



***“Even Mother Nature Has An Agent”  
Environmental Stewardship as the Duty of An Intermediate Being***

By Philip Bess

Over the last fifteen years or so I have seen (and been moved by) many of the aspirational / inspirational billboards sponsored by The Foundation for a Better Life, an organization that promotes common-ground character virtues while trying at the same time to avoid being a partisan in our contemporary wars of culture and religion. But even peacemaking is unavoidably a partisan activity, especially these days around environmental issues. As an example I offer this photograph I took, of a poster that arrested my attention several years ago as I passed through the airport in the wilderness gateway of Anchorage, Alaska. The poster features a photograph of ethologist Jane Goodall and one of the many chimpanzees in whose company she has spent much of her adult life (and who have inspired her passion for environmental care), accompanied by the caption “Even Mother Nature has an agent. Stewardship: Pass It On.” This caption I aver is true and striking, but hardly uncontroversial.

*Nature* is a word with multiple meanings. We use *nature* to designate broadly *all-things-that-exists-and-how-they-work-together-and-behave*; which is to say, as a term practically synonymous with *the world* and with *reality*. Nature in this sense can be understood by materialists as the entire universe of matter-in-motion and that which emerges from and within it; but also in a theological sense of *all-created things* (“visible and invisible” per the Creed), which is to say that *nature* is everything that is *not God* --- to which the materialist will of course add: *which there is not*. I will distinguish later between materialist and theological understandings of nature and their differing implications; but most often I will use the term *nature* in this generally universal sense common to both materialists and theists.

A second sense of *nature* refers to those essential qualities of a thing that define the kind of thing it is in terms of both its distinguishing features and above all its final cause, its end, its *telos* (the latter sense classically formulated by Aristotle as “[the] nature of a thing is its end [for] what each thing is when fully developed, we call its nature...”) In this sense we say things like “it is in the nature of human beings” or “it is natural for human beings” to e.g., conceive and be conceived in male-female coitus, nurse their young, employ productive and practical reason, desire to know, live in walkable settlements, think in symbolic narrative, live well, etc. This teleological view of nature ---of things *in nature* having *a nature*--- is also implicitly theological, and therefore a view that materialists seemingly must deny in principle. But though I will argue for this teleological view of nature and human nature from empirical premises and from reason, my purpose here is not to debate or attempt to prove this point, but rather to illustrate how some teleological understanding of nature and human nature is a necessary premise for the idea of environmental stewardship.

My sub-title refers to “an intermediate being,” by which of course I mean man (male and female). And here I note several different understandings of the place of human beings in nature common in contemporary discourse, and acknowledge as well the conclusion implicit in my use of the term “intermediate being.” This conclusion cannot be helped (and I will try to explain why), but at issue is the idea of “human exceptionalism” --- i.e., whether human beings are exceptional, and if so in what ways, and with what environmental, moral, political, and cosmic significance.

The March 12, 2015 issue of *Nature* magazine contains an essay ---not an original thesis, rather a summation--- by two English geographers entitled “Defining the Anthropocene,” the subject of which is whether (and starting when) human activity has so altered the global environment as to constitute a new geologic age: the Anthropocene Age, as successor to the 11,000-year Holocene Epoch that is itself part of the larger 2.6 million year-old Quaternary Period (or Great Ice Age). I claim no expertise in geology and geography; but presuming --as I do-- the validity of the concept of geologic time, I note that the designation *Anthropocene* unavoidably suggests an exceptional quality to the species *homo sapiens*, if only in terms of our collective human powers. But here let us set aside the exact nature of these powers, how human beings have used them, and how human beings should use them; and consider instead several accounts of how best to understand the species that possesses these powers.

One understanding of human nature common to the modern era sees man as standing both above and outside nature (after Descartes, as a sort dis-embodied rational being); and nature itself as raw material --sometimes more pliable, sometimes less-- for furthering human ambition (an instrumentalist post-Francis Bacon view of nature as a reality not simply to be *understood* but to be “conquered” and *used* to satisfy human desires). In this view dating from the origins of the modern era, the human person *has* an animal nature, but this animal nature is not regarded as essential *to* our human nature. Indeed, this Enlightenment view of nature and human nature is foundational for the industrial west (and now for everything from the global economy to the sexual revolution), in which the over-riding objective is, in the words of C.S. Lewis, “to subdue reality to the wishes of [human beings].” It has also had significant environmental consequences ---set aside climate change; if nothing else, think of industrial toxicity at the scale of Lake Michigan’s southwest shoreline, New Jersey’s Chemical Coast, or the chemical plants and oil refineries immediately north of Louisiana’s State Capitol grounds in Baton Rouge--- the long-term effects of which remain unknown; and has prompted not only environmentalist discontent and backlash, but also a neo-pagan anthropology and cosmology in which nature itself is increasingly understood as sacred.

Although sacred nature has an ancient history, its recent manifestations are virtually concurrent with the industrial revolution, with this distinctively modern twist: that man is a kind of plague

upon or virus within nature. Because this human anti-humanism is in some ways a mirror image of the Enlightenment view I have described earlier, it is important to see their similarities as well as their differences. Both effectively place man outside of nature, one side designating man as nature's ruler, the other designating man as nature's enemy (but also, on the other hand, nature as modern man's healer). Nevertheless, each in its own way is also anthropocentric in attributing moral significance to the *relationship* (dominant or submissive) between human beings and the natural order.

Except perhaps by mental habit, no such anthropocentrism characterizes a third contemporary understanding of nature and human nature, a materialist understanding represented popularly today by evolutionary psychologists such as Steven Pinker and Jerry Coyne. In this view, *homo sapiens* is an animal completely continuous with and entirely immersed within physical nature. The essential moral and theological objections to such a characterization would be with the adverbs "completely" and "entirely," which are necessary to the materialist metaphysic but render the latter unhelpful as a foundation for any coherently imperative human moral sensibility (including environmental stewardship). For if man is *entirely* embedded in nature, and nature is *all* there is, then nature is what nature does and whatever man does is natural. Lacking any teleological view of nature, and lacking any standards of value external to nature, it is impossible to argue coherently that, say, strip mines in West Virginia and nuclear waste dumps in Nevada are any less 'natural' than such artifacts as the baroque gardens of Versailles, or such *objets trouvés* as the Hudson River Valley.

So to summarize the salient features of the preceding views of nature and human nature: one would place man *above* and *outside* nature; a second would make man subservient to nature, and ideally (for some) remove man *from* nature; and the third would place man entirely *within* nature, insisting also that nature is all there is. But there is a fourth view: that of man as an intermediate being.

Attempts to 'green' industrial societies are now more than 200 years old, many at a certain scale successful; but the environmentalist politics in which we are immersed today have their origins in the 1960s. A recurring theme of environmentalists from the 60s forward has been to identify what I have described as a modern Enlightenment view of nature and human nature with biblical

religion and the latter's allegedly unambiguous imperative for human beings to "go forth . . . multiply . . . subdue the earth." Such identification is the theme of a famously influential essay by Lynn White, Jr. in the March 1967 issue of *Science* magazine entitled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," an essay which prompted a reply by Thomas Derr in the January 1975 issue of *Worldview* magazine ---which Richard Neuhaus, then a political liberal, edited even *before* he edited *This World*, the immediate predecessor of *First Things*--- entitled "Religion's Responsibility for the Ecological Crisis: An Argument Run Amok." Countering White's thesis, Derr writes forty years ago:

If there is any "orthodox" Christian attitude toward nature, it is not, as White has it, arrogance, but respectful stewardship of an earth which belongs only to God. . . Nor is [this] stewardship incompatible with anthropocentrism. The Judaeo-Christian placement of man at the apex of creation as trustee for the rest of nature certainly does not mean that nature may be manipulated to serve the whims of man. That would contradict the meaning of "trustee" or "steward." But at the same time, it puts man prominently into the picture and avoids the dangerous unreality of making nature without man our moral standard.

Now here I want to draw an inference from an entirely empirical observation: not only is stewardship not "incompatible with anthropocentrism" (as Derr phrases it), nor with human exceptionalism (as I would phrase it) --- environmental stewardship is only possible *because* of human exceptionalism, *because* of the human distinctiveness implied in geologic-time concepts such as The Anthropocene Age. No other species world-wide, as a species, is capable of altering the ecology of the planet; only *homo sapiens*. And one obviously need not be a theist to make this observation about human powers. But as interesting as the powers themselves are two questions that immediately suggest themselves, and the different answers they prompt:

- What do these human powers imply *about* human beings? And
- What should human beings *do* with these powers?

Now, following my argument, it is not from biblical religion but from the existence of our specific human powers that I infer man's status in nature as an intermediate being. Nevertheless, the inference itself has metaphysical implications. Between what realms do human beings

mediate? Empirically it cannot be denied that human beings are animals and thereby *part of nature*; and there seems to me no reason to doubt either the general scientific understanding of our animal nature or the general philosophical understanding of the same we have inherited from Aristotle, Aquinas and other natural philosophers who have studied and understood human beings as a certain kind of animal. Nevertheless, by virtue of our collective human powers ---our capacity for complex symbolic thinking, the sophistication of our tools, our *ability* to steward nature, and our demonstrated interest in telling both nature's story and our own--- human beings also *transcend* nature. All of which is to say that this fourth view of nature and human nature contends we understand ourselves most truly by imagining neither that we stand *apart* from, dominate, and bend nature to our will; nor that we are some *unnatural plague* upon nature; nor that we are simply *immersed* in nature and lack both the power and the duty to superintend nature and possibly even improve it. Rather, we understand ourselves most truly as intermediate beings.

We moderns don't often enough recognize and articulate the implications of our intermediate status; and as we have seen, many today deny it. Nevertheless, to shrink from recognizing our intermediate status vis-à-vis nature and something that transcends nature is to preclude any intellectually coherent notion of environmental stewardship, as well as any critical moral understanding regarding what human beings actually do both within and to the natural order.

Human beings act upon the nature that both sustains and constrains us. As part of nature we look to our own interests, routinely compete mortally with other species, combat "the natural elements" that threaten us. We err in imagining that either nature or man is complete; err again in imagining that either nature or man is benign. Our individual and communal well-being requires us to make use of nature prudentially, to understand nature well, and to tinker with nature cautiously; just as our too-often-too-dimly-perceived vocation as stewards also challenges us to act upon nature generously. Our human capacities include both the ability to improve nature and the ability to spoil nature; but the very language of 'improvement' and 'spoliation' implies a source of value that can only come from outside nature itself. Christians and other metaphysical realists know what this Source is; and in this view of nature and human nature, human flourishing *requires* that we understand and respect simultaneously the nature within which we are embedded, the reality of nature within ourselves, and the nature of reality beyond ourselves.





The Ghent Altarpiece / "Mystic Adoration of The Lamb" (detail)

But such understanding is only the starting point of our collective human vocation. Anyone can infer correctly by reason alone that man is an intermediate being who both participates in and stewards the natural order. For Christians however, biblical religion provides a fuller vision of what such participation and stewardship entail and the substance of human flourishing, for which the dominant teleological and eschatological images are a Garden and a City, a New Eden and a New Jerusalem. But that is a larger topic, for another time.

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