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CULTURE AND MORALITY

JOHN COGLEY

The greatest sin, Jean-Paul Sartre once said, is to turn what is concrete into an abstraction. One need not be a devotee of M. Sartre's existentialism to appreciate the observation. For even at a time when three newspapers a day and hours of television viewing bring us more reality than most of us can bear, the temptation to abstractionism remains great.

It is, for example, the predominate vice of that chilly company who deal with the death of millions as a factor, but no more than that, in military game theory. Men, women, and children suffer and die one by one, but these people have developed a way of talking about mass annihilation that can banish the image of burning flesh from the mind.

Reading Robert Kennedy's reminiscences, one is reminded again in his account of the typical military response to the Cuban missile crisis of how easy it is to forget that living flesh or dead bodies are behind every casualty accounting. It is particularly easy when the air is clogged with stately phrases like National Honor, Measured Response, and Massive Retaliation. Even such a long-accepted abstraction as Nuclear Deterrence really means that the world is held together by the threat that if millions of people on one side are killed, millions on the other side will also die. But that formulation too lacks the stuff of life. To savor what it means in human terms one should concentrate on a single death, a single burned body, a single disfigured face.

The same thing can be done with The Race Problem, The Crisis in the City, or Law and Order. The Race Problem, translated, means a festering ghetto, a rat-infested tenement house, a young man or woman without hope for the future, a mother whose children are undernourished. The Crisis in the City means the fury of young people watching affluent America on television and knowing they are not part of it but are doomed to a future perhaps worse than their bitter past. Law and Order means the frustration of being unable to speak out, to protest against the indignity one is daily subjected to. It may ring well as an abstraction. In the concrete, it means panicky policemen, broken heads, enraged mobs, the searing hatred between the nation's poorest and the nation's finest.

One reads of starvation and squalor at a time when scientific progress has made them unnecessary — the Problem of the Third World. Behind the rounded-out statistics called underdevelopment, again, are living, breathing men and women.

The evil that has been done in the world by turning the concrete into the abstract is incalculable. Hitler, for example, reduced millions of sinning saints and saintly sinners to an abstraction called The Jew. But the six million died one by one, each death a cataclysmic tragedy. Six million Jews meant six million Anne Franks. Since that terrible period, the world again and again has had to deal with another abstraction called The Refugee — millions of men, women, and children, all individually homeless, all individually hungry and hopeless.

To say all this is not to denigrate abstract reasoning. There is, if anything, too little rather than too much of it in the world. It is to suggest, however, that abstraction is a property of the intellect, whose final purpose is to get a hold on reality, the concrete. The heart cannot reach out to an abstraction. Perhaps, then, it was the denial of the heart in favor of a deceptive intellectualism that Sartre had in mind when he spoke of sin. —*1969*

Richard Grossinger

PREFACE

Nuclear war sits as a kind of zen riddle in the heart of modern civilization. There is no resolution, no relief, and no way of avoiding the consequences. We find ourselves staring not only at the end of consciousness but the end of history and the end of time. It is almost unbelievable that we could bring this on ourselves and our world; yet we stand at the brink without many ways of turning back. Our own individual deaths, grounded in biological mortality, are overwhelming enough, but to have a poisoned silence sweep the Earth moments after our own extinction, to have nothing living follow us, is unendurable. It represents the triumph of the deadliest gods and the demise of nature itself. In the shadow of this unimaginable event we go on day after day, continuing to engage the complexities of our existence. The threat that all this activity could be sheared off, eradicated and scorched into nothing in the space of hours, is the cosmological hallmark of the twentieth century. It is where we have come, out of the various decadent religions of the nineteenth century, into a rising (seemingly irresistible) tide of global materialism (and global nihilism), ruled by the rigorous but rigid forces of pure quantity — a quantity that has now swelled to its inevitable fruition in a bulbous malignant bomb, a bomb that could return all our dissatisfaction and torpor to the cosmic unconscious from which it came. We have become compulsively scientific, image-less — and now an anti-sun has arisen from our very minds. It is naive to think that this is only a political and strategic crisis; it is the physicalization of our crisis of faith, our loss of inner meaning and courage. The warhead is the collective recoil of our spiritual conscience; that is why we cannot wrench free of it or pull back from its compulsion. Only the process of engaging the riddle, of staring unflinchingly through its deadly ruses, is now productive — not as a solution (of course), but as a way of awakening ourselves to who we are and why this is happening to us.

I don't remember when I first became aware of the implications of nuclear weapons, but it was very close to my awakening to the culture itself, probably around third or fourth grade. I no longer remember a time when I did not fear a terrible blinding end. While still in grade school I turned on the radio in reaction to any unexplained and prolonged siren (and by now have done so at least a hundred times in my life, always to be reassured, strangely, by the ongoing inane chatter of America on the dial; ultimately, the chatter is disturbing in another sense, for it maintains the twenty-four-hour-a-day mindlessness and commerciality that beg the crucial questions of our lives — even when they pretend to address them, as in pseudo-serious talk shows). Yet turning on the radio assured me that America was still there. The worst time was June of 1961 when I was sixteen. I lived under a barely subdued terror for most of that month, sure that the end would come each hour. I started at every loud sound. I also saw *Night of the Auk* on t.v. at that time, and it shocked and depressed me in much the way people were more recently overwhelmed by *The Day After.* To this day I find *Night of the Auk* even more chilling — for the stark fragile beauty of its language, for the failure of learned men to avoid the "war" among themselves even after the Earth's incineration, and for its early dramatization of our fearful denial of the spiritual test we are undergoing. *The Day After* is, in a sense, part of the new tyranny of literalism, the reign of quantity; it is the prime-time marketing of our destructive capability. *Night of the Auk* was a prophetic statement of our imperiled humanity. And that is why I have brought it back into public attention here. Hopefully, the play itself will be revived, performed again, and even republished.

My worst attack of nuclear nightmare was adolescent, though hardly trivial for that reason. It subsided perhaps because I passed out of childhood into a world that was difficult in other incomprehensible ways and filled with all sorts of injustices and unbearable acts. I would not live forever anyway, nor would I get to the bottom of things. I don't know how that anxiety ended or changed into other things, though I recall precisely the elation I felt when I realized six years had passed from the time a camp counselor had promised: "No way we can make it through the next five years." I remembered and waited almost a third of my life then to prove him wrong. Anything else was a gift. But the nuclear fear was not just a symptom for teen-age anxieties nor (on the other hand) an actual literal threat; it was an aspect of the overall difficulty and sorrow of the world. I learned that it could be lived with as all the rest could — uncomfortably but as part of a desperate struggle for enlightenment before it was too late. And it didn't have to be honored moment to moment, for vigilance was also a destructive force.

In recent years I have had some trouble with people newly alert to the scope of the nuclear threat. Often they demand a rigid adherence to their strategies for removing nuclear weapons, strategies that usually share the unyielding literalism of the military. The longer one has lived with the lion the more humble they become in its teeth. Mindless anti-war activism is another form of bellicosity in the guise of denial of bellicosity. Nuclear weapons represent far more than stupid generals and unenlightened technicians. People and politicians have fought wars mostly from desperation and necessity, have built weapons in the confusion of mixed conscious and unconscious strategies, often with the goal of ending war. As a species, our ambivalences and nightmares stand out; even when we form implacable antlike armies and carry out atrocities, we are struggling with unconscious demons and on the verge of redemption. One might as well be anti-death or anti-disease as anti-war in the absolute sense. The warriors are inside us, to be embraced and understood, perhaps millennia from now to be ritualized into protectors of all life, all sentient beings. Even the nuclear bomb is inside us, and we must accept the wisdom of its message if we are to avoid its lethal retribution.

Paradoxically, we must depend on the members of the anti-war movement to raise our consciousness; their outrage and discomfort are an essential eruption of our dormant malignancy — most powerful and curative when they are least rigid: when they bear exotic death's heads and corpse dolls and put on underworld dances; least effective when they are reduced to bumper-stickers, regimented marches, and chanted slogans. These latter activities merely polarize people into ideological camps. Nuclear weapons must awaken us to an event outside political parties, even outside consciousness and outside history. They must incite a wild revival that no religiosity can claim.

We must awaken, we must make conscious some of what is unconscious, or we will blunder into Armageddon. The anti-war movement, though relatively powerless in superpower terms, is a faint but crucial beacon for consciousness at this time. Unless superior beings are guiding us or a magus in the soul of the planet is holding back holocaust, we must rely on ourselves to stay awake, even if we must do it dogmatically in an age of dogma. The magus may also abandon us if we do not affirm him in our waking minds.

So the images and symbols of nuclear activists are collectively healing, though in individual cases they may irritate people and alienate closet advocates by their righteousness and the unexamined lifestyles behind it. It is too late now to plan an elegant defense. We must make use of what arises spontaneously; we must use existing energy to create new energy, always billowing toward an unknown goal, an unforeseeable resolution. That is what the atom teaches us anyway: pure energy from mass, limitless power from the minute particles of creation. To that we might add the Buddhist precept: that all energy is (in the first place) mind too.

A great deal of anti-nuclear (to use the euphemism) writing is to wake us up, some of which is the writer waking him- (or her-) self up, reaching to the danger in an ever deeper part of the collective soul. We have included only a small amount of such writing because a collection of (even beautiful) peace poems does not touch the more subtle and paradoxical aspects of this dilemma. In making images of the end of time and the destruction of living beings and whole cities we startle ourselves, harangue ourselves, and even pity ourselves, but we also usually lead ourselves back simply to anger at the nuclear establishment for doing this to us. It is more important to find ways to empower ourselves and to take respon-

sibility, even for acts which are not individually ours. In any case, the so-called "pro-nuclear" position is not that vulnerable. The majority of nuclear-weapons-advocates are equally disheartened by the present impasse and its implications; they argue that destruction may, in the end, be unavoidable and that, in any case, it is not avoidable by a retreat from nuclear weapons. The debate goes back and forth without resolution. The nuclear-advocates argue that the only way to avoid the use of such weapons is to deter war by a balanced arsenal. The corresponding anti-nuclear position is that deterrence is short-term only; if the weapons are built they must ultimately be used, either by error or misjudgement if not by arrogant calculation, and then the whole accumulated stockpile will go off, destroying all life on the planet. To this the advocates argue: well, even if that is to be so, it is our only hope because if we do not use the weapons to deter our enemies, they will be used anyway, either on us in our weakness or to blackmail us into surrender; then the world will be conquered by a ruthless dictatorship and there will be decades if not centuries of suffering. A humanist might then ask if even that were not better than destruction of life itself; after all, every dictatorship eventually crumbles from within. However, this is not a debate that we can reasonably expect creatures at our level of evolution and with our brief lifespans to resolve. No one is worrying about fifty years from now or even twenty years from now. They are trying to get through the next twenty-four hours, then the next month. Nuclear weapons are on the level of interest rates: metaphysical questions can be answered only through our living itself.

Anti-nuclear writings also express some of the new level of vigilance that has come since the ascension of Ronald Reagan. It took a gung-ho nuclear-arms-race advocate and an uncompromising militarist to awaken people to the fact that they were already half-awake to a world dangerously overarmed with nuclear bombs. A subtle almost inexpressible change has occurred, and even though it is difficult to trace or spell out, it has given rise to a mass movement. Nuclear vigilance and nuclear terror have been with us since Hiroshima, but people were lulled by the non-bellicose rhetoric of our leaders and the seeming mutual commitment of us and the Russians to detente. The mere fact that we have gone without a world war for a time longer than the time between World War I and World War II is reassuring to people: we have survived the Cuban Crisis and our fear of an imaginary "Red Chinese" foe.

But these reassurances are hollow in light of the actual danger: Ronald Reagan has done a service for nuclear consciousness, for he has brought the characters of *Dr. Strangelove* to life and shown that they were not mere fictive exaggerations (though they were also alive and among us before he took office). He has created the living image of a Hollywood president of uncertain emotional depth and wisdom who believes in the *Book of Revelations* as a literal deific prophecy. But he did not invent the dilemma; he is a symptom of our wish to deny the global crisis in all its aspects and simply to blame the Russians. But it is a terrible oversimplification to think that one person or nation could create a problem of this scale. Ronald Reagan is a specter of our somnolent sense of urgency, despite the fact that he may blunder into the dreaded nuclear war. He has made our situation worse, but he has also ended the latency period of nuclear consciousness, and in that sense he has helped to improve other aspects of the situation. Almost all of the writing in this book is post-Reagan and certainly would not have been done with the same urgency and depth of self-examination without his administration. Without him we might not actually *be* more safe; we might only *seem* more safe. *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* could not have been written today. We can still laugh at it, but we cannot write it because we no longer feel the same irony or distance from the madness.

Historical political writing of the sort done by Freeman Dyson and Thomas Powers represents a new and earnest public dialogue that is more typical of the 1980s. Both authors present the very ordinary practical difficulties that contribute to an extraordinary crisis. In *Weapons and Hope* Dyson traces and documents the differing views of warfare between ourselves and the Soviets and shows how we will be unable to negotiate arms reductions as long as we live in two opposed interpretive frameworks and value systems. The American military accepts nuclear deterrence as a reality and purports to defend our populace behind its imaginarily concrete

shield. The Russians, with their more recent direct experience of bloody wars and invasions on their own soil, view war as an uncontrollable and unpredictable pandemonium which, once unleashed, can take any wild course. They are not as involved in the fictive war-games reality that American planners honor. Of course neither side maintains an absolute position, but in terms of strategies of defense they worship incompatible gods.

According to Dyson, when the Russians say that they will survive a nuclear war, they are merely stating a centuries-old national credo — not just for war but for their ancient civilization. They conceive of themselves as the survivors of barbarian hordes from Asia, Napoleonic armies, and a Nazi war machine. They are too primitive, even with their mastery of the technology of the atom, to be bought off by our slick marketing of "deterrence." If *their* weakness is stubborn unexamined ideology, ours is our susceptibility to mercantile images. They have a rigid bureaucracy; we have a Madison Avenue government. In trying to sell the Russians deterrence as an assured and fully-tested product (and the mode of arms reduction that goes with it), our government is asking them to buy our definition of reality. They, on the other hand, continue to offer a reality so harsh and brutal that we see no safeguard in any compromise or world worth sharing with them.

As Thomas Powers points out, one of our ploys then is to bankrupt the Russians by trapping them in an arms race they cannot afford. As with a high-frontier star-wars defense, we try to impel them into our shiny modern high-credit reality. But in the process we may bankrupt ourselves and the world as well, bringing on a different global cataclysm. And, in any case, they will always steal our secrets (atom bombs, computer chips, satellites, etc.), whether they actually do or we imagine they do. We are part of the same superpower conspiracy to control the world by quantity, to bind the Third World to our image. On the level of espionage and counter-espionage, there are no longer enough patriotic loyalties to keep national secrets from either side. Once the international spy experiences the truth of the global corporate conspiracy, he is more interested in naming his price and getting his share of the pie than defending the rhetorical ideals of his homeland. Powers lists the mirrorred atrocities (and accusations of atrocities) of both sides:

Q: *What about Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia?*
A: What about Guatemala, Cuba, Chile, Indonesia, Iran?
Q: *What about Afghanistan?*
A: What about Vietnam?
Q: *What about Hafizullah Amin?*
A: What about Ngo Dinh Diem?
Q: *What about Masaryk?*
A: What about Lumumba?
Q: *What about Sakharov?*
A: What about Martin Luther King?
Q: *What about the kulaks?*
A: What about the Negroes?
Q: *What about the purges, Gulag, Lubyanka, Siberia?*
A: What about Dresden, Hamburg, Hiroshima, free-fire zones, Agent Orange?
Q: *What about the SS-20?*
A: What about Pershing, GLCMs, SLCMs, ALCMs?
Q: *What about fifty thousand tanks in Eastern Europe?*
A: What about the neutron bomb?
Q: *What about world revolution and the triumph of Communism?*
A: What about "the last best hope of mankind"?
Q: *What about Khruschchev, "We will bury you"?*
A: What about Sen. Richard Russell, "If we have to start over again from Adam, I want to be sure he's an American"?*

"'What do you think spies are,' asks John Le Carré's secret agent: 'priests, saints and martyrs? They're a squalid procession of vain fools, traitors too, yes; pansies, sadists and drunkards, people who play cowboys and Indians to brighten their rotten lives. Do you think they sit like monks in London, balancing the rights and wrongs? . . . This is a war. It's graphic and unpleasant because it's fought on a tiny scale, at close range; fought with a wastage of innocent life sometimes, I admit. But it's nothing, nothing at all beside other wars — the last or the next.'"†

It would seem that we are left with little choice now: either

* ***Thinking About the Next War***, New American Library, New York, 1983

† ***The Spy Who Came in from the Cold***, Avenel Books, New York, 1983

a grueling daily war of thievery and deceit that robs us of our national resources and identities, or the end of civilization itself. It is no wonder that ideological purists build shelters and await the end of the present civilization and the beginning of the next with anticipation and hope. Of course, the scientific establishment has now decreed a "nuclear winter," which will destroy all life on Earth after the exchange of bombs. Their scenario may be accurate, but it is still another attempt at deterrence, and to the peasant reality of both the Soviets and the Third World it must still look like an American public-relations scheme. Once again, our self-importance betrays us, betrays even our humanitarian and philanthropic intentions. We must not forget that the majority of people in the world do not have a life that many in the West would be willing or able to lead, and their numbers in Mexico, India, China, Africa, etc., are increasing dramatically. We likewise must not forget, and be willing to look within ourselves to see, that our own pious horror at the destruction of the Earth is at least partially linked to the share of the Earth that we hold. How much less might be our moral outrage and terror if we each held our appropriate fractional amount of the planet's resources. But then no nation would have the capacity or the need to assemble nuclear arsenals. So self-examination should be part of the raising of our consciousness — on this issue alone if no other. The Third World has always suspected Western liberalism, and that is why poor nations often ignore our messages of peace and seem to support Soviet stands, even against their own self-interest. It is their way of protesting not our monopoly or our greed (as they are often just as avid for the same goods); it is their way of protesting our arrogant pieties. They do not begrudge us the sword but they find laughable the notion that we expect still to control the world's wealth by our superior culture without the sword. Their whole lives have taught them the sorry relationship between power and justice. They don't want apocalypse either, but sometimes they must feel that any disruption of the present order would be an opportunity.

Our own credo of deterrence does have one advantage over the Russians' stubborn decree that they will somehow survive: we recognize, if in the wrong way and for the wrong reasons, that we are in a new world-age and the old rules don't pertain anymore. Ideological rigidities no longer have the same power. But a spiritual transformation is needed, not just a computerized war-game. We intuit, dimly and in the distance, that unrestrained World War must become archaic or played out hypothetically in symbolic replicas. We do not see that our ideological rigidities, cruelly masked as democracy and freedom, must also be transformed in a way that takes into account the present state of sentient life on our planet. One deterrent means nothing without the other; the atomic weapon is just a technological rigidity to support an ideological one. But we have taken the first unconscious step into a new ritual and a new millennium. There *is* a lesson in not yet having fought with nuclear weapons — if only we can grasp its true meaning in time.

Dyson and Powers emphasize a simple but key point: nuclear weapons do not actually increase military capability. They freeze nations into positions of not being able to fight any war, even of self-defense; and they invite nuclear arming by an enemy. They are, in a sense, the end of the military profession, its replacement by computers and hypothetical wars, with greatly increased danger and risk at no increase in security. The early atomic scientists also thought of the nuclear bomb as the end to war as we knew it, but unless the military fully accepts this, we can rely only on fortune and rationality to prevent the absurdity of the use of strategically meaningless weapons.

The notion that nuclear weapons are useless and that the vast sums of money necessary for their manufacture and upkeep could be better spent is probably one of the most workable practical solutions to nuclear war, though the idea of the same money going for different weapons would hardly be attractive to pacifists. If we take the position that war will always be hell and that warring nations will fight with what weapons they have (and we are very far from a peaceful planet), then at least we might hope to buy some time by tailoring our arsenals to fightable wars. As Dyson shows, we can keep our hi-tech defense and move into new areas of miniaturized weapons, but we don't have to destroy all life on the planet. This is his ordinary solution to an extraordinary problem. It represents Gary Snyder's hope (expressed in the opening discussion) that nuclear weapons become tabooed, deeply tabooed — in Dyson's sense, not because they are immoral but because they are impractical.

The latter part of this anthology explores our cosmic and archetypal identity in the nuclear crisis. We must face the fact that nuclear weapons are not the only epidemic on this planet or the only perilous fact of our condition. We are born against all odds

onto a pagan sorrowful world that has seemingly arisen from conflict, murder, and strife among living entities. We are in competition with other life-forms for the resources of this planet, and we are embattled within our own species. Nuclear war is a symptom of this dilemma, but it is not the malignancy itself. Our inability to undo its grip is also our inability to solve the other problems in our situation. If we somehow magically eliminated nuclear weapons, some other biological, cosmic, or psychological threat would replace them as the most advanced symptom — until we reached the disease itself. Even without the bomb our situation is desperate.

At the turn of the century we thought of war as an interlude in civilization — a madness, a distortion of ordinary life. But Freud pointed graphically to what we already suspected: a hidden and unfathomable unconscious realm from which our hostilities arise — irrationally and unpredictably, not even as pure instincts but as the distortions of instincts (archetypes, Jung later said, after the Nazis, powerful entities we shun and fear at grave risk of being possessed by them), and Toynbee pointed to a series of cataclysmic wars that did not seem to be sated by either the first or second global outbreak. It will take a great deal more than skillful diplomacy and good intentions to avoid destroying our civilization. We exist to a large degree at the mercy of unconscious forces, and we must bring some crucial aspect of them to expression in our lifetime. Those forces are ultimate, and real, and bigger than we are. They are not in a position to show compassion to us; only we have that power from our human-ness. So we must face them as they are, face ourselves as we are, not as we would like to be. The answer to nuclear weapons is not just abnegation of violence, hatred of hate, destruction of the destroyers; it is a new order of culture, a new ceremony, which will return these gods to a less menacing position.

The metaphysical question posed by nuclear war is like the question of creation itself: will everything really come to an end? Will all life-forms be destroyed, or will some survive and evolve in new directions? Will people survive in small numbers and fight (or not) Einstein's Fourth World War with bows and arrows? If the Earth is destroyed, is this then the destruction of everything? These questions have been asked by other generations for other reasons. We cannot know what spirit realms might succeed this reality, but we must face the real spiritual consequences instead of some science-fiction apocalypse.

If we engage in nuclear war and wipe out this world, and there is no other aspect of our creation, then we will have either fulfilled our pathology or given in to the pathological aspect of our nature. There will be a silence like that that preceded us. But even if the spirit worlds go on from here into other realms, and we wipe out this world, we will not enter some heaven or hereafter of the saved, scot-free. We will have to remake this world elsewhere through what is left of our spirit, and it will be all the harder and will take all the longer (in cosmic time), and we will have to do the hard yoga we did not do here. The Christian fundamentalists are simply wrong in expecting they can play Armageddon and then ride happily beside God into the Kingdom of Heaven. Nothing in nature works this way. There was work to do before the bomb, there is work to do to prevent the bomb, and there will be work to do after the bomb, whether we fire it or bury it.

The following is quoted from "Society by Design—Bread Labor:11", by William S. Coperthwaite, published in MANAS, September 19, 1984, p.1:

"We have been developing rapidly into a society of independent people as regards dependence on family, friends, and neighbors, yet remain very dependent on the impersonal society at large for our daily needs. This makes us a much more mobile and emotionally unstable people. Each unit in the society becomes more interchangeable (and less needed personally). I suggest that we need to reverse this trend. We need to become more dependent on our families, neighbors and friends (and more needed as a result), and more independent of the society at large for meeting our needs."

THE NEXT STEP

THERE are two arguments against enthroned self-interest. One is that in the long run it doesn't work. The other is that human beings are not really self-fulfilled until they feel themselves animated by the Promethean spirit of service. The first argument is pragmatic, the second metaphysical, growing out of the idea that humans are by nature that portion of the universe which, having reached self-consciousness, became responsible for its beneficent functions. On this view, humans are the caretakers of the world, a role which, finding it burdensome, they gave to the highest representatives of the species, whom they had elevated to the status of gods. Conforming to after determining the will of the gods then became the duty of humans. The gods, through various arrangements, were our ancestors from whom, however ambiguous and confusing, our instructions come.

We may regard this as practically unbelievable, yet anthropologists now agree more or less with Marshall Sahlins who, as one of their number, put the matter briefly in *Culture and Practical Reason*: "So far as I know, we are the only people who think themselves risen from savages; everyone else believes they descend from gods."

Why is this idea so completely alien to us? As good an answer as any was given by Nietzsche in his careless phrase, "God is dead!" meaning, as he later explained, we have abolished the true world, and since our world is the true world's imperfect reflection, it too is being abolished. How is it abolished? By becoming what we call "value-free," which is a way of declaring it meaningless. In *Human Nature and the Human Condition*, Joseph Wood Krutch summed up the cultural result:

> Today the prevailing opinion among even the moderately intelligent and instructed is based largely upon their understanding and misunderstanding of Darwin, of Marx, of Freud, and more especially, of the popular expositors. From the teaching of these masters they conclude: (1) that man is an animal; (2) that animals originated mechanically as the result of a mechanical or chemical accident; (3) that "the struggle for existence" and "natural selection" have made man the kind of animal he is; (4) that once he became man, his evolving social institutions gave him his wants, convictions, and standards of value; and (5) that his consciousness is not the self-awareness of a unified, autonomous *persona* but only a secondary phenomenon which half reveals and half conceals a psychic nature partly determined by society, partly by the experiences and traumas to which his organism has been exposed.

This view of our origins has a practical effect on how we regard ourselves. Krutch continues:

> Thus though man has never before been so complacent about what he *has*, or so confident of his ability to *do* whatever he sets his mind upon, it is at the same time true that he never before accepted so low an estimate of what *he is*. That same scientific method which enabled him to create his wealth and to unleash the power he wields, has, he believes, enabled biology and psychology to explain him away—or at least to explain away whatever used to seem unique or even in any way mysterious. . . . Truly he is, for all his wealth and power, poor in spirit.
>
> Sometimes he so far forgets himself as to talk wildly about the need to "control our destiny" and about the prospect that we shall soon be able to do so. What he seems to forget is that "control" implies some defined end, a movement toward some fixed point in the direction of which he wishes to move. But that is what the dominant relativism cannot supply.

It is little wonder, then, that self-interest was adopted as the motive power of our lives, the stimulus and stir behind our daily activities, the glue that holds together our organizations of various sorts—from country club to the national state. Why, then, raise any question at all about this driving principle, sanctified for businessmen by Adam Smith as the producer of the wealth of nations, made the basis of animal instinct by Darwin and the biologists, and given the tone of "culture" by hedonist philosophers? Because, as Mr. Krutch concludes:

> Even most of those who are neither Christian nor, in ordinary sense, mystical, do nevertheless feel that there is something lacking in our society and that this lack is not generally acknowledged; do feel that, for all its prosperity and for all its kindliness, generosity, and good will, it is somehow shallow and vulgar; that the vulgarity is superficially evidenced in the tawdriness, the lack of dignity and permanence in the material surroundings of our lives, and more importantly in our aims and standards; that we lack any sense that efficient and equitable systems of production and distribution are only a beginning, as, for that matter, are also our ideal of democracy and our struggle for social justice. You may, as a few do, attribute that alienation to "a lack of religion." But perhaps even that term is not broad enough. It is a lack of any sense of what life is *for* beyond comfort and security, and it would still be so even if all these good things were conferred upon all. At best life would still remain, in Yeats' phrase, "an immense preparation for something which never happens."

The book we have been quoting was published in 1959. Since then the indications of dissatisfaction Krutch noted have grown in dimension and insistence. The level of criticism has heightened, starting with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), followed by dozens of volumes concerned with what the rage for acquisition has done to the world around us. Our disgust for ourselves is matched by the anguish of a mutilated nature. And in *Science* for March 10, 1967, Lynn White, jr., wrote: "With the population explosion, the carcinoma of planless urbanism, the now geologic deposits of sewage and garbage, surely no creature other than man has ever managed to foul its nest in such short order." The ecological indictment and evidence mounted to become a chorus of indignation and appeal, while the call to humans to assume a larger responsibility—accept man's promethean role—was explicit in the work of a microbiologist, Catherine Roberts, who said (in *Science, Animals, and Evolution*, 1980):

> Man's conscious awareness of his conscience, the divine ethic, and his self-transcendence as a realizable human potential *does* set *Homo sapiens* apart from other creatures. And precisely because of his spiritual uniqueness, he has a responsibility to help lower beings to ascend that exceeds any responsibility to them based on a sense of physical relation through common descent. . . . In assuming the existence of a spiritual hierarchy of being, there at once emerges an idea wholly undemocratic and, at the same time, wholly necessary for the evolutionary ascent: *noblesse oblige*. This is no illusory concept to bolster the human ego. . . . In the religious scheme of things, the higher are ever helping the lower to realize potentiality for the sake of the cosmic good.

Mrs. Roberts is right, if still a minority voice. The idea of man as a cosmic benefactor, even a cosmic manager, does involve hierarchical relations with the rest of nature and life, and this assumption brings us squarely in opposition with the great discovery and cause of the eighteenth century—Equality. Yet there is nonetheless a resolution of this difficulty, which she also names—*noblesse oblige.* The eighteenth-century revolution probably would never have taken place—or would have been very different in character—if there had been more *noblesse oblige* practiced by the upper classes. We don't exploit our children —at least we try not to—partly because they are in so many ways at our mercy, and partly because we love them and often want them to grow up to be better or even wiser than we are. If we begin to think of the less privileged races and classes as younger members of the great human family, we might bring our behavior in line with hierarchical law as it applies to us, if we become conscious of this principle and deliberate in following its rule.

The trouble with equality at the cultural level—it is a moral necessity at the political level, for reasons the Founding Fathers made clear—is that it discourages striving for excellence and settles for the lowest common denominator. Such equality becomes the equality of an atomistic society, where all the units are alike because equally unimaginative, equally mediocre, equally passive and malleable. Where would the American Revolution have been without a galaxy of distinguished individuals, starting with Paine, Washington, Jefferson, and Adams? And if you read their lives you find that, whatever their individual tastes and differences, they were all committed to *noblesse oblige.* They may have had money, but they didn't work for money in their service to their country. They worked for vision and principle. Pick any period of history especially worth remembering, whether Periclean Athens or Elizabethan England, and you will find a similar collection of remarkable men and women for whom *noblesse oblige* was a natural inclination. Then, in more or less our own time, although starting with transcendentalist figures like Thoreau and Emerson, there is the company described by Paul Brooks in *Speaking for Nature* (Sierra Club, 1980)—dozens of men to whom self-interest seemed an absolute stranger, who worked all their lives in behalf of the community of life. Nature. like human life, is filled with inequalities. Nature resolves these difficulties—if they are difficulties—with the numerous miracles of symbiosis, the web of interdependent function. Among humans, the solvent is love—a love for other humans and the surrounding life, transcending temporary and partisan attachments.

It is no accident that the best human beings of our time have turned to the wisdom implicit in ecological science for inspiration and guidance. Krutch, who joined this fraternity as a devoted—and accomplished—amateur, wrote in an essay, "Conservation Is Not Enough," published in the *American Scholar* for the Summer of 1954:

> Hardly more than two generations ago, Americans first woke up to the fact that their land was not inexhaustible. Every year since then, more and more has been said, and at least a little more has been done, about "conserving resources," "rational use," and about such reconstruction as seemed possible. Scientists have studied the problem, public works have been undertaken, laws passed. Yet everybody knows that the using up still goes on, perhaps not so fast nor so recklessly as once it did, but still at a steady pace. And there is nowhere that it goes on more nakedly, more persistently, or with a fuller realization of what is happening than in the desert regions where the margin to be used up is narrower.
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> First, more and more cattle were set to grazing and overgrazing land from which the scanty rainfall now ran off even more rapidly than before. Then more outrageously, large areas of desert shrub were uprooted to plant cotton and other crops which were watered by wells tapping underground pools of water, now demonstrably shrinking fast because they represent years of accumulation which can be exhausted even more rapidly than an oil well. Everyone knows that this water supply will give out before long—very soon in fact, if the number of wells which draw on it continues to increase as it has been increasing. Soon dust bowls will be where was once a sparse but healthy desert; and man, having uprooted, slaughtered, or driven away everything which lived healthily and normally there, will himself either abandon the country or die.
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> To the question of why men will do or are permitted to do such things, there are many replies. Some speak of population pressures, while others more bluntly discuss unconquerable human greed. Some despair; some hope that more education and more public works will, in the long run, prove effective. But is there, perhaps, something more, something different, which is indispensable? Is there some missing link in the chain of education, law and public works? Is there something lacking without which none of these is sufficient?

One begins to suspect what Mr. Krutch has in mind—a deep and realizing sense of *noblesse oblige.* For its expression he goes to Aldo Leopold, the forester and conservationist who wrote *A Sand County Almanac* to record his feelings and observations of the natural world, and to declare that "missing link" in its concluding chapter, "The Land Ethic." Krutch's appreciation of it is too good to omit here. He said:

> This is a subtle and original essay, full of ideas never so clearly expressed before, and seminal in the sense that each might easily grow into a separate treatise. Yet the conclusion reached can be simply stated. Something *is* lacking; and because of that lack, education, law and public work fail to accomplish what they hope to accomplish. Without it, the high-minded impulse to educate, to legislate and to manage becomes as sounding brass or tinkling cymbal. And the thing which is missing is love, some feeling for, as well as some understanding of, the inclusive community of rocks and soils, plants and animals, of which we are a part.

The gist of Leopold's contention is that enlightened self-interest is not enough—it is not *good* enough. As Krutch puts it briefly: "The wisest, the most enlightened, the most remotely long-seeing exploitation of resources is not enough, for the simple reason that the whole concept of exploitation is so false and so limited that in the end it will defeat itself and the earth will have been plundered, no matter how scientifically and farseeingly the plundering has been done."

This call to become lovers of the earth, we might note, is itself irenical, not compulsive. A compelled love, for us, does not, cannot, exist. Love is spontaneous, springing from the roots of our being. Either we feel it or we don't. Yet there are stories aplenty of how people learn to love, of the strange ways in which people come to feel the bond of affection. The love of poor and unhappy people began for Jane Addams in watching a bull fight in Madrid. Henry George's lifelong fight against poverty began with his seeing the misery in an American city on

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a cold winter's day. No planned curriculum will teach people to love, although certain kinds of exposure seem to make a contribution. Both beauty and ugliness have their effect.

In 1894 a child was lost in the forest near Hampshire in England. Who was the child? He was Richard St. Barbe Baker, and this little boy lost fell in love with the trees. As Paul Hanley, who lives in Saskatchewan, where St. Barbe went to school, has said in the current *Structurist*:

> For nine decades the child will grow in his affinity for trees; their fate will be entwined with his own. He will mobilize people on every continent to plant and protect trees; he will awaken thousands to the oneness of humanity and all living things, and to the healing of the earth. He will be the Man of the Trees.

Let us have no more talk of self-interest as the only spring of action in human beings. There are dozens. scores, hundreds of accounts of human beings who found in themselves another reason for living—working and living. We may be long in recognizing, with Aldo Leopold and some others, that self-interest does not work, but learning this will be assisted by the discovery that all through the years of the exploitation of nature, another way of relating to the earth, to our fellows, to all forms of life, has been put into practice by the few. What has been done by the few can also be done by the many. We are all equal in this possibility, however our skills may vary. In fact, this very variability may prove a blessing to the world, since there are so many different things to do.

We should however return directly to the subject of love since from all accounts this is the heart of the matter. It has consideration in Wendell Berry's essay, "People, Land, and Community," in which he says:

> We can commit ourselves fully to anything—a place, a discipline, a life's work, a child, a family, a community, a faith, a friend—only in the same poverty of knowledge, the same ignorance of result, the same self-subordination, the same final forsaking of other possibilities. If we must make these so final commitments without sufficient information, then what *can* inform our decisions?
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> In spite of the obvious dangers of the word, we must say first that love can inform them. This, of course, though probably necessary, is not safe. What parent, faced with a child who is in love and going to get married, has not been filled with mistrust and fear—and justly so. We who were lovers before we were parents know what a fraudulent justifier love can be. We know that people stay married for different reasons than those for which they get married and that the later reasons will have to be discovered. Which, of course, is not to say that the later reasons may not confirm the earlier ones; it is to say only that the earlier ones must wait for confirmation.
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> But our decisions can also be informed—our loves both limited and strengthened—by those patterns of value and restraint, principle and expectation, memory, familiarity, and understanding, that, inwardly, add up to *character* and, outwardly, to *culture*. Because of these patterns, and only because of them, we are not alone in the bewilderments of the human condition and human love, but have the company and comfort of the best of our kind, living and dead. These patterns constitute a knowledge far different from the kind I have been talking about. It is a kind of knowledge that includes information, but is never the same information. Indeed, if we study the paramount documents of our culture, we will see that this second kind of knowledge invariably implies, and often explicitly imposes, limits upon the first kind: some possibilities must not be explored; some things must not be learned. If we want to get safely home, there are certain seductive songs we must not turn aside for, some sacred things we must not meddle with. . . .

Self-interest is of course an almost omnipresent factor in human behavior, but only one of a number of factors. Held to its natural function, it takes care of our biological requirements and our material needs. It works for good when limited to these areas, just as, for example, pain works in delivering warnings that something in our physical lives is amiss and needs correction. Other factors may take charge of the intellectual and moral ranges of our being, including our activities as teachers and administrators—really two closely related departments in our role of users of social intelligence.

Our mix of motives works well so long as we understand their function, but it produces only confusion and paradox when we do not distinguish between them. And when we allow self-interest full authority over every aspect of our lives—which means in relation to others and to the natural world—we introduce forces leading to disharmony and malfunction of the sort now becoming apparent. Recognizing this may be the lesson of the twentieth century, and possibly the next major step in *human* evolution.

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