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Should We Try to Relieve Clear Cases of Suffering in Nature?

This essay addresses the empirical manifestations of life, not questions about the innermost essence of life, whatever that may be. Therefore, it does not discuss beliefs in the absence or presence of a definite trend toward ever "higher" life-forms. It just talks about what we see around us.

Aldo Leopold and many other dedicated protectors of nature seem to hold that nature as it evolves with its fabulous manifold is good in an ethical sense, not beyond ethical good or evil. At least this is my conclusion about Leopold's opinion, if we accept the rather trivial proposition that if something is ethically wrong, it cannot be ethically good.

In *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There* (1987), Leopold says: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the ecosystem. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."

Various interpretations are possible, some of which are not acceptable to me. These are interpretations such that the above formulation—let us call it the *L*-formulation or just *L*—furnishes a general criterion or definition of right and wrong in an ethical sense. I do not operate with any such general criterion or definition. Also, I am worried about the "thing." If "a thing" is meant to connote something much wider than "an interaction of a human being with the rest of an ecosystem," then over the centuries things would happen that according to *L* would be wrong: ecosystems come and go.

A reformulation of *L* such that I could accept it would read: "A decision has presumption in its favor if there is reason to assume that its implementation will tend to preserve—or at least not interfere with—the integrity, stability, and beauty of the set of ecosystems concerned. A decision

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has a presumption against it if there is reason to assume that its implementation might reduce the integrity, stability, or beauty of the set of ecosystems concerned." I write "set of ecosystems" instead of just ecosystem because any human interaction happens with a set of comprehensive systems of unequal scale—the largest today being the planetary system of the sun.

At least one distinguished ecologist, Ivar Mysterud, and a friend of the reindeer, thinks that even if there were an ecologically very innocent way of heavily reducing the population of a certain parasite that causes extreme pain to the reindeer, or of altering its habits, it should nevertheless *not* be carried out. The reason: it might disturb a relevant ecosystem. We know too little (the *docta ignorantia* of a field ecologist!). I agree that there is a presumption against it, but I disagree with his conclusion. The very prolonged, cruel sufferings of the reindeer count more. I am for radically reducing the population of the parasite even if it may be wrong according to *L*. If an ecosystem is dominated by pain-producing parasites, perhaps we might say its "beauty" diminishes? I am somewhat uncertain about how to interpret the term, and also about the possibility that human beings could preserve or enhance beauty by interfering.

Philosophically less important, but ecopolitically important: if an ecosystem has been radically disturbed or destroyed by human beings (for example, through deforestation) and a different ecosystem is created (for example, a desert), does *L* cover the new system? If "man-made" ecosystems are not covered by *L*, how is the European situation to be judged? Fairly old landscapes that are "man-made" in the sense of having been radically influenced by human beings a long time ago are now protected as "free nature." We try to preserve their present integrity, stability, and beauty, or we try to restore a former ecosystem considered to be more "natural," but partly because their "human" character has been forgotten.

In short, I feel a need to know about how *L* is applied in concrete cases.

Perhaps because of the problematic nature of all proposed criteria of goodness since the time of Socrates, I look with wonder at the efforts to find a nontautological supreme and general characteristic of goodness. Perseverance in the service of protecting nature, and support of the deep ecology movement, does not imply any definite opinion on questions of unconditional goodness of nature as a vast set of ecosystems—not even on whether the question of goodness is meaningful. In what follows, I shall fo-

cus on the darker side of free nature and how contemplation of this may influence one's choice of ultimate criteria of the goodness and badness of a case of interference.

The development of life on finite Earth clearly presupposes the process of dying. We must "accept" death, but the death of insensitive beings does not disturb us as much as the death of sensitive beings, and a quick, painless death does not disturb us as much as a slow, painful one. Sometimes the quick death is due to predators; sometimes the slow, agonizing death is a "natural" death of old age—but sometimes the opposite is the case.

Every day some animals become weak and ill and enter a process of dying that involves prolonged pain as far as we can judge from their behavior. When wild reindeer smell large carnivores like bears, wolves, or dogs, they run away quickly. Old and tired reindeer find it more and more exhausting to keep up with the others. The same holds of some of the young ones. If they are caught quickly by carnivores, they tend to get a rapid, merciful death and not a slow, "cruel" one. Some reindeer experience the latter. Having been badly attacked by a winged insect (*Cephenomyia trompe*), they may die very slowly from suffocation from the growing larvae in their noses.

I hope no such planet exists, but consider one where slow, painful death from parasitism is universal. How would we talk about nature on such a planet? What kind of book would Thoreau have written there?

The parasitology of mammals tells us about parasites that kill or maim in ways that elicit intense alarm, disgust, and great negative feelings in us. Evolution specialists tell us that such parasites are not among the most successful and highly developed ones, which thrive without inflicting intense suffering or death on their hosts.

This admission of the imperfection of some parasites does not console their victims, however. The situation is relevant in assessing the adequacy of unconditional positive, sometimes highly emotional utterances about nature. What do human beings do when witnessing animals in what they think is unnecessary and prolonged pain? Those who intensely identify with the victims try to rescue them, provided it is not too late and a practical way is seen. The rescue may involve merciful killing by human hands. Generalized, and made into a policy, rescue attempts would amount to an

attempt to reform nature. Not everybody studying the consequences of such a policy will accept it as desirable. Because it is totally out of our reach completely to eliminate prolonged extreme suffering, it is of no practical value to discuss its ethical status, but its existence makes *general* glorification of nature strange to many of us.

A main point under consideration is our ignorance of consequences. What if we had adequate knowledge? One answer: we never will have! I suppose, though, that we could have sufficient knowledge in particular cases. If adequate ecological knowledge were available, some of us would not hesitate to interfere on a large scale against intense and persistent pain.

The manifold of different cultures is a desideratum according to most supporters of the deep ecology movement, but in many of them some animals in culturally important situations are caused terrifying and persistent pain by human beings. There is a real difference between initiation rites of a culture causing pain and rites involving animals who cannot grasp the meaning of the pain inflicted on them. Their helplessness is of a higher order. My very tentative conclusion is that the cultures in question might be approached in a way that indirectly would cause a change of behavior toward those animals.

"Look at this exquisitely beautiful little creature! Look at the colors, the shapes, the impressive and beautiful contrast between the green surrounding and its own colors! How can we not bow down in awe? How can we human beings kill and destroy so much of beautiful nature!?"

This passionate utterance may have occurred when a nature-worshiper saw a ladybird beetle in action, without noticing that the beetle was systematically using her formidable jaws to pierce the bodies of small green aphids, eating her way through a stalk of them. If her behavior were filmed and enlarged and shown on a big screen, the same nature-worshiper would probably shudder.

The utterance "beautiful, lovable!" does sometimes, but not always, depend directly on a process of identification. If identification is strong, an utterance like "tragic, paralyzing, horrible" may be rather natural. Moreover, action will follow, completely spontaneously. The victim is rescued.

A "compassion priority norm" seems to collide with the point of view of Stephan Lackner in his very important book *Peaceable Nature*:

> We have to accept life on its own terms. There are no others, at least none that apply to us. We have to talk about "good" or "bad" even while conscious of the obvious relativity of such valuations. "Good for whom?" we have to ask before every decision. The more general the applications of this "good," the more desirable. The mounting scale of positive values would appear, consequently, like this: good for my own self, for my family, for my club, for my community, my ideological or religious group, for my province, nation, continent, for humanity, in ever widening circles. Only when we come to the most general aim—good for life—is relativity suspended, allowing us to envisage an obligatory good.
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> (Lackner 1984)

Can I know whether rescuing or not rescuing a living being from lasting, excruciating pain is "good for life" of the biosphere at large? I don't know, and I decide to rescue anyhow.

For some philosophers, among them Peter Wessel Zapffe (Naess 1991e), the hypothesis that life is completely meaningless plays an important role; for others, hypotheses about definite cosmic goals are all. Lackner says that we "have to accept life on its own terms." Some people, however, decide to quit life, basing their decisions on hypotheses about their own lives and their unwillingness to continue. One may have a norm saying that one *should* accept life on its own terms, whatever they are, but this is a norm that many of us feel depends on some fundamental premises: answers to the question "Why should we?" Must we be passive because insufferable pain is a genuine part of life?

What is the status in the work of Thoreau of compassion and interference to end prolonged suffering? It is a question that might throw light on his basic view of identification and the human–nature relationship. When he observes one ant fighting another, there is identification:

> I saw that, though he was assiduously gnawing at the near foreleg of his enemy, having severed his remaining feeler, his own breast was all torn away, exposing what vitals he had there to the jaws of the black warrior, whose breast-plate was apparently too thick for him to pierce; and the dark carbuncles of the sufferer's eyes shone with ferocity such as war only could excite. . . . I felt for the rest of

> that day as if I had had my feelings excited and harrowed by witnessing the struggle, the ferocity and carnage, of a human battle before my door.
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> (Thoreau 1971: 230–31)

> Just within the edge of the wood there, I see a small painted turtle on its back, with its head stretched out as if to turn over. Surprised by the sight, I stooped to investigate the cause. It drew in its head at once, but I noticed that its shell was partially empty. I could see through it from side to side as it lay, its entrails having been extracted through large openings just before the hind legs. . . . Such is Nature, who gave one creature a taste or yearning for another's entrails as its favorite tidbit!!
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> (Thoreau 1949: 345–46)

There is a certain neutrality in this attitude in spite of strong, but partial identification with sufferers. I do not see examples of Thoreau interfering "in nature." It is as if Nature, by him written with a capital *N* in the above quotation, is something apart or that human beings are something apart. I do not know. Just because I am not apart, I interfere in certain situations no matter what abstract reflection tells me.

Ecosophy, in my variant, "T," does not imply any "acceptance of life" independent of definite assumptions about life. It contains—among others—two hypothetical assumptions: (1) there are no structures of the universe such that living beings cannot reach the highest levels of realization of their potentialities; (2) there is no definite limit of development of symbiosis, using this term in a wide sense. The development of ecosystems is not such that the self-realization of a living being depends *necessarily* on the destruction of the potentialities of others.

Part of the motivation for developing Ecosophy T is a reaction against "cult of life" and "cult of nature" *whatever its manifestations*. It is also a reaction against a tendency to take as axiomatic that life—Life with a capital *L*—somehow exists independent of the behavior of living beings, and that nature—Nature with a capital *N*—somehow exists independent of what happens, manifests itself for all to see. Ecosophy T does explicitly and firmly reject human brutality, cynicism, oppression of the weak, and lust for "power over."

The twentieth century has seen political developments in which completely amoral acceptance of power and strength has been justified based on

concepts of "nature red in tooth and claw." If nature is dependent on brutality, and we are part of nature, why should we try to shun brutality? As Hitler once said: "We have to destroy the Polish intelligentsia. It may sound brutal, but it is in accordance with the laws of nature." Brutality, racism, and other coercive phenomena have been defended in many ways, but one of them is by means of an unrestricted acceptance of *every* manifestation of life in nature.[1]

A student of cultural anthropology may witness in a particular culture a case of extreme suffering, which he may consider completely unnecessary and easily avoidable. Yet he knows that if he uses his way of eliminating that suffering, he undermines the culture. The clash of norms is formidable; there is no easy way out. Whatever the decision, the goal would be, according to Ecosophy T, to relieve extreme suffering of the kind envisaged *within* the framework of the culture. As with animals, ignorance and misconception must be taken into account. A culture is not something static.

Whether we are dealing with cultural systems or with ecosystems, the problematics are in principle the same: we have to assess the consequences of interference, the short-term as well as the very long-term effects, and judge the effects in terms of a norm system. We *have to* reach conclusions based on glaring inadequacy of available empirical knowledge and a clear norm system.

The complexity of the web of life even within a cubic millimeter of soil is, and presumably will remain, indescribable, but if humanity does not destroy itself, our basis for concrete ecological decisions may increase immensely. Respect for the dignity of free nature and proper humility do not rule out planned interference on a greater scale, as long as the aim is a moderation of conditions of extreme and prolonged pain, human or nonhuman. Such pain eliminates the experience of a joyful reality. We are not justified in turning our backs, or closing our eyes, to extreme suffering.

The higher levels of self-realization of a mature being *require* with increasing urgency the assistance of any living being to realize its potentialities, and this inevitably actualizes the concern for the sufferers.

This kind of argument indicates part of the motivation for not placing a norm like "Richness and diversity of life!" as an ultimate norm. The ultimate guidelines must squarely face the extreme suffering in nature. The argument implies disturbing some manifestations of life; it implies interfer-

ence in natural processes—but highly selective interference and not necessarily on a large scale. Interference in nature today is excessive.[2]

The admission of the existence of extreme kinds of suffering in free nature does not in any way support highly influential "bellicose" views of nature as a whole. The most often quoted articulation of such a view is that of the poet Tennyson: "Man . . . who trusted God was love indeed / and love Creation's final law / Though Nature, red in tooth and claw / With raven, shrieked against his creed. . . ." Darwin used his expression "the struggle for life" extensively, and the interpretation was quite natural that he mainly referred to the painful and deadly struggle against enemies. Kropotkin, early in the twentieth century in his seminal *Mutual Aid* (1955), objected, but the view that nature was *full* of cruel competition suited the extreme economic liberalism and colonialism of England as well as the bellicose nationalism of Germany. Today, popularizations of this theme are still found in the life sciences. The opposition is vigorous but less known to the general public.

The following six propositions I think are tenable:

1. Predation (of animals by animals) has played an important role in evolution but is not a necessary ingredient on the level of birds and mammals.
2. A very small portion of birds and mammals die through predation (5–10 percent).
3. Only a small part of the life of animals is adequately described by the expression "struggle for life" or "struggle against enemies."
4. The fitness referred to in the phrase "survival of the fittest" does not in general refer to fitness in deadly struggle or cut-throat competition with others.
5. Many birds, such as flamingos, and mammals, such as koalas, rarely meet a violent death (not taking human and exotic, human-introduced predators into account).
6. In the long run and on the whole, the less the chance of getting killed, the fewer the number of descendants. There is no general pressure to have as many offspring as possible. (Having no natural enemies results in a natural birth-control tendency of having fewer pregnancies.)

Even if these propositions are strongly confirmed by observation, it is not very strange for a twenty-four-hour stroll in free nature to result in many observations aptly but unprofessionally characterized as tragic, brutal, cruel, hideous, horrible, or detestable.

Accounts written by forerunners and contemporary supporters of the deep ecology movement rarely mention these encounters and observations. Why not? I think it is worth pondering that most supporters implicitly assume and strongly feel the existence of a creative principle essentially connected with life that more or less compels veneration—something akin to Spinoza's "God or Nature." It is, however, nature with capital *N*. Trying to communicate this essential creative aspect of life by dwelling on cruelty and pain would lead us astray. So we don't talk about it?

In Ecosophy T there is an ultimate norm "Self-realization!" and an ultimate hypothesis "The higher level of self-realization reached by a living being, the more further increase requires others to reach self-realization."[3] In simple words, it is not a question of acceptance of any kind of life but of "live *and let live*!" Thanks to the capacities of the human brain, full realization of our potentialities—if there is any limit—cannot be anything like an ego trip but must be a joint venture with other beings, both human and nonhuman. The higher the level of realization, the more the realization is a joint venture, a Self-realization without loss of the individuality of each living being. We have sometimes the potentiality of relieving extreme suffering, human *and* nonhuman—and we make use of that privilege.