TOWARD AN AXIOLOGY OF NATURE

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"Excuse me, sir, you have something to tell me, don't you?" The tiny man moved forward on the counterpane and looked Peter keenly in the eyes, as though anxious as to how he would receive the message he had to deliver. He spoke in a low thin voice. "God is dead," Peter understood him to say. Peter sat up. "I *know* that," he protested. "And you didn't say that anyway. Nietzsche did." He felt put upon, as though by an impostor. Kant smiled. "Yes, Nietzsche said that. And even when Nietzsche said it, the news was not new, and maybe not so tragic after all. Mankind can live without God." "I agree," said Peter. "I've always lived without him." "No, what *I* have to say to you is something more important. You did not hear me correctly. Listen now carefully and remember." Again he looked Peter steadily and searchingly in the eyes. "Perhaps you have guessed it. Nature is dead, *mein kind*."

Mary McCarthy
Birds of America[1]

Ah, but it is hard to find this tract of the divine in the midst of this life we lead, in this besotted humdrum age of spiritual blindness, with its architecture, its business, its politics, its men!

Hermann Hesse
Steppenwolf[2]

That we are destroying the world is commonplace: we need only look from the pollution of cities to the pillage of Vietnam, from the poisoning of the countryside to the bull-dozing of the Big Thicket. The problem is clear; the solution is not. We get bogged down, I fear, when we seek the solution in its source; when we believe that if we discover how the problem arose, we will then have in hand the answer to it. Perhaps the situation is an offspring of the mind-body problem or the spirit-flesh dichotomy, or Pauline Christianity, or the call for dominion in genesis or the sterility of the Newtonian world-view or in general what Whitehead calls the "bifurcation of nature." Or perhaps the "cause," and I use the word cautiously, is a combination of all of these possibilities. Whatever may be the source of the difficulty, numerous have been the suggestions concerning its solution. Alan Watts, for example, recommends a new experience (or a reinterpretation of an old one).[3] Dane Rudhyar wants a "metaphysics of wholeness" which will lead to *The Planetarization of Consciousness.*[4] Ian Barbour recommends ". . . three strands in an interdisciplinary theology and an ethic of ecology: man's unity with nature, God's immanence in nature, and responsible control of technology."[5] similarly, Harold Schilling advocates a "holistic ethic,"[6] while Huston Smith suggests that we try to grasp the world in terms of the *Tao.*[7] I do

not want to dispute what these people have to say. In fact, the contrary is the case: I will assume many (though perhaps not all) of the positions these people argue. I want to propose another solution; but I hope that this possibility will not be *just another* answer among others, but will be one which comprehends and clarifies these others (although I surely don't try to demonstrate this in so short a paper as this). We ought to admit this much as certain: the problem directly concerns our fundamental attitude toward the world and ourselves. As such it falls squarely within the province of *value*. Accordingly, I propose that we seek to remedy our ills with a study of value, with axiology—a logic of worth. I thus presuppose that we can systematically understand and teach *value*, insofar as we can show people how they do in fact value and, *given certain presuppositions* , how they ought to value. This paper is about those presuppositions.

Hitherto philosophy has sought to raise itself to the level of science. We must, however, raise science to the level of philosophy. But we shall not, as one might expect, accomplish this end by changing the method of science; rather, our variation must concern itself with the content and attitude of science. In short, we must temper the scientific understanding of the world with philosophical self-understanding. From this perspective, the synthesis of science and philosophy will yield a religious world-view. The horizon or mediating concept through which we will effect and comprehend this synthesis is the notion of *intrinsic value.*

I assume (and here I follow the axiology of Robert S. Hartman[8]) that value falls within three separate but related categories: systemic, extrinsic and intrinsic, in each of which value will be determined by "concept fulfillment." It should become clear that with regard to the understanding and teaching of value, the presupposition is not that we all value the same things but that we value them in the same way. I will briefly discuss each of these kinds of valuation, although our primary concern here will be with intrinsic value.

Systemic value arises out of the construction of a system, for example, geometry. Its corresponding value term is "perfection." Here, the properties by which we judge concept fulfillment are finite and if the concept is not fulfilled, then the object is not merely imperfect, rather it is just not that sort of thing. For example, within the system of geometry, a circle must be the locus of points in a plane equidistant from a given point: anything more or less and "it" is not a circle—any circle is a perfect circle. To value something systemically then is to value it as an element of a system.

A thing is valued extrinsically not as an element within a system but as a member of a certain class. The corresponding value term for extrinsic value is "goodness." Whereas we arrive at the systemic concept by

construction, we obtain the analytic concepts for extrinsic valuation by abstraction (of common properties). By abstraction we get a class definition. But things valued extrinsically have more properties than just the difinitional ones–otherwise the abstraction is not an abstraction. For example, in order to be a watch a thing must meet certain minimal definitional requirements. For valuation, we add expositional predicates to the definition–e.g., "waterproof," "self-winding," etc. If we apply our concept to a given object, then it is a good watch (i.e., a good member of its class) if it is a watch at all (meets definitional requirements) *and* if it has the properties which correspond to the exposition (added valuational predicates). Notice that this theory of value does not presuppose that we all must value the same watch; rather it presupposes that if we value watches extrinsically, then we do so in the same way. Whereas the synthetic concept of a system has a finite number of predicates (formal relations, actually), an analytic concept theoretically has a denumerably infinite of predicates. Fortunately we value with only a few of these; but the more of the predicates (and their corresponding properties) of which we are aware, the more acutely can we value extrinsically–this is why we have experts.

The last type of value within Hartman's[9] system is intrinsic and its corresponding value term is "uniqueness." we must be careful here because intrinsic value is quite different from systemic and extrinsic value. It is on the order of an *experience* rather than an evaluation. Its intension is the singular concept or "unicept": its extension is an individual. Instead of "unicept" we might as well say "open concept" or in fact "no concept at all," since to value intrinsically is to value without conceptual restrictions–it is to value the individual *qua* individual. Accordingly, when we value instrinsically, we do not judge or evaluate, rather we experience the individual in its individuality, in its uniqueness. We take the object to be valuable in and of itself, regardless of what class concepts might be applicable to it.

Hartman has argued that human individuals are infinitely more valuable than other individuals and should accordingly be valued intrinsically. I do not want here to argue directly against the view but merely to point out its potential dangers, especially with regard to our ecological situation. For if we push this view we might tend to elevate the human community above the rest of nature, in the fashion for example of Kant and Fichte. I need only quote from Kant's *Lecture on Ethics:*

> In fact we have only other-regarding duties towards men. Inanimate things are completely subject to our will, and our duties to animals are duties only with reference to ourselves.[10]

He says again later,

> But so far as animals are concerned, we have no direct duties. Animals are not self-conscious and are there merely as a means to an end. That end is man.[11]

This is one of the attitudes we are trying to avoid. Yet, despite his tendencies toward humanism, I can remember Hartman's remarking to me one day that I would begin to see the subtleties of his system when I could see that pulling the wings off a fly was axiologically equivalent to torturing a human being. We need to see what one might mean by such "axiological equivalence."

As we have seen, when we value an individual thing intrinsically, we experience it *as* an individual, in its uniqueness. Yet, *qua unique*, there seems to be a sense in which each individual is equal to each other, that being insofar as each individual is or *could be* valued intrinsically. This is to say that all entities are equal to each other from the axiological perspective of uniqueness. At this point let us presuppose that we ought to value intrinsically. From our axiological concept of uniqueness, then, we should ideally value all things as they are in and of themselves. But what does this mean? Perhaps it will be helpful to use Kantian terminology. To value all things intrinsically, as though they have intrinsic worth, is to extend Kant's Kingdom of Ends such that it covers not merely the human community but the world-community. Hence, by presupposing that we ought to value each individual intrinsically we are presupposing that we treat each individual not merely as a means but as an end in itself. From the point of view of the moral concept of fairness, our presupposition means that we need to extend the notion of fairness to all things, not merely to persons. I will now try to say why I think this presupposition to be justifiable.

I believe that there comes a point (or several points) in our philosophy at which we reach rock bottom, at which we reach an (at least tentatative) absolute, an absolute being, as Fichte points out,[12] that which has no further ground but in some sense constitutes its own ground. We cannot give ordinary reasons for these absolutes–indeed it is they which will determine that which constitutes a reason. Their justification is to be found in the enhancement and enrichment which they bring to the life which is guided by them or in the workability of the system which springs from them. I want to suggest that we adopt the principle of valuing all things intrinsically as such an absolute. This suggestion means then that we ought to treat all things as though they had intrinsic worth. If this assumption is justified then it will be so not because of more basic principles from which it is derivable but because of the harmony and richness which hopefully will result from having adopted it.

Now, our principle must have two aspects: ideal and practical, which I classify as deontological and utilitarian, respectively. We need two aspects because of the tremendous problems encountered in a strictly deontological attitude. The most obvious one is that it would be virtually impossible to adopt this ideal as one's absolute duty and at the same time practically function in the world. Thus in some cases we might be forced to compromise our absolute, tempering it with a utilitarian (or naturalistic) ethic of consequences. I have in mind here a holistic ethic such as that put forth by Harold Schilling:

> Such an ethic would accept the inevitability of tension between individual and group, between what is best for the individual and what is best for the common good, and would seek a balance between the two by emphasizing the needs, not of the individual in and of himself, but of the *individual in community*. This would be recognizing the supremacy of relatedness, interdependence, and wholeness, rather than of independence, self-sufficiency, and isolation; and of communality, rather than of rugged individualism. Also it would be taking cognizance of the great fact of natural existence that the individual–human and nonhuman–derives existence, character, and meaning from the relationships that make up the community.[13]

Thus I would advocate that even if at times we have to give up our deontological absolute in favour of a utilitarianism, we should adopt a holistic ethic which emphasizes the world-community. One might ask then, why we need the deontological aspect at all if we have to surrender it at times. We must keep in mind that, as Aristotle points out, ethics is not a matter of accident, but of character. I am maintaining then that we are much *more likely* (although we may never be certain) to treat the world decently, to develop "good" character by assuming, and *always keeping in mind*, the deontological principle. For we are trying to bridge the gap between what we *ought* to do and what we *can* do, and by assuming our deontological absolute as an ideal guide we keep our end always in view. In this regard our means and ends are the same, since both aspects spring from the fundamental attitude toward the world which this axiology advocates and from the ontological assumption that what is valued intrinsically, although it may be valued for or in its uniqueness, cannot be taken as ontologically distinct or separate but as an interrelated aspect of the whole. I believe that these conclusions will make more sense if we see them in the light of their possible religious implications, to which we now, in closing, turn.

To say that a thing has intrisic value is to attribute to it what Kant might call dignity or worth. But to say it has this sort of dignity or worth is in a sense to say that it has an intrinsic right to be, it has equal claims on existence. In this sense we might take each thing to be sacred or divine. If we make this assumption of the sacrality of all things, then I think we are

much less likely to do them harm. I am not suggesting here that we go to the extreme, say, of Jainism, for such an extreme ultimately destroys itself. Surely, we destroy even when we eat, but (and here we need the second aspect of our basic principle) we can be careful and we can replace and rebuild and regulate our activities. In other words, if we treat all things solely as ends in themselves or as so-sacred-that-none-can-be-violated, then we are possibly reduced to something like Jainism or suicide. But that too is to destroy. Our alternative is this: we must remain aware that we use the rest of the world and the rest of the world uses us. We are all interrelated and interdependent *means* towards the fulfillment of each other. This is what it means to be an aspect of an ecosystem. But our extended categorical imperative, as it were, demands of us that we treat all things not *merely as means* but as ends in themselves as well. Thus we must see in those things we have too long taken to be profane that which is sacred. With respect to the deontological, obsolutist aspect of our basic ethical principle I quote Huston Smith:

> Absolute and relative completely interpenetrate without obstruction or hindrance. They are one and the same thing. With this realization the aspirant discovers that everything in the world about him, every tree and rock, every hill and star, every bit of dust and dirt, as well as every insect, plant, and animal, himself included, are manifestations of the Tao and their movements are functionings of the Tao. Everything, just as it is, is in essence holy.[14]

Yet, with regard to the utilitarian, practical aspect of our principle, I quote Schilling:

> At this point a word of caution. Nature is a subject about which it seems easy to be unduly sentimental. It is, of course, quite natural to become emotionally involved with a lovely tree or breath-taking landscape or a primeval wilderness area that is threatened by an industrial development, and to want to protect it fiercely and at all costs–without giving sufficient thought to what those costs may be for the common good. Moreover, it seems all too easy to let one's logic falter with respect to this subject, and to suppose that because life in general is regarded as sacred, all living creatures in particular are to be regarded as sacrosanct and absolutely inviolable.[15]

NOTES

[1] Mary McCarthy, *Birds of America*, (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1971) p. 288.

[2] Hermann Hesse, *Steppehwolf* (San Francisco: Rhinehart Press, 1963), p. 30.

[3] This is, of course, a central theme in Watts' literature. See, for example, Alan W. Watts, *The Book* (New York: Collier Books, 1971).

[4] See Dane Rudhyar, *The Planetarization of Consciousness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

[5] Ian G. Barbour, "Attitudes Toward Nature and Technology," in *Earth Might Be Fair*, Ian G. Barbour, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), p. 166. It should become clear that I am greatly indebted to this volume.

[6] See Harold K. Schilling, "The Whole Earth is the Lord's: Toward a Holistic Ethic," in *Earth Might be Fair.*

[7] See Huston Smith, "Tao Now: An Ecological Testament," in *Earth Might Be Fair.*

[8] See Robert S. Hartman, *The Structure of Value: Foundations of Scientific Axiology* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969).

[9] See, for example, Robert S. Hartman, "Four Axiological Proofs for the Infinite Value of Man," *Kant-Studien*, 1964.

[10] Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. by Louis Infield (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 191.

[11] Ibid., p. 239.

[12] J. G. Fichte, *Science of Knowledge* (*Wissenschaftslehre*), ed., and trans. by Peter Heath and John Lachs (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970), p. 93.

[13] Schilling, op. cit., p. 109.

[14] Smith, op. cit., p. 78.

[15] Schilling, op. cit., p. 111.

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