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Humans as "Part and Parcel of Nature": Thoreau's Contribution to Environmental Ethics

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> I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil,–to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society.
>
> Thoreau, "Walking"

Introduction

Henry David Thoreau's writings about nature have inspired millions of people to rethink their relationship with both society and the natural world around them. He is often thought of as, Laurence Buell notes, an "American environmental saint" (1995, 171). Thoreau's account in *Walden* of his roughly two-year stay on the shores of Walden Pond (near Concord, Massachusetts) is near sacred text for those embracing the virtue of simplicity; the pond itself has become a destination for environmental pilgrims wishing to walk in his footsteps. In *The Maine Woods* we are given further insight into the complex relationship between the civilized and wild, both as types of place and elements of human character. And in his essay "Walking" we find an early (1862) explicit call for the protection of nature from further exploitation and development. As we today look for answers to pressing environmental problems it is worth asking what Thoreau might teach us.

One difficulty with Thoreau's work from a philosophical perspective is that he is not writing as a philosopher; the arguments must be teased from rich poetic and literary descriptions that contain seemingly inconsistent messages and images. Richard Schneider puts it bluntly: "He can be exasperatingly contradictory" (1995, 94). Nevertheless, there is much to be found that can be reconstructed into something more closely resembling an analytic argument that can inform our understandings of our relationship

with the world around us. In what follows, I will focus narrowly on the elements of Thoreau's thought as identifiable in the epigraph above: an emphasis on individual freedom, the belief that humans and nature are intimately related, and a general distrust of civilization. Together these points bring us to what I see to be the central insight of a Thoreauvian environmental ethic: life devoid of natural wildness (whether in wilderness areas or our back yards) is one of boredom, conformity, and misplaced priorities. This particular argument—distinctly human-centered—for greater protection of our environment will admittedly best be only part of a larger ethic that also places value in nonhuman nature independent of human need. Although some of the latter can be found in Thoreau, it is the human-centered argument that is his most significant contribution to contemporary environmental ethics.

Humans as Part and Parcel of Nature

In 1967 Lynn White, Jr., published an essay that stirred a great deal of controversy, arguing that the traditional Western reading—as it solidified in the Middle Ages—of the Genesis creation story lies at the root (with subsequent developments in science and technology) of today's environmental crisis. In short, the view that is implicated is one in which humans are seen as separate from, and superior to, the rest of the world; nature is a mere resource for human material betterment. Despite the myriad of replies this essay generated—most of which point out that the story is much more complex than that presented by White—it seems undeniable that our metaphysical views, attitudes towards others (including the nonhuman world), ethics, and behavior go hand-in-hand. The traditional dichotomy between humans and the rest of the world—the conceptual and ethical separation in which we are thought to be the only, or the distinctly superior, morally relevant beings—allows for free consciences as we continue to drastically alter our natural surroundings. Seeing ourselves as part of the natural world around us would surely alter how we interact with our larger community much the way that acknowledging fully other people's humanity changes positively our ethical relations with them.

Aldo Leopold, pointing to the difficulty of getting people to embrace important conservation measures, argues for an expanded ethical circle to include nonhuman entities and the ecological community as a whole. "No important change in ethics," he says, "was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions" (1987 [1949], 209-210). Ethics must fit our conceptions and attitudes of who we are in relation to others who are, or might be, ethically relevant. To this end, Leopold argues that we humans are "plain members[s]"

of a complex and interdependent biotic *community*: our common evolutionary heritage and participation in the interconnected “pyramid of life”—in which energy and nutrients flow upward from the soil to microbes, plants, herbivores, and eventually carnivores, and downward with death and decay—make us “fellow-voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution” (1987 [1949], 202-204, 109, 215-218). His ecological model has us not as the apex of the pyramid, but as occupying an ecological space with other omnivores such as raccoons. Knowledge of these interconnections gives us “a sense of kinship with fellow-creatures; a wish to live and let live,” which is necessary in order to think beyond the purely prudential (Leopold 1987 [1949], 109).

Although Leopold, writing a century after Thoreau, had the burgeoning science of ecology from which to draw as he made the case that we are deeply connected to the world around us, Thoreau’s earlier view is remarkably developed. It involves three elements, two descriptive and one normative. First, being “part and parcel” of nature can refer to the physical connection between ourselves and our natural environment. Like Leopold, Thoreau accepts that some sort of evolution is at work in the world and is acutely aware of the interdependence of all life. Robert Richardson, Jr., argues that Thoreau was influenced by Darwin’s *The Voyage of the Beagle* and his notion of natural selection described in *Origin of Species* (Richardson 1986, 243, 376-79).[1] We see evidence of this in Thoreau’s meticulous study, “The Dispersion of Seeds,” in which he claims that “we find ourselves in a world that is already planted, but is also still being planted”; he agrees as well with Saint Pierre that the world is full of “perfect adaptation and harmony” and describes adaptation as a “sort of constant new creation” (Thoreau 1993, 100-101, 102). These rudimentary evolutionary references point to Thoreau’s belief that humans are evolutionary “fellow-voyagers” with other animals.

Although it is less clear whether Thoreau thought that we humans too have evolved, he says a great deal more about other ways we are similar to nonhuman animals in our physical relationship with nature. For example, he describes farmers and other outdoor workers as unknowingly falling “into the scheme of Nature” and being “a part of the industry of nature” (1985 [1868],

[1] Gary Nabhan says, similar to Richardson, that “Thoreau was the first Anglo-American field ecologist to be influenced by Darwin’s theory of natural selection and adaptation” (1993, xiv). In contrast, Walter Harding believes that “despite the fact that Thoreau was impressed with Darwin’s theories, they had appeared too late to have any significant influence on his own thinking” (1982, 429).

260, 175). Humans and animals are seen as pursuing the same goals in life; both children picking chestnuts and farmers harvesting corn are "on the same errand" as are squirrels (1993, 128-29). In *Walden*, Thoreau compares bird nests and fox holes with human shelter, holding that in both cases warmth in winter depends on taking care to secure a warm habitat (1985 [1854], 346, 524). In "The Dispersion of Seeds," humans and other animals share in the job of spreading seeds, and the human clearing of forest land is comparable to natural fires and windfalls (1993, 68, 84, 97, 99, 77). Finally, the human body itself is part of the physical world in being composed of partly "leaves and vegetable mould" (1985 [1854], 432). Although none of this is particularly novel or controversial, failing to acknowledge our physical union with the world around us allows us to place short-term financial gain over deeper, long-term betterment.

Second, in addition to our physical participation in, and dependence upon, our environment, we are connected to nature spiritually. Thoreau claims that we humans are both "earth born" and "heaven born." The importance Thoreau places on this duality is reflected in his dismissal as "quackery" physician attempts to heal bodily ailments by addressing only physical needs (1985 [1868], 308, 209). Nature too is a complex of the material and the "More" (i.e., the transcendent, "higher" spiritual or nonmaterial reality of souls, God, and the like). Getting a precise picture of the dual character of nature as Thoreau sees it is not, however, an easy task. We can note at least that nature is not itself God (or ultimate Mind or Spirit) or the body of God since, for example, within a single sentence Thoreau calls nature our mother and God our father (1985 [1868], 303, 306). Beyond this, though, it is unclear to what extent nature represents the divine functioning in the world, is an aspect of the divine, or is an independent entity or force. Nevertheless, the point here is that for Thoreau there is an intimate connection not only between the human body and mind but also between the material stuff of the world and the More. And importantly, being not merely physical ourselves, we can at times experience some of the ineffable spiritual reality beyond our narrow selves:

> My life was ecstasy. … This earth was the most glorious musical instrument, and I was audience to its strains. … 'There comes into my mind such an indescribable, infinite, all absorbing, divine, heavenly pleasure, as sense of elevation and expansion …. This is a pleasure, a joy, an existence which I have not procured myself.' … The maker of me was improving me. When I detected this interference I was profoundly moved. … I was daily intoxicated (1995, 8-9).

Thoreau concludes this passage with a question that further captures his sense of both the mystery and the extent to which we are connected

spiritually to the world around us: “With all your science can you tell how it is, and whence it is, that light comes into the soul?” (1995, 9).

Understanding Thoreau can sometimes be furthered by looking to the work of his elder friend and mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson. When it comes to the ontological status and relationship between ourselves and nature, the two thinkers overlap but move in divergent directions. Emerson seems to waver between a Berkeley-like idealism and a dualism where the significance of the material is secondary to the spiritual. In “Nature” he both notes that there is an “occult relationship between man and vegetable” and that we can sometimes experience this connection: we become, in his famous words, a “transparent eyeball” where we experience the “currents of Universal Being” that flow through us and nature (1983 [1849], 10). Nature is the “great apparition,” the “‘incarnation’ of God,” and symbol of higher moral and spiritual truths (1983 [1849], 7, 42, 20, 24). But although he says that “there seems to be a necessity in spirit to manifest itself in material forms,” Emerson also argues that reason suggests that idealism is true, even as he notes that he could not prove this one way or the other. Furthermore, only “the frivolous make themselves merry with the Ideal theory, as if its consequences were burlesque” (1983 [1849], 25, 32). Even if material nature turns out not to be real independent of our minds and God, the laws of nature and their effect upon us are stable and unified. In the end, Emerson contrasts his view not only with the frivolous idealists, but also with the “vulgar view” that sees nature as a mere material thing (1983 [1849], 38). As he puts it, “I have no hostility to nature, but a child’s love to it. I expand and live in the warm day like corn and melons. … I do not wish to fling stones at my beautiful mother, nor soil my gentle nest” (1983 [1849], 38).

For Emerson, the human soul is a part of ultimate “Reason” while the human body and the rest of the material world are (merely) manifestations of this “higher” spiritual aspect of reality. Thoreau too says that the “actual world … is perfectly symbolical of the path which we love to travel in the interior and ideal world” (1993 [1862], 56, 59-60), but the material world is much more substantial—both metaphysically and in terms of value—for Thoreau. He asks rhetorically, “Is not Nature, rightly read, that of which she is commonly taken to be the symbol merely?” (Thoreau (1985 [1868], 310). Relatedly, for Thoreau the world both is alive and something he feels kinship with (1985 [1854], 563, 449; 1985 [1868], 306). It is not empty but full of “honest spirits”; in fact, he senses a tree’s “living spirit” and speculates that it might go to as high a heaven as he (1985 [1864], 732, 685). Richard Schneider argues that Thoreau sees nature—including its physical existence—in a different manner

than does Emerson: "For Thoreau spirit is found in nature, not *through* it" (Schneider, 1995, 100; emphasis in original). In short, as Ronald Hoag puts it, for Thoreau there is a "shift in emphasis to the physical side of the correspondence between facts and spirit," though this does not signify a fundamental move away from the transcendentalism he shares with Emerson (1995, 153).

This brings us to the third point regarding our connection to the world around us. Although it is, for Thoreau, a matter of descriptive fact that we are bound up with the world physically and spiritually, our attitudes and perspective can connect us to or push us away from nature. To put it another way, we bring something to the relationship that gives it its shape or meaning in the same manner that knowing what to look for helps us to locate something. Thoreau thinks, for example, that we find just as much beauty in the world "as we are prepared to appreciate,—not a grain more" (1995, 41). We are part of nature in an attitudinal sense only to the extent that we conceive of ourselves as physically and spiritually part of it: "By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent" (1985 [1854], 429). If it were not for Thoreau's constant emphasis on the independent reality of nature, Emerson's belief that the reality of the world exists primarily in its symbolism and force in the mind might account for this aspect of the relationship between humans and nature. For Thoreau, though, the world, ourselves, and our relationship with the world are both dualistic and real, though our attitudes or perspectives will give that relationship its shape and meaning.

Given these three senses of connectedness between us and our natural environment, what are we to make of the fact that Thoreau also often speaks of human interests and powers being in contrast to those of nature?[2] For example, in "The Dispersion of Seeds," Thoreau speaks of "cross-purposes" between nature and the human owner of a woodlot (1993, 170). In another place, he observes that a square clear-cut in the trees can only be the work of humans since nature never does such things (1985 [1864], 773). It is not just that there are conflicting purposes, but we sometimes "desecrate" nature through our actions (1985 [1868], 307); our intimacy with the natural environment is challenged when our goals differ from those of the rest of nature. But Thoreau is no misanthropist or primitivist; he values human company, intellect, and culture. Thus we might hear Thoreau as saying two things. First, and sensibly, he is thinking that even as part of nature, we

[2] Thoreau usually capitalizes "Nature" when he is intending it to be personified and leaves it lowercased when he is referring to the non-personified natural world or environment. For simplicity, I will use the lowercase unless quoting directly.

naturally have interests that conflict with those of other entities (and they with each other and us). Second, the more we fail to see ourselves as part and parcel of nature, the more we will act in ways that run counter to it, and hence to ourselves.

Humans are part of the world, both physically and spiritually, but our autonomy means that our beliefs, attitudes, and actions can run counter to the will of nature. Because nature does not suffer from a similar weakness of mind, it is more intimately connected to higher law, or ultimate truth, than are we.[3] As will be seen, access to this truth—and hence to self-improvement—is to be had through experiences of nature.

Nature’s Role in Human Betterment

Thoreau sees the failure to recognize and cultivate our deep connection with the natural world as leading to inner disharmony, blindness, and staleness. That is not to say that civilization does not bring good and important things to our lives, such as the insights of poetry and philosophy, but getting trapped wholly in—attitudinally and perspectively—the humanized world robs us of opportunities essential to personal development and wellbeing. Central to this argument is Thoreau’s focus on individual freedom, character, and eternal, as opposed to merely human, law.

In “Life without Principle,” Thoreau boldly proclaims that, “It is individuals that populate the world,” and argues that freedom is so important that its loss is worse than death (1993 [1863], 85; 1993 [1854], 22). Although political freedom is necessary for inner (psychological or moral) freedom, it is the latter that is of ultimate value. Inner liberty (i.e., personal autonomy) is limited, Thoreau notes, by narrow-mindedness, prejudice, and the love of money and social status. Many people who have significant political liberty lack inner liberty, remaining “slave[s] of an economical and moral tyrant” and are “slaves of King Prejudice” (1993 [1863], 87). Inner freedom allows a person to find his or her own way in the world; without it life is likely to be led, as Thoreau so distinctly puts it, in “quiet desperation” (1985 [1854], 329). Without it, priorities are skewed towards empty goals that result ultimately in misery.

Second to his emphasis on individual freedom is Thoreau’s belief that a person’s life is good and valuable only if it involves the cultivation of good character, which in turn, of course, guides one’s actions (1993 [1860], 36).

[3] Thoreau uses “higher law” and “truth” (often capitalizing each) interchangeably to refer to permanent, divine (and thus objective) truth.

This can best be seen in his political writings, in which Thoreau continually berates his fellow citizens for lack of good character. According to him, most people are more interested in money, liquor, and entertainment than in bettering themselves, and because of this "the mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies," allowing the state to neglect its duty to justice (1963, 158; 1993 [1849], 3). Thoreau was against both institutional slavery and the U.S. war with Mexico and it infuriated him to see that the public's concern with profit and goods made them willing to "even postpone the question of freedom to the question of free trade" (1993 [1849], 4, 5). What he calls the "gospel of the Merchant's Exchange" blinds people to such an extent that even in light of the gross injustice of slavery, people carry on as if there were nothing to be concerned with (Thoreau 1993 [1854], 26, 29). Individuals and the state alike are guilty of the sin of indifference (Thoreau 1993 [1849], 6; Thoreau 1993 [1863], 88), though unjust (even if democratic) government is traceable directly to the lack of good character in its subjects; reform must first take place in the individual.

Third, the result of this lack of character on the part of individuals is that government is able to enforce laws that do not coincide with higher, divine or eternal "Law." For example, although Thoreau's fellow citizens were concerned with the technical legality of slavery and the Fugitive Slave Law in light of the Constitution, they failed to obey the "eternal and only just CONSTITUTION, which He, and not any Jefferson or Adams, has written in [their] being" (1993 [1854], 27; emphasis in original). Questions of justice and freedom do not wait for a human judge to decide them according to human law; they are "already decided from eternity to eternity" (1993 [1854], 20). Obedience to higher law is what determines whether or not something is good. In fact, the truly free person is beyond the bounds of codified human law in the sense that it is not the threat of punishment that motivates (Thoreau himself was willing to go to jail rather than pay taxes that would support the U.S. war with Mexico), but a personal commitment to higher law; it is inconsequential whether human laws are broken as long as eternal law is upheld (1993 [1860], 47; 1993 [1862], 70). Deciding in any particular case which action is morally right, or exemplifies and furthers right character, is a matter of conscience—of comparing the available options and one's character with the law "written in [one's] being" (1993 [1854], 27).

The relevance of this to environmental ethics becomes clear when we see that for Thoreau life immersed in civilization restricts an individual's opportunities to grow as a person. Society has both a conforming and a limiting influence on its members, impeding one's freedom to pursue self-improvement consistent with one's conscience, and hence with higher law. For Thoreau, this is not insignificant but central to our being and wellbeing.

He conveys the depth of his feelings in his feigned surprise that shopkeepers who remain indoors all day do not commit suicide and in his ridicule of those who exercise indoors as missing the "springs of life" that "are bubbling up" in nature. Life without direct contact with nature leads to a softness, a thinness of skin, agitation, perplexity, turmoil, oppression, and suffocation (1993 [1862], 51, 52, 63). Part of the problem is that, as mentioned, society places undue emphasis on making money, which, he thinks, is more opposed than even crime to life itself: "ways to get money lead almost without exception downward" (1993 [1863], 76-77). Even the farmers, who are in perhaps the best position to be in a close relation with nature "begin digging their graves as soon as they are born" making themselves "sick, that [they] may lay up something against a sick day" (1985 [1854], 326, 328).

Greed leads people to cut down trees, ignoring their higher uses, and to take the world around them for granted (1993 [1863], 76). Ignorance leads to our being "so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked." Economic concerns eventually become our "keen and subtle masters" (1985 [1854], 327, 328). Therefore, even though we are physically and spiritually part and parcel of the natural world, by isolating ourselves and acting as if we were not connected so, we have "fallen" and are in need of redemption, or at least rehabilitation.

Life in communion with nature provides the needed redemption. Lives of desperation become free and peaceful as higher law is recognized and lives are led according to its precepts instead of those of a conformist and misguided society. Nature helps us identify and understand higher law. But nature as a source of truth depends at least in part upon how we see ourselves connected to it. Exposure to nature is potentially a process of purification, with a person "flow[ing] at once to God when the channel of purity is open." As one learns to conform to life's, or God's, higher principles, one can reap the "true harvest" of daily life: a "life [that] emits a fragrance like flowers and sweet-scented herbs, is more elastic, more starry, more immortal" (1985 [1854], 492, 497, 495). But as noted earlier, one's attitude largely determines the quality or meaning of one's relationship with nature, though an unappreciative heart too can nevertheless be initially opened through exposure to the wilds and wonders of nature that make one aware that it is not simply an inanimate object distinct in kind and worth from humanity. A gradual awareness of one's place in the larger (physical and spiritual) scheme of things affects a person's life in positive ways (1993 [1862], 67). Without the experience of non-human nature, people tend not to move beyond uncritical acceptance of prevailing but stifling social mores.

It is worth noting that for Thoreau following higher law rather than human laws is not simply obeying a different master or list of rules and regulations since the former do not restrict but free people to live as they see fit.[4] Because society expects conformity on valuing wealth and prestige over justice and wholeness, something is needed to jar us out of our conformist tendencies so that we might recognize and embrace eternal law. What is needed is the wildness of nature.[5] This wildness (not necessarily wild*er*ness) frees us from the confining effects of society and thereby allows us to think more simply and clearly and hence to become more receptive to ultimate truth. Unfortunately, not everyone will take notice; some are too insensitive and accepting of control and conformity. In a humorous poke at such individuals, Thoreau wonders whether the autumn trees in their "high colors and exuberance of spirit" would lead them to conclude that some mischief is brewing (1995, 36). For many of us, though, the experience of the wildness of nature can indeed push us to explore the wildness within ourselves, freeing us to consider the world and our lives in terms foreign to society but consistent with higher law (Thoreau 1985 [1854], 577).

Lest we mistakenly conclude that Thoreau wholly rejects society in favor of wild nature, it is instructive to note that even in his roughly two years of living in a shack near Walden Pond he frequently welcomed guests, visited nearby Concord, and even became acquainted with the engineers of the train that daily rumbled past the pond on its trek to and from Boston. Total isolation from society was not his goal. The objective was, instead, to live a simplified life outside the constraints of civilization in order, as he says, "to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (Thoreau 1985 [1854], 394). Although he complains extensively of the conformist influence of society, he also believes that there is a right proportion to be found between the influence of civilization and the wild: "I would not have every man or every part of a man cultivated, any more than I would have every acre of earth cultivated: part will be tillage, but the greater part will be meadow and forest" (1993 [1862], 69). He thinks it is best to combine the hardiness produced in the wild with "the intellectualness of civilization" (1985 [1854], 333). Thoreau's back-to-nature argument is, then, not a rejection of civilization, but a call to balance the influence of society with that of nature. Such a balance will help each person to develop in a way that is consistent with higher law.

[4] Thoreau adds that a person "who takes the liberty to live is superior to all the laws, by virtue of his relation to the law-maker" (1993 [1862], 70).

[5] The idea that for Thoreau the wildness of nature has this jarring effect on people is borrowed from J. Bennett (1994).

Evaluation

Does Thoreau offer a compelling rationale for protecting the natural environment from further negative human change? The argument as I have reconstructed it is essentially as follows. Thoreau believes there are three aspects to our being part and parcel of nature: we are, as a matter of descriptive fact, both physically and spiritually connected with the world around us (we live and function in the world like any other creature and are part of the "More" of which nature too is a part), and we can be more or less attitudinally connected with nature. Conceptualizing ourselves as separate from nature can have a detrimental effect on our inner well-being. We have an unfortunate tendency to conform politically, religiously, and socially when immersed wholly in civil society, and more specifically, we end up with misguided priorities, wrongly championing economic success and social standing as ultimate goods. We miss the beauty to be found in simpler lives and healthier relationships, thereby living instead "lives of quiet desperation." Exposure to nature can help us overcome this problem by enabling us to see that there is more to life than simply making a living and seeking higher social status. It allows us to see beauty and connection with this larger world and the More to live satisfied lives. There is a better life to be had than our narrow citied lives allow. Being in nature can jar us out of our conformist thinking. In terms of this providing an argument for the protection of the natural environment, we can conclude simply that nature (more and less wild) should not be fully altered or humanized; to do so would profoundly limit opportunities for personal growth.

This argument is an instrumentalist argument, though not one dependent upon or limited to the usual human-centered reasons for protecting the environment, such as that nature is a source of material resources, scientific knowledge, new medicines, and recreation, or a hedge against disease causing pollution or environmentally disrupting species loss. It contains some potentially non-anthropocentric elements due to nature's (like our own) connection with and source in the divine, but the thrust of the argument seems mostly about how we might escape the negative influences of society and grow as individuals. Thoreau is nonetheless articulating what many have thought and felt, both in regard to our hurried and limited lives in civilization and the positive effects time spent in less-humanized environments can bestow. There are, however, some clear points of debate. The objections are of two sorts. First, some of Thoreau's underlying metaphysical commitments—such as his belief in the spiritual realm of existence and higher law—will be

rejected by many. Second, one may doubt whether Thoreau gives us enough by way of argument to justify robust protection of nature.

To take the objections in turn, we can note first that there is wide agreement that we are physically connected to the rest of the world in countless ways. Darwin describes a shared evolutionary history and Leopold gives a compelling account of ecological interconnectedness; our dependence upon soil, climate, water, and the like, and the effects upon us of disease and natural disasters are obvious enough. But why should a religious skeptic accept Thoreau's contention that we are spiritually connected to the world around us? Such claims, even ardent theists must concede, are impossible to prove given their lack of empirical content. Worse, even if one accepts the existence of a divine creator, it is unclear how to provide a convincing argument in favor of Thoreau's particular conception of God, nature, and humanity. However, we need not sort this out here. Instead, we can secularize Thoreau's core environmental thesis: our psychological and emotional wellbeing is tied to exposure to nature; it is through experiences in nature that we are jarred out of our conformity to society's expectations and values whether we conceptualize this in psychological and emotional, or in spiritual terms. It might be objected that what we have gained in philosophical defensibility we have lost in depth and force of meaning: a relationship with something beyond the mundane, after all, would provide a particularly important reason to further pursue that connection. In the end, though, I think that whether one prefers the religious or secularized version of Thoreau's argument can be left up to each individual; the core insight remains.

Similarly, we might also doubt the existence of higher law—that is, objective morality independent of human experience. In fact, other than in religiously-based ethics, traditional natural law theory has long ago been traded in philosophical circles for secularized theories, even by many committed theists. But Thoreau's notion of higher law is not that of, say, Thomas Aquinas. It is a view that is tied in Thoreau to a belief in the divine as the ultimate source of truth and morality. However, key elements of the conceptual apparatus of traditional natural law theory are exchanged by Thoreau for a simpler picture: God is the source of everything, including truth; that truth is accessed by us not through pure rationality, but through experience and intuition. Further, the hierarchical apparatus and relationships between types of law and reason—as well as some of the odd conclusions by traditional natural law theorists (e.g., regarding sex and procreation)—are not found in Thoreau. Nevertheless, the objection that accepting Thoreau's environmental insights depends upon belief in the objective existence of moral truths (again, existing independently of the lived human experience) remains. Like above, my preferred solution is to suggest that we can remain

agnostic or even reject Thoreau’s views in favor of, say, even a roughly utilitarian or deontological view, and yet retain Thoreau’s insight that we are each ultimately responsible to certain moral principles and virtues in contrast to self-serving and narrow interests in money and social status. Whether morality comes from God, reason, moral sentiments, or some combination of these can be left to the side. The point remains that as we experience and learn more about the world in which we find ourselves—beyond the literal and metaphorical walls of society—we are sometimes jarred out of our narrow and conformist thinking. We do, or can, recognize meaning and value as we experience the wonders (and, let us not forget, the terrors) of the natural world.

A third objection builds on the previous two. One might agree that spending time in nature is an effective antidote to the rampant materialism and consumerism that plague our lives and yet wonder whether this is the only way to a more meaningful existence. We all know many virtuous and happy people who spend little time in nature. Can Thoreau’s warnings against materialism and consumerism, for example, be had without experiences of less-humanized nature? The answer must be yes, although the wealth of writers, artists, philosophers, psychologists, religious thinkers, and everyday citizens concerned with nature points to the fact that nature experiences are crucially important for many. Perhaps this is as good as the argument can get at this point. But although environmentally-minded individuals who share Thoreau’s convictions may not be able to convince the stubborn skeptic, it seems that most people are at least somewhat sensitive to the natural beauty and wonder around them, including that which they can experience in their local, lived space.

Finally, one might object that the argument as reconstructed here tells us little about how much or to what extent natural areas, species, or overall environmental quality should be protected. This is especially so given that most of us could probably benefit from nature experiences of a sort not dependent upon the huge wilderness areas that many environmentalists want protected. In fact, as mentioned above, Thoreau himself seems to prefer one foot, so to speak, in civilization and one in the woods. This suggests that we should focus on protecting smaller, local areas where we can go for afternoon strolls to escape, even if for only a couple of hours, our otherwise quite urban and suburban lives; those in rural areas need to work less hard to have the same access to experiences of nature.

It does seem likely that for most of us most of the time, having access to some less-humanized areas—local parks and recreational lands—is necessary

and enough for psychological development and overall wellbeing. If so, much more needs to be done to protect nature as we find it in our local, lived spaces, including species protection, pollution control, and, of course, greater distributional fairness of environmental benefits and burdens. Even environmental ethicists have begun to question the seemingly single-minded focus on (and, in fact, the very concept of) large-scale wilderness protection (see for example, Callicott and Nelson, 1998). Yet despite this, neither these authors nor any other environmentally-conscious thinkers and activists wish to *exchange* the older concern for wilderness for new attention to local space; *both* large and small-scale natural areas, species, and the like, must be furthered—they are, in fact, inseparable and interdependent.

Defending the usefulness of Thoreau here could involve two different moves. First, we might simply note that the wildness of nature necessary to jar a person out of his or her conformist life will differ from person to person. Perhaps for most people local areas for walking, birding, or camping will suffice; but for others, having wilderness areas to either spend time in or to simply know of as existing will be important. Leopold argues that "a decent respect for minorities" should push us to protect wilderness, especially since, "wilderness is a resource which can shrink but not grow" (1987 [1949], 194, 199). However, when pressure increases to address other human needs (e.g., poverty) this argument may not go far in protecting either local or more distant and wild places. The second move, then, will be to admit that we will need to go beyond Thoreau (or at least beyond the argument as I have reconstructed it here) to find supplementary justifications—perhaps even to nonhuman nature as possessing intrinsic value—for adequate environmental protection of both local and faraway places such as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska. Such arguments are not inconsistent with Thoreau and his human-centered argument can still play a significant role in our thinking about our own connection with the world around us.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations of the argument as I have described it, Thoreau's insight that we are part and parcel of nature is important because, as Leopold later argues, we can only progress beyond a prudential approach to nature when we see ourselves as part of the larger whole. For Leopold this larger whole was the ecological community; for Thoreau it is that and much more since we and nature are related spiritually as well as materially. If I am correct that one can embrace much of Thoreau's environmental views even if he or she rejects some of the controversial ontological elements, the significant problem that remains is whether Thoreau's argument provides enough of a

justification for robust responses to the myriad of environmental problems we face. I do not dismiss this concern, but maintain that accepting Thoreau's human-centered reasoning can be coupled with other arguments for the protection of nonhuman nature. There is nothing contradictory about arguing that we must protect natural places and their constitutive parts because, for example, they possess intrinsic value, while simultaneously advancing Thoreau's more human-centered argument. I have argued that the latter is about protecting our access to less-humanized environments in which we can find relief from our work-a-day lives and, as needed, be jarred out of our conformist, materialistic tendencies. Time spent in more natural environments has the potential to teach us more about the ways in which we are connected to the natural world around us and, perhaps, to the More of which we and the rest of nature are a part. Thoreau's message is a call for us to reevaluate our values and priorities by being in a right relationship with nature. The world looks different when it is our home and community as opposed to being mere material to be used or a stage on which our lives unfold.

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Humans as “Part and Parcel of Nature”: Thoreau’s Contribution to Environmental Ethics

Abstract: Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) develops an understanding of human beings as “part and parcel of nature” that includes the idea that we are physically, spiritually, and attitudinally (more or less) connected to the world around us. The image he offers is one in which life spent too much in civilization, where work and social expectations determine the quality of one’s daily life and personal character, lead to lives of boredom, conformity, and misplaced priorities. Time spent in more natural environments is the antidote. Such experiences have the potential to jar us out of the conformist and—to his mind—personally stunting existence into which most fall. Growth and liberation come from experiencing the “More” of which both nature and we are a part. Thoreau calls us to reevaluate our values and priorities by being in a right relationship with nature, which does not require that we accept all of his particular ontological commitments. The argument that emerges for greater protection of the environment is admittedly quite human-centered. However, Thoreau’s insight that we are part and parcel of nature is important because, as Aldo Leopold later argues, we can only progress beyond a prudential approach to nature when we see ourselves as part of the larger whole. The world looks different when it is our home and community as opposed to being mere material to be used or a stage on which our lives unfold.

Keywords: Henry David Thoreau, environmental ethics, nature, wildness, instrumental value, intrinsic value, character, ecology

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