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EDITORIAL

Ethics and environmental conservation

After addressing a conference on 'Ethics and the Practising Scientist' some four years back, I remember the conferees struggling to formulate a code of ethics for those engaged in the so-called 'hard' sciences. They could not arrive at a satisfactory formulation, and at one point the chairman, in utter exasperation, confessed that, he didn't care for details about principles or quibbles over which slant the statements took, for 'frankly any code should do!' During the decade before and after that 1993 meeting, attempts to enunciate moral principles for researchers and manifestos for responsibility in science have come and gone, and the notes of discord have not abated.

Now those who are concerned to study and write about environmental conservation are, almost to a person, it seems, committed to standards and stances that are against 'environmental deterioration and breakdown' (even if variously conceived and defined). There is already something intrinsically ethical about conservationist discourse and practice, distinguishing this aspect of science from most others. It sits specially apart from academic disciplines that do not presume in their practitioners quite the same kinds of axiological pre-judgments, since few can expect of physicists or mathematicians, for example, that they should or would never take their research into areas which have obvious usability in the armaments industry. Conservation, when engaged in by biologists, ecologists and the like, is in this special respect more like medicine, from whose professional fold we expect an implicit acceptance of the Hippocratic oath to save human lives. Of course, scientists and sciences cannot ever completely avoid 'the ethical dimension', and all of them, in a basic sense sought by those in the above-mentioned conference, might be expected to have need of some common code. This code might be to extol the pursuit of truth, abjure plagiarism, and encourage those aspects of science helpful to the human species, so long as it does not pass certain (now very hotly disputed and not yet uniformly prescribed) bounds. But environmental conservation apparently expects more than such basics, because it is *already* ostensibly ethical in significant ways; it is more openly life-affirming, more preveniently grappling with the rights and wrongs of situations.

That being the case, there is every reason why papers on environmental ethics, let along reviews of environmental facets of disciplines such as philosophy, theology and buddhist philosophy, should receive adequate coverage in the pages of this journal. After all, the crises and conditions documented by most papers which are submitted present serious choices and challenges of a moral character. These include those over human and non-human population levels, the extent of landscape modifications, resource exploitation, and pollution control. The state of play in ethics, philosophy and studies in religion is so relatively fluid in our so-called 'post-modern' situation, moreover, that freer rein should be allowed for debate over such matters and their implications for environmental policy-making.

As I perceive it at this *fin de siècle*, there are two larger bodies of ethical orientation impinging on and legitimizing the conservationist spirit. The one springs from 'the scientific enterprise' itself over the last century and a half and may be loosely dubbed 'neo-Darwinism'. It is by no means a homogeneous block of opinions. For most of this century, Marxists, appealing to Engels' reading of the Darwinian position in the 1880s, have incorporated Darwin's biological naturalism into their ideology. Since Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), there have been appeals to the maintenance of 'whole [eco-] systems' as the Darwinian-inspired criterion of value through which prescriptive decisions on behalf of life-forms on the biosphere have been put forward. Neo-Darwinian positions are mainly naturalistic, humanistic and secular, even though on the fringes there are the 'process thinkers' bent on accommodating nature's myriad events with a forever integrally-engaged God.

The other body of approaches is more distinctly affected by spiritual traditions. Interestingly, there is a growing tendency to remind scientists that the modern scientific disciplines themselves arose out of religious world-views, and that although it might have seemed as if scientists could

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afford to 'dispense with religion', this has been like kicking the very ladder away that allowed them to climb to a vantage-point in the first place. Some historically-aware reflectors on the history of the hard sciences see that scientists have never really escaped the reliance on 'testimonial and authority' which they often attributed to the religious temperament. The attitudinal scene is changing. While some debates between science and religion, such as the one between evolutionists and conservative creationists, are leading to dead ends, others are leading to *rapprochement*. And this is becoming very evident in the area of conservation.

A Russian Catholic contribution to the ethics of environmental conservation in the last issue of the journal is indicative (Schreider 1997). Some might have been impatient with the argument as somewhat formalist and unadventurous. The point is, however, that we were hearing a new voice from post-Communist Russia. It was a distinctly non-Marxist one, from a person recurrently arrested by the KGB for investigating theological and religious well-springs of ethics. Professor Schreider knew that the naturalistic ethics of Marxism were bankrupt, and he realized State totalitarianism was a false custodian of the environment, and concluded that it could not play surrogate to the transcendent demands of the Sacred, the absolute imperative to look after the 'created order'. In the collapse of the Communist bloc, the twentieth century has been witness to the eventual revulsion against the enforced proposition that 'Man can live by a secular, naturalistic socio-environmental engineering alone.' That makes it important for researchers concerned about the state of the biosphere to discern the place of the 'spiritual impetus' in reclaiming health for the planet.

It is very tempting, since events in the early 1990s, to conclude that the political economy of capitalism provides a preferable way forward for nations and their environments. Yet there has already been enough shift in consciousness to reveal mass disillusionment with the commonly de-spiritualizing expedient and unethical qualities of Western societies. What we can loosely describe as the New Age movement has expressed this rejection, although it is a curiosity that New Agers tend to eschew ethical absolutes and are consequently flabbier than we might have expected in framing a more even-keeled and realistic set of social and environmental goals. The debilitating consequences of private greed, 'corporatization', and national growth economics, however, simply cannot amount to the levels of sustainability we need for survival. On this, neo-Darwinian extollers of viable whole systems in democratic contexts can readily concur with those who, recalling absolutist demands, insist that we are forfeiting our 'cosmic responsibilities' or 'sacred duties'. Capitalist enterprise is now hurting eastern and other non-Western environments so much that spiritually-based ethics in a plethora of traditional cultures are becoming crucial ethical resources to turn around humanity's 'false courses'.

We urgently need to cultivate ethical and spiritual dimensions in defence of environmental conservation, and this journal openly welcomes serious reflections on the religious values and beliefs we need for our survival.

Reference

Schreider, J. (1997) The duty of humanity before the environment: a Russian Catholic viewpoint. *Environmental Conservation* 24(3): 210–12.

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