

## Ethics and Environment: Can There Be a Consensus Across Cultures?

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Could there be within the human race, a moral sense that binds the species to the natural environment? Are there primal emotions about nature, and would these then provide a basis for a more nearly universal human ethic of environmental sustainability? Would recognizing and working with such archetypes then empower more persuasive reasoned argument?

Whether ethics proceeds legitimately from emotion or reason is a venerable discussion which need not be joined here. It is hoped to draw power from both by fashioning rational arguments which should stand on their own, while at the same time seeking to align such arguments with an emotionally rooted moral sense. The term “moral sense” is used in deference to the British moral sense school of ethical thought.<sup>1</sup> The concept of a moral sense might also be usefully seen in terms of a Jungian archetype, or perhaps as propensities encouraged in human DNA.

It would seem clear that arguments about the environment tap the deepest passions, as people have risked careers and lives to express concern about environmental damage. At the same time, opposition to the environmental movement is passionate as well, drawing strength from heartfelt arguments concerning liberty, private property, a need to dominate nature, or simple hunger. These might also be seen as taking power from deep moral

senses. In this context, there may be a sense in people that prefers liberty to enslavement, possession to poverty, or power to weakness. The natural drive to feed one's self and family in the short run may be the opposition's strongest single argument in terms of its ability to drive daily choice. These senses, the morality of which should be considered carefully, almost certainly empower many rational arguments against environmentalists and environmental sustainability.

It appears that the values which lie most deeply within humankind, which constitute an innermost sense of right and wrong, must then create life's great commitments and conflicts. What senses within the heart drive a passionate commitment to the environment? What ethical arguments should best give form to these feelings? And what drives the opposition?

In order to advance such an inquiry, this preliminary taxonomy is offered in the hope that it will stimulate research and discussion. An ethic is advanced here which depends upon feelings concerning what is holy and the responsibilities thereto, as well as the sense of community and the sense of legacy. A preliminary exploration of counterargument is then considered, where such counterargument might also be grounded in the deepest human senses of right and wrong.

### A Sense of the Holy

To be in awe, to sense majesty and power in contrast to one's own insignificance, to be to be fascinated and drawn toward this power, these have been identified by Otto as components of religious experience.<sup>ii</sup> They are components of the human experience of "the holy."

The majesty of nature evokes this sense in many and for these people the veneration and protection of the environment takes on the power of religion. While this may stand on its own, it may also be conjoined with the understandings of more formal religion, or wisdom tradition. Students of comparative religion have found a nature theme in many of the world's religions and wisdom traditions. For example, Campbell characterizes the Hindu position as "...an essential affirmation of the cosmic order as divine."<sup>iii</sup> In Taoism he finds a similar sense:

...in China, the vocabulary of Taoism associated the idea of the Tao with the order of nature, in Heaven and on Earth; so that the ideal of the sage was of a man who, like the mythical mystic Lao Tzu himself, had escaped from the social sphere to nature, where his own nature had developed amid the noble influences of mountains, waters, trees and wonderful mists.<sup>iv</sup>

This is not just poetic. The way in which different societies develop a sense of the holy has been observed to have practical economic implication as well. For example, Weber has associated some forms of Protestant Christianity with economics:

...the religious valuation of restless, continuous, systematic work in a worldly calling, as the highest means to asceticism, and at the same time the surest and most evident proof of rebirth and genuine faith, must have been the most powerful conceivable lever for the expansion of that attitude toward life which we have here called the spirit of capitalism...<sup>v</sup>

If attitudes contributing to economic success can be attributed to a Protestant Christian sense of the holy, a similar theme may be found in a Japanese rendering of Zen Buddhism. Campbell characterizes different renderings of Buddhism:

The Indian Buddhist was disillusioned with the universe, the Chinese with society, the Japanese---not at all.<sup>vi</sup>

In parallel with the Protestant Christian perspective, this Japanese view encourages constructive worldly engagement. For example, Shichihei describes the application of Zen Buddhism to business in Japan using the teachings of the monk Shoshan. Here, humans are a part of the cosmic order and the essence of the cosmos is defined as Buddha. In this view, everyday labor is in fact Buddhist practice if performed with the right intention. As in Protestant Christianity, this kind of Buddhism sees such work as an ascetic exercise.<sup>vii</sup> Some modern Japanese firms including Panasonic are now operating successfully using this philosophy.<sup>viii</sup> There are other examples of what might be called “business as religious practice” as well. Scholars in Islam have committed great effort to the interpretation of business in a way suitable for Muslim practice.<sup>ix</sup> In India, application of Vedic scripture has been reported by Katiyar and Rekhi to improve corporate performance. They report:

Many are convinced that western management has outlived its relevance to the Indian psyche.<sup>x</sup>

In The United States, the last few years have been witness to a reform movement which makes use of concepts such as a “spiritual” business or a “spiritual” leader.<sup>xi</sup> This is not yet a majority movement and many business leaders are still fond of the phrase “business is business,” as though business had its own set of rules which function in isolation from the other values in the society. In the context of this discussion it should be clear that this perspective may not always prevail. Business may in fact be religion, or intimately involved with what is holy, and what is holy may be nature. The European philosopher Spinoza believed everything that exists is part of a single system, which is at the same

time nature and God.<sup>xii</sup> Those with similar perspectives will be most passionately committed to defense of the natural environment.

### A Sense of Responsibility

Among the world's great monotheisms, Islam, Christianity and Judaism, there is a sense of the holiness in nature which is somewhat more complex than the unity described by Spinoza. In these systems of thought God and nature are separate but closely connected. Nature is God's creation, and the human species is responsible to God for the way in which humans care for and utilize nature. For example, Muslims believe that the heavens and earth were created by Allah, belong to Allah, and may only be used for just ends.<sup>xiii</sup> Ali characterizes the Muslim position as follows:

Allah's creation is all for a true, just and righteous purpose. It is not for mere whim or sport.<sup>xiv</sup>

In the Judeo-Christian view, nature is God's creation and the human species is given "dominion" over it.<sup>xv</sup> This dominion is to be exercised as a responsible "stewardship." Thus, the human species is the steward or caretaker for what is God's.<sup>xvi</sup> It is important to study the underpinnings of this view, as the balance between dominion, which expects that humans will in some sense conquer nature, and stewardship wherein humans care for nature, has been interpreted variously. A key to the interpretation would seem to be the Hebrew word *kovesh* which refers to the way in which humans might "conquer" nature. This term allows for substantial redirection of nature towards man's ends but, importantly, it also requires that resources and abilities be left intact.<sup>xvii</sup> If this requirement is met, businesses will be responsible for the full costing of their activities, leaving the environment "intact" in this sense. Despite its vulnerability to various interpretations, the concept of stewardship is compatible with a real love for nature and can drive the conscientious care of nature.

Responsibility to God will be a most powerful argument for environmentally sustainable practices when making the case before orthodox believers in the Islamic or Judeo-Christian communities.

### A Sense of Community

The sense of community can be powerful in the human heart and in the formal discussion of ethics as well. No issue will force the consideration of community more powerfully than care of the natural environment, for it is impossible to partition the air, ocean or ozone according to a traditional understanding of private property. The idea that "you breathe your air and I'll breathe mine" is simply not workable. The pollution from one industrial state must eventually be shared by all.

Relationships within the human community comprise a central and well developed theme in ethics, whether derived from religious or secular sources. In Christianity the love of God and neighbor are the highest commandments, where the love of neighbor is defined broadly to include a mandate to love one's enemies.<sup>xviii</sup> Buddhism teaches that the enlightened person should be guided by a deep sense of compassion that includes all parts of creation.<sup>xix</sup> Confucianism regards "jen" or benevolence as the most effective power for harmonization of life on earth.<sup>xx</sup> Taoist tradition attributes the saying "I have only three things to teach: simplicity, patience, compassion." to Lao Tzu.<sup>xxi</sup> What is sometimes termed the Confucian "silver rule" (What you do not want done to you, do not do to others) is in remarkable parallel with the Christian "golden rule" (Do to others as you would have them do to you).<sup>xxii</sup> Islam teaches care for the poor and a sense of justice.<sup>xxiii</sup> Campbell summarizes the importance of a compassion ethic across religious communities:

I think of compassion as the fundamental religious experience  
and, unless that is there, you have nothing.<sup>xxiv</sup>

There are parallel insights in philosophy. The Kantian categorical imperative may be formulated as: "So act as to use humanity, both in your own person and in the person of every other, always at the same time as an end, never simply as a means."<sup>xxv</sup> In the modern discussion of sustainability, McDonough and Braungart will also make a connection between community and religion. They argue for a shift from a "cradle to the grave" to a "cradle to cradle" view of materials use:

What would have happened, we sometimes wonder, if the  
industrial revolution had taken place in societies that  
emphasize the community over the individual, where people  
believed not in a cradle to grave life cycle, but in  
reincarnation?<sup>xxvi</sup>

Regardless of an industrial history developed in the tradition of individualism, new scientific developments will inexorably force the issue of community. Even the most individualistic of societies will be forced to rediscover their roots in the sense of human community. Love of neighbor is a sufficient argument for environmental sustainability, even for those who cannot love nature.

### A Sense of Legacy

Unable to love nature, God, or neighbor, some may still manage another love, the love for their own children. It is perhaps one of the most powerful moral senses, the sense of family, children and legacy. Great family dynasties have been built on this, and it marks a species as one of the higher creatures, in that higher creatures are concerned for their young. While the lower creatures such as sharks and turtles might spawn their young and

leave them to their own devices, most of the higher creatures will render substantial care for their young, to the point of sacrifice, sometimes to the point of death.

Are humans one of these higher creatures? In a speech entitled “Are Humans Smarter than Bacteria?” Suzuki likens humanity to the micro-organisms in a pond which is being destroyed by algae.<sup>xxvii</sup> Like the micro-organisms, humanity seems not to understand its situation. It seems not to understand that it is destroying the prerequisites to its own survival. It might well be asked whether humans are indeed higher creatures than the sharks and the turtles.

This is the most basic argument in this ethic, and as an argument for simple survival of the species perhaps the most easily made universal.

### The Ethic and the Argument

The ethic here suggested rests upon some of humanity’s deepest senses: the sense of what is holy and the responsibility thereto, the sense of community and the sense of legacy. Numerous rational arguments may be subsumed to these deep feelings concerning what is right, and numerous rational arguments placed in opposition. Some of the most effective arguments placed in opposition will also rest upon deep senses of right and wrong, and these must be treated with care. These will include arguments for individual liberty, private property, and economic growth as necessary to feed a population. Recognizing the strengths of these counterarguments will encourage deeper study and should result in the discovery, or in some cases the rediscovery, of critical principles.

As an example of the kind of thinking which will be required, the work of John Paul II might be considered. Here he articulates a useful understanding of the relationship between individual freedoms and the freedom of capital as he considers whether to advocate “capitalism”:

If by “capitalism” is meant an economic system which recognizes the fundamental and positive role of business, the market, private property and the resulting responsibility for the means of production, as well as free human creativity in the economic sector, then the answer is certainly in the affirmative. Even though it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of a “business economy”, “market economy” or simply “free economy.” But if by “capitalism” is meant a system in which freedom in the economic sector is not circumscribed within a strong juridical framework, which places it at the service of human freedom in its totality, and which sees it as a particular aspect of that freedom, the core of which is ethical and religious, then the reply is certainly negative.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Thus, while recognizing the generic superiority of pluralistic market economies to totalitarian arrangements where individual liberty is concerned, it should also be recognized that the extension of the argument to an absolute freedom for corporations might actually result in an impairment of individual liberty. The naïve connection between individual liberty and corporate freedom must be replaced with something more sophisticated. Reconsideration of corporate charters, as explored by Hawken, might be in order.<sup>xxix</sup> A preference for individual liberty over corporate liberty should form the basis for legislation when the two forms of liberty are not operating in mutual support. This may require a rediscovery of the distinctions between natural and civil liberties in order that the juridical framework, the system of law and justice within which corporations operate, is fashioned with wisdom.

The sanctity of private property will be defended with great passion as well, and arguments will be made concerning its relationship to individual liberty.<sup>xxx</sup> While the ability to build wealth certainly supports the liberty of the wealthy individual, it is also useful to consider the roots of the original argument. For example, study of the writing of John Locke, a primary advocate of private property in the western tradition, yields the following important limitation to private property rights:

Nothing was made by God for man to spoil or destroy.<sup>xxxi</sup>

In the consideration of such arguments, the movement toward environmental sustainability will take on a decidedly interdisciplinary flavor. Scientists will force the issue, as the society must pass from the ignorant state of Suzuki's micro-organisms in the algae pond to a state of species awareness concerning the environmental challenge. At the same time, others must argue the ethical and practical issues of the transition, taking on such difficult issues as population control, corporate charters and the technology of environmentally sustainable business practice.

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<sup>i</sup> The British Moral Sense School is associated with the idea that people have natural feelings which lead the individual to promote the public interest. Authors associated with the school include Shaftsbury, Butler, Hutcheson and Hume.

<sup>ii</sup> Substantially condensed from Rudolph Otto, The Idea of the Holy, (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 13-71.

<sup>iii</sup> Joseph Campbell, Oriental Mythology, (New York: Arkana Penguin 1991), p. 339.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid., p.488.

<sup>v</sup> Max Weber, "Asceticism and the Spirit of Capitalism," chap. 5 of The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, trans. T. Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), pp. 155-64, 170-172, 180. Also as published in On Moral Business, eds. Max I. Stackhouse, Dennis P. McCann and Shirley J. Roels, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), pp. 248-251. Especially note p. 251.

<sup>vi</sup> Campbell, p. 489.

<sup>vii</sup> Yamamoto Shichihei, "Zen and the Economic Animal," Entrepreneurship: The Japanese Experience, 5 (March 1983): 1-7. Also as published in Stackhouse et. al., pp. 389-395.

<sup>viii</sup> Information concerning Panasonic has been taken from an interview with Dr. Masato Yamazaki, Assistant Professor of Economics, Aquinas College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

<sup>ix</sup> Consider for example such works as Studies in Islamic Economics, ed. Khurshid Ahmad, (Leicester, U.K.: The Islamic Foundation, 1980).

<sup>x</sup> Arun Katiyar and Shefali Rekhi, "Guiding Principles," India Today, 15 July 1994, pp. 42, 43. Also as published in Stackhouse et. al., pp. 761-763. Especially note p. 762.

<sup>xi</sup> See Marc Gunther, Faith and Fortune, (New York: Crown Business, 2004), pp. 44-61, 326-254.



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<sup>xii</sup> See Benedict De Spinoza, The Chief Works of Benedict De Spinoza; The Ethics, trans. R.H.M. Elwes, (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), pp. 43-74.

<sup>xiii</sup> See the Holy Qur'an with commentary by A. Yusif Ali, (Kansas City: Manar International, 1998), 15:85; 44:39; 46:3 which correspond to pp. 537, 1099, and 1111 respectively.

<sup>xiv</sup> See the commentary section, The Holy Qur'an, p. 537.

<sup>xv</sup> See the Thompson Chain Reference Bible, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1983), Genesis 1:28-30; 9:2, 3 which correspond to pp. 2, 8 respectively.

<sup>xvi</sup> The Bible, Genesis 2:15; Exodus 19:5; Leviticus 25:23; Psalm 24:1; I Corinthians 4:2; I Timothy 6:20; which correspond to pp. 2, 75, 127, 564, 1167, and 1216 respectively. See also Harwood Hoover Jr., "Christian Ethics and Market Mechanisms of Profit: the Intersection of Scriptural Themes with Models of Market Structure," Journal of Biblical Integration in Business, fall 1998, p. 51.

<sup>xvii</sup> Kenneth B. Fradkin, Daniel Lapin, Clifford E. Librach, David Patterson and Gary Parras, (Editorial Board), "A Comprehensive Torah-Based Approach to the Environment," in Environmental Stewardship in the Judeo-Christian Tradition, ed. Michael B. Barkey, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: The Acton Institute, 2000), p. 12.

<sup>xviii</sup> The Bible, Mark 12: 29, 30 also Matthew 5:43-48, which correspond to pages 1037 and 990 respectively. For a development of this in the Roman Catholic tradition, see John Paul II, Veritatus Splendor, (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1993), pp. 24-27.

<sup>xix</sup> Frederick Mayer, The Great Teachers, (New York: the Citadel Press, 1967), p. 30.

<sup>xx</sup> Campbell, p. 415.

<sup>xxi</sup> Lao-Tzu, Tao Te Ching, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), p.67.

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<sup>xxii</sup> Compare the Confucian “silver rule” as found in Confucius, The Analects of Confucius, 12:2 (Franklin Center Pennsylvania: the Franklin Library, 1980), p.90, with the Christian “golden rule” in the Bible, Matthew 7:12 and Luke 6:31, pp. 991 and 1053 respectively. Note that despite the parallel, the Confucian rule is stated as negative injunction, while the Christian rule is stated as positive injunction.

<sup>xxiii</sup> For a discussion of Zakat and the Sadaqat-Ul-Fitr alms and charity expectations in Islam, see Muhammad Abdul Aleem Siddiqui, Elementary Teachings of Islam, (South Elgin Illinois: Library of Islam, 1995), pp. 69-72.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Joseph Campbell, The Power of Myth, (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), p. 265.

<sup>xxv</sup> Immanuel Kant as cited in H.J. Patton, The Categorical Imperative, A study in Kant's Moral Philosophy, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967), p.129.

<sup>xxvi</sup> William McDonough and Michael Braungart, Cradle to Cradle, (New York: North Point Press, 2002), p. 103.

<sup>xxvii</sup> David Suzuki, “Are Humans Smarter Than Bacteria?” A speech discussed in Paul Hawken, The Ecology of Commerce, (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), pp. 206, 207.

<sup>xxviii</sup> John Paul II, Centesimus Annus, (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1991), pp. 81, 82.

<sup>xxix</sup> Hawkin, p. 106.

<sup>xxx</sup> Barkey, pp. 48, 55-58.

<sup>xxxi</sup> John Locke, “Of Property,” Second Treatise: An Essay Concerning the True End of Civil Government, par. 23-38, 46-49, World Classic Series, (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), pp. 23-34, 39-42. Also published in Stackhouse et. al., pp. 203-207. Especially note p. 204.

