

Chapter 4. Yes, for the Sake of All Forms of Life on the Planet.

Dave Foreman, “Wild Things for Their Own Sakes”

At the heart of the problem of our thinking is the false belief that all beings exist for the sake of human thriving. Rather, wild things exist for their own sake. Those who would disregard the intrinsic value of all beings have the burden of proof to show in a strong and mindful way why this careless, carefree, uncaring behavior is good.

Reading Questions

1. Foreman wants to shift the burden of proof when it comes to justifying acts that damage wild beings. How so?
2. Once that burden is shifted, we face a new set of questions. It is worth making a serious effort to answer each one of them:
 - a. How is it okay to snuff out life for short-term, selfish ends?
 - b. How, in a deep, wide way, is careless, carefree, uncaring behavior good?
 - c. Do we have a right to bring to naught the wild beings of the Earth?

Carly Lettero, “Spray Glue Goes. Maggots Stay.”

Even at the moment of a loved one’s death, we face choices between actions that are life-affirming and actions that are destructive of our values. Every generation needs a revolution, Lettero states, and our generation’s is to answer the obligations arising from our reverence for life by curbing the waste, the trashing, and the destruction of Earth and its inhabitants.

Reading Questions

1. As an exercise, design your own funeral in such a way that it embodies your values. Include details about casket, practices, rituals, participation of others, etc.
2. It is time for moral spring-cleaning, Lettero says. In your life, what stays? What goes?

Shepard Krech III, “Ornithophilia”

If only each of us can latch on to something in nature that allows for reflection, brings self-awareness, and enhances well-being, then we will be poised to take the next step and intervene in favor of that thing or the habitats on which it depends.

Reading Questions

1. Krech speaks of seeing the flight of the woodcock as his Aldo Leopold moment. What does he mean by this? Why did it result in his refusal to hunt woodcock? Have you ever had such a moment (what Abraham Maslow called a “peak experience”)?
2. According to Krech, what exactly is our problem? And what, according to Krech, is the “solution”? Do you agree or disagree with him, and why?
3. If someone said, “Birds, schmirds, why should we care about birds?,” how could you most forcefully respond, using Krech and your own experience and knowledge about birds?

Gary Paul Nabhan, “Heirloom Chile Peppers and Climate Change”

By threatening traditional native plant foods, climate change endangers the relationship between nature, culture, plants, and the stories and songs that celebrate them. We must respond to climate change, he says, by framing the issues in terms of what we know and care about and then advancing what we learn by sharing food, stories, songs, and celebrations.

Reading Questions

1. Nabhan suggests that global climate change will “wreak havoc on the place-based cultures of this Earth” (p. 116). How is this so, and should we care, and why or why not?
2. Nabhan suggests that we need to appeal to that which people “care about. They care about sharing food, sharing stories and songs and seasonal celebrations” (p. 118). Is this true? If so, what does this suggest for a strategy to address global climate change?
3. Can you tell a similar story about a food item that you love in the same way that Nabhan loves chile peppers?

David Quammen, “Imagining Darwin’s Ethics”

David Quammen uses the insight that ethics evolved naturally out of the need for social utility to put the giant mess we have created for Earth in perspective relative to Darwin’s explanation of evolution. We are, he says, undermining what once was a natural and good process in moderation and inflating it to disastrous proportions, such that it threatens our ability to pass on to the future joy in “the diversity of life, its beauty and wondrousness” (p. 119).

Reading Questions

1. Quammen points out that you cannot simply make moral inferences from the descriptive theory of evolution (recall the practical syllogism). So how can or does the theory of evolution inform ethics?
2. Quammen suggests that Darwin’s own example shows that we do not need religion in order to be good. If this is true, then why do we need it at all?
3. What would Darwin say about global climate change and the loss of biodiversity? How is what is happening now different from extinction as a natural process? (Note: it might serve us well to rehearse a distinction like this.)

Robert Michael Pyle, “Evening Falls on the Maladaptive Ape”

Our genetic heritage leads us to deal foolishly with problems like climate change—problems that require moral regard for the future and for those beyond our acquaintance and our species. The consequent cultures and economies of perpetual growth are not compatible with human and planetary thriving. It’s an open question whether we can act on our latent capacities for honesty, generosity, mercy, and cooperation, rather than our inclinations to seek power, greed, and domination.

Reading Questions

1. Unlike some others, Pyle believes we need a new ethic, one based not solely on human well-being but “on the well-being of the supportive fabric” (p. 126) of life. How does he make his case, and do you agree?
2. “We are the maladaptive ape, at twilight. Evolution will mock our tardy rage” (p. 128). What does Pyle mean when he says this? What is his argument for this claim? Is he being unfair, or overly fair, to humans? Could we, each of us, become an adaptive ape? What would that look like?

Ethics Background: How can we categorize the values of living things?

Many people argue that all forms of life on the planet have value (whether intrinsic or instrumental) and therefore should be protected. In contrast to those who might say that some forms of life are expendable because they have no value at all (maybe the mosquito, for starters, and maybe the desert pupfish or the snail darter), ecologists have recently tried to be very explicit about the many, often unnoticed types of value that the natural world provides. This effort has resulted in several different taxonomies of ecological value. Here is one that integrates several of the schemes.

Instrumental values:

Direct values. These are **goods**, things we extract from ecosystems and use: wood products, wild foods, fish, water, pasture, crops, etc.

Indirect values. These are the **services** that ecosystems and their participating parts provide: filtering and purifying water, watering crops, cycling nutrients, attenuating floods, pollinating crops, fixing nitrogen, etc. The economic value of these services is estimated in the trillions of dollars.

Option values. These are the values in possible **future** uses. No one now knows what plants might be the next pharmaceuticals or what use dolphins might be in modeling new forms of artificial intelligence, for example. These possibilities have value.

Cultural and spiritual values. These are the values that are often missing from the list of instrumental values but that have real value to us and are means to important human ends. They include **aesthetic value**, the appreciation of the beauty of the natural world; **cultural value**, the significance of the natural world for defining and enriching cultures; **heritage value**, the significance of places as locations of events meaningful to us; and **spiritual value**, the value we place on some encounter with powers far beyond us and meanings we can’t fathom. And there are those ineffable values: the comfort we take in the return of the seasons, the joy we feel

listening to the dawn chorus, the hope we sense in new growth, the deep understanding that the cycles of living and dying give to us. The list of cultural and spiritual values is rich and long.

Intrinsic values:

The values we find in organisms, processes, places not because they can provide us something else, but because they are worthy in and of themselves.

Activity / Application 1: Adding to the oath

An Oath for the Animals begins on p. 129. What would you add to the list—additional actions or restraints that would express true respect for the well-being of all forms of life on the planet?

Activity / Application 2: A case study about the intrinsic and instrumental value of living beings

Assemble a Council of Beings. Someone (or some group) will need to speak for the barred owls. Someone will need to speak for the spotted owls. Someone will need to speak for other forest dwellers. And some will need to be decision makers, reasoning from a variety of moral points of view (including anthropocentric consequentialism, biocentric consequentialism, Albert Schweitzer's reverence for life, and Alan Taylor's argument, below). The question: What is to be done?

The spotted owl is an endangered species that lives in old growth forests in the Pacific Northwest. Now that logging of the owl's habitat has been reduced, a new threat to the spotted owl has been identified—the barred owl. The more aggressive barred owls have been steadily moving into spotted owl territory, reducing their nesting sites.

A new feasibility study has been proposed, to learn whether killing the barred owl improves spotted owl numbers. According to the experimental protocol, Fish and Wildlife officials would shoot barred owls in a carefully controlled experiment near Grants Pass, Oregon. Prior to beginning the study, however, officials want to meet with scientists and local interest groups to assess their opinion of the plan. Fish and Wildlife officials place the highest priority on preventing the extinction of the spotted owl, but they understand the importance of considering all the moral implications of the study.

In *Civilization and Ethics*, Albert Schweitzer writes: "I am life which wills to live, and I exist in the midst of life which wills to live. . . . Just as in my own will-to-live there is a yearning for more life . . . so the same obtains in all the will-to-live around me, equally whether it can express itself to my comprehension or whether it remains unvoiced. Ethics thus consists in this, that I experience the necessity of practicing the same reverence for life toward all will-to-live, as toward my own. . . . It is good to maintain and cherish life; it is evil to destroy and check it. The ethic of reverence for life recognizes no such thing as a relative ethic. The maintenance and enhancement of life are the only things it counts as being good in themselves. . . . The ethics of reverence forces one to decide for themselves in each case how far they can remain ethical and how far they must submit themselves to the necessity of destroying and harming life and thus become guilty. A good conscience is the invention of the devil."

In the article "Human-centered and Life-centered Systems of Environmental Ethics," Paul Taylor writes: "I argue that finally it is the good (well-being, welfare) of individual organisms, considered as entities that have intrinsic worth, that determines our moral relations with the Earth's wild communities of life. . . . We have *prima facie* obligations that are owed to wild plants and animals themselves as member of the Earth's biotic community. We are morally bound (other things being equal) to protect or promote their good for their sake."

Chapter 5. Yes, to Honor our Duties of Gratitude and Reciprocity.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, “To Commit a Crime Against the Natural World Is a Sin”

Our responsibility toward God’s creation requires voluntary restraint in order to live in harmony with our environment. Failure of restraint means that we become consumed by avarice and greed, and estranged from God. It follows that to commit a crime against the natural world is a sin.

Reading Questions

1. How would Christians defend themselves against the Patriarch’s accusation that to harm nature is a sin, or could they defend themselves? If it is a sin, then how should Christians avoid this sin?
2. What is this essay’s most powerful argument for melding environmental concern with Christianity?
3. Do you think the Patriarch’s argument here would be effective against people who defend their lack of environmental concern on the basis of their Christian commitments? Why or why not?

Nirmal Selvamony, “Sacred Ancestors, Sacred Homes”

The places of our ancestors are sacred places to which we ourselves belong. The shattering of the connections between people, their places, and their ancestors creates a disharmonious and destructive way of life. Our task is to recover the continuity of places and people through time.

Reading Questions

1. In one sentence, how would you summarize the argument that leads Selvamony to conclude that “a social order based on ancestral sacralization is our best option for a viable future”?
2. How does Selvamony connect “ecological imperialism” to our current condition? Can you think of an example in your own region of ecological imperialism? How has it affected the local human and nonhuman community?
3. How can each of us, in at least some small way, “recover the spiritual basis of the tiNai” (p. 140)?

Robin W. Kimmerer, “The Giveaway”

The Potawatomi practice of the “giveaway” illustrates our proper relation of gratitude and thanksgiving toward the Earth, which gives us life and breath and sustenance. For these gifts, we have responsibilities to be grateful, to respect the gift, and to respond with reciprocity. The Earth is a gift, and we must pass it on just as it came to us.

Reading Questions

1. Have you ever thought about your actions, your life’s work, as a form of reciprocity for the gifts that you’ve been given?
2. Considering the gifts that have been given us all, what are some examples of an appropriate reciprocity that we might engage in? That is, how might we begin to appropriately respond to the Earth’s gifts?
3. “When I close my eyes . . . I envision people recognizing . . . the dazzling gifts of the world, seeing them with new eyes, just as they teeter on the cusp of undoing,” writes Kimmerer (p. 145). If you close your eyes and think about what this might look like in the world, what do you see?

Courtney S. Campbell, “From the Mountain, a Covenant”

A Christian moral ecology calls on us to experience life as a gift, for which we have a covenantal reciprocal responsibility to use the gifts respectfully and gratefully. Our commitment is to act so as not to foreclose or predetermine life options for future generations. The primary religious sentiment is the experience of awe and wonder as we contemplate the Earth.

Reading Questions

In an unexpected confluence, similar arguments about our obligations of gratitude came from a Mormon elder (Campbell), a Potawatomi botanist (Kimmerer), the leader of the Eastern Orthodox Church (Bartholomew I), and a student of Australian aboriginal thought (Rose). Here are some of the most important claims that Campbell makes. What does each claim mean? What resonance do you find with the words of the others?

- a. We must “experience life as a gift.” I am a “ ‘beggar before God’ ” (p. 148).
- b. “Awareness of the biological reality that our very existence is contingent on Earth, soil, water, air, and so on should cultivate moral dispositions of gratitude, humility and solidarity” (p. 148).
- c. “These dispositions are at the core of an ethic of radical dependency and interdependency that must supplant historical models of anthropocentric authority without accountability” (p. 148).
- d. “I find myself in a covenantal relation with nature, [which] concerns my respectful and grateful use of the gifts I have received” (p. 148).
- e. My specific covenantal commitment “is to ensure an open future; I am responsible to act so as not to foreclose or predetermine life options for future generations” (p. 149).
- f. “Awe and wonder cultivate dispositions of gratitude, humility, and solidarity as the self opens to a realization of dependency on powers beyond our control” (p. 150).
- g. “As I have been a recipient in my dependency, so I am called to care for the vulnerable and poor, including the vulnerable of a fragile future” (p. 150).

Deborah Bird Rose, “So the Future Can Come Forth from the Ground”

Reflecting on her experiences with Aboriginal people in Australia, Deborah Bird Rose describes the understanding that all interdependent life came from the ground and so too will that of the future, for it follows the present. It is therefore our obligation, she says, to care for the ground so that the future is able “to be born and to live, and then to return into the source” (p. 155).

Reading Questions

1. Explain in the simplest terms possible the unique ideas in Rose’s explanation of Aboriginal ideology: “Dreamings,” “behind mob,” “new mob,” “betrayal,” “the future in the ground.”
2. Can you pause for a moment and put your own life in the context explained in this essay? That is, can you think about similar temporal connections in your own life? Can you embed yourself in “that dizzying sense of time running all over the place” (p. 156)? Can you also include the nonhuman animals, plants, lakes, and rivers, ecosystems that you are and have been a part of? Does this change your sense of obligation in any way?
3. Can you connect Rose’s essay with others that you have read thus far? Which other essays does it resonate with most? Is there something important about this resonance?

Ursula K. Le Guin, “A Conference in Time”

All the gods from all the Earth’s times and places are called to gather in Rome to decide the fate of humans. Some gods call for war, others for mercy. In the end, the decision is made by the mortal Earth herself. What does she decide?

Reading Questions

1. Okay. What happens in this poem? Just tell the story in simple words. What is “the word that rang out across the inner sky” (p. 158)? How does the story end?
2. Imagine yourself as one who has been called to the Conference in Time. What would your judgment be?
3. What makes this poem so powerful? Is it the story line? Is it the language? Something else?

Ethics Background: What is gratitude, and in what sense is it a duty?

When we question Western philosophers about gratitude, we get a thin, dry answer. There are two kinds of duties, philosophers say: **Perfect duties** are the duties that are the correlate of someone else’s right, and so impose an obligation. For example, Jack has a right to control access to his private property, so Jill has a duty to refrain from trespassing. It’s not a matter of choice. **Supererogatory duties** are different. The duty to be grateful, like the duty to be generous or merciful, is not something one can ask of you. No one has a claim against you for gratitude or generous treatment. In fact, gratitude, generosity, and mercy must come freely; if they are compulsory, they lose their worth and character. That’s not to say they aren’t duties, but the origin of the obligation is in the duty one has to oneself to be a good person.

But gratitude is surely more than this, especially when it comes to gratitude for the gifts of the great Earth. Then, gratitude is a kind of **seeing**, an awareness of the magnitude of the gift of this Earth. To see the world gratefully is to be endlessly surprised by the bare fact of it, its beauty and power and everlastingness. It’s easy to move through life and never notice how the moon moves the tides or the bees drive the evolution of beauty, but that would be a failure to notice, a failure of grateful seeing.

Gratitude is a kind of **terror**. The gifts of this world come unbidden and undeserved. Humankind has no claim against the universe for starlight or clams. Rain is not a birthright. The world is contingent, improbably beyond our control; it could be, or not. If any of its gifts were to be taken away, there is no entitlement we could claim. The gift is a mystery.

Gratitude is a kind of **rejoicing**. Even though it might not have been and may yet not be, the Earth is. The sudden awareness of the gift can fill us with joy, a sense of well-being that lifts our spirits, expands our senses of possibility.

And is gratitude a moral obligation? With all due respect to Western philosophers, of course it is. The obligation is owed to the Earth itself. To be grateful is to live a life that honors the gift of life: to care for it, keep it safe, protect it from damage; not to discount or ignore it, but to use it respectfully; to celebrate it, to honor the worth of it in a thousand ways, not just in words, but in how we live our lives. To do any less than this dishonors the Earth.

Activity / Application 1: This calls for a potluck.

For this class, please bring a dish to share. In addition, bring a gift to give away—a poem you love, a well-worn book from your shelf, a tomato start, something else. Share the food in a great feast. Then give the gift and take one in return.

How does the satisfaction of getting compare to the satisfaction of giving? What terrible price have we paid, individually and collectively, by imagining that our worth is measured by what we keep, rather than by what we give away? In what small ways, in what new or recovered traditions, can we begin to create a culture based on gifts?

Activity / Application 2: The Conference in Time

This exercise asks discussants to take on the role of a particular deity from the poem:

Allah
Jehovah
Jupiter
Zeus
Jesus
Freya
Athene

Aphrodite
Lady of the Crossways
Pan
Venus
Plumed Serpent
Turquoise One
Pachamama
Vishnu
Coyote
Corn Woman
White Shell Woman
Persephone

Each person choose one. Then pull out iPhones and laptops and quickly get a sense of who that deity is.

Read the poem (*Moral Ground*, pp. 158–60) aloud through the phrase “ ‘What is to be done?’ he says,” with each of the deities reading that part that refers to him or her.

Then convene the committee, discuss, and reach a decision.

Chapter 6. Yes, For the Full Expression of Human Virtue.

Brian Doyle, “A Newt Note”

Brian Doyle describes the wonders and miracles his children encountered in a hike “through the vast wet moist forest” of the Oregon coast. What kind of “greedy criminal thug thieves would we be . . . if we didn’t spend every iota of our cash and creativity to protect and preserve [such] a world” (p. 168)?

Reading Questions

1. Doyle suggests that we have a very serious obligation to preserve a world of wonder, that this is a natural outcome of being a virtuous person. What is his argument, and do you agree?
2. Explain how Doyle uses humor to make his point. Why is the use of humor so powerful in this essay? Is there something important about maintaining a sense of humor in the face of an epoch of great environmental harms?
3. What do you think Brian Doyle’s children will grow up to do in their lives?

John Perry, “Worship the Earth”

Worship is one aspect of religion worth saving. The object of the worship must be both responsible for the existence of the worshippers and affected by the worshipping. The Earth is the best subject of our worship, honored in ritual and song. Like other objects of worship, it must be considered “so out-of-bounds that [it doesn’t] even enter into cost-benefit analyses” (p. 172).

Reading Questions

1. How does Perry make the case that the Earth is a most “suitable object of worship”? Do you find his argument compelling?
2. What are Perry’s two conditions that make an object worthy of worship? How does the Earth fulfill these conditions? Can you think of any other conditions that might make the Earth, or any other object, worthy of worship?
3. According to Perry, what role might philosophy play in creating a worshipful attitude toward the Earth?

Bill McKibben, “Something Braver Than Trying to Save the World”

Bill McKibben concedes that the planet is changing “in hideous and damaging ways” (p. 175), but he insists that this is no excuse to give up and stop trying to limit the damage. We must act, he says, to save the Earth. In doing so, we will revive our societies because Earth-saving actions and community-creating actions—such as farmers’ markets and smaller, closer homes—are one and the same.

Reading Questions

1. Why does McKibben believe we still have a moral obligation to the future even though he argues at the same time that the world we have known will “change in hideous and damaging ways”?
2. What’s the link between farmers’ markets and global climate change?
3. In general, would you describe McKibben’s portrayal of our situation as hopeful or desperate, or both, or neither?

Massoumeh Ebtekar, “Peace and Sustainability Depend on the Spiritual and the Feminine”

Today’s problems, Massoumeh Ebtekar claims, are the result of an imbalance and lack of inner peace in our decision-making circle, which stems from the historical suppression of the feminine. To fulfill our obligations to the future, she says, we must revive the feminine—attributes like gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and closeness—and thus restore the balance.

Reading Questions

1. According to Ebtekar, how precisely are the spiritual and the feminine linked to our current environmental problems?
2. In Ebtekar’s summary of Mulla Sadra’s text, *The Four Journeys*, do you see resonance between this Islamic philosophy and philosophies of other religious, or even secular, traditions?
3. Ebtekar presents us with an image of an appropriate leader? What is that image? How close or far away are we from that image? How might we encourage those with these qualities to seek leadership positions?

Dale Jamieson, “A Life Worth Living”

We face a paradox: even as we are told that money equals freedom, the wealthiest people feel trapped by their lifestyles and increasingly dependent on forces outside themselves. So what makes a life worth living? We find meaning in our lives in the context of our relationships to nature. Lives worth living are those built on activities that are in accordance with our values, whatever happens in the world.

Reading Questions

1. Jamieson points out that simply understanding the facts of environmental harms and current and future injustices will not, by themselves, move us to act. How does he suggest we will be moved to act? If you consider our responses to environmental harms, where do we exert our energies—on simply understanding the facts, or on something more?

2. Consider what Jamieson says, as well as your own thoughts: what does a meaningful life look like in the current era of climate change and other environmental harms?

Thomas L. Friedman, “Who We Really Are”

A twelve-year-old girl, speaking at the 1992 Earth Summit, reminds the world’s leaders that climate change is not just about “the whales,” but about children and the lessons they learn from their parents about living well on Earth. The difficult decisions we make in response to climate destabilization will ultimately reveal what we value and who we are as human beings.

Reading Questions

1. What exactly is it about Severn Suzuki’s statement that Friedman finds so “eloquent,” do you think? What do you find powerful about her words?
2. Describe three things (emotions, realizations, ideas, etc.) that pop into your mind when you read Suzuki’s words.
3. What do you think Friedman means when he says that our decisions are about “who we really are” and not a matter of merely “technical decisions”?