

36 HUMAN NATURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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As I write this paper during the fall of 1990 in San Marcos, Texas I am to understand that both nature and we are gravely endangered by an ever-diminishing ozone layer of the atmosphere; and I am to understand that such is now the case in Nairobi and that such will be the case both in San Marcos and in Nairobi in July 1991 when we gather in Nairobi to share our insights on 'Philosophy, Man, and the Environment' at the World Conference of Philosophy.

Although, to many of us, this way of always thinking and talking about ourselves, our activities, and nature on a planetary basis depicts the true and now even the obvious, it still requires a rethinking on our part. For I do not think that in the face of the immediacy of quotidian demands, we easily bring to the fore an understanding of ourselves as beings on a vulnerable planet both of which are suffering from our destructive acts. Again, recognizing the truth of this is one thing, but internalizing it is an ever-present and significant feature of our self-concept is quite another. As difficult as the latter may be, it is still, given the current climate of opinion, the politically, socially, and intellectually correct and responsible thing to do.

What troubles me about this approach is its crisis management orientation in that it narrowly identifies a specific and urgent problem that has arisen, and identifies a narrow solution in which each of us can participate. In what follows, I would like to make these charges a little clearer and, more importantly, present a theory of human nature that can, on an on-going basis, guide our thinking about ourselves and the environment. Ultimately I argue that we should construct, in an on-going fashion, conception of ourselves and our environments which carry with them advice for our conduct. The current claim on us to think about nature in a reactive fashion and about ourselves as citizens of an endangered planet then becomes but an instance of how my more general view can be employed.

Let us first clarify the invitation to think of ourselves as beings on an endangered planet. Carl Sagan does a good job depicting for the layman the problem that chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) have caused the planet. Our use of such things as hair-sprays and deodorants in aerosol containers and our use of air conditioning and refrigeration systems release CFCs. These diminish the ozone layer which has served as a shield from the sun's harmful ultraviolet rays (UV). This means, for one thing, the loss of millions of lives from the cancers caused by these rays. But this is not the main problem, Sagan explains. The UV is killing unicellular life forms on the ocean's surface. They are at the beginning of the food chain, so, if destroyed, so is life. Sagan's advice amounts to our having to realize and take to heart some things about ourselves and nature. Seemingly insignificant actions we perform have grave consequences for the planet, and we must think of ourselves in this fashion. Further, nature as we have known it is far from indestructible; nature is vulnerable. Sagan says that we should begin to think and act not merely in terms of our nation and generation, but in terms of the entire planet.

This approach is too much tied to some obvious measures we can take to deal with the problem at hand, and is too little part of any theory that would assist us in thinking about problems that arise. Sagan, the scientist, has us applaud the ingenuity of university scientists who discovered the effects of CFCs on the ozone layer; and we can well suspect that he appreciates, and would want us to appreciate, both the complexity of the topic and the investigation and the rigor and care with which the results were presented to the scientific community. Yet, outside the arena of science, it seems that issues of a social nature have such simple solutions if we could but get ourselves to conform our conduct to what reason so clearly prescribes: think of nature as vulnerable and act accordingly. I have a hard time seeing social issues as being so easy to define or solve, and I think we need a theory that allows us to perceive and solve them in a more sophisticated fashion.

My view, simply put, is this. Our nature allows us to construct, in an ongoing process, conceptions of ourselves ranging from specific roles we occupy to our humanity itself, with these conceptions suggesting guidelines for our conduct. Suppose, for example, that our thinking about ourselves as humans leads us to conceive of ourselves as rational beings, as competitive but social and striving to progress. Going hand in hand with this construction are such

evident guidelines and admonitions for conduct as: act not on impulse, act rationally; compete, and progress. The constructed concept is in effect a normative one and, as such, brings with it rules to govern our experience. Highlighting as the distinctive feature of this view the idea that humans can develop an understanding of themselves together with the idea that tied to this conception are rules for conduct, I refer to humans summarily as the constructors of rule-referring conception of themselves.

I cannot here go into the full scope of my argument for this position, but I will offer a few considerations that might incline you to see the truth of this thesis. My experience, along with that of my students, is that almost every one of the many theories of human nature that we study has one ring of truth; all of us view ourselves quite differently at different times. Further, we find over and over that ethical theorists have in some way grounded their ethical advice in their estimation of human nature. Kant, for example, sees us as rational beings in effect, and commands us to act rationally; Bentham sees us as pleasure seekers, and commands us to produce the greatest pleasure for the community. And each of these commands seems plausible given the view of human nature that the theorist has offered. From such data, I gather something quite general about our nature: that we can and do see our nature in a variety of plausible ways, each of which provides a basis for constructing guidelines for conduct. We are thus free to construct a fruitful view of our nature from which we can reasonably determine guidelines for conduct. For example, the pragmatist's insight about reality and various aspects of it are a function of a pragmatic conceptual framework. This can be rethought in terms of how we have talked about human nature and our roles, and a consistent theory governing all of this can be formulated. The main insight is that these external environment are extensions of how we are choosing to see ourselves—in these cases, how we choose to see ourselves in the world. Once this move is made, these constructions too can be seen as carrying with them normative advice for conduct.

Relating this to our discussion of the environment and to Sagan's analysis, we might rethink our notion of our planet and recognize its vulnerability, in which case the normative advice would be to act more responsibly toward it. And we might rethink our notion of ourselves so that we recognize that we are inhabitants of a planet. In this case, we would have to assess the consequences

of our acts for not just our more restricted environments like state and nation but for the entire planet. But this, is portraying Sagan's analysis in the very best of lights. It is apparent that these new conceptions that he offers us are not the result of a critical analysis of competing alternatives, or an endeavour to construct an optimal view.

In what follows I wish to identify some significant variables that seem to weigh in any intelligent assessment of how we should conceive of nature and of ourselves, especially with regard to our relation to nature. First is the debate regarding nature's vulnerability. At one extreme, nature is portrayed as passive, inert and separate from people who can and do treat it as an entity that can be manipulated or exploited for human purposes. At the other extreme, nature is portrayed as an active, living entity of which we are a part, that responds to our interacting with it as any organism would and that commands our respect and appreciation. My theory would have us disentangle the various threads of each of these views, look for further competing alternatives, and then have us decide on each variable, seriatim. Thus, as an example, we would separate from this description the activity-passivity issue, ask how else we might think of nature, and finally select the optimal descriptor. We would begin to construct an adequate conception with the understanding that we may modify it as we see how it fits with other descriptions we select, or as we are advised by experience. One obvious move is to recognize that this either-or dilemma posed for us by the debate is too rigid, with an obvious alternative being that nature is both. This alternative probably accords better with some of our experiences and it sets up the inquiry of just which aspects of nature are active and which are passive. While I am not prepared on this limited ground to argue that this is the best way of thinking about nature, I do want to underscore the point that our theory fostered the identification of this alternative.

With regard just to the few matters at issue in this polarized debate, we would proceed similarly with another question. Is nature living or dead, and what are the alternatives? If we choose to see nature as living, what kind of a living entity are we likening it to? A lower animal, a mammal, an elm? We would then break beyond the matters at issue in this narrow debate and raise others, some of which surround Sagan's suggestion. For example, should we think of nature as the planet, as he suggests, or as the solar system, or as the

universe? And, if the universe is selected, for example, we would ask how this fits with our initial decision to regard nature as living. Further, pursuing Sagan's recommendation that we think of nature as vulnerable, we find that his suggestion opens a host of matters. Is nature vulnerable in a destructive and irreparable way or in a destructive but reparable way? Are we altering it temporarily for an acceptable purpose, altering permanently for an acceptable purpose, altering temporarily for an unacceptable purpose, or altering permanently for an unacceptable purpose?

This theory of human nature has been introduced because it gives us the latitude to construct cogent conceptions about ourselves and our environments that at once are responsive to the ways in which on-going experience demands assessment and re-assessment. It also recognizes the deep complexity of the variables available to us, from which we can forge these conceptions. The adoption of this approach makes our dealing with such matters a more difficult task, but it does so with the promise of providing solutions that we can endorse as optimal within the context of our continual search for better ones.