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Rights, Obligations and Environmental Ethics: Reflections from the West

Michael Palencia-Roth

“Traue nicht dem Wasserboden” (Do not trust the ocean bottom)
Goethe, *Faust II*, line 11137

“When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.”
John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*

“We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”
Aldo Leopold, Foreword to *A Sand County Almanac*

The Monolithic Perspective and Matricide

Many years ago, I was invited to participate in a panel discussion on human rights during a conference held in Tokyo. The first to speak, I said that The Universal Declaration of Human Rights issued by the United Nations would be the place to start the discussion on human rights, for its goal was the dignity of all human beings. Immediately, a Chinese colleague on the panel interrupted me to say that the declaration was not universal at all, but rather the product of those powers that were victorious at the end of the Second World War; that it was a political document with roots in the West, in particular the 18th century; and that the connection between rights and dignity was a cultural assumption, not a universal one. He said, further, that in the East The Declaration of Human Obligations would have been produced instead. He concluded by insisting that the West was the civilization of individual rights and freedoms, and that the East was the civilization of social

* University of Illinois and Research Center for Moral Science

obligations and responsibilities. In his mind, the divide between East and West was unbridgeable, permitting neither discussion nor compromise. I could not even get him to admit that all human beings have a “right” to “dignity,” regardless of their cultural origin. My Chinese colleague would have said that Rudyard Kipling was correct when he wrote, “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.”¹⁾

In that discussion, I and my Chinese colleague each revealed some monolithic assumptions: I that “human rights” was the supreme universal value, he that the East was the sole possessor of the idea and practice of obligations and responsibilities and that an unbridgeable abyss separated a monolithic West from a monolithic East.

The monolithic separation of East and West is attractive to many because it is simple and confirms a dualistic conception of reality. Dualistic thinking facilitates the ethics of domination over other human beings and over nature itself. It justifies—whether by design or not—the use and abuse of power, and it does so through strategies of objectification and dehumanization. Dualistic thinking based on the belief in monolithic cultural identities masks the layered complexity of culture itself. The issue of rights plays a role in eastern cultures, just as that of responsibilities or obligations does in western cultures. Certain traditions in the West discuss responsibility, obligation, and duty—profoundly moral traditions that value human dignity as well as the individual’s relationship to others, to society, and to nature.

In his last book, *Mankind and Mother Earth* (1976), Arnold Toynbee issued a dire warning. “Man,” said Toynbee, “is the first species of living being in our biosphere that has acquired the capacity to wreck the biosphere and, in wrecking it, to liquidate himself” (17). This capacity for “matricide,” to use Toynbee’s term, he attributes primarily to the industrial revolution and the creation of atomic weapons and nuclear energy—children all of the biblical injunction in *Genesis* 1: 28 to subdue the earth and have dominion over everything that moves upon it (*Mankind and Mother Earth*, 18, 20).²⁾ Or, as Aristotle writes in his

1) Kipling’s words are usually taken out of their original context and used to support blanket assertions about the East versus the West. What Kipling actually meant was something more subtle and the opposite of an unbridgeable confrontation. Here are the original lines, which both begin and end the poem entitled “The Ballad of East and West”: “Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,/Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great judgment Seat;/But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,/When two strong men stand face to face, tho’ they come from the ends of the earth!”

2) The essentially theological argument is made by Lynn White’s in his influential essay on the subject. See Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* (1967), 155: 1203-1207. See also Arnold Toynbee, *Mankind and Mother Earth: A*

Politics (Book I, Chapter 8), all things in nature are made for man. Behind Toynbee's words as well as those in *Genesis* and in Aristotle's *Politics* is a perspective that places the individual first and the collective second. In essence, this perspective is egocentric and anthropocentric rather than altruistic or ecocentric.

We must find ways to replace dualism and categorical thinking with other ways of thinking and of being in the world. This essay is, in part, a critique of monolithic value systems and the dualistic thinking they demand, a critique of anthropocentrism in ethical thought, and a critique of the environmental indifference that may result in ecological matricide. These three critiques are interrelated. They call for an exploration of the proposition that western civilization is not only the civilization of rights but also that of obligations and that it can contribute to the development of environmental and ecological ethics. This all-too-brief essay has not been written in order to diminish the importance of the ideas of responsibility and social obligation in the East. In bringing to light some dimensions of western thought less familiar to Eastern scholars, I hope to contribute to the discussions under way in the Japan Society for Global System and Ethics as well as in the call for a United Nations Ethics Summit, issued one month after the tsunami and Fukushima Daiichi disasters. What I have to say is not particularly original, but my hope is that it will become part of the discussion in Japan and in the East generally.

Rights, Dignity, and Duty

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations, so scornfully dismissed by my Chinese colleague, is not exclusively a statement of individual rights. It also maintains that our inherent dignity and rights stem from the fact that we are "all members of the human family" (preamble) and that "everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible" (article 29).³⁾ Furthermore, this UN declaration has roots far deeper than the 18th century. In the West, these extend to classical thought, especially that of stoicism, and to early Christianity. The issue of "rights" is bound up with issues of "duty," "humanity," and man's relationship to "nature"—all issues important in Japanese and other Asian cultures.

For Cicero (d. 43 BCE), who composed two essays on "dignitas,"

Narrative History of the World (New York & London: Oxford University Press, 1976).

3) See (<http://www.un.org/es/documents/udhr/>).

dignity refers to moral excellence, the characteristic that differentiates the human being from the animal. An animal, said Cicero, wants only to eat, to sleep, to pursue sensual pleasures, all of which are primordial instincts. A human being, by contrast, can control these instincts through study and reflection. In that control, the human being finds “dignity.”⁴⁾ “Dignity” is thus equated with being human, with *not* being an animal, and with living in moderation as a member of the human community. For the Stoics, it was the pursuit of “the good life” or virtue that was most important. This pursuit was a profoundly moral activity, requiring that one live in harmony both with other human beings and with nature, sometimes identified with “fate” and sometimes with “reality” or “logos” or natural law. However, we cannot say that Stoic morality includes “environmental consciousness” in the modern sense of the term.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and others consider that man, because he is created in the image of God, resembles God. His “dignity” therefore derives from his relationship to God. The purpose of life is to draw closer to God, and one’s duty is to behave in such a way as to deserve that relationship. This thought runs through the central document of western monasticism, the Rules of St. Benedict. The “Rules” emphasize the importance of a selfless devotion to the community and of living in harmony not only with it but also with nature. But living in harmony with nature is a secondary duty here. In the words of Thomas Merton, who summarized St. Benedict in his *Basic Principles of Monastic Spirituality*, the “Benedictine way [is that] of humility in the common life” (66), for it is that which brings the monk closer to God. Indeed, “...the monk has, as his primary function, *the duty to be a monk*—to be a man of God, that is to say, a man who lives by and for God alone” (122).⁵⁾ Man’s moral

4) “Sed pertinent ad omnem **officii** quaestionem semper in promptu habere, quantum **natura hominis** pecudibus reliquisque beluis antecedit; illae nihil sentiunt nisi voluptatem ad eamque feruntur omni impetu, hominis autem mens discendo aliter et cogitando, semper aliquid aut anquirit aut agit videndique et audiendi delectatione ducitur... Ex quo intellegitur corporis voluptatem **non satis esse dignam hominis praestantia**, eamque contemni et reici oportere; sin sit quispiam, qui aliquid tribuat voluptati, diligenter ei tenendum esse eius fruendae modum” (*De officiis*). “But it is essential to very inquiry about **duty** that we keep before our eyes how far superior **man is by nature** to cattle and other beasts: they have no thought except for sensual pleasure and this they are impelled by every instinct to seek; but man’s mind is nurtured by study and meditation; he is always either investigating or doing, and he is captivated by the pleasure of seeing and hearing... From this we see that sensual pleasure is quite **unworthy of the dignity of man** and that we ought to despise it and cast it from us; but if some one should be found who sets some value upon sensual gratification, he must keep strictly within the limits of moderate indulgence.” (my emphases) See Cicero, *De officiis*, Edited and translated by Walter Miller (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1928), p. 30.

relationship to nature is complicated in the Judeo-Christian tradition by the conception of God as the creator of nature and therefore as separate from it. In the 17th century, Baruch Spinoza would argue for the inseparability of God and nature, an argument that is modern in its consequences for environmentalists, for it shifts the notion of man's duty toward God to include a duty toward nature. For Spinoza, God and nature (and man) are one.

In the European 18th century, the concept of duty—or obligation—was connected to democratic principles and secularized. Politically, with Locke and Rousseau, duty becomes part of Social Contract theory. Philosophically, with Kant, duty was made central to ethics. Kant's categorical imperative—"So act that you would be willing that the principle of your action be made into universal law"—has sometimes been called the equivalent of the golden rule. That is not quite accurate. Christ's injunction is to love one's neighbor as one loves oneself. This injunction is self-referential and therefore belongs, as Chikuro Hiroike would say, to conventional morality. Kantian ethics moved the focus from the self to "universal law," to what in other contexts has been called "natural law." For Kant, the human being is part of nature, connected to it not only elementally but also through the use of his reason. Kant explored the elemental connection in "the metaphysics of nature." The rational connection he explored in "the metaphysics of morals." For Kant, then, man and the natural world are elementally and morally interconnected and interdependent.

Environmental Hubris

This sense of interconnectedness and interdependence should have given rise to humility vis-à-vis nature, but that has not generally been the case. An iconic example of environmental hubris occurs in the second part of *Faust*, in which Goethe alludes to the Dutch sea-reclamation project of the late Middle Ages and adapts the Baucis and Philemon story from Ovid's *Metamorphosis* (VIII: 611-724) to Faust's world. In that scene, we see Faust surveying his domain, the land that he has conquered from the sea through the use of dikes. He is proud of his accomplishment, but his technological mastery over nature has its critics. Baucis tells Philemon, "one should not trust the ocean bottom," knowing that ultimately, despite Faust's promises to the contrary, he may not keep them safe and also that nature is more powerful than man.

5) Thomas Merton, *Basic Principles of Monastic Spirituality* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1996).

Goethe alludes to two potential dangers: the ocean may flood this low-lying land despite the dikes, and Faust, out of greed to possess even more land than he now has, may destroy the home of Baucis and Philemon.

In trying to control nature, one may in fact contribute to its destruction. This is the message of Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring*.⁶⁾ The title refers to a phenomenon observed in Hinsdale, Illinois in the mid 1950s. In 1958, a housewife wrote to a leading ornithologist in despair because the songbirds that she had heard every spring were virtually gone. What had killed them, she asked? He explained that pesticides, in particular DDT, had entered the food supply of birds first through being sprayed on trees, killing beetles and other insects on which birds feed. In the autumn, leaves still covered with DDT had fallen to the ground and become part of the soil. That soil then became food for earthworms, and earthworms became food for birds (97-119), which then died. In effect, the cycle of life had become the cycle of death. As Carson noted, “insecticides” should really be called “biocides,” killers of life itself (18). Insecticides are used to control nature and to make farming more profitable. Carson was not against the use of chemicals to aid farmers. She was against their excessive and indiscriminate use without much thought to their possible consequences. She was critical of “environmental hubris.”

It is hubris to believe that the balance of nature can be altered without serious consequences. Rachel Carson knew this as a scientist and as a “moralist” who reflected on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In her 1960 preface to the second edition of *The Sea Around Us*, published originally in 1951, she wrote:

“Although man’s record as a steward of the natural resources of the earth has been a discouraging one, there has long been a certain comfort in the belief that the sea, at least, was inviolate, beyond man’s ability to change and to despoil. But this belief, unfortunately, has proved to be naïve. In unlocking the secrets of the atom, modern man has found himself confronted with a frightening problem—what to do with the most dangerous materials that have ever existed in all the earth’s history, the by-products of atomic fission. The stark problem that faces him is whether he can dispose of these lethal substances without rendering the earth uninhabitable.”⁷⁾

6) Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1962).

7) Rachel Carson, *The Sea Around Us* (revised edition New York: Oxford University

The examples of environmental hubris are legion and not limited to the West. It is naïve to trust the ocean bottom, as the tsunami of March 2011 tragically proved. It is hubris to believe that nuclear power can be made totally safe in the face of nature's fury, as Fukushima Daiichi graphically demonstrated. The events of March 2011 were made worse because of a lack of respect for the interconnectedness of man and nature.

Environmental Ethics

The recognition of man's interconnectedness with the natural world led the German naturalist and scientist Alexander von Humboldt, influenced by Kant and by the Romantics' exaltation of nature, to devote his life to a scientific exploration of the New World, primarily Latin America. Toward the beginning of his major work, entitled *Kosmos*, published between 1845 and 1847, von Humboldt wrote: "Considered from an intellectual perspective, nature is a unity in diversity, the blending together of the manifold in form and attributes, in essence, [the blending] of the objects and powers of nature as a living whole" (my translation).⁸⁾ It was von Humboldt who, along with Carl Ritter (in *Die Erdkunde*),⁹⁾ created the phrase and concept, "unity in diversity," which has become so fashionable in the last three decades. In the 19th century, the concept was associated with the natural world and with man's relationship to it. Today, it is discussed primarily in the social sciences.

According to Aaron Sachs, in *The Humboldt Current*, Alexander von Humboldt is the main source and inspiration of American environmentalism.¹⁰⁾ It is with environmentalism that the concept of obligation and duty acquires its most extensive applicability. Von Humboldt influenced the pioneer of American environmentalism, John Muir, as well as others. Muir, like von Humboldt, recognized the phenomenon of interconnectedness. In *My First Summer in the Sierra*, he wrote: "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to

Press, 1961), p. xi.

8) "Die Natur ist für die denkende Betrachtung Einheit in der Vielheit, Verbindung des Mannigfaltigen in Form und Mischung, Inbegriff der Naturdinge und Naturkräfte als ein lebendiges Ganzes." See *Kosmos: Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung* (Stuttgart: J. G. Gotta'scher Verlag, 1845), vol. 1, Introduction, pp. 5-6.

9) *Die Erdkunde im Verhältniss zur Natur und zur Geschichte des Menschen (The Science of the Earth in Relation to Nature and the History of Mankind)*, 19 volumes, written 1817-1859.

10) Aaron Sachs, *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism* (New York: Viking-Penguin Books, 2006).

everything else in the universe.”¹¹⁾ Muir, who died in 1914, helped to save many wilderness areas in California from the predatory advance of capitalism. Because of his advocacy, the Yosemite Valley and mountain-range area became a national park; also, the Sequoia National Park was established to protect the giant sequoias of California. He was instrumental in founding the Sierra Club, now one of the most significant environmental organizations in the world. President Theodore Roosevelt, perhaps the most environmentally conscious American president, traveled to California to meet him in 1903 and, inspired by him, enacted legislation to create and maintain a number of national parks. Muir is commonly known as the father of the national park system and, according to his biographer Steven J. Holmes, a “patron saint” of American environmentalism.¹²⁾ His work was not an unqualified success, however. In fact, he lost some key environmental battles in the San Francisco area to the needs of industrialization and urbanization.

John Muir, like Alexander von Humboldt and Henry David Thoreau before him, was moved by the divinity of nature to attempt to live in harmony with it, and to advocate that others do so as well. For this, he was severely criticized as an obstacle to the civilizing process. Half a century later, *Silent Spring* vaulted Rachel Carson into the first rank of environmentalists and she, too, became the target of reprehensible attacks, in particular attacks organized by large chemical manufacturers. Scientists in the employ of chemical companies questioned her scientific credentials. Corporate lawyers threatened lawsuits. A former secretary of agriculture accused her of being a “communist.”¹³⁾ But she did not back down and continued to question the profit motive in modern society.

Aldo Leopold, one of the founders of the Wilderness Society in the USA and a guiding spirit in the American environmental movement, spent all of his adult life in forestry and eventually was named adviser on conservation for the United Nations. When he died in 1948, he left behind, in draft, a manuscript that would be published in 1949 by Oxford University Press as *A Sand County Almanac*. Now a classic of environmentalism, the *Almanac* explicitly presents the relationship of man and nature in terms of ethics. In its most important and influential chapter, entitled “The Land Ethic” (237-264), Leopold wrote that man

11) John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), p. 211.

12) See Steven J. Holmes, *The Young John Muir: An Environmental Biography* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999).

13) Linda Lear, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), pp. 429-430.

and nature are interconnected through ethics and community. There are three levels of ethical awareness and action: first, the relationship between individuals (in the West, the Ten Commandments is an example); second, the relationship between individuals and their society (democratic principles or social contract theory would be examples); third, the relationship between individuals and the land, as is evident in environmentalist movements. Each relationship imposes an obligation upon the individual to act in the interests of others and, ultimately, of the earth itself. Leopold saw these three levels of responsibility as stages in an evolving process of living within ever more encompassing communities, the earth being the largest. For Leopold, “all ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts” (239). The greatest obstacle to the land ethic, to a moral existence within this largest of communities, Leopold saw, was the profit motive. The evolution advocated by Leopold begins with ethics between individuals. It then expands to include social ethics and, eventually, ecological ethics, the title of a recent book by Patrick Curry.¹⁴⁾

As a discipline and mode of consciousness, environmental ethics does not belong to one part of the world only. The thinkers come from many cultures. Before environmentalism became a common word in academic circles, in 1961 a number of scholars from around the world, including Arnold Toynbee and Pitirim Sorokin as well as Shi-yi Hsiao from Peiking University and Kyoshiro Yajima from the University of Tokyo, met in Salzburg, Austria, to create the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations.¹⁵⁾ At the end of that inaugural meeting, everyone agreed that the era of independent nation states in conflict and competition with each other must come to an end. The future of humankind depends on it (*Problems of Civilizations*, 403-414). Summarizing the consensus of those present, Toynbee said that the entire world had become connected militarily and technologically, whether or not it wanted to be interdependent in these ways. Therefore, the world had now to strive to come together in terms of culture, religion, psychology, and art. If the world fails to do so, if misunderstanding and fear dominate the relationship between cultures, then the destruction of the world through a nuclear holocaust becomes all the more possible (*Problems of Civilizations*, 408). We must acknowledge,

14) See Patrick Curry, *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2006).

15) See the proceedings of that 1961 meeting: Othmar Anderle (editor), *Problems of Civilizations: Report of the First Synopsis Conference of the S.I.E.C.C., Salzburg, 8-15 October, 1961* (The Hague: Mouton and Company, 1964).

Shi-yi Hsiao said in that Salzburg meeting of 1961, that we may be as diverse as leaves on a tree but that we all belong to the same tree (*Problems of Civilizations*, 403). In a similar vein, I would maintain that misunderstanding our responsibilities and our place in the ecosystem that is the earth will lead, at the very least, to natural tragedies like the tsunami of March 2011, to nuclear accidents like Chernobyl and Fukushima Daiichi, and to the irreversible degradation of the environment.

Early formulations of the relationship between ethics and the environment, such as those by John Muir, were rudimentary. The conceptions of Aldo Leopold are deeper and more extensive in reach. And more influential as well, for his central challenge has been taken up by many contemporary environmental movements of the last half of the 20th century. The call has been heeded by individuals, academic institutions, non-governmental organizations, governments, and transnational entities like the European Union and the United Nations. For example, a new field in philosophy was created in the 1970s, “environmental ethics”; it has its own journal, *Environmental Ethics*, established in 1979. There are at least 15 graduate programs in environmental ethics in the USA, Europe, the UK, South Africa, and Australia. Publications in this field are numerous.¹⁶⁾ Up to this point the vast majority of environmental organizations may be found in the western hemisphere. The Sierra Club, Greenpeace, World Wildlife Fund, the Nature Conservancy, and Friends of the Earth are examples. Established in 2001, the international non-profit Oceana, headquartered in Washington, D.C., has as its sole mission the protection of the oceans, which cover 71% of the globe. In 1962, the United Nations held a conference on the human environment in Stockholm and followed up with another conference in 1992. The UN established the UNEP (the United Nations Environmental Program), now headquartered in Kenya. In Europe, the European Environmental Agency (EEA), established in 1990 by the EU, has long been a vocal advocate for the environment. In the United States, governmental agencies include the EPA (the Environmental Protection Agency), the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Park Service. In the East, Japan has been a leader in the evolving field of environmental ethics, as evidenced by the relatively recent establishment of organizations like The Japan Society for Global System and Ethics, as well as by other initiatives, such as the “Message from Tokyo,” issued jointly

16) For example, see not only the articles published in *Environmental Ethic* for the past thirty years but also Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III (editors), *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 554 pages.

by the UN University and UNESCO in 1995.

In sum, it is simplistic and misleading to insist that East is East and West is West and that they cannot meet. It is equally simplistic and misleading to insist that the concept of duty and obligation belongs to the East and not to the West as well. The history of ethical thought undermines this perspective, and the evolution of environmental ethics from anthropocentrism toward ecocentrism disproves it. East, West, North and South can, indeed must, meet.