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The Rehabilitation of Nature

A Course and its Literature

The Rehabilitation of Nature: A Course and its Literature

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In philosophy courses we talk about naturalism, state of nature, natural law, natural sign, natural kind, and natural deduction, but we do not as a rule discuss nature in the sense of trees and mountains. But there are serious philosophical questions raised by the rustic concepts of nature and the relation of nature to humanity that are both interesting in themselves and relevant to important issues of our day. In this essay I shall describe a course organized around the idea of preserving nature. I hope to articulate the general problem of preservation and then to draw attention to some subsidiary philosophical issues I have found adaptable to an undergraduate course. As I go along, I shall mention background sources, mainly books, that I have found helpful, as well as the few newly published texts.

The Preservationist Intuition

The main phenomenon to be investigated in this course is a moral intuition shared by many to the effect that society should preserve some natural places in their raw and wild state. This intuition is particularly interesting because frequently it remains undiminished even in the face of strong utilitarian counter-arguments. The problem is to understand this intuition by relating it to a conceptual scheme which explains it and in which it is reconciled, if possible, with traditional moral theory.

Although probably not much time should be spent in philosophy classes on the mere history of ideas, I think an historical approach by far the best way to develop a sense for the concept of preservation. It has become a truism to say that Western culture is of two minds in its attitudes toward nature. On the one hand is the attitude which has largely prevailed to the present that wilderness is an impediment to progress and should be tamed. On the other is the minority position that wilderness is an inviolable source of aesthetic delight and moral inspiration. A brief introductory essay on the history of European attitudes is to be found in Part I of John Passmore's *Man's Responsibility for Nature*. Giving a philosophical twist to the idea of natural hierarchy, Passmore construes man's dominance in moral terms and traces the extinction in our culture of any deeply felt responsibility for nature. By far the most complete history of European ideas is by the humanist-geographer Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*. Glacken is mainly concerned with tracing the idea of environmental determinism from earliest times to the nineteenth century. His lack of conceptual incisiveness is more than compensated for by his many interesting observations on what various thinkers have believed about nature. The hostility of the classical world to wilderness and the slow emergence of pastoral sensitivity among the Romans can be traced in George Sontar, *Nature in Greek Poetry* and Henry Rushton Fairclough, *Love of Nature Among the Greeks and Romans*.

It is also interesting to follow the evolution of attitudes toward nature revealed in Western painting, as it develops from medieval indifference and hostility, through Renaissance appreciation of the rural setting, to later romantic and expressionist treatments. Kenneth Clark in *Landscape into Art* is a bold but pleasant guide, and by consulting it instructors can easily prepare a slide show to illustrate the dramatic changes and enliven the classroom. Nature as a theme in the European enlightenment and romantic period is an immense subject, but a careful introduction philosophers may enjoy is Arthur O. Lovejoy's *Essays in the History of Ideas*. The idea of man's technological mastery of nature from Bacon and the rationalists, through Hegel, to Marx and Marcuse can be found in William Leiss, *The Domination of Nature*, though the style is somewhat tortuous.

The true preservationist ideal, however, emerged not in Europe, but in North America. The best account of its development and continuing battle with opposing values is Roderick Nash's history, *Wilderness and the American Mind*. The philosophical roots of American preservationism are outlined in Morton White's *Science and Sentiment in America*. White explains how the transcendentalists, beginning with Jonathan Edwards, successively weakened Locke's faculty of reason and strengthened that of moral sentiment in a process that culminated with the anti-intellectual moral enthusiasm of Emerson and Thoreau. A good source for the literary transcendentalists is Norman Foerster's *Nature in American Literature*. The transcendentalist tradition was carried directly into the modern preservationist movement by John Muir, a self-styled disciple of Emerson and the founder of the Sierra Club. Herbert Smith, in his book *John Muir*, succeeds not only in systematizing the last transcendentalist's thoughts, but more amazingly he also instills some appreciation for Muir's florid style. For Muir's ideas in his own words see *My First Summer in the Sierra* and *The Mountains of California*. Toward the end of his life Muir locked horns with the new ideology of nature, conservationism, articulated by the U.S. Forest Service and its founder Gifford Pinchot. On this struggle see Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*. Hays, a historian, argues that contrary to popular belief conservation was not a struggle between industry and nature lovers, but rather the institutionalization in the Forest Service of a doctrine of scientific exploitation of natural resources. Devour the wilderness, only slowly. Though this variety of conservation is still strong and well entrenched in government bureaucracies, it has given rise in recent years to an interesting off-shoot best represented by the forester-ecologist Aldo Leopold. Leopold conjoined the utilitarianism of Pinchot, which he had learned in graduate school and during his career in the Forest Service, with the insights of the newly emerging science of ecology, and saw that they implied not resource management but the more radical preservationism of Muir. Leopold's thoughts are set down in his popular essay *A Sand Country Almanac*, and the interesting story of his intellectual development within its social context is chronicled in Susan L. Flader's history of Leopold, *Thinking Like a Mountain*. Modern preservationism, then, has two roots in American thought, the transcendentalism of Muir and the utilitarianism of Leopold. Both of these traditions raise interesting moral problems which make the concept of preservation a fruitful focus for philosophical inquiry and a good course topic. I shall try now to sort out the various issues in a schematic way to suggest how a course curriculum might be organized.

Utilitarianism and Nature

In attempting a *reductio* on preservationism for an audience of economists, John Kenneth Galbraith once pointed out that preservationists prefer something in inverse ratio to the number of people who enjoy it. The audience was probably convinced. The argument is typical of developers who generally argue against preservation on economic grounds

like jobs, flood control, and energy. Any sensitive person cannot help but be swayed by strong utilitarian arguments of this sort, but interestingly some people do not find the utilitarian considerations always decisive. For some people in some instances, preservation is better than social happiness. A convinced utilitarian can dismiss such preservationists as morally immature or irrational, but a far more interesting approach is to explain the preservationist intuitions and, if possible, to reconcile them with utilitarian theory. Such explanations are of two sorts: (1) those which claim preservationist intuitions are really utilitarian deep-down and (2) those which claim an entirely different moral theory is required to account for preservationism. In this section I shall outline the various attempts at reconciliation, each of which makes a good topic for class discussion. In the next section I shall do the same for the so-called "new ethics."

Cost Benefit Analysis and the Market. The obvious utilitarian move is to argue that preservationist intuitions are about social goods very indirectly grounded in utility, but nevertheless groundable in principle. More daringly, utilitarians may argue that the market price mechanism can be used to measure even difficult to calculate utilities. Cost benefit analysis purports to offer some theory for assigning dollar-values to all relevant goods, and environmental foes are usually armed with such studies when defending their projects. The appraisal of this position involves elementary issues in what may be called the philosophy of economics: whether price is in fact a function of utility, whether some intangibles (e.g., beauty, peace, harmony) are unpriceable. A good source for the "theory" of cost benefit analysis that shows it for the naked emperor it is, is Part V of *Economics of the Environment*, a collection put together by economists Robert Dorfman and Nancy S. Dorfman.

Externalities. A special problem for the pricing mechanism characteristic of environmental economics is that of externalities. Some phenomena possessing a "fluid" nature like water, air, and noise pollution greatly affect social happiness but will not stay put long enough in one place to receive a price. The problem is how to devise market schemes to price pollution anyway. The early part of the Dorfman's collection provides both a non-technical introduction to the welfare economics and price theory needed to grasp the problem, and in later sections papers describing several ingenious solutions. The topic is a good exercise in the limitations of economic analysis in markets.

Ecology. Most ecological arguments for preservation are at core simply efforts to point out the long range effect on human happiness of environmental meddling. Beyond the recognized difficulty of markets to measure long term as opposed to short term utility, the form of ecological arguments is not very interesting. They do have one curious feature, however, their frequent dependence on current ignorance. We just do not know the full effect of freon, the argument goes, so ban spray cans. When probabilities are assignable, such cases may reduce to decision making under uncertainty. John Passmore discusses some of these points in Part II of his book.

Conservation. When conservationists are defined as opposed to preservationists, as believers in long term rational exploitation of resources, it is clear that they are a species of utilitarian. However, the most philosophically interesting variety of conservation is that undertaken for the sake of future generations. How much do we owe future generations? Can a utilitarian as such have any ground for banning people from the utilitarian community simply because they exist in the future? How does this case differ from the exclusion from social goods of national or racial minorities, or of animals? Can we know the tastes of future generations? Passmore's chapter "Conservation" and Joel Feinberg's essay "The Rights of Animals and Unborn Generations" in William

Blackstone, ed., *Philosophy and Environmental Crisis* are good texts for class use.

Rights of Trees and Animals. One way to ground preservationism in traditional moral theory is via the concept of right: wilderness has a right to exist undisturbed. Two strategies have emerged within utilitarianism for making this argument. The first construes rights in the traditional utilitarian fashion as institutional arrangements that are changeable as needed and are designed to further social utility. Taking this line in his essay "Should Trees Have Standing," Christopher Stone argues that assigning rights to natural objects would further human utility because doing so would solve the problem of externalities. A judge could appoint a trustee to sue a polluter for damages done to a lake when these damages do not happen to hurt any person. A more radical approach is to question the exclusion of non-human animals from utilitarian calculations. Feinberg argues in his paper that animals have interests, and Peter Singer in his provocative book *Animal Liberation* puts forward a similar point that any being capable of feeling pleasure or pain should be considered a moral equal. Passmore discusses the question of animal suffering and its claims on humans in his chapter "Preservation," and Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, pp. 35-47, argues that the criteria for being a moral subject are much more stringent than capacity to suffer or feel pleasure—though Nozick is arguing from the non-utilitarian tradition of natural rights.

New Foundations

As would be expected, non-utilitarian attempts to account for preservationism have been rather exploratory. I have already mentioned Peter Singer and Robert Nozick, though Singer's views are compatible with utilitarianism and Nozick's are not very preservationist. Below I shall sketch some more radical departures from traditional views which are also somewhat sympathetic to preservationism.

Holism. Ecologists like Eugene Odum (see "Environmental Ethics and the Attitude Revolution" in the Blackstone collection) and Aldo Leopold sometimes seem to be suggesting that quite apart from utilitarian effects of ecology on society, there should be a new ethic of harmony between man and nature, desirable in itself. In the ideal world man would limit his actions to those which were natural, to those which somehow blended with the whole rather than fought against it. It is an interesting challenge to figure out the senses of natural and unnatural presupposed here.

Marxism. In *Domination of Nature*, mentioned before, William Leiss offers a radical critique of the Western identification of progress with technological advancement. Though I find Leiss' discussion rather muddled, there certainly seems to be the grounds in Marxism for the social theory necessary to question the growth ethic that has gobbled up much of the wilderness.

The Irreplaceable. Though not much has been written on the concept of the irreplaceable by philosophers, it serves as a beast of burden among preservationists: we should preserve the irreplaceable. Typically the idea is used in one of two senses. Something can be irreplaceable, first, because we do not have the technology to reproduce other objects of its kind, i.e., other objects with some desirable set of physical properties. Hence, representatives of species should be preserved because they enrich the gene pool. The cinchona tree should be preserved because it yields quinine. Here the considerations are utilitarian. We need objects with these properties to further social utility. But some objects are irreplaceable in a second, more interesting sense. There would be no problem reproducing imitations of historical artifacts like the Declaration of Independence or art objects like the paintings of Vermeer. The technology exists,

Likewise one could, with astro-turf and landscape horticulture, reproduce copies of wild nature. But we do not want the copies, we want the originals. Here, built into the concept of irreplaceability, appears to be a genetic condition. Part of the value of historical objects, works of art, and natural objects is their mode of generation. Part of what is valuable about a natural object is that it is natural. Here again is the concept of the natural. But even if this idea was puzzled out, this sense of the irreplaceable has another limitation. Even in this sense, it does not follow that all irreplaceable objects should be preserved. Value judgments independent of the concept of irreplaceability are needed to distinguish the good from the bad.

The Aesthetic. Beauty may provide a clue to preservationist instincts. Here I have found three issues worth pursuing. First, there is the question of whether nature as opposed to art is really beautiful. Strange as it may seem, the dominant answer until relatively recently would have been no. A nice discussion of natural and artistic beauty is to be found in Chapter IV, "Art and Nature" of Francis Sparshott's *The Structure of Aesthetics*. Second, there is the curious threefold classification of natural scenes into the picturesque, the beautiful, and the sublime. Here one reads Kant. Third, there is the question of whether aesthetic experience is not in fact a variety of pleasure and explainable within utilitarianism.

Kantianism. Finally, I would like to report on a project by Mark Sagoff who, in his monograph length "On Preserving the Natural Environment," *Yale Law Journal* 84 (1974), pp. 205-267, proposes grounding preservationism in Kantian moral theory. Space precludes comment here on the substance of Sagoff's program, but his theory is a good example of the kind of systematic non-utilitarian approach that seems necessary. I myself cannot shake off the feeling that utilitarianism cannot capture what is wrong with developments like the Hetch Hetchy Dam or the James Bay Project.

A Note on Texts

Of all the works mentioned here, the best all-round text would be Passmore's *Man's Responsibility for Nature*. Good supplementary material would include Dorfman and Dorfman on economic issues, Stone and Singer on rights of natural objects, and Blackstone's collection for various subjects. Historical material may be found in Passmore's Part I and chapter 1 of Nash.

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