

# The Metaphysics of Ecology

By Peter Milward

To begin at the beginning, especially when speaking about a word in such common use nowadays as “ecology”, is so important. It is so important to be clear in our minds about the words we are using. It is so important, as philosophers say, to define our terms. After all, as T. S. Eliot laments, “Words strain,/ Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,/ Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,/ Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,/ Will not stay still.” Such a word is “ecology”.

Then, what is “ecology”? Simply, to resolve the compound Greek noun into its component parts, they are *oikos* meaning “house” and *logos* meaning “word”. Yet who is there nowadays, speaking of “ecology”, will think of either “house” or “word”. All the same, they still retain their distinctive importance even in the compound meaning of the word as used nowadays. They are the old parts that still retain their meaning in the new whole.

So what do we think we mean by “ecology”? Well, it may be defined as that branch of biological science which deals with the balance of living things in the natural world. The natural world which surrounds us, the world in which we live, move and have our being, from birth to death, is based on a certain delicate balance. But that balance is increasingly being disturbed and overthrown by our excessive use, or exploitation, of the elements in nature.

Formerly, most human beings lived in an agricultural society and found it natural to live in harmony with the world. But latterly, with the rise of experimental science, based on the Baconian principle of “Knowledge is Power”, the balance of nature has come to be upset by human greed –



L.L. Fitzgerald, *Poplar Woods* (1929)

and never more so than in the present age, since World War II. In seeking to dominate the world of nature, we have succeeded in pulling that world down about our ears. As the Roman poet says, “*Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurrit*” – Expel nature with a pitchfork, yet it ever comes back.

There we have the meaning of “house”. It isn’t just a house built with human hands, for a family to live in. It isn’t “the house that Jack built”, at which he can proudly exclaim, “What a clever boy am I!” It is the house of the natural world, built by divine hands for human beings to live in – peaceably and in harmony with each other. It is the house whose building is so charmingly described in the first chapter of *Genesis*.

There we begin with the creation of light above. Then come the roof and the walls, then the foundation of the earth and the seas, then the ornamentation of the house, with a floor of grass and other forms of vegetation, then the dwellers in the house, the birds of the air, the fishes of the sea, the beasts of the field, until all is ready for the arrival of the first man and woman. God is himself the architect, the builder, the designer, the artist, the gardener – in a word, the creator.

Then, who is God? Ah, there is the mystery behind it all, the seer unseen, the creator uncreated, the one pure being present in and above all these many varied beings. Then there is his name, revealed to the reputed author of the five books of the Law, the Pentateuch. To Moses, tending his sheep on the slopes of Mount Sinai, God reveals his name as “I am who am”.

Thus what characterizes God in and above all things is simply “I AM”, preferably written in capital letters. God makes his own the first person singular of the present tense of the verb “To be”. He simply affirms his present, singular, personal being. He tells Moses, as the centerpiece of divine revelation in the Old Testament, that HE IS.

Here one senses an objection to what God says of himself. Isn’t he transcendent, far above all being? Isn’t he incomparable, unique, in himself alone? Yet here we find God, even as creator, descending to the level of created beings. Here we have God speaking of himself like one of his creatures.

Yes, God may be uncreated Being, in the unique singular, with a capital B for “Being”, whereas we are all created beings, in the common plural, with only a small letter for “beings”. Still, we aren’t only plural. Nor are we only common. Each of us is singular and unique, each in his or her own way. As such we can, each of us, say, “I am” – while keeping to the humble way of small letters.

Here I am chiefly speaking of human beings, men and women, who have received from God the gift of his word, by which we can say, “I am.” No animal, not even a monkey, a parrot, a raven, has ever said “I am” – with any kind of consciousness or degree of understanding. A parrot may be trained to repeat the words, “I am”, after his master. But then the words are merely sounds whose meaning is dependent not on the well-trained bird but on his patient trainer.

Now I come to the other, simple component of the compound word “ecology”. I come not only to the “house” of this natural world, the house built with divine hands, but also to the “word” with which he built it. For so we read in the beginning of the first chapter of Genesis, “And God said, Let there be light. And there was light.” Nor was there only light, but already before the creation of light there was the Word of God, implied in the past tense of the verb “To say.”

God who is utters his creating word, and things come into being, not

all at once but one by one, in due order in the process of time. And so, as a result of that first word spoken in the beginning, we have a procession of created beings paraded before our enraptured eyes. And so, with God himself, we utter the appreciative “Good!”

In this way, as St. John says in his recapitulation of Genesis, “In the beginning was the Word”, and “In him was Light.” We, too, like St. John, and like the infant Wisdom in that other account of the creation in Proverbs viii, may think of ourselves – without blasphemy – as present with God from the beginning of creation. We, too, may look on the unfolding of light even from the moment of what scientists call “the Big Bang” – though I would prefer to call it “the Big Flash”, considering that sound travels more slowly than light. We see the lightning first, before the thunder hits our ears.

Then we may further watch the light taking various shapes in the form of galaxies, stars and planets, till it crystallizes and solidifies in the various forms of plants and animals on this tiny planet Earth. It is all so fascinating. We feel impelled to clap our hands and shout, not just “Good!” at each thing, but “Very good!” at them all together.

In this way we may compare ourselves to the sons of God in the morning of the world, when they sang for joy, “Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth!” Now we have at last, after all the aeons of the scientific imagination, come down to Earth. Now we see all the things to which we have become familiar from the time of our birth – flowers and trees, birds and fishes, and so many animals.

Now we can even put names to them, as God brings them before us, as he brought them before Adam, one by one. We can even recognize ourselves in them and in him who is naming them on our behalf. We can see ourselves first in Adam, then in Eve. And with them we may say, each of us, “I am!” Thus we echo the word of God, taking to ourselves the very name of God.

In all this long procession of created beings, however, from the original form of light, through various forms of life, down to the animals and birds with their varied noises, there has been something wanting. Fascinating as they all are, one by one, and intriguing as it is to devise names for them, they all have, we find, one defect in common. We can speak to them, calling them by the names we have devised for them, but they can’t answer us. We may say to the cow, “Moo-moo!” but the only answer the

cow can give us is an echoing “Moo-moo!” And that is the end of our conversation. It is a conversation without real communication.

On the other hand, when Adam meets Eve, he is so delighted. In her he recognizes himself, yet not himself. She is like him, for they share the common privilege of echoing the divine name, “I am.” They can each introduce themselves, the one to the other, “I am Adam”, and “I am Eve.” In each of them is present, as not in any of the hitherto created beings, the word of God, the power of speech, or *logos* in Greek.

Eve is unlike Adam, for she is Woman and he is Man. But what joins them together as Man and Woman is the power of Love. And that Love, with the Word of God, is shown as present from the beginning in the divine Breath or Spirit which moves over the face of the waters of primeval chaos.

We think of the creative Word descending from God, as Son from Father, in the beginning. We think of him coming down, down, down, through the procession of creatures in the Great Chain of Being – from spiritual to material, from animate to inanimate, from pure Being above to non-being below, from all to nothing.

Such is the way Pope speaks, in his *Essay on Man*, with admiration at the immense order of the world. And before him we have St. Paul commenting on the incarnation of the Word, coming down from heaven to earth, emptying himself of his godhead to become one with sinful humanity, making himself even nothing to give us everything. This is called “a new creation”, but it still follows along the lines of the old. Beginning, as Dryden sings, “from harmony to heavenly harmony”, it proceeds in an impressive diapason, “closing full in man.”

Now, we may ask, how does all this apply to what we know as “ecology” in the world of today? How does it enable us to solve the practical problem of restoring that balance in nature which we are now in process of destroying with our blind greed? Destroying, I may add, with the assistance of all the scientific, technological, mechanical means at our disposal.

Well, let me answer in the words of the prophet Jeremiah, “For want of a vision the people perish.” After all, it is necessary to go back to the beginning, to the simple words “house” and “word”, in order to understand the true meaning of the compound word “ecology”. It is necessary to see the natural world as the “house” in which we have to live, the

house built not with human but divine hands. It is necessary to peruse the several parts of that house, passing in procession before our delighted eyes, with the amazed realization, “This is all mine!” Only, it is mine not to abuse but to use, to enjoy, even to love.

What is more, when we reflect on ourselves, as men and women to whom is granted the power of *logos*, the ability to speak in words – when we further reflect on our power of echoing the divine name, “I am” – when we realize how unlike we are to the other beings in the house of God that is the natural world – then it is only natural for us to feel overwhelmed by all this weight of glory. It is only natural for us to ask, with wonder, “Who am I to receive such an honour?” At the same time it is only natural for us to exclaim, with Peter on the holy mountain, “It is good for us to be here!”

We may also reflect, with Hopkins, “What is Earth’s eye, tongue, or heart else, where/ Else, but in dear and dogged man?” Yes, we may reflect, “How dear I am to God, who has made all these things in heaven and on earth for me! How immense, and generous, and uncalculating, is his love for me!” Earth can’t speak for itself. All Earth can do is but to be. If it makes any sound, it is through the wind in the trees, the birds singing on the branches, the animals playing round the roots. Only man can speak on Earth’s behalf, as Hopkins speaks for Earth in this poem of his. Thus man isn’t so much the ruler as the representative of Earth.

At this point in my discourse on Earth, as the house or temple built with divine hands, I can’t help thinking of two more poems by English poets. For this is the domain, not of scientists, who only speak of Earth in cold, objective terms; it is the proper domain of poets, whose speech is subjective – not from the head but from the heart.

The first is Coleridge, who speaks of prayer in relation to all creatures on the face of Earth, and of love as the heart of prayer. “He prayeth best,” he says, “who loveth best/ All things both great and small./ For the dear God who loveth us,/ He made and loveth all.” The point of this prayer is that the divine Word, in coming down from the height of heaven to the depth of Earth, in emptying himself even of his godhead, comes not only as “Word” in relation to understanding, but also as “Love” in relation to spiritual power.

Thus, as I have mentioned with reference to the second chapter of *Genesis*, not only does Adam name the various animals brought to

him by the Lord God, but he is also filled with love when God brings him Eve as his companion. At the same time, what I wish to emphasize, in view of the above-quoted poem, is that the love of Adam and Eve is not to be exclusive – as if (in the words of a once popular song) “you were the only girl in the world, and I were the only boy”. It has to be all-inclusive, as it were spilling all over the face of Earth, according to the language of true love.

After all, in the eyes of Adam, Eve isn’t only herself. She reminds him of everything else in the world – not least in the flowers, which are so feminine. In his eyes the flowers are there to be picked and made into a bouquet for him to present to Eve, in token of his love for her. And in the eyes of Eve, Adam isn’t only himself. He reminds her of everything else in the heavens above – not least in the stars shining in the sky. Indeed, the stars above are like the flowers below. So Man is traditionally compared to the sky as sky-father, while Woman is according to the same tradition regarded as earth-mother.

Nor is that all. In the flowers below and in the stars above, Adam and Eve are to see not only each other, but also the handiwork of their creator. They are to thank him for his generosity in giving them all these things. Then, considering how he is present in them all, and at work in them all, they are to love him in them and them in him. For he has made all things both great and small. So as he is in them and reveals himself in them, they are all worthy objects of his love. We may even imagine them, for all that we may be accused of “the pathetic fallacy”, as each speaking to us in its own way and each echoing the divine name according to its degree of being, “I am.”

Here we may recognize this implied in another poem of Hopkins, “Each mortal thing does one thing and the same,/ Selves, goes itself, *Myself* it speaks and spells,/ Crying, What I do is *me*, for that I came.” Not only are human beings privileged to echo the divine name, “I am”, in their use of words. All other beings, too, whether on the earth or below the earth, or in the sea or the air, can say, each in its own way, “I am.”

Then, because they all share in this divine name, whether as “images” or as “vestiges” of God (according to the old mediaeval distinction between rational and irrational creatures), they are all obliged – literally, “bound together” – to love each other. This is the love which St. Paul calls “the bond of perfection”. It is the harmony of the Spirit from which

all things began, no less than from the creative Word.

Now I come to my second poet, Henry Vaughan. One morning he imagines how “the quick world awakes and sings./ The rising winds and falling springs,/ Birds, beasts, all things/ Adore him (namely God) in their kinds./ Thus all is hurl’d/ In sacred hymns and order, the great chime/ And symphony of nature.” Here is precisely the ideal of ecology, consisting not just in a scientifically determined balance of forces in the natural world, but in “the great chime/ And symphony of nature.”

This is also what Vivaldi recognized in his musical *concerti* on the Four Seasons and what Beethoven heard in his Pastoral Symphony. It is also what great poets and musicians have all recognized in the world, or “house”, of nature, and what has most inspired them in their poetry and music. It is they who show us the true way to a restoration of the upset order of nature, reminding us as they do of the original order – the true way to the end of nature by directing us back to the beginning.

Finally, I have to add that what I have been saying is truly, not academically, metaphysical. For it goes beyond that physics which originally (in the meaning of Aristotle) meant the study of the nature (or *physis*) of things. It goes beyond the “new science” of Bacon and Galileo and Newton, which has, alas, contributed to the present upset of the ecological balance in the natural world. It goes beyond the world of nature itself, as we see it with our eyes and hear it with our ears.

For the “house” of nature in which we live, built as it is with divine hands, isn’t only what we see with our eyes or hear with our ears or measure with precise mathematical calculations. It is as much unseen as seen, as much unheard as heard. As John Keats observed in his “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter.” More mystically, if paradoxically, another poet, Francis Thompson added, “O world invisible, we view thee!/ O world intangible, we touch thee!/ O world unknowable, we know thee!/ Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!” This is what we know and appreciate and love in the outward forms of the natural things around us, while at the same time we join their inner harmony and take our human part in the symphony of nature.

Such metaphysics is, as I have implied, not at all scientific, or impartial, or objective – in the old, conventional way of thinking about experimental science. For it recognizes that we human beings are ourselves part of



the “house” of nature around us. It recognizes that not only are we subjects, in contrast to other things that may be studied objectively, but all things are subjective as well as objective. We can only enter into them by sympathizing with them, without being deterred by the accusation of “pathetic fallacy” – a term that may well be cast into the teeth of those who use it!

What is more, such metaphysics isn't at all secular, according to the hitherto accepted idea of science, but verging on the sacred. To all things it aims at restoring the original ideal of the sacred. According to that ideal all things are seen as proceeding in the beginning from the creative Word and Spirit of God. At the same time, it looks by way of poetic prayer to return to the end, as Hopkins also says, echoing the Roman poet Virgil, “Thee, God, I come from, to thee go,/ All day long I like fountain flow,/ From thy hand out, round about,/ Mote-like in thy mighty glow.”