

# TYPES OF MOTIVES FOR ECOLOGICAL CONCERN

*by James A. Keller*

In the past few years we have heard much about the ecological crisis. We have been told that the growth of human population and the development of technology have brought about kinds of pollution that threaten the quality of human life and the survival of numerous species, including, perhaps, our own. A number of proposals aimed at resolving this or that aspect of the ecological crisis have been made by scientists and governmental leaders. But not nearly as much has been said explicitly about why we should be concerned about this crisis. More often the reason for concern has been more implicit than explicit in the literature; that is, we have been told what would happen if we did not do something, and it was assumed that we would not want that "something" to happen. For instance, we might be told that the pollution of the air in our cities is causing lung diseases and death; therefore, it is said, we ought to stop this pollution by taking certain steps.

I do not wish to imply that this kind of focus is unimportant or misguided; indeed, it is indispensable. Yet it seems to me that it might also be instructive to reflect on the kinds of motives which are offered, often in this rather implicit manner, for ecological concern. This will be my purpose in the present paper. More specifically, I wish to suggest that three quite different kinds of motives for ecological concern can be discerned in the literature and in contemporary discussions; then I wish to discuss some relations between these kinds of motives on the one hand, and the Christian tradition and Western philosophical thought since the Renaissance, on the other.

## THREE DIFFERENT MOTIVES

There are, I suggest, three different types of motives one might have for being concerned about the ecological crisis. I shall label these three as follows: (1) crass self-interest, (2) enlightened self-interest, and (3) altruism.

The attitude of the crassly self-interested can be epitomized as follows: "If we don't do something about the ecological crisis, it's

James A. Keller is assistant professor of philosophy at McMurray College, Jacksonville, Illinois.

liable to kill us"—and the "us" can refer to the speaker's family, his community, his nation, or the entire human race. The distinguishing characteristic of those whose type of motive is crass self-interest is that they view everything outside a certain selected group as nothing more than a means to the well-being of that group. The group may be as wide as the human race or much narrower, but it is (by definition) never wider than the human race. For the sake of brevity and concreteness, I shall restrict my attention to the case in which the group in question is the whole human race. (The critical comments which I shall make about this position in the course of this paper would apply with even more force if the group is construed more narrowly than the entire human species.) In summary, then, crass self-interest as a type of motive for ecological concern bases that concern on the claim that human well-being and perhaps human survival are at stake in the ecological crisis.

Now it seems to me that the type of motive I am calling crass self-interest is in effect simply a continuation of the attitude which has brought the ecological crisis upon us. The attitude to which I refer is one which places intrinsic value—the value of being an end rather than just a means—solely and exclusively in human beings. This attitude is responsible for the extinction or near extinction of several species and for changing the topography of great areas of our planet. For men who were working under the assumption that nothing outside the human race had intrinsic value or who did not care about the intrinsic value which anything outside the human race might have have plundered living species and devastated great areas. No doubt it is true that the concerns of men who did these things usually were not even as broad as the entire human species, but plainly their concerns did not go beyond our species. If they wanted some part of a living thing for their own purposes, they would kill the thing and take it. Thus, various fur-bearing animals were hunted for their hides, elephants were slaughtered for their tusks, and vast forests were cut for their timber—or simply to clear the land on which they grew. Practices of this sort created a variety of problems, including erosion as a result of deforestation. Moreover, men have sown pesticides, strip-mined, and in other ways shown their indifference to their nonhuman environment.

It is not my purpose in this paper to catalog man's ill-treatment of his natural environment; rather, I wish to call attention to the attitude—often not articulated—which underlies it. It is an attitude which sees nature as an inexhaustible lode of riches to be shaped and used as man sees fit. This is but the other side of the assumption

that all intrinsic value resides in human beings. For if it resides solely in human beings, then none resides in nature, and nature has value only as a means, only as a tool, for human purposes.

Just above, I claimed that crass self-interest as a kind of motive for ecological concern is simply a continuation of the attitude which has brought us our ecological woes. The reason for my claim is not hard to see. The attitude which brought us our woes is the attitude that nature is an inexhaustible lode of riches to be shaped and used as man sees fit. Those whose motive for ecological concern is crassly self-interested have learned that the lode of nature's riches is not inexhaustible. Therefore, they conclude that we must conserve nature, not because of any intrinsic value which it has, but because our self-interest demands it. We shall not survive and we shall not be able to continue indefinitely to use nature for our own ends unless we are careful how we use it. Thus, crass self-interest as a kind of motive for ecological concern does not challenge the fundamental assumption that nature has no intrinsic value and that it is to be used solely for human purposes; rather, this kind of motive merely urges care in that use.

The second type of motive for ecological concern is what I termed enlightened self-interest. Of course, one might say that the previous type of motive showed enlightenment. But the enlightenment did not concern nature itself, but only how we treated nature. With the first type of motive, man still was regarding nature simply as a means or tool for his well-being, but he was enlightened about the limits on how much the tool could be used. With the second type of motive, he has moved to an enlightened view of the sorts of contributions nature can make to man, not just the limits on how much we can use various entities and processes in nature. In other words, with this second type of motive, man has become aware of new ways to use nature, not just of limits on how much nature can be used in old ways. One may, for instance, come to recognize that nature itself has a kind of aesthetic value; it is beautiful or inspiring or magnificent. But one also feels that nature has this value only because there are human beings around to appreciate its beauty, to be inspired, or to find it magnificent. Thus, this type of motive also fails to attribute intrinsic value to nature. It admits that nature's value does not depend solely on how man can shape it or modify it for his own ends, but it still does not speak of a value for nature independent of human appreciation. At most, what is claimed is that man loses something when he misuses nature; what he loses is aesthetic or spiritual; it touches his heart or inmost being. But the tragedy of

ecological waste is still understood in terms of the way in which it robs the human spirit of something of great value. Thus, enlightened self-interest as a kind of motive for ecological concern is enlightened about what nature can contribute to man, but it still sees nature's value in terms of what it can contribute to man.

The third kind of motive for ecological concern is what I have termed altruism. This kind of motive is one which affirms that nature has intrinsic value, or more precisely that things in nature have value in themselves, entirely apart from man. Of course, a view of this type does not have to deny that nature also has the sorts of value for human beings noted in the first two types of motives. But it also insists that entities in our nonhuman environment have value in themselves, apart from human concerns and purposes. Such a view therefore provides a kind of motive for concern about the ecological crisis based on what that crisis is doing to the earth and to the creatures on it, rather than based exclusively on how the human race is affected by this crisis. That is, it provides a kind of motive for ecological concern not simply based on how the ecological crisis affects man; hence, I term it "altruism."

DENIAL OF INTRINSIC VALUE IN NONHUMAN ENTITIES—  
A LONG TRADITION

If this third kind of motive sounds odd to some of us, I think that is largely because of developments in Western culture which began with the Renaissance. It would not, however, have sounded strange in the Middle Ages. For in the Middle Ages there were two traditions which sustained the view that there are intrinsic values in nonhuman entities. One of these traditions was the Platonic one, as modified in Neoplatonism and as adopted and adapted by such theologians as Augustine and pseudo-Dionysius. This tradition equated being and goodness. According to it, to be is to be good, and a thing is good insofar as it is. This was given a theological interpretation in the doctrine that everything that exists participates in God and is like God insofar as it exists. That is, everything in its own way imitates God. And to the extent that it does this, it is good with a goodness that does not depend on human purposes, but is grounded upon its relation to God.

It was, however, not only the Platonic tradition which nourished the view that nonhuman entities had intrinsic value; the Aristotelian tradition also did. It did so because Aristotle viewed the realm of nature as a vast number of processes, each moving toward its proper goal. In the Aristotelian universe everything had its proper final

state or proper mode of operation; when it attained that final state or operated in that mode, the situation was objectively good. For example, acorns naturally tend to become oak trees, rocks naturally tend to fall toward the center of the earth, and man tends to operate in accordance with reason. When these processes go on unhindered, then the situation is good, not simply because man values it, but independently of human valuation.

We might note in passing that the mention of these traditions shows that there might be a variety of theories which share the characteristic of attributing intrinsic value to entities other than human beings. In particular, the conviction that nature contains intrinsic values can be associated either with a theistic outlook or with a nontheistic outlook; it can be focused around a belief in God or it can dispense with such a focus. Of course, Aristotle was a theist of sorts, but his theism did not play a major role in his thought and it certainly was not essential to his belief that every natural object or process has its own proper goal, the attainment of which is good.

I should also point out explicitly that I am not saying that ordinary people in the Middle Ages were familiar with the philosophical and theological traditions discussed above. What I am saying is that the presence and importance of these traditions contributed to a climate of opinion which was congenial to the belief that nature contained intrinsic values. The thoughts of the educated do influence the basic attitudes of their culture, perhaps only slowly but, nevertheless, surely. This influence of the educated helps to explain the very different climate of opinion today.

The Renaissance, the Reformation, and especially the birth of modern science brought radical challenges to the philosophical and theological traditions that sustained the belief in intrinsic values in nature. The Renaissance emphasis on, and fascination with, man and his potentialities tended to organize the realm of values with man as its center. The Reformers lacked the sort of interest in speculative philosophy and its relation to philosophy that was essential to the great syntheses of the high Middle Ages which had supported belief in intrinsic values in nature. (Of course, the late Middle Ages had already witnessed a decline in confidence in philosophical speculation and in what it could contribute to theology; my point is simply that the Reformers, because of their particular interests and approaches to theology, contributed to this decline and, because of their strong cultural impact, accelerated it.) The Reformers certainly had no explicit concern about the issue of intrinsic values in nature. Their lack of concern with the issue (and more

generally with philosophical speculation) did not help it survive in areas where the Reformation was victorious. Moreover, the cultural shock of these events and of the discovery of the New World tended to open men's minds for a thoroughgoing challenge of the accepted (premodern) scientific tradition and for the construction of a new one. The work of men such as Galileo, Descartes, and Newton created that new tradition. This last factor was, I think, the most important one in depriving men of their belief in the existence of intrinsic values in nature. Whereas Aristotelian science had seen nature as a vast number of processes, each of them construed on a biological model as inherently purposeful, the new science saw nature as a vast machine. Natural processes were construed mechanically, not purposefully. Purpose, end, accomplishment, fulfillment—these played no part in the new science and therefore value was banished from nature.

This view of the universe as composed of purposeless bits of matter in mechanically determined motion had a number of important consequences in philosophy. One of these was the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Primary qualities are mass, length, number, size, shape, position, and velocity; these qualities were supposed actually to reside in natural entities. Secondary qualities were colors, sounds, tastes, smells, and tactile qualities such as hot, cold, rough, and smooth; these were supposed to be due to the effect of primary qualities on human perceivers. If one analyzes these two types of qualities, one discovers that the primary qualities are those which can be measured and treated mathematically. Only these were supposed actually to exist in nature. The secondary qualities, which give nature its value for human beings, were held to be dependent on the human observer and therefore not a part of nature itself.<sup>1</sup> Since there was no room for, or basis for, values in a universe composed of purposeless bodies in mechanical motion, and since values clearly were a part of human experience, it was concluded that all values depend on the human observer, indeed that they are part of his subjective appreciation of his mechanical universe.

Descartes's sharp separation of body and soul, of extended substance and thinking substance, fits in very well with the primary-secondary quality distinction. Extended substance could be treated mathematically; indeed, it could be exhaustively treated mathematically. It was something extended and in motion—and nothing more. Thinking substance, on the other hand, was the

repository of everything else which could not be fitted into the mechanical universe described by the newly emerging physics. Thought, decision, feeling, secondary qualities, and all values were relegated to this limbo. Moreover, according to Descartes, only human minds were thinking substances; human bodies, animals and plants in their entirety, and all inanimate nature were only extended substances. Thus, all values in the entire universe were dependent on those relatively few bits of thinking substance that were human minds.

Nor did modern theology resist this trend to locate all intrinsic value in human beings and to define the value of other entities through their relation to human beings; indeed, it joined this trend. Schleiermacher's conception of theology as *Glaubenslehre*, as the explication of Christian consciousness, meshed very well with the stress on man as the source of all values. Moreover, Schleiermacher explicitly baptized this view of the nature of value. Expounding the meaning of the Christian belief in the goodness of creation, he wrote:

Every moment in which we confront externally given existence involves the implication that the world offers to the human spirit an abundance of stimuli to develop those conditions in which the God-consciousness can realize itself, and at the same time that in manifold degrees the world lends itself to being used by the human spirit as an instrument and means of expression.<sup>2</sup>

That is, the doctrine of the goodness of creation means that the world stimulates the growth of one's God-consciousness and that the world can be used for human purposes.

Nor is Schleiermacher unrepresentative of nineteenth- and twentieth-century theologians on the question of intrinsic values in nature. The sharp distinction between nature and history which is so characteristic of twentieth-century theology also is very compatible with the denial of intrinsic values in nature. Much twentieth-century theology has focused on man as a historical being. Sin was seen in terms of man's violation of his relation to God and to his fellowmen, but not in terms of his violation of his relation to the nonhuman world. It was stressed that God is a living God who meets and judges man in historical and interpersonal events. In such theology, nature appears only as a backdrop for the real drama of man's relation to his fellowman and to God. Possibly, many theologians of this century would not have denied that the nonhuman world has intrinsic values, but also most of them never spent much time affirming it. And

their failure to say anything must be regarded, at least in terms of its influence, as more important than what they might have been *willing* to say or deny.

I believe that this same sort of tendency to ignore or to deny intrinsic values in nature can be seen in the works of many existentialists, both theistic and nontheistic. Perhaps two illustrations of this will do. To take first a theistic existentialist, Rudolf Bultmann, we can note that nowhere in his writings does he speak of any values intrinsic to nature. Indeed, he seems to dismiss the realm of nature as containing no values except insofar as it impinges on human life. One might well claim that the total drift of his thought would make it impossible for him to do anything else. For he sharply distinguishes objective thinking from existential thinking, and restricts the apprehension of value to the latter. But by its very nature, existential thinking cannot ask about the value which anything has apart from its relation to the thinker.

For an atheistic existentialist, we might consider Jean-Paul Sartre. As is well known, Sartre holds that there are no values except what the individual creates for himself by his own decision. Furthermore, only human beings can create values. For only human beings, among all the entities on this planet, are *pour soi* rather than *en soi*; only human beings create their own futures by their choices, so only they create values by valuing. Clearly, the consequence of both Sartre's and Bultmann's views is that all values are human values. I think that in this regard they are more typical than atypical of existentialists. I do not, however, want to seem to be suggesting that existentialists created the feeling that all values are human values, for they surely did not. It seems to me that the origins of this view lie in factors which entered our culture at the beginning of the modern era, as I already argued. The existentialists have, however, given profound expression to the feeling that all values are human values, and in giving such profound expression to this feeling they have no doubt strengthened it.

Martin Buber might be thought to be an important exception to this generalization about existentialists. For he insists that one can have an I-Thou relation with natural objects.<sup>3</sup> This might be thought to make him an exception because he says that in every I-Thou relation, the Thou to which one is related stands out as an individual in its own right, and it has value as the particular thing that it is; this is true even in I-Thou relations with natural objects.<sup>4</sup> But we must not overlook the fact that Buber speaks of value only in relation to human beings. To be sure, it is not a value based on exploitation, but



on mutuality; nevertheless, Buber does not speak of a value in nature independent of man. Moreover, he refuses to speculate on whether man has significance for nonhuman objects;<sup>5</sup> whether or not man does is not important for Buber's thought. Therefore, if his ideas were used as a basis for ecological concern, I would classify the resulting motive as enlightened self-interest.

Thus far we have seen that a number of factors in modern and contemporary culture have contributed to creating and sustaining our widespread feeling that there are no intrinsic values in nature. It is also worth noticing that the biblical witness which forms the basis for the Judeo-Christian tradition does not provide an unambiguous voice on this matter. Other writers have noted this ambiguity. For instance, David E. Engel, in a recent issue of *Zygon*, argues that the biblical witness is ambiguous on the issue of whether man is to preserve nature or to exploit it.<sup>6</sup> His question is not quite the same as mine, but the answer to it is related to the answer to mine. For if nature has no intrinsic values, then it would seem that man should be free to exploit it, subject only to the limitation that he not make it unfit for himself in the process. On the other hand, if there are intrinsic values in the realm of nature, then it would be hard to argue that man is free to exploit nature as he sees fit. Nevertheless, despite the relations between Engel's question and mine, the two are not the same, and it might be well to consider the biblical material in relation to the question of whether or not there are intrinsic values in nature.

Perhaps the first thing we should say is that the general tendency of the biblical tradition is to ignore the issue of the existence of intrinsic values in nature. I choose the word "ignore" deliberately; the biblical writers do not deny that the natural realm has intrinsic values and they certainly do not stress it. Generally, they simply ignore the whole issue and concentrate on the values of historical existence and of interpersonal relations. Of course, the existence of intrinsic values in nature was not a question with serious practical consequences in biblical times, for men then did not have the numbers or the technology to harm nature as modern man does. Moreover, and probably more importantly, to ask whether or not there are intrinsic values in nature is to ask a very abstract question, but abstract questions were not the forte of the biblical writers. But when we have said these things and when we have recognized that the biblical writers concentrate on human values, still one can ask if there are not hints that at least some of them found intrinsic values in nonhuman things.

I think that there are such hints. One of the clearest comes in the first Creation account, which is contained in Genesis 1 and the beginning of Genesis 2. In this narrative the creation of the heavens and the earth is described as taking place in six days. In the first five of these days the creation of all but man is described; at the close of each of these days, God pronounces good that which he has created. We are not told why or in what sense these things are good, but it would seem that their goodness cannot be dependent on man, since he has not yet appeared on the scene. Of course, it might be possible to interpret God's pronouncement to refer only to the fact that the things which God has made will be useful to man when he is created. But this seems to me to be strained and unlikely, and I think that the burden of proof rests on anyone who wishes to advance such an interpretation. It seems to me far more natural and far more likely that the writer meant that God was judging them to be good in themselves or good in relation to God. In either of these interpretations, their goodness would not depend solely on their usefulness to man; it would be intrinsic.

Another hint at intrinsic values in nature comes in the final chapter of the Book of Jonah, in a passage which describes Jonah's disappointment at God's concern over Ninevah. God gives Jonah an object lesson and then asks him: "Should I not pity Ninevah, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, *and also much cattle?*"<sup>7</sup> Surely that is an odd thing for God to add—"and also much cattle"! Clearly the passage implies that God cares for cattle and that cattle therefore must have value. The only question is whether their value depends solely on their potential usefulness to man or whether they also have intrinsic value. While I do not regard the answer as clear-cut, it seems to me that the latter interpretation is more likely. God's question employs a parallel between human beings and cattle; certainly human beings have intrinsic value, and it seems to me natural to infer that cattle do also. Among other hints that the biblical writers attribute intrinsic value to nonhuman entities are the well-known Gospel passages about God watching over the fall of a sparrow and clothing the lilies of the field.

I termed all of the foregoing biblical passages "hints" because I think that their import is not conclusive. Moreover, they are so few and their relation to other, more central biblical themes is so uncertain, that I do not think that a strong case can be made for a biblical warrant for attributing intrinsic values to nature. This is why I earlier termed the biblical witness ambiguous. It would indeed be

strange if that witness were clear-cut and overwhelming, for then we should wonder why it had so long gone unnoticed.

AFFIRMATION OF INTRINSIC VALUE IN NONHUMAN  
ENTITIES—A CONTEMPORARY NEED

No doubt by now the reader will have begun at least to suspect that my sympathies lie with that kind of motivation which I termed altruism. I regard both of the other kinds as containing large amounts of *hubris*, of human pride and self-exaltation. They are attempts to do in the realm of value what the geocentric hypothesis did in the realm of astronomy—to center everything about man. There is, moreover, a further problem with these other two kinds of views: their concern for nature will last only as long as nature continues to have value for man. Should man ever find a way to get around this, then these other kinds of views could provide no resources for opposing the sort of devastation of our environment which we find occurring now.

But it is one thing to point out the problems with these other kinds of motives and quite another thing to try to find reasons in support of the altruistic kind. I shall, however, try to suggest one and try also to state what seems to me to be needed if the altruistic kind of motive is ever to gain wide acceptance.

The reason in support of the altruistic type of motive which I would like to suggest comes from our basic human experience. It seems to me that even today in a culture which in its intellectual formulations by and large restricts intrinsic values to the human sphere, we all feel intrinsic values in nature in our direct experience of it, as opposed to our intellectual reflection about nature and about our experience of it. Any of us who has had a pet or who has observed animals has, I imagine, felt sympathy with them, has rejoiced with their joy and with their excited facing of life, and has sorrowed with their pain and suffering. Now sympathy is an interesting experience, for that with which we sympathize must already have value and be capable of being a repository of value. We sympathize with animals, but we sympathize only with the *owners* of things. If someone has a valuable antique broken, we sympathize with him for his loss, but we do not sympathize with the antique; we feel sorry for him, but not for it. If, however, an animal is suffering, we can sympathize with it, regardless of whether or not it has an owner who will be made sorrowful by its suffering. I suggest, then, that our direct experience of animals does support the view that they have intrinsic value.

No doubt it would be difficult to argue that there is any common human experience of sympathy with plants, to say nothing of a direct experience of value in the realm of inanimate things. Perhaps some argument could be constructed along these lines, but we shall not explore that issue here. It is enough for our purposes to note that we have some experience of intrinsic value in some nonhuman entities. How much of the realm of nature contains intrinsic values need not detain us now. Given our present intellectual milieu, it will be a major accomplishment even to find some evidence of nonhuman intrinsic values.

It should be clear, too, that attributing intrinsic values to nonhuman entities is *not* just another form of basing all values on human beings and their judgments. It is true that it is human beings who attribute intrinsic values to nonhuman entities, but when we do this, we are claiming that they have these values independently of us; that is, we *recognize* their value rather than *confer* it. We are claiming that they have whatever value they have independently of us and would have it even if there were no human beings.

Having argued that we directly experience intrinsic value in nonhuman entities, let me hasten to add that I am not suggesting that all things have equal value. I have no hesitation about affirming that a single human being has more value than a single representative of any other species of which we know. This is because a human being is the most complex thing of which we know; its depth and range of experience far transcend that of any other known living thing. Thus, I am not suggesting that all living things have equal value, but only that they have some intrinsic value.

But even if I am correct in my claim that our direct experience supports the belief that nonhuman entities have intrinsic value, it is one thing to have evidence for this belief and it is another thing to make the belief effective in regulating our large-scale conduct toward our environment. It seems to me that what is needed if the latter is to be accomplished is that we must challenge the mechanistic view of purposeless matter derived from the physical sciences which has increasingly dominated our culture's view of nature during the last four centuries. What we need, then, is a comprehensive viewpoint in terms of which we can meaningfully and intelligibly and with intellectual honesty affirm intrinsic value in nonhuman entities—or perhaps we need several such viewpoints. We need this not in the sense that everyone will become acquainted with such a viewpoint any more than everyone became acquainted with Newtonian physics or with Platonic or Aristotelian philosophy. But just as these

theories created outlooks which militated against or supported ascribing intrinsic value to nonhuman entities, so we need such a theory or viewpoint today. This theory, whatever it (or they) may be, must do justice to the mechanism which physical science has discovered to be such a fruitful way to approach certain phenomena and it must do justice to our direct experience—something the heritage of scientific mechanism has not done.<sup>8</sup> Such a comprehensive viewpoint must necessarily be metaphysical, and today it is popular to eschew metaphysics; but this eschewal of metaphysics has too often merely permitted an unreflective metaphysics based on natural science to dominate men's beliefs and attitudes by default. It seems to me that either we must challenge the metaphysics of scientific mechanism that dominates our culture today or else we must be content with one of the first two kinds of motives for ecological concern.

#### NOTES

1. We can note the deep faith underlying the conviction that primary qualities and only primary qualities are really found in nature—the faith, namely, that the real is mathematicizable and that only the mathematicizable is real. This faith itself was the result of a number of factors in early modern culture.

2. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. and trans. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960) article 59, p. 238.

3. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, 2d ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 6.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

5. *Ibid.*

6. David E. Engel, "Elements in a Theology of Environment," *Zygon* 5 (1970): 218–23. For a fuller discussion, see Frederick Elder, *Crisis in Eden* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1970).

7. Jonah 4:11. My italics.

8. This charge is amply documented in the first six chapters of Alfred North Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Free Press, 1968).