

Shifting Human-Nature

Is it possible for a human population of more than six billion people to share limited resources in a peaceful co-existence with the “more than human” world? This question has generated debates about water, endangered species, animal rights, social justice, militarism, biotechnology, and most recently the Kyoto Protocol: in addition these debates are keeping the concept of sustainability consistently in the public eye.¹ In response, there are increasing global concerns about forms of economic development that have undesirable social and ecological impacts. Values and patterns of behavior from the past are being put into question as humanity faces new challenges we have never known before. New pressures from globalization are creating opportunities for increased consciousness, which in turn is creating a revised set of values that will be necessary, if our diverse societies and the non-human world are to share and consume resources in an equitable and sustainable way.

The intent of this article is to explore, the historical development of the dominant belief systems and patterns of behavior that have led to the deeply engrained Western philosophical ideology, that sustains human superiority over the natural world. By examining these belief systems we can then begin to deconstruct these human values, in order to make room for a change in social consciousness that is required in order to support the ecological health of our planet. In Donald Hughes well known article: *The Ancient Roots of Ecological Crisis* he states, The modern ecological crisis is to a great extent the result of attitudes, which see nature as something to be freely conquered, used, and dominated without calculation of the result cost to mankind and the earth. These attitudes stem from particular ideas, which were held by ancient peoples who most influenced us. Animism, which saw the natural world as sharing human qualities and treated things and events in nature as sacred objects of respect and worship, was the dominate attitude in early antiquity and persisted almost everywhere in the Mediterranean world, but gradually gave way to others ways of thinking. In Israel, transcendent monotheism replaced animism’s “world full of gods.” Instead of giving divine in itself, nature was seen as a lower order

¹ Janes, Robert, R. and Conaty, Gerald, T. *Looking Reality in the Eye: Museums and Social Responsibility*. University of Calgary Press, Alberta, 2005. 2pp.

of creation, given as a trust to mankind with accountability to God.²

It was Aristotle (384 –322 BCE) who was both a philosopher and a scientist who first perpetuated this philosophical shift towards a human – centered belief system in society. Aristotle, in great detail wrote about five- hundred different animals in his works, including a hundred and twenty kinds of fish and sixty kinds of insects. Aristotle saw living creatures as evidence of design in nature; each species represented a different design for a particular purpose. He was the first to use dissection extensively. He regarded nature as a hierarchy, in which the function of the less rational and hence less perfect beings was to serve the more rational and more perfect.³ So he wrote, Plants exist for the sake of animals, and brute beasts for the sake of man – domestic animals for his use and food, wild ones (or any rate most of them) for food and other accessories of life, such as clothing and various tools.⁴

This philosophical ideology became the main belief system that weaved its way through Western culture. It was integrated into the early Christian writings of St. Paul, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. It was Aquinas that resonances Aristotle’s philosophies most closely, “Plants exist for the sake of animals and animals for the sake man. Sins against god, one’s human neighbors, or against oneself. Even charity does not extend to irrational creatures,” for, among other things, they are not included in “the fellowship of everlasting happiness.”⁵ The belief systems of Paul, Augustine and Aquinas continued to influence Christian thought within the Catholic Church as late as the nineteen century. Evidence of this was apparent when Pope Pius IX refused to allow a society for the prevention of cruelty to animals to be established in Rome because to do so implied duties towards animals.⁶ Christianity continued its

² Hughes, J. Donald. “The Ancient Roots of Our Ecological Crisis.” *Environmental Ethics: Diverges and Convergence*. Eds. Armstrong, Susan and Bolster, Richard. New York: McGraw Hill, 2003. 168

³ Singer, Peter. *Not for Humans Only: the place of non-humans in environmental issues*. *Environmental Ethics: an anthology*. Ed. Andrew Light and Holmes Rolsten 111. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2003. 55

⁴ *Politics*, 1256b.

⁵ Singer, Peter. *Not for Humans Only: the place of non-humans in environmental issues*. *Environmental Ethics: an anthology*. Ed. Andrew Light and Holmes Rolsten 111. 56

⁶ Singer, Peter. *Not for Humans Only: the place of non-humans in environmental issues*. *Environmental Ethics: an anthology*. Ed. Andrew Light and Holmes Rolsten 111. 56

anthropocentric attitude towards nature allowing and condoning the exploitation of the natural world.

However, it was not only the Catholic Church who considered humans to have greater worth over other species. The Judeo-Christian propagated the belief system that humans are superior to animals and plants because their creator has given them a higher place in the Great Chain of Being; the order of this hierarchy is as follows, God, angels, humans, non-humans, plants, and finally inanimate objects.

If we look at the biblical belief systems which support the argument that nature was created specifically to serve man, in comparison with the evolutionary theories that were developed by Descartes, Kant and Darwin one can see the same belief systems that support the ideology of man's dominance over the natural world were developed. For example, Rene Descartes (1596 – 1650) often called the father of modern philosophy, shaped the view that humans are distinctly different from animals and the rest of the natural world. In Descartes view, language and reason are the features that set humans apart from other species. He argues that the observed behaviors of all non-human creatures can be explained without ascribing minds and consciousness to them. He concludes that non-human animals can be viewed as no more than machines with parts assembled in intricate ways, based on Descartes rational, humans have little responsibility towards animals or the natural world, unless the treatment affects other humans.

By the end of the 15th century the technological superiority of Europe was such that its small, mutually hostile nations could spill out over all the rest of the world, conquering, looting, and colonizing.⁷

The next philosopher to consider in this analysis is Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804), a German philosopher during the age of enlightenment in the 18th century, was considered to be one of the great philosophical thinkers of all time. Kant asserted that only rational beings merit moral concern. He believed that for a rational being rationality is the same for all rational beings, all rational beings work for a common goal: which is to achieve a rational world. Since non-human

⁷ White, Lynne. "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis." *Environmental Ethics: What Really matters, what really works*. Ed. David Schmidt and Elizabeth Willcot. New York: Oxford University press. 2002. 9

animals and natural entities are not rational, they do not merit moral concern. Kent concluded that human beings have little or no responsibility towards animals or the natural world.

Next we come to Charles Darwin (1809 – 1882), who in 1859 published, *The Origin of Species*, where he proposed the theory of evolution for the first time. When his theory was first proposed, there had been significant debate because of the theological implications that came with it. Darwin's theory of evolution was composed of many parts, however for the purpose of this essay I would like to surmise that *The Origin of Species* was based upon the idea of common descent. Basically Darwin believed all species are related because they have all evolved from a common ancestor. This evolutionary process occurs because life is not a static system and species constantly change by means of natural selection. Even though Darwin's theories established a link between the human and non-human world, his concept of the theory of the process of "natural selection" was translated into, "mans superiority" over other non-human beings and supported the belief system of mans right to dominance over the non-human world.

The Industrial Revolution was also a time of evolution in regards to the relationship of humanity with nature. One must consider, prior to the Industrial Revolution even though the common belief of the time was in the inherent superiority of humans over the non-human world, society was still dependant upon nature. During the Industrial Revolution humanity proved that it no longer needed to depend on nature for its survival. The increasingly enormous role that technology has played in this adaptive system in Western European culture and now among its antecedents in North America was not at one time a given, but directly related to that decision long ago to use technology to beat back the power of nature. Human technological advancements made it possible to sustain larger and larger populations by exploiting more and more natural resources. Naturally, industrialization leads to environmental degradation. The concern with industrialization is that it is not a long-term solution to human and non-human sustainability, since it operates under the premise of tech fix, or the idea that humans will be able to invent new technologies to insure survival. These solutions, while economically advantages, do not consider the long-term impacts of this continual and escalating intensification of resource use and excavation; indeed they suppose an exhaustibility of resources. However the success of new technologies to insure

survival will not be successful because they are based upon attitudes and belief systems that exclude any responsibility towards the rights of the non-human world. Changing the attitudes and actions of human beings towards the non-human world is the determining factor, which will decide how the future plays out. Part of the challenge around sustainability is helping individuals and groups to gain an enhanced sense of consciousness about their world.

Published in 1949 as the finale to *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold's 'Land Ethic' defined a new relationship between people and nature and set the stage for the modern conservation movement. Leopold understood that ethics direct individuals to cooperate with each other for the mutual benefit of all. One of his philosophical achievements was the idea that this 'community' should be enlarged to include non-human elements such as soils, waters, plants, and animals, "*or collectively: the land.*"

In short the land ethic changes the role homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.⁸

Central to Leopold's philosophy human beings have an important role in protecting and preserving the health of this expanded definition of community. Ultimately, Leopold understood that our economic well being could not be separated from the well being of our environment. Therefore, he believed it was critical that people have a close personal connection to the land. Leopold called our attention towards the need to change our philosophy and current values with regards to the treatment of the environment.

Recently in 2004, Peter Singers article, "Not for Humans only: the place of non-humans in environmental issues", echoes Leopold's philosophical ideology as he asserts, when humans change the environment in which we live, we often harm ourselves. The harm that humans do to the environment, however, does not rebound solely, or chiefly, on humans. It is nonhumans who bear the most direct burden of human interference with nature.⁹

⁸ Leopold, Aldo. "The Land Ethic." *Environmental Ethics: an anthology*. Ed. Andrew Light and Rolston 111. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2003. 39

⁹ Singer, Peter. "Not for Humans Only: the place of nonhumans in environmental issues." *Environmental Ethics: an anthology*. Ed. Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston 111. Oxford Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2003. 55

Now that we are finally beginning to understand that the human – nature divide is the basis to our present peril. The question is; how can we alter these ingrained western belief systems that have developed over thousands of years? And in addition consider externalities such as, the legal issues pertaining to property rights, the treatment of common law resources, and the distribution of wealth across various economic classes, whether on a regional, or global in scale. These issues also exert a great influence on efforts to achieve sustainability.

One naturally puts forth the suggestion that more conservation education and environmental management is needed in order to maintain and distribute equitable natural resources. One would assume that by becoming more knowledgeable about the natural world, we would acquire sufficient ecological knowledge to solve many of the environmental problems caused by modern culture.

However, I must assert that even though we know why the number of living species in the world is decreasing, we know why global warming is occurring, we know why the world is in an oil decline, we know why our landfill sites are over capacity, we do little to alter this course of global destruction. I am not under valuing the importance of education, as I do believe educational institutions and environmental centers can be of great assistance and benefit in encouraging people to become more conscious of the relationships that link them to nature and to other people. I believe this is only one part of the process. The solution to these problems not only requires knowledge of ecological processes through science and education, they also depend upon changing the values and patterns of behavior of human beings. We need to create a change in social consciousness by fostering the development of new belief systems based upon developing an ecological conscience, in the early stages of child development. By teaching values that support the rights of the non-human world early on and by creating opportunities for children to connect to nature through real experiences, we can change the ecological health of our world. This new value system would encourage individuals to be personally accountable and responsible towards the non-human world. Through this concept of cultivating an ecological conscious we can create a culture that supports sustainability through a process of shared values that regards the non-human world in an equal relationship with humans.

