



# Loving Nature: Past, Present, and Future

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## Abstract

At this hinge point in planetary history, the future of Earth is in our hands. How ought Christians to love nature? In the biblical past, Earth was a miracle, a divine gift. Today, the land of promise is a vision of a planet with promise. Ancient certainty needs to become an urgent future hope.

## Keywords

Earth, Nature, Promised land, Garden Earth, Creation, Wilderness, Communities, Environmental ethics

## Introduction

Earth has an ancient past, a critical present, and an unknown future. For the first time in the forty-five million centuries that life has existed on Earth, one species has the capacity to jeopardize the planet's future.<sup>1</sup>

Human beings once believed Earth to be the center of the universe, and human beings to be the pinnacle of creation, but since Galileo, people have come to perceive Earth as a minor planet, lost in the stars. Since Darwin, humans have realized that our species arrived late and last on this lonely planet. Today, however, we are once again putting humans back at the center. Some scientists say we have entered the Anthropocene Epoch, a time when human activity affects the entire planet. In this expanding human empire, we will manage the planet, fulfilling at last that “dominion” on Earth for which we were destined (Gen 1:28). At this hinge point in planetary history, the future of Earth is in our hands. The question we face is whether in this future we want a denatured life on a denatured planet. We can address that question by asking how humans can and ought to love nature.

## Defining the Capacity to Love

The word “love” refers to a varied collection of emotions. Love may be self-regarding, mate- and kin-regarding, other-regarding, genetically based, instinctive or acquired, conscious or

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subconscious, deliberated or spontaneous, proximate or ultimate, intrinsic or instrumental. Love may be in-group or out-group, local or global, transgenerational, transformed by experience of the natural world or by cultural and historical ideals, in principle and in practice. These rationales represent complexities of caring amidst an embarrassment of riches. For most people, the concept of love brings immediately to mind human interpersonal relationships, but perhaps discussion about whether we can and ought to love non-human others will expand our thinking.

Ethicists often have doubts about whether ethics can be universal or even trans-cultural, if ethical laws might be no more than socially constructed mores, embedded in particular cultures. Ethics is never absolute—or so we are told. Postmoderns know that nobody has a “grand narrative.” Our ethics are piecemeal, just as our loves are a smorgasbord. But some ethicists today suggest we ought to widen the scope of moral concern to include those who have been relegated as outsiders. Just how inclusive do we need to be? Is there place for a grand narrative of love that extends from self to family, to community, tribe, nation, humanity, all of life, land, planet, God?

### Love Gone Wild: Misplaced?

A first concern to address is the belief that there is no love in the wild, that in this discussion we might be foisting an inappropriate emotion onto a “loveless” nature. The central Christian virtue of love, *agapē*, seems nowhere in a nature “red in tooth and claw.”<sup>2</sup> Christian love is expressed through kindness, mercy, generosity, compassion, justice, patience, and forgiveness. To many people, those virtues do not seem present in nature or relevant to deciding how to behave when encountering wild nature. The Bible encourages reconciliation, community, harmony, reciprocity, and *shalom*. Most of the sensibilities we struggle to nourish as civilized beings are not evident in the wild. From this perspective, were humans to love raw nature, love would have “gone wild,” would be misplaced.

The Bible contains a few insights on how humans should relate to animals. A righteous person must have regard for the life of animals (Prov 12:10). Oxen must be allowed rest on the Sabbath (Exod 20:10; Deut 5:14), and the ox in the pit requires rescue, even on the Sabbath (Luke 14:5). The ox that treads out the grain is not to be muzzled (Deut 25:4), nor are ox and donkey to be yoked together (Deut 22:10). Such biblical concerns urge compassionate treatment of domestic animals, but they tell us nothing about wild nature. Some people find it hard to apply to wild nature the human category of “rights.” Ascribing rights to insects or forests seems implausible. The better explanation might be that there are intrinsic values found present in creation, to which we are drawn in respect and care.

Christopher Southgate has argued that Christians ought to become redeemers or healers of the evils in nature, moderating the suffering there. He hopes for a “pelican heaven,” that is, that God will resurrect the myriads of animal lives sacrificed in the evolutionary process.<sup>3</sup> Is there heaven for rattlesnakes and beetles? Compassionate concern for redeeming the lives across evolutionary

2 Alfred Lord Tennyson, “In Memoriam A. H. H.,” Canto 56 (London: Edward Moxon, 1850), n.p.

3 Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 85.

history, most of them cut short in early death, soon becomes incredible. If these lives are worthwhile, it is through their contribution to the ongoing process of life on Earth, not in some heaven to come. Pain in nature remains in the context of natural selection; pain is instrumental to survival and to the integrity of species.

If there seems no space for *agapē*, perhaps there is place for *philia* (“brotherly love” or friendship). Aristotle suggests that animals can express *philia* (*Eth. nic.* 1155a). Francis of Assisi calls the creatures great and small his brothers and sisters.<sup>4</sup> Still, it does not seem that one can have friendship with wild bears or wolves, much less frogs or snakes, while honoring their wildness.

Perhaps there is place for *erōs*, a love that desires to possess others in self-fulfillment. If “possess” means that the self is incomplete and reaches out to another to achieve completeness, then humans might love wild nature. But such embrace would more likely require “letting be,” that is, leaving the creatures wild. Wild animals do not need our beneficence; they need us to leave space and let them alone.

Many Christians’ idea of love of nature is of the “This-Is-My-Father’s-World” vintage, a sentimental praise of what is lovely in nature: mountain grandeur, spring woodlands, wildflowers. But what of the ugly: the predator ripping open prey, or deer starving in winter? What of violent earthquakes and storms? Jesus is said to have rebuked the sea and quieted the wind (Mark 4:39). In what sense might “love gone wild” seem plausible?



Sir Edwin Henry Landseer (1802–1873). Study of a Lion. Oil on canvas. Tate Gallery, London.  
Photo Credit: Tate/Art Resource, NY

4 Regis J. Armstrong, ed., *Francis of Assisi: The Founder*, Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 3 vols. (New York: New City, 2000), 2:798.

## Promised Land, Garden Earth

Loving the land is a central theme of the Hebrew Bible. Israel is given “promised land,” described as “a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exod 3:8; Deut 27:3), and as “a land which the LORD your God cares for; the eyes of the LORD your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year” (Deut 11:11–12). Walter Brueggemann describes land as “a prism for biblical faith.” He writes: “Land is a central, if not the central theme of biblical faith.”<sup>5</sup> “The land” is both geographical and symbolic. Yearning for a sense of place is a perennial human longing, of belonging to a community placed on a landscape. Israel’s sense of living on a land given by God can yet speak to the landlessness and lostness of modern persons. All peoples need a sense of social communities in place on a sustaining landscape on which they belong and to which they belong in care and in love.

Land is *adamah*, the arable land on which plants can grow and animals can graze, and *’eretz*, the terrestrial earth, brought forth on the third day of creation (Gen 1:9–10). Israel’s promised land is a corner of a larger garden (Earth) on which humankind (symbolized in Adam and Eve) has been placed. In the second creation story, “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). By this account humans are “Earth-gardeners.” Earth is the scene of creative wildness, but parts of this wildness are tamed, made into a garden, and cultivated. The original context of “dominion” is closely related to *dominus*, Latin for master of the house.

A favored model is that of stewardship, rather than dominion. Perhaps “Earth-gardener” needs also to be interpreted as “Earth-trustee.” A steward manages for the benefit of an owner; a trustee cares for what is under his or her care. There is concern about proper care from the first chapter of Genesis. God says to the human couple: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion. . . .” (Gen 1:27–28). For many generations, humans interpreted this to mean that the role of humans on Earth is to conquer it. Famously, historian Lynn White laid much of the blame for the ecological crisis on this belief.<sup>6</sup> Theologians have replied that appropriate dominion requires stewardship and care.<sup>7</sup>

Though according to the Gospel of John Jesus did say that his kingdom is not of this world (John 18:16), he taught in the context of the imperial Roman world, and his reference to “this world” is to the fallen human culture he came to redeem, the false trust in politics and economics, in armies and kings. In the surrounding landscape Jesus found ample evidence of the presence of God, and he frequently used natural phenomena as metaphors for God’s kingdom. The birds of the air neither

5 Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 3. See also Norman C. Habel, *The Land Is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); and Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

6 Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155 (1967): 1203–7.

7 John B. Cobb, Jr., *Is It Too Late?: A Theology of Ecology* (Beverly Hills, CA: Bruce, 1972); James A. Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991).

sow nor reap yet are fed by the heavenly Father (Matt 6:26; Luke 12:24), who notices the sparrows that fall (Matt 10:29). Not even Solomon is arrayed with the glory of the lilies (Matt 6:29; Luke 12:27), though the grass of the field, today alive, perishes tomorrow (Matt 5:18; cf. 1 Pet 1:24; Isa 40:8). There is in every seed and root a promise. Sowers sow, the seed grows secretly, and sowers return to reap their harvests (Mark 4:26–29). God sends rain on the just and unjust (Matt 5:45). Jesus teaches that the power organically manifest in the flowers of the field is continuous with the power spiritually manifest in the kingdom he announces. He connects the good land, the rural landscape, with deeper natural powers, present also in wild nature.

### **“Let There Be . . .” Swarms!**

To get the most inclusive perspective, we must go back to the biblical beginning, not asking simply if this creation was a “Garden Earth” for human dominion, but what to make of its wildness. Right at the creation, God is interested in sun, moon, stars, birds, fish, animals—before humans were created. The days of creation are a series of divine imperatives, not so much fiat as they are commissions: “Let the earth put forth vegetation. . . . Let the earth bring forth living things according to their kinds” (Gen 1:11, 24; see Mark 4:28). God ordered earth to “bring forth swarms of living creatures” (Gen 1:20). The swarm means biodiversity! Adam’s first job was a taxonomy project, naming the animals (2:20).

According to the first Genesis account of creation, the apex of the creation is man and woman, made in the image of God (1:26). Yet the world is habitat not only for humans but also for myriads of creatures—from great sea monsters to birds, beasts, and “creeping things”—which, repeatedly, God finds “good.” God bids all these creatures to “be fruitful and multiply” and to fill the waters, the earth, and the skies (Gen 1:20–22). God clearly enjoys the biodiversity.

In the days of Noah, the Hebrew covenant is renewed after a flood, with divine provision for the wild creatures: “I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you” (Gen 9:8). God instructs Noah to “keep them alive with you” (Gen 6:19). The biblical account lists quite a menagerie: “fiery serpents and scorpions” (Deut 8:15; Num 21:6), jackals, hyenas, owls, kites, ravens, porcupines, ostriches, wild goats, and “wild beasts” (Isa 34). Nor does God forget the flora: “The trees of the LORD are watered abundantly; the cedars of Lebanon which he planted” (Ps 104:16). That certainly sounds like a God who loves wild nature.

God also blesses lands where humans are absent: “You crown the year with your bounty. . . . The pastures of the wilderness overflow; the hills gird themselves with joy; the meadows clothe themselves with flocks; the valleys deck themselves with grain; they shout and sing together for joy” (Ps 65:11–13). These fierce landscapes, sometimes supposed to be ungodly places, are godly, after all. God does not want all these places subdued and cultivated; rather, God delights in places with no people! Although wilderness is a locale of human wandering, taken for what it is in itself, prior to using it to symbolize human hopes and disappointments, wildness in the Bible is never a bad thing. “The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the badgers. . . . The young



Monte Dolack, poster illustration. Courtesy of Wilderness Watch, Missoula, MT. [www.wildernesswatch.org](http://www.wildernesswatch.org).

lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God. . . . O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures (Ps 104:18–24). This psalm celebrates an entire ecology, not simply a promised land.

God loves creatures according to their kind, and so should we. That is, we should not love creatures simply for the ways they are like us. That God is “personal,” as revealed in inter-human relations, does not mean that the natural relationship of God to lions and eagles is personal. Nor should humans treat wild animals as persons. They are to be treated with appropriate respect for their wildness. The creatures are the proper object for divine love, and accordingly, humans should care about them as God’s beloved creatures. Each form of life has its proper integrity, defended by its successful caring (its adapted fit), and we humans must come to respect, to love that creaturely integrity.

## Wilderness

Words translated as “wilderness” occur nearly three hundred times in the Bible. A formative Hebrew memory occurred during the years of wandering in the wilderness, a mixed experience of wild landscape, searching for a promised land, and encounter with God. In the Pentateuch, wandering is in the *midbar*, an uninhabited land where humans are nomads. This common Hebrew word often refers to a wild field, where domestic animals may be grazed, and where wild animals live, in contrast to cultivated land, hence sometimes “the pastures of the wilderness” (Joel 1:19–20). Another word for wilderness is *arabah*, meaning “steppe” (Gen 36:24), also translated as “desert.” “The land that was desolate [*midbar*] shall be glad, and the wilderness [*arabah*] shall rejoice” (Isa 35:1). Land that lies in waste is *chorbah*; land without water is *yeshimon*.



Terebinth tree in the wilderness of Sinai.  
Photo Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

Wilderness is often a locale for intense experiences: stark need for food and water (manna and quails in Exod 16), isolation (Elijah and the still small voice in 1 Kgs 19), danger and divine deliverance (Hagar and Ishmael in Gen 21:8–19), encounter with God (Moses, the burning bush and the revelation of the divine name [Exod 3], and the giving of the law at Mount Sinai [Exod 19–20]). There is a psychology as well as a geography of wilderness. There is theology gained in the wilderness.<sup>8</sup>

The kind of wilderness the Hebrews knew often seems to have a negative character, especially contrasted with a promised land flowing with milk and honey (Exod 3:8). But God was there in the wilderness, and the fierce character of the wild landscape seems to have intensified the divine encounter. In the wilderness, the people were contentious, murmuring, unruly, and forgetful of the promises and power of God. They wandered there until they learned the lessons of the hardships of the wilderness (Deut 8:3).

The New Testament word most often translated “wilderness” is *erēmos* (or *erēmia*), which refers to an isolated place. (This is also the Greek word most often used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew words examined above.) The wilderness figures at critical junctures in the life of Jesus.<sup>9</sup> At the opening of Mark’s Gospel, John the Baptist appears as a “voice of one crying in the wilderness” (Mark 1:3; cf. Isa 40:3). Baptized by John, Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness for forty days (Mark 1:12). The Devil is there and tempts Jesus to be the wrong kind of

8 Terry L. Burden, *The Kerygma of the Wilderness Traditions in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994).

9 Ulrich Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, SBT 39 (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1963).



Messiah (Matt 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13). But the Spirit, too, is there and prevails. Jesus is at once “with the wild beasts” and ministered to by angels (Mark 1:12). Jesus undergoes a struggle for self-discovery in an environment of wild forces, threat and grace, which, seen in its depths, is encounter with the divine presence.

Jesus is soon found returning to the wilderness (again in Mark’s opening chapter): “In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed” (Mark 1:35; cf. 6:31–32). Jesus searches for solitude, and the natural environment provides the needed ambiance. Peter, James, and John see Jesus transfigured upon a high mountain (Mark 9:2). Wilderness is a place for persons both to encounter God and to encounter a God that is larger than human concerns.

That the fair land of Israel, with its cities and fields, should again become desert and wilderness is a frequent prophetic threat (e.g., Jer 51:43). Relapse to the wild is used as a symbol for judgment. Jackals roam the land, which has been destroyed in punishment for sin (Isa 34:1–17). It is not wilderness, as such, that is negative, but a return to wildness is a tragedy only in foil to failed culture. There are frequent passages where natural events such as rain, drought, or storm are interpreted as divine judgment and flourishing harvests as a sign of divine blessing.<sup>10</sup> Certain biblical passages also suggest that the natural world is blighted by human sin (Gen 3:18; 6:7, 11–13). These passages are not to be taken to suggest that existing wildlands are “fallen,” nor that wild nature needs to be redeemed; rather, human sin impacts all of creation. A peaceable natural kingdom, where the lion lies down with the lamb, is the symbol of fulfillment in the restored land (Isa 11:6). This too is a cultural metaphor and cannot be interpreted as censure of natural history.

## The Genesis of Caring

Contemporary biology refers to the evolution of “selfishness,”<sup>11</sup> a half-truth that is easily misinterpreted. A more comprehensive, complementary way to view natural history is as generations of “caring,” as nature elaborates, diversifies, conserves, and enriches life. An immediate objection is that the words “selfishness” and “caring,” when applied to nature, are too anthropopathic. However, we can argue that there is “caring” wherever values are at stake.

When sentience arises, neural organisms evidently “care.” Animals hunt and howl, find shelter, seek out their habitats and mates, feed their young, flee from threats, grow hungry and thirsty, become hot, tired, excited, and sleepy. If “caring” is too loaded a term to describe their motivations and reactions, then call them “interests” or “preferences.” Staying alive requires “self-defense.” Fear, too, is a form of caring. Living things have needs. The biological processes must be “pro-life.” Looking at bark on trees, we might say its only function is to protect life. But throughout natural history there has emerged a somatic self, with the know-how to protect it. If this isn’t yet “caring,” it is on the threshold of it.

10 Jeanne Kay, “Concepts of Nature in the Hebrew Bible,” *Environmental Ethics* 10 (1988): 309–27.

11 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).



Caring becomes complicated, because selves are implicated with other selves. Living things are webbed together in ecosystems, and hence their cares are interwoven. Relationships and networks are formed. Caring is only self-contained up to a point; it becomes involved in processes within which one is networked. A predator cares about catching its prey, the prey cares to escape, and both are caring for their young. Caring occurs in a matrix of different concerns.

In this larger context, living things reproduce and pass along their genetic traits. In fact, by Darwinian accounts, reproduction is their priority care, or else they become extinct. God commands: "Let the earth bring forth living things according to their kinds" (Gen 1:24) and "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:20–22). Through evolutionary selection, behaviors are selected that attend proportionately to the family, what biologists call "kin selection." The individual competently defends its values and its "self" wherever and to the extent that this is manifested in the whole gene pool. Since any particular individual can flourish somatically without reproducing, and indeed submits to self-risk by reproducing, by another logic we can interpret reproduction as a species regenerating its own kind by reenacting itself again and again. In this sense a female grizzly bear does not bear cubs to be healthy for her own sake, any more than a woman gives birth to children for her own health. Rather, the bear cubs are *Ursus arctos* recreating itself by continuous performance. A female animal does not have mammary glands and ovaries, nor does a male animal have testicles, to preserve its own life; these organs are defending the line of life bigger than the somatic individual. The individuals are genetically impelled to sacrifice themselves in the interests of reproducing their kind. What they "care about" is something dynamic to the specific form of life.

Evolutionary selection represents the kind of coping individuals need if they are to succeed in re-producing their kind, distributing more widely the information coded in the genes. Survival transmits genetic value to others. Genes are distributed by organisms who do not simply live for their "selves," but to spread the best of what they know to other selves. Genes are selected for what they can contribute to the next generation. Contrary to "selfish genes," we can understand that genes are "shared." If doubters wonder whether this is yet to be called "caring," no doubt it is moving in that direction.

Animals can care about others of their kind, especially their mates and offspring. Some animals are social: elk form herds, bees and ants form colonies, and birds of a feather flock together. This can be for their self-interest; each is safer in the company of others. But there may be more to it.

When humans arrive on the scene, there emerges the most complex caring. Humans have ever more complicated concerns, such as caring about family, tribe, nation, careers, and ideational causes, such as biological science, French literature, or religious faith. At basic levels, this is still self-interest, though elaborately networked. But humans also have the capacity for a wider vision that encompasses the inter-workings of the entire world. This requires a complex brain that can evaluate others not only in terms of immediate benefit and harm, but also with concern for long-term health and integrity. This includes understanding human community, in which mutual reciprocity is possible and treasured, and knowing an ecological community, in which humans can realize and treasure the life-supporting network. Humans alone on the planet can take a

transcendent overview of the whole and can care for all of life on Earth—past, present, and future. How do we develop our capacity to love from self-interest to love of all creation?

## **Person to Planet: Expanding Human Loves**

### *Self-love: Biophilia and Security*

All creatures prefer the kinds of environments in which they evolved. Biologists call this “biophilia.” Human biophilia evolved as an innate, genetically based disposition to love animals, plants, landscapes with trees, open spaces, and running water.<sup>12</sup> In modern times, however, any residual biophilia is weakened by our much more powerful desires for self-satisfaction and security. People today tend to prefer culturally modified environments. The truly natural thing for humans to do (based on our genetic disposition) is to build connections with the natural world, yet our desire for security has led us to build a culture differentiating—indeed, alienating—ourselves from nature. Agriculture, business, industry, and development consume most of our attention, and the search for pleasant experiences in natural surroundings is occasional and avocational. True, people love a house with a view and a garden, but they also like a big house and lots of money (milk and honey) in the bank. Consumer capitalism has transmuted a once-healthy pattern of desires into avarice. With escalating opportunities for consumption, driven by markets in search of profits, we need to have more self-discipline than comes naturally. Our self-interested tendencies overshoot; we love ourselves (egoism) and our families (kin altruism) and find it difficult to know when and how to say “enough.”

We increase our security, and in so doing, we fence ourselves off from threatening nature. The Israelites longed to get out of the wilderness into a promised land that dripped with milk and honey, and for us, this desire has translated into more and more milk and honey. For all of human history, humans have been pushing back limits. Especially in the West, we have lived with a deep-seated belief that life will get progressively “better,” that one should hope for abundance and should work toward obtaining it. Economists call such behavior rational; humans will maximize their capacity to exploit their resources. Moral persons will also maximize human satisfactions, at least those that support “the good life,” which includes not only food, clothing, and shelter, but also abundance, more and more goods and services. Perhaps humans will learn to desire sustainable growth for themselves and their children, extended to tribe and nation. But humans are poorly equipped to deal with the sorts of global-level problems we now face. Distant peoples and far-off descendants do not have much “biological hold” on us. Across the era of human evolution, when we lived as isolated groups, our behaviors had little effect on those remote from us in time or in space, and natural selection shaped only our conduct toward those closer to us. Now that we live in a “global village,” global threats require us to act in massive concert of which we evidently are incapable. Humans may bear within themselves the seeds of their own destruction. Human genes, human loves once enabled our adaptive fit but may in the next millennium prove mal-adaptive and destroy us.

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12 Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

### Community Love: My Tribe, My Country

Humans have long loved their communities and their countrysides, a love that expands from self and family to people, tradition, and place. This type of community love is quite congenial to a bioregional ecology. As Aldo Leopold observes, “[t]hat land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics.”<sup>13</sup>

Abraham and Lot, and later Jacob and Esau, were already caring for their lands by dispersing their flocks and herds because the land could not support all of them dwelling together (Gen 13:2–13; 36:6–8). They surveyed the pastures from the Negeb as far as Bethel and on to where Abraham’s tent was pitched between Bethel and Ai (Gen 13:3), on which these nomads realized they were trying to keep too many sheep and goats. The Hebrews worried about livestock trampling and polluting the water in riparian zones, where the land interfaces with streams and rivers (Gen 29:1–8; Ezek 34:17–19). They knew to let land lie fallow every seventh year (Exod 23:10–11; Lev 25:2–7). Residents on landscapes live immersed in their native range ecology. They grow to love and respect their landscapes, their promised lands.

Communitarian love is quite congenial not only to ecology but also to evolutionary biology. Well-adapted genetic drives are flexible, especially in vertebrates with well-developed brains. Loyalty to tribe conveys value on all members of the tribe, on average, so that it is in any individual’s probable advantage to cooperate, even though he or she has some risk of personal loss. Natural selection favored those genes that caused the early humans to be altruistic toward members of their own tribe. Such tribal love has produced modern patriots who love their country, both tribe and lands. That the Israelites loved their promised land, and that we love our lands, makes excellent sense from a Darwinian point of view. Elliott Sober and David S. Wilson insist that there is no “universal benevolence” among human beings: “Group selection favors within-group niceness and between-group nastiness.”<sup>14</sup> That human loves expand to tribe and country comports with both biology and Hebrew monotheism. But can human love expand further to include those outside our group?

### Cosmopolitan and Global Love

Through religious faith, ideas become widely shared. The transmission process is neural, not genetic. One has to be indoctrinated into a religion. Biologically speaking, it is an evolutionary anomaly that the new adherents to a group cease to have any genetic relationship. Christianity is a good example. It took root in the Middle East by baptism of believers, not through genetic transmission, and there are now more Christians in Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Africa than in its region(s) of origin. The Calvinist “tribe” of Christianity in Geneva, Switzerland prospered, but today there are more Presbyterians in Korea than in any other nation in the world, and Korean

13 Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), viii–ix.

14 Elliott Sober and David Sloan Wilson, *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 9.

Presbyterians have sent out 40,000 missionaries to over one hundred countries. Adherents to the major religions are moved to act not just by their genetic programming. Ideas shared become ideals shared. Disciples teach kindness by word and example. They generate concern for other humans near and far and encourage relating to them with justice, love, and respect. By evolutionary standards, such a commitment to universalism transcends human genetics. Any account of in-group altruism to achieve out-group competitive success is powerless to explain the universalism in the major world faiths. But the major world faiths have escaped tribalism, not only in ideal but also in the real, proportionately to their success. Shared faith no longer provides any differential survival advantage, because it is equally advantageous to all.

The Torah taught Jews the benefits of showing love and compassion to others (see, e.g., Lev 19:9–18, 33–34; Deut 10:17–19; 14:28–29; 15:7–11; 24:14–15, 17–22), and today it is an ideal shared by many. Jesus went even further: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies” (Matt 5:43). Religion creates the capacity for a wider vision.

Of course, reciprocity with competing out-groups exists outside of religion. Such reciprocity forms the basis of world trade, both cooperative and competitive. But such cooperation tends to be self-serving. For the religiously altruistic person, however, the question “Who is my neighbor?” (cf. Luke 10:29) is answered in terms of who is in need, whom I can help with my time or money, not who is likely to reciprocate with a net gain to my genetic line. There is no longer any differential survival benefit, because all these out-group people are also winners.

Universal and cosmopolitan convictions cross race, nations, and time to involve logic that is trans-genetic and more inclusively loving. Something has emerged in human thought and capacity for altruistic love for which biology does not provide a full account. Doing to others as we would have them do to us helps us to cope because it is an insight that benefits not just the tribe or nation, but the whole world.

### *Inclusive Environmental Altruism*

Even such altruistic love might not be inclusive enough, if it remains devoted to one species. *Homo sapiens* still considers itself to be the aristocratic species on Earth. Ethicists have struggled with impressive, if halting, success in an effort to evolve altruism in proportion to egoism. What has resulted is a sense of ethical priority, often exclusivism, toward humans. Humans are on top; only humans count. Love your (human) neighbors, as you do yourself.

From a narrow perspective, the non-human world makes a resource of everything else, and most other living beings defend only their own kind, although there are exceptions. Thus, humans behave that way, too, maximizing their own kind while justifying their position by claiming to be the central species of moral concern. Look at how this attitude of “humans first” plays out with World Health Organization policy: “Priority given to human health raises an ethical dilemma if ‘health for

all' conflicts with protecting the environment. . . . Priority to ensuring human survival is taken as a first-order principle. Respect for nature and control of environmental degradation is a second-order principle, which must be observed unless it conflicts with the first-order principle of meeting survival needs."<sup>15</sup> That seems quite humane. But "second-order" will typically cash out as "never," and that is the problem. The continued existence in the wild of most of Earth's endangered species—felines, canines, rhinos, elephants, primates, and many others—depends on six hundred major reserves for wildlife in eighty countries.<sup>16</sup> If these reserves are not policed and protected, the wildlife will not survive. There will always be some hungry persons who would exploit these reserves, and the ethical complexities multiply when one weighs saving nature with using the land for feeding people.

Human (humane) ethicists who argue that humans are always first-order suggest that humans defend only their own kind, and in this respect, they play by the rules of natural selection. They do not become moral agents for nature. Trying to defend the higher value of humans, they act like beasts, looking out for themselves and their kind. These humane ethicists, whether religious or secular, stunt humanity because they do not know genuine human transcendence that is defined by caring for others.

Humans have expanded their territories all over the globe. What is an appropriate lifestyle for humans residing in this globally occupied territory? Always to put themselves first? Nothing more? Rather than using mind and morals, hand and brain, as survival tools for defending human life, the better course is that the mind form an intelligible view of the whole, and the hand defend ideals of life in all their forms.

"Human" is cognate with "humus"; we are made of earth or dust (Gen 2:7)—*adam* (human) from *adamah* (earth)—yet we are unique and excellent in our capacity to view the entirety of the world we inhabit. Humans are made "in the image of God" (Gen 1:26) and thus have great responsibility. As we face the future, a Christian environmental ethics invites awakening to the greater story of which humans are a consummate part. In earlier eras, humans sought safety through exodus from nature into culture, but now humans need to be liberated out of egoism and humanism into a transcending overview that sees Earth as a blessed land of promise, exuberant with life, a land filled with integrity, beauty, dynamic achievement, and storied history. This exodus occurs not from but *within* a promised land.

Humans can be genuine altruists; this begins when they recognize the claims of other humans, whether or not such claims are compatible with their own self-interest. But the evolution of altruism is not complete until humans can recognize the claims of non-humans: ecosystems, species,

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15 World Health Organization, *Our Planet, Our Health: Report of the WHO Commission on Health and Environment* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 1992), 4.

16 Laura Riley and William Riley, *Nature's Strongholds: The World's Great Wildlife Reserves* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

landscapes. In that sense environmental ethics is the most altruistic form of ethics, because it really loves others. It transforms residual egos into resident altruists. This ultimate altruism is, or ought to be, the human genius. In this sense the last becomes the first; this late-coming species with a latter-day ethics is the first to see the whole of the story that is taking place in *agapē* love, true compassion for others.

## Promised Land, Planet with Promise

Both Judaism and Christianity, which emerged from Judaism, became more universalist and less land-based in their ethic. Both these movements grew out of a geographically particular promised land, but came to understand every people as residents of a divinely given landscape. These faiths may have been mistaken when they became uprooted from encounters with the land. Christians and Jews should be re-rooted in whatever the landscapes of their residence. In this sense, the vision of a promised land is inclusive, not exclusive.

Today, the call is to see Earth as a planet with promise. Viewing “Earthrise” from the moon in 1971, Apollo 14 astronaut Edgar Mitchell was entranced: “Suddenly from behind the rim of the moon, in long, slow-motion moments of immense majesty, there emerges a sparkling blue and white jewel, a light, delicate sky-blue sphere laced with slowly swirling veils of white, rising gradually like a small pearl in a thick sea of black mystery. It takes more than a moment to fully realize this is Earth . . . home.” Mitchell continued, “My view of our planet was a glimpse of divinity.”<sup>17</sup> Astronaut Michael Collins, command module pilot for the Apollo 11 lunar landing in 1969, also recalled being Earth-struck: “Earth is to be treasured and nurtured, something precious that must endure.”<sup>18</sup>

When this biospheric miracle is understood as divine gift, that vision of a planet with promise makes all the more alarming our current discovery that this is also a planet in peril. “A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever” (Eccl 1:4). That ancient certainty needs now to become an urgent future hope.

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17 Kevin W. Kelley, ed., *The Home Planet* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1988), 42–45.

18 Michael Collins, “Foreword,” in Roy A. Gallant, *Our Universe* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 1980), 6.