

***“AND WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?”  
NEW ECOLOGICAL ANSWERS  
TO AN OLD THEOLOGICAL QUESTION***

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The question in the title of this paper comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 10. A lawyer asks Christ “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Christ asks him in return “What is written in the law?” The lawyer knows: “Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” It is the right answer. But the lawyer isn't satisfied. Wanting to “vindicate” himself, as the Lukan account puts it, he says to Jesus “And who is my neighbor?” Christ's reply is the parable of the Good Samaritan. Samaritans were regarded by Jews of that time with contempt and suspicion. But this Samaritan rose above that. He, not the priest or the Levite who passed by on the other side was the true neighbor. The moral is clear and admirable. All people are our neighbors, even those whom we might think of as outcasts and enemies. We live in one world.

Since the time of Christ the extent and complexity of what is meant by neighbor has changed. We have many more neighbors than was imaginable then, with new needs of enormous scope. But one thing has not changed — the assumption implicit in the idea of neighborliness that we are referring to people, that every person is our neighbor. It is an assumption which is beginning to be challenged.

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One of the notable writers who has challenged it is Aldo Leopold. In his book *A Sand County Almanac* he writes that humans, animals, plants, even the soil are members of a biotic community in which all are worthy of mutual respect and possess intrinsic moral value.<sup>2</sup> Can our neighbor be a tree, a mountain, a stretch of Mid-Western dirt? Can our neighbor be a horse, a worm, an alligator?

Such questions might be tolerated as whimsical at best. A kind of St. Francis' sentimentalism brought into the twentieth century: "Sister bird." Some philosophers regard such thinking as foolishness when the existence of human life on our increasingly crowded and polluted planet is at stake. Yet not only Leopold but others are looking at the world differently from how it has been looked at, so that the answer to the question "And who is my neighbor?" includes for them not only people but also the whole range of earth's occupants as described by Leopold. If that is what is meant by neighbor, and the New Testament teaches us to love our neighbor as ourselves, we as Christians should love our neighbor in this extended sense as ourselves. Yet there is some uncertainty about how we are to respond to this new version of the Second Commandment. The traditional version is clear. We know who people are and we know we should love them, all of them. But trees, are we to love them as ourselves? Animals? Dogs are not a problem. Alligators?

In a recent article Sallie McFague asks "Should a Christian love nature? Most have not over the past two thousand years and many today still don't... Of course, Christians should respect nature, use it carefully, and even protect it, but isn't loving it a bit extreme. Should we love nature? My answer is a resounding Yes." Her reason is that God is with us on this earth. The physical reality of our environment is "where we find the presence of God." But how should we love nature? Her answer is that to love something we must know it. Therefore we must pay attention

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<sup>2</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1949.

to the world around us. We must see “each and every creature, everybody as intrinsically valuable in itself, in its specialness, its distinctiveness, its differences from ourselves.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Sallie McFague, “Should a Christian Love Nature?”, *The Spire*, Vanderbilt University Divinity School and Oberlin Graduate School of Theology, Vol. 15, no 3, Spring/Summer 1993, p. 1.

The writer is expressing a view increasingly coming to the fore. Last year on October 4, 1993, the National Religious Partnership for the Environment was officially initiated.<sup>4</sup> Its executive director declared that “how people of faith engage the environmental crisis will have much to do with the future well-being of the planet.” The program already has pledges of three million dollars, so it is on a firm financial footing. Its intention is to act upon “a biblically based imperative to care for God’s creation.”<sup>5</sup>

Somber predictions about the degradation of the earth are not uncommon, but the warning has been repeated beyond religious circles. The most recent World Watch Report notes that more than 1600 scientists, including 102 Nobel Laureates, signed a “Warning to Humanity” in 1992. It was a very serious alert that no more than one or few decades remain before we will have lost the ability to repair the damage which the earth’s inhabitants are inflicting upon their planet.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, people of faith, who are most likely to recognize themselves as caretakers of the planet and answerable to its Creator, have a special responsibility toward the environment. To that extent we should “love” nature. But as other parts of this same volume of World Watch illustrate, it is receiving very little love. The terms “love” and “neighbor” are not synonymous. One can have neighbors and get along with them without loving them. Both terms, however, include the element of responsibility, that is moral, responsibility. If we are morally responsible to someone or something we are obliged to treat him, her or it in terms of its own value, not in terms of the value it might have for us. The distinction often drawn is between an anthropomorphic view of our environment (valued in terms of its usefulness to us) and one which accords other non-human

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<sup>4</sup> “Churches Care for the Earth”, *The Christian Century*, October 13, 1993, p. 968.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 969.

<sup>6</sup> Lester R. Brown, *State of the World*, A Worldwatch Institute Report on Progress Toward a Sustainable Society, New York, London, W.W. Norton and Company, 1994, p. 19.

constituents of the universe as having intrinsic value. The New Testament, through the Second Commandment does, however, equate neighborliness with love. From this it follows that if we are to love nature, if we should love nature, if we have a moral obligation to love nature we must treat it also as our neighbor.

The first thing to note is that by taking this revised version of the Second Commandment seriously we enormously extend the range of our moral responsibility. It is not only the number of additional entities, animal and non-sentient, but the nature of the responsibility. We do not expect animals and plants to be moral. We have to be moral for them. We have to take the moral initiative even more than we would have to with children. Are we ready for that? We may doubt it, given how poorly we behave to other humans. And we were not behaving perceptibly better when Christ was alive, which is one reason for the parable. The cynical, or perhaps the realistic, might ask whether people are inclined to do anything for any reason other than their own interests, without fear or without an advantage compelling them to do it. But even if we reject that kind of cynicism there is still a question. One wonders how morally responsible the Good Samaritan would continue to be after the third, fifth, ninth, twelfth battered wayfarer he came across on his travels whom no one else felt responsible to help. At some point he would say “This is enough. I have my own family to take care of.” Consider the initially generous attitude of the West Germans to the East Germans after Communism fell and the wall was breached, and how that attitude changed as the West Germans found themselves confronted with an overwhelming burden. This is people dealing with people. Beyond a certain point even the most enthusiastic neighborliness wears thin. It is therefore no small matter to include a huge additional range of natural creatures and natural objects within the scope of our moral responsibility.

Those who reject the anthropomorphic view of nature, the view that regards nature in all its forms as having value only as it serves human interests, take at least two positions. One maintains that we have a moral responsibility to non-human sentient

creatures, primarily animals, but rejects any such responsibility to the non-sentient world. The other view includes the non-sentient world: trees, earth, mountains all have intrinsic value and merit moral consideration. Bernard Rollin, who supports the first view but not the second, makes the distinction between them because animals care about what we do to them, whereas rocks, trees and non-sentient creatures don't. Animals suffer, they feel pain, anxiety, loneliness. They can be bored.<sup>7</sup> Almost everyone has a personal example which can illustrate this, especially those who own a pet. In Rollin's opinion, based on such considerations, there are "no morally relevant grounds" for excluding animals from moral consideration.<sup>8</sup> If we should love nature these are a part of the natural world we should love. But while the theory is good, actual human practice falls somewhat short. Marian Dawkins in her essay "Attitudes to Animals", writes "There are few areas of our lives where our attitudes to anything are as confused and tangled as they are in the way we think and treat animals."<sup>9</sup> Many of us are selective about which animals qualify as having moral status, but for the most part we don't think about it. As Dawkins explains, "our moral sympathies are drawn to those animals that are clever or that show evidence of ability to reason."<sup>10</sup> Dogs, horses, cats, some kinds of monkeys do qualify. Cows, pigs, hedgehogs, in general, don't. If we claim to "love nature", to regard the animal kingdom as our neighbor, this is something we have to sort out. Dawkins continues, "The only way we can arrive at a moral position in our attitude to animals is to find out more about those animals themselves and their view of the

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<sup>7</sup> Bernard Rollin, "Environmental Ethics and International Justice", printed in *Problems of International Justice*, edited by Steven Luper Foy, Boulder and London, Westview Press Inc., 1988, p. 127.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Marian Stamp Dawkins, "Attitudes to Animals", *The Fragile Environment: New Approaches to Global Problems*, edited by Laurie Friday and Ronald Laskey, Cambridge, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 41.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

world. In other words, in order to decide what our attitudes to animals should be, we need to find out what the attitudes of those animals are.”<sup>11</sup> The second non-anthropomorphic view is associated with the writing of Aldo Leopold, particularly his essay “A Land Ethic” included in his book *A Sand County Almanac*, to which we have referred. “The land ethic”, explains Leopold, simply enlarges the boundaries of the (moral) community to include soils, waters, plants and animals, or collectively the land.”<sup>12</sup> The anthropomorphic view regards humans as dominant and their interests as primary. According to Leopold we are members of a community of interdependent parts, not dominant members. We compete, but we must cooperate. He expresses this in terms of a biotic pyramid, land at the base, then various evolutionary layers, plants, insects, animals, finally humans. Land to him is “a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants and animals.”<sup>13</sup> All members of this community including those which have no apparent value are entitled to moral consideration as fellow members.

But as with the earlier case regarding animals this concept is not without its problems, particularly when applied to practical situations. Recently *Newsweek* ran a story about restrictions on logging in the Pacific Northwest. Along with the story was a picture of a little boy holding a sign which read “Please put my dad back to work.” One man described himself as a sixth generation logger. He is now out of work, his family on food stamps.<sup>14</sup> However Christian or religious it may be to “love nature” it is also indubitably Christian to care for the basic needs of human beings; and one of the most basic is having a job.

What I am trying to do is to show that although it may be admirable to love nature and regard all natural things as our neighbor, unless we give careful attention to what that means our

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>12</sup> Aldo Leopold, p. 239.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

<sup>14</sup> *Newsweek*, April 12, 1993, p. 40.1.

views will be dismissed as merely sentimental. Yet the idea of regarding the natural world as a neighbor is not sentimental. The issues at stake in how human beings relate to their environment are too serious. Nor is loving nature sentimental, providing we are realistic. Even among humans we find it hard to act with moral responsibility toward those for whom we feel no care. And it is hard to be morally responsible when how we should be is confusing, and the consequences of trying to exercise such moral responsibility are unclear.

McFague stresses the importance of getting to know nature, “to love something we have to know it.” She calls upon us to “see each and every creature, everybody, as intrinsically valuable in itself.”<sup>15</sup> The thought is expressed elsewhere. “It is inconceivable”, writes Leopold, “that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect and admiration, and a high regard for its value.”<sup>16</sup> A. Wilson in his book *Diversity of Life* quoted from the Senegalese conservationist Babu Dioum. “In the end we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, we will understand only what we are taught.”<sup>17</sup>

Such expressions appeal to the best intentions of many of us, but like the command to love God, it is deceptively easy to agree, not so easy to understand and put into effect in our lives. When we are called upon to love nature, to treat all its parts as having an intrinsic value, does that mean we have to treat every tree, rock, horse, cow as we would treat human beings? That's part of the difficulty in the idea of loving nature, of treating it as our neighbor.

But putting the question in such a way conveys a misunderstanding of what the references to love and intrinsic value mean. Each element in the natural world has an intrinsic

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<sup>15</sup> McFague, *loc. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> *A Sand County Almanac*, p. 261.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Wilson, *Diversity of Life*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 320.



value, but not an independent value. It is an end in itself, it has intrinsic value, but it is the means to the end of others. The soil has intrinsic value, but it is a means to the health of the planet. The Fox Indian who made an offering and uttered a prayer to a tree he was about to cut down recognized that the tree had intrinsic moral value, but saw it also as a means to the end of providing him with shelter.<sup>18</sup> We are therefore not loving a tree in the way we love a human being. We are not at liberty to cut down a human or use a human being solely for our purposes. With regard to a tree we are morally obliged to recognize its intrinsic value and are obliged to treat it in a morally responsible way, but the appropriate way of doing so is with respect to the role which the bearer of the value, the tree, plays in the natural community. The role of the trees is to provide, among other things, wood for human use. (In the case of the beaver — for animal use.) In more than an analogical sense forests are the earth's lungs.<sup>19</sup> The role of an antelope in its wild state is to provide, among other things, food for a carnivore. As we recognize the role, or we might describe it as the responsibility of members of the biotic community to one another, it will not affect *that* we be responsible, but it will determine in what manner our moral responsibility is appropriately fulfilled. Taking this approach will help us to deal with what otherwise might be the unmanageable burden of extending our moral responsibility to the whole of nature.

This understanding is not inconsistent with the meaning of the Second Commandment. The difference between the two commandments is that in the First we should love God with total commitment. Our love must be directed only to God. In the Second Commandment we are to love our neighbor according to the measure of our own interest. While we are directed to give to God our total love, we give to our neighbor just the amount of love which, recognizing our neighbor's interests, is attentive to our

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<sup>18</sup> Lewis M. Hopfe, *Religions of the World*, New York, MacMillan Publishing Company, Inc., London, Collier MacMillan Publishers, third edition, 1983, p. 36.

<sup>19</sup> Lester R. Brown, *State of the World*, Table 2-3, p. 33.

own. There are instances when a person goes beyond that. Christ himself did. But the Second Commandment provides a standard for our daily behavior. If we return to the hypothesis of what the Good Samaritan might have done when confronted with the twentieth battered person lying beside the road, it would not be a matter of his running out of kindness, but, in loving as he loves himself, acting in accord with this meaning of the Second Commandment.

Our moral responsibility toward nature can be understood as making an effort always to recognize the role which a sentient creature or non-sentient object plays in the natural community and acting toward it in terms of that, but to do so according to the standard of our self-interest as it is affected by our moral responsibility to other members of the natural community. The result, if we can get it right, is what Al Gore refers to in his book as balance.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Al Gore, *Earth in Balance*, Boston, New York, London, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992.

The problem, of course, is how do we get it right? I have come to believe that we cannot fulfill the First Commandment if we neglect the Second. But I don't think we can do much of a job with the Second Commandment if we neglect the First.

Overmuch concern with the Second Commandment, however laudable it is to love our neighbor, too easily tempts us into taking advantage. We can be unselfish in very selfish ways. We need the First Commandment to get beyond the self. Philosophers would say we need to take into account the Not-Self, which provides a check upon our self-assertion and can save us from the narrowness of preoccupation with Self. Theologically, as we endeavor to love God as the Commandment requires, we allow our view of the world to be influenced by the One who created it. If we believe that God created the earth and considers it good, part of our faith's commitment should be to cherish that good and protect it.

Indeed yes, but lack of neighborliness in the world is so widespread that this kind of talk may seem almost quaint. The actual, massive destruction of the environment goes on regardless. Yet our interpretation of the Second Commandment, the reference to balance, the philosophical and theological exhortation to look beyond the self (which is the point of the First Commandment) is in fact the only way by which the natural world can even survive. This is not only for its own sake, its intrinsic value, but also for the long-term survival of the humans who are causing the destruction.

Returning to the question with which we began, “And who is my neighbor?”, attempting to answer it confronts us with problems which we have to do something about. We can't avoid them, for they won't avoid us.

## SOMMAIRE

### **«ET QUI EST MON PROCHAIN?»: NOUVELLES RÉPONSES ÉCOLOGIQUES À UNE VIEILLE QUESTION THÉOLOGIQUE**

«Et qui est mon prochain?» C'est la parabole du Bon Samaritain qui a apporté la réponse à cette question familière du Nouveau Testament (Lc 10, 29). Morale: notre prochain, c'est tout le monde. Il s'agit là d'un message important et qui demeure pertinent pour un monde où les animosités vont s'accroissant. L'affirmation implicite que cache cette conception du prochain, c'est toutefois que notre prochain est constitué par *tout le monde*, c'est-à-dire par toutes les *personnes*. Dans cet exposé, je poserai la question de savoir s'il est possible d'aller au-delà des personnes. Est-il possible d'inclure dans notre définition ce que les philosophes décrivent comme étant des créatures sensibles non-humaines? Celles-ci peuvent-elles constituer notre prochain? Et pouvons-nous aller au-delà? Pouvons-nous y inclure des choses non sensibles? Aldo Leopold, auteur de *A Sand County Almanac*, croit que les hommes, les animaux, les plantes et même le sol font partie d'une communauté biotique au sein de laquelle tous sont dignes de respect et où tous possèdent de manière intrinsèque une valeur morale. Un arbre, une montagne ou un bout de terre du Mid-West peuvent-ils alors constituer notre prochain? Et un cheval?

Nous pourrions tolérer de telles questions en les considérant au mieux comme saugrenues, sauf qu'elles sont posées par de plus en plus de gens qui ont commencé à regarder le monde d'une manière différente de celle dont on l'a toujours fait. Cependant, si ces questions ont un sens dans le monde en général, alors elles doivent engager la foi chrétienne, qui nous enseigne à aimer notre prochain comme nous-mêmes. Si notre prochain est un arbre, devons-nous l'aimer comme nous-mêmes? Et qu'en est-il des alligators?

Faisons une première remarque: si nous acceptons cette interprétation du second Commandement, alors nous étendons de beaucoup le champ de notre responsabilité morale. Reste à savoir si nous y sommes prêts. Nous ne nous sommes pas acquittés jusqu'ici d'une façon particulièrement brillante de notre responsabilité envers nos frères humains. Comment alors pouvons-nous y inclure de manière réaliste l'ensemble du monde naturel? Même quand nous en faisons l'effort, nous ne sommes moralement peut-être pas aussi admirables que nous le croyons. Marian Dawkins a fait remarquer que notre «amour» des animaux est fondé sur une sélection. Ce sont les animaux qui sont affectueux et intelligents, comme les chiens, les chevaux et les singes, qui nous attirent: les animaux qui ne le sont pas nous attirent beaucoup moins. Ceci exclurait donc les alligators.

Si nous prétendons aimer l'ensemble du monde naturel, que faire lorsque notre engagement envers sa conservation met un humain, qui lui aussi en fait partie, au chômage?

Peut-être bien cependant que notre manière de considérer le problème est trompeuse. Certes, tous les éléments non humains du monde naturel possèdent une valeur intrinsèque mais il ne s'agit pas d'une valeur indépendante. Le sol possède une valeur intrinsèque, mais il constitue également la ressource nécessaire à la santé de la planète. Une antilope possède une valeur intrinsèque, mais dans son état sauvage elle constitue également une nourriture pour les animaux carnivores. Reconnaître le rôle de tous les membres de la communauté naturelle à l'intérieur de leurs relations mutuelles nous aidera à déterminer la manière la plus adéquate pour nous acquitter de notre responsabilité morale envers la nature.

Un tel point de vue s'avère incompatible avec le second Commandement. Contrairement au premier Commandement, le sens du second est de n'accorder notre attention aux autres qu'en autant que cela soit conciliable avec nos propres intérêts. Par conséquent, aimer la nature équivaut à reconnaître le rôle que joue un objet ou un animal au sein de la communauté naturelle, ainsi

qu'à établir avec lui des rapports, en fonction de ce qui est compatible avec nos propres meilleurs intérêts. Il s'agit là d'une équation qui requiert un prudent équilibre. Comment le trouver? C'est le premier Commandement qui nous montre la voie. Le second Commandement nous persuade trop facilement de prendre notre profit. Nous pouvons nous montrer désintéressés d'une façon très égoïste à plusieurs égards. Nous avons besoin du premier Commandement pour aller au-delà du moi. Les philosophes disent que nous avons besoin du Non-Moi car il offre un frein à notre affirmation de nous-mêmes. Si nous le traduisons en termes théologiques, ceci signifie que, de même que nous nous efforçons d'aimer Dieu tel que l'exige le premier Commandement, de même permettons-nous à Celui qui a créé le monde d'influencer la conception que nous nous en faisons. Si nous croyons que Dieu a créé la Terre et qu'il la considère comme étant bonne, alors une partie de notre engagement de foi consiste à la chérir et à la protéger.

Pour revenir à notre question de départ, «Et qui est mon prochain?», tenter d'y répondre nous confronte à des problèmes auxquels nous devons trouver des solutions. Nous ne pouvons les éviter parce qu'eux ne nous éviteront pas. La question a rapport à un Commandement, à deux Commandements même. Comme j'ai tenté de le démontrer tant dans un sens philosophique que théologique ou religieux, nous ne pouvons nous assurer de la possibilité d'un avenir qu'en nous efforçant de les observer tous deux.