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The Awakening: Reevaluating the Anthropocentric Framework of Western Ethics

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This is a scarred planet. Having grown up in New York, a city draped in the pungency of gasoline and choked by the perpetual presence of overflowing garbage dumpsters, I became aware early on of the burns and lacerations that riddled the land. Man and nature had ceased their waltz, distinct dissonance having jarred them apart into two separate entities which remain out of tune and staggering to separate melodies.

Today, it has become more apparent than ever that the relationship between humankind and the environment is pocked by the acidic corrosion of anthropomorphism. Consequently, the sustainability of the environment, its capacity to endure, is becoming increasingly uncertain. The problem lies with human's neglectful disregard for environmental ethics. Although over fifty years ago Aldo Leopold pointed out: "land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics," humans have nonetheless continued to separate the environment from discussion of moral responsibility (Leopold 1). Has our Western consumerist culture irrevocably skewed our understanding of stewardship, or can we establish a more holistic set of environmental ethics? After all, when we discuss ethics, in the words of Aristotle, "we are discussing no small matter, but how we ought to live" (qtd. Rachels xi).

While visiting Cape Tribulation, a small knob jutting from the northern coast of Queensland, Australia, I realized how deteriorated the environmental ethics of Western culture truly are. The area represents a crucial point for sustainability where conserving what remains is weighed against the ease of oblivious, indulgent destruction. We teeter, toes curled over the line that separates what could be: on the one side, successful sustainability and on the other, wasteful

deterioration. What will determine whether we tumble over that line? I believe it comes down to whether society begins heeding Leopold's words and shifts away from anthropocentrism[1], embracing the natural world as worthy of moral consideration.

Tribulation: *"distress or suffering resulting from oppression or persecution."* James Cook named Cape Tribulation when he came upon the land in July of 1770 because, he explains in his journal, "here began all our troubles" (Cook 274). While the appellation echoes man's dismissal of nature as an impediment to human expansion, the true *distress* and *suffering* is that of the land. The world's voiceless biota has been neglected; although history books depict human's success "conquering," the prideful adjective merely obscures the raping of the land and conceals the shortsighted depletion of resources that has fueled man's perpetual quest for domination and expansion. James Cook's naming of Cape Tribulation reflects his view of the rainforest, mangroves and coral reef structures that compose the area as mere impediments to his colonization rather than instilled with intrinsic value; just as today many humans are blind to the moral imperative that preservation of environmental integrity presents. It was thus with a twist of irony that Cape Tribulation was where the *tribulations* of the world's environmental crises (not the tribulations the environment posed to James Cook) dawned on me, providing a new lens of clarity on the importance of environmental ethics.

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I sat with friends on Cape Tribulation's Coconut Beach amongst the warped bark of mangroves, our toes digging into the sand as sweet mango juice dripped from our chapped lips. The tide sulked into the horizon while the trees stood like weathered widows turned to sea, their

[1] Anthropocentrism is defined as a "philosophical viewpoint arguing that human beings are the central or most significant entities in the world" (Encyclopedia Britannica)

roots entwined, hunching grotesquely into the sand. Our only concern was molten sun overhead as its rays dripped on our skin like wax, the heat flushing our cheeks carmine.

Looking back, this moment should have inspired deep conversation, it should have transformed us into Aldo Leopolds, Edward Abbeys and John Muirs. We should have relished the empty expanse of caramel sand under the canopy of silent celeste blue. We should have tuned-in, thought, discussed, appreciated and been inspired. We should have, but, of course, we didn't….

> "Olive garden, endless baskets of buttered bread sticks, 5 cheese ziti sizzling on the plate."
>
> "Juicy Lucy's, a big hunk of a burger on a fresh Kaiser roll."
>
> "Taco Bell. 89 cent burritos, cheesy chalupas at 2am."

No, any shred of ethical philosophizing was miles from our contemplation as our conversation diverged to the familiar topic of "food pornography:" the delicacies, albeit grease-laden foil-wrapped artery-cloggers, that we so missed from America. Sandy limbs snaked around the mangrove branches as wide grins cascaded into dimples, our thoughts spouting from our stomachs rather than sprouting from our minds. Our insipid conversations carried on on until the sky bled plum and terracotta to the tune of yawns; so much was said, yet nothing of substance or value.

This experience highlights one impediment to environmentally ethical behavior: human cognitive processes are skewed by a culture centered on the pursuit of self-interest. Indulgence has shifted from being merely an aspect of human nature to a facet of modern Western culture as we are taught to buy, use and dispose material goods rather than appreciate the inherent value of the natural world. On Coconut Beach, I had been unable to see how the mangrove I

anthropocentrically repossessed as a lazy-boy recliner to lean upon was an endangered and vital part of the local ecosystem. Unable to see that the hotel we stayed at preyed on people's desire for immersion in the environment, while it actually polluted and destroyed that very environment we sought to be immersed in. Unable to see that my lack of concern for the environment beyond how it served me was not merely ignorant, but also unethical. While my actions may not have been extreme enough to warrant being deemed 'immoral,' my oblivious nature on Coconut Beach is the seed from which immoral, environmentally detrimental actions originate. This escalating progression is illustrated in the following hypothetical scenario: Someone with the same anthropocentric perspective that I had comes upon Coconut Beach, except instead of sprawling out like I did, he decides it is a prime location to construct a commercial development; lacking an environmental conscious, he begins haphazardly bulldozing the endangered mangroves and turning coastline that had provided crucial nesting ground for the Hawksbill turtle into beachfront patio space, all of which ultimately causes erosion, habitat destruction and species endangerment. In summation, operating based solely on self-interest is indeed a slippery slope to immorality.

How had I, and what seems like the vast majority of the Western world, so blatantly excluded the environment from an ethical framework?

Philosophers "from Socrates to Sartre" have asserted that moral standing can only be applied to humans, and thus contend that the natural world lies outside the realm of ethical obligation (Keller 10). The orthodox anthropocentrism of some of the most influential early thinkers in history helps explain how the notion that moral obligations do not encompass nonhuman entities became so deeply ingrained into modern social ideologies. One such philosopher was Aristotle, who maintained that "nature has made all things specifically for the

sake of man" (Rachels 34). The French theorist René Descartes (1596-1650) expressed a similar belief, arguing that nonhumans were essentially machines and since ethical consideration cannot be given to machines, moral consideration extends only to human beings, not the environment (Keller 12). Following this thread of Descartes' logic, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) suggested that moral duty applies to humans because humans are the only rational beings; however, Kant's stance did sway more liberal than Descartes with his consideration of an indirect duty to nonhuman entities, although this was only in conjunction to serving the primary morality of humans (12). The beliefs of the philosophical giants who gilded our ethical framework were thus heavily anthropocentric, which helps explain why contemporary Western ethical thinking today is dominantly human-centered, tending to exclude non-human entities from the realm of moral obligation

The Western world's Judaic-Christian background has also been cited as a factor responsible for shaping a culture that dismisses the environment, especially as it is situated in opposition to paganism, or the worship of the earth. Historian Lynn White argues that "Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt" (White 1203) in the ecological crises because its theology incorporates the teaching that man has dominion over the natural world and is superior to all other mortal creatures:

> God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and everything that creeps on the ground after its kind; and God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. (Genesis 1:26)

Not only does the notion that the Earth was created for humans fuel man's ambition to dominate the land, but the theological tenet that humans were created in the image of God also makes them think they are closer to divinity than nonhuman entities. The result is an ingrained disposition to exploit and conquer nature, manifested in man's anthropocentric ethic. White contends that along with the Biblical traditions that are passed from generation to generation, so too is the latent "orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature" inherited (White 1207).

While many intertwining historical factors led to the current ethical perspective, what is most important is not *how* it came to be, but what we can do to fix it *now*. Fixing this was not on my agenda while I was still lost in an anthropocentric daze on the coast of Cape Tribulation, but it soon would be.

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From the mangrove studded beach I was whisked inland via a rickety van that smelled of old deli-meat and potting soil. As we bumbled along the driver, an Aboriginal man with a thunderous laugh and bronze-flecked eyes, unraveled the story of the Rainbow Serpent (Kurriyala) who created the forest and now lives beneath its floor, ready to unleash its wrath on anyone seeking to destroy the natural harmony. The jalopy eventually lurched to an abrupt halt and I stumbled half-asleep onto a gravel lot, an emerald wall of Bull kauri, Bunya and Plum-Pine rising before me: The Daintree Rainforest.

My friends and I quickly whipped our cameras out, capriciously snapping photos of our grinning faces against the backdrop of the Rainforest, the magnificent ecological wonder swiftly being relegated to an indistinguishable blur of green through the lens of my Kodak. Our guide shook his head and stopped us, gathering us in front of a branch upon which tiny ants with

metallic, beryl hued bodies marched. "*I guarantee this will be a much better memory than that – these are Australian Green-head ants and they are delicious, they taste like limes,"* he encouraged us as he swept one up with a calloused index-finger and dropped it into his mouth. We tentatively followed suit, hesitant to eat something that was not cozily tucked into a plastic wrapper or plucked from a grocery store shelve. While uncomfortably crunching the acidic insect, we followed him into the jungle. The further we ventured away from the gravel lot, the more apparent it became just how intensely the Daintree Rainforest teemed with life. Our guide led us from the delineated path, pointing out colossal Golden Orb-weaving Spiders, sapphire-headed Cassowaries and a Taipan snake whose forked ebony tongue protruded sinisterly as its lithe, brandy body slipped silently through the undergrowth. Even when no animal could be seen, our meandering was continually accompanied by the melody of rustling leaves and bird calls that blended together in the distance, echoing the presence of some unknown life.

The sunlight dripped like honey through the canopy casting an absinthe glow: how could anyone stand there and truly believe that humans were the most important things on Earth? In a place so intensely invigorated with life, mankind seemed overwhelmingly insignificant in comparison. The awe and humility that my experience in the Daintree elicited did not parallel today's dominantly human-centered ethic, which made me wonder, is the natural world truly intended to serve man's wants, needs and desires?

Australian philosopher Richard Routley[2] took on this question which resulted in his creation of the "Last Man" thought experiment (49). Routley put forth a seemingly simple scenario:

> The last man (or person) surviving the collapse of the world system lays about him, eliminating, as far as he can, every living thing, animal or plant (but painlessly if you like, as at the best abattoirs). What he does is quite permissible according to basic [human] chauvinism, but on environmental grounds what he does is wrong. (49)

What the scenario illustrates is that even if there are no human interests for the environment to serve, it would still be immoral for the entire biosphere to be razed; however, according to the rationale that the environment only has instrumental value, this mass destruction would be morally permissible (Keller 12). Clearly to the environmentally enlightened conscience the proposed scenario is *not* ethical, which thus proves that nature does have intrinsic value.

What Routley emphasizes is a fundamental error in anthropocentrism, an error that is more explicitly analyzed using the "shallow-deep split" theories of ecology outlined by Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher, in 1973. The deep ecology movement is "not a slight reform of our present society, but a *substantial reorientation of our whole civilization,*" as it challenges the assumptions the Western ethical framework is built on by viewing inalienable rights in all living entities, regardless of their instrumentality (qtd. Katz, ix).

While the deep ecology movement encourages a relational rather than individualistic ethical perspective, the shallow ecology movement continues to revolve around anthropocentrism (Naess 95). The shallow ecology movement views the environment as possessing instrumental but not intrinsic, and only situates environmental issues in relation to

[2] Routley changed his named to Richard Sylvan in 1983 and although sources cite him under both titles, for clarity I will use Routley throughout.

their effect on human health, welfare and wellbeing. While certain offshoot effects of the shallow ecology movement might benefit the environment, such as pollution reduction, it is not enough. Furthermore, the shallow ecology movement's reliance on technology to fix issues is problematic because it fuels the notion of human superiority and plays into the consumerist culture, which only leads to further environmental degradation (95). The shallow ecology movement thus poses the potential to exacerbate a dangerous cycle, while the deep ecology movement seeks to change capitalistic culture at the root to instill societal ideologies with a more communally enriching ecologism.

I emerged from Cape Tribulation's Daintree Rainforest enlightened by a deep appreciation for the intrinsic value of the natural world. Acknowledging the environment's inherent worth, however, also meant acknowledging that the entire Western system of ethics to which I was accustomed was actually askew and extolling the wrong values.

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While my inland adventures on Cape Tribulation sparked the realization that Western ethical perspectives were insufficient, it was while scuba-diving the Great Barrier Reef that I recognized just how acutely destructive these anthropocentric insufficiencies truly were.

The boat we had chartered came to a stop atop the choppy water, and I raised my head from a sea-sickness induced stupor to find a glassy expanse of blue stretching out in all directions. A speck of human civilization could not be seen from any angle; instead, we were surrounded by the sun dancing upon the water as it rejoiced in the disappearance of the horizon's jaws.

Overwhelming excitement pulsed through me as I descended into the water and swam toward the Great Barrier Reef, the iconic image that dons aquarium backdrops plastered to mind. I had expected to be blinded by bright salmon coral and greeted by sea turtles, Wrasse and the eager waves of sea anemone. This was not the case.

The reef appeared dead. It was a mass of grey rock, flecks of dull tones in a mass of somber stone. How could I have missed the funeral? Did the news capture the public mourning? Did the President make an address, solemnly shaking his head with dignified grief? It seemed that I was gazing upon the open casket, staring at something that once palpitated with life but now appeared drained and leeched of all vitality.

Upon closer inspection, the Reef's pulse could be recognized: small organisms darted about while the clementine bodies of Clownfish weaved through the coral and fat sea cucumbers lay like gluttonous sloths upon the seabed floor. The Great Barrier was not dead; however, a combination of human impacts had fomented a formidable storm that the reef looked worn having weathered.

Over-fishing, dredging, pollution and global warming are all responsible for the destruction that the Great Barrier Reef (GBR), the largest organism in the world, faces. The severity of the detriment caused by human activity has resulted in the reef losing half of its coral since 1985, with two-thirds of the decline occurring since 1998 according to the U.S. National Academy of Sciences (Reeves 6). The coral that remains today stands in critical condition, with a fifth of the reefs being damaged past the point of recovery, while a quarter are endangered and another quarter face "long-term collapse" (Spotts 5). The GBR forms a delicate ecosystem for a diverse range of biota, including "600 types of soft and hard corals, more than 100 species of

jellyfish, 3000 varieties of molluscs, 1625 types of fish, 133 varieties of sharks and rays, and more than 30 species of whales and dolphins," as well as "one of the world's most important dugong populations and six of the world's seven species of marine turtle" (Australian Government 8). This biodiversity is essential to the reef's health, and yet humans still make decisions that threaten its delicate symbiotic balance.

The Great Barrier Reef offers a prime example of a situation in which the flawed rationales discussed earlier, Western orthodox anthropocentrism and the Shallow ecology movement, have been employed: despite the already extensive damage inflicted on the reef, on January 31st, 2013, "the Australian Federal Government and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority approved the expansion of Abbot Point coal port and the associated dumping of three million square meters of dredge spoil and waste into reef waters" (Reeves 3). It is man's feeling of superiority that enables such potentially environmentally devastating risks to be taken for the interest of commercial industry. Rather than trying to avoid causing more damage, scientists instead explore methods of "culturing preadapted genetic strains" of coral and transplanting coral from other counties; however, J.E.N Veron, coral specialist and former chief scientist with the Australian Institute of Marine Science, asserts that these attempts at "coral gardening" should only be looked to as extreme last resorts for they are "more likely to cause problems than solve them" (Veron 210). Indeed, Nature's role cannot be usurped by man; humans can only alter their own behavior (210). No amount of human intelligence or technological advances will make humans capable of doing what Nature does, for the fragile ecological processes have countless unforeseeable causal implications that man will never be able to fully understand or master.

Is it right that our current system of ethics tells us that despite the irrefutable evidence that human behavior is causing the destruction of species, habitats, ecosystems and, on a whole, the natural world, humans nonetheless do not owe the environment a moral duty? In Leopold's words echoes the answer to that question: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (qtd. Pojam 20). According to this standard, it is clear that the reckless destruction of the Great Barrier Reef, and man's environmentally negligent conduct in general, is unethical.

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The evening before I left Cape Tribulation, the clouds overhead swelled and our guide whispered the traditional Rain Song to the wind:

"Have you forgotten us?
We have not done any wrong.
There is nothing growing here,
it is all dust.
Everything is drying out;
when are you going to send rain?
Have you forgotten us?
If someone has done wrong to you,
it is not us."

Feeling the words reverberate through my skin, the sky crackled into a deep foreshadowing grumble. What if it *is* us that has done wrong? The sky bellowed, breaking into an onslaught of fat raindrops. That night, Carson's warning of silent springs did not materialize as the storm

ignited into an orchestra of rain; however, without remedy to the plague of anthropocentrism, the deafening stillness of an unsustainable world remains an impending reality.

An Aboriginal proverb says, "We are all visitors to this time, this place. We are just passing through. Our purpose here is to observe, to learn, to grow, to love... and then we return home." Although I was simply a visitor in Cape Tribulation, the land taught me invaluable lessons and transformed my ethical perspective. I learnt not only that anthropocentric Western ethics are inadequate, but just how vital it is to establish environmental ethics given the current severity of ecological degradation. We are all aware of the moral imperative to do no harm, but that imperative needs to be extended so that we learn to exist not just without further harming the planet but with the recognition that the natural world has rights too.

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