

Some Short Thoughts on Morality, Ecology and Nature

By Laurie Miller

Nature Knows Best, and as Neil Evernden has pointed out perhaps facetiously, Ecology Knows Nature (1992: 8). However, for a number of reasons, these statements have become truisms for many of those who consider themselves environmentalists – “ecology seems to reveal the moral order of being by simultaneously uncovering the *verum, bonum* and *pulchrum* of reality: it suggests not only the truth, but also a moral imperative and even aesthetic perfection” (Sachs, 1992: 32).

At one point in its history, ecology was full of discussions of balance, diversity, climax community and interdependence (Worster, 1994). From this understanding of the way nature “works” there have been many attempts to derive some form of “ecological ethic” based on a belief that human societies should mimic what amounts to a “natural law.” From such proponents we learn that human activities which disturb the rule of natural law, which disrupt natural processes or which degrade natural balance are, in effect, unnatural and ought to be replaced by an ethic of Following Nature. Few ideas it seems, have been recycled as often as the belief that the ‘Is’ of nature must become the ‘Ought’ of humanity (Worster, 1994).

Of course, some have been determined to demonstrate otherwise, often based on conceptions of nature derived from a radically different version of ecology than that subscribed to by the “followers” of nature. Examples of this are easy to find – Rolston (1979) is convinced we ought not to consider deriving a moral injunction to “follow nature” at least in any imitative sense since

nature proceeds with an absolute recklessness that is not only indifferent to life, but results in senseless cruelty which is repugnant to our moral sensibilities. Life is wrested from her creatures by continual struggle, usually soon lost; and those “lucky” few who survive to maturity only face more extended suffering and eventual collapse in disease and death (17).

Rolston and others believe that nature has condemned us to live by attacking other life: nature is a gory blood bath; all we can be sure of at the hands of nature is calamity.¹ Indeed, if we accept this view of the way nature “is” it seems easy to conclude that nature is not worthy of our moral imitation (in the sense of “following” nature). It is but a short leap to the proposition that nature, rather than requiring our obedience to a harmonious natural law, is suffering from a lack of humanity’s controlling, ordering, and moralizing skills: “good men” will attempt to bring order to nature rather than seek order in nature.

This changing interpretation of what nature “is” continues into the present. Although the common public perception of ecology is based on the ideas of community, climax and stability, the modern ecological description of nature is not much different from the version ascribed to by J.S. Mill, based as it is on ideas of ceaseless natural disturbance. That disturbance ecology immediately seems to teach us is that no firm guide to behaviour can be found in nature. If we can no longer determine, either empirically or intuitively what is “healthy”; if what nature is is in constant flux, disturbed, unsteady, chaotic; if change is the only constant in nature, then no moral ought is easily derivable, at least not one of the sort with which we are familiar (Worster, 1994).

(A) Moral Science

There is a growing consensus among historians of science (and some scientists themselves) that the way we see nature is merely a reflection of the way we see ourselves. Indeed, the distinction between “us” and “nature” is increasingly apparent as a cultural artifact (Evernden, 1992). What is made clear throughout Worster’s (1994) history of ecology, is the extent to which our interpretations of nature are themselves historical. When nature is conceived as the domain of final causes, final forms, a static realm of cooperation and harmony – the harmony of nature reflecting the harmony in the mind of God – then all creatures have their proper place and role in a fixed, natural, society. Indeed society itself was seen as a fixed, static entity, with every person born into his or her appropriate, hierarchical station. But when human society is filled with turmoil, strife, ceaseless change and conflict, the domain of nature becomes a parallel realm of violence, competition, resources, commerce. What was a truism in one age – nature knows best – becomes an ironic indictment of another age’s naiveté. The question “can and ought we to follow nature?” changes with each successive alteration in perception of the natural (dis)order.²

Although it has been a common ploy of those who hope to “speak for nature” to draw on the authority of ecological science to bolster the moral legitimacy of their claims, the recent history of ecology could be characterized as a continuing effort to strip human “projections” of value, judgment and meaning from a strictly material science (Worster, 1994). Many ecologists have taken great pains to distance their science from those who would seek moral virtue, or at the least scientific support, from its findings.³ Despite such efforts, many still believe that ecology can interpret moral lessons which are “inherent” in the relations and processes of nature for an eager society.

This aptly serves to illustrate the difficulty inherent in basing a claim about the “proper” way for humans to behave on an understanding of nature provided by ecological science (or what passes for it). Those whose description of nature (as provided by ecology) was that of a force which is reckless, cruel and selfish drew a very different set of precepts about humanity’s moral obligations to nature than those whose scientific description of nature involved balance and diversity, or even constant change and disturbance.

What I have been describing is yet another example of what logicians have called the naturalistic fallacy: the idea that because something is true in nature that it ought to be true for “man.” It seems as though a further fallacy, if not in logic then at least in strategy, is revealed by reliance on supposed natural truths; when the “is” of nature changes, the moral construct it has been supporting becomes subject to question, as does the authority and reliability of those who constructed that moral imperative (Evernden, 1985). In their reliance on ecological arguments, it may be said that “environmentalists” are engaging in a ruse which perhaps deceives themselves more than it persuades others.

Speaking of Nature

We are told of an era in which value and truth were seen to reside in the mind of God, and through God, as patterns in Nature. What the science of ecology attests to is a history of removing divine properties from the world. The project of science as a whole has been to make the world natural – to remove from our belief, all that is not amenable to material explanation. The supernatural is not the province of science – only that which is explainable – namable – is within its jurisdiction. Through some curious quirks of history best dealt with by others (Worster, 1994; Bronowski, 1978), science has come to be the arbiter of truth for our society, and science deals only with those elements of the world which are accessible to its methods.

What then can we say about attempts to derive natural moral imperatives for society? To what can we refer to as our ultimate standard? What is missing from the philosophers' discussions of fallacies or the activists' debate over strategy is the acknowledgment that arguments such as "Nature Knows Best" are yet another attempt to establish the existence of an external arbiter for action, judgment and morality. Nature fails to fulfill this role precisely because, at the moment ecology determines nature to be other than what we had thought, it is revealed as a construct of our own making.

What I have been leading up to asking is this: do we know what are we talking about when we attempt to "defend nature"? When the ecologists tell us that nature is disordered, violent, or subject to constant and random change, what is contained in the nature of which they speak? Is it the same entity the defenders of Nature are seeking to protect?

As C.S. Lewis noted "we are always conquering nature, for nature is the name for what we have, to some extent, already conquered." In order for nature to serve as an external, independent repository of the *verum, bonum* and *pulchrum* it must be conceived as something beyond human understanding and control. In other words, nature must remain (in at least some respects) supernatural. Yet the entire project of science, and of the science of ecology (despite its remnant Arcadian tendencies) has been to make the world known, to explain the mysterious, to make the fantastic common – to make Nature natural. In order to accomplish this, it has been necessary to redefine our terms. What we find is inherently unexplainable must be removed from the common conception of "nature." Nature (as defined by ecology) is of no moral concern because we have stripped the concept itself of moral interests so that in conquering the material elements (while ignoring emergent, spiritual or moral properties) we conquer only that which we have named. We reduce things to mere nature in order that we may conquer them. Yet it is most often those supernatural qualities, whether described as emergence, self-will, or mystery, that draw many environmentalists into the fray to "save nature." Yet it is precisely these qualities that the science of ecology is distinctly unqualified to interpret for a world so apparently eager for them.

So if the Nature which ecology is describing is mere nature and thus a thing of our own creation, containing nothing which we do not attribute to it, attempts to use such an entity as an external source of moral imperatives for human society becomes a circular proposition. We find in nature only that which we have put there. When Pascal says "there is nothing which we cannot make natural," he is referring to the stripping of supernatural, inexplicable, mysterious elements from the world in order to make it material – amenable to our dissection and control. Once this is the case, there is truly "nothing natural which we do not destroy." Through a small reworking of an "environmentalist's" phrase we learn that perhaps we are hazarding the world by making it natural.

A Divine "Science"

Perhaps we should be asking why some people among us, in this age of relativism, appear so determined to invoke standards of absolute morality in both our relationships with other people and most particularly with nature (here described as the ultimate source of morality: nature knows best, ergo follow nature). It truly appears then, as though the ought has been leading the is. We have found a moral ought in which many appear to believe, and we go seeking some external authority, some external source of value, because we fear our lack of persuasive force without one. Yet that moral value had to come from somewhere. As Pascal said (of God): "you would

not seek me had you not found me." Clearly, those people engaged in seeking justification for their moral statement have access to some sort of moral authority in which they devoutly believe. By what name shall we call such an authority? To what can we attribute its force for those who recognize it? Whatever it is, we seem increasingly incapable of mounting a defense of it in the face of a society, and a science, which denies its very existence.

Despite all attempts to the contrary, it appears as though ethical arguments based on ecological science can prove a treacherous prospect for the unwary advocate. Increasingly, it seems as though C.S. Lewis' admonishment may be the most instructive: "an ought must not be dismissed because it cannot produce some is as its credential. If nothing is self-evident, nothing can be proved. Similarly, if nothing is obligatory for its own sake, nothing is obligatory at all" (1947: 53). Moral principles are not things you can reach as conclusions, they are premises. In this way, the solution to the environmental crisis may be a moral one after all. Environmentalists, perhaps, should not be too hasty to dispense with piety.

Notes

- 1 These admonishments are best summed up by John Stuart Mill in his essay *Nature*: "everything, in short, which the worst men commit either against life or property is perpetrated on a larger scale by natural agents."
- 2 Of course, the actual history of the relationship between "nature and society" and its interpretation through the science of ecology is much more complicated than this. See Donald Worster's *Nature's Economy* for a more complete rendition.
- 3 Paul Colinvaux truly is the exemplar of this stance. He writes "Ecology is not the science of pollution...still less is it the science of doom...I write this book in some anger to retort to this literature...I take the opportunity to brand as nonsense tales of destroying the atmosphere, killing lakes and hazarding the world by making it simple." Colinvaux's conclusions regarding the "social implications of ecological knowledge" are that the true model for ecologists is that of Darwin who "did not write of pollution and crisis but of how the world worked" (all quotes taken from *Why Big Fierce Animals are Rare*, 1979).

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