

... John Rodman, "The Other Side of Ecology in Ancient Greece: Comments on Hughes," *Inquiry* 19 (1976), 108-112:

The classical roots of ecological sensibility lie not only in the 'theatre of reason' (Greek nature philosophy and natural history), but also in religious mythology. More important than the world seen as the 'theatre of the gods', however, was the radically ecological view of death stated in mythic form by Empedocles and the Pythagoreans. The very emergence of the 'theatre of reason' marked a significant stage of man's alienation from nature (and from himself), though the struggle between rationalistic anthropocentrism and a more ecological perspective reappeared within philosophy itself, so that the legacy of 'the Philosopher' is a dual one.

II. The Other Side of Ecology in Ancient Greece: Comments on Hughes

John Rodman

Pitzer College and the Claremont Graduate School

The classical roots of ecological sensibility lie not only in the 'theatre of reason' (Greek nature philosophy and natural history), but also in religious mythology. More important than the world seen as the 'theatre of the gods', however, was the radically ecological view of death stated in mythic form by Empedocles and the Pythagoreans. The very emergence of the 'theatre of reason' marked a significant stage of man's alienation from nature (and from himself), though the struggle between rationalistic anthropocentrism and a more ecological perspective reappeared within philosophy itself, so that the legacy of 'the Philosopher' is a dual one.

Donald Hughes ('Ecology in Ancient Greece', *Inquiry*, Vol. 18 [1975], pp. 115-25) has done us all a service by his succinct survey of views of nature in ancient Greece, especially by calling our attention to Theophrastus. My terms 'survey' and 'views' – like Hughes' two organizing images, 'the theatre of the gods' and 'the theatre of reason' – suggest, however, the limitation of his approach. Ecology is represented as something essentially

spectatorial, a 'rational endeavor' growing out of the theatre of reason, and becoming in modern times a 'special field' of natural science. Certainly there are academic biologists who will recognize this lineage, but the general ecological sensibility emerging today is not limited to the (apparent) spectatorial objectivity of the scientific approach.

It may seem Romantic to feel nostalgia for a culture in which all things were 'full of gods' (Thales), but the founding father of the modern ideology of resource conservation, John Evelyn, lamented that his contemporaries no longer revered trees as sacred, and that only prudential considerations of national security and national prosperity could be mustered to try to deter England's deforestation.¹ Also, in his pioneering treatise on urban air pollution, Evelyn appealed overtly to the popular concern for public health while subtly invoking images of pollution as a profanation of sacred places: fuliginous vapors were penetrating all of London, including the churches, the royal palace, and even the lungs of His Most Sacred Majesty, Charles II.² Evelyn was, of course, a transitional figure in whom a classical education and a religious sensibility confronted two different aspects of the modern ecological crisis. We who have proceeded farther along the path of modernization and secularization are more apt to articulate our anxieties in ostensibly scientific (?) terms, such as the ecological domino theory: first the dodo, then the passenger pigeon, then the brown pelican... and then man – the last endangered species. Yet the beginnings of the resource conservation ideology in the seventeenth century, the humane movement in the late eighteenth century, and the wilderness and wildlife preservation movement in the nineteenth century (to name only three of the historical tributaries flowing into the contemporary 'ecology movement') owed little if anything to scientific ecology in either the classical or the late nineteenth-century sense. For example, John Muir deplored the damming of Hetch Hetchy not because it endangered man's life-support system through the oversimplification of ecosystem diversity, but because it was a profanation of a sacred place where a person could encounter the holy.³

Undoubtedly, as Hughes suggests, some places were holier than others. The phenomenon of widespread deforestation interspersed with small sacred groves marked the late Hellenic landscape, as it did the Buddhist portion of the Chinese countryside.⁴ In the Greek case, does this mean that religious mythology was ecologically ineffectual in its essential nature, or that it lost its effectiveness and became merely localized (i.e. anomalous) in the course of a general desacralization of nature? 'Ancient Greece', as Hughes discusses it, was already an agricultural society (evoked by the chorus of *Antigone* in terms of man's rape of the earth and his domination of nonhuman species), already well on the way to ecological deterioration (as Plato's remarks on the deforestation of Attica suggest). The emergence of the theatre of reason – that is, of philosophy, including nature philosophy – may have been more a symptom of that decline than a source of rejuvenation.

In appraising the theatre of reason it is well to keep in mind Cornford's dictum that the Greeks, at a particular point in time, 'discovered Nature'⁵

5532
RODMAN

pal
1976

13 notes

tsoc
39
1318

C12
Ecology

my Habilitationsschrift on Marx's dialectical method, MS.) In the first ed. of *Capital*, Marx thought it sufficient to make fairly wide use of the terminology of Hegel's dialectic, because he thought this would make clear the particular relation between concrete and abstract labour in commodity production. See in his first ed., op. cit., esp. pp. 19 f. and 44. Engels persuaded Marx that only Hegelians would understand this terminology. See his letter to Marx of 16 June 1867, and Marx's answer of 22 June 1867, in Marx, Engels, *Werke*, op. cit., Bd. 31, S. 303-6.

29 See Marx, *Das Kapital*, in Marx, Engels, *Werke*, op. cit., S. 91.

30 Marx, *Theorien über den Mehrwert*, Bd. 2, in Marx, Engels, *Werke*, op. cit., Bd. 26.2, S. 161. My trans.

31 Carver, op. cit., p. 55.

32 Cf. Marx, *Das Kapital*, in Marx, Engels, *Werke*, op. cit., S. 88.

33 Ibid., S. 87.

34 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (Rohentwurf), 1857-8, Bd. I, Verlag für fremdsprachige Literatur, Moskau 1939, S. 593. Reprint Europäische Verlagsanstalt, Frankfurt/M s.a.

35 Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, op. cit., S. 28.

II. The Other Side of Ecology in Ancient Greece: Comments on Hughes

John Rodman
Pitzer College and the Claremont Graduate School

The classical roots of ecological sensibility lie not only in the 'theatre of reason' (Greek nature philosophy and natural history), but also in religious mythology. More important than the world seen as the 'theatre of the gods', however, was the radically ecological view of death stated in mythic form by Empedocles and the Pythagoreans. The very emergence of the 'theatre of reason' marked a significant stage of man's alienation from nature (and from himself), though the struggle between rationalistic anthropocentrism and a more ecological perspective reappeared within philosophy itself, so that the legacy of 'the Philosopher' is a dual one.

Donald Hughes ('Ecology in Ancient Greece', *Inquiry*, Vol. 18 [1975], pp. 115-25) has done us all a service by his succinct survey of views of nature in ancient Greece, especially by calling our attention to Theophrastus. My terms 'survey' and 'views' - like Hughes' two organizing images, 'the theatre of the gods' and 'the theatre of reason' - suggest, however, the limitation of his approach. Ecology is represented as something essentially

spectatorial, a 'rational endeavor' growing out of the theatre of reason, and becoming in modern times a 'special field' of natural science. Certainly there are academic biologists who will recognize this lineage, but the general ecological sensibility emerging today is not limited to the (apparent) spectatorial objectivity of the scientific approach.

It may seem Romantic to feel nostalgia for a culture in which all things were 'full of gods' (Thales), but the founding father of the modern ideology of resource conservation, John Evelyn, lamented that his contemporaries no longer revered trees as sacred, and that only prudential considerations of national security and national prosperity could be mustered to try to deter England's deforestation.¹ Also, in his pioneering treatise on urban air pollution, Evelyn appealed overtly to the popular concern for public health while subtly invoking images of pollution as a profanation of sacred places: fuliginous vapors were penetrating all of London, including the churches, the royal palace, and even the lungs of His Most Sacred Majesty, Charles II.² Evelyn was, of course, a transitional figure in whom a classical education and a religious sensibility confronted two different aspects of the modern ecological crisis. We who have proceeded farther along the path of modernization and secularization are more apt to articulate our anxieties in ostensibly scientific (?) terms, such as the ecological domino theory: first the dodo, then the passenger pigeon, then the brown pelican... and then man - the last endangered species. Yet the beginnings of the resource conservation ideology in the seventeenth century, the humane movement in the late eighteenth century, and the wilderness and wildlife preservation movement in the nineteenth century (to name only three of the historical tributaries flowing into the contemporary 'ecology movement') owed little if anything to scientific ecology in either the classical or the late nineteenth-century sense. For example, John Muir deplored the damming of Hetch Hetchy not because it endangered man's life-support system through the oversimplification of ecosystem diversity, but because it was a profanation of a sacred place where a person could encounter the holy.³

Undoubtedly, as Hughes suggests, some places were holier than others. The phenomenon of widespread deforestation interspersed with small sacred groves marked the late Hellenic landscape, as it did the Buddhist portion of the Chinese countryside.⁴ In the Greek case, does this mean that religious mythology was ecologically ineffectual in its essential nature, or that it lost its effectiveness and became merely localized (i.e. anomalous) in the course of a general desacralization of nature? 'Ancient Greece', as Hughes discusses it, was already an agricultural society (evoked by the chorus of *Antigone* in terms of man's rape of the earth and his domination of nonhuman species), already well on the way to ecological deterioration (as Plato's remarks on the deforestation of Attica suggest). The emergence of the theatre of reason - that is, of philosophy, including nature philosophy - may have been more a symptom of that decline than a source of rejuvenation.

In appraising the theatre of reason it is well to keep in mind Cornford's dictum that the Greeks, at a particular point in time, 'discovered Nature's

– or, to state it more radically, the Greeks *invented* Nature. To philosophize about nature meant to adopt a particular posture – that of an observer who stood over against nature as something out there and looked at it, seeking to discover regularities in its movements. 'The rift has begun to open between the self and the external world.'⁶ To philosophize in its pure form meant not only repudiating the explanation of the world in terms of the actions of the gods but also repudiating the participatory consciousness typical of myth and ritual. Thus Plato's philosophical indictment of the poets and tragedians reached its highest pitch in his denunciation of *mimesis*, the activity of imitation or representation whereby a person played the role of another. *Mimesis* not only violated the principle of specialization ('justice') but allowed outlet to the 'irrational' parts of the *psyche*, which were 'bestial' in character; it could even take the form of a person's letting some elemental natural force such as the roaring sea or the rolling thunder speak through him.⁷ With philosophy and science (the theatre of reason) was born that alienation of humanity from a reified Nature that is still preserved in the language of so much of the current ecology movement, most notably in the phrase 'natural environment'.

An environment implies a point of reference, a subject for which all else is milieu. Hence, ecology is not unreasonably 'teleological', though the more sophisticated it is, the more movable is the point of reference. By Hughes' own account, Theophrastus ('the Father of Ecology') was teleological in his viewpoint, but in a non-anthropocentric way (a plant had its own *telos*). Aristotle's error was (allegedly) to be teleological in a purely anthropocentric way, as if all things existed for the service of man. Yet this error seems to be shared by the mainstream of modern science and much contemporary ecology. From the beginnings of the modern scientific worldview as articulated by Descartes and Bacon to such recent and diverse figures as Teller, Salk, Ehrlich, and Commomer, explanation in terms of efficient cause may have replaced explanation in terms of final cause as a way of linking external phenomena, but the underlying purpose of the scientific enterprise has generally been to advance the interests of the human species by learning the laws of nature so as to better manage them to our advantage.⁸ Only now the focus has shifted somewhat from 'progress' (e.g. the indefinite warding off of individual mortality through medical science) to mere 'survival' of the human species.

As for Aristotle, it seems a shame to give up 'the Philosopher' wholly to the enemy. The anthropocentric teleology cited by Hughes is found chiefly in the *Politics* (1256b) and, to a lesser extent, in the *Ethics*, in both of which works the frame of reference is explicitly species-specific – 'the good for man'. Elements of another perspective are visible in the *Metaphysics*, the *Physics*, and the writings in natural history (*On the Soul*, *Parts of Animals*, *The History of Animals*, *The Generation of Animals*, etc.). All forms of life are ensouled and strive to participate in eternity as best they can – plants by reproduction (which has apparently become the *summum bonum* for man as well, in the age of Malthus, Darwin, and contemporary ecology), many

nonhuman animals (and man) by striving for a well-being beyond mere survival. One gets a vision of a great diversity of species, varieties, and individuals, each with its own inner principle of motion, its own potentiality to actualize – a hierarchical but also immensely variegated and complex universe whose ultimate prime mover is not man.

As for the Scholastics, the ultimate point may be not so much that they read *Genesis* through the anthropocentric eyes of Aristotle as that the medieval University of Paris chose to establish Aristotle's *Politics* and *Ethics* as standard texts while prohibiting the teaching of his *Metaphysics* and nature philosophy.⁹

The more subtle objection to Aristotle applies to him insofar as he followed the moral philosophy of Socrates and Plato and assumed as axiomatic the proposition that every species ought to act so as to maximize its differential rather than its genus. The premise of man's world-alienation (and of his self-alienation – the tyranny of rationality over the rest of the psychic ecosystem) is engraved in this basic axiom of classical moral philosophy, but little attention is paid to it, partly because it is so basic, partly because it is still so widely shared, not only by modern philosophers¹⁰ but also by the colloquial projections of ordinary language, which still oppose the truly human to bestial cruelty and to merely vegetative existence.

Finally, in any account of ancient Greek views of nature, the tradition of Pythagoras and Empedocles surely deserves mention, since it exhibited in both theory and practice a deep sense of the kinship of human with non-human (especially animal) life. The notion of reincarnation embodied in mythic form the basic ecological principle that the death of an individual is a kind of translation or recycling of cosmic energy from one form to another. Thus Empedocles:

There is no birth in mortal things, and no end in ruinous death. There is only mingling and interchange of parts, and it is this that we call 'nature' [*physis*].¹¹

Pythagoras, Empedocles, and writers in the Pythagorean tradition – such as the Plato of the *Myth of Er*, Plutarch, and Porphyry¹² – provided a well-known alternative, a kind of counter-culture, to the two established Greek outlooks aptly called by Hughes 'the theatre of the gods' and 'the theatre of reason'. It was not the spectacle of the gods embodied in storm or harvest, or the scenery of the world as classified by natural historians, that was expressed in Empedocles' statement that 'In the past I have been a boy and a girl, a bush, a bird, and a dumb water-dwelling fish'.¹³

What is the relation of such participatory mysticism to ecology? Reflection on the contemporary ecology movement suggests that, while there is an ecology of scientific observation, with man standing in the center of the universe gazing at 'his' reified 'natural environment', trying theoretically to comprehend himself in relation to it, there is also an ecology of participation exhibited by every eco-activist who has fought to prevent the damming of a wild river, to preserve an endangered species, or to save a grove of trees from

being cut down to make a parking lot. The ecology of scientific observation provides convenient rationalizations for such resistance actions in terms of salvaging mankind's life-support system, but the motivating force of resistance action is more likely rooted in the tradition of Pythagoras and Empedocles, in our deep suspicion that at some time, in some place, in some way, we have been, are now, or will be, a river, another animal, or a tree.

NOTES

- 1 *Sylvia, Or a Discourse of Forest-Trees and the Propagation of Timber In His Majesties Dominions*, London 1664, 'To the Reader'.
- 2 *Famijunglum, or the Inconvenience of the Aer and Smoke of London Dissipated*, London 1661.
- 3 *The Yosemite, Century*, New York 1912, pp. 225 ff.
- 4 See also Yi-Fu Tuan, 'Our Treatment of the Environment in Ideal and Actuality', *American Scientist*, Vol. 58 (May-June 1970), pp. 244 ff.
- 5 F. M. Cornford, *Before and After Socrates*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1932, Ch. I.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Republic* 392-8, 603-8. Needless to say, this is the same Plato who wrote dialogues and (selectively) utilized myths himself. Perhaps the repudiation of the mythological consciousness on the part of a philosopher is most intense when he is struggling to differentiate himself from it; and perhaps philosophy cannot fully dispense with mythology.
- 8 For an analysis of the ideological roots of the modern scientific worldview in Bacon and Descartes, see William Leiss, *The Domination of Nature*, Braziller, New York 1972, and John Rodman, 'The Dolphin Papers', *North American Review*, Spring 1974.
- 9 See Frederick Copston, *Medieval Philosophy*, Harper & Bros., New York 1961, p. 72.
- 10 E.g. J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Ch. II.
- 11 Empedocles, Fragment 8, in Hermann Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, Berlin 1922, 4th ed., Vol. I; trans. by Philip Wheelwright, *The Presocratics*, Odessey Press, New York 1966, p. 127.
- 12 Plato, *Republic* 614-20; Plutarch, 'The Cleverness of Animals...'; 'Odysseus and Gryllus'; 'That Brute Beasts Reason'; 'On the Eating of Flesh'; Porphyry, *On Abstinence from Animal Flesh*.
- 13 Empedocles, Fragment 117, in Diels, op. cit.; trans. by Wheelwright, op. cit., p. 141.

12. JULY 18