized statement gives credit, it does capture an element of significance in Schweitzer's and Buber's respective views of reality. For Schweitzer, the culminating moment of spirituality is, not exactly a Beatific Vision, but Ethical Mysticism, and it only comes after introspection and a life of faith and service. For Buber, one first encounters the Divine, the scattered sparks of *shekina*, through the I-Thou, and only then does that person find personhood and commitment to a life of service. Even more contrasting than Schweitzer's and Buber's religious views is Leopold's secular empiricism which draws on evolution and elevates the land organism. These three individuals represent entirely different systems of thought and belief.

Yet, I submit that what is more remarkable than the differences between their respective worldviews is their unified voice on basic principles of experience. Their ethical ideas are all grounded in inexpressible life experiences that emerge as one engages

⁴ Wayne Mayhall and Timothy Mayhall, 73.

the life around them. Schweitzer, who bases this phenomena in the profound will-to-live says that as you are absorbed in life it “suddenly seizes you with vertigo.”⁵ In a similar statement, Buber declares of the I-Thou encounter, “I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness.”⁶ Leopold locates the sensation in the aesthetic, yet the effect appears to be the same, as life existence progresses from stages of the beautiful to “values as yet uncaptured by language.”⁷ It is this basic, and inexpressible, phenomenon of being, grasped through relation, more than any school of thought or religious worldview, that drives their ethical visions. As a result, Schweitzer understood the need to qualify his use of rationalism, expressing the importance of mind, heart, and experience. Leopold applied a holism to his empiricism, stressing that scientific investigation ought to increase our awareness of wonder and mystery in the world rather than seek to refute it. Finally, Buber tempered his interest in mysticism with palpable relation, thereby avoiding an extreme otherworldliness. In each case, they softened a traditional perspective to accommodate the everyday, yet unutterable, reality they experienced. Relational experience revealed to them the same basic truths which they afterward attempted to place into context with their distinctive traditions and training.

This mystery that Schweitzer, Buber, and Leopold spoke of was not fantastic and otherworldly, but simple and natural. In fact, each of them bolstered their argument for its existence by drawing on their own childhood experiences with life in nature and on the

⁵ Marvin Meyer and Kurt Bergel, *Reverence for Life*, 67. See Chapter Two, footnote 55.

⁶ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Smith, 7. See Chapter Three, footnote 8.

⁷ Leopold, “Land Ethic,” in *Sand County Almanac*, 239. See Chapter Four, footnote 85.

farm. Leopold spoke of the purity of childlike investigation, and Buber noted how innocence draws one into the I-Thou.⁸ By his own request, Schweitzer was memorialized at the large rock that overlooked Munster Valley in eastern France, where so many of his innovative thoughts first came to him as a youth.⁹ These moments in nature were uniquely theirs, but they urged that similar experiences were open to all.¹⁰ Schweitzer maintained that, although we put on airs of intellectualism, the basic mystery of life is present to everyone. We conceal it for fear of being too sentimental.¹¹ Buber associated the mysterious I-Thou with real love, a universal experience familiar to everybody with “a candid heart and courage to pledge it.”¹² Lastly, Leopold felt that the joy of exploring wildlife was bred into the fiber of the race. It was not a spiritual matter as he understood it so much as a physiological and emotional need. All three reflect the attitude expressed by Luther Standing Bear at the beginning of this work, i.e., that intimate association with flora and fauna fill us with “the joy and mystery of living.”¹³

⁸ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Smith, 16. See also Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 127-128..

⁹ Predrag Cicovacki, *Albert Schweitzer's Ethical Vision*, 3.

¹⁰ Thomas Berry tells of his experience in a meadow near his home at eleven years old, and of the “deep mystery” that was revealed to him at that time. He writes, “Perhaps it was not simply this moment that made such a deep impression upon me. Perhaps it was a sensitivity that was developed throughout my childhood. Yet as the years pass this moment returns to me, and whenever I think about my basic life attitude and the whole trend of my mind and the causes to which I have given my efforts, I seem to come back to this moment and the impact it has had on my feeling for what is real and worthwhile in life.” Refer to *The Great Work*, 12-13.

¹¹ Albert Schweitzer, “Philosophy of Civilization,” in *Reverence for Life*, 81. See Chapter Two, footnote 52.

¹² Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, Postscript, trans. Smith, 130. See Chapter Three, footnote 122.

¹³ Luther Standing Bear, “Nature,” in *This Sacred Earth*, edited by Roger Gottlieb, 40.

Though precious and few in any person's lifetime, it might be said that, upon reflection, people can recall such moments. Despite the fact that we should have, by and large, a common reference for discussing such sensations we opt instead for silence. David Tracy suggests that events similar to these are "limit situations," or moments in human experience that go beyond what can be examined or explained by rational thought and discourse.¹⁴ This fact makes one all the more prone to doubt past memories and to set up defenses against future experiences. He writes, "Clearly, such experiences, however ambiguous, are not yet in principle merely 'strange' experiences. Uncommon they are. Yet they are uncommon mainly because we try to keep them from surfacing in our everyday lives by our strategies of inauthenticity: '*divertissement*,' distraction, *Gerede*."¹⁵ Martin Buber describes a similar process as wholly turning oneself over to the I-It disposition to the point where the I-Thou "ceases to burn."¹⁶ In doing so, both Buber and Tracy seem to agree that we miss the real significance that unutterable moments have in disclosing "the most deeply held meanings of our lives."¹⁷

Mystery in a Modern World

Given their belief in the strong presence of wonder and awe in the living world with its inspiring and assuaging qualities, it comes as no surprise that Schweitzer, Buber and Leopold raised a unified voice on the disturbing trajectory of modern civilization.

¹⁴ David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 105-107.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁶ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Smith, 34. See Chapter Three, footnote 16.

¹⁷ David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 107.

Growing urbanization with its expanding reliance on the factory system, on science and technology, unyoked humans from an enlivened world, and consequently from the marvels associated with it. A modern division of labor did not favor sustained contact with nature. Despite the fact that city centers are filled with masses of people where the I-Thou ought to occur, Buber noted the paradoxical growth of urban loneliness.¹⁸ Though modern technological progress promised to improve human well-being, Leopold recognized the compulsive need for gadgetry and the hypochondriac-like mentality toward the economy.¹⁹ As if summing up both views, Schweitzer labelled the modern alienation from nature and soil as “serious psychical injury.”²⁰

As the first chapter of this dissertation attempted to show, the physical structures of the modern West that hamper a full appreciation of mystery in the living world exist in tandem with set of metaphysical axioms that sprouted from skepticism and were kept alive by the hope for material progress. For Schweitzer, Buber, and Leopold the narrow focus on these axioms was a matter of secondary importance. Schweitzer praised the Eastern and ancient Western cultures for their concern with elemental matters of life which are linked to the power and influence of a mysterious world will.²¹ Modern philosophy and science, on the other hand, no longer looked at life as if immersed in it,

¹⁸ Buber attributes this to the idea that being so caught up in world of I-It, the modern human fails to open up to the other. Refer to Chapter Three, footnote 99.

¹⁹ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, xvii. See Chapter Four, footnote 30.

²⁰ Albert Schweitzer, “Decay and the Restoration of Civilization,” in Ciovacki’s book, *Albert Schweitzer’s Ethical Vision*, 92. See Chapter Two, footnote 35.

²¹ Schweitzer, “Out of My Life and Thought,” in Meyer and Bergel’s text, *Reverence for Life*, 113. See Chapter Two, footnote 25.

instead approaching reality “objectively,” or from the outside. In a similar tone, Buber compared the orienting person of modern philosophy who must inspect reality by means of laws and formulas, with the realizing person of relation who, through the *I-Thou*, comes to recognize the thing as it exists in itself.²² Finally, Leopold’s orchestra example illustrated that getting hung up on the physical mechanics of the instruments caused one to miss the harmony of the orchestra. There was something ethically and ontologically significant about the wonder of the aesthetic whole that a reductionist methodology could never hope to explain. In each case, these authors gave voice to an underlying reality that could not be captured by an evidence-based investigation.

Though troubled by the rigid standards meant to guarantee objectivity in academics today, Schweitzer, Buber and Leopold were not dismissive of modernity’s remarkable successes. Specifically with reference to science and technology, all three men understood the important role it has played, and continues to play, for human betterment. Yet they urged that there is more to human betterment than just convenience and physical well-being.²³ The awareness of a mysterious life force in the world was orienting and brought with it more profound and complete human goods. For both Schweitzer and Buber, it was associated with the Divine itself. In a statement that seems to capture each of their views, Buber writes, “If you explore the life of things and of conditioned being you come to the unfathomable, if you deny the life of things and of

²² Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 38. See Chapter Three, footnote 58.

²³ On the dangers of “convenience” see Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*. Borgmann argues that while technological advancements are convenient, there is a certain fulfilling and enriching social context that can be lost in the process.

conditioned being you stand before nothingness, if you hallow this life you meet the living God.”²⁴ Recall that for Buber, the sacred I-Thou was an essential factor for navigating the everyday I-It. Indeed, for each of these writers, the intention was never to do away with our modern world of convenience and technological advancement, but to discover the spiritual, emotional, and ultimately ethical resources to keep it in check.

A science of greater humility that operates within a world of inexpressible wonder is no small demand, for it stands in opposition to the primary concerns of the Enlightenment project, namely the hope for greater certainty, control, and profit. As an example, recall that Descartes’ adoption of mechanism and deism allowed him to perform science in a world of pure cause and effect. From an academic viewpoint, where the goal is to disclose truth, it is easier to operate in a world without variables that simply cannot be objectively explored and clearly discussed. Schweitzer, Buber, and Leopold understood the uneasiness that their acceptance of the ineffable would cause, and the limitations it would place upon, academics. Their own lives demonstrated a struggle to navigate this limitation. Leopold confessed that he stood both in the field of science and the domain of poetry.²⁵ Schweitzer felt compelled to turn to his life example as his primary argument.²⁶ And Buber, also understanding the limitations of expression, stated, “I have no teaching. I only point to something.... I take him who listens to me by the hand

²⁴ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 71.

²⁵ Leopold, “Natural History,” in *Sand County Almanac*, 205-206. See Chapter Four, footnote 38.

²⁶ Refer to Chapter Two, footnote 1.

and lead him to the window.”²⁷ He must point because words are simply not adequate.

From an intellectual standpoint, the unfathomable is unnerving. Yet, because its presence is real and important, Schweitzer, Buber, and Leopold all heeded the ubiquitous call to submit to, and stand up for, its influence.

The Moral Significance of Relation

As discussed above, the history and structures of contemporary life and thought make it difficult for this mystery to regain a foothold in Western society. The ideas of groups like the romantics and transcendentalists who have recognized such wonder have been influential, but not well-established. The solution to the popular disregard for the basic wonder of life and being for Schweitzer, Buber, and Leopold appears, on the surface, to lie in different paths. Where Schweitzer highlights reflection on “will-to-live,” and Leopold stresses knowledge of the land as a biotic community, Buber settles on the sole good of intimate encounter. At a fundamental level, however, they all accept that the mystery of life existence, and the ethical significance that emerges from it, blossoms in activity, that is, as it is encountered and served directly. Schweitzer ultimately qualified his introspective approach with the claim that it all begins with the “physical life, out of the linking of life with life.”²⁸ Certainly there could be no reflection on the will-to-live around us without a measure of kinship with other being.

Leopold felt the modern world needed improved information so as to appreciate the significance of Darwin’s discoveries. Yet he stressed that book learning, though

²⁷ Quoted in Donald L. Berry, *Mutuality: The Vision of Martin Buber*, 89. See Chapter Three, footnote 124.

²⁸ Meyer and Bergel, *Reverence for Life*, 137. See Chapter Two, footnote 106.

important in its own right, could never be sufficient to engender concern until there was a direct encounter with the wonder itself. Speaking about the disappearance of *Silphium*, a native prairie flower, Leopold writes, “We grieve only for what we know. The erasure of *Silphium* from western Dane County is no cause for grief if one knows it only as a name in a botany book.... *Silphium* first became a personality to me when I tried to dig one up to move to my farm.”²⁹ Enhanced awareness was important for Leopold’s “Land Ethic,” and it largely hinged on mutual encounter. Thus, in spite of their rational and empirical orientations, both Schweitzer and Leopold confirm Buber’s primary claim that the ineffable is to be found in our encounters with the life around us.

Mutual encounters, then, are a crucial factor for restoring the influence of a mysterious life reality active all around us. With these encounters come the all-important truths related to moral and ontological meaning. Leopold writes, “For many laborers wilderness is to be conquered. To the laborer in repose, able for the moment to cast a philosophical eye on his world, that same raw stuff is something to be loved and cherished, because it gives definition and meaning to his life.”³⁰ It is in studied relation that Leopold finds love, respect, and value for the land. It is in the I-Thou moment that Buber suggests we recognize the bold presence of the other as an end in itself. Only in the reciprocity of I-Thou are we individually made aware of values that are not simply instrumental.³¹ As one reflects on personal will-to-live and is “absorbed in life,” says

²⁹ Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 52.

³⁰ Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 264.

³¹ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 38. See Chapter Three, footnote 58.

Schweitzer, the feelings of empathy and reverence for other will-to-live are awakened in us.³² For all three writers, intimate encounter and sustained engagement play an essential role in unveiling the sensation that leads to moral responsibility.

At the same time, Schweitzer and Leopold can add important dimensions to Buber's exclusive emphasis on mutual relation. Buber writes of the encounter as if it is both unaffected by the material facts of the world and spoiled by the musings of rational thought. Leopold makes a solid case, however, for the way that close and sustained observation of a living being can lead one to marvel at and appreciate the wonder of its existence. Martin Buber's I-Thou, in comparison, can seem overly fluky and serendipitous at times. Schweitzer's emphasis on the reflection of life and its wonder also adds an important element. It may be that rational thought cannot do complete justice to what is experienced through relation, but probing the mystery to its depths, as Schweitzer puts it, seems to demonstrate a faithfulness and committedness to living it out in one's daily life. The germs of moral insight might be spawned in the mystery of relation, but their application to real world circumstances requires individual contemplation and dialogue with the thinking community.

Schweitzer, Buber and Leopold all perceived the unfolding of moral understanding facilitated through encounter as a progressive array of events that transforms one's awareness of what is real and important. The inexpressible power behind mutual encounters awakens a sense of moral responsibility, and one's response to

³² Meyer and Bergel, *Reverence for Life*, 67. See Chapter Two, footnote 55.

this new understanding is the foundation of a healthy conscience. For Buber and Schweitzer, intimate encounters not only open one to the sacredness of life existence, they also reveal the self, i.e., what one is and what one may become. Such encounters are a moment of personal evaluation and choice. Again, this seems to capture Leopold's experience with the dying wolf and his reevaluation of predators. It is important to note here that relational experiences do not necessarily change human character. Rather, they give moral insight to persons who then choose to actively change themselves. One sees here how closely self-realization and becoming are to an ethics founded upon relation. Again, speaking of Albert Schweitzer, Mike Martin comments, "[S]elf realization combines striving for excellence with sharing in others' lives."³³ Martin goes on to highlight the importance of "personal projects of love." It is what we discover in our close relationships with others that fuels the aspiration to live a principled life.

The association of moral understanding and personal becoming with the basic mystery of life and being found in mutual relation has immense significance for environmental ethics discourse today. By and large, the debate for ecological ethics and inherent value proceeds along the path outlined by the Enlightenment, i.e. according to empirical and rational evidence. Scientists point to the intelligence of certain animals or to the specific niche a species serves in an ecosystem as evidences of their moral status. Philosophers make arguments for the inherent value of beings grounded in qualities like

³³ Mike Martin, *Albert Schweitzer's Reverence for Life*, 2. See Chapter Two, footnote 66.

sentience or the capacity to value.³⁴ Theologians illustrate that nature's inherent value and the divine call to stewardship are grounded in tradition or sacred scripture.³⁵ All of these methods attempt to make an intellectual argument of sorts, and this is good and important. Recall that Leopold felt eventually there had to be an intellectual basis for the cherished values we feel inside.³⁶ But Schweitzer, Buber, and Leopold challenge us to a greater standard when they illustrate that real moral understanding and personal ethical striving are linked to the mystery one encounters when engaged with life. Schweitzer would call anything else an "impotent theory of the universe," for though it might be thought-provoking, it is not life changing.³⁷

An Argument for Engaged Practices

In summary, despite the diversity of their metaphysical outlooks on the world and their epistemological preferences, Albert Schweitzer, Martin Buber, and Aldo Leopold share remarkably similar views concerning the existence of simple wonder and mystery, the centrality of mutual encounters, and the importance these serve in generating moral ambition and personal meaning. They see these as being thwarted by an objectifying worldview that favors certainty, control, and consumption above a picture of reality more

³⁴ For Utilitarians, beings without sentience tend to lack any inherent worth. Holmes Rolston argues for inherent value in nature based on the fact that all living things, inasmuch as they strive for and rely on elements for growth and flourishing, can be loosely called valuers. If it can be called a valuer, it can be said to have inherent value.

³⁵ A common scriptural argument among Jews, Christians, and Muslims for nature's inherent value, for example, is that in the beginning of creation God called the world good. Often it is pointed out that God calls the creation good before the creation of Adam and Eve.

³⁶ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 43. See Chapter Four, footnote 46.

³⁷ Cicovacki, *Albert Schweitzer's Ethical Vision*, 91. See Chapter Two, footnote 26.

faithful to the totality of life and human experience. Each understood that the abstruse nature of their thoughts would trouble contemporary scholarship, and yet they maintained that essential elements of a fulfilled human existence depend on one's willingness to submit to the subtle truths discerned in life-being through relation. They accepted their powerlessness to offer any positive proof for these ideas, instead turning to their own life examples and experiences. Their writings are more like an invitation than evidence.

What is the limit of our responsibility for the other? Aside from pointing out our responsibility through love and reverence for the inherent value we have discerned in "the other," these authors give no distinctive list of guidelines. One might take their word on the matter, but the proof of their ideas are not in words or data but in one's personal encounters with "the other" itself. Buber writes, "One does not learn the measure and limit of what is attainable in a desired direction otherwise than through going in this direction."³⁸ What is the limit of our responsibility for the natural world? This work contends that the answer cannot really be internalized without actions that place us in a reciprocal relation with the other. In the final section, I consider activities such as gardening, small farming, and ecosystem restoration as practices that immerse one in reciprocal relation, bringing with them the meaning and sense of responsibility anticipated by Schweitzer, Buber, and Leopold.

³⁸ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber and the Eternal*, 76.

Cultivation as a Way into Praxis

The Garden Mystery

This dissertation, building upon the ideas of Albert Schweitzer, Martin Buber, and Aldo Leopold, contends that gardens may be a useful tool for approaching the complex ecological challenges we face, not because of their technical effects upon the environment, but because of their heart-changing impact on the gardener. The connection of the garden to human and social well-being is not a new idea. Indeed, it belongs to the oldest of tales. Drawing on such works as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Homer's *Odyssey*, and the book of *Genesis*, Robert Harrison, a classics professor at Stanford University, points out that the ancients typically understood the perfection of human happiness as a life in a garden setting.³⁹ The ancient philosopher Pliny the Younger, himself a gardener, wrote that it was "a good life and a genuine one."⁴⁰ His effort to cultivate the garden, he relates, was part of the greater effort to cultivate himself.

Given the considerable attention on the garden by the ancients, David Cooper, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Durham University, wonders at its curious neglect in modern-day philosophical discourse.⁴¹ As Leopold might say, its investigation is left to the musings of artists and poets. Is this scholarly neglect due to the same inexpressible

³⁹ Robert P. Harrison, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition*, 1.

⁴⁰ David Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens*, 10.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 5-6. Ted Toadvine says the same of farming. Refer to Toadvine, "Culture and Cultivation," in *Nature's Edge*. See also Theodore Hiebert's essay, "The Human Vocation: Origins and Transformations of the Christian Tradition," in *Christianity and Ecology*. Hiebert examines the favoring of the creation story in Genesis 1 which emphasizes dominion and control, over the Genesis 2 account that stresses Adam and Eve's caring for the Garden of Eden.

influence that Schweitzer, Buber, and Leopold thought was beyond the rational and empirical grasp of the human mind? David Cooper argues that the garden is a place full of mystery that is linked to its reciprocal characteristics, for the garden somehow responds to the gardener's efforts as if a self-governing and lively entity:

Human creativity ... must be what the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel calls 'creative receptivity.' Even the most Promethean artist or inventor should renounce 'the claim that ... we have the power to make' things 'dependent only on ourselves.' Instead, we should cultivate 'wonder' at what is 'granted to us as a gift,' for we at most 'welcome' and 'transmute' what, by no 'device' of our own, comes to presence for us. Marcel's name for what grants the gift is not 'nature,' but 'Being.'⁴²

Albert Schweitzer's inspired moments as a youth on the large rock overlooking the Munster Valley come to mind here. He understood that the ideas given to him were, in part, a gift from another. Cooper equates the presence of wonder one encounters in the garden with "being," with that life energy which graciously responds to our presence and activity. Reflecting on this puzzle of the voiceless other that gives, Buber writes, "Again and again I am reminded of the strange confession of Nietzsche when he described the event of 'inspiration' as taking but not asking who gives."⁴³ Buber appreciated the importance of human will in a modern world but he did not fully give in to voluntaristic ideals, for the epistemological significance of the I-Thou moment is always contingent upon grace from the other; there is always another who responds to our presence.

⁴² Ibid., 146.

⁴³ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 129.

In this final section, I will look more closely at the wonder associated with gardening and the role it plays in conveying responsibility and meaning to modern human living. I will also consider the challenges a gardening approach presents environmental ethics today. Before moving ahead with these discussions, two points are important to make here. The first is that this final section on gardening is only intended to entertain one way that the novel ideas of Schweitzer, Buber, and Leopold can develop into praxis. These individuals did not specifically point to gardening as *the* solution to the world's ills, and neither does this dissertation. Certainly there are many activities and practices that might convey the truth-bearing characteristics of relationship that Schweitzer, Buber, and Leopold envisioned.

The second point is a matter of parlance. Gardens take many forms, and while the term may be applied broadly, by *gardener* I intend that person who is engaged and committed to nurturing other life. With that said, it is possible to assert that some gardens have gardeners while others have laborers and landscape architects, that some farms have gardeners while others have managers, and that some ecosystem restoration projects have gardeners while others have technicians. Just as Leopold had pointed out, some farmers stand in relation to the land while others see it merely as a place in which to labor and make a living. The difference is not necessarily one of technical ability or profession, but more so an understanding of the ends for which the activity is pursued. The gardener views the farm, the garden, the ecosystem as an end in itself in addition to any other instrumental role it plays in providing income, beauty, or ecological services.

Furthermore, the gardener tends to recognize that his or her own meaning is somehow entangled with the garden. Schweitzer, Buber, and Leopold all captured the important element of mutuality in our encounters with other being. Only a gardener so described views time in the soil as a reciprocating experience.

Ethics and the Gardener

It is easy to say that time in the garden increases one's attentiveness to the natural world. The more we learn to recognize the diversity of life in the garden, the more likely we will be to identify it while pursuing other non-related activities. This, however, does not make a case for ethics. Though increased awareness makes a person more skillful at what they do, it does not necessarily foster virtue or compassion. Yet the mindfulness developed in attentive cultivation is more complex than simple familiarity with an activity. One becomes aware, not just of species and soil conditions, but that a living other is mysteriously present which is influenced by, and responds to, our nurturing efforts.

To the gardener caught up in the well-being of the garden, the produce of a vegetable plant and the beauty of a flower are not altogether the products of labor, but gifts from something we stand in relation to.⁴⁴ The gardener recognizes that, with a power beyond human control and comprehension, life flourishes and imparts its goodness, and in this simple fashion it reciprocates in a mutually benefitting way.⁴⁵ With this comes an enhanced attitude of care and devotion, a spirit of gratitude and humility, and a sense of

⁴⁴ Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens*, 73.

⁴⁵ Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens*, 94-96.

respect toward the other, the very qualities that Schwietzer, Buber, and Leopold envisioned toward the other, and that environmental ethicists strive to make a case for today. Iris Murdoch refers to this mindfulness toward the other as “attention,” or “a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality.”⁴⁶ Highlighting the importance of relation, she stresses that this openness toward the other is the chief characteristic of the active moral agent.

This is an experience that mere exposure to the outdoors does not necessarily provide. David Cooper writes, “Central to the general idea of communing is that of intimate sharing or mutuality, and this latter idea surely gets a purchase on the relationship between a gardener and the vegetables he or she grows in a way that it does not on that, say, between walkers and the hills or fields through which they walk.”⁴⁷ The moral disposition of the gardener is influenced specifically by the relational aspects of cultivation. Like Pliny the Younger mentioned at the beginning of this section, Karel Capek, an early 20th century Czech author and avid gardener, illustrates in his book *The Gardener’s Year* that working the soil and refining the inner person are correlated activities, for the gardener develops inner control and selfless concern for the well-being of the other. Robert Harrison explains, “[I]f Capek’s experience as a gardener taught him a basic ethical principle that can be broadly universalized, it is the following: ‘you must give more to the soil than you take away.’”⁴⁸ Working for the well being of the garden,

⁴⁶ Murdoch, *Sovereignty of God*, 33.

⁴⁷ Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens*, 73.

⁴⁸ Harrison, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition*, 33.

the small farm, the ecosystem, brings in its wake a stark awareness of, and appreciation for, the formidable conditions all life stands up against as it works to establish its own good in the world. At the same time, it makes apparent the remarkable role that one can play in determining those conditions. The gardener makes the continual choice to be attentive to the good of the species in the garden. Perhaps it is this that causes Harrison to conclude, “No one embodies the care-dominated nature of human beings more than the gardener.”⁴⁹

One cannot help but compare this with dominant strains of thought in the industrialized world today toward Earth. Because it is primarily structured by labor forces and the profit motive, modern civilization reaps the goods of Earth but without the added wisdom that relational encounters impart. From the perspective of industry and a consumer economy, life on Earth is a resource to be prudently mined and harvested. Karel Capek was concerned with the indifferent posture of modern technology, for it had “none of the humility, devotion, and curatorial vocation of the gardener.”⁵⁰ A lack of mutual encounter with other life limits the opportunity for the maturation of these personal qualities. In Capek’s view, the activity of gardening is vital for both parties, for gardens degrade without people, and people degrade without gardening.

As noted earlier in this dissertation, Enlightenment thinking took up the cause for epistemological certainty and the quest for empirical control. Statements had to be open to critical examination to become recognized as viable truths. The subtle insights

⁴⁹ Ibid., 25.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 37.

discerned from relation could not stand up to the narrow standards of rational and empirical investigation. Combined with the turn toward an urban and technologically advanced lifestyle, these factors cause a certain forgetfulness of the important role that cultivation can play in developing traits like self control, empathy, and compassion. Harrison believes that these standards of truth in the West have promoted attitudes of criticism at the expense of the goods of cultivation. He concludes that, as a result, the Western outlook on the world has lacked a certain health and constructiveness.⁵¹

The critical demeanor of the modern West deserves some attention, for it is accompanied by an antagonism and fear toward the natural world. As noted in the first chapter, Thomas Berry speculated that such fear had its beginnings with the Black Plague that ravaged Europe in the 14th century. Theodore Hiebert, an Old Testament professor at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, believes that its beginnings are much more ancient. He argues that since the early centuries of the common era, the Genesis 1 account of creation in the Bible, where Adam and Eve are given dominion and commanded to subdue the Earth, has been favored over the account in Genesis 2 and 3 in which Adam and Eve are commanded to care for and serve the garden.⁵² Whatever its origins, enmity has existed in a variety of forms and expressions throughout Western history even up to current times. A mild form of this can be seen in the way advanced societies find refuge from the diseased and unfiltered elements of nature through urban

⁵¹ Ibid., 161.

⁵² Theodore Hiebert, "The Human Vocation: Origins and Transformation in the Christian Tradition," in *Christianity and Ecology*, 141.

living and technological progress. Nature—to many—appears dirty, contaminated, harsh and must be sanitized and tamed before becoming part of human living. To put it in the words of anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, nature is viewed as “raw” while society is “cooked.”⁵³

In more extreme expressions, the danger imposed by nature and its wilderness becomes an excuse for heavy-handed dominion and repression. The American pragmatist, William James, who argued for pacifism, recognized that there were some necessary virtues that accompanied the life of a soldier. While he dreamed of ending human fighting, he saw a problem with walking away from the discipline, honor, and pride of the military. His solution to this dilemma was “an army enlisted against nature,” where we might preserve the martial virtues and, at the same time, rescue humankind from the toil and dangers imposed by the elements.⁵⁴ Compare this with the indigenous perspective expressed by the Native American, Luther Standing Bear:

But nothing the Great Mystery placed in the land of the Indian pleased the white man, and nothing escaped his transforming hand. Wherever forests have not been mowed down; wherever the animal is recessed in their quiet protection; wherever the earth is not bereft of four-footed life—that to him is an ‘unbroken wilderness.’ But since for the Lakota there was no wilderness; since nature was not dangerous but hospitable; not forbidding but friendly, Lakota philosophy was healthy—free from fear and dogmatism.⁵⁵

⁵³ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, University of Chicago Press, 1969.

⁵⁴ William James, “The Moral Equivalent of War,” *McClure’s Magazine*, August, 1910, 463-468. See also Lisa Newton, *Business Ethics and the Natural Environment*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, 5-6.

⁵⁵ Luther Standing Bear, “Nature,” in *This Sacred Earth*, edited by Roger Gottlieb, 42.

Standing Bear concludes that the great difference between the faith of the Indian and that of the “white man” is whether nature can be seen as something one can trust and live at peace with.

Antagonism toward the natural world is a sign of an objectified relationship, where one fears what cannot be controlled. As the nurturing posture of the humble gardener is reacquainted with the wonder and moral responsibility toward living being, the problem of antagonism is also addressed through fostering a greater disposition of trust and optimism. Consistent gardening turns one away from the security of civilization for a moment to rediscover, as Leopold did on his small farm, the basic rootedness and dependency humans have on Earth, which steadily provides through seasons and years. It teaches that the natural world is consistent and dependable, even if at times threatening.

Again, Standing Bear writes:

We never railed at the storms, the furious winds, and the biting frosts of snows. To do so intensified human futility, so whatever came we adjusted ourselves, by more effort and energy if necessary but without complaint. . . . Bright days and dark days were both expressions of the Great Mystery, and the Indian reveled in being close to the Big Holy. His worship was unalloyed, free from the fears of civilization.⁵⁶

Standing Bear would agree that it is proper and good to protect oneself from the ailments of life brought on by natural conditions. To believe, however, that nature is a predator to be avoided or defeated is an unhealthy and misleading disposition.

The work of cultivation is properly an act of faith and trust. As modern technology proliferated at an unprecedented speed immediately following the Second

⁵⁶ Ibid., 40-41.

Word War, Martin Heidegger recognized that this element of relation and trust was being lost. Juxtaposing the peasant farmer with the explosive Green Revolution of his day, he writes:

The field that the peasant formerly cultivated and set in order appears different from how it did when to set in order still meant to take care of and maintain. The work of the peasant does not challenge the soil of the field. In sowing grain it places seed in the keeping of the forces of growth and watches over its increase. But meanwhile even the cultivation of the field has come under the grip of another kind of setting-in-order, which sets upon nature. It sets upon it in the sense of challenging it. Agriculture is now the mechanized food industry.⁵⁷

Certainly Heidegger was aware of the great benefit of modern technology, but he wanted to understand its full impact upon human civilization. His exploration of the topic led him to conclusions similar to Standing Bear's. Where the peasant farmer sows with a basic trust in Earth and in the mystery of growth, the economist and corporate farmer sow, spray, fertilize, and otherwise attempt to mechanically control natural objects with an eye on the risks.

In short, one learns to submit to and trust in the remarkable processes at work in the garden as they care for it and watch it develop over seasons and years, and I argue that this can be an important step in developing an attitude of trust and compassion toward the natural world at large. Schweitzer, Buber, and Leopold all stressed the importance of recognizing and submitting to the underlying riddle of life. Hands-on cultivation whether in the garden, on the farm, or in the local ecosystem, aims at this ideal by combining active nurturing with ultimate submission to an overflowing life

⁵⁷ Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings*, 296.

energy and force that is gracious, yet beyond human understanding and control. For Martin Buber, such service is the moral response to the mysterious *I-Thou*. He writes, “Let the significance of the effect of creatures upon us remain sunk in mystery. Believe in the simple magic of life, in service in the universe. . . .”⁵⁸ For Albert Schweitzer, *ethical mysticism*, or the spiritual unity we can achieve with others, is facilitated by active caring.⁵⁹ Cultivation so described involves mystery, caring, and trust which find their common ground in the simple sentiments of affection. David Cooper writes, “In effect, the life of the garden lover, not unlike that of the lover of another person, is one of ‘voluntary dependence’, which, Goethe tells us, is the ‘best position’ any of us can be in.”⁶⁰ The mystery of mutual relation found in cultivation can help instill the virtues of trust and compassion that all humans need.

From the Garden to Environmental Ethics

It is in the dynamic of mutual relation and the moral and ontological meaning it restores that the value of gardening practices have significance for environmental ethics at large. The work of ecological ethics is frustrated by a pervasive lack of appreciation for living things as centers of value. The reasons for this have been outlined in detail in the first chapter of this work. The apathy commonly felt for the well-being of nonhuman life that surrounds us is a result of our failure to see being and to recognize its inherent worth. The life and works of Albert Schweitzer, Martin Buber, and Aldo Leopold challenge us to

⁵⁸ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 15.

⁵⁹ Mike Martin, *Albert Schweitzer's Reverence for Life*, 2.

⁶⁰ David Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens*, 76.

look more deeply into the life of things, to turn toward, rather than away from, wonder and mystery, and above all to reestablish mutual relation. Gardening is one way to accomplish these feats, and in the process of doing so to re-attune our natural ability to perceive and appreciate living being. I argue that it may be in the microcosm of the garden, the small farm, or the urban ecosystem that we succeed at developing the virtues, values, and insight necessary to direct our concern toward the broader environment.

One apparent challenge to the idea that devotion can readily move from the garden to the larger environment is the concern that affections are biased and too often exclusive of others. In such a case, the sense of responsibility or concern would not make it past one's own plot of ground. However, similar to Buber who, as we saw in chapter 3, believes the exclusive and genuine *I-Thou* moment is entangled with a sense of moral responsibility for all life, Robert Harrison believes that what one discovers while cultivating has broader moral implications for the natural world:

The gardener's relationship to soil begins with his own private plot, which he cultivates and comes to know in its properties, and from there it extends outward to the earth as a whole. Like Eve's eating of the pomegranate, gardening brings about a transformation of perception, a fundamental change in one's way of seeing the world, call it a phenomenological conversion. No longer does the eye stop at the surface of nature's living forms; it looks to the depths in which they stake their claims on life and from which they grow into the realm of presence and appearance.⁶¹

It is argued here that hands-on cultivation has the potential to open the human mind to the wonder and breadth of inherent value within one's personal sphere of influence, and it stands to reason that such enlightenment will encourage the virtues that lead to reflection

⁶¹ Robert Harrison, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition*, 30.

and accountability for life in its diverse and even remote manifestations. In his book *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*, Michael Pollan asks, "What if now, instead of to wilderness, we were to look to the garden for the making of a new ethic?"⁶² David Cooper suggests that this makes greater sense than the current popular model which, instead of focusing on what is close to us and working outwards, concentrates on developing wilderness values that relatively few in our urbanized world can relate to. Gardening in one form or another is accessible to all, even in highly urban areas, and the very thing it can do is to make the diversity of Earth-life a little more relatable.

A concern of others might not be that gardening will never successfully work to engender a robust environmental ethic, but that it will succeed, and in the process of doing so create greater hostility and disdain for human life. Those coming from this perspective worry that environmental sentiment tends to foster anti-human sentiment, for it pits the inherent value of one against the other. Such concerns are not always misplaced. David Kinsley, referencing a few modern environmental thinkers, notes:

No doubt exasperated and infuriated by the serious and continuing damage that humans are inflicting on the ecosystem, Callicott at one point states that the measure of one's biocentric concern could be determined by the extent of one's misanthropy (hatred of human beings). Paul W. Taylor, in a similar vein, says that, given the threat the human species poses to other species and to the ongoing health of the biotic community, the complete disappearance of the human species would hardly be understood as a catastrophe by other beings.⁶³

⁶² Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*, 206. See also Cooper, 107.

⁶³ David Kinsley, *Religion and Ecology*, 189.

If an ethics built upon the relational practices of cultivation succeeds at increasing an awareness of inherent value in non-human life, it goes without saying that human policies and ambitions which neglect such value should be scrutinized.

I argue, however, that such an ethic is inclusive rather than exclusive of the human good. First, it can bring people together for a common and healthy cause. Harrison notes that in urban environments, garden areas are emerging and are transforming neighborhoods into community centers.⁶⁴ In 2004, two neighbors in San Francisco obtained permission from the city to remove litter from a median with the intention of planting a garden. Other neighbors eventually joined in, and before long it was a thriving patch of vegetables, herbs and flowers. Harrison comments:

Several other gardens have since cropped up in the neighborhood, and now, where addicts, pushers, and vagrants once urinated, trashed, and engaged in turf wars, there are different kinds of congregations. As one local resident declared to a reporter: ‘More and more over the last few months, people have been leaving their houses to gather in the center of the garden. Some people have met one another for the first time near the collard greens.’⁶⁵

Nobody will dispute the fact that mass urbanization, industrialization, and a consumer based economy have radically diminished the boons of community. Urban gardens have the potential to become centers for dialogue and interaction as people regain interest in, and control of, the neglected commons.

Similar stories have been told of ecosystem restoration projects. In 1977, a handful of novice restorationists set out to restore the remnants of the tallgrass prairie

⁶⁴ Robert Harrison, *Gardens*, 44

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

ecosystem along the North Branch of the Chicago River. Their efforts spanned from Foster Avenue in the south to just north of Dundee Road, and by 1993, 17,000 acres were being restored by more than 3000 volunteers.⁶⁶ William Stevens, who documented the endeavor in his book *Miracle Under the Oaks*, noted that the desire to belong to a community was a powerful motivator for many of the volunteers. He writes, “Working with other people in a joint outdoor adventure harks back to the days of community barn-raising, says Jane Balaban, but that sort of thing has largely been lost in modern life.”⁶⁷

Stevens continues:

Sometimes there is a family tragedy. Cliff Reese, a member of the group who was about eighty years old, literally died in action, from a heart attack. . . . His widow, Jessie, missed a few trips but rejoined the group. ‘We were all calling and checking on her and telling her it was time to get on the bus and head back to the field,’ says Fauerso, ‘and it’s rewarding to see she was enjoying our friendship.’⁶⁸

In the process of drawing closer to their local environment, volunteers of the North Branch restoration projects in Chicago were also drawing closer to each other.

But it goes beyond simply having a place to physically meet and interact with others. Relationships that inspire care, concern, and responsibility are humanizing, a truth any first-time parent or devoted companion will readily acknowledge. Encounters that allow for the experience and personal expression of love have a softening influence which motivate one to do good and to be better. It is the argument of this work that such softening relationships are possible with life in its various manifestations. Cindy

⁶⁶ William Stevens, *Miracle Under the Oaks*, 11.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.

Hildebrand, a local Chicagoan who volunteered her time to help restore the tallgrass prairie ecosystems along the Chicago River, appreciated her experience with the restoration project primarily because it established a relational connection with the plants and animals that she had formerly been apathetic about.⁶⁹ In a conversation with William Stevens, she confessed, “suddenly I have relationships with other living things in the same way I have relationships with people, and it makes life a lot richer.” Referring to the local flora and fauna, Robert Lonsdorf, volunteer and chief steward of the Miami Woods prairie on the North Branch, declared, “it’s been a real pleasure getting to know them in a personal way—bur oaks, for instance—and generally feeling more plugged into life on earth. I’ve restored myself, in a sense, to the natural world. Emotionally it’s been very fulfilling.”⁷⁰ To put it in terms that I have used elsewhere in this work, dedicated time and service toward “the other” enabled Cindy Hildebrand and Robert Lonsdorf to appreciate the life force and dynamism of beings where they had formerly noticed only scenery and objects.

While these experiences of value in nature certainly may arouse feelings of opposition to human policies and practices that disregard the well-being of Earth life, they do not directly cultivate hatred toward humans. Rather, the opposite appears to be true. As was pointed out in the beginning of this work, University of Rochester psychologist, Netta Weinstein, discovered in a three year study that immersion in nature

⁶⁹ Ibid., 197-198.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 198.

made people less self-interested and more concerned with community values.⁷¹ Again, their conclusion was that engagement with natural surroundings seemed to have a direct influence on the positive treatment of other humans. In a remarkably similar tone, Standing Bear writes almost eighty years earlier, “But the old Lakota was wise. He knew that man’s heart, away from nature, becomes hard; he knew that lack of respect for growing, living things soon led to lack of respect for humans too. So he kept his youth close to its softening influence.”⁷² While it is not the primary intention of this work to establish a connection between cultivation and social ethics, it is certainly a topic worthy of future exploration among social scientists, philosophers, and theologians. What is important to establish here is that the moral virtues nurtured in cultivating practices, such as compassion and sensitivity toward life, are inclusive rather than exclusive of human life.⁷³

Exercising Dominion Over Inherently Valuable Life

One of the primary targets of environmental ethicists today is the presumptuous attitude common in the modern West that nature exists exclusively for the material well-being of humans and is meant to be controlled and dominated. We saw in the first chapter of this work that Francis Bacon believed the human purpose was to exercise control over the natural world, or the “oracles of God,” thereby exposing its secrets for the good of

⁷¹ Netta Weinstein, et al., (2009). “Can Nature Make Us More Caring?” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 35, 1315-1329. Refer to footnote 6.

⁷² Standing Bear, *Nature*, 42.

⁷³ See Iris Murdoch for her analysis of the moral important of attention and vision, in *Sovereignty of Good*, 33-44.

human life, and restoring the glory of Eden through dominion. While the religious vision behind Bacon's thinking does not predominate today, the general attitude of dominion over nature does. Consequently, environmental thinkers recognize one of their primary duties as the dismantling of this highly anthropocentric worldview, and many will see cultivating practices as an inappropriate model for accomplishing this. After all, Bacon wrote with some knowledge and apparent experience about the pleasure and the beauty to be had in a "princely garden."⁷⁴

This leads to the question of whether gardening is just another form of control and dominion. I have attempted to argue in this paper that cultivating practices can play a valuable role in restoring a respect for the marvel of life, an appreciation for being, and a sense of moral responsibility for the other. Yet, does it still assert human superiority over the natural world? Ted Toadvine, Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Environmental Studies at the University of Oregon, notes that the French Philosopher Simone de Beauvoir dedicates an entire section of her book *The Second Sex* to early agriculture with the argument that it "marks a turning point in masculine self-awareness and control over nature, leading to private property, cultural institutions, and a new temporal self-understanding."⁷⁵ Does this explain why Bacon can encourage a rigorous approach to

⁷⁴ Francis Bacon, "Essays or Counsels Civil and Moral," in *Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, 791-795.

⁷⁵ Ted Toadvine, "Culture and Cultivation: Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Agriculture," in *Nature's Edge*, edited by Charles Brown and Ted Toadvine, 207. See also Simone de Beauvoir's work, *The Second Sex*, published in 1989 by Vintage Books, 66-81.

natural study on one hand and speak comfortably about the garden on the other, because they both belong to the same worldview of dominion and compulsion?

Though some cultivating practices can fairly be labelled acts of dominion, the sort I have focused on in this work inspire humility and regard for other. At the beginning of this section I emphasized that not all gardening practices are equal, for some lead to an awareness of being and to an understanding of intrinsic value while others do not. Again, there are gardeners and there are managers, landscape architects, and casual admirers. The attitude, intention, and worldview with which we approach “other life” will condition what we ultimately find. For some, the garden plot is a canvas and the species mere paints, all awaiting the human’s artistic expression. In such cases, gardens serve the instrumental function of stimulating human senses, and while not all bad, the deeper wonder associated with life and being that Schweitzer, Buber, and Leopold gave witness to is still beyond one’s grasp.

Some of the most elaborate and highly artistic gardens which squeeze nature into forms of human imagination have even been compared to expressions of slavery.⁷⁶ Commenting on Frédéric Richaud’s novel *Gardener to the King*, a story about Jean Baptiste de la Quintinie, David Cooper writes, “And, back to the vegetables, the ‘simple wisdom’ learned by Louis XIV’s head kitchen gardener at Versailles, taught him that ‘everything ... should be performed as an act of humility,’ and not in the manner of his royal master, with his ‘insatiable will to make the world conform to ... his dreams.’”⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Cooper, 101.

⁷⁷ Cooper, 96.

This distinction between cultivation as a means of artistic expression and the humble cultivation inspired by relationship comes down to what the three authors central to this dissertation might label as a “grace beyond the reach of art.”⁷⁸ It is only after we are affected by the person, the animal, that plant, this ecosystem that we realize it provides more than just comfort, food, beauty or ecological services. Control and compulsion are objectifying dispositions that exist in cultivation only where there is an absence of the service and grace that reveal humility and mutual dependency, that is, where one fails to perceive being.

It is with this objectification in mind that one can interpret Bacon’s writing on the garden. Though he demonstrates adeptness at identifying the multitude of garden species that delight human faculties, his master garden design is a human imposed ideal of geometric and sensuous perfection common for the elite European gardens of his day. The plot should be at least thirty acres and divided into three general areas: a finely shorn lawn at the entrance, a square garden in the middle with a stately arched hedge, and a heath in the back.⁷⁹ Every plant has its proper purpose and place in the master plan. Some plants should be positioned directly in walkways because only by being crushed under foot do they “perfume the air” and provide “pleasure when you walk or tread.”⁸⁰ Ponds

⁷⁸ This phrase is taken from Alexander Pope’s poem, “Essay on Criticism,” Part 1, line 152. See also Cooper, 96.

⁷⁹ Francis Bacon, “Essays or Cousels Civil and Moral,” 793.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 793.

should be avoided because they invite “flies and frogs.” Fountains are good, but they must be “cleansed every day by the hand,” and devoid of “fish, or slime, or mud.”⁸¹

It is apparent from his writing that Bacon was a distant admirer of the garden with no interest in, or knowledge of, the relational boons of cultivation itself. For him, it was all part of the quest to fulfill the God-given command at the beginning of Biblical time to subdue Eden. Again, Theodore Hiebert stresses that there are two different accounts of the creation and garden experience in the Bible.⁸² Genesis 1, the priestly account, highlights the subduing and the exercising of dominion over Earth. It emphasizes that humans are special in being created in the image of God. It is this portrayal of creation, Hiebert argues, amplified by Platonic idealism and a hierarchy of being which divided the material from the spiritual, that has set the tone for much of Western history.⁸³ It is through this understanding that Bacon reflects on the garden. Genesis 2 and 3, or the Yahwist account, on the other hand, paints a much different picture. The words used to describe the human role in these chapters are to serve, keep and till the garden. It is not simply farming or managing the land. Speaking of the Hebrew word *abad*, or “serve” in Genesis 2 and 3, Hiebert writes:

⁸¹ Ibid., 794. Compare Bacon’s aversion to slime and mud with Karel Capek’s understanding of the real gardener: “While I was only a remote and distracted onlooker of the accomplished work of gardens, I considered gardeners to be beings of a peculiarly poetic and gentle mind, who cultivate perfumes of flowers listening to the birds singing. Now when I look at the affair more closely, I find that a real gardener is not a man who cultivates flowers; he is a man who cultivates the soil. He is a creature who digs himself into the earth, and leaves the sight of what is on it to us gaping good-for-nothings.” Refer to Harrison, 29.

⁸² Theodore Hiebert, “The Human Vocation: Origins and Transformations in Christian Traditions,” in *Christianity and Ecology*, 132-154.

⁸³ Ibid., 141.

[I]ts use for cultivation must stem from a sense of the vital power of the land over its creatures and of human submission to this power in the act of farming. This way of speaking of agriculture views the human as the servant, not the master, of the land. It emphasizes human dependence on, rather than dominion over, the earth.⁸⁴

Humble cultivation, in contrast to gardening as a form of art and architecture, involves a change in perception toward the real living world. It submits to, and works with, the vital energy of the Earth. Such cultivating practices are important to environmental ethics today because, as the Yahwist author may have recognized, they can foster sustained attention to, and respect for, the land and the life it sustains.

Ecological Ethics and the Principle of Sacrifice

Even humble cultivation infers a certain sense of human dominion and control over nature that remains distasteful to some. The gardener eliminates “weeds” and cuts back some species so that others might grow, thus exercising a “lordship” of sorts. Thoreau was struck by this concern while at Walden Pond. In an attempt to live more self-sufficiently on the land he cultivated a patch of beans, and later, feeling guilty about treating the land as his personal property, he wrote, “What right had I to oust johnswort and the rest?”⁸⁵ Did not the native flora and fauna which once occupied the space where his patch of beans grew have as much right to live and flourish as he did? Thoreau had succeeded at recognizing the wonder and inherent value of life, and now, like Albert Schweitzer, he was distressed about how to live and sustain oneself in a world full of

⁸⁴ Ibid., 140.

⁸⁵ Cooper, 100.

being. This leads to an important and difficult question, namely, what precise moral guidance can an environmental ethic, spawned in the garden and established through relationship, provide us today, particularly if it reveals the inherent value of all life? Does it not lead to the paradox and moral gridlock of “biocentric egalitarianism” where all things have an equal right to live and flourish?⁸⁶

Unfortunately, there can be no absolute answers to this question. I have argued in this work that relational practices like cultivation can restore a sense of the mystery of life and an awareness of, and responsibility for, “the other.” Aldo Leopold interprets this responsibility in terms of the health and integrity of the ecosystem; what is ultimately best for individuals can be achieved by placing precedence on the health of the land. For Albert Schweitzer and Martin Buber, on the other hand, responsibility for the value of another is the limit of what is revealed through relation. It does not tell one that hunting is absolutely forbidden, that raising stock and cultivating crops are always wrong, or that shopping for produce and meat at Walmart is immoral. It only reveals the inherent value of, and our responsibility for, the sacred other.

For Schweitzer, this leads to the overriding principle that it is good to maintain and encourage life; it is bad to obstruct and destroy it. Leopold would agree, and add that maintaining the ecosystem and biological diversity best accomplishes this in the long run. For Buber, it is left up to our judgment in the I-It domain to determine how we can best remain true to what we learn in the brief I-Thou moment. He would agree with

⁸⁶ William C. French, “Against Biospheric Egalitarianism,” *Environmental Ethics* 17, 1 (Spring 1995): 39-57.

Schweitzer that there are no specific guidelines because the matter is ultimately shrouded in the inexpressible encounter. That one is accountable for the sacredness glimpsed in “the other” is beyond question, but how to live it out is a life’s work. Ethical deliberation and action require fidelity to the standards of friendship and love discovered in relational encounters, yet these do not provide the rational certainty we hope for. We are each individually judged and justified by the standard we have personally discerned in relation rather than by specific codes, doctrines, or theories. This makes it next to impossible, and wrongheaded if we are true to Schweitzer and Buber, to try and outline a specific standard here.

Returning to Thoreau and his patch of beans, he recognized more than simply the truth that cultivation is problematic. He faced the paradox each one of us lives within as we strive to make a place for ourselves and our family in this world of wonderful, yet unfathomable, living beings and interconnected systems. It is impossible to live as a human and not destroy life, and the common response to this conundrum is the conclusion that such life—animal or plant—must possess instrumental but not intrinsic value. Instrumental value suggests that a thing is only good in terms of its usefulness for someone or something else. Intrinsic value, on the other hand, recognizes that a thing is valuable as an end, or independent of others. It is through the lens of utility that many of us in the modern industrialized West seem to navigate our judgements of value, and without the insight that relational encounters provide, it is an easy conclusion.

For those like Thoreau, however, who have become aware of the mysterious life of the other, casting off of the absoluteness of intrinsic value is not an option. The life of johnswort is as inherently valuable as any other, and justice seems to require that it should be left alone. Like Thoreau and Schweitzer, we may wish to just “live and let live.” But there is no life without death, and to get hung up on the absolute wrongness of death is to overlook profound, even if paradoxical, implications contained in the principle of sacrifice. First, though death is difficult, in a more inclusive and holistic sense, it is also joyous, beautiful, and constructive. Leopold’s understanding of the “land organism” fits in here. The good of individuals is important, but all living things coexist within a larger dynamic that is also good and important.⁸⁷ Meaningful death grants life, contributes to diversity, and provides for a broader good. Schweitzer was troubled by his need to kill for food and shelter, but it allowed him to continue his life of service and compassion toward other beings. He must have conceived of some greater, more noble, life purpose for his own being, otherwise the most noble act he could have performed would have been his own elimination. Perhaps it is for this reason that he is best known for his life of the service to others, both human and nonhuman. Far more disturbing is meaningless death that desacralizes and wastes the hallowed life of another.

Second, when we comprehend that inherently valuable life is given for us, whether human or non-human, it instills the virtues of love, respect and gratitude.

⁸⁷ For a discussion on the tensions between individualist and ecocentric in ethics, see Holmes Rolston’s essay, “The Land Ethic at the Turn of the Millennium, in *Environmental Ethics: Divergence and Convergence*, 393-394.

Perhaps a gift of beans allowed Thoreau to better appreciate the unpretentious existence of johnswort. A world without the gift of sacrifice is a world without the power to inspire the insights needed to define the line between want and need. Lastly, it is through the giving of others that we often find the desire and courage to give of ourselves; to put aside our self-interests in the service of other life. A common Christian saying is that we love because we were first loved by God. Ethics in this sense is not so much a rational examination of the virtue of justice, but a response to what we have felt when given a gift from of another.⁸⁸ Ultimately, an ethic that emerges through the intimate practice of cultivation does not provide specific codes that can be rationally scrutinized, but opens one up to being, to greater remembrance of, and responsibility for, the sacred other, even when the life of that other lies before us as a gift. It inspires the virtues of respect, gratitude, and compassion, and in this sense it offers what many moral philosophers and theologians hope for today, namely, a tangible method for encouraging self-restraint and personal regard for the life of others.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this work I argued that the heart of ethical responsibility and the motivation to proactively care for the life around us was caught up in the enigma of relation. The first chapter attempted to demonstrate how and why the dynamic of relationship was gradually abandoned across broad sectors of modern societies as a source for comprehending truth in the world. New standards of metaphysical and

⁸⁸ To better understand ethics as a personal response, refer to H. Richard Niebuhr's work *The Responsible Self*. See also Martin Buber's discussion on rational thought vs. response, Chapter Three, footnote 34.

epistemological understanding increasingly failed to validate the basic mystery of being discerned through relation, and as a result, the living Earth was experienced more and more as an objectified world. In chapters two, three, and four, I have attempted to show how Albert Schweitzer, Martin Buber, and Aldo Leopold confront the common view that the natural world is composed of nothing more than objects whose sole purposes are to provide for the material and emotional well-being of human life. Despite the fact that these thinkers come from different cultures, religious beliefs, and professions that flavor their personal understanding of reality, they share remarkable similarities about the basic wonder and mystery one confronts when engaging the living world, and the sense of meaning and responsibility it evokes. How they precisely highlight that mystery in the world takes on different forms reflected by their individual backgrounds. But they would all agree with Schweitzer's conclusive thought that it begins with the relational bonds that link life with life.

The implications of this for environmental ethics are profound. Where current models rely primarily on intellectual arguments enlightened by scientific data and/or religious doctrines, a method which takes seriously the insights that relational encounters can provide requires, in addition to the former, direct engagement with other life. Relation keeps one's ethical contemplation in contact with its profound and living source rather than allowing it to become an unengaged reflection of thought upon remote thought.⁸⁹ This final chapter and section has attempted to make the case that gardening,

⁸⁹ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 204, 205. See Chapter Three, footnote 78.

small farming, ecosystem restoration projects and other similar acts of cultivation are examples of practices that can plunge us into mutual relationships with a diversity of life and re-attune our inherent aptitude to perceive being and value.⁹⁰ They can renew our appreciation for an enlivened world, relieve us from the estranging effects of technology, and address the long standing antagonism toward nature in major streams of modern Western societies. For the gardener caught up in the well-being of the garden, the natural world is a gracious and consistent giver of life and meaning, and this has an effect on the way the gardener, in turn, behaves toward others in the world.

While they do not provide specific moral rules to follow, cultivating practices which nurture mutual relationships teach the importance of generosity and thanks, and in the process convey a few overarching truths, namely, that life in its diverse manifestations is valuable and should be cared for, and that a fundamental way of accomplishing that care is through our willingness to reciprocate the gift, i.e. to give of ourselves and, at times, to forgo our personal desires. With these broad standards in place, one can weigh other important human values such as health, comfort, family and community. An ethic which accepts the inherent value of being does not need to be dismissive of other human values, but it should at least form part of one's understanding of the world. It need not pit the environment against human welfare, but it should inspire one to walk more at peace with others, human and nonhuman. To suddenly register the phenomenon associated with life and being is to, among other things, gaze into the depths

⁹⁰ See Edward O. Wilson's work *Biophilia* on the physiological bond formed between humans and their natural environment.

of personal accountability. More than revealing specific rules, it declares what one is and what one must strive to become in a world of inherently valuable life.

Admittedly, there is a practical obstacle to adopting cultivating practices today. Namely, is it realistic to go back to a life in the soil? The world is growing more urban and dependent on a global economy. It is fused to technological progress and science. Says Martin Heidegger, “Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it.”⁹¹ Of what real help are cultivating practices for a world relentlessly on the move in the opposite direction? This dissertation is not intended to argue that everybody should turn from technology and city life to join the small farm renaissance.⁹² Cultivating life in the soil, however, is an activity available to all, even in great urban centers, as was illustrated above. In essence, it is an approach that embraces the future, grasping onto truths too little recognized in recent Western history. As cultivating practices open one up to a profound world of being and to renewed responsibility, they also add a dimension to life that can be personally enriching. Leopold writes:

I knew a bank president who adventured in roses. Roses made him a happy man and a better president. I know a wheel manufacturer who adventures in tomatoes. He knows all about them and, whether as a result or as a cause, he also knows all about wheels.⁹³

⁹¹ Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *Basic Writings*, 287. Spring 39-57.

⁹² Wendell Berry argues, on the other hand, that the U.S. would benefit if more people would return to small farms and the practices of agriculture. See *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1996.

⁹³ Leopold, *Sand county Almanac*, 183.

An ethic that encourages cultivating practices does not cling to the romantic visions of the past, but provides a tangible means to embrace a complicated future with fundamental insights.

It has been the objective of this dissertation to raise the possibility that intimate encounters with others, particularly non-human beings, are essential wellsprings for moral awareness and for ethical motivation. After outlining the formidable obstacles an approach based on relation has faced with the unfolding of Western history, I turned to the life and works of Albert Schweitzer, Martin Buber, and Aldo Leopold to rekindle an image of ethics that is action oriented and grounded in the unfathomable bonds of relationship. I have argued in this final chapter that humble practices of sustained cultivation may provide a way to realize the ethical and ontological boons of relation that these thinkers envisioned. The real benefit to environmental ethics that this approach offers is to work from the moral person outward. It begins with our own plot, and with our personal practices and character. It opens our eyes to a dimension of life that is easy to overlook in a world of convenience and omnipresent technology. This work, however, only raises possibilities. It is the theoretical beginnings of an ethics based on nurturing practices. More study, particularly from the social and psychological sciences, is needed to examine the subtle effects that nurturing practices might have on the ethical dispositions of those engaged in sustained practices of cultivation.

As educators concerned with a healthy and sustainable planet, an essential principle emerges from this theoretical exploration. If it is true, it suggests that while the

study of doctrine, theory, data and events are crucial to ecological ethics, no education or training is fully adequate which does not offer some opportunity for intimate relational experiences. It might be argued that universities are not the place to provide such opportunities. However, the growing trend in service learning suggests higher education understands that students learn truths about the world from more than just professors, textbooks and lab work. Campuses are ideal platforms for community garden projects, for local restoration efforts, and for sustainable farming programs. They are ideal places for students and the community to both learn the practical knowledge associated with these activities and to seriously reflect on the ethical dimensions that emerge from their relational encounters.

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